Kidnapped and raised by Ice and Sword

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Kidnapped and raised by Ice and Sword

by purplefox

Summary

A young Naruto comes to realize why he is the target of the village's hatred. In an attempt to escape the pain and hatred of the village he grabs hold of someone with the same eyes as him. In trying to avoid hatred he sees the pain of the shinobi world up close. His dream has never seemed harder. It has never seemed so far away.

He knows he has to love but it is harder than he thought it would be. At least inside the village. Seeing a shinobi's pain helped him on the path to realize what kind of shinobi he wants to be but even Naruto does not know if he has what it takes to really be Hokage.

Strength is one thing love is another. He wants to change and he wants to save everyone. He wants to love the village.

Notes

Disclaimer: I don't own Naruto or any of the characters.

Hope you guys are going to enjoy this one. I've been thinking about it for a while. Wanted to write this for so long but now I have the time.

I'm hoping I can update often *cross fingers for that* Because by often I mean once a week or every two weeks. We will see what happens.

*Oh and last year when I was being vague about missing nins.....it was because I had this in the works ^_^ no need to thank me.

**this isn't the only thing I'm currently working on but it is the one I'm working on the most so it gets uploaded first lol

Enjoy
It was hard enough being alone. He was unsure why he was. The Sandaime said nothing when he questioned him, the caretakers scorned him.

And the villagers, their eyes watched him. Scorned him and sometimes they took action and that was the worst. He was alone. He had no idea why he was hated. Why he alone was treated that way.

Why no one looked at him and saw him.

The academy was supposed to be the new start. He would do his best. Show his best and overcome them all. But it never worked out the way it was supposed to. One year in and he was already doing terribly.

How was he to graduate when he barely understood? Graduation was so far away but for Naruto it loomed close.

With the whispers behind every corner. People insisting that he was a failure.

Not everyone was like that. But enough were. He was alone and Naruto just knew the moment he stopped making noise, everyone would walk past him as though he did not exist.

He was the only one who had to fight to be acknowledged and to exist.

He was the only one and no one could tell him why.

But not now.

Naruto looked shyly to the man opposite him. Mizuki Sensei was different. He laughed a lot and he looked at Naruto and smiled. He was different and his ideas were big.

Just like Naruto’s.

“Tell you what.” Mizuki smiled as they sat on the monkey bars. “I think if you show Iruka Sensei that you can master one the scrolls the Hokage has, he’ll let you do over the test. After all the grades are important right? You can’t have your grades holding you back. I know you’re capable of more.”

Naruto’s heart jumped as Mizuki Sensei praised him. “Really?”

“I’ve been watching you.” Mizuki smiled. “I know you’re capable of far more than what people think.”

“A Hokage scroll.” Naruto muttered. He thought of the scrolls he usually saw the Sandaime with. But those did not seem important at all.

“There is a special one.” Mizuki confided. “It’s really heavy so you have to be careful.” Mizuki beamed at him. “It’s called the Scroll of Seals and very important. You know, if you manage to trick the Hokage too. I bet he’ll be really impressed as well. After all, only elite shinobi can trick the Hokage.”

“Have you ever managed Mizuki Sensei?” Naruto asked eagerly. Mizuki looked away a smile playing on his lips.
“I think I might have. Once or twice. But nothing like what you will accomplish.”

Naruto laughed and swung his feet in happiness. The way Mizuki Sensei talked to him. It made him feel happy. Acknowledged. Maybe this was the moment in his life that would change everything.

After all a nice Sensei like Mizuki was looking at him. Smiling at him. And a man like this obviously knew the right way. Maybe in time Naruto could get information from him that he desperately wanted to know. After all, Mizuki Sensei was a Sensei and everyone knew they were always right and that they knew everything.

XxX

Some things did not add up. Iruka knew Naruto. Admittedly not well but he knew his personality well enough. This sort of thing. It was not Naruto.

Iruka fought hard to see Naruto as Naruto and not the way others usually saw him. It had been difficult but the similarities to himself had been far too strong to ignore. That was why his resentment that he had harboured had faded away.

The enemy was not there. And blaming a child was cowardly.

Still no matter how much he sympathized with Naruto, he was not sending a child out to die. He simply would not. Ninja was not a game. They put their lives on the line. There was no way he was going to give Naruto the easy way out.

No way he was going to fail him unnecessarily either. There was potential in that boy. And so Iruka hoped that in time those failures would shape Naruto into a strong shinobi. He had the potential after all.

No one who could think of all those ingenious pranks could be an idiot. Real thinking went into those. Skill went into the preparations.

But people were unable to see past their pain and their past so Naruto went unacknowledged.

It was really a pity.

But.

Naruto was capable of many things but this was not one of them. At least not on his own. Pranking someone even the Hokage? Sadly, that was Naruto.

But Naruto hated reading as it was. He hated lectures and got bored easily. He had no need for a scroll. Especially that scroll and another thing bothered him. Just how had Naruto even known about that?

That was something not many knew of.

Something was wrong. He knew it. So while others fumed in fear and anger, Iruka listened and contemplated. When the call went out to find Naruto, Iruka said as little as possible and instead thought about the places he was most likely to find the boy.

He had to find him quickly. Just in case. It could be an elaborate prank. Naruto overhearing more than he should again and basing his prank on that. Also, it could be someone behind him.
Iruka looked around for Mizuki in order to share his suspicions and frowned when he saw the man had already gone. He most likely had rushed off as well to find Naruto first.

Iruka had seen Mizuki and Naruto from time to time. If Mizuki found Naruto first, he would be the best person to calm the other irritated shinobi. He had practice, sticking up for Iruka after all.

Iruka met the Sandaime’s eyes before he nodded and left.

If only people could do like he had and see the way he saw things.

XxX

Mizuki Sensei was late. Naruto panted as the scroll lay next to him. He had learned a jutsu all right, it had been ridiculously hard. Far more trouble than it was worth but he had done it. He knew he was supposed to wait on Mizuki-sensei but the man had been late.

Iruka Sensei would be surprised for certain. Naruto could not wait to see the look on his face, and when Mizuki Sensei finally came along, he would be proud too. After all, the plan had worked even better than they had talked about.

Naruto grinned thinking about how much easier transformation was. They had it so boring at the academy. Sure, his transformation had been off by a little. Maybe a lot but that certainly did not matter now.

That old man.

Naruto released a bark of laughter at the surprised look the Hokage had given him.

But it worked out fine. He pranked him good. He did it, and he learned something he was willing to bet nobody else could do yet.

Reading it had been hard. Getting it right had been harder. All the big words and misleading phrases, but he had gotten it done. Him.

He was stronger now.

XxX

Naruto, he was not hiding. Iruka paused his scolding to consider the almost happy way Naruto looked at him. His demeanour screaming of excitement and an eagerness to show something off. The scroll was opened.

Naruto, had he read the scroll? Iruka felt his body chill. He tried to relax himself reminding himself of how difficult the scroll was to be. Of how challenging.

“You found me first Iruka Sensei.” Naruto laughed and Iruka’s bad feeling deepened. “You weren’t supposed to but since he’s late I can just show you!”

“Show me what?” Iruka asked.

“I only got one done.” Naruto laughed. “But look look! Mizuki sensei said you would have to let me pass if I did all this!”

Iruka felt something inside him crack. “Mizuki?” He asked slowly. “Mizuki…he told you to do this?”
“Umhmm.” Naruto nodded. “You’ll have to let me pass now. I can do a Hokage level jutsu!” He boasted.

“Well done.” A dark chuckle came from behind them. Iruka registered Naruto’s glee at the person and his heart cracked again.

“Mizuki.” He hissed as he turned around. Keeping Naruto and the scroll behind him. “What have you done?”

Mizuki. He looked different. The cloak he was wearing. The way he was carrying himself. Iruka had run across enough missing nin to know what one looked like. Mizuki, he was about to run.

“Iruka sensei?” Naruto asked softly from behind him.

“Ahh Iruka.” Mizuki chuckled. “You found him first.”

“Just what the hell are you playing at Mizuki?” Iruka demanded. “All this time, were you just playing at being a shinobi? What have you done?”

“Just made use of the tools at my disposal.” Mizuki grinned. “Unlike the fools around us.”

“Get out of here Naruto!”

“Iruka sensei?” Naruto’s unsure tone tore at his shattered heart but this was not the time. Iruka drew his kunai as he crouched and faced the…

Traitor.

“Mizuki.” He snarled. “What the hell have you done?”

“He tricked you!” Iruka yelled to Naruto. “Naruto! He lied! Learning a jutsu wouldn’t change your grades all at! It was all for his plan. Take the scroll and go!” Iruka did not stop to hear whether Naruto was listening to him or not. He launched towards Mizuki, his first upward slash to force the man to retreat a step.

“Keep out the way Iruka!” Mizuki snarled at him. He leapt out the way for the first slash but threw a smoke bomb at the ground disorienting his senses.

Iruka heard the sound of fleeing footsteps and felt terror grab him.

XxX

“I don’t know why you bothered to listen to him. Wasn’t I good to you? Nice to you? Listen to you in ways no one ever did? What made you at the last moment listen to him?”

Naruto swallowed as he held the scroll on his back. The weight was heavy. But the feeling in his gut was heavier. The look in Mizuki sensei’s eyes had changed. They were cold. Unfeeling and they were similar to the villager’s eyes.

Was it always like that?

“You believed in him when he is the last one that should.” Mizuki laughed. He took a step forward and Naruto whimpered as he took two steps back.

“Iruka sensei.” Naruto whimpered.
“You don’t even know what you are.” Mizuki chuckled. “The Sandaime is really a fool.”

“Sandaime?” Naruto asked. What he was?

“Didn’t you think it strange how everyone hates you?” Mizuki laughed. “How they scorn you and want to kill you but don’t. Don’t you think it is strange at all?”

Naruto’s breath caught in his throat as Mizuki said the thing he had been thinking about for ages. how he asked the thing Naruto had been asking everyone that he thought would pay attention.

“Even your precious Iruka Sensei would not tell you this. He follows the Sandaime too much. Like a puppy after the master. Pathetic. He would never dream of breaking the law.”

Law? “What law?” Naruto frowned. “A law, about me?”

“Oh yes.” Mizuki gloated. He took another step closer. “For a few years now. A brand new law but we don’t get to tell you about it.”

A secret from him? “What is it?” Naruto demanded.

“Oh ho. You want to know now huh? But we are never ever tell you. That you are-“

“Mizuki!” Iruka sensei landed in the branch above their heads. “Don’t you dare!”

“Ahh see? Even Iruka won’t tell you. And it is about you. But I bet right now he has another reason for not wanting to tell you.”

“Tell me what?” Naruto asked fearfully. He watched the look of horror and fear grow on Iruka’s face and felt fear himself. “What is it?”

“Eight years ago. The Yondaime defeated the Kyuubi. Everyone knows that tale. Even you.” Naruto nodded even as he took another step back. “But you see, he sealed that Kyuubi in a newborn child. You. You are the Kyuubi. The demon fox that ravaged the village!”

“Mizuki!” Iruka bellowed. “Stop it!”

“And not only that. You killed hundreds of shinobi and made many children orphans. Like Iruka! You’re the monster that killed his parents!”

“Enough!” Iruka roared. He threw kunais in Mizuki’s direction. Naruto blinked as his knees wobbled.

That was why he was hated? He was the demon fox that nearly destroyed the village? But he could not remember any of that.

“Naruto! Duck!” Iruka called. Naruto moved on instinct falling to his knees. A shadow appeared over him then there was a loud meaty sound.

Naruto looked up slowly. Crouched over him, Iruka was bracing himself on his forearms and looking over him with a look of pain and concern on his face. As Naruto watched, blood trickled from Iruka’s lip.

“So sorry Naruto.” Iruka breathed and Naruto shook as tears gathered in Iruka’s eyes and the man’s forearms shook. “You weren’t supposed to find out yet. You were supposed to grow and find your way like every other kid but that couldn’t happen could it?” A tear hit Naruto on the cheek and he flinched.
“Huh.” Mizuki said from behind them. “I wasn’t planning on killing you yet Iruka but it doesn’t matter in the long run.”

Iruka ignored him. Tears running down his cheeks. “You certainly had it rough huh Naruto? I’m so sorry. So sorry.”

Whimpering, Naruto slid back from under Iruka. The scroll a heavy burden on his back he stumbled to his feet. His eyes took in the huge shuriken in Iruka’s back. His world swirled. His stomach tumbled.

He fled.

XxX


“The lessons of Konoha must have slid through your slimy brain.” Iruka coughed. Naruto hesitated where he hid. “As if I’m going to let you get your hands on Naruto.”

“Give it up Iruka. You and I both know what the Kyuubi is capable of.”

“Yes.” Iruka said quietly. Naruto’s heart plunged further. “I know what that demon fox would do. With the likes of that scroll. What it could do. The thought is terrifying. But Naruto isn’t that fox. That’s the difference. He’s a little silly. Plenty bratty but one day he’ll be a valuable shinobi to the leaf. And if you can’t see that…you’re worse off than I thought Mizuki.” Iruka broke off to cough and Naruto shakily came to a decision.

Iruka sensei believed in him. He might not be perfect but Iruka sensei saw him.

In him bubbled rage and the need to fight. Naruto slid the scroll off his back and carefully made the seal.

XxX

Not the fox but Naruto. Naruto had saved him. It was sort of hard to breathe. Iruka struggled to keep upright and awake as Naruto swayed on his feet.

Multiple shadow clones. They were lucky the boy was still alive. He barely got through with the classes on chakra. But this was alright. Even though Naruto had no reason to, he had chosen Iruka. To listen to Iruka.

But right now, his heart had to be breaking.

“Naruto?” He asked shakily. “How about some miso ramen after this?”

He tried to smile through the pain as Naruto’s face crumpled and the boy’s tears started to flow. Iruka could feel himself going in and out of consciousness but he could feel others approaching and he knew he would have to stay awake for that.

He opened his arms. Sucking in his wince as Naruto barrelled into them. Iruka relied on the trunk of the tree behind him as he felt the others approach.

“Sorry.” He whispered and Naruto’s tears turned to sobs.

“Not your fault.” Naruto sobbed into his neck. “I’m the one that’s sorry Iruka sensei.”
“I guess we’re both sort of idiots.” Iruka whispered. “But I’m so sorry. It must have been hard.”

Naruto was warm.

XxX

“That’s why.” Naruto muttered his heart heavy. “That’s why they all have eyes like that.” Iruka sat down on the swing next to him. Naruto refused to look at the man. He guessed he was sort of in trouble but he was not in the mood to do anything beyond what he was currently doing.

He had not wanted to return to the place he had spent so much time with Mizuki sensei but it was the only place he really knew that he could be at peace. Even though he now knew they were all lies. This spot had done nothing to him.

It was still a good place to sit. He could still watch.

But, they would never look at him. He now knew that. How could he make them acknowledge him? He knew what the Kyuubi, what he had done to the village. How could they even stand to look at him?

How was he to become someone like the Hokage when he was something like this?

“That’s part of the reason.” Iruka admitted. “But that is not really a reason.”

“Yes it is.” Naruto’s heart clenched. “It is a reason. I hurt the village! Lots of people died. Your parents too!”

Iruka paused. “Yes.” He admitted. “Yes they did and yes the Kyuubi nearly destroyed the village. But Naruto…”

Naruto looked around to see Iruka sensei’s sad face. “What?” He asked.

“You and the Kyuubi are two different things.” Iruka said gently. “You aren’t the fox no matter what anyone says. That isn’t you. Aren’t you the one always saying you’re Uzumaki Naruto? That is who you are.”

“How can I become Hokage if the village won’t look at me?” Naruto asked and heard Iruka’s breath hitch.

“It won’t be easy.” Iruka sensei said softly. “It’ll be a long hard road ahead of you. Now that you know the truth I’m sure it is going to be even more painful for you. But you’re the boy that won’t give up. I’m sure you’ll find a way. And I acknowledge you. You’re a beloved student of mine.”

Naruto watched the way Iruka’s eyes softened as they looked at him.

No one had ever looked at him like that and Naruto knew Iruka sensei was nothing like Mizuki. He had gotten hurt for Naruto. Defended him.

“What else can I do?” He was lost. “I’m the thing they hate.”

“And fear.” Iruka said gently. “You already know the answer though. You were already working hard. You’ll have to become strong. But not just strong enough to become Hokage. You’ll have to become strong enough that you can understand and that is far harder. It is hard to become a shinobi. It will be harder for you. I’m sure you won’t understand now but you will have to become more than strong physically. You have to train and grow your emotions too.”
Naruto frowned. This talk was similar to what Iruka had said before. “You mean forgiveness?” He asked curiously.

“It’s not fair.” Iruka said softly and his hand patted Naruto on the head. “But that’s something about life.”

Naruto felt hot tears flow down his cheeks. He ducked his head and stared at the ground. “But it isn’t fair.” He said softly.

“I know.” Iruka sensei said softly and Naruto felt defeated.

XxX

No one saw him. No one was even looking for him. It was as he feared. The moment he stopped trying everyone went along with their own lives and their own thoughts. And he was the ghost simple passing through. Like that story he had overheard.

Naruto sat on the park bench and felt more alone than before. He had been thinking ever since he and Iruka sensei had that talk. The old man had come by too and Naruto had apologised but that had not been enough to make him feel better.

He felt tired.

He was tired and he wanted it to end.

He did not want this. He never asked for it. And yet he had to go on for how long? He had to keep fighting and it was not fair.

“You.” A voice breathed from in front of him. Naruto startled and wobbled from where he sat on the bench. His eyes shot up in fright to freeze.

In front of him. Looking right at him was someone. Someone was looking at him. Talking to him and their eyes. Big and curious but nothing like the villagers. Naruto looked at his pale delicate skin to his dark hair falling down his back and was confused. This did not look like anyone he had ever seen before.

He did not know everyone in the village but there were types around and this boy. He did not fit any of them. He was looking at Naruto. He was talking to him. His eyes were kind and curious. His pale pink kimono stuck out as well.

Who was he and what did he even want?

Naruto released his grip on his knees and sat up properly watching as the boy watched him.

“Why did you talk to me?” Fell out his mouth and he winced at himself.

“You have the same eyes as me.” The boy said. He looked at the empty space next to Naruto and Naruto realized he was taking up the majority of the bench because he was sitting in the middle of it. He cautiously scooted to the side watching the boy all the while.

“Same….eyes?” Naruto asked curiously.

“Why do you look the way you do?” The boy asked as he took the seat next to Naruto. He held onto the stone bench and kicked his feet in an almost lazy manner. “Konoha is so prosperous.”
“Are you from outside the village?” Naruto asked as his mood dimmed. Of course that was the reason the boy was so friendly. He did not know.

“Yes. I’m Haku.”

“Naruto.” Naruto said slowly. “Uzumaki Naruto.”

Haku flashed him a grin and Naruto smiled back because of it. It was warm and accepting. It took the nerves away. “So why are you unhappy?“

“What do you mean by eyes like yours?” Naruto demanded. They stared at each other a while before Haku sighed.

“I can tell. This village. Someone. Maybe everyone, they don’t need you. Your existence isn’t needed or maybe unwanted by anyone in this world. Or at least. It is what you think.”

“I’m something they can’t forgive.” Naruto felt his voice break and looked away from Haku. “They fear me and they have a reason to.”

“That doesn’t sound like something good.” Haku said but Naruto looked back at him because of the understanding and resigned note in the boy’s voice. He met Haku’s eyes and melted at the understanding in his eyes.

“You?” He asked his voice shaking.

“Not anymore.” Haku said as he shook his head. “Not since I met Zabuza-san. He doesn’t care what I am.”

*What I am.*

Those words repeated in Naruto’s head. He looked over Haku again carefully. He looked like everyone else. In fact, he looked better than anyone else but the way he spoke was how Naruto knew he sounded. And Zabuza whoever this man was accepted Haku?

Above them tiny little droplets started to fall and Naruto gaped. He looked at Haku as Haku gave him a resigned smile.

“You can do that?” He asked in amazement. “Are you in ninja?”

“No.” Haku shook his head. “But Zabuza-san trains me and he was one.”

“Is he here too?” Naruto asked curiously. Haku nodded. “And he likes you the way you are?”

“I’m a necessary existence to him.” Haku smiled and Naruto frowned because somehow that did not sound exactly right. But he looked at Haku’s smile and the way he carried himself. How happy he looked and it looked real.

“Zabuza-san has a mission here.” Haku.

“For what?” Naruto asked suspiciously. “He isn’t from here is he?”

“No.” Haku said softly. He looked excited. “Where we are from is far from here.”

This was starting to sound like something he had heard about in the academy. “Haku.” He said slowly.
“Haku.” A deeper voice from behind them. Naruto watched Haku turn around excitedly and smile and he himself turned around slowly to nearly fall off the bench in shock.

He could accept the man’s lack of eyebrows. Even his startling lack of clothes. But it was still cold out so he should be wearing a shirt. The huge sword the man was carrying on his back? The even more familiar scroll the man was carrying in his hands as he eyed Naruto with distrust?

But the scroll was thing he was unable to get over the most. He hopped off the bench with a cry. “Why do you have that thing?” He demanded.

“So you know what this is?” The man asked curiously. “You aren’t a normal brat are you? But you’re too young to be a genin. Too naïve to be even an accelerated graduate. Just who are you?”

“Shut up!” Naruto snapped. “That thing belongs to the Sandaime Hokage! Why do you have it?”

“Haku. They’ll be looking for us soon.” The man told Haku as he strapped the large scroll to his back with ease. “We need to be going.”

“Yes Zabuza-san.” Haku smiled. Naruto flailed as he was ignored but Haku’s outstretched hand startled him.

“Come with us.” Haku insisted and Naruto yelped in surprise.

“Haku! This isn’t a field trip!”

“He has the same eyes as us.” Haku insisted his eyes never leaving Naruto. “You don’t have to do anything. I know what we are but he has our eyes.”

“I can’t just leave!” Naruto snapped. “I’m Uzumaki Naruto.”

“And from the looks of it, nobody cares.” Zabuza shrugged and Naruto’s heart plummeted. “I wonder though. There shouldn’t be a reason for it. But you might be useful.” He turned away and Naruto stared at his browned back.

“They might not want you.” Haku said softly and he nodded towards the direction of the town and the little lights. “But we’re just like you. You want to stay here?”

But, Haku was like him was he not? Naruto looked at how alive Haku was. How happy he seemed. How Zabuza looked at him. Haku had talked to him. Looked at him. Haku was strong and Haku was different.

Naruto took Haku’s hand and smiled back when Haku smiled. It was late. Outside was chilly and as he held Haku’s hand, no one noticed as the three of them left the village. His heart was thumping in his chest. Excitement and fear. Who knew what he would face from now on. But once Haku looked at him and saw him, whatever physical or emotional pain came. It would be worth it.
The Hokage sighed as he read another report on the same matter. Recently other villages had become more probing and curious. He knew why. He also knew why they had to keep up the charade. There was no one to blame but themselves.

He had tried. Tried and failed. Minato’s hope had fallen through. Maybe the villagers had not been ready. Actually no one had been ready. Part of him hoped that all was not lost but he had lived through three devastating wars he knew better.

He mourned and he was resigned.

Konoha had lost something vital and he was not talking about the scroll.

He glanced at his window half expecting a blonde haired brat to be peeping curiously at him but he knew better. The village, it was quiet. Too quiet and that was all their faults.

There was no time to be lax. They had played the game and lost. Without a jinchuuriki Konoha was far more vulnerable than it should be.

He winced his gaze no longer seeing the paperwork. If they had been better. More prepared. If the village had been the way it was now Naruto would never have been taken. An innocent child’s pranks aside.

Gods knew what he had suffered. They held hope he was still alive but gods they knew better and who knew the condition the boy would even be in? This was on them.

Xxx

There was good and bad in a shinobi village. Mistakes were learned from. However, it was hard to mess up any more than Konoha had already done. Kakashi found it hard to even look at the picture he had of his former team now.

How could he look at his sensei when the one thing he had entrusted to them was gone? Kakashi had known what kind of struggle the boy would have to go through. Kushina had it simpler but not easier. That and Kushina had terrified everyone Kyuubi or not.

And not many really knew about the terror the Kyuubi could bring but they had learned the night Minato died. Everyone had learned and just wanted to forget.

And everyone’s negligence led to the problem Konoha had currently. No Kyuubi, no Naruto. It was their fault and they were barely keeping their standing.

It was a village wide top secret that their Jinchuuriki was gone. As if that was going to do them any
good. There was a balance for a reason. There was a reason that people were chosen to be Jinchuurikis.

There were keeping it quiet but they all knew their power had fallen.

The only thing that kept them going was the hope that Naruto was still alive.

At least. That was what the Hokage hoped. Teams were still being sent out after all. They did not know who. They did not even know how but the information gathered from the academy incident had not painted a pretty picture.

Naruto had helped take down a traitor. He would not have gone easily or even silently. He was the village terror. The prankster. A boy full of life. That quiet departure. It reeked of foul play.

So however it was done. If the boy was alive. He was in a bad condition.

“Minato Sensei, we failed you.” He whispered.

XxX

“You don’t have to be here.” The Hokage growled to Shisui. “All of you are constantly underfoot.” Shisui only shrugged as he deposited a stack of reports on the Hokage’s desk.

“We’re always here.” Itachi spoke up from the ceiling. “This was your idea after all Hokage sama.”

“Somehow it went differently in my head.” The Hokage sighed pulling the first wrinkled sheet towards himself.

“Too late to complain now.” Shikaku pointed out as he joined the Hokage at his desk. “That the reports from the spies near Suna?”

“Yes.” Sarutobi chewed on his pipe. “They speak about something interesting. Something we have to look into.”

“Whose report is it?” Shisui asked as he leaned over to get a better look.

“Shisui-kun you’re ANBU not Hokage.” Sarutobi hissed leaning the paper from Shisui’s line of sight. “Wait until I show you. You’re just like your grandfather.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” Shisui laughed as he took away the report. “This is...ohhh! Oi Itachi!” A sigh from the ceiling and Itachi gracefully fell into a crouch facing the Hokage’s desk. “This report is from Iris!”

A spark of recognition ignited in Itachi’s gaze. “So that means they are well.”

“More than well.” Shisui waved the report. “I grew up with them. If they say something is interesting up north that means we might be up to something.”

“All I see is a possible sighting on the scroll.” Shikaku muttered as he read over Shisui’s shoulder. “Whatever you are seeing I don’t.”

“We should concentrate our searches for Iwa and Kumo.” Shisui insisted. “Someone stole that scroll. We need to know who.”

“We’ve been looking for the scroll of seals for a few years.” Itachi said slowly. “I’m glad it turned
back up again if this is accurate but there is a more important matter than that.”

“But how did this person find it?” The Hokage muttered drawing the other’s attention to himself. “No one has found word on it since it disappeared. To steal it you would have to know of it.”

“So if true. How did the person know?” Shikaku murmured. “And they had a grudge with whoever had it holding before this. Beheading?”

“So we should put feelers out there.” The Hokage smiled. “We might get something back. A few answers would be nice.”

“Why don’t we ask Jiraiya sama?” Shisui asked. “He has his spies everywhere. He can make a small detour. They say the women in Kumo are nice.” Itachi coughed. “I said people said I wouldn’t know.” His long suffering gaze made Itachi sigh.

“Jiraiya would be the person most suited.” The Hokage frowned. “But at the moment his search is complicated. It might be best not to bother him yet.”

“We’ll come up with something.” Shikaku pointed out. He glanced outside at the sun. “At least we will when I get back.”

“Oh, it is your turn right?” The Hokage chuckled. “Little Shikamaru.”

“I hope Iruka Sensei didn’t scold him too much today.” Shikaku said tiredly. “Itachi you’re picking up your little brother today as well right?”

“Yes, Father is unable to do it today.” Itachi exchanged a glance with Shisui. “You’ll head to the station?”

“When I’m finished here.” Shisui nodded. Shisui’s eyes followed Itachi and Shikaku until they closed the door behind them. “We need more people at the station Hokage sama.”

“Then that will be the next thing we address.” Sarutobi nodded.

XxX

It was a good idea having the two clans such as the Uchiha’s and the Nara’s manage the police. The Second Hokage had started with something good but after the disaster that was the Jinchuuriki’s kidnapping changes had to be made.

It had been realized as they tried to figure out who had taken the boy and what had happened that they realized the problems. Fugaku had prostrated himself before the Hokage making the man uncomfortable as he tried to put the blame on his shoulders.

The Hokage had dismissed the claims but admitted to himself, and some of the higher Uchiha members that Naruto’s disappeared meant foul play and not any of the good kind.

“It should be taken into consideration that the boy managed to take an academy Chuunin teacher down. Mostly by luck but he did manage it. His disappearance was accompanied by silence. We should fear the worst.”

Sarutobi had watched how Fugaku had paled at the news. How the other Uchihas present immediately blamed themselves.

“At this point we can’t rule out civilian participation.” Fugaku had admitted.
“Then you may need some fresh eyes.” Sarutobi had offered. “But not the eyes you are used to.”

Which had given birth to the Uchiha and Nara station.

After all this opened the village security duty to more than Uchiha. And allowed Sarutobi to take for himself the shinobi he felt were better suited for missions. And it allowed him to help other shinobi currently suffering by giving them a little home duty.

Everyone won.

Especially Sarutobi. The village was becoming more and more involved with each other and the unease that had been building had vanished in the face of the tragedy.

XxX

“So is this true? Are you absolutely certain?” Kakashi froze outside the door to the Hokage’s office. He exchanged a shrug with Shisui uncertain to exactly why he had been called.

“Yes.” That voice. Kakashi nudged open the door to see an ANBU was crouched in front of the Hokage. “It checks out.”

“Good.” Shikaku nodded. “We’ll look into it. At the same time this will put us in good standing with the other countries. Also has the benefit of raising the level of Konoha’s efficiency and power.”

“Relax.” The Hokage’s hand trembled as he held the report. “We aren’t certain as yet.”

“What is going on?” Kakashi asked drawing the attention of the Hokage.

“We think we have located the Jinchuuriki.”

“The Jinchuuriki or a blonde boy?” Shisui frowned next to him.

“He apparently has the marks but that is what you are going to find out. It’s going to be a hard and dangerous retrieval.”

Meaning bloody. Kakashi braced himself mentally filing away all worries.

“We’re ready.”

“Good. You leave at first light.”

XxX

“So we’re going by hearsay.” Shisui muttered as they travelled. “Not that over the last few years we have not gone by worse.”

“It’s different this time.” Boar reminded them. “The client reported that the ninjas he hired fit the description we put out. Also as much as they have tried to keep under the radar they are an interesting and if the reports from Kumo are to believed. Fearsome.”

“The report said they were large.” Kakashi murmured. “And keep growing.”

“They keep a mostly low profile.” Another ANBU murmured. “But a few of their skills are known.”
“The client is the one that alerted us to the matter. He hired us because he hired them and we may have business with them. Whether they have what we seek or not, our rules are the same.”

“How horrible.” Monkey’s soft voice said. “You know the client is nothing but a cheapskate right? He just doesn’t want to pay.”

“We’re aware of that but if they do have the child with them. They don’t deserve our mercy.” Itachi pointed out. “This is a group that managed to steal one of Konoha’s greatest weapons from right under our noses.”

“Exactly.” Kakashi answered. “We can’t forget that. We can’t forgive something like that.”

“Enough talk.” Boar spoke up. “We need to move quicker.”

XxX

They were close. The scent that the client had generously provided to them helped. Kakashi signalled to the rest of the squadron and they waited.

Below them was a trap. Kakashi was tense with the anticipation. Finally, they would be able to do something. He would be able to do something. Correct their wrongs.

Finally, they appeared. The guards. All of them had read the bingo book. Kakashi knew who those two were although they were not that high up in rank. The only reason they had not been caught was because of the group they were hiding in. but that would end now.

The demon brothers. They had followed Zabuza from Kiri but that was going to change. As of now. It needed to be quick. They could not afford any mistakes. They might be so close.

Kakashi watched as Shisui slid back on his ANBU mask. He gave the nod of approval and Shisui flickered from sight.

Kakashi ignored the sound of the two men being quickly illuminated. He had picked up another trail. They were close. Very close. The demon brothers were down. Now the rest of the group they would be able to capture. And he hoped they had Naruto.

Even though the odds were against it. That the reality would be cruel. That it would be better if a group such as this one did not have him Kakashi wanted them to have him. So that this mission would mean something more.

That they could correct the wrong. Rescue him. That he would be able to look at his Sensei’s stone face without dying inside. That they could do better. That they could make up for what they had done. Bring him home safe.

XxX

The group was even bigger than reported. A mixture of so many Shinobi that Kakashi was confused to how they had managed to get along for so long. Still no match for their squadron. Kakashi could see that. He also saw that they had taken them off guard.

There was a scrambling among them as they tried to mobilize but it was far too late. Kakashi opened his closed eye even as his heart felt weak at the sight of what had to be Naruto in the enemy camp.

Alive and well. A few dozen enemies between them but that was not going to stop them. Kakashi
charged forward as did the other ANBU.

The moment he heard the clash Kakashi knew they would have trouble. Zabuza was strong and the pale youth with him looked the same way. Shisui and Itachi defected from the charge to engage and Kakashi was grimly thankful.

The woman facing him was undoubtedly a shinobi however. Old but a Shinobi. Kakashi was trying to figure out what her jutsu was when he watched her fingers twitch in a way he knew far too well. With a curse he withdrew his kunai and sent his chakra running through it. He only barely avoided the puppet that sprang from the ground.

He ducked around and his slash backwards severed the strings allowing the puppet to fall aside harmless. Kakashi wasted no time. Before she could summon a puppet or perform a jutsu he sent his chakra charged kunai into her neck.

Knowing that was not enough to stop her he withdrew another and kept it loosely in his hand. He was close enough to finish the job but the sense of impending danger made him leap for the air. Somehow a woman had appeared. Ivory hair and green eyes that blazed hatred, the fireball she spat at him Kakashi knew was one he had copied before.

He wasted no time using his legs to break the older woman’s neck before he launched towards his new threat. He watched her form seals again but it was far too late. His kunai lodged in her wrist and Kakashi quickly formed his own seals and ended the rogue nin from the Kusa Village.

Suna and Kusa. This group was a band of misfits but this was no time to let his guard down. They were so close. Kakashi could see that. He allowed the chakra in his hand to dissipate before he made his move.

They had to be careful the last thing they needed was distractions so the group could get away. Their goal was so close. Kakashi turned to where Naruto had been when mist started to form. His heart in his throat he cursed.

Of course. Zabuza. They would use the cover to distract them or escape or to better their own attacks. Since it was Shisui that had gone after Zabuza, Zabuza had figured out the best way to stop the likes of Shisui and Itachi was to hide their eyes.

And Zabuza’s own method of silent killing…they had really gotten themselves into trouble doing it like this. Even his nose could detect nothing but going by the clashes continuing in the mist that was quickly thickening Zabuza’s squad knew exactly what to do.

This was a bad situation but not an impossible situation and even if it was. Kakashi would not back down. He could not. There was no way he would back down when he was so close. They were so close. They would have to tear him away.

Naruto was right there! The hell with the smoke and the shinobi in his way. He was right there! So close that if he went a little farther he could touch him. Bring him home!

Kakashi gritted his teeth, this bad situation would not make him falter he was prepared.

XxX

The piercing whistle came when Kakashi had just stolen a sword from a samarai. Part of him wanted to know how a samarai of all people ended up with Zabuza but now was not the time for those things.
At the sound of the whistle he grinned. That was signal. They had Naruto. At the same time a harsh cry spread across the field. Kakashi hesitated the sword in hand. The samurai’s shadow stopped as well. Then he felt it. The mist was lessening.

They had got him. No more silent killing or anything close to it. Kakashi delighted from behind his mask.

XxX

Genma had secured him. They had what they came for so that meant that they were able to fight now without holding back. But the reaction of Zabuza’s crew when they saw Naruto hanging limp over Genma’s cloaked shoulder was staggering.

Kakashi had been prepared for many reactions but as the mist lifted. He swore Zabuza and his group’s eyes locked onto Genma’s retreating figure. The scream that came then was not human. He was convinced.

It was the scream of a mother. A brother. A father. A relative. As a shinobi Kakashi heard many things. Been faced with several situations but nothing like this. The sound of what was terror rising as the opposing group realized that Naruto had been retrieved shocked him.

Shisui’s cry of pain snapped him out of it. Kakashi saw that the slim boy and Zabuza had evaded Itachi and Shisui had been forced to retreat.

“They’re here for Naruto!” The boy with Zabuza snarled and his voice filled the clearing.

The boy’s statement changed everything. Kakashi signaled for Rat to get two others to guard Genma. He saw that Raidou had gone to back Genma up but that would account to nothing in the face of the group’s rage.

The clearing turned cold and before Kakashi could curse the fact that they had a bloodline limit to deal with, a black haired woman was coming for him her sword raised high as her grey eyes misted in tears. Whether it came from sadness or fury Kakashi was unsure of. He readied himself for the impact when she was forcefully blocked.

“Thanks.” He told Shisui as the man kept the female from advancing.

“No problem.” Shisui grunted. “Zabuza is wicked strong. He got my arms with that heavy sword of his.”

“Your cousin will cry.” Kakashi murmured and received a bark of laughter from Shisui.

“I know he is a former swordsman but the sword should not be that awesome.” Shisui laughed as he forced the female to retreat. “I’ll leave him up to you.”

“Lazy.” Kakashi commented as he ducked past where Shisui and the female were now conducting battle. She was good with seals and good with a sword too. But so far he had not seen her use any jutsu yet. Meaning she was very good or it was her weak point. As it was she was against a sharingan user so her fate had already been sealed.

As was the fate of all of Zabuza’s group gathered there.

Kakashi could hear the squad of Zabuza’s diminishing. Which meant their job was almost complete. They had to finish this and finish it as soon as possible. They had Naruto and with Zabuza he could see what was unmistakably the Scroll of Seals. With this they could end this.
Chakra gathered in his palm. Kakashi lunged forward. Thanks to Shisui and undoubtedly Itachi, Zabuza had been injured. Kakashi could smell the blood coming from the man. The man that had taken Naruto for whatever reason. He kept an eye on Zabuza as he raised his chakra filled hand.

“Zabuza-san!” There was a gust of wind and then Kakashi’s hand was penetrating the pale boy’s chest. His eyes widened in shock of how quickly the boy had gotten there. “They are here for Naruto-kun.” The boy whispered harshly. Blood spilled from his lips and Kakashi winced in sympathy as the boy tried to grip onto his hand. The boy did not have long.

“Haku!” Zabuza’s voice was shaken. Kakashi spared a glance to the man’s face and took note of the widened eyes and distraught expression above the man’s covered mouth.

“Please escape Zabuza-san.” The boy, Haku whispered. His grip on Kakashi tightened and Kakashi leapt back out of Zabuza’s immediate reach in case he wanted to try something. When Kakashi looked back to the boy he shook his head. The boy’s eyes were wide open but he was gone.

And his hand was still trapped.

“Damn it Haku.” Zabuza cursed. The fighting around them was lessening.

“Sad isn’t it Zabuza.” A voice called from the other side of the clearing. Kakashi frowned as he used the moment of Zabuza’s distraction to remove his arm from Haku’s body. He sighed as he lowered the body to the ground and closed the boy’s eyes. He was young. Too young and pale.

“You.” Zabuza’s voice was ugly. “You did this. You sold us out.”

“I did my job. The job of a smart law abiding citizen. Didn’t you say it so many times yourself? Shinobi are all tools of those who have them.”

“You never had us.” Zabuza snarled. Kakashi discreetly checked on the others of his team. Not a man down. He felt overwhelming relief. “I can’t believe scum like you have the audacity to do this to us.”

“I’m not the one that ran away from my village. You weren’t even the demon you claimed to be. Paying you would have been a waste of my money. You got the job done with your rude group of misfits but you got it poorly.”

“You fucking scum.” Zabuza sent an enraged glance at Haku. “Did you plan this from the start?”

“Your fate was sealed when you came to deal with this country. As if I would not hear about your past. And the fact that Konoha was looking for something in your possession.”

“About that.” Itachi spoke up. He was covered in blood from head to toe and was approaching from behind their client. He tilted his head towards the short grey haired man. “Konoha is greatly distressed about you knowing about our private affairs.”

“What?” The client spluttered. He looked around at the squad in the clearing. Those fallen and those awaiting orders. “What do you mean?”

“You can’t be serious.” Their client spluttered as he stepped away from Itachi. “I gave you the
information you needed. Doesn’t that count for something?”

“Boss!” Kakashi sighed as a group of ten rushed forward. Itachi retreated to the trees.

“You missed some.” Kakashi called out and he was sure he heard a snort from Itachi’s direction.

“Shinobi.” Zabuza had addressed him so Kakashi gave him his full attention. “I’ll be right back. From what I heard you should have no reason to get in my way as I do this.”

Kakashi hesitated he removed his Hound mask allowing his hitai-ate to taste cool breeze again.

“Saves us the trouble.” He drawled. The fighting had seized after all. Or to be more precise….the only one left was Zabuza.

XxX

He could have ran. He could have escaped but he did not. Kakashi could slightly admire the man because with the last minutes of his life, he had decided to kill the man that sold him out. Him and his friends.

None of them could deny the bond of those who had gathered under Zabuza. They were nakama. And a much bigger threat than any of the countries knew. Kakashi had taken the time during Zabuza’s fight to get a better look at some of the faces.

If Zabuza had gone back and started the revolution. He might have won.

But this here was his fate.

As Zabuza moved around Kakashi’s nose was able to pick up more of the man’s scent. Better analyse the scent of Zabuza’s blood and he knew what the faint bitter smell was. When Zabuza beheaded the client the clearing was silent.

“You bastards.” Zabuza’s voice was deep and shaky. “I can’t believe it ends like this.”

“You couldn’t have thought it would be smooth sailing forever.” Kakashi frowned. “You also knew.”

“It doesn’t exist you know. The weapon you think that you need so badly.” Zabuza laughed. His sword trembled in his arm and he dragged it behind him as he approached Kakashi. Or maybe the boy. Haku. “I knew the moment Haku picked him up that he would be valuable but dangerous.”

“Pick him up?” Boar questioned. His calm as he cleaned his sword went unnoticed by Zabuza. “So you were the thief a few years ago.”

“Shut up. I just want to see him.” Kakashi stepped away from the boy’s body as Zabuza approached. The scent was stronger now. Damaged organs. Shisui had done more damage that Kakashi had thought. “Haku.” Zabuza’s voice was more a caress than a sigh.

With what had to be the last of his brute strength the sword was embedded into the ground and Zabuza fell onto his knees. He trembled before he lay himself next to his fallen comrade. “Shit, Haku. I’m sorry.”

There was nothing to say. The squad was done. Zabuza was done and they had Naruto. Kakashi’s heart leapt. They had him.

“I couldn’t protect him Haku. I know other than me he was the thing that meant the most to you.
Everything fell today.” Kakashi watched as Zabuza’s hand trembled as he stroked Haku’s cheek. “You were right about the prick I should have let you gut him when we got here.”

It was sad. The end of the life of a shinobi but this was their fate. But that did not make it any less heart-breaking. Kakashi watched as Sparrow turned away as Zabuza spoke and stroked Haku’s cheek.

“I couldn’t get away. Naruto is going to be taken back to that hell of a village.” Kakashi looked at Zabuza as the man ignored them all. His voice weakening. “He’s a strong kid he’ll make it this time. He doesn’t have the eyes you hated so much. These few years you’ve been by my side it only makes sense I would end here too. I hate to say it but this was all we had. All we needed. You were always too pure so I know I won’t go the same place as you but it’s okay. I got the shit that ruined your plans. We were almost there.”

Zabuza cleared his throat. “I want to pass on a message to the kid.”

“I don’t think that would be wise.” Itachi spoke up.

“I don’t care.” Zabuza snorted. “He’ll need to hear it. Tell him he was right. And tell him we aren’t tools and to remember the fate of a missing nin.”

“Anything else?”

“He can have it if he wants it.” Zabuza waved a hand towards the sword in the ground. “I doubt you’ll let Kiri have it. I know how Konoha works.” Zabuza ignored them to force his battered body closer to Haku’s “I hope it’s pure white where you are Haku.”

Kakashi bowed his head when it was obvious that Zabuza was gone. Then he heard it. He turned to Shisui to see that he was sitting by the female he had been fighting earlier. Still alive. But not for much longer. Kakashi stepped around the bodies of Haku and Zabuza to get to Shisui who was trying to restrain the female.

“Please stop struggling.” Shisui muttered and Kakashi sighed because Shisui was always too kind. The woman scowled before she trembled and spit in Shisui’s face. Shisui reeled back from shock and Kakashi remained out of spitting range of the woman.

“You bastards.” She hissed as she held one of her gut wounds. Kakashi flicked his gaze over it before returning to her face. His nose had not lied. She would die in minutes. Shisui had gotten a good few hits in and she had lost far too much blood. “It’s not fair.” She breathed and Kakashi watched her tears drip down her face.

“Why does Naruto have to be taken by monsters such as you? What will happen to that child?” Kakashi remained silent even as the rest of the ANBU slowly approached. Shisui tried to calm her again but she was inconsolable.

“I think you have the wrong idea.” Itachi spoke up as he knelt by Shisui. “We’re retrieving an important member of our village.”

“So important that his eyes were full of pain and he was so easily taken.” She laughed and they all collectively flinched. Tears dripped from her eyes and her grip slowly loosened on her wound. “I hope he remains strong even when in the lion’s den. Ah!” She exclaimed as her wound gushed more blood.

“Naruto-chan.” She breathed. “I hope you don’t forget us and you grow big and strong.” Her tears increased and the rest of them remained silent. “Don’t let them tear you down. You’re more than a
weapon. You’re a combination of so much. You’re something new. A hope.” She sobbed. “Like grass, like a weed you can survive anywhere. Be the best you can be and forgive us.” Her breath hitched. “We were unable to protect you. I’m so sorry.” Her heart stopped as the last tear left her eyes.

XxX

Their Jinchuuriki had been missing for a total of four years. Naruto had been seven when he had been taken and at eleven he had certainly grown. Kakashi spared a glance for the unconscious boy slumped over Raidou’s back.

The encounter they had with Zabuza. When they had come to get Naruto, they had not expected that. Not the way the squad fought to protect Naruto. How they obviously thought Konoha was in the wrong. Zabuza had known even if he had not said a word.

So many of the squad could have tried to escape. Especially on hearing what their objective had been. But they had stayed to fight and grieved over their inability to protect Naruto.

Kakashi had not been the one to kill her but the woman’s tears as she died. Obviously grieving that Naruto would be taken away stayed with him.

The terrain changed and Kakashi pushed the woman from his mind. They were home and the Hokage had a reason to really smile again. Konoha had a reason to celebrate. He could look up at the Fourth’s face with less guilt now. They had brought Naruto home. Finally.

XxX

Naruto twitched. His arms hurt. So did his throat and his head. Also there was that feeling. As if he had gone to sleep crying. What was that about.

He released a little groan as he opened his eyes. What had happened. Why could he not smell cooking? Or hear singing? No one was brushing his hair. It did not feel as though he was in Haku’s or Raiya’s lap. What the hell was going on?

The it came back to him and he opened his eyes startled. His gasp echoed and Naruto trembled when he realized he was in darkness. He was in a hard chair his arms pinned to the side but that was not what bothered him. Where was everyone?

“Naruto?” There was the sound of a door opening and Naruto flinched as a ray of light entered the darkness. He cracked open one eye and his jaw dropped when he saw the face of the man in the doorway.

He honestly had thought he would never see him again. Had resigned himself to it. And behind him with the huge hat and white robes.

“Ji-chan. Iruka-sensei!” He sobbed his eyes over flowing with tears. Their image blurred but it was alright. The shapes were coming closer to him. “Iruka-sensei!”

“Naruto.” Had Iruka-sensei’s voice always been that hoarse? Deep. It did not matter. He finally got to see them again.

The things restraining him were released and Naruto shuddered as he was picked up and promptly smothered by Iruka. Somehow it was different to that time when Iruka hugged him after the incident with Mizuki-sensei. Iruka seemed a little smaller.
Iruka released him and looking sheepish stepped away. Naruto slumped on the metal chair and looked at the Sandaime. He looked even older than he had before. “Jiji.” He said softly and watched a small smile appear on the wrinkled face.

“Naruto.” The Sandaime said in response. “Welcome home.”

Naruto blinked. Home. So he was in Konoha, but what about the others? He remembered some bits before Zabuza used the mist but he had been grabbed by someone in a funny mask. What had happened. Where was everyone?

Haku? The others? Everything he had known had just been ripped away and now he was back in his old life. His old role as Uzumaki Naruto. Naruto looked down, he was no longer in the kimono that he and Haku had chosen for him.

Was that part gone too? The little blue kimono with the white trimmings he had saved up for?

“We’ll be back to ask you some questions later but we just wanted to see for ourselves that you were safe.” The Hokage said softly. Naruto could only look up and nod. Anxiety in his gut and questions ravaging his mind.

XxX

“We shouldn’t be getting overly excited.” Hotaru scowled. “It’s a miracle we managed to recover the jinchuuriki but we shouldn’t get carried away. The original plan that you came up with Sandaime can no longer apply. Things have changed.”

Sarutobi paused before he glanced at Hotaru. Himself and the council were conversing and ignoring the gather ANBU in the room. It may have been called a meeting but only himself and the council members were actually discussing anything. “What do you mean.”

“He knows what he is. He’s been with the missing nin for years and judging by the report we can’t just sweep it under the rug.” She hesitated. “What are we to do with him now?”

Sarutobi swallowed. They had not thought beyond getting Naruto back. He watched the ANBU knelt facing him. These gathered put their lives on the line for the village and to recover the jinchuuriki. Of course things changed with Naruto being raised outside the village.

He was hale and healthy and he had concentrated on that. When he had seen the boy in the medical bay he had been so relieved. Of course they had taken precautions. Everyone was wary of the seal but it was still there and still strong.

“I’m assuming you brought it up because you have an idea.” He looked down at the table and steeled his resolve. “What do you think we should do?”

“We have to consider the option of resealing the jinchuuriki.” Danzo said and Sarutobi choked. That was not the only reaction in the room. Hotaru cleared her throat and Sarutobi saw Homura look away. The tension among the gathered ANBU went up.

“What a thing to say Danzo!” He scolded turning to give Danzo his full attention. “We’ve been searching for Naruto for years and now you want us to kill him?”

“He was in the enemy’s hand for years.” Danzo said slowly. “We don’t know how he developed. We were not around to see.”

“I’m for returning to how things previously were but Danzo has a point. We don’t know anything
about the boy. What he has seen or done. How he survived.” Homura announced. “Whatever
decision we make it can’t be made lightly. Regardless of your feelings.”

The tension among the ANBU rose again and Sarutobi sighed. He waved a signal for the ANBU to
calm down before he addressed the matter. “We can ask him. Just as we would not do that to a
shinobi that had been ours we won’t do it without testing Naruto. He may be young and still a child
but that child went up against a Chuunin in order to defend a member of this village. I find it hard
to believe that the will that displayed itself then was extinguished so easily.”

“Then fine. Let the boy explain himself.” Sarutobi eyed Danzo who had given in far too easy to be
genuine. “We’ll await the results and your decision Sandaime.”

“Whatever decision you make it better not bite us.” Hotaru announced as she raised her sleeved to
her face. “Whatever plan you may have lurking in your brain Sandaime you can’t forget about your
duty to the village. No matter what the boy is a risk.”

“What happened was not his fault.” Sarutobi pushed by his chair. It was time to return to Naruto.
“It was ours. The seal and the boy would have never been taken if we had managed ourselves
better.”

XxX

“My esteemed rival!” Kakashi hesitated in his climbing to see Gai grinning up at him. “You seem
different today.”

He could continue with the rock climbing. It was training after all but this was Gai. And he was in
a mood anyway. Kakashi braced his foot on the rock face and kicked away so he could jump to the
ground where Gai waited.

“Different how?” He asked as he straightened his mask.

“Well the entire village feels different in some way.” Gai frowned. “But you feel different. The
weight that smothered us seems to be lifting but we’ve received no reason to why so I suppose this
has to do with secret business.”

Kakashi hesitated. He knew he could tell Gai. Actually he would not be surprised if half the village
knew by now. The adult shinobi by now. And if not the Jounins had to be spreading the word.

“We found him.” He said as he tried to pass off the news lightly. He watched Gai’s face. He
watched confusion dawn before elation covered it. He braced himself for the tight hug but it was
not enough. Gai’s impact sent him back a few feet.

“This is good news!” Gai hesitated. “Everyone including you have been down about the matter but
this is good yes?” Gai drew back slowly. “This is good right Kakashi. The child is fine?”

Kakashi hesitated. Naruto was alive. Healthy. But the situation he had been in needed answers. The
fact that people died cursing them. Thinking them as monsters still lingered with him. Being cursed
with someone’s dying breath was something he was used to but the way the boy obviously
Zabuza’s personal guard had hesitated on who to attack and protect. The way Zabuza had words to
pass onto Naruto.

The way Naruto had been cared for at least that was how it looked. Kakashi was unsure to just
what the hell that meant. But he was with them that counted for something it just had to.

“Kakashi!” Gai’s face had paled during the time Kakashi had zoned out. “The child is okay?”
“He’s alive.” Kakashi said softly. “Healthy but that’s his body. He was with missing nins Gai.” Kakashi watched Gai swallow and felt the fingers on his shoulder tremble. “There is no telling what happens now.”

“They recovered the scroll as well?” Gai asked. Kakashi nodded and Gai’s grip tightened for a second before it relaxed. “We can’t worry about what has not happened yet. For now. We celebrate the retrieval of something lost.”

“Stolen.” Kakashi corrected. “And aren’t you a jounin sensei now? Or are you still getting to know your team?”

“How did you know?” Gai flashed him a grin. “But our rivalry continues Kakashi!”

“It’s my turn to pick.” Kakashi reminded him and laughed to himself as Gai’s enthusiasm dimmed. “So…whoever can get to the top of the rock by climbing…using one arm.” Gai perked back up. “And…sabotage is encouraged.”

“Oh my rival!” Gai looked ready to hug him.

XxX

Other than the light from the ceiling the room was dark. Some consideration was given to the fact that the person going to be interrogated was a child. Meaning T&I had stepped down and those in the police station had stepped forward.

There had been a bustle among the Uchiha’s and Nara’s on who was to question Naruto. Some Uchihas stepped down immediately Fugaku being one of them. Since they were on the rescue mission Shisui and Itachi refused to interrogate but instead wanted to watch.

It was a long process but finally they had five people to do the interrogation. Iruka bit his lip as he remained outside the room. When not performing his regular duties he was outside Naruto’s room. Waiting.

The Sandaime watched Iruka’s tense form for a few moments the people he had chosen behind him. It was not going to be easy but it had to be done. It could almost be considered a debrief. Almost. The Sandaime exchanged a nod with Iruka before he opened the Naruto’s room.

XxX

“So what does Konoha mean to you?” Iruka started at the question. That he was being allowed in on the interrogation was amazing enough but the way these people treated Naruto. It was so gentle and kind it brought tears to the eye. But that question. It was a strange direction to take.

“Konoha?” Naruto sounded confused. “It’s the place where Jiji and Iruka-sensei is. Where I went for ramen. Where I was born.” His voice strengthened. “Where I’m going to be Hokage.” Iruka felt tears come to him eyes. “What does it mean to you?”

“This is a-“ Someone who was in the room tried to interrupt.

“It’s okay.” The Jounin who had asked Naruto the question cut him off. “Konoha is the home which I protect. Every single day.”

“You’ve asked me about this and that.” Naruto’s voice was wary. “When do I get to ask questions?” Iruka’s heart clenched at Naruto’s fear. He clenched his hands into a fist and endured.
“We’re almost finished.” Another Jounin spoke up.

“I’m hungry.” Naruto muttered his voice low and embarrassed.

“Ah we’re almost done so just two more questions.” The Jounin sounded almost apologetic. “We want to make sure you’re okay.”

“Tell us about Iruka-sensei.” The Jounin speaking, Iruka was certain he had never heard her before. Her voice was soft and soothing.

“Iruka-sensei.” Naruto’s voice was happy. “He got mad easily back at the academy because he fell in my traps but he always treated me to ramen.” There were a few muted sniggers in the room. Obviously the Jounin in the room. Iruka tried to will away his embarrassment. “I missed him.”

Naruto had-

Iruka tried to swallow past the thickness in his throat. It was still so hard to believe that this was okay. That Naruto was home now looking none the wearer. He looked as though he had taken a vacation not spirited away in the middle of the night with no clues.

“About the scroll of seals.” The female prompted. “What do you know about it?”

“That stupid No brows stole it.” Naruto mumbled. “I was determined to get it back but then he told me the one he gave away was a fake!” Naruto sounded insulted. “He is a double crosser! He kept saying he needed money he needed money. Dragging me and Haku all over the continent. Then he gets money and what does he keep doing? Not even what he was supposed to.” Naruto huffed in obvious disgust. “But he didn’t use the scroll and he didn’t sell it either. If he had tried to use it I would have burnt it up.” Naruto sounded so proud.

“The scroll the client had was a fake?” Iruka gasped. But before all that. What the hell had happened between Naruto and the missing nins?

“You wanted to get the scroll back?” A Jounin asked. He sounded confused. “You are a ch-“ He sounded as though something had hit him in the back hard.

“What we mean to say.” Another Jounin spoke up. “Is that it is impressive that you thought about Konoha’s interests in your condition.”

“Thanks.” Iruka gritted his teeth at how wary Naruto sounded. “Can I ask you guys something now?”

“Sure?” The Jounin responded.

“What…” Naruto’s voice was hesitant. “What happened to the others?”

Iruka was aware of the atmosphere totally changing. It felt as though the rooms were suddenly filled with ice. The silence of everything and everyone made him aware that there were more people present than he was aware of. Which meant ANBU. Which meant whatever happened to Naruto was worse than he had originally thought.

He clenched his hands into fists as he waited for whatever the Jounins inside were going to say.

XxX

“About the others....”
Naruto had known. At the back of his head he had suspected but it still hurt. When the dark haired man had exchanged a look with the dark haired lady he had known. He had not needed to finish his sentence. Naruto’s stomach had dropped to his toes.

They were gone. The fight that had broken out that he had witnessed before waking here was real. It was real, it had happened and everyone he had known was gone. Tears dropped down his cheeks as he was unable to stop the flood of memories.

“Haku.” His breath hitched at the thought of his foolish hope would now never come true. He was aware of the room becoming deathly still again but he had already ducked his head so the tears could flow. “Everyone.”

“Um Naruto?” The man with spiky hair that seemed nervous since he had stepped in the room seemed even more nervous. “Are you okay?”

“They…” Naruto’s voice hitched as he thought about the last few years. “They were family.” He said softly.

“But they kidnapped you.” The lady’s voice contained alarm. Naruto shook his head sadly. He could still recall that day. When Haku had seen him and offered his hand.

“I left with them.” He admitted and ignored the gasp. “Haku. Haku was…” His voice hitched. “He was different and Zabuza still looked at him and he looked at me. He wanted me and I know it was wrong.” Naruto admitted. “I didn’t like how Haku thought about himself or how Zabuza did but Haku…”

“He meant a lot to you.” The man who had asked the weird question about Konoha knelt in front of him. “I’m sorry.”

“I wanted him to leave Zabuza and come be a real ninja.” Naruto sniffled. “I wanted to become Hokage and show him better stuff than the stuff he kept talking about. I wanted to be the Hokage and I wanted Haku in Konoha but Zabuza came first.”

And he always had. It had been a hard thing to deal with but Naruto had born it. He had endured the things Zabuza tried to teach him because he knew in his heart that it was wrong. He might have been hated but he was still a human. Iruka-sensei had showed him that.

“They didn’t kidnap me.” Naruto admitted. “But that No brows was not going to tell me how to get back either. Even if I was willing to leave without Haku. And I knew I couldn’t get back to Konoha on my own.” Naruto sulked. “I didn’t know where I was half the time. And things in the group kept changing but I was going to come home.” Naruto hesitated. “I got carried away, being with people who would look at me.”

“I learned a lot of things.” Naruto admitted. “I didn’t want to put the village in anymore pain. And it was nice. Being with people who understood. Haku’s people hated him too! Ryu’s people hated his clan for something. And I knew what they were.” Naruto whispered. “But it was the first time I had a family.”

“Wait Naruto.” The nervous man interrupted him. “People didn’t hate you.”

“Don’t lie.” Naruto lifted his head to eye the man suspiciously. “Mizuki-sensei told me everything that night. I know why the village hates me.” He knew what he was and it terrified him. “You don’t know what it’s like. I know it was wrong. That Zabuza was bad but…we all had the same eyes.” Naruto repeated Haku’s words. “Even though I was a useless brat who didn’t know anything
they still wanted me around.”

“It was hard huh.” The man murmured that knelt by Naruto.

“I never forgot Iruka-sensei or Jiji.” Naruto repeated. “Everyone wanted to follow Zabuza to Kiri but I was never going to stay with them. They wanted to go to Kiri.” Naruto recalled how everyone talked about helping Zabuza. Even Haku.

Haku who after each discussion would go and train for hours until Zabuza went to fetch him. Who always smiled when Naruto begged him to stop training and rest. Or eat.

“I wanted to come home.” Naruto admitted shakily. “But I didn’t know how and then…I didn’t know if anyone would want me to. Before they just wanted me to disappear. But with Zabuza it was different.” Naruto looked away. “Sorry.”

“It’s understandable.” The man said softly as he stood. He tapped the chair Naruto sat in. Naruto guessed it was supposed to be a sort of comfort. It just made him feel more hollow.

From the roof a voice cleared. Naruto glanced up in confusion searching for something. A movement drew his attention to the farthest dark corner by the ceiling. “Naruto-kun, I was asked to pass on a message to you.”

Who the hell had a message for him? Who was this guy. Naruto frowned as he tried to get a better sense of the shape in the darkness. “Who are you?” He asked in irritation.

“I’m one of the ANBU members that assisted with your retrieval.” The man said and Naruto blanched. He swallowed nervously at how easily the man had given that information. “I was asked to pass on a message to you.”

“From who?” Naruto question. Hope then bloomed in his chest. “Haku?” Had Haku left a message for him? Naruto looked eagerly at the shadows. It had to have been Haku. Or one of the nee-chans but most likely Haku.

“It is from the individual known as Zabuza.” The voice continued and Naruto’s heart plummeted. Of course not Haku. “However the individual known as Haku was very concerned about your well being.”

“What did Zabuza have to say?”

“He said you were right. That you’re not tools. And that to remember the fate of missing nins.” The voice paused. “He also chose to fight and avenge those who fell. The client that betrayed the group. Zabuza killed them as well. And he chose to die at Haku’s side.”

“Shinobi are tools. I’ll be used and you’ll be used. Haku is my valuable tool kid. Don’t think I’ll let you take him away from me.”

“My place is by Zabuza-san’s side.”

“You’re a cheeky little shit. You won’t last long. You’ll break the moment someone starts to use you.”

“Zabaza-san isn’t all that rough. But it is my duty to stay at his side. My strength is for him. I have nothing else.”

“Shinobi are tools and if you can’t see it then you’re a fool. We are here to be used and nothing
more.”

Naruto choked up.

XxX

Sarutobi did not fully approve of Itachi taking measures into his own hands but he understood. He had been wary of the fact that Zabuza wanted to pass on a message but now that he could see Naruto’s reaction he was glad Itachi had taken the initiative.

“He said the sword is yours if you want it.” Itachi added on and to Sarutobi he considered that the final blow because Naruto’s lip trembled and the sobs started.

The whole incident was a mess from start to finish but he did not think he was imagining the look in Naruto’s eyes. He was grieving but there was no anger only resignation. ‘Remember the fate of missing nins’ it seemed that Zabuza’s had tried to make up for what they had done.

Still. It was okay to let the boy grieve. He was a child that had lost something precious. And from today he would grow. Sarutobi’s gaze shifted to the other side of the room. Homura tilted his head in his direction. In acknowledgement.

XxX

Everyone was gone. He did not even get to say goodbye. He would never get to see them again. There would be no more flat out arguments between himself and Zabuza. No long baths with Haku.

No harsh training with Ryu no fake battles with Kaya. Everything was gone. But the thing that was hurting his heart the most was that Zabuza had chosen to end the group there. He had sought revenge after he told Naruto so many times what a useless emotion it was.

He had rejected his idea that ninjas were tools. He had chosen to die with Haku and the others. Zabuza had accepted the group as family and that was what hurt the most.

He was back in the village. The last few years of his life ….the future he had imagined. Everything was wiped clean. He was now Uzumaki Naruto, Konoha’s jinchuuriki and the peace he had, would only remain in his memories.
How it should have been

Chapter Summary

As if the past four years never happened.....

Chapter Notes

Thanks you guys ^_^ anyway I think I can make this a weekly thing now. 
Also kind of busy with something else but I'm trying to make sure it doesn't interfere 
with this updating. 
Also slow burn. Very slow burn.....likeKO but worse...because this fic is gonna be 
kind of long sorry in advance 
Anyway thanks!!

A classroom. His classroom. It looked exactly the same but it felt so different. It had not changed a
bit but his feelings about it certainly had and he was looking at it through new eyes. A place he
honestly had not expected to return to. That was what this place was.

Naruto shifted his gaze from examining the classroom to where Iruka-sensei was at his side
introducing him. Or to be more precise, reintroducing him. He had been their classmate after all.
Although now it seemed like a life time ago.

Some of them looked vaguely familiar. Obviously older versions of the memories he had in his
mind. In the far back of his mind actually.

“Today.” Iruka-sensei said with his hand warm at the centre of Naruto’s back. “I want you to
welcome Uzumaki Naruto. He used to be in this class but he’s back now.” Naruto smirked to
himself at Iruka-sensei’s vague introduction. He allowed his gaze to drift across those in the class.
Most were confused but a few were shocked.

He took a step away from Iruka-sensei and folded his arms at the back of his head. There was no
sense in giving more information than necessary. He smiled and made eye contact with a boy he
knew that he knew. “Yo!” Kiba had not changed a bit. Except now he looked a little more savage.
“I’m Uzumaki Naruto!”

He made sure he was loud. He might be back but there was no sense in sparking curiosity in any of
them. The Sandaime was the one that had made the decision for him to continue his education as
though he had never left so Naruto was going to do his best to fit in and catch up. He knew the last
thing Jiji needed was people asking questions.

And an old classmate that had disappeared now reappearing out the blue and totally different to
how people vaguely remembered him was asking for trouble.

That and Naruto needed space and time for himself. No one in the class wanted to associate or even
speak with him back then. He did not want a repeat of that but he certainly did not want them
looking too closely either.

“Naruto?” A blonde was staring wide eyed at him. “Are you serious?”

“Ino please stay in your seat.” Iruka-sensei answered as he lightly patted Naruto on the shoulder. “Why don’t you take a seat Naruto so we can start the class.”

“Sure.” Naruto grinned. He took a quick glance around. He knew where he wanted to sit but he was giving the village life thing a chance after all. He chose the section farthest from the door with most people he vaguely recognised.

He pretended that as he chose his section that the class were not staring. He ignored the whispers as he passed the first row. Pretended he could not see the blatant staring when he passed the second row.

“You’re not using the window; can I sit there?” Naruto asked the boy in the third row. Dark hair, sleepy eyes and a mesh shirt. He had not changed at all.

“Once you don’t block the sun.” Shikamaru shrugged as he shifted so Naruto could pass. Naruto slid into his seat and looked behind him. Kiba was two rows up staring and a row below him right behind Naruto was a boy he knew as well. Naruto grinned at them before he turned back forward.

XxX

“You know some of them were really worried about you.” Iruka-sensei said as Naruto tried to make sense of the things he had missed. He looked up at Iruka-sensei in confusion. Iruka shot him a small smile. “Your class mates. Some were asking about you constantly. Even the Hokage got involved they were so worried.”

Naruto blinked in surprise. He knew people most likely would have been curious about his disappearance but he honestly thought all would have brushed it away and gone on with their lives. Not asked questions. Not gone to Jiji and try to find out.

Naruto looked down at the papers in front of him but did not see them. “They did?” His voice sounded tiny.

“Yeah.” Iruka-sensei’s hand was warm on his shoulder. “Kiba, Shikamaru, Chouji and Hinata all asked for you. Daily in the beginning then it went down to weekly but we could not tell them what we did not know ourselves.” Iruka-sensei’s eyes dimmed. “I didn’t like brushing them off but raising their hopes would have been cruel.”

“I know.” Naruto murmured in an attempt to reassure Iruka-sensei. He placed a hand over the one Iruka-sensei had on his shoulder and smiled brightly. “I understand. Really I do and I’m glad to hear that some of you worried. I’m sorry I didn’t-“ Naruto broke off as Iruka-sensei shook his head.

“It’s okay Naruto. It wasn’t your fault and it works out.”

“Umm.” Naruto hummed as he removed his hand from covering Iruka’s. Iruka also removed his hand and brought the papers back into focus.

XxX

Naruto cleared his throat prompting the two boys to stop in the middle of their conversation. Chouji crumpled the potato crisp bag he was holding and exchanged a glance with Shikamaru.
Shikamaru flicked his gaze over Naruto as he approached where the two boys sat on the bench.

“Hi.” Naruto said when he stood in front of them. “Um I just wanted to say it’s been a while and I heard you were asking about me.”

“Yeah.” Chouji spoke up. Shikamaru looked as though he had been going to open his mouth but he shrugged as Chouji continued. “Everybody was acting weird at the time then you disappeared. But you’re okay now right?”

Naruto blinked. “What?”

“You’re fine now. Cause you’re back right? Ino said you might have been sick.”

That was a fine excuse but there was no way it would stick. Naruto grinned and shoved his hands into his pockets. “I’ll be fine. Say you guys remember the place we used to skip Iruka-sensei’s lessons?”

“If you’re talking about the basement steps we aren’t allowed there anymore.” Shikamaru spoke up. Chouji reopened the bag of crisps and offered to Shikamaru who took one. “And Iruka-sensei is a lot more vigilant these days.”

“He was back then too. Didn’t stop us.” Naruto pointed out. Chouji burst out laughing.

“You haven’t changed a bit Naruto.” Chouji shook his head. Naruto laughed along.

XxX

Cursing to himself, Naruto used a flyer from his pocket to fan Hinata’s face. He had no real idea what was going on but the moment he had said hi to her she had went down. Naruto had no idea what her issue was. Maybe she did not eat much.

She certainly was pale enough to support that theory. Although paleness had nothing to do with healthiness he should know after all. Haku had been-

“N-N-Naruto-kun?” Hinata squeaked and Naruto stopped fanning to sit back. Her face was still flushed and she was avoiding his eyes but it was better than her spilled out on the ground. Hinata struggled to sit up and pressed a clenched fist against her chest. She still avoided his gaze. “I-I-Is there s-something you w-wanted?”

“Um Iruka-sensei said you were one of the people that looked for me.” Naruto mumbled awkwardly. He rolled back up the flyer and shoved it into his jacket. “I just wanted to say thank you. That means a lot to me.”

“O-oh.” She stammered. Her flush deepened and Naruto eyed her in alarm. The last thing he needed was her fainting again. Maybe he should get Iruka-sensei.

“Yeah.” He said slowly.

“I-I w-was worried.” She stammered still looking away from him. The fist resting on her chest clenched. “I-I’m g-glad to s-see you’re fine.” Naruto smiled. Fine was pushing it but it was nice to hear that.

“Thanks Hinata.”

XxX
“A dog?” Naruto questioned.

“It’s because of my clan.” Kiba said triumphantly. He patted the dog snoozing on his head. “Akamaru is mine.”

“Akamaru.” Naruto said slowly as he eyed the very white dog. “Imaginative.” There was a beat of silence before Kiba glared at him.

“It’s a good name!”

“I’m not saying he’s not I’m just thinking he’s white!” Naruto yelled back. They glared at each other before they broke into grins at the same time. “How big will he get?”

“I don’t know.” Kiba shrugged. “I guess a little smaller than my Mom’s wolf.” Naruto searched his memory but could only pull up the huge hulking shadow that had accompanied Kiba’s mother when she picked him up from the park once. He eyed the puppy on Kiba’s head and tried to associate it with the shadow.

“I can’t see it.” He shrugged.

“It won’t happen right away.” Kiba pointed out. “He’s still a puppy but he’s a ninja dog!” Naruto grinned at Kiba’s response. His gaze rested on the puppy so happy and relaxed on Kiba’s head and thought about what Kiba had not added.

That Akamaru would be a friend.

XxX

“I was on a mission. A mission.” Naruto teased to the ire of those gathered around him. A girl with a round face and brown pigtails scowled at him before she stormed away. Naruto laughed at her frustrated retreat.

“Really?” Sakura asked. She was a little away from the group. “Where did you go?” Naruto sighed. She was as cute as ever.

“Sakura-chan.” He smiled. “It was a vacation!” He laughed when she rolled her eyes. Her gaze went back to her eternal interest. Sasuke. Naruto shrugged and focused instead on how he was going to get rid of those asking questions.

His gaze met Sasuke’s and he blinked. Sasuke was staring right at him not making an effort to look away or be subtle about it. Sasuke’s brows were wrinkled as though he was desperately trying to figure something out and since he was staring straight at Naruto, Naruto guessed the something was him.

He winked at Sasuke before he gave his attention back to the classmates that were getting repetitive. Since he had no cover story he had to think of what he wanted to tell those gathered.

But honestly. They would not believe him if he told them the real truth anyway. And it had been a vacation of sorts. He had taken a break from the hatred and traveled all over. Seen so many things. Met so many people.

He could almost hear them. All of them. The feeling was so strong if he closed his eyes he felt as though he would be there. Naruto looked away from the group to the window. Mission was pushing it. Vacation too. Journey was better. For the last few years he had been on a journey.
He had just disappeared and now he was back. Honestly the class had no idea how they were supposed to treat him. When speaking about it with parents they were given no clues to how to treat Naruto either.

Some shinobi parents became suspiciously closed mouthed when their children spoke about the amazing reappearance of Uzumaki Naruto. Other shinobi parents just shrugged it off. Civilian parents were almost tense and wary leaving children even more confused.

But the confusing one would have to be Naruto himself. He seemed like the Naruto they could recall. But something was different although most could not put their fingers on it.

It was suspicious how he just reappeared. He was gone so long. There was no way he should be able to catch up or even keep up.

“Private lessons?” Ino suggested among a group at lunch. “All this time he was getting private lessons?”

“I don’t think it’s done like that.” A civilian girl mumbled. “That’s why the academy is the way it is. You have to learn here.”

But even though Naruto had no trouble keeping up. He noticeably slipped up in village matters. Something many were not willing to let slide.

“He doesn’t know the Konoha protocols?” A civilian boy muttered. “That’s….odd.”

And the stares continued. But Naruto ignored them and laughed it off. He had landed back in their lives so unexpectedly. It was surprising and almost suspicious.

“But he talks the same junk as before.” Ino laughed. “For sure that’s Naruto.”

“Y-yeah.” A girl murmured. “We’re just blowing things out of proportion. He’s been back for three weeks. We should let it drop. It’s probably really nothing after all.”

“Yeah.” The group agreed.

“Back to class!” Iruka roared from the academy window.

“Hasn’t sensei heard of a bell?” Ino muttered as she crumpled her juice box. She tossed it deftly into a can as she rose to her feet. “Back to class I guess.” The others rose and followed her back to class the academy door closing behind them.

Naruto released a heavy sigh and slipped from the shadows that lead to the basement. “It’s harder than I thought to blend in.” He muttered. He shrugged and followed the others.

Xxx

Shisui adjusted his ANBU mask and greeted the other guards on shift. He concealed himself under the awning of the roof adjacent to the one he was supposed to be watching and eyed the flickering lights in the room. “Asleep?”

“No.” Cat responded his voice soft. “He’s restless.”

Shisui sighed. “So another night then.” He muttered true to his words the window to Uzumaki Naruto’s room was suddenly thrown open and the boy’s face appeared. “Guess he can’t sleep
again.” Naruto’s face turned away to look back inside his room and Shisui guessed the bed before he slipped outside with only a rolled up blanket in his arms.

There were a few sighs from the other ANBU on watch and Shisui rolled his eyes. “Come on this was expected.” Crane muttered. “Let’s go.”

“Guess it’s too much to expect him to stay inside like any other brat his age.” Shisui murmured as the ANBU on guard started to move. Tracking Naruto to where ever he wanted to go at night.

“He’s not a normal child.” Cat murmured as he slipped past and Shisui sighed as he followed.

XxX

Not that Konoha was quiet but it was not what Naruto was used to. The routine that he had gotten used to was no longer here. Sleeping inside, in the apartment he had been in so long ago…it was strange. It was hard to do that.

He had come from nights sleeping outside with the stars his ceiling. Of course there had been the occasional inn but that was rare. There were tents too but only when necessary. Most of the time it had been the hard ground. Sometimes trees and sometimes Naruto had fallen asleep on many a shoulder or lap.

It was hard to forget that. It was hard to move on from that. It was hard to be alone. Being alone was the hardest thing. He did not hear the heartbeats of his friends. The soft breaths of his family.

There was silence and it was far too loud to actually bear. And the rooms were walls closing in on him. Being alone was worse but just going back to the old stuff in his past was harder.

So the first night back in Konoha after he had been released Naruto wandered the village until sunrise and slept outside on a field.

The second night he had tried but when night fell he pushed open his window and escaped. His memory of Konoha’s geography was hazy but he recalled a lake on the outskirts. He spent an hour running his hand through the cool water and thinking.

When the stars glittered overhead Naruto had laid back and relaxed. He was cold and the ground was hard but he felt more relaxed than he had in the apartment.

He had stared up at the stars and thought of Haku and the others. Of similar nights. The longer he stared at the stars and thought of his friends the less alone he felt. He could feel them. The memories inside him making their presence stronger. And so he slept.

It was not healthy and he knew sooner or later someone would call him out on it but for the right now this was what relaxed him. Being in a village and knowing it was supposed to be for good was hard.

Naruto spread the stained blanket over himself and watched the stars overhead. He was a little cold but that was okay. The familiar circumstances gave him warmth and gave him peace and if he pretended the others were near. If he tucked something under his head, he could pretend that he was resting on Haku’s or Alya’s lap. He would feel a little less alone.

Sleeping outside was better anyway.

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“Well this is a sign that he is completely healthy.” The Hokage murmured to himself as he chewed on his pipe. Shisui pretended not to hear the man but the furious Chuunin was not having any of it.

“The civilian had to spend the rest of the day looking for his chickens! And on top of that he was frantic because the boy painted numbers on them but skipped one making him think there was one missing!” Shisui bit back a snort at the boy’s quick thinking and prank.

“I’ll take that into consideration.” The Hokage nodded. “I’ve already ordered for him to fix the coop. that should be enough for now. And the teachers at the academy are going to be keeping a closer watch on him.”

“A guard might be better.” The irritated Chuunin muttered as he stormed out the office. Shisui allowed his chuckle to break free and he almost lost his footing from where he hid on the roof.

“He used to be a trouble maker I recall.” Shikaku pointed out. “Maybe this is his way of feeling out the village. Or drawing attention to himself.”

“A bit of both?” The Hokage responded. “But this is an impressive amount of pranks. He did the same with some wild pigs I think. Got three. Painted the numbers One, two and four on them and set them loose in the market.”

Shikaku snorted. “That’s what that was about? I thought they had gotten away.”

“No Naruto was behind it.” The Hokage sighed. “He’s just settling in. At least. That is what I’m hoping.”

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“I think he should invest in a sleeping bag.” Badger muttered. Shisui agreed. So far Naruto had spent a total of four nights actually sleeping in his room and Shisui knew it was not because of the weather. He seemed to prefer sleeping outside. Or not sleeping at all.

“I’m willing to leave him one.” Sparrow spoke up. She nodded in Naruto’s direction. “The ground has to be cold.” There was a moment of silence after her statement.

“But would he take it is the question.” Iris pointed out. “And I didn’t know you cared that sort of way.”

“I don’t” Sparrow shrugged. “Just he’s still a kid or at least his body is. He shouldn’t be sleeping outside. It sucks. I hate sleeping outside. I like sleeping in my bed in the village no matter how lumpy the ANBU beds are. It’s better than the ground.”

“I guess it’s what he is used to.” Shisui pointed out. “He feels out of place.”

“You mean trapped.” Iris corrected. “He could sleep anywhere outside but he chooses somewhere where he can see the sky.”

“He can leave his window open and see the same sky.” Badger grumbled. “There is no cover out here. No people. No houses.”

“Maybe that’s why he chose it.” Sparrow mused aloud and Shisui gave her his undivided attention. “There aren’t that many people around and he can relax. People might make him nervous.”

“With all the mischief he gets into?” Iris snickered. “You’re way off target.”
“What is he doing? Primping?” Sparrow asked. Shisui glanced at her to see the ANBU on question was leaning dangerously off the wall in order to see Naruto better. “Isn’t he a bit too young to be worrying about his hair?”

“Is this guard duty or yap duty. Somebody tell me.” Badger answered as he remained in his position. “We are supposed to watch the target not exchange conversations.”

“Live a little won’t you.” Sparrow muttered. “He’s a kid.”

“He’s more than that.”

“But right now he’s acting like a kid.” Shisui cut in as he eyed the boy in question. Naruto was leaning as close as possible to the mirror and tugging at his hair. Shisui could see that the boy was unhappy about something. “This is a part of being a kid too Badger.”

“What’s the deal with his hair?” Sparrow mused as Naruto tugged the spikes on his hair in irritation. “Is he trying to style it?”

Shisui watched Naruto fight to gather all the hair on his head in one grip and shrugged. “Don’t ask me. I don’t bother with mine.”

Sparrow set into a mostly muted mumble about blessed genes and Shisui continued to frown down at Naruto watching his reflection in the mirror. He did not know the problem but the boy’s hair was decently long. Maybe he wanted to cut it? Maybe he should. He resembled the Yondaime enough already.

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“Oi what are you doing?” Naruto stumbled when he heard Shikamaru’s voice behind him. He had not thought any of his classmates would have come to the outdoor baths at this time of day. But actually, that just might be why Shikamaru was here.

“Nothing.” Naruto sulked as he looked at his reflection again. There was nothing wrong with him but what he was looking was not there yet. He wanted to keep some his old routines with him and sadly enough he could not do it.

And there was no one he knew that would allow him to either. And it was a stupid idea anyway. Naruto’s eyes went to Shikamaru who was furiously drying his hair the limp strands beginning to show signs of life. An idea dawned.

“Hey Shikamaru.” He said eagerly. Shikamaru turned to him still rubbing his hair. “How do you get your hair into a pony-tail?”

“A pony-tail?” Shikamaru frowned. “There’s more to this style than you think Naruto. It’s a clan thing too. And you don’t have enough to tie anywhere. It’s too short. It would end up looking like a turnip.” Shikamaru turned away but not before Naruto saw the smirk on the boy’s face.

“That means even Iruka-sensei’s hair is long too.” He sighed. “I knew I wouldn’t be able to do it so soon. But isn’t my hair too spiky to get away with it?” He frowned to himself. He turned back to Shikamaru to see the boy was frowning at him. “What?”

“Part of me want to ask.” Shikamaru said slowly. “But another part of me says it’s too troublesome and that’s the part of me that is louder.”
“You don’t change at all.” Naruto tsked. “It is always what’s a drag or interesting or troublesome with you.”

“And you run headfirst into trouble.” Shikamaru shrugged. “You’re not in position to criticize me.”

“Who said it was criticizing?” Naruto muttered as Shikamaru left the bathing area.

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“No.” Naruto laughed. He dodged Iruka-sensei’s teasing hand. “I’m not going to cut it.”

“Naruto.” Iruka-sensei’s voice was full of exasperation. “It’s beginning to get out of hand. It’s a little longer than expected.”

“I know.” Naruto said softly. He tugged at a few of the strands that were beginning to hint at bangs. “I want it to grow.”

“But-“

“Nuh uh.” Naruto refused.

“Geez what’s gotten into you?” Iruka-sensei sighed. “If you insist on not cutting it you have to manage it yourself. A shinobi has to pride himself on his appearance.”

Naruto eyed Iruka-sensei suspiciously. “Really?” He questioned and Iruka-sense laughed.

The man patted his shoulder and kicked his feet into the dirt. Dust drifted up lazily and Iruka-sensei’s swing moved a little. “Well, at least the future Hokage should huh?”

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“Here again?” Shisui sighed as he stopped on a rooftop. He stared down at Naruto as the boy gripped the railing and stared at the Hokage mountain. “He really likes this place.”

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Even for Naruto, this was weird. Shisui sat on a tree limb and watched as Naruto stared at something. He was tempted to activate his sharingan. See if the boy was trapped in a genjutsu because the boy’s demeanor was off.

Coming to the park at this sort of time was weird. Staring at a park bench as though it held the secrets to the universe was also weird.

Shisui sensed Itachi’s approach before he heard him and when Itachi dropped onto the same branch as him without disturbing a leaf he inclined his head to the younger Uchiha.

“This is..” Itachi murmured as he took a seat by Shisui. “So he’s come here at last.”

“What is this place?” Shisui murmured as Naruto continued to stare at the park bench.

“Naruto-kun scent disappeared from around this spot.” Itachi whispered. With a sigh the man slipped off his ANBU mask to hold it in one hand. “Or to be more precise around this area was the place he was last sensed. Or so the reports say.”

“I didn’t get the full report of how he disappeared.” Shisui complained as Naruto took a step towards the bench. “How did you get it?”
“I didn’t.” Shisui rolled his eyes at Itachi’s innocent expression. There was no way he was going to fall for it. “The Hokage left it unattended.”

“Well you could have spread the word” Shisui complained as Naruto gingerly sat down on the edge of the bench. He gave a shaky inhale that carried to their ears where they hid in the trees and stared at his knees. “Is he going to be okay?”

Naruto gave the space next to him a glance. Almost as if he was half expecting someone to be there. Shisui’s heart twisted in sympathy. They had done what was necessary. He did not regret doing it but he did feel bad for the young jinchuuriki. The boy had lacked for most his life then he finally had something good. Something worth protecting.

And he’d lost it. But it had been necessary. Although painful. Shisui could only imagine how the child must feel. But that only made him feel uneasy. The last thing they needed was hatred overtaking the child.

“But he is wise beyond his years.” Itachi said and Shisui jolted out his thoughts to see Itachi watching him and not Naruto. “I know what’s on your mind. It is on all of ours as well.”

“Yeah.” Shisui said uneasily as he watched Naruto stand again. The boy gave an almost resigned look towards the bench before he turned away and left in an almost jog. But he did not look back. Shisui had to give him props for that. But that did not mean he would not be reporting the incident to the Hokage.

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“It’s not going anywhere.” Iruka-sensei lightly scolded. He shook his head as Naruto ignored him and picked up the bowl to finish the broth. He rolled his eyes at the owner who only laughed before he turned his attention to Naruto.

“Another one Naruto?”

“Yeah!” Naruto cheered slapping the bowl down to the counter. “Miso ramen this time!” His happy grin warmed Iruka’s hear and he had to turn away before he was found out. Instead he finished his own bowl and turned back to Naruto.

“When I said I was going to treat you I didn’t intend for you to bleed me dry.” He joked. “Don’t you want something other than ramen?”

“Ummmm.” Naruto mumbled through his next bowl. “Nope!” the noodles disappeared into Naruto’s mouth and he grinned. “You should know me better than that Iruka-sensei.”

“Oh what are we going to do with you.” Iruka sighed as he tussled Naruto’s hair. He ignored the boy’s loud squawk and resigned himself to watching Naruto inhale as many bowls as possible. It seemed the boy’s love for ramen had not dimmed in the least.

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“Everything is so white!” Naruto laughed. “It’s white and it feels white too ya know?”

“Uhh I think so.” Iruka chuckled. “So beyond of it being white what else was it like?”

“Quiet.” Naruto mumbled with his mouth full. “It was super quiet. Maybe because we were in the forest? But it was quiet you could hear for miles. Which was good because when you heard a big crack you knew which direction not to go or if to run or not.”
“Oh?” Iruka smiled. Naruto talking about the places he had seen was always entertaining. Naruto’s observations were always of something unexpected.

“Sand is overrated.” Naruto shrugged bringing Iruka’s attention back to him. “It gets everywhere and in everything and it annoys everyone too unless they are in denial. If you don’t clean it properly it gets in the puppets too.”

Iruka stifled his flinch at the mention of Naruto’s former companions and instead focused on the story. “I heard sunsets in the desert are nice.” He mused as he signalled for another ramen for himself. “I saw a few in my time but never got to appreciate the beauty.”

“Only if a scorpion isn’t in the view.” Naruto snorted. “I don’t know how people choose to live in the desert. There’s always something underneath trying to kill you.”

“Like what?” Iruka laughed.

“Killer ants, scorpions, freaky lizards that spit freaky poison.” Naruto looked more grossed out than scared. “I mean it’s good when you’re hungry for meat but the way they keep coming after you is creepy.”

“I don’t remember the last time I had to eat wild lizard.” Iruka teased. “But I don’t think you’ve seen the last of it. Genins end up in all sort of positions you know?” He laughed at Naruto’s full body shudder. “Just teasing. Just don’t lose your food pills in the field okay?”

“Never letting them go.” Naruto muttered around the bowl he held to his lips. “I don’t know if it was how it was cooked or just the scorpion but it was watery and tasteless. And all that chewing! Waste of meat for something that big.”

“Somehow I think it was the preparation.” Iruka laughed.

“But there’s always game in the other countries.” Naruto shrugged. “But the sun rising on an ice mountain is pretty.” He hesitated. “And the night is cool when you’re surrounded by trees.” Naruto returned to his food leaving Iruka bemused.

“That can’t be it.” He teased and received a delighted grin from Naruto.

“Of course not! Hey Iruka-sensei! Bet you never heard of this before.” And as Naruto started his tale Iruka was able to relax. Naruto’s expression was so open and free. Which was all he ever wanted.

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“The brat did a lot of travelling.” Shisui whistled as he toyed with his sword. It was a childish thing to do but after watching a child’s movements for weeks, self-discipline slipped and old childish things came roaring back.

“Sounds like he went to everywhere on the continent.” Iris snorted. “Geez but he sounds so happy about it. I bet he’s the one child that can bounce back from almost anything.”

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“I cannot claim to know of that man’s intentions.” The Hokage said. “But I can at least do this much.” Zabuza’s sword lay on a scroll in front the Hokage. “It’s better that such a tool not be waved around so carelessly and for Naruto’s sake, I’d rather it be where we know it is.”
The gathered ANBU nodded and watched the Hokage seal the sword. With a sigh the man rolled it up. Kakashi watched the Hokage from behind his mask as the man tucked the sealed scroll into his robes and backed the gathered ANBU members.

“I’m sorry that I dragged you into this mess.” The Hokage said softly. “It was necessary for the village’s security and instead of the matter being dropped it continued on. With you being conflicted.”

Kakashi remained silent as the Hokage spoke. He had a bad feeling where this was going. Well not entirely bad. Just he had the feeling that it would be better to be wary.

“Some of you have spoken to me on the matter of the jinchuuriki. I have listened to all your ails. I have read every report and I have also recalled the mistakes of the past.” The Hokage turned back to face them. “I believe in each and every one of you and your accounts on the matter of the Jinchuuriki’s retrieval.”

Kakashi held his breath as the Hokage met all their gazes. He watched as the man watched them. His heart sped up at how the Hokage was contemplating them. Had something else happened?

“Naruto-kun.” The Hokage raised his voice and Kakashi twitched as did the rest of the ANBU gathered. Behind them the door opened. Kakashi smelt the moment Naruto entered. At least now he knew why they were gathered in full uniform, hoods and all. It was not for another mission.

“Jiji?” Naruto’s voice was unsure. “I thought you said if I cleaned up the paint and said sorry that it would be okay!”

“This isn’t about that incident.” The Hokage sighed. “Although we will talk about that again later. This is about something else. Come around.”

Kakashi’s eye tracked Naruto as the boy carefully skirted around them to join the Hokage. Naruto’s face as he eyed them was curious. “Jiji?”

“There’s a matter that concerns you.” The Hokage withdrew the sealed scroll. “This is for you to decided what to do with it when you get a little older. You can send it back to the original village or store it.”

“Is that Zabuza’s” Naruto’s face fell. “His sword?”

“Yes.” Naruto’s eyes dimmed as he looked at the sealed scroll. “He left it to you if you want it.”

“Because I bet he didn’t think I could ever use it.” Naruto snorted. “And? You wouldn’t call all them here for that Jiji.”

“I wanted to tell you about the decision that I made.” The Hokage said slowly. He gave Naruto a soft smile. “I gave the order for all those including Zabuza to be buried in Fire Country.”

“You gave…” Naruto gasped. “Really you meant it? But Haku said that nothing would be allowed to remain! That they wouldn’t get graves!”

“I took your circumstances in consideration.” The Hokage lightly patted Naruto on the head. “And it’s the living that need the graves. And they were family to each other right? Not just Zabuza and this friend of yours but all of them.”

“Yeah.” Naruto breathed. “Thanks Jiji.” He hesitated. “I can visit them?”
“Provided no one else has a problem with my decision.” Kakashi realized that the Hokage was referring to them. Those that had struck them down. But considering everything else. They deserved a decent burial.

Kakashi could see Shisui’s figure out the corner of his eye. He knew the man was most likely recalling the woman who had died.

“Being buried in the same country that Uzumaki-kun resides.” Boar spoke up. “I think not only is that the best action but that some would prefer that.” Naruto’s face brightened.

“We’ll talk about the other thing when you make Genin.” The Hokage murmured to Naruto and Kakashi’s ears only just caught it. He was curious about it but the Hokage waved his hand in dismissal. “That’s all. Disperse!”

Kakashi had no choice. With his gaze on Naruto he left the Hokage’s presence.

XxX

“You are lucky you passed.” Shikamaru snorted as he eyed the test scores in front of him. “I thought you said you studied.”

“I did.” Naruto snatched back the papers. “Considering everything I’m lucky I even got this much. There’s so many rules and information.” Naruto started muttering under his breath as he flipped through his paper. “So many clauses and things to do too.”

“They are there for a reason.” Shikamaru shrugged. “But at least you passed. Although your theory marks suck.”

“But now I’m a genin.” Naruto grinned. “And my theory is higher than Kiba’s.”

“What did you two bet this time?” Shikamaru asked as he slid back into his seat.

“Secret.” Naruto sang. “See ya Shikamaru.” He took two steps back and bolted for the door. Shikamaru rolled his eyes and slumped on the desk. Tests were serious drags. So boring. He thought that being a ninja would be interesting but so far it was just memorization and was not that a drag.

XxX

“What you think eh?” Naruto grinned as Iruka-sensei picked himself off the ground. “I’ve been working on it secretly and now I think it packs a bigger punch than the original!”

“What the hell!” Iruka-sensei raged. “Who told you to use that stupid jutsu!”

“It’s not stupid!” Naruto snapped. “It’s a good distraction you see I go ‘pah’ and the enemy goes like you did just now.” Naruto watch the flush deepen on Iruka-sensei’s face. “I could have ran away or stolen your wallet Iruka-sensei.”

“Don’t use that dumbass-“ Iruka-sensei pinched the bridge of his nose tightly. “What’s the deal with that jutsu!”

“Super effective against perverts.” Naruto grinned and gave Iruka-sensei the thumbs up.

“That shouldn’t be something you think about you know.” Iruka-sensei rubbed his nose vigorously. “Cut it out with that silly jutsu.”
“Bet the Sandaime will fall for it too.” Naruto snickered under his breath. He caught Iruka-sensei’s glare and decided to keep his improvement to himself. Unless necessary. It could bring a few laughs after all. For him and others and he had been working hard on transformations.

It was his personal jutsu.

XxX

“Not a child’s game.” The boy peered up at Naruto and Naruto felt his heart soften.

“Yeah.” Naruto grinned. “It’s a title worth fighting over you can’t get it because you say you want it. You have to prove that you deserve it but not only by being the strongest.” Naruto coloured.

“There’s other stuff too. So you say you want to be Hokage? Well Hokage’s my dream and you’ll have to fight me for it.”


Naruto snorted as he thought about the Sandaime that had collapsed because of Naruto’s sexy-jutsu. Both of them were to fault but the old man had been getting repetitive and annoying so without thinking he had used it.

Turned out okay. The Hokage shooed him away without making him retake the forms and that was just fine for him. “Well that’s only in one thing.” Naruto murmured. He knew no idea how he was supposed to tell the boy that his grandfather was a giant perv.

“Teach me?” Konohamaru demanded. He leaned forward and Naruto was struck at how pleading the boy looked. He relaxed. It was some harmless fun after all and the more people willing to catch people off guard the better.

And a ninja was supposed to use all the tools he had at his disposal. So who knew. That jutsu could come in handy one day. And if not it could help Konohamaru wheedle some stuff from some the perverted adults in the village. Especially those pretending they were not. Like that sensei of his….

“Sure thing. But this isn’t an easy jutsu.” Naruto grinned. “There’s more to it than you think so we’ll go on a little trip and always remember this is a jutsu that can be improved.”

XxX

“Amazing!” Konohamaru was unable to contain his excitement. Naruto shook his head as he eyed the form of Konohamaru’s sensei that had fainted. “You did improve it!”

“You’re not ready for that level.” Naruto chuckled. “But you get the idea right? It doesn’t have to be the same each time and sometimes you need to add more power to it.” Or dig deep into a pervert’s fantasies. Naruto shook his head at the fallen man. One naked girl, nothing. A harem? He lost it.

“I’ll defeat you one day. So be prepared Naruto nii-chan.” Konohamaru extended his hand eagerly and Naruto laughed as he took it. When they shook hands Naruto felt his heart warm.

“I’ll be looking forward to it.” Naruto promised. “But don’t expect me to wait for you.” Because the path to the top was treacherous and long. And he really had no time to waste.

XxX

Sakura and Sasuke? Well he could have ended up on a worst team. Naruto was not too sure who
that could be but he knew worst was possible. Somehow he knew the Sandaime was behind it. He had to be. Either as revenge for teaching Konohamaru the sexy-jutsu. Or for Naruto using it on the Sandaime.

He just didn’t fit in. Naruto watched Sakura watch Sasuke. He had no idea what he was supposed to do from here. Their Sensei was late for one. And he had a vague idea of what he could do, he just did not want to do it.

But this guy whoever it was, there were really late. Not even a little late but super late. Naruto ignored Sakura and rigged the door. It was an easy trap. One easily dodged but it mollified him. Why was the guy late? Didn’t he think they had something to do?

Sasuke was glaring at him. Sakura’s emotions were torn between himself and Sasuke and Naruto was feeling bore. He wanted to train. He wanted to get this over with. He fiddled with his hitai-ate for a few seconds to remind himself why he had not left the classroom yet.

Then he heard it. The soft footstep out the classroom. Different from Iruka-sensei’s which meant their teacher had finally come. And either would or would not walk right into his rigged trap.

The trap sprang when the man opened the door. The Jounin who walked in got caught. It was pretty harmless just an eraser. Sasuke scoffed and turned away. Sakura sniggered and did the same. Naruto laughed but eyed the man warily.

Whoever this man was he was dangerous. He did not just get caught in the trap. He had seen it and decided to get caught anyway. That was different from getting caught in it. This man, this Jounin he was in a whole other league.

“The roof.” The Jounin stated after he eyed the eraser. Naruto noted how he was hiding one eye with his Hitai-ate. Maybe it was missing, or maybe it was something else. “Meet me on the roof.” He disappeared in a poof of smoke. Naruto had not even seen him make the seal.

This Jounin, he was fast.

“Naruto! You made him mad.” Sakura hissed as she made her way for the door. “That isn’t the way to make a good first impression.”

“Impressions can change.” He muttered as he followed her. Sasuke took the lead his hands shoved in his pockets and Naruto barely restrained a sigh.

XxX

Slightly scary. Not in the fighting way but the intelligent way. Naruto stared blankly at the man that so casually eyed them and fumbled on what to say. He could be brutally honest of course. It was what was easiest and what was expected.

But somehow he had the feeling that the man was looking for something more than that. Naruto wanted to see what that hitai-ate was hiding. A scar? Naruto was not afraid or disgusted by those. A deformity? Somehow this guy did not seem the type to hide or even care about such things.

Tell him about themselves. He might as well go first. He just knew he would get depressed listening to the other’s ones. Theirs would sound so innocent and perfect and his had much darker hopes underneath.

Naruto raised his hand and watched how the Jounin’s attention came to him. No wariness. No hidden hatred. No fear. Nothing but a little curiosity.
“I’ll go first.” Naruto offered.

XxX

Their Sensei sounded like a man of self-control. How could one not have any hobbies? Or likes or dislikes? Normal people had preferences. Maybe it was a Jounin thing. Or an elite shinobi thing. But why would an elite shinobi be late?

Somethings just did not add up. Sakura waved goodbye to him and Sasuke just left. Naruto eyed the sun high in the sky before he made a decision. Tomorrow was the meeting. No harm in getting a little intense training in at the last minute.

XxX

“What is he doing?” The Hokage frowned.

“I don’t know.” Shisui admitted. “I’ve seen Itachi do some intense, freaky sometimes nonsensical training routines or methods but he has nothing on Naruto down there.”

“I thought he was sharpening the sticks to burn Kakashi-senpai’s house.” Cat murmured from above them. Shisui snorted at the way the Hokage gave a dirty look to Cat who remained hidden above them. “I hear he drives some to those sort of lengths.” Cat’s tone implied that in that situation he would have helped Naruto burn the house in question.

“Kakashi has nothing to do with this. I think.” The Hokage muttered as he chewed on the end of his pipe. They watched as Naruto rigged trees so that they were fixed to a certain spot. “What is that child thinking? He should be resting for his test tomorrow.”

“He isn’t really a quiet child is he?” Shisui murmured. “Hokage-sama maybe he’s simply-“ Shisui cut himself in surprise.

Naruto had pulled a rope. An obvious trigger for the traps he had been rigging. Shisui had admitted curiosity for what all the sharpened sticks were for but now that he knew he wanted to put an end to the insanity.

The sharpened sticks were flying at different intervals. Different places, different timings but all aimed at the boy in the centre of the circle. “What in the world.” The Hokage gaped.

Naruto had drawn his kunai and was using it to deflect the sticks as they flew at him at a fast speed. He was not staying still either. He was moving from tree to tree but with each tree he touched the riggings moved and the aim changed.

But it was still highly dangerous. Naruto started disabling some of the trees but Shisui had the deep feeling it was more than that.

“Who is he seeing?” The Hokage murmured as Naruto yelped and stumbled back. He was doing well. Some of the traps were disabled but apparently that was not enough. Shisui gaped as something coiled around the fallen sticks on the group drawing them to yet another rigging.

How many had the boy made? What the hell was the purpose? Shisui was prepared to step in at any point as the weapons flew faster and faster, the rigged trees no longer shot in one direction but wavered constantly. But all that time Naruto remained in the circle.

Then there was silence. Shisui saw that somehow all the rigged trees had stopped firing. He doubted it was because they had run out of ammo. Naruto had plenty of sticks to start with.
“Ahh!” Came from Naruto who had sat on the ground. “My loss, again. I need to work on my speed.”

Work on his speed? For a genin that had been brilliant. There were not that many that would survive that long in a situation like that. In fact, Shisui doubted there were any who wanted to be in a situation like that. Or a training method like that.

“What an interesting method.” The Hokage muttered and Shisui eyed him eagerly. “So the purpose was to avoid being impaled. Did he improvise or is there another method?”

“Hokage-sama?” Shisui questioned. “What do we do?” Shisui gestured to Naruto who had begun to disable his little project.

“It seems mostly harmless.” The Hokage glanced at Shisui. “He dodges well enough. Almost Chunin worthy. That’s all we should concentrate on.”

“Right.” Shisui looked back to the boy who the longer they watched him the more he perplexed them. “He’s a genin now too.”

XxX

Whatever Kakashi-sensei wanted them to do it sure as hell was more than get the bells. And seriously? The might be lazy, rude and borderline perverted but he was strong.

Naruto charged him with a clone and watched it get ruthlessly dispelled with a wince. The man had not even looked away from his book. They were that weak. Naruto glanced to Sasuke to see the boy running through a handful of seals. It took a few seconds to click what Sasuke was going for and he resigned himself for the chase.

Sure enough Kakashi-sensei had not just dodged. He moved fast and shoved Sasuke into the ground. All this and a minute had not even passed yet. Well Naruto had chakra to spare. He created two clones to rescue Sasuke and watched as the boy took the opportunity to hide.

Concealing their presence was a good start but they were against a Jounin and a good one. Naruto crawled backward until he put some space between himself and his new Sensei. He sat with his back to a tree as he tried to figure out his strategy.

There were many ways to get through this. Kakashi-sensei was a teacher. He was not out to kill them. The worst fate they had coming for them was going back to the academy. So that meant they could go all out.

A deep chuckle came from deep inside him and Naruto seethed and ignored it. Well not entirely all out. There was a reason behind this. And two bells were a real pain to think about at the moment when getting one seemed impossible.

So before he could make a proper plan, he needed to know a little more about what he was dealing with. Naruto nodded to himself and stood up brushing away at his pants.

XxX

There were some good students from the academy this year. Kakashi was unsure to whether they were ready to be a shinobi but there was plenty of time to test that later. Of course Itachi’s little brother was a little amusing.

A little headstrong. Kakashi just knew one of them was going to charge him after he announced
the rules to the little game. He had bet either Naruto or Sasuke. Naruto may have come first but Sasuke had been a few feet behind using Naruto’s charge to prepare his jutsu.

Now if it had been planned he would have given them points. But it had not been. Naruto had charged in. Sasuke had seen and reacted. He had seen ahead and used Naruto as a distraction and that bothered Kakashi because that was something the old him would have done.

But what a surprise. He had not gotten to lay a hand on the real Naruto since the entire exercise. They were all clones. Kakashi kept his eye on his page. He sensed someone quickly approaching. He caught the fist before it could get near him and had been prepared to throw when he decided to test a theory.

He tossed the boy into the air ignoring the yelp. He watched the boy recover his stance. Naruto’s fingers danced over his weapon pocket before he left it alone. A strange decision.

Kakashi met the next punch. Dodged the next kick and easily swept the boy’s legs from under him. His small poke did nothing to dispel the boy. This one was real. How amusing.

Naruto stumbled away rubbing his side. “What the hell!” He snapped.

“Either that’s a stronger clone or it’s you.” Kakashi mused. “Decided to get serious?"

“What did you do to Sakura-chan?” Naruto asked. His blue eyes were wary.

“A shinobi technique. Genjutsu. You want to taste it as well?” Kakashi slid his book back into his weapons pouch.

“You made her see something nasty.” Naruto growled.

“You seem more fired up than before. Shall we begin?” Kakashi sensed Sasuke and Sakura fast approaching. As much as he wanted them to work together, he wanted to see what they were made of as well.

It seemed as though Naruto was aware of Sasuke’s and Sakura’s approach because his angle of charge was different to what Kakashi expected. Instead of coming head on, Naruto’s charge was different, a sweeping curve intending to get past Kakashi. Except Kakashi was not in the mood to let that work.

Instead of staying where he was he went on the offensive. A quick charge that cut Naruto off. Kakashi’s broad kick forced Naruto to jump backwards. Naruto skidded his hands flailing for a few seconds before he got his balance.

“The bells are here.” Kakashi reminded Naruto. “And so am I.”

Naruto growled and his next movement was a quick zig zag pattern towards Kakashi. Kakashi admired the tactic even as he avoided Naruto’s broad sweep to knock his feet from under him. He grabbed the blonde’s shoulder’s on his descent and flipped easily over Naruto and brought the blonde with him.

With muted force he slammed Naruto to the ground taking care to wind the blonde not seriously injure him. Then he turned his attention to Sakura and Sasuke who had finally caught up.

Xxx

Sasuke was good at targeting. He went for low blows in order to work his way up. Unfortunately,
he was not good enough a distraction for Sakura to take the bells or for Sasuke himself to take the bells. Kakashi chuckled as he sent Sasuke flying.

He smothered his laugh as he blocked Naruto’s kick. It was solid however. And his form was good. Something he was comfortable with. Kakashi approved. He sent Naruto flying back a few metres as he ran through the options of what to do. Then he settled on something hilarious.

XxX

“What the hell.” Naruto complained as he rubbed his ass. “What is even going on?”

“I don’t know but we’ll never get any of the bells before the time runs out.” Sakura pointed out. “He’s using jutsus on us now his fireball swallowed up Sasuke-kun’s.”

“Ah.” Naruto muttered. “I missed that.” It must have been while he had been recovering from that Thousand years of pain. Certainly felt like it would ache for a thousand years.

“Sasuke-kun!” Naruto glanced up to see Sasuke hobbling in their direction resembling a drowned rat.

“Did you get hit with that Thousand years of pain too?” Naruto demanded the moment Sasuke got near.

“No!” Sasuke hissed as he dropped to the ground. “Look we’re going to have to work together to take him down. We’re running out of time and one by one he can toy with us.” Exactly what Naruto had been thinking all along. But instead he shrugged and agreed with Sasuke.

XxX

“Well all of you managed to touch the bells at least once. That goes beyond my expectations.” Kakashi reassured them. Naruto sighed he knew it had been an impossible task but at least now they could have food.

“You mislead us.” Sakura pouted.

“It was a test.” Kakashi-sensei tried to reassure her. “And you all passed marvelously.” Kakashi-sensei jingled the bells at them. “Now I’d like to impart a few words about this test to you. Then we’ll talk about when we meet for our first real mission.”

XxX

“Um.” Kakashi said sheepishly. “Can we talk for a bit?” Naruto eyed him suspiciously. The boy’s fingers clung to the door, Kakashi doubted he would be invited inside, especially after the test he made them go through.

“We’re supposed to meet tomorrow afternoon.” Naruto said warily. “So why visit us now? Or is it just me?”

Kakashi shrugged. He knew Naruto already knew the answer. “I just believe there should be a little talk between the two of us.”

“Honesty. So I ask questions and you ask questions?” Naruto released the door to cross his hands over his chest. He looked even more suspicious.

“I’ll answer any question you might have.” Kakashi prodded.
“What’s the deal with the mask? Can you take it off?” Naruto immediately asked. His eyes twinkled even as he eyed Kakashi’s face.

“Not that.” Kakashi hummed as he stroked the mask in question. “That’s one request I won’t be fulfilling.”

“Are you here to tell me you know about the Kyuubi?” Naruto had lowered his voice on the last word. “Because I know Jiji would have told you.”

“Majority of the adults are aware of the nine-tails.” Kakashi reassured. “But ammm, that isn’t exactly all.”

“You were there.” Naruto’s voice was certain. Kakashi nodded. “Why tell me?”

“I want to be honest with my friends.” Kakashi smiled. Naruto’s eyes lit up with amusement.

“So you come to tell me not only do you know that I’m the Kyuubi. You tell me you were one of those sent to rescue me.” Naruto tilted his head. “I kind of suspected it would be like that. Jiji is the Sandaime he sent people that if the worst came to it would be able to protect themselves from me. I doubt he would have given me a Jounin sensei that could not efficiently deal with me.”

“You’re good.” Kakashi hummed. He fumbled around in his pocket for the other reason he had sought out Naruto. “Your taijutusu is pretty developed. Still rough however.”

“To be expected.” Naruto hummed. “So.”

“So?”

“So.” Kakashi’s froze at the amusement and intent he could sense from Naruto. “Now I know that you were ANBU. Do I get to tell the others?”

“Ahh.” Kakashi coughed as he took the keychain out his pocket. Naruto took it from him and Kakashi shrugged. “It’s no longer something I’m doing but…”

“Yeah I know how black ops work.” Naruto shrugged. He grinned at the small dog on the keychain. “Cute.” There was another pause. “Kakashi-sensei?”

“You aren’t alone.” Kakashi murmured. “I just wanted to let you know that it is okay to think about them and whenever you want to visit them tell me.”

“How did Haku die?” Kakashi sighed at Naruto’s question.

“He blocked an attack for Zabuza so Zabuza could get away.” Kakashi answered. “I’m sorry but he was quick. There was no way anyone could have dodged.” He was surprised at Naruto’s wistful smile.

“For Zabuza huh? I’m not surprised. I always felt it would come down to that.”

“Naruto.” Kakashi breathed. He hesitated. “How about we relocate the conversation? I know you’re fond of ramen but a drink?”

“Sure.”

XxX

“So you looked for me too?” Kakashi glanced back to see Naruto had returned from buying a soda
from the machine. “You know when I was gone.”

“Everyone did.” Kakashi pointed out. He ignored Naruto’s disbelieving hum. “Not just the Sandaime and Iruka-sensei cared. And people change.”

“Yeah.” Naruto mused. He popped the can open and took a sip. “I guess they do.”

“And I’m not just your Sensei because I was ANBU.” Kakashi pointed out. “The Sandaime thinks I’m the perfect match for this team and along with you we have a pretty smart ninja and an Uchiha.”

“So you’re saying to trust in you?” Naruto asked curiously. “After you thrashed all of us and shoved your fingers-“

“Ahh ha ha. That happened didn’t it?” Kakashi laughed. “Holding a grudge?”

“I’m going to get you back someday.” Naruto glared as he drank the rest of the soda. “I don’t care how long it takes.”

“Revenge is a dark thing.” Kakashi smiled.

“It’s them you need to be telling that.” Naruto laughed. “But what’s under the mask?” Kakashi jolted in surprise at Naruto’s curiosity. “What is it?”

“A face.”

“But what kind of face?” Naruto needled. Kakashi laughed before he lightly patted Naruto on the head and ruffled his hair.

“Mine of course. Now next time the soda is on you.”

XxX

“Who has eye on the target?” Kakashi asked into the comm.

“I do.” Sasuke responded.

“As do I.” Sakura answered.

“I’m right above it.” Naruto whispered. Kakashi nodded.

“Right, make your move.” There was a thump before a large yowl echoed through the speakers.

“Sakura here. I’m with Naruto.

“We got it.” Sasuke reported. “Ribbon on the ear. It’s the right one.”

“Gyaah!” Naruto’s yelp prompted Kakashi to remove his own comm set. With a sigh he decided to join his students. It was easy to find them after all. Naruto’s complaining could be heard a good distance away.

“Let’s just get it to where it’s supposed to be.”

“I’m not carrying this demon!” Naruto complained. “Ouch! This cat is nothing like normal cats and this is the third time we had to catch this one in particular!”
“It looks used to running away doesn’t it.” Sakura murmured just as Kakashi joined them. She carefully wrestled the cat into a cat carrier. Naruto collapsed onto the ground with a sigh. “But it’s still a mission.”

“You catch it next time then.”

“I had eyes on it nobody told you to catch it.”

“I was closer.” Naruto said dryly. “And you may have had eyes on it but it had eyes on you.”

“What?”

“You didn’t even notice.” Naruto brushed off his pants as he stood. “It had you made so I was the only one besides Sakura who could have made another move and Sakura caught that bad tempered tom yesterday. It had to be me if we wanted to wrap up the mission.”

“What’s that?” Sasuke hissed. “What’s all of that even about? Who said it saw me?”

“Body language and we had to capture this one more than once. What? Aren’t you taking this serious? Mr-all-missions-are-important? Or was that said only for my benefit?”

Sadly enough, Naruto and Sasuke had a few issues of their own. Naruto objected to Sasuke trying to lead over him and Sasuke found it hard to follow behind Naruto. They were constantly butting heads and competing.

“What about we leave the matter of how it was caught until later? Naruto-kun. Sasuke-kun.” Kakashi threaded steel in voice.

XxX

“Wahah! You got so big.” Naruto praised. “Time for a new pot. Almost a pity you’re just for decoration huh?” Naruto finished watering the plant on the windowsill. “After this mission I’ll get that new pot for you. I guess I should also go and see what kind of plants they have for sale too.”

Naruto fixed his headband as he made his way for the door. Another day of genin missions but it was just fine. His plant was getting big. Soon he would be able to keep it by the doorway or maybe give it away.

Since it was Iruka-sensei that had bought it for him he could always give it to the man after it got big enough and needed less attention.

A plant. Houseplant. A sign of stability. It was not as though Naruto did not know why Iruka-sensei had bought the plant for him. He knew all too well. Iruka-sensei had given the slightly damaged huckleberry bush to him to make Naruto feel at home. To give him part of a routine. And taking care of the plant had given him something to do. Naruto had enjoyed watering it. Taking care of it and waiting for it to grow healthy. It would be nice if it bloomed but that was not all Naruto wanted it for.

It was just nice coming home and seeing something alive there. Gardening was just relaxing.

XxX

There were just too many lost animals in Konoha. It got old. It was the same thing every time. Kakashi-sensei would set the time. They would turn up. He would be late, by a lot. It was
ridiculous how easily and quickly the man forgot them or the things he himself had planned.

Then they would head to the mission office around early afternoon and pick their mission which always consisted of some sort of running around Konoha. Naruto honestly thought Kakashi did it on purpose.

Lost cats, mostly which had to do with that damned cat that always got away. Naruto knew that he should tell the woman to get the hint already but with Kakashi-sensei always disturbingly close when they returned the cat there was no chance of that. Double the fact that Sakura objected to him being rude to the clients ensured that the woman avoided Naruto telling her in detail how and why she was better off with a new cat.

But if they were not chasing some cat or dog around they were doing chores. And of course Kakashi-sensei pulled out his book and ignored them while they did it.

It was kind of nostalgic and familiar.

Naruto bit his lip and shook his head to throw his thoughts away. He could not focus on that. Right now he was supposed to be looking for a lost puppy.

“I have eyes on the target.” Sakura’s voice chimed in his ear.

“I’m coming to your location.” Sasuke. Of course it was.

“I’ll be there in a bit.” Naruto sighed. He got up from his crouch and looked around the rooftops for the quickest way to where Sakura was.

Xxx

“The food will get cold.” Naruto shrugged as he started on his ramen. He usually would be with Sasuke and Sakura on waiting but he was hungry. His impromptu training session in the morning had left him starving and the quick cup ramen had done nothing to the ache in his gut. If he was to wait he would be half dead by the time Kakashi-sensei finally turned up.

“As if you care.” Sakura muttered. Naruto noted that she pulled her own bowl closer. “It’s ramen so as long as the bowl is there you’ll eat it.”

“No patience.” Sasuke huffed. Naruto noted how the boy did not even glance at his bowl and shrugged.

“I’ll say.” The flap behind them moved to reveal Kakashi-sensei. The man bathed them with a hurtful glance that Naruto refused to fall for. “Couldn’t you wait just a bit longer?”

“If you were the one paying.” Naruto snorted. “But this is our money. No way I’m going to wait on a Sensei and waste a good food experience.” He gave Kakashi a harsh thumb down.

“I wanted to eat with my cute team.” Kakashi said mournfully as he took a seat. Sakura snorted next to Naruto and Naruto rolled his eyes. “Only Sasuke waited for me.”

“That’s because he doesn’t need to eat.” Naruto mumbled under his breath. “He runs off of excellence and admiration.” Naruto was pretty sure Sasuke heard him but as he tasted the first noodle all thoughts left his mind.

Xxx
“Sasuke?” Kakashi questioned. They were done for the day Sakura and Naruto walking ahead laughing. Kakashi was impressed. Their client’s pet was a tricky one but Naruto and Sakura had teamed up to finally trap the cat.

Honestly the cat was worse than the Fire Lord’s wife’s cat. It had evaded them so many times that Kakashi had been thinking about stepping in a few times. Sakura and Naruto cornering it had been a point of pride for them.

“What?” Sasuke mumbled. Kakashi stared down at the boy’s head as they walked. He knew he was not imagining it. Sasuke was staring at Naruto but not in the usual way. It was confusion mixed with suspicion.

“You okay?” Kakashi asked. He slowed his steps to match Sasuke. “That cat put up quite the fight.”


XxX

“A plant?” Sakura leaned over the plant in the window. “Hey Sensei. This wasn’t here the last time we came here.”

“That’s right.” Kakashi smiled. He joined her at the window and carefully turned the plant around so she could see the writing on the pot.

“That- Naruto! He gave you a plant?” Sakura’s face was a cross of surprised and highly amused. “And he really named it that?”

“I think he said the room was too bare.” Kakashi hummed. He watched Sasuke’s form on the other side of his room. “Find anything interesting?” He called to Sasuke as the boy started getting close to his photographs. For the time being it was better if they did not know too much.

“He said it sucked that you had so little hobbies.” Sasuke corrected as he came back to join them. “Where is he anyway?”

“Right here!” There was a sound of a door closing and then running feet. Naruto charged into the room with a shopping bag held high. “Let’s eat them before they melt!”

“Which ones did you get?” Sakura asked and reached for the bag.

“Kakashi-sensei bought it.” Naruto said cheekily. “So I got the best ones. And there’s the ones you like Sakura-chan.” Kakashi rolled his eyes at Sakura’s delight and Naruto’s sly grin in his direction. He turned to see Sasuke subtly glancing from the door to Naruto and back.

Kakashi caught on quickly to the reason for Sasuke’s unease. They had not heard the door open had they?

XxX

Naruto shrugged at Sasuke’s questioning glance even as he cursed himself on the inside. Sometimes things just came flying out of his mouth. And what was he expected to say anyway?

Kakashi-sensei had just left it alone but Sasuke was relentless. Naruto guessed that Sasuke saw it as
a closing of the gap but honestly, they were beyond that sort of thing now. Or at least he was.

So he could recognise a few herbs. So he was better than expected at certain chores. There was no need for that sort of suspicion. Naruto was not down Sasuke’s back over the jutsus he knew so why be on Naruto’s case?

Honestly. Sasuke was making this harder than it had to be.

“Good job Naruto.” Naruto suppressed the shiver that occurred the moment Kakashi-sensei spoke behind him. Instead he forced his body to stay relaxed as he shoved the basket of herbs at their sensei.

“Our mission was just a basket of these things right?”

“Umhmm.” Kakashi’s eye wandered over the content of the basket. “It’ll be of great help to those at the clinic but that was faster than even I expected Naruto. You really are surprising.”

“Yeah I didn’t even know where they grew.” Sakura sighed down at her basket that was filled quarter of the way. “All we got was a picture of it and that it grew in damp places and you found all that?” Sakura sighed. “And Sasuke-kun didn’t get much either.”

“Eh heh.” Naruto laughed weakly. “I just know plants better I think.” Especially that plant. And he had seen it grow many many different places. Figuring out where it was possible for it to grow plentiful was almost ridiculously easy. “But now the client has extra right?”

“Well we’ve finished early.” Sasuke shrugged. “Even for us.”

Which meant training. Naruto looked at Kakashi-sensei to see the man’s head already buried back in that stupid book. He rolled his eyes. Would not be his first time training alone.

XxX

“Well that was how many D-ranks today?” Kakashi asked curiously. “Five? My how you’ve grown.”

“Cut it Kakashi-sensei.” Sakura frowned.

“But I’m touched. You’ve grown marvellously.”

“But he won’t treat us. Or turn up on time.” Naruto sighed. “I’d take disapproval over his cheapness.”

“I don’t know which I want more. Never see that book again or see him turn up on time.” Sakura whispered. Kakashi’s ears picked up the conversation but for the sake of his little team he pretended he had not.

“You’re going to spar now.” Kakashi beamed. He ignored his team’s gasps of outrage. Mostly from Sakura and Naruto. Sasuke was silent.

XxX

“Geez, Naruto! Haven’t you heard of manners?” Sakura complained. She tossed a small pebble that hit the blonde’s shoulder.

“I’m hot!” Naruto complained. His jacket abandoned and clad in a mesh shirt and his pants he was backing the rest of them. “I had to run all the way back ya know.”
“No one told you not to send Kakashi.” Sasuke pointed out. He waved his popsicle in Naruto’s
direction. “He would have gotten here fast too.”

“Kaka-sensei?” Naruto demanded. Kakashi inhaled as the air was filled with the noises of Naruto’s
slurping. “We’d be waiting forever if he had gone to get them. I learnt my lesson after we sent him
for the soda.”

“I’m right here.” Kakashi chuckled. “And I wouldn’t have let them melt.”

“Sure.” Naruto mumbled with his back to them.

“Well anyway we got to do something besides D-rank missions.” Sakura smiled. “Although to
think about it we’ve been doing all the chasing and building ones.”

They certainly had and Kakashi had a good gauge on their stamina. Also it was nice to see how
they reacted in different situation. Getting them to learn formations and tactics was easier when
they had an actual target. They needed to learn how to work together and how each other worked.

And they really had grown. And they would find their own way of fighting.

“Kakashi-san.” A shinobi dropped from the trees a respectable distance away. “Sorry to interrupt.”

“It’s okay.” Kakashi waved lazily. He had a good idea what this was about anyway.

“Hokage-sama would like to talk to Naruto for a bit.”

“It’s okay.” Kakashi turned to Naruto but the boy had already stood up. With the half eaten
popsicle in his mouth he snatched up his jacket.

“When are we meeting?” He asked as he slipped his hands through the sleeves.

“Nine at the bridge.” Kakashi mused. “Don’t be late.”

“Tell that to yourself.” Naruto snorted. Kakashi would have felt hurt if it had not been for the
amused look on Naruto’s face as he joined the Jounin. All too soon the two disappeared from sight.

“Kakashi-sensei.” Sakura looked worried. “Is Naruto in trouble? He couldn’t have done a prank he
was with us all day.”

“Ahh this has to do with another matter.” Kakashi shrugged. He could only wonder at what the
Hokage wanted Naruto to clarify for him now.

XxX

“Sit down. I have something to tell you.” Kakashi stood in front of them seriously and Sakura’s
heart beat sped up. She glanced next to her to only see that Sasuke’s face had not changed in the
least.

“Kakashi-sensei?” She asked as she retook her seat.

“You’re aware that a few years ago, Naruto disappeared from your class.” Sakura’s tongue froze in
her mouth. Of all the things for Kakashi to say that had not been one of them.

“Yes.” She nodded. “About two years after we started the academy I think.”

“Then he just reappeared.” Sasuke continued. Sakura felt her heart leap. “And no one said
anything. He was just back.”

“Yes.” Kakashi-sensei said. He sighed his eye closing before he stared up at the sky. “You were not aware of this. Originally even Naruto did not want to bother you with the information but I think and Naruto agreed that in the long run, secrets will hurt you as a group.”

“Huh.”

“So?” Sakura pressed. “What is it you have to say?”

“Naruto was kidnapped from the village and up a few weeks before he appeared back in your class he was with his captors.”

“What did you say!” Sakura thought she had verbalized her thought but instead she saw Sasuke had jumped out of his seat. “He was what?”

“No way.” Sakura found it so difficult to believe. Naruto had come back and just smiled away everything. He had been the same nagging prank pulling kid as before.

“How?”

“Now that’s something a little beyond your current rank.” Kakashi-sensei chuckled. “But it could have gone a lot worse.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Who knows.” Kakashi-sensei muttered. “If you want to know more you’ll have to ask Naruto himself but try not to press too hard. It’s a sensitive topic and not the way you would imagine.”

“Is he okay?” Sakura breathed.

“I wasn’t too sure.” Kakashi-sensei paused. “But the more I see him on this team the more I know that he will be.”

Will be. Meaning. He was not? Sakura looked at her feet as a cold hand gripped her heart.

XxX

“Uh Sakura-chan.” Naruto remained rigid in her embrace. Part of him was screaming. Most of him was confused. The embraces he had gotten used to were different. Everyone had been taller. His nose would have been crushed into a hip or a chest.

But as Sakura’s hair tickled his nose he was struck at how unfamiliar it all was. Besides Iruka-sensei and of course the Hokage….the last time he had been held like this would have been-

Better not think about it.

“You could have told us.” She sniffled and Naruto laughed softly. He awkwardly moved his hands around her so he could pat her hair in reassurance.

“No, I really couldn’t.” He admitted. “I’m not too good with words and talking about that. Every time I try it gets confusing.”

“Are you okay?” Sakura drew back to peer into his eyes. “I can’t believe something like this happened.”
“It wasn’t so bad.” Naruto shrugged. “It was an adventure and nothing the future Hokage can’t handle.” He would have to come clean one of these days about everything but not now. Right now even Sakura would not be able to handle the full story.

Naruto spotted Kakashi-sensei a few feet behind Sakura Sasuke at his side. He shook his head at the man. Kakashi-sensei had given the bare bones of the story and Naruto was willing to bet the man had given even less than was originally agreed on.

“Now you won’t have to worry about slipping up.” Kakashi-sensei shrugged. Naruto paid no mind to Sakura freezing up or the way Sasuke stiffened. “You can relax. Your teammates will understand you.”

Naruto shifted his gaze to Sasuke. The boy was watching him with an unreadable expression.

XxX

“No more!” Naruto complained. “I refuse to catch another lost pet! I’m worth more than these D-rank missions.”

“I have to agree.” Sasuke spoke up. Naruto blinked in surprise. “These D-ranks are becoming a waste of time.”


“Every time it is the same thing.” The Sandaime frowned. “They have been doing marginally well. Maybe it is time for a change of pace. I have a C-rank mission that needs to be completed.”

“Yes!”

“Of course, Sandaime-sama.” Kakashi-sensei responded.

“So? What’s the mission?” Naruto asked eagerly.

“He should be arriving just about now.” The Sandaime said. Naruto heard footsteps approaching and he turned to the door curiously. “Ah that is him. This does solve the problem if Team Seven is going to take the mission.” The door slowly creaked open and Naruto grinned.
Land of waves and despair

Chapter Summary

Mission in the land of waves

Chapter Notes

So weekly updates will be a thing for this month! I just wanted this out the way before I go languishing in the cinema and other stuff.
*This story will be long.
**Very long idk when we are going to get to the ending. So far I only have until the middle outlined. So yeah, this will take a while. And I was encouraged to do what I want with this fic so. Many detours to the plot will be made.
***I used a lot of canon stuff in this and future chapters. Mostly because I forgot so damn much so I had to reread and rewatch. And I added stuff that helped the story.
****There are many minor ships in this fic...but they don't matter only KakaNaru does.
*****There is a reason for the four year time skip. Anyway, love you darlings!!

The client was fishy. The mission was fishy but Naruto kept his mouth closed and instead raced back home so he could pack. He was getting to leave the village again and he was going to be on a C-rank. No matter how weird the mission sounded it was a C-rank.

No matter how rude the client was and how drunk the man seemed, he was still the client. And this was going to be fun. No cats to catch. No dogs to walk or lure out. No roof fixing that would have been far too difficult for a civilian to achieve.

No, this was going to be an honest to gods C-rank. Naruto flashed a smile at his reflection as he raced about packing.

His times spent on the road with Zabuza and Haku certainly would come in handy. Then again back then they could only carry the essentials. They were always on the move. Always going. Even when it was no longer just then.

You quickly learnt what was important. What was necessary and what was an affordable luxury. Naruto finished and eyed his pack. He hefted it onto his back testing the weight. It would do. It had more weapons than clothes but he knew what he was doing.

This was an escort mission after all and Naruto had nagging feeling in his gut.

XxX

Well at least he was not alone about his suspicions. When Naruto met up with his team he knew they were all packed for more than a fun trip across the country. Sasuke was eyeing the client. Sakura was trying to make conversation with the client and Kakashi-sensei.
Naruto met the man’s gaze and held it.

Well. You never knew what Kakashi-sensei was thinking after all.

“Shall we get going?” Kakashi-sensei offered. “We should try and get a good distance today at least. Packed everything you need to?”

“Hn.”

“Yes.”

Naruto nodded.

“Then let’s get going.”

XxX

The open road. He had sort of missed it. Naruto could still remember how it felt to travel with Haku and Zabuza. Both of them either just in front of Zabuza and if the territory was one that was, a few steps behind.

Back then Haku and Zabuza had always been restless. Nervous. Or at least Haku and the Demon Brothers had showed it more. Zabuza had walked fearlessly. Naruto had understood why Haku liked watching his back the most.

And of course it was a shinobi’s job to be observant. The world told a story. From the desert to the forests. Even ice mountains.

And it was the job of a shinobi to quickly hear the story and react accordingly. They were here to protect the client. Any attackers had the advantage. Because they were the hidden and Naruto and his team were the exposed.

It made the job hard.

Naruto knew that the mission was fishy and the more he watched the client the more certain he was and he was not the only one. Sasuke’s gaze had narrowed at the client on receiving the mission but Sasuke had not said a word.

Sasuke was as sick of all the D-ranks as Naruto was. Naruto could only hope that he was overreacting. That all this was simply a drunk carpenter’s paranoia. That his past was making him see things that were not there.

Naruto felt the back of his neck prickle and hoped he was just imagining it.

XxX

“Oi Sakura-chan.” Kakashi stopped trying to engage the moody client in conversation in order to eavesdrop. “Want to hear something?”

“No no! It’s not anything like that.” Naruto interrupted her. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you about it for a while.” Kakashi saw the slight adjustment to his steps Sasuke made and silently chuckled. “It’s about your hair.”

“My hair?” Sakura asked confused.
“Yeah it’s really long and pretty.” Naruto’s tone was soft and wistful. “But I think you should do something with it.”

“You mean cut it?” Sakura sounded horrified. “No way! This is supposed to-“

“No not cut it. I guess you’ve already gotten the talk about it being you know.”

“I have.” Sakura’s tone was muted.

“I think you should tie it up if you don’t want to cut it.” Out of the corner of his eye Kakashi saw Naruto gesture wildly. “Just for missions and stuff.”

“I don’t...”

“Lots of shinobi do it.” Naruto hesitated. “Um, I used to know someone with some gorgeous hair. Just like yours. It was long and beautiful and he was sort of proud of it.”

“Used to-Oh.” Sakura whispered.

“Yeah but he tied it up in this sort of way that was really cool. No one even knew how long his hair was until he took it down. Think about it. You would have your hair up out the way during missions but when it is us in the village you go wham wooow and let it down!” Naruto’s tone had risen during his excitement.

“I don’t think I know a good way.” Sakura admitted. “And I don’t want a ponytail or anything like that.”

“I can do it.” Naruto hummed.

“You can?”

“Yeah I used to do Haku’s sometimes and some the others used to let me brush their hair.” Naruto trailed off. “I mean. Long hair is so nice to play with and it is amazing how with a few different styles you can be a whole new person.”

“I think that’s pushing it.” Sakura laughed. “But when we take a break?”

“Yeah.”

Xxx

“It’s pretty.” Sakura laughed.

“Sakura-chan you seem to like your bangs so I left them.” Naruto finished adjusting the bun on Sakura’s head. “Good.” Naruto breathed in satisfaction. “It won’t move.”

“You’re good.” Sakura murmured. “It looks so well done.”

“Haku used let me put his back up.” Naruto shrugged. “He had pretty hair.”

“You done?” Kakashi interrupted. The ordeal was entertaining and he was happy for Sakura and Naruto getting closer. He was also happy Naruto shared part of his past so willingly but he had a bad feeling.

“Yeah.” Naruto nodded. Sakura tucked away her mirror.
There was not a moment’s hesitation in him when the time finally came and Naruto was glad about that. He had been afraid his reactions would have changed his response dulled. But it was exactly the same and he was relieved.

He could not help the smirk that slipped out as he blocked the enemy’s kunai. They had seen genin and one Jounin and thought their job was going to be far easier than they imagined. They were wrong.

Behind him was the client and Sakura. He could not afford to make any mistakes. Naruto felt the enemy’s strength as they tried to push him back.

“I don’t know what’s going on.” He hissed as he pushed right back with his own kunai. “But you won’t get past me.”

The enemy’s eyes widened at something behind him and Naruto used the distraction to push them back. He felt Sasuke come up from behind him and he leapt out the way pulling out a few shuriken.

“Well we won’t have to worry about that anymore.” Sakura’s voice shook Kakashi was unable to blame her. He had been ready to tell the genins to be on their guards. He had felt the trap closing in. Nothing he could not deal with. He had been prepared to use the opportunity to test their reactions.

But Naruto had blown the plan out of water when he attacked. He had been a blur as he met the enemy head on. His heart had stopped for a bit there. Naruto certainly had guts.

Kakashi was impressed with how Sasuke had leapt into action afterwards. Not a moment of fear or hesitation from the two of them even Sakura had held up well.

“What was that?” Kakashi turned his head spotting the way Sasuke was confronting Naruto. “We never learned anything like that.”

“What are you talking about?” Naruto’s tone was annoyed and frustrated. “You get tips too.”

“You knew he was there.” Sasuke pointed out. “How did you know?”

Good question but one Kakashi knew that Naruto would carefully evade. The kids had done well considering it was their first time in such a situation. With someone who really wanted to kill them. Or least it was Sakura’s and Sasuke’s first time that he knew of. Naruto had travelled for a few years with the worst of the worst.

It would be ridiculous if he did not know a little on how to spot a few enemies. And he had done well. Kakashi had not expected that from Naruto at all. But the way he had blurred to the rescue. Kakashi would have to look into that later.

Naruto was different from them. Sakura watched his back as he walked ahead of them. When the ninja had appeared Naruto had not tensed or cried out. The shinobi had been attacking but Sakura knew that Naruto had been moving at the same time.

That was not the Naruto people were used to. They knew he had been out the village. Kidnapped.
But what exactly had he suffered? He had so easily and quickly reacted to the situation in a way that left even Sasuke confused.

He really was seeing things different than them. Around them Sakura saw the open road and their client who they had to protect but Naruto seemed a little like their Sensei now that she looked closer.

Aware and observant. Sakura balled her hands into fists. She had to keep up. Already Sasuke and Naruto were getting ahead of her. The only good thing she had done when the shinobi attacked was jump to the client’s defence but already it had been far too late. Naruto and Sasuke had taken him down under the watchful eye of their Sensei.

But their Sensei had been proud of her too and stayed right but Tazuna’s side as well.

Xxx

“Sakura-chan was right behind me.” Naruto argued. “When the person you care about is right behind you and in danger Sasuke a hero gets a power up.”

“Are you trying to say Sakura couldn’t handle it?”

“I’m saying.” Naruto stressed. “That I saw the threat and I reacted accordingly. I don’t get what the big deal is.”

“So you’re saying the reason you were able to do all that is because you wanted to protect Sakura? Are you trying to imply that Sakura was unable to defend herself?”

“I’m saying that if anything I was buying time for Sakura and anyone else to react accordingly. It was a fluke Sasuke. I just thought it was weird how the birds were reacting.”


“I got lucky.” Naruto shrugged. Sasuke reluctantly let it drop.

Xxx

“Be on your guard!” Kakashi-sensei commanded. He yanked his hitai-ate up and Sakura’s mouth dried at the red eye. The air was getting tense. At Kakashi-sensei taking position ahead of them, Sakura froze where she was and made sure she covered Tazuna-san’s vital points.

“What is it?” She called out but the moment the words left her mouth she knew. The air was thick and heavy and there was a light mist forming.

“Someone’s coming.” Sasuke muttered from next to her. Sakura felt her nervousness rise as she peered around to get a sense of who they were dealing with.

“He’s here.” Naruto whispered before Kakashi-sensei moved suddenly. Sakura did not see the objects flying her way but she certainly did hear the sound of them being deflected.

“As expected of one of Konoha’s more elite shinobi.” The hoarse voice came from everywhere. It was hard to pinpoint exactly where it was coming from but it sounded as though it was coming from in front of them.

“Who are you.” Kakashi-sensei had taken out two kunais and his stance was at the ready. Sakura swallowed as she took another look around. She highly doubted this person would be alone and
distracting Kakashi-sensei would be a good way to launch a proper attack.

A figure appeared from the shadows in front of them. Sakura swallowed nervously as she took in the man’s slim figure.

She was surprised by the snort next to her. Naruto’s stance was almost relaxed and he was staring at the shinobi in amusement. “Kiri?” Naruto’s voice was amused and hoarse at the same time. Sakura’s fear went up. “You’re supposed to be Kiri? Haven’t you heard of a shirt you flasher.”

“Naruto!”

“But he isn’t wearing one.” Naruto pointed out to Sasuke. He pointed almost lazily to the man staring now at them. “And he made the mist too. Although it’s weak.” Naruto snorted. “And look at him? He’s supposed to be scary right? He isn’t scary at all!”

“Naruto.” Kakashi-sensei sighed.

“Not scary huh?” Sakura jolted as the air changed. The longer she stared at the man the more her body trembled. She was somehow being pulled into that gaze. Her fear was tripling. He was dangerous and he wanted to kill them! “What do you know?” You’re just brats.”

Sweat dripped down her arm and onto her Kunai. She was so afraid. Her mouth was frozen in her mouth. She took a step back and felt relieved at how she heard Sasuke and Tazuna-san doing the same. This man whoever he was, he was dangerous. And he could kill them and he wanted to.

“Heh.” Sakura twitched when she heard Naruto speak. “You think that’s cool? That’s something? That you’re the only one? That you’re special? Guess what anybody can do that and only people who understand can back it to hell up!” His last words were thick sounding as though something was in his mouth but his words were clear. Not shaking in the least.

The realization that Naruto was not afraid helped her to steady her trembling kunai. But then it hit her. It was as strong as a wind and so dark she whimpered and took a step back. But it was coming from Naruto.

She stared in confusion as Naruto locked eyes with the man ahead of them. And she could see the fury, the rage and she did not doubt Naruto in the least.

“You’re a missing nin from Kiri? Their standards have dropped. Or were you one of those that came out after they stopped the program?” Naruto taunted. Sakura shuddered at the thirst for blood that she was sensing from Naruto. “Why don’t I come over there and introduce myself? Since I’m the brat.”

“Naruto! Don’t antagonize him.” Sasuke hissed. “Remember the mission.”

“I think you’re taking care of it quite well over there.” Naruto murmured. “But he isn’t going to just let us pass.”

“What the hell is Konoha doing?” The man took a step back that was countered by Kakashi-sensei and Naruto taking a step forward. “And a sharingan? Damnit! This isn’t over Tazuna.” Another step back and the light mist thickened.

“He’s running.” Naruto hissed in disgust.

“We’ll see him again don’t you worry about that.” Kakashi hummed. “For the time being we need to be on our way.”
“So how do we get into the land of wave?” Sakura asked curiosly.

“By boat.” Naruto answered.

“Naruto!” Sasuke hissed. Kakashi silently watched them from where he walked by Tazuna’s side. The man was shaken. “What was that?”

“Back there? A missing nin.” Naruto answered so simply that Kakashi huffed softly and looked away. He had his suspicions but Naruto was confirming a lot of them. The Hokage…the Sandaime would not handle the news well.

“How were you able to-“ Sakura cleared her throat. “I couldn’t breathe! But you were able to move and talk and everything.”

“I was with some pretty scary shinobi myself you know.” Naruto boasted. “After a while you stop being scared. And if you freeze up you die. I wasn’t going to die.”

“But you wanted to fight. You wanted to hurt him too.” Sakura pointed out.

“It’s nothing.” Naruto brushed off. “You’ll be able to do it too but you gotta get really mad.” Sasuke huffed and left the topic alone but Kakashi caught the moment Naruto looked back at him. They watched each other for a few moments. Held each other’s gaze before Naruto looked away.

Naruto knew there was no sense in trying to hide it from him after all. He might want to downplay his knowledge and talents but Kakashi was something different. However, with the attack things had changed. Which meant Kakashi would have to do some training and the others too. But they were good students. Quick witted, all of them. They should be able to catch on rather well.

XxX

“So that’s it.” Kakashi-sensei looked tired. “That’s the true story behind this place.”

“So what are we going to do?” Sasuke asked as he neatly put away his chopsticks.

“Hmm we’ll stay and complete the mission.” Kakashi-sensei answered. “But you three have some training to do.” Naruto saw the look Sasuke was giving Kakashi-sensei and frowned a bit before he remembered what they had seen before.

That eye had shown something very special. A sharingan. Kakashi-sensei had given the brief about it when Tazuna-san had been occupied but Naruto saw that Sasuke was not satisfied with that. But their Sensei was strong if he could use someone else’s bloodline limit. He wondered if they would ever get the full story behind the eye.

XxX

First chakra control. Kakashi knew he would be going through the motions with Naruto. The other two had not caught on but he knew Naruto had more control than he let on. So the best thing to do would be to train them all and tweak Naruto’s skills as he went along.

First, a little lesson. Kakashi knew Sakura would catch on quickly enough. Now that they had the story to the country, Kakashi wanted to get a proper look around and find out who all their enemies were. He wanted to do the right thing but this was their first C-rank. No matter how much he suspected Naruto could handle himself. Sakura and Sasuke had never left the village in their lives.
And Itachi and Shisui would have a big problem with him if something happened to Sasuke as well. Kakashi could sense Sasuke’s need to succeed. He could guess the reasons to why. This training would be another test and then he would cram as much as he could into their heads.

This was going to get bad but there very rarely was a thing called good missions anyway.

Xxx

As expected of Sasuke he learned quickly and Kakashi suspected Itachi had something to do with the way Sasuke was managing to do the tree walking exercise. Sakura did it better, her control close to perfect. However, her stamina needed work.

Naruto on the other hand his control needed a little fine tuning but he was good. They all were. But right now they were able to do it as they concentrated. Kakashi would have to test that and fix it.

Xxx

“Morning training?” Kakashi asked cheerfully. Naruto was doing pull ups on a sturdy tree branch. He had to be at it for a while judging by how his skin glistened. “You’ll be too tired for the training later.”

“Nope.” Naruto panted. “And this is going to help.”

“Are you planning to carry Tazuna-san away from danger?” Kakashi asked curiously.

“Heh as if.” Naruto panted. “It’s not for now.” Naruto’s fingers tensed on the branch. “Just getting stronger one day at a time.”

“Hmm.” Kakashi mused. He watched the way Naruto’s body flexed with each pull up. How Naruto’s muscles strained. He also noted the development of the boy’s body and filed away the information for later. “You shouldn’t push it.”

“Nowhere near pushing it.” Naruto hissed as he hovered off the ground. With a loud groan Naruto hauled himself up until he could scramble onto the branch. “Kakashi-sensei why are you up so early?”

“My student was up early.” Kakashi pointed out. “I’ve been ignoring it but I wanted to know where you were going.” Kakashi watched as Naruto walked on the branch. “Surveillance is going to be later.”

“When do you think people will come after Tazuna-san?” Naruto swung around his feet glued to the bottom of the branch. Excellent chakra control.

“When they think they have enough people or a good enough plan to deal with a Sharingan.” Kakashi admitted. “Until then, you guys train.”

Xxx

The townspeople were scared. Understandable. But the way they ignored their own inevitable destruction bothered Naruto. Sitting quiet would achieve nothing. Doing nothing would get you nowhere but an early grave their backs were pressed against the wall and yet the people could not see it.

Naruto passed on some of his candy to the huge eyed orphans. He watched the big smiles on their faces and felt his heart ache. They were so sweet. So simple. They were worth fighting for.
This country must have been beautiful once. It must have been. It still had the possibility of being a good country again but the people were willing to let their will die for the illusion of safety.

Naruto knew this kind of evil. He knew it far too well and he knew that this town that seemed a shadow of itself would become worst if left alone. They really had no choice. They would have to fight.

XxX

“No one bothered you again today hmm?” Kakashi asked Sakura. “That’s good.”

“What did you do Kakashi-sensei?” Sakura asked. Kakashi’s ears picked up the sound of dragging footsteps and he gestured to the door.

“Hmmm that.” He said as Sasuke and Naruto stumbled through the door. Naruto looked far worse but that was because his training was different very different. Naruto had a vast amount of chakra inside him and Kakashi wanted him to use it well.

“Who is on the bridge tomorrow?” Sasuke asked as he sat at the table with a wince.

“Me again.” Sakura shrugged. “Kakashi-sensei said he’ll switch with me.”

“You have something to do in the morning?” Sasuke asked curiously. Kakashi watched the way Naruto’s fingers gripped the table before he answered.

“There’s something I want to take a look at.” Kakashi hummed. “It’ll only take a bit. Sakura will be back and training with you before you know it.”

XxX

“Happy hunting.” Naruto grunted. Kakashi shoved his hands into his pockets as he watched the boy labour and train.

“What?” He asked carefully but Naruto only spared a moment to roll his eyes at him before he continued with the push ups.

“You’re about to do something really cool in secret far away from us. So either you know where their base is or you’re about to mess up their plans.” Naruto collapsed gasping. “Either way happy hunting.”

“Don’t tire yourself out.” Kakashi reminded him. He eyed the boy’s back that was covered in sweat. “What have you been doing?”

Naruto rolled to his back before he kicked himself upright. He slouched forward his hands on his knees. “Training.”

“You’re of no use if you’re tired.” Kakashi pointed out.

“That’s why I’m stopping here.”

XxX

Even the weak could find strength in numbers. And these lot had numbers. Kakashi slowly removed his kunai from the bandit’s neck his other arm supporting him to keep him from falling and making too much sound.
Kakashi gently eased the man to the ground and ignored the sound of blood dripping onto the leaves. This man had not stood a chance and he was the fifth Kakashi had encountered. He had located the base and their enemy.

Now remained the case of slowly shaving down their numbers. Keeping an eye on his surroundings Kakashi fished out a vial from his jacket. One drop was enough along some of his chakra to speed the process along.

All too soon the body disappeared in a puff of smoke. It was strange to use such a technique on someone other than a fallen team mate. Kakashi carried it along so that he still had that option. But using it on enemies. And not even enemy shinobi at that.

There were ninjas among them but Kakashi doubted there were more than four. The one he had disposed of on their way there after Naruto and Sasuke took him down, that one had to have belonged to this group as well.

And from what he had gathered they were scared shitless of the thought of facing shinobis. Even the missing nins. Kakashi had not found a way to take them out as yet but he knew that an opportunity would present itself sooner or later. But he wanted to throw a wrench in their plans.

So he would give them a ghost to chase. If these men were to simply go missing suspicion would be raised. Some would fear that he was picking them off one by one. Kakashi slowly picked up the man had been carrying.

But if they left along with some belongings. Some would think that they had simply fled. Or spirited away. There would be simply way too many theories to come to as simple decision or a simple plan. Which all worked in his favour of course. He had some things to teach his cute little genins before he sent them into actual danger.

XxX

“Food.” Naruto hummed. Kakashi watched as he rifled through the first bag Kakashi had brought back. “Clothes, weapons too.” Naruto flashed him a happy grin. “Good haul.”

“So.” Sasuke asked as he tested the sharpness of a knife. “What is all this for?”

“Well it would be a waste to just throw them away.” Sakura pointed out. Kakashi eyed her as she sniffed some of the vegetables. “Better not to waste anything right?”

“The town is suffering.” Kakashi pointed out. “And yet our opponents have so much.”

“A few clothes and food won’t fix that town Kakashi.” Sasuke pointed out. He ran his fingers over the cloth of a shirt. “It’ll only temporarily ease some their pain. You know this.”

“It’ll help with their survival. Those too cold. Those too hungry. You heard the old man. This bridge is their hope even with many losing hope.” Naruto held a shirt to his face and Kakashi was caught on how peaceful he looked. “And we can keep the weapons.”

“Of course.” Sasuke sounded insulted. “We can’t arm them. Who knows what will happen.”

“They’ll die.” Naruto shrugged. Kakashi watched as Naruto folded the shirt to set it aside. “Whether they fight or not. If the bridge doesn’t go up they’ll die. Easy as that.”

“So what are we going to do?” Sakura tested the sharpness of a sword. “Sensei.”
“Learn how to use these?” Kakashi asked. Sasuke rolled his eyes and Sakura sighed before she gathered the vegetables to herself.

“I shouldn’t have asked.” She muttered as she left. Naruto stood the moment she left and unzipped his jacket.

“And what are you doing.” Sasuke hissed as Naruto shrugged into one of the poorly maintained shirts.

“Going undercover.” Naruto grunted as he slipped out his pants and grasped the one that looked the worst. Kakashi wrinkled his nose discreetly behind his mask. The original owner obviously had neglected on the washing.

“Kakashi.” Sasuke sounded exhausted. “Talk to him.”

“Don’t get caught.” Kakashi said cheerfully. Sasuke sighed and Naruto laughed. “Don’t give yourself away now.”

“As if I could.” Naruto muttered as he shoved the clothes into one the bags.

“You speak as though you have done something similar to this before.” Kakashi chuckled. “Have you?” Sasuke’s eyes darted to his but Kakashi kept a close eye on the tense Naruto. He remained frozen in place his hands trembled as his fingers hovered over an article of training. “Well?” Kakashi pressed softly. “This something familiar Naruto?”

Through effort Naruto continued but Kakashi saw the way Naruto’s fingers still trembled. “How was I supposed to do something like this before?” Naruto groused. “Sensei you need to stop reading fairy tales.” Naruto slung the bag over his shoulder and his wary look to Kakashi kept him from pressing more. “A hero isn’t a hero to everyone.”

Kakashi gave Sasuke credit. He waited until Naruto left before he levelled him with a suspicious glare. Kakashi amused himself with kunais and avoided the gaze. Somehow he knew this place would open Naruto up more than the village and a team would.

Kakashi tossed a kunai up and caught it one handed. “Oi Sasuke. How about some one on one training?”

Sometimes all that was needed was a little kindness. Naruto disappeared the way he had arrived and as he left he heard the young mother’s exclamation as she found the thick shirts he had left behind.

Naruto knew how cold the nights could get. How people suffered. He had seen it before. Experienced it before back when they had to run and there had been so much running. Food left behind. Times when the food they had were not enough for those simply doing nothing.

But he had not stayed doing nothing for long. He would have been left behind eventually. Naruto hopped down an alley and dropped pants and shirts onto some the bigger kids and slipped down another alley way.

He knew how the streets worked for poorer kids. Things were always given to the younger ones. In most cases someone always had a younger sibling. Not all the time did good things go for the younger ones but it did mostly.
Most of the time someone was looking out for the young ones. But if things were too bad then that stopped. It was hard for normal people, for people at all to suffer endlessly with no reprieve in sight. That was when cruelty and drastic measures came into play.

Naruto folded up the empty sack and stuffed it into his pocket. This country was sad. Painful and it was hard to believe that a bridge would solve that. But the old man believed that the bridge would be the first step.

Naruto just did not know if these people would last long enough after the first step.

XxX

Sasuke was the academy’s number one rookie and it showed. He was good and Kakashi could see behind his technique to where Itachi lay. Whether that was good or bad remained to be seen.

He was learning Sasuke. Seeing the boy’s triggers trying to map him out. They were going to face an enemy soon and he needed to know Sasuke’s strengths and weaknesses. Because just because the boy was good did not mean Kakashi could protect all of them. Things happened.

“Again.” He instructed. He watched Sasuke form the necessary seals. They would have to eventually work on speed. Naruto tended to stick to taijutsu and use his clones. Sasuke had the power and chakra to do some devastating moves.

But Kakashi knew that eventually Sasuke would come to realize just how much chakra Naruto had inside him and he would know there was no way he could match. Because even if he concentrated on quality. When it ran out that was game over.

“You’re not going to talk about that eye?” Sasuke panted. Kakashi raised an eyebrow in mild surprise. He touched the covered part of his eye gently. Thoughts of Obito as always lingering.

“Maa what’s to say? I have a Sharingan but it’s nothing like yours.” Kakashi shrugged.

“How is that possible.” Sasuke asked curiously. “Itachi never talked about anything like this.”

“For good reason.” Kakashi answered. Inwardly he winced at the position Itachi had put him in. because Itachi wanted to spare his brother from the darker sides of being a shinobi. A shinobi with a bloodline limit he had made it harder of Kakashi because there was no easy way to say that not only did people covet the abilities. That bad things happened to those with seemingly obtainable bloodline limits.

Even if people knew they did not have the body to properly use it. Like himself. He could barely use the Sharingan as it was. Pushing his limits was hard. He was lucky so far that he did not have to push himself or his eye. But if it came right down to it, he would have to use it.

Kakashi eyed Sasuke and his simple black eyes and found that he could not blame Itachi. The Sharingan was a powerful thing after all. He could not blame Itachi for wanting his brother to remain the way he was for a little longer. A little innocent in the blood soaked world of shinobi. Because sooner or later the pain would come.

And Sasuke’s eyes would reflect the agony.

“Well, a shinobi’s body is full of secrets.” Kakashi said softly. “And this eye is something I plan to protect.”

XxX
“Crying will get you nowhere. It’ll not accomplish something. I respect those who are willing to fight for what they believe in. To make an actual change. Not tuck their heads under the sand just because. Crying won’t change anything. It will be the same thing every day. And then what? Heroes won’t be heroes without struggle. Without pain and something to protect. So go hide under some sheets. Cry-baby.”

“Naruto!”

“Let him go Sakura.” Sasuke eyed her from where he sat at the table. “Let him go.” The door closed signalling Naruto’s departure. Kakashi sighed as Inari fled upstairs. It had escalated rather quickly but he had not expected Naruto to last so long.

However somewhere Inari had hit a nerve because Naruto had quickly and fiercely responded his voice deep with his barely contained rage. Kakashi would have to get back to Naruto on that. However, it would not do to drive a stake between them and their client’s family. He would have some mending to do.

Xxx

“Need some help?” Kakashi asked softly. He had been giving Naruto the needed privacy but watching the boy continuously fumble was not his way.

“Sure.” Naruto sighed. Kakashi lightly sprang down from the tree to join Naruto on the ground. He had taken his seat next to Naruto when he realized his position would not do. He had been about to move closer when Naruto shifted half leaning into his lap his hands outstretched.

Kakashi froze as Naruto shoved his hands on his. “Help me run through the seals?” Naruto asked and Kakashi nodded as he took Naruto’s hands in his. Naruto’s shoulder bumped into his as he guided Naruto through a pretty standard formation.

Naruto had obviously taken the term cooling off too literal. As Kakashi kept a decent speed for forming the seals he was able to identify the cool scent on Naruto. The blonde had obviously taken a swim or to be more precise a dunk in water. And judging by the faint scent of salt the blonde had gone farther than the river.

“Maybe this would go easier if I was in your lap.” Naruto laughed. Kakashi’s heart stuttered.

“Maybe.” He contemplated. “But somehow I doubt that would change much.”

“Well not now.” Naruto snorted. “Another time. Though I’m tempted just to get off the hard ground.” Kakashi barely refrained from mentioning that not much would change in terms of seating. He doubted his thighs were the soft cushioning Naruto was looking for.

“Ahh.” Kakashi coughed.

“I lost my temper.” Naruto said softly.

That Kakashi could talk about. “But it was understandable and after little Inari calms down he’ll see things in a new light.”

“Crying doesn’t change anything. Some people won’t come save you even if you are crying. The world won’t care. There are so many people crying Kakashi.” Naruto whispered.

“I know.”
“Joining them achieves nothing. But standing up does.” Naruto smoothly finished the combination of seals and looked up at Kakashi. His blue eyes were darker in the dim light. “Anyway. Should I do it again?” Naruto wiggled his fingers. “Practice the seals.”

XxX

“He didn’t say that out of spite. He doesn’t hate you.” Kakashi said softly. Inari was next to him and the boy’s sniffles had lessened as they sat on the pier. “He’s stubborn. We heard about the situation from Tazuna-san. Naruto also grew up without a father when he was younger.”

Naruto had lacked a family while he was younger but not for very long. As Kakashi suspected. Haku and some of Zabuza’s team had spent four years trying to make up for that lack in their own ways.

“He doesn’t know what parents are.” Kakashi continued. “He didn’t have a single friend.” Fate had been cruel to Naruto. The life he should have had. The one Minato-sensei and Kushina-san had hoped for, that dream life had been torn away.

Inari turned to him in surprise and Kakashi had to stop a small laugh from coming out. He knew why the boy was confused. Just looking at Naruto you would never know these things. That he was an orphan. That he had been alone.

“He was always desperate to make people recognise him.” Kakashi said softly. The pranks. The fighting Kakashi had watched Naruto do. The way he had fought for attention. The dream Naruto had found all during that struggle. “And he’s able to put his life on the line for that dream.” Regardless of his past, Hokage still meant something to Naruto. It was still his dream.

Kakashi saw it in the way Naruto looked up at the Hokage’s stone faces. In the way he watched the Sandaime.

“He’s probably bored of crying now.” Kakashi admitted. The words Naruto had spoken rang true. That Naruto had learned such a truth at such a young age depressed him. Inari looked away from him but Kakashi saw the way the boy’s hands twitched. He most likely related and understood.

No he definitely related and understood. Naruto had that way about him and although it seemed most of Naruto’s words had gone over little Inari’s head, Kakashi was here to play translator and it was working.

“That’s why he knows the true meaning of being strong just like your father.” Kakashi pointed out. Naruto who had jumped to Sakura’s defence so quickly that Kakashi was still amazed. Who obviously was someone that put his friends first and wanted to protect them. “Naruto might be the one that understands you the most. Some of those things he said earlier. He most likely was telling himself over and over again.” Kakashi admitted.

He met Inari’s shocked gaze and smiled.

XxX

The sun was low. Naruto sat on a hill just above the town and watched. He was by himself but he did not feel alone. As he looked down at the town, saw smoke wafting upwards from several locations. As he listened to the sound of the city. It was hard not to be drawn to the past.

It would be around this time that they would enter a city. Some of them scouting for information or searching and researching clients. Or buying food.
And of course Zabuza would remain behind. Naruto looked at the empty spot next to him. If this was anything like then, if it was anything like the past Zabuza would have stood his legs apart and his sword balanced on his shoulders as he waited for the others to return.

But of course if Naruto was still with them things in this country would have played out differently. The others had not been heroes. They had been grasping for survival by any means necessary. It did not excuse them but it was hard to forget that.

This country. They would have come here. Or at least Zabuza would have, Naruto was certain of it.

XxX

He was good but everyone had their limits. Naruto had been pushing himself since they first got there and Kakashi saw his progress. One day’s rest would not hurt him. He was in danger of chakra exhaustion anyway and by Kakashi’s estimation, they had a few more days until their enemy made a move again. The bridge still had some ways to go before it could be considered finished.

“That—” Sasuke cut himself off as he shook his head. He gave a sigh before he finished putting on his shoes.

“You know he won’t stay asleep.” Sakura whispered as she stood by the door.

“Let him rest for now.” Kakashi hummed. “He’s improved a lot in a few short days after all.”

“He’ll follow.” Sasuke pointed out.

“Sasuke-kun is right.” Sakura whispered. “Will he be okay here?”

“He’s just tired.” Kakashi responded. “Now let’s get going. Naruto gets to sleep in today. We are going to need him at his best.” Kakashi held the door open so that his team and Tazuna could trail outside. When he allowed the door to close behind him he carefully listened to make sure that Naruto had not woken. On hearing nothing he nodded to himself and trailed after the group.

XxX

“Ah I seem to have miscalculated by a lot.” Kakashi sighed. The mist was light but it was still enough to give trouble and he could smell the enemy.

“How much?” Sasuke asked tensed. Kakashi was proud of how he and Sakura stood with their bodies firm and tense ready to protect Tazuna.

“A lot.” Kakashi sighed. “A lot of them.”

XxX

“Hah?” Naruto rolled awake. He was unsure to what made him wake up but it had to be something important. He stilled listening to his surroundings. The sun was peeping through the windows. Too high in the sky for the old man to still be here.

Which meant that the house was silent because he had been left behind. Naruto snarled silently as he bounded out of bed. He rushed into the bathroom half his clothes off before he risked the water. It was cold but it went a long way towards waking him.

He struggled into clothes as he rushed down the steps. Inari’s mother was staring at him in amazement as he jumped down the last steps.
“They said you would sleep all day!” She gasped and Naruto snorted at that.

“I’m fine now. How long did they leave?” Inari’s mother glanced out the window.

“Not too long but they should be at the bridge already. Is your body okay?” Naruto gave a fleeting thought towards his body to access it. He gave the lady a thumbs up as he hurried out the house. The food pill Iruka-sensei had given him would have to be breakfast.

The back of his neck was prickling as he rushed down the pier. Something bad was going to happen. Or at least he thought so. Sometimes the senses played tricks on you. Sometimes it was best to listen to them. Heading to the bridge as fast as he could was the best thing to do.

XxX

This was bad. There was no easy way out. It was going to be a hard fight out as it was. They may not all be skilled but there were plenty enough that mistakes were not going to be an option and Kakashi was working on a disadvantage. He could not afford anything to happen to his team or Tazuna-san.

Especially his team. A scent on the wind alerted him to a person’s stealthy approach. Kakashi slowly turned and removed his kunai from his pouch. There was no way he was going to allow these people to harm his team if he could help it. Logically he knew he could not protect everyone by himself. But Kakashi was determined to shave off some the numbers.

He gathered enough chakra that he was able to make the quick dash his feet soundless on the bricks of the bridge. He met the attacker head-on. Kakashi stepping in his body angled low even as his kunai swept down from high. There was a choked gurgle and Kakashi with his eye saw the man’s surprised eyes as he weakly tried to staunch the bleeding from where Kakashi jaggedly removed the kunai.

The man sank to his knees the sound echoing in the light might and Kakashi quickly retreated to where he had stood.

“Kakashi?” Sasuke asked.

“That was me.” Kakashi confirmed. He hesitated at baring his sharingan. He would rather wait until he was pushed into using it. Judging by the crowd they had to fight, every scrap of chakra he had would come in handy.

Shadows approached them but Kakashi could tell by their confident walk that they were no real threat and the moment the shadows got close enough that Kakashi could see their faces he knew why.

“Sasuke.” He said softly. “These are water clones.”

“No problem.” Sasuke hissed. Kakashi felt pride at the way Sasuke darted forward his form giving no openings. The enemy had to be surprised at Sasuke’s speed. Something Kakashi had been working on for the last few days. Sasuke was back before the clones fell to the ground as water again.

“Good job Sasuke-kun!” Sakura praised. She looked around at them from where she was guarding Tazuna’s side.

“Well done.” Kakashi praised. “You’re constantly living up to your title as the academy’s number one rookie”
“But?” Sasuke asked. Kakashi tensed as the mist grew denser.

“Well in this situation where it looks bad all around I wouldn’t mind a few surprises and aces up our sleeves.” Kakashi admitted. “I’d like something unpredictable.”

“Be careful what you wish for.” Sasuke muttered. Kakashi’s eye fixed on a lurking shadow attempting to close in.

XxX

As it turned out, he had to go back. Something was nagging at him and the more Naruto tried to shake off the feeling the more certain he became that he was in a sort of pincer trap. From behind and in front. Complete annihilation.

Naruto eyed the path back to the house. He was desperate to get to the others but they could handle themselves and if not Kakashi-sensei was there. On the other hand, he had left behind the most vulnerable people and something sinister had passed this way.

Something eager to hurt. Naruto eyed the sword cuts on the trees. If he was to follow them he just knew he would find something worse along the way.

If he hurried, he could check it out and join the others.

XxX

Part of Kakashi was elated. Sasuke would be of greater help now. Another much stronger part of him was sad because of what this meant. Even though the Uchiha bloodline was praised and worshipped. Those that carried the actual legacy despaired of passing it on. Like Itachi had.

Kakashi could remember Obito being eager for his to awaken and remembered the circumstances that it had. The eyes of the Uchiha were a painful thing to endure. There were strengths and weaknesses to them but people only saw the strengths.

Still, Sasuke’s eye had awakened. Not all the way but it was still enough. Sasuke was feeling pride. Kakashi knew that. The boy had adapted quick already relying in his newly awakened Sharingan. But not only the boy’s bloodline limit would be awakened.

There were too many enemies for them to spare anyone. When someone went down. They could not chance them coming back up and Kakashi was hesitating on giving the order. Sasuke would do it. Kakashi knew he would but he was reluctant to be the one to pull the curtain.

He wanted the moment to be when it was necessary. First kills were hard no matter the reason and now was not the time or place to have the breakdown that occasionally happened.

They needed Sasuke sharp. So Kakashi would be the one to do the actual killing for them. To keep their hands clean for a little longer. They knew the situation they were in. They knew their chances of getting away unscathed was low. They also knew the enemy was numerous. Sasuke and Sakura were intelligent.

XxX

Heroes were supposed to be late. And flashy. And pure. Naruto waved goodbye to Inari as he carted off the two bandits. They were not shinobi. They were far from it. But they were still a threat and they had tried to kill Inari and his mother.
“I can’t take too long.” Naruto said softly to the men being carried by his clones. They were tied up and gagged. “I’d like to say this will be painless but…I’ve never died before. And my near death experiences never included drowning.” The men made muffled noises and continued to struggle but Naruto shrugged in response.

He toyed with their swords as they got further away from Inari. At least he knew his bad feeling was justified.

XxX

Sasuke was shaky. Kakashi cursed in his head as he worked to keep them from being overwhelmed. Sakura could have made the hit but Sasuke had decided to take it instead. If he had let Sakura handle it for a while longer he could have remained as he was.

But Kakashi knew that was not what Sasuke wanted. He wanted to change. Grow. Become a shinobi worthy of respect in his own right. Which was why he had met the enemy shinobi and made the fatal blow as the shinobi tried to get closer.

Sakura could have stunned him. Forced him to retreat until Kakashi could take care of it. But Sasuke had wanted to make his stand and had chosen his path. And he now realized how hard it was. How heavy the blood coating his hand was.

Some said that if you were prepared the first kill was easy. It was the second that was harder. Kakashi knew better. All kills were hard but you learned to live with it. You found a way to cope that allowed you to keep your humanity or you yourself were lost.

And many ANBU members got lost. Shinobi too. Killing was not easy. Not the method or the act. Kakashi watched Sasuke dodge a sword and hesitate before slashing his kunai across his opponent’s neck. Not enough to kill but a serious wound.

Killing was not easy and he was proud that Sasuke was holding up so far. Even though he was sad that his student had come down this path so early and by the look of things Sakura would have to do the same. The group was still formidable and still pushing them. Protecting Tazuna-san was their goal but there were still many enemies to go through and they were only so many. And they had only so much chakra.

The only good thing was that the mist was not so heavy to block their sight. They could still see each other and their approaching enemies.

Kakashi mentally evaluated those approaching. He ignored their jeers and cries and tried to find the most dangerous ones. Those would be his target. He finally located his target. Things had finally reached the point that a sharingan was necessary. Or at least the use of his was.

They still had far too many to fight. The longer they took the more chances their enemy had to turn it all in their favour and from the way things looked the sights of their comrades dying did not deter them in the least. In their eyes they saw three fighters.

Their pride would not let them leave and that might be their downfall.

Kakashi used as little chakra as possible to charge at his target. He stole the target’s sword using it to quickly take out the man next to him. The sword was an inch from the target’s neck when something froze Kakashi’s hand. The sight of senbons suddenly piercing the target’s neck. Kakashi froze as the senbons made the target freeze before he crumpled.

But that was not the only strange thing happening. All around them was the sound of something
making an impact. Shocked cries and the sound of bodies. Toppling.

“The hero has arrived!” Kakashi’s voice caught at the sound of Naruto’s voice.

With the bodies falling he was able to get a better gauge of the situation. Also, the fog was lessening. Kakashi turned to locate Naruto’s voice and found the boy toe to toe with an enemy shinobi. Kakashi inhaled sharply in fear. Fear that quickly faded as the shinobi. The mist nin slowly fell to his knees.

“Naruto?” Sakura asked.

“Sorry. Inari had some trouble back at the house.” Naruto said. He leaned over the enemy shinobi and Kakashi inhaled in shock over the senbon he withdrew from the man’s face. “I had to deal with them first.”

The shinobi was visible to Kakashi’s gaze and he did not need the insight of the sharingan to know that the man was dead. Naruto had got plenty of their enemies. But not all.

“What do I pay you for? Can’t you kill one family?” The voice demanded. Kakashi’s gaze went to the short man approaching and knew that was when it would end.

“You’re him then. This is all your fault.” Naruto snarled. Kakashi’s alarm grew at the boy’s tone before he gave a careful glance towards Tazuna and the others. Priorities. Naruto had proved that he could handle himself. “This will end with you won’t it?” Naruto hissed. Naruto’s aura grew. Not the fox’s. not anything Kakashi had felt or thought he should suspect about.

It was as though a demon had arrived. The way the others took a step back Kakashi knew they felt it too. Naruto turned to face the others on the bridge and whatever that was on his face that scared those facing him Kakashi was unable to figure out or see.

“I’ll take it from here Kakashi-sensei.” Naruto hissed. His first step towards those still gathered brought fear from them. The second whimpers. Then Naruto set out into a full run. The sword he held behind him. Obviously not his. Stolen, borrowed whatever one called it. The way Naruto clutched the hilt.

The way he ran. He was far more trained than Kakashi had originally thought. The first wave of bandits went down hard. His sharingan caught every movement. How Naruto ran into the crowd. How his sword moved. Thrusting and swinging among the gathered and cutting down and there was not a hint of hesitation in his movements.

Nothing except his goal. The man that had started it all. Some of the bandits tried to fight back. Impale Naruto’s defenceless back but it was as though Naruto had eyes at the back of his head. Each attack deflected and the perpetrator quickly eliminated.

He did not get all. Naruto was cutting straight through the crowd after all but the numbers were suddenly far better. It might take a little work but they could fight. And they could win.

“I’ve seen far too many like you.” Naruto snarled. He suddenly switched hands his arc low as he aimed the sword for Gato’s chest. It sank in the man’s chest so easily that Kakashi was surprised to see Naruto withdraw a senbon and imbed it into the corrupt man’s throat. “People like you who don’t want to put your life on the line shouldn’t toy with those who do.”

There was maybe a moment’s silence as Gato stumbled backward. The force of Naruto’s sword and senbon sending him reeling backwards. But all too soon the man toppled over the bridge.
“What the hell.” One bandit murmured.

“The shinobi’s Gato hired is dead!” Another cried out.

“Who’s going to pay us?”

“What are we going to do now?”

“It’s their fault! Damn you! We had it good.”

“It won’t end like this.” Another swore. Kakashi prepared himself for another attack as the crowd focused again on them and Naruto. But an arrow appeared stopping everything.

“Like hell it’s going to go on like this!” The voice was high. A child’s voice. Kakashi watched as Inari slowly approached but behind him the amount of people…it had to be the village and they had not many impressive weapons but the will that they carried that vibrated the air was more than enough to Kakashi. “Naruto nii-chan! Hero’s come late right!”

Kakashi turned in time to see Naruto’s gaze soften. “Yeah! They do. For a flashy entrance! But damn it Inari. Yours is far flashier than mine could be.” Naruto formed an all too familiar seal and Kakashi grinned as the shadow clones appeared. Fresh and plentiful and with grins that promised to kick ass. “So?” Naruto asked. “Still want to go?”

Kakashi wanted it to be over as well so he used his own chakra. He did not have as much as Naruto did but he could use just enough to make the perfect bluff. About twenty should do. Twenty would do. “We’ll also be your opponents.” Kakashi announced as his clones took form. “Who is first?”

Mentally he cheered along with the townspeople as the bandits exchanged looks before heading for the end of the bridge.

“Not bad for a happy ending.” Naruto laughed. One of his clones peered over the edge of the bridge. “They’ve got a boat.” He announced.

“Let them go.” Tazuna said. “We’ve made our stand and won here. That’s enough.

“That means it’s over!” Inari’s voice echoed. “Gato’s gone!” The cheer that rose up after his announcement rocked the bridge and bounced over the water. Kakashi covered his sharingan again and smiled softly. At least there was a happy outcome from the situation.

XxX

Beyond chakra exhaustion Kakashi’s team had not gained many injuries. There were the odd cuts and bruises but they were mostly safe and in Kakashi’s eyes that was the most important thing. He of course had the worst of it. He had used his sharingan. He had even been forced to use his chidori.

But considering that his team was fine. More than fine, Kakashi was willing to take the pain with no problem.

The culmination of the bridge confrontation had ended in a celebration. Kakashi to his shame had collapsed and when he awoke his team was by his bedside all with serious expression. Expressions that contradicted the merry making outside that Kakashi could hear.

Sakura sat between Sasuke and Naruto but her gaze never shifted from Kakashi. Sasuke seemed to be self-reflecting and Naruto’s gaze shifted from Kakashi to the window where the noise from
outside drifted in. it was a peculiar thing to wake up to.

But there was no getting around the simple fact that this mission had changed things. For all of them. There would be no going back. Sasuke had awaked his sharingan although not all the way. Sasuke had also taken a life something he had not come to terms with.

And Naruto…

Naruto had shown more of himself that Kakashi was willing to bet that the boy had not intended to do. He had bared himself in a way that Sasuke and Sakura would have to look at him differently. That they would ask more questions and come to their own conclusions. And Kakashi could not blame them.

While Sasuke was self-reflecting Naruto was unchanged. Naruto was exactly the same. He had done the necessary. He had even gone beyond the necessary allowing emotions to overrule sense. Killing Gato solved many things. Killing Gato was something Kakashi would have done as well. Had been planning to do eventually. But the way Naruto had done it and the aura he carried. That was different.

That was very different and very unexpected but there was nothing Kakashi could do. He could push but the chances of Naruto shutting down on him were higher than Naruto sharing information. So Kakashi on awakening had smiled to the best of his ability and carefully greeted his team.

Doling out praise. Stressed the importance of their task. Announced their job was not finished just yet and enquired to their feelings. Kakashi was not disappointed by their various responses. Sakura’s was in-depth. She obviously had used the time to fully analyse her feelings and observations. In time Sakura would become an outstanding shinobi. Kakashi saw in her that she was questioning herself. Her goals and her ability and sometimes since they had arrived in Wave, her need to compete had awakened.

Sasuke was coping with everything thrown at him. He was still battling his inner demons. Kakashi knew from experience that those were not going to go away anytime soon. It was okay if they never did. Worries never defined who one was.

Kakashi wanted to help Sasuke but he could admit to himself that Sasuke was going to need more than help. He would need to talk to someone and he needed a buffer. Because of his actions he was examining himself. His feelings and his actions. Until Sasuke reached a conclusion, Kakashi was unable to tell whether that was a good or bad thing. Sasuke’s next move from this point on would define him.

It could be a good thing. Or a bad thing. Ambition was not a bad thing. Neither was wanting to surpass someone. As long as one knew why they needed to. Kakashi wondered if Sasuke knew why he needed to improve so much and for who. If Sasuke knew why he needed the strength, he sought out so recklessly.

But that was why he was here. To pick them up when they tripped and to help them find the right path. There were many paths they could take. No matter how much they failed. No matter if they did. Kakashi was supposed to be right there to help them out.

Of course, he was supposed to learn them as well as or better than they knew themselves. With Naruto that would be a challenge. Simply because a few years of the boy’s life was a mystery. Or at least it had been. Naruto had become slightly unravelled on the bridge and he had shown a bit of his past.
Naruto had already dealt with the hurdle Sasuke found himself at. Kakashi could not help but feel a little regretful about that.

XxX

“I had to fight if I wanted to survive.” Naruto said softly as Kakashi approached him. Kakashi watched the boy’s tense back for a moment before he shrugged and joined the boy, allowing his feet to dangle into the water as he joined the boy at the riverbank. “It wasn’t about me.” Naruto said softly. “There were things I wanted to protect too.”

“I’m not mad at you.” Kakashi pointed out. “I was surprised but I’m not mad.”

“I know you’re not mad.” Naruto’s tone rose and the blonde grabbed his hair in his hands and made a frustrated noise. “I know that. Just I feel like I have to explain myself.”

“No.” Kakashi shook his head. “You don’t. You were far away, in a situation that meant facing danger every day. And from what I heard.” Kakashi turned so that he could fully see Naruto’s face. “You went willingly.” Naruto nodded but averted his gaze from Kakashi’s. Kakashi sighed heavily. “No one blames you for that either. You were a child.”

“I’ve killed before.” Naruto said softly. “The first time wasn’t about me. It was for Haku. I needed to help him. Protect him. Zabuza and the other two weren’t around. And I was so scared and angry.” Naruto lightly kicked his foot and disturbed the water flowing by. “And there were so many of them.” Naruto whispered. “I didn’t even do it properly.”

“I would be surprised if you had.” Kakashi murmured.

“Those who break the rules.” Naruto said softly. “They are scum and those who don’t value their friends. They are worse than scum.” Naruto turned his head and the pain in his eyes froze Kakashi. “So what about someone who couldn’t protect their friends? What does that make me?”

“Naruto.” Kakashi hesitated. “It doesn’t make you anything.”

“I couldn’t save them. Not from their situation. Not from getting caught up in my mess.” Naruto said bitterly. “What does that make me. I wanted to keep them safe forever.” Something flickered in Naruto’s gaze before he looked back to the surface of the water. “Even Zabuza.”

“I’m sorry.” Kakashi reached out his hand. He stopped himself before he covered Naruto’s and instead rubbed gentle circles on the boy’s back. “Losing friends is not easy.”

“We would have come to a place like this.” Naruto said softly. “Or come here but it would not have worked out for Inari. Or the old man. Or the bridge. None of that would have happened. We’ve been in this situation before.”

Swallowing his alarm at how Naruto referred to the missing nins Kakashi instead focused on what Naruto was saying. “I would imagine you had.” He admitted. “There isn’t much work for a missing-nin fleeing his country.”

“And in the end we just kept picking up people.” Naruto laughed. The sound bounced across the waves and was music to Kakashi’s ears. “The clients were crap but when we could we did a little good. I don’t know about all the jobs we did. I was usually hidden or being trained.” Naruto’s sly glance made Kakashi snort. “I learned a lot of things.”

“I gathered that.” Kakashi nodded. “It’s a relief that I don’t have to have that talk with you.”
“I’m sorry that they made me choose between my friends and their lives.” Naruto said softly. “I’m not strong enough that I can find a third option. One day I won’t have to do it but for now I’m just sad that that there was no real option for me to choose. Except for Gato.” Naruto’s voice deepened and Kakashi watched him curiously.

He watched the way Naruto stared at the water his fists clenched tight and the way Naruto seemed enraged thinking about the man. He heard the slow inhale Naruto made, the sound a strained struggle. Kakashi lowered his hand from Naruto’s back and wondered when the blonde would acknowledge him again because Kakashi could see Naruto had instead fallen into his own thoughts. Thoughts that were much darker.

“Guys like him don’t deserve my pity.” Naruto hissed. “It was his fault the situation got that bad and with him it would have gotten worse. He doesn’t think of people as people.”

“Many people consider shinobi as merely tools.” Kakashi spoke up. He ignored the way Naruto’s gaze fixed on him and stared at the water himself. Kakashi could feel the sharingan behind the cover, a heavy burden and reminder of how stupid he could be and how unkind the world was.

“Not me.” Naruto said and Kakashi was drawn to look at him because of his tone. It was not light but it was somehow determined. “I decided a long time ago that those sorts of things aren’t right. They only lead to regrets. Unhappiness.” Naruto’s tone dimmed a little. “I don’t want that. I can’t make Hokage thinking like that.”

“So what will you do?” Kakashi was genuinely curious. Many people had different opinions on the life of shinobi. Their burdens and what they should do.

“I’ll follow my own way.” Naruto laughed. “A path of no regrets. If I fall, I’ll keep getting up over and over. I won’t give up. I won’t run.” Naruto whispered. “Not when there is someone behind me. I’ll stand tall and for what I believe in and I won’t give up.” Naruto whispered. “I won’t lose.”

“That’s not a bad way of shinobi.” Kakashi admitted softly. He watched the way Naruto’s eyes darkened at his words and the way the small flush spread across Naruto’s cheekbones. “A rather famous shinobi says that the fate of a shinobi is to endure. Endure everything. That the strongest shinobi have the greatest endurance.” Naruto was so enraptured by his words that Kakashi lifted his hand again and lightly stroked Naruto’s hitai-ate his hand then brushing Naruto’s blonde strands aside. “Seems to me that your way of ninja might be the best for becoming a Hokage. After all a Hokage…”

“Is the strongest shinobi in the village.” Naruto finished. His laughter pulled a chuckle from Kakashi and soon enough Kakashi pulled his hand away and contemplated the water. His heart felt lighter than it had since he had arrived maybe it was because of what the boy had said. Or maybe it was just Naruto’s nature.

XxX

“A lot of it was like this.” Naruto murmured. Kakashi paused his hands shoved in his pockets and turned to look at Naruto. There was a good wind on the bridge and with so many working on the bridge everything was going fine. They were only watching over them because that was the mission. That and because they really had nothing to do but wait for the bridge to be finished at this point.

“Travelling?” Kakashi asked curiously. “Are you going to tell me you worked on bridges before?” Naruto released a bark of laughter that nearly pulled a laugh from Kakashi in response.
“No.” Naruto chuckled. “I mean some the jobs were like this. Or to be more precise. They were like the genin missions. At least it seemed that way to me. Sometimes to throw people off our trail we would go to places that shinobi were scarce. Or at least that was what I was told.”

“I did think you were a little familiar with some things.” Kakashi hummed. “That explains some things. So they trained you.”

“You’ve met Zabuza.” Naruto’s tone was a cross between fond and resigned. “You think he let us sit on our asses? It was a group and everyone did something. Everyone had a purpose.”

“And Haku?” Kakashi was unsure why he pressed but he knew it was a good idea to. Naruto’s face softened and his eyes went a little distant.

“Zabuza was everything to him. Zabuza’s dream was Haku’s dream and he would have done anything to see it through. In the beginning Haku wanted that for me too. That I would be that way, find Zabuza and his mission that important but, Zabuza and I never got along.” Naruto snorted. “If we weren’t arguing over his ways, his thoughts, his general cheapness, my worth.” Naruto huffed. “We just couldn’t agree.”

“But he trained you.” Kakashi pressed. Naruto hesitated before he nodded. “Just basics.”

“Just enough to hold my own.” Naruto gave Kakashi a hesitant glance. “You know who he was. He was the Demon of the Mist. He thought differently and the program he was in…”

“They abolished that.” Kakashi nodded. “I thought that was what you were referring to back then. You really are a surprising shinobi.”

“Shinobi are supposed to be unpredictable and mysterious.” Naruto said teasingly. He hopped on the railing of the bridge and peered over. Kakashi turned his gaze back to the bridge builders.

XxX

“We’ve lost people before.” Naruto murmured. Kakashi paused in where he had stopped to pick up the bucket of fish. He let Naruto’s words sink in before he turned to give the boy a long slow look.

“Lost people?” He murmured. He knew they were supposed to bring the fish to the house as soon as possible but because of Naruto’s words he wanted to linger. Well that was not the only reason. The blonde seemed almost immune to the cold. The night breeze ruffling his hair but Naruto’s frame was relaxed.

“Us.” Naruto shrugged. “There used to be more people.” Naruto stared into his bucket but Kakashi doubted the boy was seeing the fish they had caught. “We’ve had a lot of people come and go. I saw it.” Naruto met his gaze steadily. “The fate of a missing nin. I’ve seen it before. I’ve seen it carried out.”

“I’m not surprised.” Kakashi admitted. He kept his bucket in one hand and gestured for Naruto to keep walking. “The odds for a group that large to survive that long without a few losses is way too low.”

“You’re right.” Naruto said softly. “Well not everyone that Zabuza found was worth keeping around. There were a few that clashed with Haku. There were others that their past was too big to escape from.”

“And they let you see that?” Kakashi asked.
“I went.” Naruto whispered. “And I was so angry. But you know. In the end. She smiled.” Naruto’s smile was wistful. “And she looked right at me.”

“Who was she?” Kakashi was curious. “Did you ever hear why she left her village?”

“Love.” Naruto sighed. “And they wouldn’t accept her as herself. They made it hard for her to survive there. I never got the full story.” Naruto continued. “But she didn’t hate anybody. Not them. Not us. She just wanted to be free.”

“Did she teach you how to use senbons like that?”

Naruto peered into his bucket again before he snuck a glance at Kakashi. Kakashi was struck on how playful the boy’s glance was. “Yeah. And not only just that.”

Kakashi’s eye went from Naruto’s figure to the path ahead of them. He could sense Sasuke and Sakura coming to meet them. Not that he did not think Naruto’s past should be kept private. The boy needed someone to talk to. Someone that would understand. The reason he stopped was because these talks seemed so private that having someone overhear seemed wrong.

XxX

“You think of them often?” Kakashi asked as he allowed his book to close. He finally sensed Inari leaving the house so that left himself and Naruto alone. Naruto sent him a disapproving look as he hung his jacket and pants on the line while clad in boxers and a mesh shirt. Kakashi knew that Naruto knew exactly what he had done.

“Everyday.” Naruto grunted as he propped the pole line higher. “You never let yourself forget. That they were alive.” Naruto hesitated. “And that they cared for you.” He sent Kakashi an uncertain look. “Right?”

Kakashi thought of Rin and Obito. Minato-sensei and Kushina-san. His father. He nodded. “Yes. You don’t let yourself forget that.”

XxX

“You really don’t have any hobbies beyond that pervy book.” Naruto snorted as he passed Kakashi on the stairs. Kakashi reluctantly looked away from the page to give Naruto a curious glance.

“What?” He asked.

“Beyond that book and training.” Naruto asked. “What do you allow yourself to do?” Kakashi arched an eyebrow at the boy’s cheek and contemplated Naruto’s back as he continued his ascent.

What did he allow himself to do. That was a curious way of putting it. Kakashi tapped his book on his nose and had to fight back a smile.

XxX

“-Actually up to a few years ago whenever I used the sharingan I would be out for weeks.” Kakashi said sheepishly. Sasuke shook his head in a mixture of amazement and disgust and Kakashi chuckled at the boy’s expression.

His laughter died a little when he noticed Sakura’s and Naruto’s return. Both of them struggled in with bags of groceries and smiles telling of a job done well. They carefully settled the bags in the doorway and Kakashi watched as the two bumped fists their expressions gleeful.
“We got the haul.” Sakura cheered.

“Enough for anybody.” Naruto grinned.

“The market had food?” Sasuke asked as he pushed back his chair. Sakura shook her head as she picked up her bags. “Then where did you get that?” Sasuke looked in their bags curious.

“Vegetables?”

“Naruto found them. Herbs too.” Sakura grinned. “And in some of Naruto’s bags is the game we caught.”

“Rabbit?” Sasuke asked as Sakura handed the bags to Inari’s mother.

“Hare?” Naruto shrugged. “It was fluffy and hopping but it’s huge!”

XxX

It was easy to remember the past in the country and it was easier with Kakashi-sensei. Naruto guessed that was because the man seemed like he understood and approved. Before Naruto could voice his conflicting emotions, Kakashi-sensei was there with the right word or right expression.

It was amazing. And the darker feelings that he was trying to push down were slowly being eradicated. It was not as easy as he made it sound obviously. There was a lot Naruto had to think about.

No matter how he looked at it. The life he had was gone. There was no getting that back. That chapter of his life was over. But he still had the memories with him. He still remembered and no one could take that away. He knew them. Their stories and triumphs. And they lived in him.

And honestly, it was up to him to make a difference. He knew a little about the world. Not enough. There was always something new to learn but it made him crave peace. He wanted to seek peace with those who wanted peace. He wanted less town’s like Wave country.

He wanted people to have a choice. And although that had sounded like wishful thinking back then. The Hokage could make a difference. He would make a difference. He was changing and so would those around him.

To stay still was to stagnate. It was better to adapt. Like a weed. Naruto chuckled remembering a warm hand on his head and whispers in his ear. Of a village he had never seen. Shinobi he did not know and a past rich with adventure of secrets. Jutsus and clans, order and structure. Pain too but he could remember the sound of lingering pride.

He wanted to keep those memories close to him.

XxX

Naruto was no bridge builder but it was nice to help out. The work was going fast because the whole town was helping but Naruto’s clones helped the process speed by even faster. And it was nice to see the people. There were more smiles.

Only one thing had been removed and they were smiling huge smiles. They still had problems but now they had hope. It was kind of amazing.

“What are you smiling about?” Naruto almost jumped when he heard his sensei’s voice behind him. He glanced around to see Kakashi-sensei’s eye trained on him and the pervy book nowhere in
“Them.” Naruto answered. He watched how the old and young intermingled all of them helping on the bridge. The way the children darted around removing rubble smiles of their faces. “I’m smiling because of them.”

“It’s amazing what they are accomplishing right?” Kakashi-sensei murmured. “They’ve found their resolve and through that their unity.”

“They found their courage.” Naruto added on. “And their hope.”

“Their dream bridge. It is going to be a fine bridge.” Kakashi-sensei’s eye swept over the bridge and the people working on it. “A fine bridge.”

XxX

“That huge ass sword was really recognisable.” Naruto laughed. “So Zabuza didn’t do all the works. I mean he did the really big ones if he had to. But he stuck to small things. The sword was easier to use but really flashy.”

“I know.” Kakashi said dryly.

“We moved around a lot.” Naruto shrugged. “We rarely stayed more than a few days or a week. Once the job was done that was it.” He face darkened. “There was always someone chasing us.” Kakashi remained silent and watched the shadows play over Naruto’s face. Somehow he looked even older.

XxX

“It’s a great idea.” Kakashi murmured. He kept his voice low and kept an eye on Naruto and Inari who were having their tearful goodbye. “It suits.”

Sasuke snorted and Sakura smiled. “It seems fitting.”

“You think he’ll like it?” Tazuna asked.

“He’ll love it.” Kakashi assured. “A strong sounding name that brings hope. The Great Naruto bridge.” Kakashi shrugged. “It fits.” He turned back to where Naruto and Inari were wiping away their tears. The name certainly fit. Naruto was the one that gave them the most hope after all.
Preparations in the Village

Chapter Summary

Team seven back home in Konoha, coming to terms of the repercussions of their last mission

Chapter Notes

Soo this chapter is a little early. I actually thought it was going to be late I was sooo busy and sooo behind and did not feel like doing anything tbh. So I was prepared to bring the chapter Thursday or something and apologize but surprise surprise I got so happy over the comment I got that I went right back to this \o and you get the chapter 3 days earlier than what I thought it would be ^_^  
So anyway there is that. Guess I have to remind you guys (again) there will be plenty of canon stuff popping up from time to time. Only if it fits in with the story anyway. Anyway I’m so happy writing this fic. I mean I’m not going to let my other projects fall around my ears.....this fic is gonna be hella huge anyway but writing this (certain parts) is really nice. Hope you guys are continuing to enjoy it ^_^ love you darlings!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The journey home was far quicker than going had been. Kakashi supposed that was because the air of danger had been removed. The mission was complete. The mission had changed them but not for the worse. If anything, Kakashi could say that he liked his group more than he had before.

They had learnt something from the mission. About themselves. About the world they had entered and of course about each other. Sasuke’s and Sakura’s eyes had changed.

Sakura’s opinion on both Naruto and Sasuke had changed. Kakashi knew she still had her crush but for Sakura, it was not solely about that anymore. And Naruto was a rival to her and she also believed in his strength.

Sooner or later those two would find out about the Kyuubi but there was still time for that. For now they were still trying to piece together puzzle that was Uzumaki Naruto and that would take a while. Kakashi was still trying to do it himself.

Xxx

“You know that your decision was reckless.” The Sandaime said softly. Kakashi kept his head bowed. He knew this was coming. He had known the moment he decided to stay that he was going to get called out for his behaviour. For his decision. No matter that it had all managed to work out.

That everyone was still alive. That the situation had gone better than hoped. That Konoha’s standing in the eye of other countries had again improved. He had still done something reckless and placed more than the genins in danger.
Even though he was following the teachings of the Yondaime, it still had been a reckless thing to do.

“It was a careless decision.” Kakashi admitted. “The situation kept changing and on a few occasions my opinion was wrong. I also underestimated the enemy.”

“Judging by your report.” The bitter smell of smoke wafted from where the Hokage stood. “It was thanks to the fast development of your team that aided in your victory.”

“Yes.” Kakashi admitted. Sasuke, Sakura and Naruto had been the major help. Especially Naruto. The Hokage turned to watch him his pipe held in one hand.

“How are they?” The Hokage frowned. “I heard the boy’s eyes awakened.”

“Sasuke is as well as expected.” Kakashi admitted. “He seems to be coping marginally well.”

“The girl has near perfect chakra control you say.” The Hokage’s gaze was faint. “Interesting. Very interesting and Naruto?”

Kakashi swallowed under the Hokage’s intense stare. “He has killed before. So he was a major asset.” The Hokage’s fingers tightened around his pipe. Kakashi recalled the cool precision Naruto showed on the bridge.

“He has huh.” The Hokage puffed gently on the pipe but the look in his eyes were anything but gentle. “He told you this?”

“Yes.”

“Is he…stable.” The Hokage’s words were tense.

“More than stable.” Kakashi admitted. “He questions his strength but he uses his former experiences to advance. His mind-set for certain tasks are rather developed.” Kakashi met the Hokage’s gaze steadily. “Which we expected considering where he was.”

“Has he spoken about what they did to him?”

“He had to fend for himself.” Kakashi admitted. “Zabuza was not big on letting him be coddled. He was not overly protected but he was not a badly treated hostage either. He has a reason to be fond of them.”

“I want the boy on our side.” The Sandaime’s voice was soft. “It pains me what he had to experience in their hands. When I think of the dangers he faced. The horrors he saw. That child lived with missing nins. The scourge of every village. He lived with them and he calls them family. I don’t need to tell you how wary that makes me.”

Kakashi could understand that. He himself was wary. There was no sugar coating the fact that Naruto had only known pain from the village. The only gentleness he had ever known had come from those similar to him. And those people were dead.

“He accepts the fate that befell them.” Kakashi admitted. “I think they made sure he knew what they were facing. The kind of life they had. Even if they had not. Naruto is fairly observant.”

“And efficient.” The Hokage said coolly. “We’re lucky they didn’t break the seal.”

“Or couldn’t.” Kakashi pointed out. “There is a lot we don’t know about that particular seal.”
“Does he want to see them?” The Hokage’s gaze was distant.

“I told him to tell me when he wants to. He doesn’t ignore their faults. He chooses to remember
them with their flaws.”

The Hokage puffed silently for a few minutes. Kakashi stood with his hands shoved in his pocket
as the Hokage contemplated. “In time everything will be revealed. I hope in the future you will not
be so, careless with your charges. That turned out to be an A-ranked mission Kakashi.”

Kakashi took the reprimand. “Yes sir.”

XxX

Sasuke had no idea what took Kakashi so long in the office but he had been itching to leave since
they got back. Waiting for Kakashi to give in his report was a test to his nerves.

The mission was better than all the others combined but it had been nothing like what he expected.
They learnt about Kakashi. Kakashi who had a sharingan behind the covered eye.

Sasuke swallowed and looked at his hands. He had also killed a man. Men. It had been for the
mission and he had been prepared but there was theory and practice. Something Itachi had told him
many times. Several times.

It had still shaken him up. But not Naruto. Sasuke glared at the boy backing him. Naruto had not
hesitated once. He had not been shaken. He had not even shown emotion. It had been a simple
matter of carrying out duty.

Except for Gato. Sasuke could still recall the look on Naruto’s face when he had charged the man.
Naruto’s face had been twisted and almost demonic. The aura he carried had almost made Sasuke
take a step back. He had been wondering if the figure that ran to Gato if it had really been Naruto.

That had not felt like Naruto. It had been fury in a human form. A glimpse of the underworld or
something like that. It had been more than bloodlust it was judgement and the promise of
execution all in one and Sasuke had felt a smidge of fear and he had not been the one Naruto
targeted. And that pissed him off.

It pissed him off a lot. Naruto had so many secrets. So many inconsistencies and no matter what
Sasuke did he was unable to figure it out. The idiot had as many secrets and hidden sides as Itachi
did and Sasuke hated comparing Naruto to his brother.

But there was no one else that fit closely enough. Obviously his time away had changed Naruto.
His experiences outside the village had knocked more than sense into him. He was raw.
Bloodthirsty. Wary. But the wariness Sasuke understood. He really did but Naruto was too strange.

But it was not up to him to unravel everything. As annoying as Naruto was. As infuriating as the
boy could get. He was not Sasuke’s goal. Naruto had nothing to do with his aim. Except for when
he was getting in the way of it.

Sasuke gritted his teeth. The memory of Naruto taking down the enemy bandits dimming his
elation over unlocking his sharingan. After all, he might have finally activated it but Itachi had
been far younger when he had. He had to try harder. He was supposed to be better than this. That
Naruto could keep up. That Naruto could pass him, it infuriated him.

Even though he had many pieces of information he was unable to see the proper story. His
analytical skills were good but he knew they were lacking. But the last thing he wanted to do was
ask for help. He could think of one person who would not need help.

A flash of silver hair caught his attention and he sighed as he spotted their sensei finally returning to them. Sasuke had no idea what had taken the mission report so long but he was relieved that finally he could go home. And do some training.

“Good job everyone.” Kakashi rubbed his neck with one hand and somehow was able to pull off looking sheepish with most of his face covered. “Sorry that took so long. Sensei’s sorry.” Sasuke expected the man to pull out one of his frequent excuses but instead Kakashi shrugged. “It couldn’t be helped.”

“So?” Sasuke pressed.

“Well.” Kakashi hesitated. “We’ll meet up soon but for now you’re dismissed. Good job everyone. Let’s do some healing and keep it easy from this point on eh?”

Sasuke rolled his eyes. There was no way he was going to ‘keep it easy’ and after their first C-rank there was no way he was going to go back to the ridiculous D-rank ones without a fight. He doubted Itachi’s first C-rank had ended up this way.

“I’m going home.” Sasuke shrugged. In his heart he felt a light warmth of victory.

XxX

They were finally back in Konoha. Sakura felt…disillusioned? She was relieved. The moment they had walked through the gate she felt as though a weight had been yanked off her shoulders. Maybe it was being surrounded by the familiar once again.

The cool familiarity of Konoha. So much had happened on the seemingly innocent C-rank. Her skills, had been noticed. She had gotten a little stronger but hell had broken loose. The other two had to protect her and Sasuke-kun…

Sasuke-kun had killed a man. She had not but Sasuke had. Sasuke had done that because of her. Naruto had killed men too and she had been protected even as she protected. It was not fair. She could see them. Ahead of her getting fainter and fainter by the moment.

Naruto she knew it was partly because of his past. She could tell but asking would mean waiting for the right moment to do that. Sometimes things that seemed ordinary to her would toss Naruto into some sort of trance. Or an endless loop or zone.

He knew a lot and he was tough and he kept showing that. This mission had proved it. Kakashi-sensei might not have said anything but Sakura just knew he was impressed. That had to be the reason he took so long giving over the mission report.

No matter how one looked at it. Naruto had done excellently. Beyond anyone’s expectations. And her? Could she really expect them to protect her?

“Sakura-chan.” Naruto jolted her out of her thoughts and Sakura realized the direction she was staring Sasuke had already faded from sight. “We’re back in the village!”

She frowned at Naruto unable to follow. “Yeah we’ve been back for a while now.” Naruto’s wide grin confused her further.

“So you can take it down now.” Naruto laughed and Sakura touched the bun at the back of her head in amazement. She had forgotten about it. It was a good help and it felt nice too. Naruto was
right. She could take it down. She took good care of it after all. She was about to let it down before she hesitated. She looked back in the direction where Sasuke had disappeared.

“Naruto?” She asked softly hoping their sensei was not really listening to them. The man’s head was in his book again and she hoped that meant he was not paying them any attention. “You think it’s wrong that I want to get stronger?” Naruto gave her a confused look and her gaze fell to her feet instead. “I want to get stronger so you and Sasuke-kun wouldn’t have to protect me all the time.”

“There’s nothing wrong with wanting to get stronger for someone else.” Naruto shrugged. “Having a dream based on someone else isn’t wrong.”

Sakura could sense the but coming. “But?”

Naruto’s eyes were distant. “I knew someone. He was strong. Really strong and all he wanted to do was get even stronger for the person he cared for.” Naruto’s tone was contemplative and quiet. “But in the end he was just a tool to that person and he feared being thrown away. At least…that’s what he thought until the end.”

Sakura frowned and Naruto’s words. “A tool?” She questioned.

“They were no longer a person.” Naruto said firmly. “Getting strong for someone else’s sake isn’t bad.” Naruto clenched his hand into a fist. “But you should have a reason beyond the person for getting strong. Because tools can be replaced.” Sakura gasped and stepped back from Naruto.

She glanced at their sensei but the man was still standing a distance away his face in the book. Sakura looked at her hands. The hands still clean. No death had come thanks to her hands. But she had saved no one. And killed no one.

Unlike Naruto. Unlike Sasuke. They were somewhere else. That did not mean she wanted to go out there and kill someone but Sasuke’s goal whatever it was and Naruto’s goal was helping them to make their strides forward without looking back. It was helping them accomplish things.

But what about her?

“I’m going to go home.” She said faintly. “Then I guess I’ll do some training.” She met Naruto’s eyes and smiled softly in gratitude. She had some thinking to do.

Her sensei finally lifted his nose from the book when she loudly said her goodbye and she got a nod in return. She caught the questioning look their sensei gave Naruto but Sakura was already leaving. To home. She had a brief moment of sadness that Naruto was returning to no one but she knew she needed the comfort of home and the presence of her parents to help her gather the strength for her next step. Whatever that might be.

XxX

“Sasuke.” Sasuke froze at the unexpected voice. He had expected his mother home. Definitely not his father. The day was too early for that. Itachi had not even been considered considering his duties kept him out the house frequently.

But yet there he was. A broom in his hand as he stood frozen in the hallway. Itachi’s gaze ran over him obviously searching for injuries and somehow that pissed him off. Sasuke toed off his shoes as quickly as he could and tried to slip past his brother so he could set down his pack.

Of course, things never worked the way he wanted wherever Itachi was concerned. The moment he tried to pass Itachi the broom was gone from Itachi’s hands and his brother was blocking his way.
“You’re back.” Itachi smiled. “The bridge took long?” He questioned. And Sasuke eyed Itachi’s hand that hovered hesitantly between them.

“There were some unexpected difficulties.” Sasuke admitted. His fingers dug into the straps of his pack. Part of him wanted to just come out and say it. The other part of him wanted to keep it to himself. Yet faced with Itachi the way he currently was, Sasuke knew if he did not stop the conversation he would reveal everything.

“Difficulties?” Itachi frowned. “On a C-rank?”

“I’m not too sure what rank it ended up being by the end.” Sasuke admitted. He met Itachi’s gaze and felt his eyes change and he got to witness the moment of shock on Itachi’s face before Itachi covered it up. “Whatever rank it started as, it surely isn’t C-rank anymore.”

“What happened?” Itachi’s hand grasped his shoulder. “You awakened your sharingan?”

“It was a matter of time.” Sasuke shrugged. “I’m going to my room.” He got to feel the exhilaration of leaving Itachi speechless. The moment only lasted before he got around the corner.

“Are all your team mates okay?” Itachi asked. Sasuke turned around to see Itachi watching him his face blank.

“I don’t know about okay but they are alive.” Sasuke responded. His thoughts went back to Naruto and he quickly shoved them out his mind.

XxX

She had not known how much she needed home until she stood in her doorway. She had been in the middle of taking off her shoes the way her mother always nagged her to do when she heard the faint sounds of her mother bustling around. She then picked up the sound of her father laughing to himself.

And it hit her that she was home.

The sob escaped her throat before she could stop it and another followed. Her pack hit the floor with a loud thud. It really really hit her then. That had not been a simple straight forward mission. They could have died. She could have died. She could have not come home.

“Meibuki?” Sakura heard her father yell. “Is that you? She could have never come home. They had risked everything on this mission. It was not just facing missing nins and being terrified by people’s savagery. It was reality she had faced and come through alive and most of that was not on her own power.

“No of course not Kizashi.” Her mother appeared in the hallway her hands clutching a dish towel. Her eyes widened as she spotted Sakura. “Sakura! You’re home! But what did I tell you about your shoes. You’re supposed to put them up properly.”

Her father appeared behind her mother his gaze curious which melted to reveal relief and happiness when he saw her. “You’re back already huh? There’s my girl. Say Sakura. I have a joke for you.”

Sakura did not recall moving but when her startled parents both held onto her as she hugged them Sakura could only think about how close she had come to losing this. To losing everything. She had to get stronger. She had to, so she would be able to come home. So she could make sure others could come home.
That was an interesting thing to say.” Kakashi-sensei said as Naruto watched Sakura leave. Naruto took his gaze off Sakura’s figure to find the man silently regarding him. The book was still pressed to Kakashi-sensei’s face but Naruto knew the man had not changed a page since he took out the book.

“I was being honest.” Naruto frowned. He had been honest. Sakura’s question had made him think of Haku and the frustration over that had risen up and everything spilled out without a filter but somehow he knew he had helped her.

He did not want Sakura to work hard, get better to only consider herself a tool. Not that she would but the possibility of that happening around him again freaked him out. And there were too many similarities to Haku and Sakura and it was not just the hair that they prized.

“Sakura is going to consider you a rival from now on.” Kakashi-sensei mused. “You and Sasuke accomplished so much. Besides feeling jealous and a little confused. I think her pride was hit a little.”

A memory came to Naruto and he laughed softly. He could remember hiding with Haku’s hand over his mouth as they watched Zabuza stand over a fallen figure. He could remember orange hair tangled and remember the curses muttered before the person stumbled to their feet. He could also remember the fire in their eyes when they glared at Zabuza.

“That isn’t a bad thing.” He laughed. “Where are you off to Sensei?”


“Does Jiji want to speak to me?” Naruto questioned. Nothing in Kakashi-sensei’s expression changed but Naruto knew the man was hiding something. “Is he mad at me or you?”

“No one is mad at you.” Kakashi-sensei sighed. “But I did get scolded a little.”

“Well you followed the Yondaime’s teachings during this mission right?” Naruto grinned. “Of course the Sandaime would get a little mad.” Kakashi-sensei chuckled along with him and Naruto relaxed at hearing the deep laugh.

So they had a little break. That was good. That was perfect. Naruto needed some time to himself. The mission had not been the problem. His thoughts had been and he needed to make sure he could function. That he would not see good.

A little break from everything and a reminder that he was still alive would do wonders from him. Naruto on a whim walked through the market ignoring the world around him. He ignored them to a point. He was not going to take any chances.

He had just passed a stall when a familiar scent caught him. Naruto turned back to see the sticks on incense. Before nostalgic memories could swarm him he found the one giving off the scent.

It was strong, gods it was just like he remembered. It tickled his nose and if he remembered correctly it was supposed to help with healing. Nothing he really needed but it would be a nice addition to his room. Make it feel more like his.

“You buying?” The merchant asked as he played with his hands. Naruto nodded before he dropped
the required money on the stall. There was no sense in pushing his luck. The merchant looked ready to burst into a sweat at just Naruto lingering.

He wrapped up his purchase himself and turned away to continue his walk back to his apartment. He sniffed his hands curiously and the scent hit him hard. It smelt like them.

Xxx

“I’m impressed.” Kakashi admitted. Sakura handed him the kunais and Kakashi took a moment to appreciate the callouses in her hands. “You’ve gotten a lot better.” He praised.

“I can still do better.” Sakura panted. “Thanks for getting these for me Sensei.” Kakashi watched the determined way Sakura watched the targets. He nodded impressed.

“Anything else?” He asked curiously. They were supposed to be taking a break. Actually it was a suspension until the Hokage dealt with the matter of their C-rank gone bad but actually explaining it to his team was something he was avoiding.

“No. I think that’s enough for now sensei.”

Xxx

His room had not changed since he had left. But of course nothing was going to get in the way of his training. He still had a long way to go. When he compared himself to the others he knew he was laughable.

He had held his own on the mission but they were nothing compared to the strength he had seen. Had witnessed. And of course deep inside him was the thing he swore he was never going to touch again no matter the circumstances.

He had to get strong on his own strength. Naruto winced at his room. He had washing to do. Some more training and when he got back he would bother with that. It was always best to do his washing at night. He saw less people and when he awoke in the morning he could just pick it up. Another bonus was that it was warm then. Unless it rained.

Still, it was nice to know he had not lost his edge. He had protected his team. He had seen a different outcome to the misery he had witnessed. The country of Wave seemed as though it was going to be okay and he had done something to help with that. The frustration that had lingered in him over the people they had left behind, it was a little fainter and that was good.

Xxx

Putting what he had learned into practise. That was Sasuke’s way. Improving it was of course his way as well. Or at least it was now. He had to get better. It could not just be done. It had to be done perfectly. Awakening the sharingan was just one step.

Many in the clan had awakened theirs. The next step however was to improve his jutsus and to do it flawlessly.

Like Itachi could. Then would come copying but that was harder than it looked. The move their sensei had done had seemed interesting and it had been loud but Sasuke knew doing it would not be easy. But before all of that he had to improve.

Widen the gap. If he was ever going to catch up and be worthy of the respect he craved he had to work harder.
What hard working little genins Kakashi had. From Sakura to Sasuke. All fighting to keep each other in sight and improve. Except for Sasuke. Kakashi knew he had another sight in his gaze and it was not his two team members the little Uchiha was trying so desperately to catch up to.

“Kakashi-san.” The voice from the bottom of his tree had Kakashi sighing in resignation. When he sensed the two passing by he had hoped and hoped that it was a coincidence. He knew sooner or later the man would come to seek him out.

“Itachi.” Kakashi responded. He slid off the branch he had been resting on to face the man and his cousin face to face. “It’s been a while.”

“Certainly have been.” Shisui greeted. Kakashi was amused to see that Shisui had one restraining hand on Itachi’s shoulder.

“Doing well?” Kakashi asked. Shisui visibly bit back a snort but Itachi focused on him and Kakashi could see the fight in the other man.

“Sasuke awakened his sharingan.” Itachi said softly.

“Yes he did. He did rather well in my opinion.” Kakashi admitted. “He also superbly carried out his mission and made decisions that would make his village proud. He also removed threats to his mission.”

“Sounds good.” Shisui murmured. “What happened?”

“A den of missing nin and bandits.” Kakashi shrugged. “We cleaned it up completed our mission and came back.”

“And they all came back alive.” Shisui poked Itachi in the ribs and Kakashi wondered at the man’s bravery. “So Sasuke awakened the sharingan he was bound to sooner or later.”

“Did anything else happen?” Itachi questioned and Kakashi considered the question.

He thought of the way Sasuke watched Naruto after the bridge incident. “Well, Naruto might be a little rival to him. Either as something he thinks he should overcome or something he must stay in front of. I’m afraid I don’t know which your little brother thinks it is yet.”

“Naruto-kun?” Itachi frowned. “Sasuke had asked a few questions before relating to him.”

“Like?” Kakashi was curious.

“If he was dead and the Naruto was ANBU in disguise, if someone with his circumstances should be so easily welcomed back and made a ninja. If I think there is something strange about him.” Itachi’s mouth quirked up in a smile. “He asks Father and I many questions. Mother as well.”

“Well eventually he will hear.” Shisui shrugged. “Meanwhile I’m the one who watches him the most. I don’t blame Sasuke for being suspicious.”

“What’s it like?” Kakashi asked curiously.

“Well at first he wouldn’t sleep inside. Now he does.” Shisui gave a sigh of relief. “He trains a lot. Eats an unhealthy amount of ramen. Lots of kid stuff but he really is alone.”

“I’m not surprised.” Itachi admitted.

“Man if we had not gotten him when we did…” Shisui said slowly. “We would have a problem on
our hands wouldn’t we?”

XxX

A good training session left you feeling happy and sore. The soreness would be faded. The happy
feeling and the satisfaction would dim so it was better to enjoy the feeling as long as it lasted. His
arms burned from the strain. His lungs hurt too but Naruto honestly had not felt better.

The grass was cool and not too tall. It was lush and perfect for taking a nap on. He was too tired to
bother with taking off his jacket or even anything else so with his kunai still clutched in his hand
Naruto spread out on his back and stared at the trees overhead.

It only took a few moments of seeing the sky peeking through the leaves for his eyes to drift
closed.

XxX

He could smell something. Naruto’s nose twitched as the scent came closer. It smelt like food and
something sweet, like perfume but that scent did not make any sense. His eyes opened slowly and
Naruto was confused to see the trees above him or at least he was for a moment.

He had been training by himself. That explained the trees overhead. The grass under him and the
kunai clenched in his hand but it did not explain the woman approaching him.

Naruto blinked in confusion as she smiled at him. Somehow, she was a little familiar. He remained
silent as she got closer. It was only when she used her free hand to push her hair out of her face that
he understood why she was so familiar.

Pale skin, black hair and her eyes looked a little like Sasuke’s. Actually. That was Sasuke’s
mother. He had seen her a few times before but always from a distance. Naruto swallowed
nervously as the lady held a wrapped bag in front of her.

She was just watching him. Sure she was smiling as well but it made him feel nervous. And the
way her hair wafted around her face was too comforting for the situation. It made him think of
other things. Other people.

“Have you seen Sasuke?” She smiled. Her voice was soft and her smile was inviting. “He came out
to train but it’s past time that he should have eaten.” Naruto felt his cheeks flush as the woman kept
smiling at him.

“No.” Naruto stammered. “But he probably isn’t too far away.” He admitted. Sasuke was most
likely training deeper in the training grounds.

“Oh.” Sasuke’s mother pouted. She looked away as if contemplating something. When she
crouched down in front of him Naruto’s eyes widened significantly and her smile made his heart
speed up. “Can you give this to him? He might decide to keep training and somehow I think if I
was to go looking for him I’d be accused of being smothering.” She chuckled.

Man Sasuke had it good. Naruto took the bundle from Sasuke’s mother and nodded. She gave him
another smile and Naruto felt a light sweat break out on him. He really was weak to this sort of
thing. He did not mind delivering the lunch but he did mind how much he liked her smiling at him.
It was so bright and kind.
“I’ll give him.” He mumbled and tried his best to fight away his embarrassment.

XxX

“Well he is around that age.” Monkey pointed out. Shisui tossed a disbelieving look in their direction as he watched the boy flush. Not that he did not understand some of why. Mikoto-san was beautiful and her kindness could humble anyone. However, she could scare go from sweet and humble to terror in only a few moments.

He did not know exactly what she was doing by approaching Naruto but he did know that thanks to her his report was going to be longer than usual.

“He has a sexy jutsu.” Sparrow pointed out. “It’s a lewd jutsu but I think if he could do that then this should be no problem.”

“It’s a transformation jutsu for kicks.” Badger pointed out his tone defensive. “But it’s a good jutsu.”

“To show you who all the perverts in the village are you mean.” Monkey’s tone was disgusted. “It isn’t anything special really. That transformation jutsu.”

“Now the Sandaime’s grandson’s transformation is something to behold.” Badger argued. “He focuses on the really good stuff.”

“You’re disgusting.” Sparrow muttered.

“It’s perfect. Not that Uzumaki’s one isn’t amazing. Imagine it. A harem.”

“Badger.” Sparrow growled.

“He keeps improving it. Bits and pieces.” Boar spoke up. “Maybe it is due to his exposure.”

“Well if any turn up looking like Mikoto-san I’m cutting in.” Shisui said dryly.

“He’s a boy.” Badger argued. “Don’t you remember your first crush? It usually is someone older.”

“That’s so stereotypical.” Monkey sighed. “But isn’t she the only female to treat him kindly since he came back?”

Shisui nearly bit off his tongue as he sat up quickly. As it was his mask nearly slipped off his face and he stared as Naruto held the lunch that was obviously for Sasuke. Monkey had a point. Mikoto-san would be the first female, besides Ayame at the ramen store that was nice to Naruto in the village. And it did not hurt that Mikoto-san was beautiful too. The poor boy, he had to be overwhelmed. Being a young teenager was a harsh thing.

XxX

Finding Sasuke was not that hard. Well it was fairly difficult but the search helped clear Naruto’s head and the more he walked the better he felt. He felt strange with Sasuke’s lunch in his hand but it was a strange warm feeling.

He tried to stay on the mostly used paths not wanting to get lost. Eventually he heard the sound of kunais hitting targets. It was either that was Sasuke or it was someone who might have an idea of where Sasuke was.

Not having an idea where the targets were caused Naruto to proceed cautiously. He could hear the
sound of kunais hitting targets and kunais hitting each other. He doubted that Sasuke was sparring but he had to check and make sure it was not Sasuke before he gave up.

He peeped around a tree and saw a flash of blue. He saw Sasuke throw the kunais. The angles seemed off to him. Everything seemed off to him but it was only until he heard the kunais sinking home into targets that Naruto acknowledged where the targets were.

They were not bullseyes. They were slightly off from being perfect but considering that Sasuke should not have been able to make any of the targets that was good.

“Wow.” Naruto whispered. “Incredible.” Because he had seen plenty but nothing quite like this. Most of the target had been in Sasuke’s blind spots.

“Naruto?” Sasuke sounded confused. Naruto looked back around to see Sasuke standing on a branch his hand digging into the trunk of the tree as he stared at Naruto. “What are you doing here?”

Remembering Sasuke’s mother caused him to flush again. He sheepishly raised the lunch in his hand. “Your mom couldn’t find you so I said I’d bring it to you.” Sasuke jumped down from the branch. The leap calculated and fluid.

“I see.” Naruto passed the lunch to Sasuke slightly relieved about delivering it. “What are you doing out here?”

“Training.” Naruto shrugged. “Just like you.” Sasuke’s gaze lingered on him and Naruto shrugged again. “Make sure you tell her I delivered it!” He yelled to Sasuke as he left.

Xxx

Naruto was curious about who else was around training. He had not assumed that he was the only one getting some training in. that would have been arrogant and that would have been dismissive of all the other shinobis in the village.

But seeing Sasuke’s display. Sasuke’s display that he had obviously been at for a while made Naruto think things. Who else was around and just what were they doing?

The way Konoha was he rarely saw other teams. Sometimes he caught a glimpse or two of a Chuunin but for the Jounins he rarely saw any and when it came down to the ANBU Naruto did not see a single one of them.

But for training. People did that. They had to do that and Naruto was eager to see people training. And people other than his team. He wanted to see new techniques and hear about them.

A faint something made him stop in his tracks straining to hear the sound. It was something. Something soft and maybe uncertain. Naruto stepped off the worn path again in search for the sound. All he could hear was the soft sound between long intervals. Somehow it was a little familiar.

He was wracking his brain to put the pieces together when he was finally in view. Hinata was sparring and the woman with her had to be her Jounin Sensei.

At least that was what Naruto was assuming. The woman was not wearing the flak jacket that Iruka-sensei and Kakashi-sensei wore. Nothing wrong with that but it was hard to figure out just who she was supposed to be on appearance alone.
Naruto somehow brought attention to himself and Hinata turned to face him. Naruto got a glimpse of Hinata’s face, veins bulging around her eyes before her face turned red and she stumbled with her next punch. The woman gave a cry of alarm as Hinata crumpled to the ground and Naruto dashed forward as well.

He crouched by Hinata and looked her over. “Should we call a medic nin?” Naruto asked. He tried to touch Hinata’s clenched fist but he had no luck.

“You’re…” The woman said softly. Naruto looked up from Hinata into the woman’s face. Her eyes were different. Naruto did not want to be rude and stare but he had seen many types of eyes before. Between hers and Ryu’s hers was weirder. They barely looked human.

Hinata convulsed under his hand and Naruto released a cry of alarm and gave the girl under his hand his full attention. His focus drifted back to the weird veins around Hinata’s eyes. It looked painful.

“She’ll be okay. Maybe you should ease back.” The woman said softly.

“Is it painful?” Naruto asked. He waved his hand over Hinata’s face. “When she does that.”

“She can tire herself out.” The woman admitted. “But that and this is two different things. And this.” She waved her hand over the veins. “Is because she activated her bloodline limit. It is her clan’s jutsu.”

Naruto paused. “Her clan?” His thoughts went to ice mirrors. The sound of shards forming. He looked back to the woman who had to be a Sensei. “Her eyes?”

“Yes.” The lady nodded. “It’s called the Byakugan.”

“Not that imaginative.” Naruto murmured. “What do they see with it?” He asked curiously.

“Chakra.” The woman watched him for a few moments before she turned her attention back to Hinata. “Hinata, you can’t lie there forever.”

“K-Kurenai-sensei.” Hinata’s voice was so faint that Naruto leaned over so he could hear her better. “And N-N-Naruto-kun.” She squeaked. Naruto leaned back as Hinata sat up suddenly.

“Uh Hinata!” Naruto said cheerfully. “So you were training?” Maybe it was best to pretend that she had not tired herself out. Just because she was shy did not mean she did not have pride.

“Y-Yes.” She said softly. She stared at the grass and Naruto inwardly sighed.

“I was training too! Well until I had to deliver something. What were you doing?”

“P-P-Practicing my accuracy.” Hinata stammered. “I can only do that with Kurenai-sensei b- because it’s dangerous.”

“Oh so Kurenai-sensei has to dodge?” Naruto asked. He was very interested now. “So she can’t get hit and you have to hit? And you stop when you get a hit in?”

“Right.” Kurenai-sensei spoke up. “It is slow going but it helps her with moving targets.”

Naruto considered for a while. His gaze went to Hinata’s fists. It had just been for an instant but he had seen the light blue covering. Her eyes helped her see chakra. Her strikes were supposed to do…
“So what happens when she hits you?” He asked Kurenai-sensei.

“She’s aiming to close the chakra nodes.” Kurenai-sensei gestured to Hinata. “She can see them and she is aiming to close them one by one or re-route them. When they are closed that it pretty much it for you. It is a serious technique.”

Naruto knew a little about the chakra network. Mostly from his senbon lessons. However, it must be good that those in Hinata’s clan could see the network but that made them just as dangerous. Naruto had access to two different sources of chakra but he relied on the one that was solely his own.

He never thought there would be someone who could easily seal that away just like how something was sealed away in him. He eyed Hinata for a few moments. He trusted Hinata but who knew what could happen in the future. He wanted to see that up close. Feel it. Just how they would close up and seal away his chakra. Once he knew it. He could fight it. But he could be a target for Hinata too and better yet he knew he could take one or two hard hits.

He grinned and opened his mouth again in excitement. It was a win win situation.

XxX

Hinata was reluctant but after Naruto easily dodged her first two attacks she put a bit more effort into it. Naruto was in no real danger. Sure his senses tingled just before each dodge and he had the feeling that most of the missed strikes would have caused some serious damage but he was not dodging at his full capacity.

As it was, it was more of a dance. Him dodging lightly backwards with his hands shoved into his pockets. Which was more for Hinata. Naruto’s first inclination after dodging was attacking. But that was not the point of the exercise at all. Although he saw plenty of openings.

After he learnt some more he just might try a few of the strikes. But since he could not see what Hinata was seeing that might not be a good idea either.

Because she was looking at something. The something kept changing because she kept looking at different spots each time but Naruto could tell there was something in him that she could see that he had no clue about.

It had the potential of being frustrating. Whatever those white eyes saw that he could not. But her style was graceful. Filled with purpose and Naruto knew by her form that even the fighting was clan taught. He was curious to why the sensei was teaching and not the clan but he knew no way to ask.

He and Hinata were not close like that. But her openings were just way too many. Naruto allowed one of her hands to barely scrape him before he removed a hand from his pocket and aimed at her elbow causing her aim to change. “You’re precise but wild if that makes any sense.” He said as he slipped his hand back into his pocket.

“N-Naruto-kun you’re fast.” She stammered. Naruto shrugged. He had training sessions far more dangerous to deal with. Haku’s igloo of mirrors was no joke and the speed Haku went at was nothing to scoff at either.

And the enemy was always faster. It was something Naruto had learned. You had to be fast and you had to be exact. Your first move should be your last. Waste no time.

Pretty much their motto. Pretty much the words they had fought by.

Xxx

Uzumaki Naruto was rather agile. Kurenai noticed that. Of course with the way that Hinata so hesitantly attacked it was no hard feat to dodge the attacks. But maybe it was his form that distracted her. He so easily dodged and even tried to guide her along the way. Kurenai was unsure to if the boy was just naturally that good or the praise could go to his Sensei.

But then again she had heard some things from Asuma that concerned her. There was not much she knew about the boy and the almost hesitant way he looked at her made it easy to forget that he was a Jinchuuriki.

And he had been training earlier. But he had dropped all that for the opportunity to help Hinata. Kurenai knew of the girl’s crush. The girl was almost too kind and she knew that Hinata must be ecstatic having the one she liked paying attention to her.

But Kurenai was unsure to whether that wish would come true. The boy would have a battle on his hands a mental one. He had a duty to the village that not just anybody could shoulder. And he was not what he seemed.

Naruto’s dodging had sped up in a way that Kurenai knew took training and practice. There was nothing wrong with being good. But even prodigies took time. The boy was good. A little too good at the dodging and her heart ached at what was most likely the reason.

Among the enemy for years. Nowhere to seek help and on top of that missing nins.

There was no telling what skills he had picked up in order to survive. Kurenai did not envy Kakashi in any way. But considering how Kakashi could be sometimes whatever his team did he deserved. Team seven was not going to be a stroll in the park. Not by the long shot.

Kurenai did not know what Kakashi wanted his team to be. Kurenai had high hopes for hers. They would be a fantastic hunting unit. Kiba and Akamaru already showed the best signs followed quickly by Shino. They all had great teamwork. It was just the other stuff they had to work on.

Kurenai watched as Hinata’s steps became surer and surer with every miss. She could feel the determination in Hinata as she tried to land a hit on Naruto. This was good for Hinata who was always so kind and really did not want to hurt anyone.

She was trying to seriously fight the one she admired. The one person did not want to hurt she was trying to land a hit. Kurenai already knew what she was thinking ‘Just one hit.’ It was cute and it made her proud.

She did not know what Naruto was going to get out of it however. Maybe a sparring partner? She really did not see Kakashi tucking away that book for one on one sparring. Maybe a friend? He was the Jinchuuriki after all. A title that spoke of loneliness.

Xxx

“I’m jealous.” Badger moaned. “He gets to spar with a Hyuuga.”

“It’s not as big as people hype it up to be.” Shisui protested. “Come spar with an Uchiha.”

“Please I don’t need to land my ass into a genjutsu.” Badger snorted. “Give me that over your creepy sharingan any day.”
“Hey!”

“You find our dojutsus creepy?” Itachi asked quietly and Badger yelped.

“When did you get here?” Badger demanded. “I thought you had today off.”

“I found I had nothing to do.” Itachi replied and Shisui felt sorry for him.

“Sasuke still giving you the cold shoulder?” He questioned and watched Itachi’s shoulders lower just a fraction. “He’s just going through a phase. He still loves his Nii-san.”

“He’s training dedicated manner.” Badger pointed out. “With that kind of dedication he’ll make Chuunin in no time.”

“My bet is that he makes Chuunin his first time.” Sparrow teased. “Like his Nii-san.”

“There are other ANBU duties to be completed.” Boar pointed out. Shisui snorted and fiddled with the leaves on his branch. “You don’t have to come on Jinchuuriki watch.”

“We don’t even have to be here anyway one person could do this.” Shisui snorted. “The only reason so many come on precaution is if he does multiple shadow clones again.”

“So not fun keeping track of all of them.” Badger groaned. “He can make thousands and keep them.”

“How much chakra does he have?” Sparrow asked softly. “And he hasn’t started using the Kyuubi’s yet.”

“Yeah.” Shisui muttered. There was a startled yelp from Naruto and he focused to realize that the girl had finally gotten a hit.

“So she decided to use more chakra since she could not do more than graze him.” Itachi murmured as Naruto sat on the ground. He gripped his shoulder in a tight grip obviously feeling pain. “She closed one.”

“Are you okay Naruto?” Kurenai leaned over Naruto. “It hurts doesn’t it?”

“I’m fine!” Naruto blurted out as Kurenai removed his hands from where Hinata had struck him. Behind Kurenai, Hinata stood her hands wavering her posture showing her uncertainty to proceed or not. “It stings but not that bad.” The boy’s face heated as Kurenai continued to softly rub Naruto’s shoulder. “It’s not that bad but I guess it would be worse if it were more than one right?”

“But she didn’t close one.” Kurenai muttered. “You closed two right Hinata?” Naruto’s head swung to Hinata’s direction. The girl’s head was lowered and she was toeing the ground nervously.

“Really?” Naruto’s tone was amazed. “But you should have been able to close only one just now when you widened your range.”

“When she closed one her thumb brushed allowing her to close the other but I think that was a mistake. But she did rather well.” Kurenai sighed. “And so did you but you should get yourself checked out.”

“S-Sure.” Naruto blushed. “It was fun anyway and don’t worry Hinata. That was amazing! Your clan is awesome.” He hesitated. “Can you do something like that too?” He asked Kurenai.

“My talents lie in genjutsu and tracking.” Kurenai answered.
“With that eye?” Naruto sounded eager.

“Uh no.”

“Kurenai-sensei has g-g-great chakra control.” Hinata spoke up.

“Oh.” Naruto mumbled. “But that’s great. You look like you would be incredible at taijutsu but then you can just hit them with a quick genjutsu instead.” Kurenai laughed at Naruto’s phrasing causing the boy to exchange a confused glance with Hinata. “What did I say?”

“Oh it is nothing.” Kurenai laughed. “But you’re good with the compliments Naruto.”

“Ahh Asuma-san should be on his guard.” Sparrow sighed as Naruto flushed a deeper shade of red.

XxX

It seemed that the news of his return had spread like wildfire. Well at least it seemed so. When Iruka-sensei turned up after his solo training session and dragged him out the house Naruto had been confused to why the man had been trembling with excitement.

Being pushed into a seat and told to order what he wanted and as much as he wanted had confused him. And when Iruka-sensei had tapped his hitai-ate and told him good job Naruto had wanted to cry. Iruka-sensei’s smile was so big and so content and it made it feel like he really was home.

“It’s so warm.” Naruto murmured into his bowl.

“Of course it is!” The old man boomed. “I just handed it to you!”

“No no not like that.” Naruto laughed. His hand lingered near the bowl after he set it back onto the counter. “Don’t worry.”

“So?” Iruka-sensei sounded eager. “Enjoy yourself?” Naruto thought on the contrast his mind had pulled up. How familiar travelling had seemed. How it seemed he just had to look back and Zabuza would have been there. How from time to time he thought he smelt Kaya’s scent. How certain he was that they would have ended up in that place but not to do good.

How he had played the part in helping a boy in believing in heroes again. How he had played Hero for a little bit.

“Yeah.” Naruto smiled. “Hey Iruka-sensei!” He grinned. “You wouldn’t believe the stuff I learned!”

XxX

A joke gone wrong and now the situation had gotten bad. Was really bad. Naruto kept himself positioned in front of Konohamaru and his friends. Naruto had no idea what was with these people but he could feel that they were bad news.

From the mean looking girl to the guy with the face paint. And he did not even want to think about the guy that had just appeared next to Sasuke. With his quiet voice and whatever that was on his back.

The situation was not good at all and Naruto knew where they were from but not who they were. Suna. He could recognise that village. He wanted to know why these foreign shinobi were inside Konoha but he wanted to get away from them as soon as possible.
The two were terrified of the redhead and that was enough for him to be cautious. They might be a team but the redhead with his piercing gaze called the shots. And his bloodlust lurked below the surface. It was faint but Naruto could taste it.

He knew Sasuke was having a moment in the tree with the redhead so close. Naruto wanted to get far away from him as possible and he was hoping the redhead was not wanting a fight because he looked like the type not to play fair and enjoy it.

And he wanted a fight. Naruto could sense it. He could feel it and he wondered if Sakura and Sasuke could feel it too. And he desperately hoped Konohamaru and his friends could not. There were some things they were not ready for and knowing that someone could be so quiet yet wanted to make you hurt and enjoy it was one of the things the kids were not ready for.

“Temari. Kankuro. Let’s go.” God his voice was quiet too. No rage and that was terrifying. He sounded so controlled and that was scarier than if he had yelled in rage. Because the more control you had, the longer you tended to linger and make it hurt. And the way the boy’s eyes lingered on Sasuke before he joined his group on the ground told Naruto he had already found a target.

Then those cold eyes met his own and Naruto’s breath hitched. The correct word seemed to be targets.

XxX

“You’re supposed to be taking it easy.” Kakashi scolded. Sakura kept looking at Naruto and Sasuke and Kakashi just knew he had not gotten the entire story. He just knew he should have taken them out for lunch instead of letting them barge into his apartment. “We’re on break remember?”

“Who are they?” Sakura asked. She wrung her hands as she gave her teammates anxious glances. “They aren’t from around here.”

“No they are from Suna.” Naruto muttered. “That’s what Suna’s headbands look like.”

“That doesn’t say why they are here.” Sakura pointed out. “And they are so different from us.”

“Well.” Kakashi mused. “They are here to represent their village in the Chuunin exams.”

“Chuunin?” Sakura asked.

“Like Iruka-sensei?” Naruto asked. “Those three?”

“They are here to participate in the exam they have not passed it yet.” Kakashi said dryly. “Konoha is hosting the Chuunin exams this time around.”

“What does that mean?” Naruto asked. “What’s the test?”

“It’s different each time around.” Kakashi admitted. “But it is all to see whether the individuals has what it takes to be a Chuunin.”

“So that’s what they are there for huh.” Naruto murmured. “They’re scary.”

“They are from a different village.” Sakura pointed out. “You can’t expect them to be just like Konoha.”

“But that boy…” Naruto trailed off. “I don’t like the look in his eyes and did you see how the other
two looked at him?”

“He’s strong.” Sasuke said quietly. Naruto gave Sasuke a tired glance but quickly looked back at Sakura. “That is all there is. He’s strong.”

“That isn’t all he is.” Naruto muttered.

“Incidentally Konoha has a treaty with the Sand village.” Kakashi cut in. “So I hope you didn’t do too much damage.”

“It’s them that started it.” Naruto protested. “Those two looked ready to- “He glanced towards Sakura. “Well it blew up because they were so tensed up. but still Konohamaru didn’t deserve all that.”

“We got off on the wrong foot.” Sakura murmured. “Maybe they won’t hold a grudge.”

“Heh. We’ll end up crossing paths with them again.” Naruto said softly. “And you better believe they are going to hold some sort of grudge.”

XxX

“Let’s do it.” Sasuke said. Naruto looked up confused because Sasuke was talking to him and Sakura at the same time.

“What?” He asked.

“I’m going to enter the exams.” Sasuke said and Naruto nodded. He had thought Sasuke would the moment he heard about it. Sasuke was always set on improving and there was no better opportunity than the exams.

“You think we’re ready?” Naruto asked warily. He wanted to enter too but when he thought about the three Suna nins he was uncertain. He doubted that the exams would consist of a paper test.

“Do you think you’re ready?” Sasuke asked. “We did well in the land of Wave.”

Naruto swallowed hesitantly at the reminder. They had come out alive sure but mostly that was luck. He wanted to be a Chunin too. The opportunity for new exciting missions teased at him…

“What about you Sakura?” Sasuke asked. Sakura’s cheeks flushed from being addressed but she also looked nervous.

“I think I’d like to enter.” She said softly. “We’ve done a lot of missions and training.”

“So those of us who want to enter it should just tell Kakashi.”

“We don’t even get to find out what this exam is like?” Naruto muttered. “And who else is going to be in it?” Besides Suna there were a bunch of villages out there and Jiji was going to let them waltz right in? but what if there was fighting?

It would be nice to have a full out spar. And his worry was mostly for his team not himself. If anything happened, he could protect them. He would. And if Sasuke wanted to pretend that bloodlust was not oozing from that redhead’s pores then it would be up to Naruto to keep them apart.

XxX
“It’s nice that you decided to enter together.” Kakashi-sensei mused. He looked over the page of his book to regard them. “Because you can’t enter the exam on your own.” Naruto’s mouth dropped open.

“You can’t?” He asked dumfounded. His thoughts went back to the Suna nins. The two who had stayed with the one they obviously feared. At least he got now why they had not ditched the redhead. But that might be more because they were too scared to run.

“So if I had refused…” Sakura mumbled and Naruto caught the glance Sasuke gave her. “Why didn’t you tell us that Kakashi-sensei?”

“I didn’t want Naruto or Sasuke pressuring you to enter.” Kakashi-sensei closed his book with a soft snap and got up from the bench. “I wanted you to enter the exam because you wanted to not because of Sasuke or Naruto.”

“Sakura-chan?” Naruto asked. “You do want to enter right?”

She sent him a bright smile but Naruto could see the tension behind it. “Yes, I want to see how much stronger I’ve gotten too!”

“Then it’s time to send in the paperwork.” Kakashi-sensei muttered. “I think if I do it after lunch there will still be time.”

“No we will do it now.” Sasuke glared. “If you disappear it will never get in time. Or will barely get done in time.”

Kakashi-sensei looked hurt but Naruto agreed with Sasuke. “The sooner it is done the sooner you can slack away.” He said. Then he stilled because the words were so familiar. Naruto closed his eyes and took a shaky breath. Somehow he felt that if he focused he would hear Zabuza’s mocking laugh.

Pushing away that thought Naruto opened his eyes again and focused on his team mates and his Sensei. The careful way Kakashi-sensei’s eye was fixed on him told him that moment had not been missed.

XxX

“You’re good with money.” Sakura remarked. Naruto considered her words before he answered honestly.

“Well I had to be. Zabuza insisted on necessities only and even then the stupid no brows used to skimp. I had to save up if I wanted anything for myself.” He chuckled. “I bought a hair ornament for Haku using the money I earned on my own. Little things. Weeding. Fetching water. And when I gave it to him he was so happy.” Naruto sighed. “Although Zabuza gave me a lot of shit for it and he started buying more stuff for Haku. Bastard felt he was being one upped or something.”

“That…” Sakura paused. “I don’t want to laugh but it sounds funny. It sounds cheerful.”

“It was cheerful Sakura-chan.” Naruto said softly. He shifted his purchases so he could carry them better. “Only the first few weeks were bad. I mean not every day was sunshine but there were plenty of good times too.”

XxX

There was more to swords that just running someone through or beheading a person. Naruto knew
that. He wanted his own sword to use in the exams. If he had to use them in the exams. He could still remember that those three had something with them. Those Suna shinobi.

Of course he fought reasonably well. With a sword. But it was not the same as the stuff the others were able to do.

And honestly he was sort of nervous. This was different to the missions they had been on before and Naruto was curious to how the D-ranks and C-rank they had been on was supposed to help them pass the exam.

What were they looking for inside them? He knew it was more than skill that they were looking for. Naruto knew that. But he guessed the only thing he could do for the moment was train.

And maybe, it was time that he got serious about this and be a little more honest about himself. Sakura did not mind him sharing about some of his past. Iruka-sensei did not mind either. Maybe, he could actually share more and guide others more.

Stop being so distant from the village because his team mates aside. He rarely saw anyone.

XxX

“That’s a nice offering.” Kakashi-sensei said from behind him. Naruto glanced behind him to see the man crouching in the nearby tree his head in his book. “Make that yourself?”

Naruto eyed the rice balls he had brought before he sighed. “Yes.”

“I’m sure they would have loved it.” Kakashi-sensei closed the book with a small snap. “You know you can visit them more often.”

Naruto knew that. He did but coming to see the collection of graves, it did more harm than good. Before he had been too scared to come. Fearful that his anger would rise and he would forget Zabuza’s warning. He knew that all of them had taken a big risk by running and it hurt him that he was the only one whose slate was wiped clean.

“I know.” He said softly. “But it isn’t that hard to remember. The good times. That they were family.” Kakashi fell silent behind him and Naruto smiled. “They were what they were.”

“How much did they train you?”


XxX

“A sword is more than a weapon. It’s a part of you. There is a connection forged between you. It is your friend. Your brother. An extension of you that you must control.” Naruto nodded even as Raiya’s words mostly went over his head. “You much respect each sword you hold.”

“There’s more to it than running and thrusting.” Kaya giggled into his ear. Naruto leaned back to watch her eyes twinkle down at him. Playful glints of green. “Shinobi like Raiya will swear up and down that their sword is all they need.”

“Don’t interrupt!” Raiya huffed. “He needs to learn.”

“Don’t worry we’ll be here to protect him.” Kaya teased. “And I’m not the only one that thinks he
needs to focus more on the basics. You can teach him how to fall in love with a sword later on.”

“I’ll make you fall in love with my sword later on.” Raiya muttered as she sheathed hers.

“You already did. And do. Every night.” Kaya said dryly and Naruto groaned from mortification.
“Oh drat! Sorry Naruto-chan.” A soft kiss to the top of his head and hair caressed his neck. “You know how we get sometimes.”

“Pervert nee-chans.” Naruto huffed and got identical grins from the both of them.

“You’ll be nine soon.” Raiya mused. “Maybe it’s time we gave a test similar to the one Zabuza gave you.”

“After we clear it with Haku.” Kaya teased. “I wonder how long you’ll last.”

“But-” Naruto protested.

“Don’t worry.” Raiya said solemnly. “We won’t push you too far. We’re nowhere near the strength of Haku. We won’t push you that far.”

XxX

Naruto woke covered in sweat. He had been dreaming. Lately he had been dreaming of the past. Simple days without running.

Maybe it was because he had accepted that there would be no more running. Something that back then he had doubted greatly. As strong as they had been. As strong as Haku, Zabuza had been the chances of them taking over Kiri and living happily ever after had been dim.

Not with all of them. Naruto had suspected many had latched onto the dream because they wanted to stop running. He had wanted to stop running for their sakes. He had understood why they were running in a strange way. They had no choice. Or at least. That was what he had been told.

Naruto pushed up the window in his bedroom and closed his eyes at the cool night air that rushed in. Maybe he was dreaming of better times now because he could actually deal with it properly.

He would never see them again but it would be cruel to forget. They were not the comrades many would want them to have but they had been the comrades he had and they had cared about him. They in the end were not bad at all.

Still, it would be nice to talk to someone who would understand. The Sandaime would listen but he always talked philological. He meant well but he was hard to understand. Iruka-sensei barely stifled his worry half the times Naruto opened his mouth.

Sometimes he wanted to talk about how cool they were. How Zabuza had looked training. How beautiful Haku was. How happy Raiya looked because she was free. Free to L-

Well. He had promised to stop thinking about that.

Also maybe another reason that the dreams were about good times of the past was because he would need those memories to get him through the exam with his resolve intact.

After all, it was necessary to keep his resolve. Hokage was a long road. A hard dream and it seemed so far. Naruto raised his hand out the window and smiled at how small it seemed compared to the night and how far away the stars seemed although they seemed right at his fingertips.
So close yet so far. Just like him and all the things he wanted.

XxX

A sword, was simply an extension of himself. Naruto slowly opened his eyes and did a quick upward slash…and nearly fell on his ass.

“Maybe something more appropriate for my size.” He sighed.

XxX

He needed more tags. There was no knowing what he was going to run into but if he was going to be running into shinobi from pretty much every village he wanted to be prepared.

Zabuza had liked teasing him about how he became a shinobi and really the story had only been scary the first ten times. But Naruto had known there were plenty like Zabuza still being created. Still being born and he knew the stupid man had about a ton of screws loose but Haku had liked him.

And he had liked Haku.

And they could have left him alone to struggle to survive. Make him scramble but Haku had given him tips. Zabuza had done somethings too but Naruto knew that was more because the man got a laugh out of it than anything.

Something to protect.

Someone to protect.

His future, his past. Both were precious. The path to Hokage would start from here. Had actually started since he came back to the village. He was not alone. There was nothing wrong with existing.

And somethings were worth dying for.

XxX

Morning was the best time to collect herbs. It was a simple gathering mission so at dawn Naruto had set off in his mesh shirt and his pants. It was cool but not cold so he had left his jacket behind. If it came to it he did not want to draw attention to himself.

And it was actually a lovely morning. It was cool and he found the necessary herbs easily. Mostly thanks to all the D-rank missions he had been on.

He had learned from some the best after all. Sometimes it was best to make your own. They could be more effective that way and you left less trails behind than just buying.

Naruto spent a good amount of time gathering the herbs and plants before he decided he had enough to do what he needed to do. He had started out the forest when he saw a pale figure walking just ahead.

Simple clothes but for a moment he thought he saw Sasuke so he stopped his advance in confusion. Then light flickered through the trees and he realized the mistake. The hair was wrong. The build was wrong and the face was wrong too.

But it felt so much like Sasuke that he was confused. Naruto realized that he had been noticed but
he remained where he was transfixed. Were doppelgangers true after all? Clones? Or could it be...a relative? The Uchiha were a clan if he remembered correctly and the mother had the same eyes as the son. So maybe this was...

Who?

The man stopped a short distance away and Naruto noted his loose clothes. All black but Naruto just knew he was not defenseless and it had nothing to do with the sword he could see was strapped to the man’s back.

“Good morning.” The man said and Naruto knew for sure it was not Sasuke. Wrong tone. Wrong way of speaking to him. Way too polite.

“Um morning.” Naruto muttered as he shifted his basket to his other hand. He did not feel threatened but not at ease either. He eyed the lines by the man’s eyes curious. Were they from age? Just part of his face?

“You’re up very early Naruto-kun?” The man said and Naruto shrugged in response.

“Best to get these early.” Naruto responded. He shook the basket in order to draw the man’s attention to it but the man’s eyes never left his.

“You seem well learned in this sort of thing.” The man tilted his head to the side and suddenly looked more than contemplative. His eyes were far warmer than before and Naruto felt a flash of familiarity that froze him. “Preparing for the exam?”

“Yeah I’m entering.” Naruto answered. He shifted again aware of the man’s eyes on him. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Yes.” The man answered. Naruto had the distinct feeling he was amusing the man but his expression had not changed so there was no way he could call him out on it.

“Why are you out here?” Naruto asked. “And who are you?”

“That’s two questions.”

“Then answer one.” Naruto replied as he took a careful step back.

“My name is Uchiha.” The man said and Naruto nodded because he had suspected that much. “Itachi.”

“Itachi?” Naruto asked to see Itachi nod. Itachi seemed to be waiting on something from him but Naruto had no clue to what it was. “What?”

“I believe you’re on the same team as my little brother.” Itachi said and Naruto knew the man was amused now. “Uchiha Sasuke. And the reason I’m out here is because I have a small mission in this direction.”

That was Sasuke’s brother? Well he knew Sasuke had a relative and he dimly remembered that someone used to pick Sasuke up back when they were kids but it had honestly blurred together and gotten tossed to the back of his mind. But this was Sasuke’s brother? Then, that meant the reason he looked at him and could see **Sasuke** was because Sasuke was...

Good god. What was he thinking? Not everything he learned was applicable to the village. Not
everyone was like them. He was simply thinking too much into it.

“`A mission huh.” Naruto murmured distractedly. “Do I get to know what it is?” He asked. “Because I thought that missions were cancelled until the Chuunin exams were done.”

“They are supposed to be but that is the ones that spans beyond Konoha.” Itachi’s eyes were fixed on him and although he looked like Sasuke the stare did not resemble him at all. “There are still C and D-ranks that need to be completed.”

Well that was a crash course of information. “So Jounins pick up the slack?” Naruto questioned. He tried to see Kakashi-sensei doing the missions they were supposed to be doing and just could not see it. He could not see the man doing a mission without urging either. Naruto strongly suspected left to his own devices the man would read that book of his. Or disappear wherever it was he liked to disappear.

“Jounins….” Itachi murmured. The man’s mouth twitched before he smiled. He chuckled and Naruto was reminded of his past so strongly that nostalgia was the only reason he did not blush. Still he had things to do before the exam began.

XxX

“Sasuke.” Sasuke slowed his steps as Itachi materialized next to him. He had been hoping that it was late enough that Itachi would have been asleep or on a mission but things rarely worked the way he wanted them to go.

“What is it nii-san.” He asked. He paused outside the door to the meeting room but Itachi only looked back at him before continuing. “Is this going to be quick?”

“Father and I wanted to talk to you before you take the exam.” Itachi’s voice was careful neutral. No warning just facts and Sasuke’s fingers tensed on the door before he released it in order to follow Itachi.

“A warning or luck?” Sasuke muttered before he followed Itachi.

XxX

“So you would say, that for someone in his circumstances.” Kakashi snapped his book closed. “That he has adjusted fairly well.” Above him various ANBU members all masked sighed and the ones he knew personally muttered to themselves.

“It’s more than that.” Sparrow complained. “He’s well adjusted. He works well but he’s isolated.”

“A teen phase.” Kakashi dismissed in order to rile Sparrow.

“We wouldn’t learn from just watching him. He will reveal more if he is spoke to.” Badger responded. “But he’s not so different from any one else.” Badger hesitated. “He hides his feelings well. I don’t know what he really thinks about anything and we’ve been watching him for so long. I know he liked the open sky.”

“He likes ramen.” Monkey injected.

“He trains using various methods and no real order that I can see.” Sparrow admitted.

“He talks to the Sandaime’s grandson and his friends as equals and they have a fascination with tricking adults.” Cat murmured.
“He has a type that he is fond of.” Monkey said softly. “He’s weak to it and he knows it.”

“A type.” Kakashi asked curiously. “Explain?”

“What does Uchiha Mikoto, Kurenai-san and Uchiha Itachi have in common?” Boar questioned and Kakashi seriously thought about the question.

Mikoto-san and Itachi had Sasuke in common. But Kurenai was another team’s teacher. Maybe it was how they treated people. It could not be about that night because Naruto still knew nothing about his past and Kakashi did not have clearance to tell him. Honestly he doubted the Sandaime would tell him anytime soon.

So maybe those three had approached him the same way? Then Kakashi remembered how on their mission how Naruto had helped Sakura with her hair how he had been focused on his task but at the same time a little wistful.

“They have all got long hair and good manners don’t they?” He asked weakly.

“He likes the pretty type.” Badger tsked. “But that distraction jutsu doesn’t reflect it at all!”

“That’s not a distraction that’s a sin.” Monkey muttered and Kakashi pretended that he had not heard them. Instead his mind went to the problem of his student.

XxX

“There has got to be a law against this.” Naruto muttered as his sensei slipped through his window into his apartment. Granted he had not been sleeping but that had nothing to do with anything. The problem was that Kakashi-sensei had just invited himself indoors. In the middle of the night.

“Yo.” The man greeted as he straightened up. He was still in all his Jounin clothes and Naruto shook his head at the sight of it.

“Don’t you sleep?” He asked. “Because normal people do that even if it is just a few hours.” Naruto followed Kakashi-sensei’s gaze to his made up un slept on bed and flushed before he stormed to his kitchen. “Shut up I was going to get there soon enough.”

“Second thoughts?” Kakashi-sensei asked. Naruto turned around as he filled his kettle at the tap to see the man lazily leaning in his doorway.

“About the exam?” Naruto questioned. “Why should I be?” it was not going to be a piece of cake whatever it ended up being but it was not something to fret over. He thought he was ready and Kakashi-sensei thought they were ready too else he would have never allowed them to sign up for it.

“They say the night before can be nerve wracking.” Kakashi-sensei admitted. Naruto snorted as he rummaged through his cupboards for the right cup ramen. “Maybe you should take a good luck charm?” It was said lazily.

“I already have plenty of those.” Naruto muttered.

“I’ve been thinking….you’re rather good with a sword.” Kakashi-sensei said easily but Naruto knew from the way he phrased it that it was nothing easy at all.

“And you wait until now to tell me that?” Naruto scoffed. The kettle was ready enough and he poured the boiling water into the first cup. “It isn’t some big secret. We had swordsmen in our
groups.”

“Obviously.” Kakashi-sensei murmured. He moved into the kitchen a slow prowl that put Naruto’s instincts on alert. “I saw many swords in that group.”

“Bloodlines stand out.” Naruto said. He fixed his eyes on his ramen and tried to ignore the way Kakashi-sensei prowled around the kitchen. How he had advanced closer to Naruto.

“I wish we knew then what we knew now.” Kakashi-sensei said softly.

“It would have ended the same.” Naruto shrugged. “Maybe worse. They had no reason to trust villages. No reason to give me up. if I had wanted to go that would be one thing.”

“But?”

Naruto hesitated. When he thought back to those days that the good times. Happy moments edged by fear that they would have to flee again. Compared to what he knew of the village…”I don’t think I would have come willingly. So to save them yes.” Naruto admitted. “But not after everything. Not after the way I felt.” He flipped open the closed lid to the ramen and stared at the ramen that was ready but did not feel much of an urge to eat it. “To leave the few people that acknowledged me for two people? I don’t think I could have made the decision Konoha would have wanted.”

“And there was no way you would leave behind Haku who was everything to you.” Kakashi-sensei said softly.

“He looked at me.” Naruto said softly. “I never had anyone do that before. Iruka-sensei had warmed up to me. The Sandaime was always the Sandaime. But Haku…” He trailed off. “No one looks at me like that.”

“That isn’t exactly true.” Kakashi-sensei said softly and Naruto jolted his hand nearly knocking over the ramen. He looked at the man next to him to see Kakashi’s eye was on him and the look was-

It was something.

Naruto looked back down at the ramen. There were so many things mixed up in Kakashi-sensei’s gaze he could not figure them all out. He could not understand what the man was thinking. He did not know all those things meant but he knew what was not in that gaze. And considering what he knew he should not be thinking like he was, but it was so difficult and he was so torn.

“Well you’re weird.” He pointed out and he felt embarrassed at the half huff that came from the man next to him. “And you had time to get used to everything that is me before you spoke to me.”

“I never had to get used to anything.” Kakashi-sensei said and Naruto frowned because that sounded honest. His gaze locked on the man next to him and he felt frustration at how the man was so closed off. But he could not exactly talk himself.

“Why did you come here tonight?” Naruto asked softly.

“To see if you were nervous.” Kakashi-sensei mused. “To see if you were prepared. To see you.” He added on and Naruto cursed how delighted hearing that made him feel. It was not supposed to be like that. He was not supposed to be so easy. But to stay aloof-

He did not want to do that either.
“Want to give me pointers?” Naruto asked and that gave him a full hearted laugh.

“No but…I can give you a tip.” And Kakashi’s gaze slid away from him to somewhere unseen. “Rely on your team.”

“Tell that to Sasuke.” Naruto muttered.

“Well you are someone hard to understand. And full of secrets.”

“And I’d like to keep them to myself.” Naruto said dryly. “And thanks to your half assed explanation and the Sandaime brushing everything under a rug I have no idea what I’m supposed to say.” He gritted in frustration. “Technically I was a missing nin. I abandoned the village. Just not for power or because I abused authority.” Naruto heard his voice tremble and grabbed the ramen cup. “I left because someone thought I was worth keeping around. Because someone looked at me and I could see he was the same as me and I thought being by that person was worth dying for.”

Naruto broke off again and closed his eyes. “How the hell do I tell anybody about this?”

“I don’t know.” Kakashi-sensei said. “But in the future there will be missions. Missions so bad they made what we went on look like a simple cat catching mission. And you will want to keep it to yourself.” Kakashi paused and he gently removed the ramen from Naruto’s grip and placed it by the sink. “But people will notice that you have changed even if you think you have not. And you will need to talk to someone at that point. You will need to talk and have people understand you.”

“You want me to talk about my life with missing nins….to people faithful to a village? Loved by a village? Protected and acknowledged by the village?” Naruto questioned.

“I want you when you feel the time is right to talk to your friends.” Kakashi-sensei said softly. “Because that is what they are.” Naruto snorted and Kakashi-sensei sighed. “You may disagree from time to time but you don’t wish harm on Sasuke and neither does he on you.”

“I don’t want to hurt them.” Naruto admitted. He could remember the way Sakura looked at him when she found out just where he had been. He could recall the way Sasuke had stared at him. If they had known the full story then…what would their faces had looked like? Did he want to know?

Sakura had been so frozen on seeing that he had killed. That Sasuke had killed. Textbook was not real life and Sasuke and Sakura had learned that. They were learning on how to be a shinobi. Naruto already had that lesson he was just fine tuning it. He was learning how to be loyal and he was learning why.

And that was a far harder lesson than learning to be a shinobi.

“They may be far more ready than you give them credit for. Just as they don’t know much about you. You don’t know that much about them.” Kakashi-sensei said softly. “So whatever happens in the exams. You should go through it together.”

“I’m a little nervous.” Naruto said softly. “I’m prepared but I have no idea what is going to happen.”

“That should be familiar to you.” Kakashi-sensei said and Naruto got the impression that the man was smiling behind his mask.

“Yeah.” Naruto admitted. “I just don’t.” He hesitated and searched for the words. “I just don’t want anything too crazy to happen.”
“I’m confident that if it is you three, you’ll survive.” Kakashi-sensei said softly. “And if it is you, I’m sure you’ll do something to surprise us all. You’re the most unpredictable after all.”

“And loud.” Naruto grinned.

“And loud.” Kakashi-sensei mused. “And stubborn. And knuckleheaded.” Naruto laughed because it was true. He did not give up. He never had. Not in training. Not on trying to save his friends. Not in this.

Naruto straightened his back and released a breath and all his tension. Tension he had not known that was in him went away. He could do this. He was ready. And he would blend the past and future to make sure they all got through with this.

“So, want to talk about your crazy theories on what the exam is like?” Kakashi-sensei asked and Naruto snorted.

“No. I’d like to eat…” Naruto hesitated. “Sit outside for a bit then go to sleep.” His next words slipped out all on their own and he avoided Kakashi-sensei’s gaze. “You don’t have to leave.”

Chapter End Notes

Split chapters are coming your way...see you (hopefully) in the weekend!!
Meeting at dawn would have been overkill. As it was, meeting around early morning was good enough. Naruto was unsure to whether Kakashi-sensei would make the meeting on time considering the two of them had only parted ways five hours before.

But it was not as though they needed Kakashi-sensei to be with them to enter the exam. And Naruto knew the man would turn up eventually. A send-off would be nice but not required after all.

But it would be nice.

Naruto eyed Sakura who was uncharacteristically quiet. She was not even sneaking looks at Sasuke. Her hand was resting on her weapons pouch and she was subdued. Her gaze fixed on the river that flowed under the bridge.

Sasuke on the other hand was almost composed. Almost. Naruto was unsure what had happened to the other boy but it was obviously on his mind.

“We’ll wait another fifteen minutes.” Sasuke said and Sakura nodded and muttered a response. When Sasuke turned his gaze on him Naruto shrugged and leaned against the rails of the bridge.

Technically they were still early. There was no need to go at the crack of dawn. Early had its advantages but so did slipping in before you were late. Sometimes that made you less noticeable. Sometimes…it helped you avoid trouble.
And they wanted to avoid trouble.

The minutes ticked by in silence. Naruto sighed when it approached the fifteenth minute with no sign of their Sensei. He resigned himself to not seeing the man before the exam was over and pushed himself away from the railing. He opened his mouth to tell Sasuke and Sakura that enough was enough when the man in question flickered into view.

“Yo.” Kakashi-sensei said so easily. “I over slept.”

Naruto scoffed. “Liar.” Sakura nodded and shook her head.

“We’re going.” Sasuke said. “It’s time.”

“Yes it is.” Kakashi sensei mused. “Well good luck. You’re going to need it.” He met Naruto’s gaze and Naruto glanced at Sasuke and Sakura before he nodded.

“We will pull through. Believe it.” Naruto grinned. He knew he sounded cocky but…the air that Sasuke and Sakura carried…it was reassuring.

XxX

Well they certainly were in the right building for an exam. Naruto shook his head at the large building before he entered. For them to return to the academy. It was ironic. He spared a look behind them to see Kakashi-sensei behind them his hands shoved in his pockets and his gaze fixed on them.

Naruto got a nasty feeling in his gut at the way Kakashi-sensei watched them. Almost as if he was trying to memorize their images.

He turned back around and tried to pretend he had not seen what he had but honestly it was too late. His senses were on alert. He was far more tense than he had been before.

Just what the hell was this exam?

XxX

So many shinobi. Plenty of them. Lots of them and Naruto struggled to understand how so many genins had passed unnoticed under his nose. He did not recognise many faces. He also did not know there were so many genin around. It made him feel better about everything but among the others gathered…. he felt so young.

Everyone gathered looked older. Even the foreign genins that he could see. Especially the foreign shinobi that he could see. Somehow…it just felt oppressive. Naruto knew that the exam was a big deal but somehow…these genin gathered looked far more tense than they had a reason to be.

And they kept milling back and forth in the corridor. Looking for something. Naruto glanced at Sasuke but he was already searching ahead.

“Please let us in.” Naruto heard the soft voice but over the sea of heads he could not see who spoke. He frowned ready to push through but people stood back from situations for reasons.

“Listen up. we’re being kind to you. The Chuunin exam is extremely difficult.” Naruto followed Sasuke and Sakura through the group to see a big nose kid speaking…except. He seemed strange somehow.
“We have seen those who gave up on being a ninja or become seriously injured taking this exam. A Chuunin is the commander of a squad.” The boy next to the first speaker was just as heavily armed as the first and he blocked the doorway. Naruto eyed his cap suspiciously.

“It’s the commander’s responsibility for failing any missions and for any subordinates’ deaths!” The first boy had spoken again and at the corner of his eye Naruto saw Sakura flinch. “And to think that these kids are trying to…” He sounded mocking and bitter. Naruto eyed the two on the ground. He guessed it was the girl who had spoken.

“What’s wrong with sifting through those that won’t pass anyway?” The second boy leered. His smile was secretive and his gaze fixed on the two fallen figures.

“That’s a sound argument.” Naruto’s step faltered when Sasuke spoke. “But I will pass.” He stepped forward few mere steps from the boys blocking the door. “And undo this field you’ve created using an illusion technique. I want to go to the third floor.”

At the murmurs around them Naruto realized…that everyone around them thought they were on the third floor. He glanced at Sakura wondering if she had caught it but her gaze was fixed in another direction.

“Oh?” The two boys exchanged a glance and Naruto saw the quick smirk they exchanged. His suspicion grew.

“You noticed?” The second boy asked.

“Sakura what about you? You should have noticed first.” Sasuke said and Naruto rolled his eyes. Still he waited for Sakura’s response. “Your analyzation skills and illusion techniques is the best in our squad.” Naruto bit back his instinctive laugh and watched Sakura. He guessed Sasuke had noticed Sakura’s mood as well.

“Sasuke-kun.” Her tone was a mixture of relief and surprise. “Thank you. Of course, I’ve noticed already. Because this is the second floor.” Confusion among the ninjas gathered broke out. Loud murmurs and a slight rise of panic.

“Detecting doesn’t mean anything if you can’t do anything about it.” The first boy said. His gaze darkened and Naruto tensed expecting him to go for the two weapons on his back. Instead he launched forward. Sasuke had already readied himself but a flash of green moved between them before they could clash.

And expertly blocked their moves. Naruto’s breath caught. He was impressed. The boy retreated back to the door and Sasuke stepped back. Naruto saw a flash of irritation on Sasuke’s face and could guess why.

This unknown boy. Someone who had been thrown to the ground a while earlier moved so quickly and stopped Sasuke’s kick.

“Hey you broke the promise.” Naruto saw long brown hair move into his vision and his breath caught. But it was nothing like what he was used to and the way the guy spoke. Naruto’s guard went up higher. “You’re the one that didn’t want to gather attention by doing something that stands out.”

“But…” The guy in green muttered. His glance towards Sasuke made Sasuke narrow his eyes and drove Naruto’s unease higher.

“She must be why.” The girl muttered and Naruto blinked in confusion before he realized that
Sasuke and Sakura were standing so close to each other…that the glance in Sasuke’s direction could have also been for Sakura…his unease reached a new level.

Green jumpsuit stepped closer to them. Past Sasuke and straight to Sakura. Naruto’s jaw dropped with the intention he felt coming from the guy. Was this the time?

“My name is Rock Lee.” Lee announced. His words were politely phrased and Naruto felt a slight pang inside him before Lee continued speaking. “You’re Sakura-san right?”

And how the hell would he know that? Naruto did not even know about these guys. The fact that they knew even just one of them was reason enough for him to be far more uneasy than he had been before. His fingers slipped to his weapons pouch and he considered his options.

Lee was fast. That moment was proof enough and Naruto doubted he had shown his full speed. For the time being…he would have to wait.

“What?” Sakura looked as dumbfounded as he felt.

“Let’s go out together! I’ll protect you till the day I die!” Lee proclaimed and Naruto’s heart stopped before he spluttered out his disbelief. Green jumpsuit and huge bushy eyebrows aside…they did not know this guy!

XxX

“No way.” Sakura said. She looked frozen. Sasuke’s eye brows shot up even as his face was fixed in a disbelieving expression. Lee looked…devastated. Naruto felt even more uncomfortable than before. “You’re too unique for my tastes.” Sakura continued Naruto shook his head and allowed a chuckle to escape. Well the exam was getting off to a weird start.

“Oi you over there.” The brown haired guy that had to be Lee’s team mate approached Sasuke a contemplative look on his face. “Identify yourself.”

“You’re supposed to identify yourself before you ask.” Sasuke responded.

“You’re a rookie aren’t you?” The boy asked. He had his hands shoved in his pockets but he looked anything but relaxed. How old are you?”

“I’m not obligated to answer that.” Sasuke murmured but Naruto saw the way his back tensed and how his arms had twitched.

“What?” The boy’s tone had gotten darker and Naruto wondered at the pale eyes he had…he wanted to ask a question but…somehow it seemed better to play it safe. Play it invisible.

The female teammate looked amused at the interactions and Lee had leaned against a wall. Naruto guessed he needed the support. After all his team mates were busy. Sasuke turned away and Naruto decided that he could at least try to console Lee. He could hear the boy murmuring about his ‘uniqueness’ from where he was.

“Naruto, Sasuke-kun!” Sakura seemed to have regained her cheer. Naruto paused before he could pat Lee’s shoulder in a reassuring manner. “Let’s go!” Well she did not exactly give them a choice. She grabbed their hands and carted them down the hallway as though they were toddlers.

XxX

They had just started to cross the small hall when they were called to stop. Naruto recognised Lee’s
voice and groaned to himself. They had been so close to getting away from all the serious contenders. He glanced at Lee’s focused expression and knew the skirmish he had been expecting was finally here.

And who was to blame?

No one really but Naruto was going with Sasuke. It had to be his attitude that brought this one them.

XxX

Just what the hell had happened? Naruto was not going to gang up on Lee. Not when he had no clue what the boy had been up to. And Sasuke was the one that had accepted the challenge anyway.

But the tortoise was talking. It was getting weirder by the second. Sakura dashed forward to catch Sasuke and Naruto took out his kunai. Fuck not making a scene that was all out the water now. Lee might have started it but it was far too weird to just sit on by now.

XxX

What the hell was this Chuunin exam? Naruto gaped as on top the tortoise that had been furiously scolding Lee…was an even stranger man that looked so similar to Lee that it honestly hurt his head.

So he was wrong? The tortoise was not the sensei? But it sure did behave like one. It had sounded so responsible and everything. Far better than Kakashi-sensei anyway.

But that pose…that everything. Naruto whimpered softly. How many weird people would appear before the exams were over with?

“You guys are on the spring time of your youth aren’t you?” The strange guy announced and Naruto’s face dropped in shock and disbelief. He could hear Sasuke’s confused voice and Sakura’s shocked one but he was unable to tear his eyes away from what he was seeing.

“An even more unique guy came out!” He yelped without meaning to.

“Hey Lee.” The man grinned as he dropped the pose. His teeth glinted and Naruto…Naruto became even more confused. Was this a sensei? Really? There was something weirder than Kakashi-sensei?

“Super unique and super bobbed hair.” Sakura stammered.

“Super unique and super eyebrows.” Naruto added on. “This is the first time I’ve seen such a thing.”

“And super eyebrows.” Naruto added on. “This is the first time I’ve seen such a thing.”

“Hey! Don’t make fun of Gai-Sensei!” Lee yelled at them. Naruto raised an eyebrow because the sensei in question was a shock to the eyes even if you forgot the pose he arrived in. And if even Sasuke had been taken aback what were other people with real normal reactions going to do?

“The hell I won’t! we don’t know how to react because of all these weird things!” He yelled back.

“What the hell did you say?” Lee’s loose bandage was grabbed tighter in his clenched fist.

“Cut it out Lee.” Gai-sensei said. Naruto’s gaze went back to him and he noted how the man in the time he had been distracted was far more serious and solemn.
Lee nodded and turned back to his Sensei. Naruto marveled at the sign of respect and obedience. But Gai-sensei’s low growl and punch to Lee’s face sent Lee reeling and Naruto gaping.

“You idiot!” Gai-sensei proclaimed and Naruto gaped in disbelief. He heard a strangled sound from Sakura and knew she was doing the same as him. What kind of weirdos had they gotten involved with? When Lee’s sensei walked to where Lee had fallen and stooped down. Naruto tensed himself, ready to defend Lee if any more violence would occur.

Yeah Lee had started it. But no one got hurt really. And it had been stopped before anything could get too serious. A few bruises everywhere that was it. So if the bushier brows-sensei wanted to make even more fuss he would have to clash with Naruto.

“Lee…you…” Gai-sensei’s voice had softened as he looked down at his student.


Gai-sensei released a sob and Naruto watched in horror as tears started flowing down the man’s face. “Lee.” He sobbed.

“Sensei…I... I” Lee sobbed and Naruto groaned when he realized that Lee was crying too. He felt highly uncomfortable. He felt as if he was seeing something highly inappropriate and considering who he had spent four years of his life with that was saying something.

“It’s okay Lee you don’t have to say anything more.” Gai-sensei sobbed and Naruto shook his head in disbelief.

“Sensei!” Naruto turned away when Lee ran into his Sensei’s arms. He could not believe he had just witnessed that with his own eyes.

“That kind of situation isn’t so bad.” Naruto whispered to Sakura.

Sakura looked at his as if he had suggested spanking the Hokage. “Idiot! It’s dangerous. Too dangerous!” Naruto shrugged and tried to tune out the murmurs between master and student.

The two looked ready to leave so Naruto spoke up. “Just wait a second! We were just talking!” He was grateful for the man’s cutting in but honestly, those two were just getting carried away.

“What are you going to do about the Chuunin exam? There isn’t much time left.” Sakura pointed out. Naruto nodded in agreement.

“What?” Gai-sensei had a look on his face that said he had forgotten entirely about the exam. “Lee I’m going to punish you for fighting and breaking a promise after the exam okay?”

“Yes!”

“Do five hundred laps!” Gai-sensei announced and Naruto scoffed.

“What’s with the turtle?” Naruto asked. But seemed better than to examine those two so closely.

“You three… is Kakashi doing well?” Gai-sensei asked and Naruto glanced at the man curiously. Did he know they were Kakashi-sensei’s team?

“You know Kakashi?” Sasuke said.

“I don’t just know him.” Gai-sensei announced. He chuckled and Naruto felt a deep unease. “People call us eternal rivals!” Naruto found that a little hard to believe. This guy certainly looked
ready to have a rival or ten but Kakashi? As a rival? He couldn’t see it.

Sasuke scoffed and Sakura said nothing but Naruto’s glance at her face showed that she was barely keeping her retort back. Barely. He glanced back to Gai-sensei to see the man still where he was. Then he was gone.

Naruto glanced back just in time to see the man reappear at their backs. “The record is fifty wins and forty-nine losses.” Gai-sensei murmured. He sounded proud of himself. Naruto’s back tingled at having the man get so close. “Just let me tell you. I’ve stronger than Kakashi.” The man grinned. Naruto ignored the grin to focus on the seriousness in the man’s eyes. He had a feeling that he was not joking.

No. he could feel it.

Lee was making approving noises and Naruto glanced back to him. His eyes locked on the uncovered hand that Lee was rewrapping. They were bruised and battered. Very bruised.

These two. They certainly were more than their appearances.

XxX

What the hell. There he was. Kakashi-sensei. The man stood in front of their way. “I see; Sakura came as well. You can now officially enter the Chuunin exam.”

“What the hell.” Naruto frowned. “You said we had already entered. And Sakura told you she was ready to enter.”

“It can only be entered in teams of three. And in terms of Sakura…you had some doubts didn’t you?” Kakashi-sensei said. Naruto held his breath because the man was right. Sakura had seemed hesitant. “But right now. You’re here because you want to because you’re certain. That lead you to this point.”

“And if Sakura-chan had changed her mind before we got here?” Naruto asked.

“Then I would have prohibited you and Sasuke from entering the exam and prevented you from entering these doors.” Kakashi-sensei said seriously. “And it would be a long time before I allowed you to enter the exams again.”

Teamwork. The word echoed in his mind and Naruto nodded.

“But the three of you are here by your own free will. Sakura. Sasuke and Naruto.” Kakashi’s eye closed and Naruto could see how happy the man was. “Good job.” He said softly and he stepped aside. “I’m proud of all three of you. You’re my team.” He said and Naruto grinned. “Now go.”

XxX

The place was packed. The tension was high too. Naruto got a glimpse of the various ninjas gathered before there was a blur of purple and someone jumped on Sasuke. Naruto walked away from Sasuke the moment he realized it was Ino. He was too busy focusing on all those gathered.

“What you’re going to take this troublesome exam too?” Shikamaru asked. He and Chouji stepped from around two other ninjas. Shikamaru looking done with everything and Chouji silently eating.

“Yeah.” Naruto shrugged. “Who else is here?”
“Too many people.” Shikamaru shrugged. “Way too many people.”

Naruto saw Team eight approach and resigned himself to noise and chaos. He nodded in Hinata’s direction and sighed when the girl flushed and looked away. He sat on the nearest table and ignored the glare of the occupant. He was not good at this sort of thing. And everyone was staring and it was just getting noisy and noisier.

“You’re the group that just graduated the academy right?” Naruto looked up at the speaker’s voice. Glasses, silver hair and somehow a kind face. “Walking around so easily with those cute faces. This isn’t a field trip you know.” The man said. Naruto noted the man’s Konoha Hitai-ate. And his scolding but protective stance…. he glanced beyond the man to see those beyond him looked tense.

Great. More trouble. But at least the red-head was nowhere in sight. They had that going for them. So if the exam could begin they could avoid the worse.

“His shirt. It’s the Uchiha’s clan symbol.” Naruto heard from his left. He gritted his teeth and glanced back to Sasuke. Great.

XxX

“Listen up!” Honestly the more Kabuto tried to give them tips and pointers the less Naruto cared. He wanted to start and instead of instilling caution Kabuto was pumping him up. Naruto felt sorry for the guy because he had the feeling that was not his intention. “I’m Uzumaki Naruto! And I don’t have the intention of losing to any of you!” His voice was loud. It echoed and it had force behind it. People behind it. And he felt a hell lot better after saying it. “Got that?”

XxX

Well Sakura didn’t take to his proclamation one bit. Naruto sulked as she raged on and on drawing more attention to them than he had done.

The he caught something at the corner of his eye. Something fast. Something approaching. Something with intent.

Without thinking he leapt towards Kabuto. He heard the alarm in the room but was too busy trying to keep the solid arm from pushing him away.

The guy was heavy. Naruto barely was able to push him back. Kabuto was already reacting.

“This doesn’t involve you.” The man growled at him.

“I’m not the one walking around like an amateur hedgehog and trying to attack people.” Naruto hissed. He cursed when he saw two other approaching. He dodged the first kunai thrown in his direction caught the second and used it to block the third. “What the hell! I’m certain that an all-out melee isn’t the first test!”

“Naruto!”

“Naruto-kun.” Kabuto said from behind him. “Don’t get involved.”

“Too late.” Naruto hissed. “They just came for you. I’m not going to sit back and watch that!” And they had come in a group. For one person. That wasn’t what the prestige village shinobi were supposed to do. Weren’t they supposed to be beyond such ‘tricks’?

“And that’s enough of that.” A deep voice announced. Everyone else snapped to attention but
Naruto did not look away from his opponent. Those eyes were cruel. “Sorry to keep you waiting. The exam will now begin. I’m the first examiner of the Chuunin selection exam Morino Ibiki.”

XxX

“You three from the Hidden Sound! Don’t think you can do what you want before the exam! Do you want us to fail you already?” The examiner’s voice cut through the tension and Naruto watched the Sound ninjas hesitate.

“I’m sorry I was exited since this was my first exam.” Naruto opponent said. His voice had gone compliant and Naruto did not believe it one bit. He knew that the boy’s voice might have gone docile but his eyes certainly had not.

XxX

The only good thing to come out of this was that Naruto could relax some. Hearing that they were not allowed to fight each other unless told so by an examiner made him feel a lot better.

There would still be fighting done the road he knew that. He could feel that. But it was nice to know that there were repercussions to people trying to get the jump on another genin.

It did not make him feel all that much better however. He could feel there were some that would not give a fuck about the rules. That would take the fail without a second glance.

There were too many here that would push that no kill rule. Too many that just ached to kill. Naruto could feel it. It tugged at him. Pulled at him. Their malice. But there were only a few in the room whose itch to kill was so strong that he paid it any attention.

After the life he had lived…the others were like cute little demons. Fear was the last thing on his mind.

XxX

A written test. A written test. Seriously? of all things. He had gotten so pumped up for a written test? He sucked at those. He knew he sucked at those there was no if about it. There was always some ridiculous and pointless question on a written test.

And he had come so far too.

The examiner shook papers in his direction a grin on his face and Naruto wanted to bloody his nose. The man’s grin widened and Naruto itched to yank the bandage around the man’s face and strangle him with it.

XxX

Naruto noticed when Hinata sat next to him but honestly he was trying not to freak out over the blank paper already waiting for him. It was the worst when you had the white sheet waiting for you when you sat down. It just sat there. Taunting you.

His number was fifty-three and other than Hinata there was no one else that he knew close to him. And they had gotten the freakiest rules for the test.

They start with 10 points. Each question was worth a point. If they got a question wrong, they would lose a point. It was more a game than an actual test. And to pass was determined by the team’s actual score. That was a dick move.
Someone could get all wrong. And the other two would suffer for it. That was evil. That just brought up the pressure for the participants.

And then of course were the leering examiners. Waiting to see if you cheated. Or to be more precise. How you cheated…

It was not an exam at all. It was a game. Then there was the whole deal with the last question… whoever designed this test had a sick mind. He knew exactly how to play people.

Naruto glared at the Chuunins at the side watching them before his gaze shifted back to the examiner. He would just have to do his best really. There had to be at least three questions on the exam that he would know. And if not…well Hinata was bound to know a thing or two.

XxX

She was trying to have faith. She really was but the moment she picked up her pencil Sakura knew she was not fooling anyone. Her fingers trembled. There was a terrible sensation all around her. The room had been tensed before but now.

It was thick with tension and it was a heavy thing pressing down on her. Pressing around her.

It was so oppressive and she knew it was not all coming from her. This was the atmosphere of the room. This was everyone around her and she knew that thanks to the rules this was the feeling of everyone’s fears.

And feeling that pressing down on her amped up her own tension. She was worried. About Naruto. About herself but mainly for the situation they found their selves in. if it was a match she would not be so worried. She had watched Naruto fight before.

But Naruto had always struggled in paper tests. This was most likely the hardest type of test for him. He was better off cheating. But there had to be at least one he could get done. But there was no doubt that it would come down to herself and Sasuke.

She had wanted those two to depend on her but with the pressure all around her…she was unsure to if she could get it done.

XxX

Sasuke could see Sakura from where he sat. Her body gave away her tension and he was worried. Of the three of them himself and Sakura were the best equipped for this sort of test but Sakura was their best bet for getting the most correct answers.

He knew why she was most likely worried of course. They could fail if Naruto got all wrong after all and if Naruto was sloppy about cheating then that was it for them too.

And the tension in the room was almost strangling.

He could feel the fear in the room as if it were a tangible thing. But that did not bother him at all. They would get through this and he had enough faith that Naruto would find a way. But he had to worry about himself for now.

And do what he could.

XxX
The test had begun and the tension had intensified. It certainly had not helped that the moment they had gotten their papers that the examiners had started scribbling. Naruto had not even gotten to read his first question when the first person had been told to get out.

Along with his team and what sucked worse was that the tension had risen again. And Naruto had not even gotten to look at the questions. He already knew they would be hard. And the way the examiners kept an eye on all of them was not making him feel any better.

There was no question about it. They were being encouraged to cheat. Which meant. Somewhere there were plants.

It made the most sense. It was the only thing that made sense. Somewhere there was someone with all the correct answers. But Naruto had no clue to where they would be. And if they were behind him there was no help for him then.

And the first question…. a cipher?

Naruto frowned. His eyes ran over the cipher noting the letter placements and the numbers.

“A cipher is meant to be decoded by those who are meant to receive it. But most of the time in bigger groups it becomes easier to decode. If only because the bigger the group, the chances of them knowing the same unique thing becomes harder. But of course the easier they make it. The more people it applies to.” Raiya’s voice echoed in his mind as Naruto read over the cipher.

He had it decoded the third time he read it.

The next question it sounded difficult at least in the beginning. Naruto had been ready to dismiss it as a math question and move on.

“If I’m here and I throw my senbon at Ryu-kun...”

“Oi!”

“Just wait for it.” Haku scolded from his stance in the tree. “Come on now Naruto-kun. If I use my full strength and he doesn’t dodge. How far will it go? Where will it land? If I just throw it. Not aiming just throw in his general direction. Will it land the same place, same distance if I were on the ground?”

“Oi! This is beginning to sound dangerous!” Ryu complained. “Why me?”

“For science!” Ayla laughed.

“Then come here!”

“It’ll miss won’t it.” Tanto chuckled. He looked up from where he was polishing his sword. “He said he won’t be aiming it and at full strength it will pass the target. It’s a little senbon.”

“It’ll graze.” Alya scolded. “He’s high enough in the tree that it’ll make a good arc and cut Ryu.”

“Let’s make a bet.” Kaiza grinned. He tucked away his beaten cards eagerly.


Naruto looked around the camp and thought to himself. He looked up at Haku who held the senbon loosely between his fingers. He glanced back at the nervous Ryu and opened his mouth.
He could answer this too. But only because he knew what it was trying to say. Only because he had seen that kind of situation play out.

The third question involved a map. Naruto had the answer before he even finished the question.

“This is a small town.” Zabuza growled. He finally was wearing more clothes. Naruto was thankful to the snow even if it was a total bitch to walk in. “Based on the map I’d say they have fifty people. If we want proper jobs, we’ll have to go to the neighbouring town.” Zabuza rolled back up the map. “But this place is isolated enough that we can rest for a few days. Judging by the map there is plenty of food if we know what to look for. Of course not many of you are good at snow lands so the rest will stay one place.”

“He got all that from a map?” Naruto whispered to Haku.

“Yes.” Haku’s smile was gentle. “Zabuza-san is great at reading geography. He knows what we will find.”

He went onto the fourth question without writing a word. And the next and then the next.

Was this reality? He knew the answers. Of course he did. Most of this had been his day to day life. Or he had been exposed to it in some way but this was a Chuunin exam? There had been none of this during their time as genins. Naruto understood why the tension was so damn high.

This was impossible for normal people! They would have to cheat. Most of this was worded so weirdly Naruto doubted many if any would understand. Which meant. They would go crazy. Nervous. They would cheat.

And they would lose their edge and get caught.

Whoever designed this exam. Was a sadist.

“N-Naruto-kun.” Naruto jumped at the soft whisper. Crap he had forgotten about Hinata. “I’ll show you my test...” She whispered.

Naruto was touched by the offer but he really did not need it. “Why?” He asked curiously.

“We’re the only rookies.” She looked embarrassed. “And it will be uncertain in the future and-d this isn’t something normal people c-can do.”

“I see.” Naruto smiled. She really was nice, Hinata. But she needed to speak up a little more. He could feel her sincerity and he just knew that if it were any of the other rookies. She would do the same. She was really a nice person.

Naruto smiled as around them more and more people were eliminated. It was a nice idea. A nice gesture but there was no way to do it without being caught. That and the Chuunins around them weren’t being easy about those they removed. If he had needed to cheat, it simply would be too risky. A kunai had flown past him twice already. He would rather not.

“Hinata, you don’t understand don’t you?” Naruto grinned as he kept his voice low. “A great ninja like me doesn’t cheat! Also you might get in trouble for aiding in cheating. Don’t worry. I’ll be fine.” Naruto reassured.

Hinata did not look reassured but she went back to her own paper. Naruto exhaled getting rid of the tension that had been building up in him due to the gazes of three of the gathered Chuunin.
He knew all the answers. He might as well write them down already.

XxX

There was some freaky stuff going on behind him and Naruto was grateful that he did not have to resort to cheating. The tension was high. Ten teams had been forced to leave. And the number was still climbing.

XxX

“Looks like we’ve gotten rid of the incompetent ones.” The examiner grinned and Naruto scowled. That was rude. “I will now give the final question.

Finally, Naruto relaxed. He could get the question over with and get out the classroom.

“Yes but before that there is something I must say…there will be a special rule before the tenth question.” The examiner announced and Naruto softly hissed at yet another rule for the exam.

“This is a hopeless rule.” The examiner ignored the whispers that started from his announcement and continued on. Naruto eyed the other examiners. “First you’re going to choose whether you want to take the tenth question or not.” The man said and Naruto hated how the man looked at them. As if he was challenging them.

No. As if he already knew the outcome. That he was certain that they would choose not to take the exam. Or maybe he was wrong. But he just felt that the man’s gaze. His presence was heavy and smothering on the room.

Naruto really disliked those sort of people. Making things unnecessarily tense.

“If you choose not to take it your points will be reduced to zero.” The man flashed his teeth and Naruto could feel how happy he was at the idea that many of them would choose not to take the question. “In other words you’ll fail.” The scar that split the man’s lips widened showing his joy at saying those words. “Your two other teammates will fail right along with you.”

And of course the room erupted into chaos. The room’s tension had tripled. Those that remained around him. Naruto could see they were more than shaken by the tenth’s question’s rule. They were terrified. He could hardly blame them. After seeing the test questions…the idea that this was even harder must be stressing them.

“And here’s the other rule.” The examiner continued silencing the rule again. Naruto was getting tired of these rules. There were too many. “If you choose to take it and you get it wrong, you will…Lose the privilege of taking the Chuunin exam forever.”

“What kind of rule is that?” Kiba demanded. “There should be people here that took the Chuunin exams in the past!”

The examiner chuckled. A low dark chuckle that Naruto knew was real. A laugh at their collective inexperience. “You were unlucky.” The man laughed. “This year, I am the rule. That’s why I gave you the option of quitting. Those who are not confident can choose not to take it. And try again the next exam. So let us begin. Those who won’t take the exam. Raise your hands.”

Naruto scoffed and rolled his eyes. He slumped in his chair. The sound was loud in the room that had silenced after the examiner’s words. The examiner’s gaze fell on him and Naruto shrugged.

“You have something to add?” The examiner asked him. “Or perhaps you want to raise your
"You've got to be joking." He laughed. "Aren't we Shinobi? There's no guaranteed safe way. We bet everything and can't get mad no matter what. It's up to us and make sure you don't go back on your word. There is no certain way. There is no easy way out." Tears came to his eyes and he tried to fight his laughter but it refused to be contained.

Maybe he would have thought about raising his hand if he had not had the life he had. Or maybe not. After all there was no easy way to become Hokage. To become respected and if there was he did not want to do it.

"Screw it! I'm not gonna run away!" Naruto slammed his hand on the desk. He was pissed and amused at the same time both emotions made his head dizzy. "After coming so far I'll be damned if I back down now. I'll take this problem, bring it! Even if I stay a genin forever I'll become Hokage no matter what anyway! And what's wrong with being a genin forever anyway? It doesn't say shit about how strong you are. There are many people who are strong. And they aren't even ninjas!"

Like Haku. Like Kasumi. Hell some had never even been fucking ninjas! His family had shown him that. The title was nice to show people how far you had come but it was better to never underestimate anyone. No matter what their 'title' or 'position' was.

"You won't scare me!" Naruto hissed. He broke away from the man's gaze towards the window.

"I'll take the test." Someone said behind him.

"I'll take it."

"Not going to back off right here. It's practically the starting line." A shaky voice said.

"I'll ask one more time. It's an event that will determine the rest of your life."

"I won't take back my words." Naruto grinned. "That's my way of doing things."

Naruto knew he was not imagining it. The tension in the room. It was clearing. He could breathe easier.

"Nice determination... then... for the first exam everyone here... passes!"

XxX

Needless to say. There was pandemonium at the man's announcement. Naruto had known something was fishy with the last question but he had not expected this either.

He greatly disliked this man. Morino.

XxX

"There was no such thing to begin with." The man’s smile was so carefree Naruto was confused by the transformation. But the confusion was dampened by his growing rage. How many would have quit just now?

A lot. Many would have quit. The tension had been high. People had been freaked. It simply was not fair to have such a thing dangled in front of you.

"Or you can call the one-two-choice question the tenth question." The man’s grin was wide. He
looked so happy. So different from the menacing examiner he had portrayed. “The nine questions accomplished their purpose. That is…to test your information gathering skills. The first test purpose lies in the first rule. That your pass fail decision is based on your three person teams.”

Which had placed pressure on them not to be a harm to their teammates. How dirty.

“But these test questions cannot be solved by you genins.” The man continued and Naruto arched an eyebrow at that. He had been right after all. And to be more precise. It could not be answered by any normal genins. “So most of the people gathered came to the conclusion…’I have to cheat to get points’ in other words the exam assumed everyone was going to cheat.”

Called it.

“So we snuck in two chuunins who knew the answers to everything. To be the targets of cheating.” Naruto glanced back. Only two?

“But those who cheated like a fool failed of course. Why?” Morino removed his hitai-ate. When the cap slid off his head Naruto nodded in understanding. This guy had a lot of scars. “Information can have greater value than life at times, and in missions and battlefields…information is contested with the life of people!”

Well he had certainly made his point. This guy had been tortured before. Badly. There were scars. Holes and Naruto wondered if screw holes alone could have left such an impression. The patch like scars were eerily familiar however. But this guy had held out.

“Information that an enemy gets after being noticed by a third person will not necessarily be accurate.” The man said as he replaced his cap. “Remember this getting incorrect information can cause great harm to your village and your teammates.”

He continued speaking with others commenting but Naruto zoned out.

“You can’t even trust the information you get when you’re under deep cover.” Zabuza laughed. “Haku paused in the middle of oiling the man’s back. “You never know what the source is trying to pull.”

“But isn’t it the way for all information?” Haku asked gently. “Spreading false information can help as well as hinder. It all depends on your position on the field and Zabuza-san will become the man that pulls the string.”

“How about this two-choice question.” Naruto looked back up to see the man had changed his position. “Let’s assume you’ve become Chuunin. Your mission is to capture a secret document. The number of ninjas their abilities and armaments are unknown. And there may be traps the enemy have set up. Now will you accept this mission or not? Just because your lives may be in danger, are you able to void such a dangerous mission? The answer is……no.”

Obviously.

“The ability to show your courage to your team members when needed, and the ability to get through a bad situation. That is what we look for in a Chuunin. A squad leader.”

“Man they really are on our tails today!” A cheerful laugh even as she slowed down. “Haku! Shall we do it?” She casually tucked her blonde hair behind her ear. Naruto slowed his steps as she slowed down. Her arm was not even fully healed yet! He reached out ready to tell her not to bother and a calloused hand grabbed his elbow.
“Don’t be stupid kid.” Zabuza growled. “You don’t have what it takes. Now get to the front.”

“It’s around that time again huh.” Tanto sounded excited. “We’ve got good footing here.”

“Don’t get in my way.” Raiya sneered. “I’ll get four of those masked freaks today. Whose village you think they are from this time?”

“I bet mine.” Mai snickered. “But the one that can match me the most is already retired!” Her back had straightened and her wrinkled fingers were tensed. Naruto wanted to yell at them to keep running but as Zabuza joined them easily standing in front of them, he found he had no words.

“They’ll catch up. don’t worry Naruto.” Alya smiled. Her grip was firm as she grabbed his wrist.

“Those who can’t bet their fate in a critical situation. Those who give up when given the chance because there is a next year, and let their minds sway over an uncertain future…Fools who have light determination like that have no right to become Chuunin. That’s what I believe. I am saying that you here who have chosen to take it gave the right answer for the difficult tenth question. You can deal with the difficulties you will face.”

“Oh geez. You don’t have to try so hard you know? Haku say something to him!” Her brown eyes were warm even as she scolded him. “What if you had missed? I taught you the points in case of an emergency. That wasn’t an emergency. You don’t have to try so hard.” Her voice softened. “You’re still a child. If only in body.”

“In mind too.” Zabuza commented as he walked past them. “But less child more toddler.” Naruto yanked his injured hand out her grip incensed at Zabuza’s teasing.

“But nee-san.” He complained when she smothered him in her chest.

“I know.” She laughed. Her blonde hair tickled his nose. “He’s mean. But you know what they say about men that talk a lot.” She whispered and Naruto laughed.

After the difficulties he had faced…he did have the determination strong enough to face anything else. He had already been tested. Naruto chuckled to himself.

“You’ve broken through the entrance. The First exam of the Chuunin selection exam finishes now! I wish you luck.” Naruto paused as the man looked right at him. He was startled at the amused smile but he allowed his own to show.

The guy was a prick to the highest order but nothing Naruto had not encountered before and that wish of good luck. It was heartfelt.

XxX

And of course nothing could be peaceful for long. Naruto’s gaze jerked to the window the feeling of something approaching had caught his attention.

When the window broke he had jerked out his seat but the woman and the banner she put up in a few split seconds. Caught his attention. She completely blocked their first examiner with her banner.

And Naruto had another moment to read the banner proclaiming ‘Second Examiner Mitarashi Anko is here’ before he caught the woman’s appearance.

He did not think he had ever seen a shinobi in Konoha like her. She looked like a punk. Actually
she looked more like a foreign shinobi than Konoha’s. There was no standard regulation anything.

But Hinata’s sensei was the same was she not? Naruto glanced in Hinata’s direction and recalled Kurenai-sensei and quickly stopped himself. Kurenai-sensei had not taken it this far.

Mitarashi Anko looked like a shinobi back alley thug. Naruto could not even see her hitai-ate due to her bangs. But he doubted many if any would be looking at her hair. Not with her coat open. Actually not with the mesh suit? But that did not matter. What mattered was that she was apparently the Second Examiner. They did not even get to take a break?

“Everyone there is no time to be happy!” She declared. “I’m Second Examiner Mitarashi Anko. Let’s go to the next exam! Follow me!” She sounded pumped up. She reminded him of someone… someone he had met recently.

“Grasp the atmosphere.” Morino muttered as he edged around the banner.
“87 teams?” Anko muttered her gaze searched the room and her face twisted into an expression of distaste. She turned to Ibiki who had come to stand next to her. “Ibiki! You made the First Exam too easy. What the hell were you thinking letting so many teams pass?”

“You know better than that.” Ibiki frowned. “You think I made the exam too soft? Really? Those who are here earned the right to be.”

“We’ll see about that.” Anko frowned. “You’ve just made my job harder than it had to be.”

“Are you saying you can’t handle it?”

“I’m saying I now have to make more than half fail the second exam. And I’m going to love it.” She drawled. The tension in the room jumped at her words but Naruto was too busy looking from her to the First Examiner and back again.

He did not want to assume…but he was going to do it anyway. Those two were weird. Very weird. And he bet that their relationship worked weird too. Another sadist. Great.

“But why is it so big?” She frowned. I thought you would have whittled it down to at most fifty teams. That isn’t like you Ibiki.” She smirked. “You’re losing your edge.”

“Mitarashi-“

“Anko.”
“Anko, you know how I operate. I won’t say it again. My part is over.” The corner of his lips lifted in a half smile and Naruto’s jaw dropped. “It’s up to you to test them. After all you came in with this flashy display.”

“Well your test was the boring one.” She mused. “Now about two-thirds. That’s a good number. Or maybe more.”

“Just don’t get carried away.”

“Yes yes, I don’t want the Sandaime scolding me again.” She dismissed. “But really why are there so many teams?” Ibiki’s eyes drifted to him and Naruto raised an eyebrow at the look. Anko’s eyes drifted to him as well. “Someone threw you off your game?” A smile teased her mouth. “Oh dear. Looks like I have something hardy to play with.”

Oh she definitely had sadistic tendencies. She suited him.

XxX

There were murmurs from those gathered but as Naruto stared at the padlocked gate he could not help but wonder how such a place had escaped his notice. He knew of the training grounds of course. Everyone did but this one.

The sight of the worn gate. Padlocked. Partially covered with grass and the feeling coming from it. The sounds that his ears could faintly pick up. There was a place wild and untamed right there in Konoha.

And it was a weird thought to have as he stared at what was obviously their destination but it felt so familiar even when he knew he had never set foot in such a place. Not when he was in the academy and certainly not when he had returned.

But the feel of the wild that beckoned. Naruto had taken a step forward before Sakura grasped him elbow. “You’re supposed to back away when you’re afraid.” She hissed. Naruto barely heard her. His thoughts were too busy being flooded by nostalgic memories. Open road. Deep forests. Laughter. Danger. Impossible beasts. Impossible climate changes. All this from the glimpse of the forest.

“Your next exam will take place in here.” Anko smiled as she jerked a thumb in the padlocked gate’s direction. Something loud squawked in the distance and the murmurs from those gathered became louder. Naruto’s gaze drifted from the examiner to the huge trees he could see. Partially see. Ahead of them was the huge tree roots. The trees were so tall; he would have to lay on his back in order to see the sky. “Training ground forty-four. Otherwise known as The forest of Death.”

XxX

Burst of conversations had started after Anko’s announcement but Naruto’s attention had drifted once again. This time it was the the poor concealment quickly approaching him.

Naruto left the front of the group to approach the strange ‘rock’. “You’ve got to be kidding me.” He muttered. “Konohamaru, what are you doing here?” He groaned. Didn’t the Sandaime have a way to keep an eye on the kid?

“Just what I expected from the man I look up to.” Came muffled from the box. “Good job detecting me.”
“How could I not?” Naruto demanded. “There isn’t a rock like that that exists in the world!”

The transformation ended bringing a cloud of smoke and Konohamaru. Alone with his two friends, Moegi and Udon. Naruto sighed at the sight of the three of them.

“What do the three of you want?” Naruto asked. “I’ve no time to play I’m about to take the Second Exam for the Chuunin selection.”

“We didn’t come to play!” Konohamaru snapped.

“Ahh is this about that jutsu?” Naruto frowned. “Now isn’t the time for that.”

“It isn’t about that either!” Moegi interrupted. “We came for a story!”

“A story?” Naruto asked. “I don’t think now is the time for that either.”

“We were asked to do an exclusive story on the Chuunin Selection exam for our school paper.”

“School paper.” Naruto frowned. “We had one of those?”

“It’s a new thing.” Udon spoke up.

“So we came to ask you some questions!” Moegi said. “Please cooperate.” She pleaded.

“Even if you say that…” Naruto muttered. His gaze drifted back to where the examiner was.

“Oh you there!” Naruto sighed as Anko’s voice carried. “What are you doing?”

“Konohamaru wants to do an exclusive for the school newspaper.” Naruto answered.

Anko blinked her face blank before she flushed and smiled. “Oh, yes I forgot Hokage-sama mentioned something like that.” She laughed uncomfortably. “It completely slipped my mind.” Naruto stared at her because how could she forget so easily? “All right! We are going to have a ten-minute break now!” She announced. “If you are asked any questions please cooperate nicely. And quietly. No fuss.”

“What the hell.” Naruto breathed.

“Naruto nii-chan.” Konohamaru had pulled out a notebook and pencil with his friends doing the same. “I’m counting on you.”


XxX

“Teamwork!” Konohamaru’s eyes shone as he stared at Naruto. “Thank you Naruto nii-chan.”

“Thanks for answering our questions. Nee-chan!” Moegi told Sakura.

“Thanks for cooperating with us and answering our questions.” All three did a polite bow and Naruto nodded in return. He could not entirely fight away his smile.

“Leader! Do your best!” Konohamaru gave him a thumbs up.

“Yeah!” Naruto answered as he returned the gesture. “I know just leave it to me!”

XxX
Ibiki paused as he read the paper. The hurriedly scribbled. Uniquely worded exam paper. He had
never thought that the boy would have known the answers. Furthermore, it was good. Better than
good and the hurried way of writing.

But the best thing was that the boy had not cheated once. What an interesting boy. He separated
that paper from the others.

XxX

“It’s creepy.” Sakura mumbled. Naruto nodded as he tried to locate with his eyes the birds that
were crying overhead. “It just feels creepy.”

“You’ll be able to experience for yourself why this is called the forest of death.” Anko chuckled.
Her gaze swept over the group and Naruto ignored her in order to survey the area carefully.

“Ahh we get to meet death.” Naruto said teasingly. He got only a moment to dodge the kunai that
would have brushed his cheek. But Anko had already got behind him. Her caress along his
shoulder made him freeze and shudder.

“It’s boys like you that die so easily in the forest.” She whispered. It was teasing but Naruto sensed
the intent under it. She did not like games this nee-chan. Or to be more precise. She wanted to be
the only one playing it.

A dark feeling came from behind Anko and Naruto wanted to wiggle away but the grip she held
him in. Him getting away would draw her attention to him again. In a way he knew would not be
good for him.

“Here’s your kunai.” A soft voice said and Naruto shuddered at the sound of something wet being
extended. He did not want to look around. Somehow it sounded nasty whatever was going on
behind him.

“Thank you.” Anko said her tone polite and almost forced. Naruto barely restrained his gasp when
the kunai drifted into view. Wrapped around a long pink tongue. “But don’t stand behind me like
that. That is unless you want to die young.” She seized the kunai from the tongue and Naruto
shuddered again when the tongue retreated.

“It’s my reaction when I see blood.” The soft voice was calming a direct contrast to the intent
Naruto could feel coming from the person. “And my precious hair was cut.” They continued. “I’m
sorry about my reaction.” They turned away but not before their gaze met Naruto’s. He shuddered
again.

XxX

“Before we start the exam.” Anko had seemed to calm down. “I’m going to pass these out to
everyone. They are forms. Consent forms. Those taking the exams must sign these. Read them
carefully if you must but if you are taking the exam you must sign them.” She casually waved a
huge stack of papers.

“Why?” A ninja asked curiously. She stared at Anko in confusion. “Why do we have to sign them?
When she turned her head Naruto saw her Konoha hitai-ate peeking out from under her brown
bangs.

“From here on people will die.” Anko smiled and the atmosphere’s temperature dropped.
“Therefore, we need people’s consent before we continue. Otherwise I’d be held responsible.”
She burst out laughing but no one else joined her. The faces Naruto saw around him had gotten serious. Blank. Careful. And considering. Sakura and Sasuke looked determined even with Sakura appearing uneasy.

“Now I’ll explain the rules for the Second Exam.” Anko grinned. “This will be a survival match.”

Xxx

“Ahh they lucked out with that sadist.” Asuma grinned. His body was relaxed on the couch and he looked far too happy for someone with a team in the Chuunin selection exam.

“You look for too delighted at the prospect of your subordinates at that man’s mercy.” Kakashi tsked.

“They’ll be fine.” Kurenai reassured. She looked nervously at her tea. “They won’t get shaken so easily.”

Kakashi laughed softly. “Well there is one person for sure I know Ibiki won’t find so easy to work on.” He closed his eye and thought of Naruto in the Land of the wave. “No, I know for certain whatever trick he will use. It won’t work.”

“Who?” Asuma asked curiously. “Itachi-kun doesn’t seem the sort to over train his little brother.”

“Not Sasuke.” Kakashi denied. As he shook his head.

“Naruto-kun huh.” Kurenai smiled. “I see.”

“See what.” Asuma looked confused. “Shikamaru told me enough about the kid.”

“Of course, you didn’t meet him.” Kurenai frowned. “Your team never crossed paths.”

“Not by choice I assure you.” Asuma relaxed and grinned. “My team is a handful.”

“What do you think of him Kurenai?” Kakashi asked.

“He’s…” She trailed off. “Unusual. Different to what I expected. Far politer than I thought he would be, he has his rough edges but he really is nice. Or at least.” She fixed her eyes on Kakashi. “That’s what he tries to be.”

“I know he was with the missing nins.” Asuma frowned. “I heard they trained him a little.” He broke off when Kakashi shook his head. “That isn’t it?”

“Far more than a little.” Kakashi admitted. “Ibiki-san has quite the surprise coming his way if he does his pick apart routine on Naruto.” Kakashi chuckled. “Not only will it slide right off him, he’ll throw Ibiki right off his game and make himself damn hard to read. In fact, the one capable of turning that Exam upsidedown is Naruto.” Kakashi admitted.

“But it’s rather quiet.” Kurenai said softly. Kakashi shook his head and nodded to the bird that was quickly approaching their window.

“I don’t think that’s the case.” He admitted as the brown dove soared in. The scroll dropped from its beak onto Asuma’s lap. “Well?” He asked as Asuma started to read.

“Our teams passed.” Asuma grinned. Then his mouth twisted. “Actually. Plenty of people passed. Far more than I would have expected. They are going to the Forest of Death now.”
“Sounds like Ibiki had his game thrown off.” Kurenai laughed. “But the Forest of Death…I know my team should be pretty okay in those conditions…Kakashi?”

“What about mine?” Asuma protested.

“They’re fine. They have Shikamaru with them.” Kurenai dismissed. “Kakashi?”

Kakashi considered. He listened to the quiet of the village. The faint sound of the leaves dancing in the wind. He thought of the Forest of Death. He thought about the many places Naruto had been confirmed to have gone. He thought and thought before he started laughing to Kurenai and Asuma’s confusion.

“I think this one might be simply too easy for him.” He laughed. The survival game must be a joke to Naruto who had lived under those conditions. It must be like coming home to him. Kakashi laughed harder.
Chuunin Selection Exams Second Exam Forest of Death

Chapter Summary

Second Exam begins, encounters in the Forest of Death

Chapter Notes

Chapter here a lil early. Might still upload another on the weekend maybe Sunday or Saturday.
This is a plot heavy chapter hopefully answers a lot of questions and I hope you guys enjoy it.
It's a good amount for a chapter lol. So enjoy guys

There would be no second chances in a place like this. They were the intruders and would have to
abide by nature’s laws all while playing out the rather twisted game. Sasuke narrowed his eyes
when the gate closed after them. They were serious about this.

There would be no giving up. It simply, it purely would be a survival game at heart. For all the
examiner parroted at them not to die Sasuke could feel many would. Especially if they ran into the
wrong opponent.

Like the Suna trio from before. Like that other Konoha team. The exam was full of monsters. And
they had been set loose in this forest of death.

Sasuke’s hand trembled in anticipation.

XxX

There was danger everywhere but that was not important. Or actually it was important but that was
not what held his attention. The feeling of anticipation had gripped him when the door closed
behind him. The familiarity of the place had grabbed hold of him.

He had never set place in this forest before but gods Naruto knew where he was. What the place
was. Where he was. It felt so familiar. He could understand so much of what he was hearing,
seeing.

He could not really be blamed could he. Compared to the village, this was far easier. Far comfier.
Much simpler. It had been his life, a life on the run. All the things he had been trying to learn,
trying to be the fled his head.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. When he reopened them his head had gone silent. The
place spoke to him and better yet, his mind-set was one of the hunt. Or the fleeing. Survival game.
He had lived that for four years in worse conditions. But he was curious. What would Konoha’s
tamed piece of savagery contain? What would it even hold?
How would it compare to the real outside?

Xxx

“Hold up.” Naruto said. Sasuke glanced back and watched Naruto pulled a scroll from his pouch. Sakura made a sound of surprise when he unrolled it and slapped his hand in the centre. Sasuke only twitched when he saw that Naruto had summoned a short sword and a few other weapons. “We gotta talk about the plan.” Naruto said slowly.

He strapped the sword to his back and when his eyes met his Sasuke realized that Naruto had changed. “The plan?” Sasuke asked slowly.

“No matter how you look at it.” Naruto answered. “This is a survival game and our lives will be on the line for the scrolls. People will be after us and we will be after them. You have to have some sort of plan to get us safely to the tower on time.”

“And you?” Sakura asked softly. “What do you think?”

“I know plenty of ways to keep us alive.” Naruto laughed. “But we should get this done as quickly as we can. Because the longer this exam drags on the harder on us it will be. And the chances of us getting killed will rise.”

“So you know this exam’s purpose.” Sasuke murmured. He kept his senses on alert as he faced Naruto. “So? What have you deducted?”

“It’s a simulation.” Naruto answered easily. “But that’s not all. The environment is out to get us. People are out to get us for what we possess. The thing we need could save our lives or hinder us. And we don’t even know about the scrolls other people have. We have to get to the tower alive with two scrolls. And we can’t look in them. Doesn’t that sound like a real mission to you?”

Sasuke’s mouth quirked up in half a smile as what he had been thinking Naruto voiced. “It does.”

“Exactly.” Naruto grinned and he started putting away the things that had been sealed away. “I didn’t think I’d need many of these but being paranoid works out.” Naruto laughed. “I know this place isn’t called the Forest of Death because there is a welcoming committee. We have to keep ourselves alive as long as possible.”

“You nervous?” Sakura asked Naruto. Naruto shook his head softly before he gave a smile to their surroundings.

“No way.” Naruto answered. “Over something like this? Well it is a strange place but I’ve been in stranger. And the people after us. They don’t compare to the people that have chased me before.”

“So, the best plan?” Sasuke asked. “We need a scroll and we need to survive. Which means we at some point will have to split up. we need supplies. Unless you brought food with you.”

“No.” Naruto answered.

“Then we need food, a plan and a way to find the other teams. We also have to hide our own scroll.”

“Well right now it is too dangerous to move.” Naruto said softly. “Everyone is searching for everyone else and being restless. Impatient. It’s afternoon now. We should move at night. Or whatever passes for night in this place. We should keep together and still for the time being.”
“Why?” Sakura questioned.

“Because there are many people we should be looking to avoid and the last thing we want to do is stumble across them by accident.” Naruto admitted and Sasuke watched the way Naruto’s eyes searched the forest around them. “It’s too dangerous to move freely. We should hide and move quietly later.”

Sasuke could admit most of the plan was sound but that did not mean he liked it. But they were in an unfamiliar place with dangerous things and people. And they needed to conserve their strength. He doubted the fights for the scrolls would be easy. He could wait until then.

XxX

“Man even though these things are trying to kill us. At least they are edible.” Naruto laughed. Sakura shook her head as she watched Naruto slip back on his clothes. She had found the perfect spot or so Naruto had told her, to hide.

A dying tree. Or to be more precise. A tree barely clinging to life because of the parasites devouring it. Staying inside the hollow root was good enough shelter but for them to do anything else they would have to climb to the top and thanks to the termites and god knew what else, there was a path to the top through the trunk.

“How the hell did you catch those?” Sasuke asked as he checked his weapons. “You were gone for twenty minutes the most.”

“That’s why I went half naked.” Naruto said bluntly. He pulled the closest fish to him and began to skin it almost absentmindedly. “I went in as bait.”

“What are you doing?” She questioned as she watched Naruto deposit the skin and other organs onto a leaf.

“I’ll dispose of this somewhere a good distance from here.” Naruto answered. “And some these kind of things have poisonous skin. Not taking any chances.”

“Then I’ll smoke it a good distance from here.” Sasuke answered. “Sakura, you’ll hold onto the scroll until we return.”

Well, it was a good plan anyway. They still had time to wait until dark and they were supposed to keep their heads low. And while they were gone, she could suppress her presence and watch other teams as they ran around fighting or hunting each other.

XxX

“I’m just going to pretend I don’t know what I’m eating.” Sakura laughed. Naruto grinned in response as they huddled together in the tree. He did not have the heart to tell Sakura all the things he had used to make lunch. Sakura was strong but some things took time to get used to.

Or you had to be desperate with no other choice.

Naruto shrugged the heavier thought away and continued with his task as he ate. He had gone heavy on the meat but there were other types of things he had harvested as well. He picked apart the herbs he collected ignoring Sasuke’s gaze.

“But these are good.” Sakura moaned as she bit into the fruit with an audible crunch. “I never saw one of these before.”
“They don’t grow very well.” Naruto admitted as he separated the stems from the herbs. “But they are spicy right?”

“Um hmm.” Sakura moaned. She looked behind her to where only a pinprick of light shone through the bark. “It’s slowly getting dark.”

“And the screams have lessened.” Sasuke continued. “People must be getting ready to rest. At least the inexperienced ones. The others will be setting up a guard.”

“But they have been active all day.” Naruto mused. “That means right around now, no one is at their best even if they nap.”

“You’ve thought this out haven’t you.” Sasuke said slowly.

“It’s what I know.” Naruto shrugged. He crushed the first herb between his fingers and ignored the cooling sensation the liquid left behind. Instead he slowly coated a few of his smoke bombs with the herb and set them aside to dry. “It’s better to travel at night. There are ways to travel that make it easier on you and your group.”

“So you guys travelled a lot at night?” Sakura questioned curiously.

“Well not fun if you trip over something.” Naruto laughed. “But you learn how to manage. Night tends to be quiet. So you need to be quiet too. And you learn how to hunt, travel, hide in the night. And you learn about your surroundings and how to avoid traps. How to find traps.”

“Traps?” Sasuke asked.

“Ninjas aren’t the only ones hunting things.” Naruto snorted. “So many times Haku saved me from losing an arm or leg. The others too but with Haku it was easier to disable the traps.” Naruto looked away remembering how Haku would look at him after Naruto nearly set off a huntsman trap. Or four of them.

“*Naruto-kun.* He would scold but his face would be amused. “*Only animals are supposed to fall for these sort of traps. Tell me why you always sense the others but not these?*”

“How are we going to find anything?” Sasuke asked.

“Well, there are a few ways.” Naruto admitted.

XxX

Sakura had no idea that the forest at night was like this. The air was thick. Almost strangling but Naruto navigated it with ease.

They were sticking together and keeping their voices down but travelling through the high branches. Why? Naruto had not explained fully but he was moving as though he knew where they
had to go so she was good with that.

There were many types of shinobi. Her studies had shown that and the longer she followed Naruto the more certain she was that Naruto was highly sensitive. Sasuke was too but Naruto did it differently.

His eyes reacted before they heard anything. His ears he relied on but there was some other sense guiding him. Whether it was a combination of all the senses or something else Sakura was unsure. But she knew that Naruto knew things they did not and those things were guiding them to where they had to go.

“Naruto.” She said quietly. Naruto stopped his simple tale of one his adventures to look back at her. Not that she was far behind. She was just a step behind him. “Did you like Haku?”

“Of course.” He answered his face was confused. “Haku was family. Everyone was. Even Zabuza.”

She shook her head and met the glance Sasuke gave her before she focused on Naruto once again. “There are many types of ‘like’ Naruto.”

Naruto looked away from her at that. His gaze to the front of them. Sakura’s heart pounded as Naruto remained silent. Part of her regretted pushing but Naruto was so confusing she had taken the chance. She had heard stories on stories about ‘Haku’ heard how Naruto talked about him and the others. And the look Naruto got on his face when he talked about ‘Haku’ she had never seen on his face before.

“You’re really good Sakura-chan.” Naruto said softly. “But it doesn’t matter.”

“So you did?” She asked.

“They are many types of ‘like’.” Naruto repeated. His next step was harsher and the soft crunch his foot made on the branch made her flinch. “I have no idea what you’re asking. Did I think Haku was pretty?” Naruto fell silent. “I thought he was the most beautiful human being I’d ever seen. Cuter than anyone else I had ever glimpsed. That includes those in the trade. There were so many ways I ‘liked’ him.” Naruto laughed. “But I still couldn’t ‘save’ him so it doesn’t matter.”

“Naruto.” She whispered. She wanted to touch his back which seemed to have gotten wider and lonelier than it had been a moment before.

“And everyone liked Haku but there was only one person Haku ‘liked’.” Naruto stressed. “I was okay with that.” Naruto looked back at her and his mouth quirked up in amusement. “My feelings were complicated but I was good enough where I was. How I was.” His eyes became distant. “But there was more understanding than anything else. I ‘understood’ Haku.”

Naruto turned back around and their pace picked up. Sakura continued on in silence her gaze fixed on Naruto’s back. Naruto had explained plenty but he had left plenty out. Sakura was still lost on how Naruto felt about ‘Haku’.

XxX

“There.” Naruto breathed as he slowed to a halt. He heard Sakura and Sasuke stop on either sides of him. Down below barely seen was the tree roots. It was also where a team was hiding. Naruto saw the gleam of the wires placed strategically around the little make shift camp.

“There huh.” Sasuke said slowly. “Who do you think has the scroll?”
“They could have hidden it.” Sakura pointed out. “They are from Kumo.”

Kumo.

“No not them. They’ll have it on their person. Their village is like that.” Naruto muttered. “But they can get aggressive fast so we’ll have to strike quick. Quicker than them. And if it is Kumo, they’ll be plenty fast.”

“So who has the scroll?” Sakura whispered as she knelt on the branch. “I can’t even see where the other two are.”

“They are on the tree wrapped up.” Sasuke answered. “So?”

“The one on guard doesn’t have it.” Naruto murmured. “The blonde boy. It will be him.” Naruto remembered his face from earlier. He had been in charge and possessive. No way he would entrust the scroll.

“We’ll take them all down anyway.” Sasuke shrugged.

“We’ll take their supplies too.” Sakura shrugged. Naruto looked at her and she shrugged again. “It’s practical. We don’t need them coming after us.”

“And how are they going to defend themselves?” Naruto questioned. He asked mainly to get a gauge on what her thoughts were. He actually agreed with the plan.

“They are shinobi.” Sakura said as she stood once more. She carefully took out her kunai. “So what will we do?”

“Distraction and pincer attack.” Sasuke mused. “Naruto?”

“On it.” Naruto answered he made the correct seal and quickly made three clones. “We’ll take him down.” They answered.

XxX

The one on guard was an alert one but Naruto’s smoke bomb quickly disoriented him. His stumble two steps back quickly put him in range of Naruto’s clone who was still falling. The kid ended up with Naruto’s legs around his neck. A quick tightening and harsh jerk would end it but that was not the game they were playing.

Instead Naruto ignored the guy’s attempts to dislodge his clone and got into close range. He shoved the little sleep bomb he had made into the guy’s mouth and watched the effects hit immediately.

But that was just one down. Naruto turned to guard the fallen Kumo ninja as his clone jumped off. He heard the rustling as the clone searched the boy’s pockets and person. It was useless but they might find a few things. Naruto felt something being shoved into his pocket before his clone dispelled.

And the other two members were awake. The leader was far more sensitive than his brown haired companion. Naruto watched as Sakura charged the slow moving companion as the blonde leader started to run from Sasuke.

So he was right. That one did have the scroll.
“You could have burnt the scroll.” Naruto snapped and Sakura rolled her eyes as the boys bickered behind her. She was trying to keep their targets from running into trouble. So she was tying them up to dump them into the tree. They could stay there for the next three four days and try again.

“Doesn’t matter now.” Sasuke frowned as he waved the scroll. “It’s useless. It’s the same as ours.”

“Sure as hell is.” Naruto grumbled. “Maybe the next team will have it. Or at least another one.”

“So we chuck it?” Sakura asked curiously.

“We keep it just in case.” Sasuke said firmly. “So you and Naruto will carry a scroll.”

“Me?” Sakura questioned.

“And I’ll carry a fake.” Sasuke murmured as he tossed the scroll they had retrieved. “In the meantime. We should split up and find another team. Naruto?”

“I’m good alone.” Naruto shrugged.

“Right then, Sakura you’re with me.” Sasuke said firmly.

“Sakura, there is someone in the ground tracking us.” Sasuke said softly. Sakura glanced at him quickly. Sasuke had set a hard pace the moment they separated. Looking for another team. To hear now that someone was following them made her wish that they had not gone from Naruto. Sasuke’s voice…

He seemed excited that someone was following them. She knew that the fight they had earlier had disappointed him a little. Even though he had taken on the leader.

“What do we do?” She asked softly. “Do we lead them to another team?”

“It’ll be a three-way fight then and they could call for back up.” Sasuke said softly. At his next leap to the other tree he glanced back with his activated Sharingan. “We’ll take them on since they are alone.”

“Are they really?” Sakura questioned. “And we’re looking for scrolls Sasuke-kun.”

“The person following us.” Sasuke smiled. “They seem like the type to trust in their own strength only. They have a scroll. I know they do.”

Sakura bit her lip before she glanced back once. She saw nothing but that had nothing to do with it. Sasuke took the lead once more and she followed, hoping that they could handle this new threat, and that this threat would have the correct scroll.

“You can’t be trying to trick us.” Sasuke scoffed as he hurled his kunai at the obviously fake Naruto. “Stop your transformation.”

“Sasuke-kun?” Sakura questioned.

“It’s all wrong.” Sasuke dismissed after the fake dodged the kunai. “From the movements to the
speech. And you heard what he said about the password…what would our Naruto say? The one we were with up to a few minutes ago. What would he say?"

“What password? This should be enough.” Sakura breathed and touched the pouch where the scroll was hidden. “That’s what he would say.”

“You did good considering you only knew him for a day.” Sasuke snorted.

“And I thought I had him too.” ‘Naruto’ chuckled. He licked his lips with a long tongue. Longer than averagely normal and Sasuke was not surprised when the transformation ended and they were faced with the Shinobi that had confronted the second examiner before about their hair.

Honestly they could have run into anyone but that kunoichi. They had given off some dark feelings. And some powerful ones. Was Sasuke disappointed over the possibility of a real fight? As if. His hands were shaking from the anticipation of testing himself against someone strong.

“What will I do.” The ninja murmured as they held their broad straw hat to their face. “I didn’t even discover which of you has the scroll I’m to acquire.”

“That sounds like your problem.” Sasuke pointed out. He withdrew his second kunai and spread his legs in anticipation of the ninja making the first move. The only thing he knew about Kusa nins…. was what he had learnt in the academy and that was not much as all.

From their pocket the ninja facing them withdrew a dark scroll. Sasuke’s and Sakura’s breath caught when they saw it. “You want our Earth scroll right?” The ninja laughed. “Since you have the Heaven scroll.”

Sasuke gritted his teeth even as inside him he congratulated himself. They just had to face this one. Better yet, this was the scroll they actually needed. Much better for them. Far better. The kunoichi tauntingly waved the scroll before them before she inserted it into her mouth. Sasuke startled even as he fumed and next to him Sakura made a sound of disgust as the ninja facing them swallowed the scroll they needed.

“Now let us begins. It looks like I don’t have to hold myself back too much.” She laughed. “The fight over our scrolls…We’ll put our lives on the line.” She grated and Sasuke’s skin crawled at how she grabbed the skin under her eye with her fingers.

Then it came. A familiar feeling but magnified higher far higher than what they had felt on their mission to the Country of Wave. His death. Sasuke could feel it. The air vibrated with it. Visions of it were before his eyes as he faced the kunoichi.

His skin dampened. His terror rose and his heart raced.

Tears dripped from her eyes and ran down her face. Her legs were unable to hold her. This was far worse than the Kiri shinobi. It was far more powerful. So bloodthirsty. All she could feel was death. If she was to move. If she did not move. Tears dripped down her face faster. No matter what option they chose, only death would come.

She heard a sound of retching next to her but her feet were to shaky, her neck too stiff. All she could do was sit on the forest floor. All she could think of was death and the knowledge that it had actually come and there was nothing she could do. Nothing she could say. That was all that faced them at this point.
They would not even see him coming. Naruto held a senbon in his mouth as he crawled over and around the wire traps keeping the Kiri nin’s ‘safe’ as they rested and waited for daylight.

Of course the average animal would get caught in these. The slugs that loved chakra. The birds that swooped down and the other things all waiting for suitable prey. That was what they wire had to be for.

Well, it would suit plenty of the shinobi participating in the exams as well. They would get caught in one of these intricate wires. But not Naruto. It seemed yet again his past experiences were helping him.

Naruto kept his eye on the shinobi that was guarding. Normally one took the guard out first. But sometimes it was better to remove the sleeping threat first. And either way, they were bloodthirsty but they were not that good.

The mist around them had soothed them. They had forgotten they were in a forest and not on their own turf just because a little mist had settled. It was a little sad. Naruto crawled under the last wire and his belly to the ground crawled to the first shinobi.

An owl cried loudly, it’s cry echoing the area. The guard turned to watch it and Naruto used the sound of the cry to muffle the first sleeping shinobi and silence.

Another animal cried out and Naruto silenced the second one sleeping. The guard turned back to look at his sleeping comrades and Naruto’s senbon sank into his neck.

“One of them has to have the scroll.” Naruto sighed aloud before he pulled the first dead shinobi to him to rifle through their clothes.

He was in luck. An Earth scroll also a few sealed ones. Naruto was a little curious to what exactly the sealed scrolls contained but he knew he had to find Sakura and Sasuke so they could get the entire exam over with.

The deal was to get both and present them at the tower. They still had a few hours of dark left. They could slip right in and avoid trouble. Naruto had already shed blood in the exam. There was no need for them to continue with that.

As of now they had three scrolls. That was enough. That was more than enough and the Forest was beginning to give him a bad feeling

Naruto glanced behind him into the dark forest. He had the feeling that something huge was back there and that it was waiting on him. He picked up the Kiri nin’s fallen sword and pointed it in the direction he had gotten the bad feeling from.

“I wouldn’t advise it.” He said quietly. He waited but he still saw nothing. He narrowed his eyes when he detected the sound of scales moving over the ground but it was all he heard. Nothing moved in his direction in the darkness.

Blood and further ahead Naruto could sense a disturbance. More than that. He scooped up and caressed the pink strands between his fingers. Sakura…the last time he saw her; her hair had been
in the bun he had shown her to do.

The only reason her hair should be like this was if she had caught it in something. Another reason was that it had been cut.

Which meant. The blood either belonged to her or Sasuke. Because someone else had been here with them and that someone else, they were the one behind the bad feeling Naruto was getting. It was just their luck.

XxX

Sakura did not think she had ever seen Sasuke so panicked. But it was understandable. The snake nearly got them then the creepy shinobi had emerged from the snake. Split it right open. And she could do nothing. Her legs were still shaking. Her heart was still racing but she had to do something.

She had to help in some way but the shinobi was fast. Almost a blur as they wound themselves around the tree towards Sasuke. If she aimed correctly and quickly she could get them before they reached the branch. But her hands would not stop trembling. Even though Sasuke needed her help.

She tried to calm her breathing in order to steady her hands but she just worried as she saw the shinobi get closer and closer to Sasuke. They had reached the branch and her aim was too shaky to actually be useful but Sakura was prepared to throw anyway. Then five shuriken and a kunai landed in the centre of the branch halting the shinobi’s creepy approach.

“Sorry guys.” Naruto said and Sakura’s knees went weak from relief. “We should have done a password or something since we were splitting up. The good news is.” Naruto showed a Heavens scroll and an Earth scroll. “I got the fucking scrolls.”

“Naruto!” Her body felt lighter at spotting him she felt relieved, her aim steadied.

“You alright? Sasuke.” Naruto asked.

XxX

“Naruto! This guy…” Sasuke’s voice shook. “He’s way above our level! Run away!” Naruto frowned as his arms fell limp as he considered Sasuke.

“Well don’t you have a curious aura Naruto-kun.” The shinobi wrapped around the tree said. His head was tilted in Naruto’s direction but Naruto could feel that whoever that was, their concentration was still on Sasuke.

That feeling he had before. It was highly possible that this guy had something to do with it. Naruto considered the way the shinobi was wrapped around the tree without a care in the world. Wrapped like a snake. Naruto recalled the feeling of something watching him and the sound of scales moving against the ground. His fingers twitched.

The shinobi’s gaze left Sasuke entirely and focused on Naruto. Naruto felt the gaze running over him as if it were a living thing. Seeing him and accessing him. It was an uncomfortable feeling. It was…an invasion.

“Wait, we’ll give you our scroll just leave us alone.” Naruto almost fell off the branch when he heard Sasuke speak as it were the shinobi’s attention went immediately back to Sasuke and he
cursed Sasuke’s naivety. He knew their opponent was overwhelming but this was something he never thought Sasuke would do.

“Well you certainly are interesting.” The shinobi straightened up a slight bit the amusement seeping from their voice. “As prey you’re opting to make a worthwhile sacrifice so you can get away. Amazing. Fascinating.” Their gaze went back to Naruto. “But not the only thing that is fascinating.”

Sasuke, that idiot.

Naruto kept his attention on the shinobi even as he launched himself towards the shaken distracted Sasuke. His punch barely had force but Sasuke still stumbled back and off the branch towards Sakura. Leaving Naruto, the one in hot water.

“What the hell.” Sasuke raged. He got up and wiped away at his face but even from their distance, Naruto could see his hands shake. “What are you thinking dumbass!”

“I could ask you the same question.” Naruto snarled. “That was the dumbest move I’ve ever seen. There is no guarantee he’ll let us go just because he gets a scroll. Can’t you feel it? He doesn’t even really care about the outcome of this exam. That kind of bloodlust he keeps emitting, that can’t be quelled by something like a fricken scroll!”

“You’re right Naruto-kun.” The shinobi giggled and it brought chills down Naruto’s spine. “You’re so fascinating. Much more than I expected.” Naruto frowned his attention wrenched away from Sasuke at those words. “I didn’t expect you. And you’re far more than I expected. Than I could have dreamed of.” Another giggle but deeper this time. Hoarser. “That way of talking. You barely resemble each other on a glance but you really are her after all.”

“Her?” Naruto asked before he cursed his distraction.

The shinobi thankfully ignored his question too busy extending their tongue and straightening up properly no longer wrapped around the branch. “My previous organisation searched everywhere for you.” Naruto’s blood chilled. “Where did you go? What have you seen? Yet you’re back like nothing happened at all”

“What the hell is he talking about?” Sakura demanded. “Naruto?”

“But this is such a treat. Hidden in plain sight and so much like her you could be her ghost. But you wouldn’t know about that would you? But you are an Uzumaki. Pure guts.” The long tongue tasted the air and it took sheer will for Naruto not to take a step back. “But you have her face too don’t you. Uzumaki Kushina’s that is.” The Shinobi leered at him. “But I bet you don’t even know who that person is don’t you?”

He did not think. The situation was tense enough as it was. So many things he had compartmentalized for safety’s sake. So many things he decided to face later and look at later. Even the blatantly obvious problems that cropped up. but one the few things he desperately wanted to know was being waved in front his face. He was being taunted with it and Naruto fell for the taunt.

His hand withdrew the sword and he had lunged at the shinobi with a snarl deep in his throat.

XxX

A scream echoed in the clearing and Sakura realized that it was hers and clamped her hand across her mouth. Over the past months with Naruto she had gotten to a point where she thought she knew
The boy that pulled a sword and launched himself at an enemy she knew they had no current way to defeat rage twisting their features. She could honestly say she did not know that person. She would swear it. This person. This person scared her they felt exactly like the other shinobi had. How those ninjas they met in the Land of Wave had. But worse.

Naruto felt far worse.

“What do you know!” Naruto roared as the shinobi effortlessly dogged his first slash. “Who are you? Who are you really?”

“Did they hide you?” The shinobi rasped. They dodged another of Naruto’s slashes making Sakura whimper where she stood. Naruto was fast but this shinobi was tons faster. “That wasn’t the original plan. What happened to you? You were gone and now you’re back playing along with the original plan? They searched for you did you know? Or did they lose you? Everyone searched for you high and low. Or was that the plan?” Naruto paused in the middle of his slash and the next sound that came from his throat made Sakura retreat four steps back her heart in her throat.

XxX

“You’re good.” The shinobi snarled at him. Naruto struggled to move the sword from the shinobi’s grip. Not only had the shinobi caught it correctly. He had done it with one hand while eyeing Naruto as if he were nothing but a specimen. It pissed him off. “But your eyes, they certainly aren’t normal. What were you doing to have eyes like that hmm? I was certain Konoha had changed its ways and for certain.” The shinobi leered. “You’re too young.”

“We’re all needed by someone.” Haku turned around his smile illuminated by the firelight. He touched his hair softly. “That hopeless feeling that reflects in our eyes.” Haku turned back to the fire. “It’s begun to fade.” His voice was wistful and Naruto’s heart thumped in his chest as he watched Haku.

“Uzumaki Naruto.” The shinobi tasted his name and Naruto shoved away his distaste in order to tug his sword away but he was deeply aware that the ninja had let him get away. “Although one wouldn’t know of you being an Uzumaki by looking at you. At least until they got to know you.”

Uzumaki.

“You say Uzumaki Naruto? Uzumaki? Konoha?” Mai’s voice was confused. “Uzumaki?”

“Is there a problem?” Zabuza growled.

“I’ve lived for a while.” Her brown eyes searched his warily. “I wouldn’t have considered him being an Uzumaki.”

“Why?” Naruto frowned.

“They are a rare clan. A decimated clan but they have a few known traits. Huge chakra reserves, red hair and sometimes red eyes but you…. you don’t resemble them in any way. You’re an orphan right? How are you sure that you are who you say you are?” Mai shrugged. “Konoha likes to keep secrets in secrets.”

“It’s not important.” Naruto dismissed.

“I’d say the same.” Mai frowned. She stroked a part of her puppet slowly. “But if you’re going to
use the name Uzumaki. It is no joke. They are so rare everyone knows who they are and I think
Konoha had one or two left.”

“I was the only Uzumaki. At least that’s what Ji-chan said.” Naruto frowned.

“There might be more to this.” She frowned.

“They have hidden from you before.” Haku said softly.

“How much do you know.” Naruto readied his sword once again. This person, they knew more
than any shinobi should know. They knew about the Kyuubi, Naruto knew that. He could feel that.
But, they did not know about his little four-year trip and the joking about their former
organization? Naruto was playing it risky and he knew that. But he was unable to turn back.
Not now. Not at this point. He had a name. he had a suspicion and a name. he would not leave it
alone. He had another key to the puzzle. Another clue to answer the question he had been asking
himself since he had come back to the village and was expected to be of Konoha again.
Just who was he? He knew what he was. A vessel for the Kyuubi. He knew that. But where did he
come from. He was an orphan but orphans did not fall out the sky. There was so much more he
wanted to know. That he needed to know and the fact that someone else besides the village was
looking for him chilled his blood.
Just thinking about what the hell could have happened to him chilled his blood. There was no
doubt, that like Konoha this organization would not treat the group nicely.
No, judging by the man facing them. It would be far worse than what Naruto had experienced. It
would be something not suitable for other human beings and although Naruto wanted to know who
he was far more interested in why.

What did they want him for? Did they want Uzumaki Naruto or did they want the Kyuubi’s
container and why? How long had they searched? Did that mean that he really had never been
safe? A normal life was forever denied to him?

“What happened to you? You’re far more than I expected and wiser. On the ball so they would
say.’ The shinobi’s tongue waved obscenely and Naruto had to repress another shudder. “I wonder
what my former organisation would think about you now.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about and I don’t want to know.” Naruto launched himself
forward again his array of shuriken forced the shinobi to move away from his team. “Who is that.
Tell me what you know!”

“But wouldn’t you like to know.” The shinobi chuckled. “Wouldn’t you like to know a little about
yourself?” He slowly dragged up the sleeve on his arm. Naruto’s gaze was dragged to the strange
markings he saw. They looked like tattoos but he knew that they had to be more than that.

Then the shinobi bit his thump and dragged the blood across the tattoos. It was at that moment it
clicked for Naruto what it had to be. He did not need Sasuke’s panicked warning. He threw himself
backward his sword out in front of him warily long before the explosion started.
A huge snake. A huge ass brown snake that the shinobi immediately got onto. The snake rose up its
tongue flickering in Naruto’s direction. Naruto’s grip on his sword tightened the man’s words still
ringing in his ears. The name still sounding in his head.

they were certain of was that you were gone. Leader was very stressed about that. Where did you go?” Another chuckle. “Don’t tell me you ran away.”

“Shut up!” Naruto pointed his sword towards the shinobi rage in his tone. “Who the fuck are you? You aren’t any normal genin. You can’t be Kusa either. If you are Konoha has a problem on their hands.” Naruto started a dash towards the snake he ignored Sakura and Sasuke’s voices. The snake dodged his first slash but the second showed him that the scales on the top of its head were too hard.

Naruto refused to give up and his rage made his body change. He could feel his teeth growing and he knew that his body had become more beastly but he welcomed the change. In front of this shinobi he welcomed it.

“So you really are it.” The shinobi whispered. “Yes, Uzumakis make perfect Jinchuurikis.” He murmured. “Even if you don’t have the traditional Uzumaki look you sure wear that look well.” He hissed his hands blurring as he crafted seals. “Yes you certainly are worth the trouble. I might as well get two for one.”

Fricken gross bastard. Naruto snarled as he dodged the fire blast towards him this bastard was taunting him. He aimed his slash towards the snake’s eyes but he was caught in mid-air. Naruto felt something wet slither around him, cradling him and he tried to struggle only for it to restrain him tighter.

He heard the others calling for him but Naruto’s focus was on the man using his tongue to dangle Naruto in mid-air.

“I can’t believe the Kyuubi’s Jinchuuriki developed this much.” Naruto was dragged a little closer and he shivered at the delight in the shinobi’s eyes. “Not only did you survive; you did a few things that were naughty didn’t you?” The gaze kept him still. “You know what you are and your eyes… just what have you seen? And that power of yours…” Pain engulfed Naruto. He choked as fire burned into his stomach. Into his seal. “It’s still uncontrollable but rage brings it out. You really don’t know anything. Just like her, it is so cute.”

Painful. What the hell had that bastard done to him? Naruto’s vision blurred and he felt himself being split into two. The Kyuubi’s chakra split away and his body slumped. He felt his shirt slip back into place but he tried to keep his eyes on the bastard that knew too much. But it was too much and his vision blurred and he fell unconscious. The last thing he saw was the smug look on the bastard’s face.

XxX

Sakura had stopped Naruto’s fall. The enemy shinobi had tossed Naruto aside. As if he had been trash after doing something to him. He could not be dead. Sasuke knew he could not be not after everything.

His legs had steadied once more and he was ready to do his part. This enemy shinobi had not made Naruto flinch, even when he knew he was far stronger than anything they had encountered and Sasuke had wanted to prove himself, he had wanted to get stronger. If he ran at something like this the last thing, he would get was stronger.

The snake the enemy shinobi was on disappeared the blast of smoke ruffling the trees and their hair. Sasuke held his kunai in a loose grip as he readied himself for the attack. He knew the enemy shinobi was playing with them but there was no other choice but to fight.
Because they both knew the shinobi was toying with Sasuke it was ridiculously easy for him to take him by surprise.

Actually it was not easy. He was as tricky as Itachi was. Slyer than anyone Sasuke had ever sparred with and in taking the shinobi by surprise Sasuke had gone all out.

He panted as the smell of burned flesh reached him. Sakura ran to him and kept him from falling something he was grateful for. Taking the punches had hurt. Being thrown had hurt. The amount of chakra he had just burned as well it made him feel weak.

Then he was frozen. Sakura fell away from his. Her knees hitting the bark of the branch with a loud sound. Sasuke was aware of her trying to struggle back to her feet but he was more aware of his own struggle and the shinobi that was walking away from his trap as if it never happened.

“You use it so well for someone at your age.” The shinobi said. “I’ve seen better of course but you still deserve praise. You live up to the name of Uchiha.” The shinobi’s voice had changed. Deeper, raspier.

“Who are you!” Sasuke demanded as he tried to move. He could see the shinobi’s face properly now. The face had burned but there was another face under it. He could see that and the hitai-ate had changed as well no longer Kusa. It was a Sound hitai-ate. He could see pale skin around the burned part of the face and the eyes. Like a snake’s.

“My name is Orochimaru.” Sasuke did not know the name at all. “Get through the exam as if your life depended on it. That is how you’ll see me again. And you’ll want to see me again.” Orochimaru chuckled. His hands made a seal and Sasuke tried once again to move but it was pointless. “I find you fascinating.” Orochimaru laughed. Sasuke’s eyes saw what he thought should be an impossible sight. Orochimaru’s neck lengthened and stretched at impossible lengths and speeds coming right at him.

He registered the bite to his neck. Painful and deep. He felt himself being released around the same time fire burned at the back of his neck. He cried out unable to stop himself and his arms moved again. But his movements were slow. Jerky and the back of his neck burned like fire.

“Sasuke-kun!” Sakura was back on her feet her gaze shifted from Orochimaru to Sasuke and back again. “What did you do to Sasuke-kun?”

“I gave him a farewell present. Something that will serve him good in the long run.” Orochimaru sounded amused. “Did you want one too?” Sasuke glared at the man as the pain burned on and on. “It was good seeing some of your moves. All of them.” His gaze drifted to where the unconscious Naruto hung and Sasuke felt fear grip his stomach. “If only I had more time.” The man mused as he began to sink into the branch. “Maybe next time.”

Xxx

“I couldn’t. I couldn’t do anything.” Sakura held Sasuke to her, tears dripped down her cheeks as she kept an eye on Naruto. There was pain in her heart. Frustration in her soul. What should she do now? How could what happened be explained? She clutched Sasuke tighter to herself.

If things had gone slightly differently, she had the feeling she would be holding Sasuke’s dead body and looking at Naruto’s caracaras. That did not sit well with her. It did not sit well at all.
It was daylight. Naruto and Sasuke still had not awakened. Sasuke seemed in the deep grip of fever and Naruto, if it were not for his breathing Sakura would have feared he was dead. She had seen Naruto sleep plenty of times. This unnatural stillness scared her.

She was too afraid to leave the hovel she had dragged the boys to. In fact, she currently was too afraid to leave them. Sasuke in his condition. Naruto in his unnatural sleep. They were vulnerable and she was the only guard they had. She just had to wait until one of them awoke. They could figure out what to do from there.

The pain still remained but it was different. It lingered but his mind was able to function. Either he had adapted to the pain or it was fading. Sasuke was unsure which he preferred. His back was on something soft. He could smell dirt under him and he could hear the cried of birds in the distance.

But what mattered the most was that he was alive. Things had gotten crazy. Things had gone to shit but he was still alive. He could still change things. From this he could grow.

He opened his eyes unsurprised to see the faint light shining through the cracks of where ever he was. His eyes drifted around until they landed on Sakura’s back. She was backing him her body on guard as she faced what he assumed was the only entrance.

“You okay Sasuke-kun?” She asked softly. Sasuke sat up and his neck twanged.

“No.” Sasuke grunted as he got to his feet. “But I will be.” He eyes landed on Naruto’s face, still and blank. “He still out?”

“It’s only been a few hours.” Sakura’s voice rough, tense. “I thought you would be out longer.”

“Even a few hours are too long.” Sasuke tested his movements. Still rough and jerky but he would not hold them back. “What happened?”

“I brought you two here.” Sakura said softly. “After that guy Orochimaru disappeared.” She still refused to turn around and it was beginning to bother him. “How’s your neck?”

“Hurts like a bitch.” Sasuke sat back down next to Naruto his gaze fixed on Sakura’s back.

“I cleaned the bite but there is something else there. Like a seal.” Sakura said softly. Sasuke felt cool fear wash over him before he ruthlessly shoved it down to be dealt with later.

“Don’t tell Naruto.” He said softly. “We can talk about it later.”

“When he wakes up.” Sakura said softly. “We can talk about everything when we get out of this.” Sasuke nodded and looked away back to the blank look on Naruto’s face. Out the corner of his eye he saw Sakura look back at him at them but he did not turn back around. Whatever that was up with her it seemed better to leave it alone.

She had gotten them here untouched. And she had remained on guard. It was better not to push her. And he was not in the condition for it either. His neck burned and tingled.

His eyes snapped open long before he gathered his thoughts. Naruto heard birds and streaks of
sunlight was hitting his face. The last thing he had been aware of was that snake bastard. That bastard that had known far more than he should of. Who had taunted him.

Who had an organization that had been searching for him. A new enemy. Did the Hokage know? Whoever these people were they were still looking for him and they knew of the Kyuubi. The others had been right, there was no out running certain parts of your own past.

A pale face came into view and Naruto narrowed his gaze on Sasuke. The boy was leaning over him the look of pain on his features. Whatever that had happened after that bastard had done whatever to him…Sasuke was still alive.

“Sakura.” Sasuke said and Narutos eyes jerked around the place they were before they landed on Sakura. “He’s awake.”

“Naruto?” Sakura looked around then relief on her face. Naruto got a glimpse of evening light and his eyes bounced around the room until he realized they were under some tree roots.

“Sakura-chan.” His voice sounded rough, hoarse. Unlike his own. “Are you okay?”

“Think about yourself idiot.” Sasuke grunted he seemed like his old self. “We’re lucky to be alive.”

“But we are.” Naruto hissed. “What happened?” He narrowed his eyes at the glance Sakura and Sasuke exchanged and cursed himself for the mess they were in.

“We got away.” Sakura said softly. “That wasn’t a genin we were fighting.”

“That’s obvious.” Naruto snorted.

“He called himself Orochimaru.” Sasuke grunted as he got to his feet. Naruto watched how the boy seemed a little unbalanced and how he guarded the back of his neck.

“Not a girl after all huh.” Naruto sighed. He watched how Sakura paled. “What?”

“That wasn’t his face.” Sakura said softly. “When Sasuke-kun burned him…it melted off.”

Well that was creepy as fuck. Naruto winced at the thought. “He was wearing it like a mask?”

“He did plenty of things that were crazy.” Sakura said softly. “Naruto. You can’t fight him again if we meet him. He’s too strong.”

“We can’t run either. He’ll just pick us off.” Naruto pointed out. He ignored her other request. He would get answers from that man. That name still echoed in his mind and the way the man had looked at him and at Sasuke. He narrowed his gaze on Sasuke. “What happened?” He asked.

“Besides a thrashing?” Sasuke glared at him.

“Well whatever.” Naruto hissed. He got to his feet and pulled out the two scrolls. “Got yours Sakura?”

“Y-yeah.” She nodded.

“Then fuck the rest of this exam. We use your scroll as bait if anyone else comes after us.” Naruto winced as his stomach twanged. He felt odd and the seal it felt wrong but there was no way he could tell Sasuke and Sakura about it yet.

“Are you okay?” Sasuke questioned. “He did something to you.”
“Are you?” Naruto asked and watched the way Sasuke’s eyes looked away from him. “Exactly. Now we’ll get out of here the moment we can move properly.”

“Naruto?” Sakura abandoned her post to stand in front of him. “Are you okay?”

He was not healing like he should be and the chakra coming from the seal was a mess. “I could do with some rest.” Naruto admitted. “But we got what we were supposed to. So before we meet someone even more fucked up we should go to the tower.”

“A-are you okay?” Sakura’s voice was uncertain.

That shinobi had known more than he should have. Spoken like he knew Naruto and he gave news that terrified him. Danger was lurking around every corner and worse yet the guy was gone, leaving behind information that he had no idea how to pursue. The name he left behind and the hints he dropped had Naruto pissed. At everyone and he needed someone to push it onto. “No Sakura-chan.” He said slowly. “I’m not okay.”

XxX

Naruto took the lead with Sakura following and Sasuke holding up the rear. The rage emitting from him was so thick Sasuke felt it could be tasted. Half of what happened he had been unable to understand. But he knew it had to do with Naruto’s past.

Most likely something that had happened when he had been kidnapped. Because the way Naruto had snapped. It was personal. Thinking about Naruto kept him from thinking about his own problems.

And Sasuke vaguely agreed with Naruto. They had done what they had to. It was time to finish the exam. Naruto had secured the second scroll and currently two of their team was injured. There was no reason to linger.

“I’m going to make a few shadow clones.” Naruto called back to them.

“People will have laid traps so that’s a good idea. How many?” Sasuke asked.

“Ten teams.” Naruto’s voice was highly amused.

“They’ll go for the second, the last and the second last for certain.”

“We will be in different teams.” Naruto answered. “Everyone gets two shadow clone guards.”

“Let’s transform as well.” Sasuke murmured. “I don’t see why it should be easy.”

XxX

And people were waiting for them. Many people. Sasuke was transformed as Sakura and he felt amused as the two clones leapt to protect him as he slipped inside the door.

Outside it broke into a melee but Naruto and Sakura made it inside. Sakura transformed from her henge as Naruto and Sasuke watched how Naruto laughed before he slammed the door closed behind them.

“Suckers.” He grinned and Sasuke grinned in response. He could faintly hear the outrage outside.

XxX
“What’s with this room.” Naruto muttered. There was writing on the wall and no one inside to greet them. After all the trouble they went through it would suck if they had another test. In fact, Naruto did not want any more of this Second Exam.

“If you do not possess heaven, gain knowledge and be prepared. If you do not possess Earth run the fields and seek strength. If you open both Heaven and Earth scrolls dangerous paths turn to safe paths. This is the secret of something something.” Sasuke read aloud.

“It shall lead the way.” Sakura picked up.

“And?” Naruto asked.

“Hand over the scrolls.” Sasuke said.

“We have to open the Heaven and Earth scrolls.” Sakura said.

“Knock yourselves out.” Naruto muttered as he handed over the scrolls. Without hesitating Sasuke and Sakura opened the scrolls. Naruto got a glimpse of the writing on the scrolls before Sakura and Sasuke dropped them as they started to bulge and smoke.

“Person? Jin?” Sakura asked as the backed away.

“Suspicious.” Sasuke muttered. “It’s a summoning. But for what?”

“We’re about to find out.” Naruto muttered as he took guard by Sasuke’s side. There was a small explosion and more smoke. Naruto gritted his teeth and braced himself as a figure appeared but then he saw brown hair, a familiar figure through the smoke.

“Iruka-sensei?” Sakura gasped.

“Looks like you guys went through some trouble.” Iruka-sensei’s smile was a bit worried. “Everyone congratulations on passing the Second Exam.”

“What?” Sasuke asked. “Are you serious?”

“We Chuunins greet the examinees after the exam.” Iruka-sensei smiled. “But the test is over, you completed the exam within the time limit.”

“What would have happened if we opened the scrolls during the exam?” Sasuke questioned. Iruka-sensei smiled.

“You’ve guessed the meaning behind this exam haven’t you Sasuke.” Iruka-sensei chuckled.

“What were you planning to do Iruka-sensei?” Sasuke repeated.

“Well, I would have made certain that you were unable to complete the exam.” Iruka-sensei said lightly. “This Exam is to test your mission completion ability.”

“Well aren’t we lucky.” Sasuke muttered.

“But there is still time left. You’ll have to wait in the waiting room.” Iruka-sensei looked sheepish. “My mission was to greet you and explain what this text means.” He gestured to the wall behind himself. “But somehow I think explaining the text will be a formality to you guys.”

“We wait?” Sakura sighed. “We have another four days left right?”
“And Naruto... you have to see some people.” Iruka-sensei looked curious. “I was told to pass that message along too.”

And just like that his frustration came roaring back and the name that was a taunt in his ears. They knew. They had to. Naruto took a breath to calm himself but he knew it would only last until he was questioned.
Chuunin Selection Exams. Second Exam complete Waiting room

Chapter Summary

Team Seven finished the Second Exam early time to wait for the Exam to end and the final results

Chapter Notes

So I kind of have the next chapters after this split into the fights hopefully the chapter will be up on Sunday (sorry but i'm reeeaaaally tired and kinda have a lot on my plate too, I love treating you guys but this is a looong fic.

Oh yeah we made 100 kudos darlings! \o thanks about that, I'm happy they like what they see so far. Not going to give anything away but enjoy. (part of me thinks i’m crazy for what i’m about to do *see back to back updates* but I know I'm not totally insane so it will be sensible updates soon enough)

*I thought I was doing a favour by updating around the weekend but I was informed most of you don't care so....yeah whenever I'm ready to update it is!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“They’ll stay in that room.” The ANBU person said and Naruto bristled. From the tone alone he knew he was in deep shit. The shinobi was keeping a wide distance from him and even worse he could feel their gaze eating him alive. And he could feel their suspicion as if it were a tangible thing.

This was not endearing anyone to him. The rage was bubbling. Memories that he swore he would keep buried were surging through the cracks of his control and he was seriously considering letting it. He was pissed. He was suspicious and he wanted answers. At this point he did not care who it came from.

“Where are you taking me.” Naruto said lowly. He was highly aware of the weapons still on him. He doubted he would be able to draw them in time however and that made him feel edgy. Edgier. And was someone’s fault.

“It’s just so you can be asked a few questions.” The ANBU responded and Naruto stopped walking. The ANBU turned slowly to face him but Naruto’s rage seeped into his voice.

“Another interrogation? Why?”

“To determine what happened in the Forest of Death.”

“And I have to be by myself why?”

“Not everyone is aware of your…situation.”
“Well fuck you too. There are plenty of things about my damn situation I don’t know either. And I’ve got a creep with an extending tongue to thank for shining the light.” Naruto snarled.

XxX

“Iruka-sensei.” Sakura said softly. She watched the way Iruka-sensei’s eyes went from the door Naruto had left through to meet her eyes. She was not surprised to see the guarded look. “What’s going on?”

“Some disturbing news.” Iruka-sensei muttered. He looked back to the door Naruto had left through. “There’s a dangerous shinobi loose but you already know that.” His gaze left the door to linger on Sasuke for a few moments.

“Iruka-sensei.” She said softly “Is Naruto going to be okay?” She hesitated at how the man’s gaze on her narrowed. “I’ve never seen him like that before.” She said softly.

“Like what?” Iruka-sensei sounded wary and it in turn made her wary.

“He didn’t listen and he just ran at him.” She said softly. “It was like if he snapped. When that man taunted him.” She shuddered as she remembered the feel of the bloodlust that had come from Naruto. The more that Orochimaru had repeated the name, the more deranged Naruto had been. She had glimpsed his eyes for a split second as he had charged the shinobi. She swore she had seen red.

“Naruto…” Iruka-sensei hesitated. “He’s had a few difficult years.” He said slowly and Sakura could see the man picking apart his words. Deciding what to tell her. “Like everyone else Naruto has his weaknesses and his strength.”

“But we’ve been together for so long.” She insisted. “I’ve never seen him like that. The way he looked at that man.” She shuddered. “That wasn’t the Naruto I know. The things they said to each other.” She hesitated. “That was Naruto?” She remembered the sound he made when the shinobi had done something to him.

“Sakura.” Iruka-sensei said softly. “What you saw, you’re going to have to tell the Hokage and your sensei. Don’t hold anything back.” Iruka-sensei said softly. “It’ll help us figure out what to do.”

“Naruto didn’t do anything wrong. We would have died!” Sakura protested. Then she remembered everything that had happened and her resolve shook. “Or only they would have survived.” She admitted. “Naruto saved us.”

“Yes he did.” Iruka-sensei patted her gently on her head. “There’s no doubt about that we just want to know how and what exactly happened. You’ll be questioned as well.”

“But for now they will take him away?” Sasuke asked. He had slumped against the wall his breaths slow. Sakura knew his shoulder had to be giving him trouble.

“His circumstances are a little different.” Iruka-sensei’s gaze went to the door once again. “It’s complicated.”

XxX

The tower had a basement. Surprise surprise. But Naruto did not care about that. He did not care about those gathered in the dimly lit room either. The only thing he wanted was answers and if no one in the room was going to fucking give them to him he was going on a rampage.
He sneered at the sight of the masked shinobi. He was sick of it and the sight of the Hokage did not calm him any.

“Uzumaki Kushina.” He grated and he got the pleasure of watching several masked shinobi tense in the room. “Tell me why someone I don’t know decided to give me the piece of information I got.”

“Naruto-kun.” A masked shinobi murmured from the shadows. “We-“

“Who is she!” His voice cut off the shinobi and bounced around the room. “I don’t give a flying fuck about your plans. Who is she.” His hands shook and his vision blurred. “I was dealing with having nothing I was playing by the rules like I’m supposed to but I looked death in the face yesterday.” He hissed. “And that bastard saw fit to tell me he knew me. Then he compared me to someone and I have no clue what he was talking about! But you know!” The shinobi in the room tensed and he snarled. “You fucking knew!”

“Naruto.” The Hokage rumbled but Naruto was not going to have any of it.

“You too.” Naruto hissed. “That guy knows what I am. How the fuck is that possible? He touched me.” Naruto stressed. “And he called me Jinchuuriki.” The room tensed again. “He knew more than he should have and he wore a Kusa hitai-ate and I’m not dumb enough to believe that.”

“His name is Orochimaru.” A Monkey faced Anbu masked shinobi said. “An S-class missing nin from Konoha.” Naruto gaped at the masked shinobi before the words clicked.

“Missing nin?” Naruto whispered. “I don’t know if you noticed but your missing nin was in that exam pretending to be a genin and kicking my team’s ass!”

“We have our suspicions about his intentions.” The Hokage admitted his head lowered. “Some of ours managed to confront him.”

“Even I know this is getting to classified information.” Naruto hissed. “He said his organization was looking for me.” Naruto stressed. “When were you going to tell me? Who the fuck are they and why are they looking for the Kyuubi sealed in me? The one that should be a fucking secret?”

The room collectively flinched but Naruto glared at them. His placed a shaky hand over his seal. The seal that felt strange since the moment he had woken back up. that bastard had done something. He had knocked him out but Naruto could still feel his touch and it made him worried.

“You’ve got a missing nin playing hide and fucking seek. Treating you all as a joke.” Naruto hissed. “Why am I here? Honestly even I know I should be the last of your problems.” They said nothing but Naruto felt the air change. “You have got to be fucking kidding me, you think I was going to run off with him?” Naruto demanded.

“No.” A badger face mask muttered. “But of the three in your team. We can get the most details from you.”

“Even when you share nothing with me.” Naruto said softly. “What a greedy bunch you are. He knew what I am. Who I am.” Naruto shuddered. “You have no idea how fucking fascinated he was! How delighted and he knew I was gone he knew, who the fuck is he?”

“Naruto!” The Hokage had raised his voice and Naruto was ready to speak over him. “Control yourself.”

“For what?” Naruto demanded.
“We want to make sure that the man you faced was Orochimaru. We are fairly certain but it is not perfect.”

“Is it not enough he waltzed into the village?” Naruto demanded. “And how am I to confirm anything? Something Sakura or even Sasuke couldn’t? He knocked me out!” Naruto gripped his stomach tightly as he thought about it.

“We can have someone find out for their selves.” A masked shinobi stepped forward and the fact that it was a blank mask made Naruto retreat a step. “Through your memories.”

“No.” Naruto refused. He eyed the man’s solid build suspiciously. Hell no. Not his memories. Not after the way they so easily rejected his own demands.

“I will only look at what occurred when you faced the enemy shinobi.” The shinobi’s tone was calm. Almost soothing. “I have enough control to do that.” Naruto hesitated and the man pressed on. “We would just like to see the fight.”

“So eager to see my ass kicking from my point of view?” Naruto asked. His eyes searched the room and cursed at the amount of people there. “And then what? Is the exam cancelled?”

“No.” The Hokage said and Naruto nodded before he looked away. He bit his lip to refrain from swearing. “We will put measures in place to protect the participants.”

“He walked into this village and played genin.” Naruto said softly. He was amazed at how controlled his voice was. “You’ve already lost.” The room tensed again. “He’s setting the pace.”

“He is an S-class criminal for a reason.” The monkey mask said.

“How do we do this.” Naruto asked warily.

“First. You take a seat.” The blank faced shinobi said. Naruto sighed and resolved himself. He had no other choice. It was either give in or be forced.

XxX

It was supposed to be a simple job but no one could call what Inoichi had to do easy. He had at first objected to the entire deal of wearing a mask but the Hokage had stared him into submission. No matter how he looked at it Naruto was still a kid.

Granted Inoichi had not been around much to really see him but he heard the reports from Ino. Or to be more accurate he overheard her but that still counted.

But now he was face to face with the boy he understood why the Hokage wanted his identity hidden. The rage he was feeling the boy emit. The distrust that hung in the air was not all from the boy.

He knew his job was to gather as much information as possible but he wanted to soothe the young boy in front of him. The name he had learned. Another thing he had learned too soon.

“May I?” Inoichi questioned he had his palm up in Naruto’s direction. The boy sighed before he nodded.

“Let’s do this then.” Naruto muttered. “So I need to inhale anything?”

“No.” Inoichi answered as he closed his eyes and placed his hand on Naruto’s forehead. “Just this
is enough.” He concentrated and started to fall.

Xxx

It was jarring, Naruto’s mind. Inoichi had no problem navigating the memories. He was actually surprised how easy it was. How organized it was. It was something to consider later when he was not on an important mission.

He heard a voice hiss Naruto’s name and he slowed the memory in time. He watched Naruto watch Sasuke and he knew for certain the shinobi was Orochimaru. How they missed that was unbelievable. And even worse the look the former Sannin was giving Sasuke and Naruto. Inoichi felt his body chill.

Did he know the man’s intentions? No. he could not begin to guess at them but the information the man tossed out was not random. Orochimaru had been testing Sasuke and from what Inoichi saw, Naruto as well.

It puzzled him. Orochimaru should have no reason to be concerned with a Jinchuuriki even with the matter of his previous organization aside.

Then he heard the way Orochimaru taunted Naruto with Uzumaki Kushina and he shook his head in disgust. There was no way Naruto would know anything but there was no way the boy would have left the taunt alone. Not with the way Orochimaru had said the name. Hinted to things. The damn shinobi had confused the situation with one sentence.

But with that taunt memories rose and that confused Inoichi. He got flashes of what he guessed was Naruto’s past. He tried to focus on the fight but the memories were colourful and loud and with them rose doubt but it was not his.

The Hokage mountain a sight seen at night and seen from lower than Inoichi could remember seeing it then he remembered how short Naruto was. He tried to steer away from the memory but the scenery changed.

“What Mai says bothers you.” It was a man’s deep voice. Naruto turned around his gaze running over Zabuza before the boy scoffed.

“Not really.”

“You’re lying.” The man laughed. “God you’re pathetic.”

“Shut up. Smug bastard.”

“But Mai did bring up a good point.” Zabuza’s eyes ran over Naruto. “I don’t know much about Uzumakis. That is before my time.” He mused. Naruto scoffed and the man laughed. “It’s before plenty of people’s time.”

“But she talked like they were shinobi.” Naruto murmured. “I didn’t know anything.”

“But you told Haku you’re an orphan.”

“Because that is what Ji-chan said!”

“And no one ever told you anything about your parents?” Zabuza’s eyes were contemplative. “And that never worried you?”
“I thought no one knew much about them.” Naruto muttered. “They died in the attack.”

“Or that was what you were told. I thought your story sounded strange when you told Haku. Your Hokage sealed that thing in you right? And saved the village? And no one knows who your parents are?”

“Zabuza-san.” It was a voice of low reproach. A boy had come up behind him and although his hand went to touch Zabuza gently his gaze was on Naruto. “I thought you said you would leave it alone.”

“Clan tells you who you are.” Zabuza ignored the hand on him and focused on Naruto. “Every clan has their story and they tell you who you are. That Mai can say you don’t resemble who you are supposed to be says that someone lied.”

“Zabuza-san!”

“And I’ve been fighting a feeling for a while now. The longer you’re with us I keep thinking I should know your face somehow. Which makes no sense.”

“What?” Naruto asked.

“Haku, go set up the tent.” Zabuza said quietly. Haku seethed but walked away. “Brat, everything you think you are could be a cover story.” The bandages around his lips lifted in what had to be a smile. “Your parents could have given you up but still be alive.”

“That’s bullshit.” Naruto snorted.

“You’re getting quite the mouth on you.” Zabuza stepped closer. “But most people learn about themselves so they can get stronger. And your life is full of holes. The hospital has to know who your parents are. There always are records.”

“Why are we even talking about this?”

“Because you’re a ticking time bomb. We may have to take more precautions.” Zabuza said bluntly. He ignored Naruto’s protest. “I’ve never seen markings like yours. You look like a wild animal.”

“Take off that wrapping and then talk you sharp teeth moron.” Naruto hissed.

“Well aren’t we a pair.” Zabuza removed his mask to leer at Naruto. “I’ll rip out your throat brat.”

“And I know exactly what Haku will do if you do that.” Naruto taunted.

“He’ll forgive me.” Zabuza leered. His smile dropped. “But after what that old bat said it is better that we do a better job when it comes to you. A clan tells you who you came from. It helps you understand what you can do. If you really are an Uzumaki there should be a way to know for sure.”

Inoichi took a deep breath as the memory changed going back to the fight but of course it did not stay that way for long.

“Who is he really?” Naruto was pretending to be asleep. Haku and Zabuza were nearby. “Until Mai-san brought it up… I never thought on it.”
“I’ve seen someone like him before.” Zabuza yawned. “Every major village has them. Or more than one. There is a special name for them too but the kid is blonde.”

“Looks have nothing to do with it. Look at me.”

“I know you have to resemble someone in your bloodline. Some traits are passed down. I think the kid will be fine until he opens his mouth and says his last name.”

“So you as well…”

“Think something is off? A lot doesn’t make sense. Not all of it is how we picked him up… you feel it too who is he?”

“Uzumaki Naruto.” Haku said softly. “That’s all he has to be.”

“You’re far more manipulative than people give you credit for.” Zabuza laughed. “But I can’t shake the feeling that his face…”

“The others think so too but…”

“No matter how you look at it, it is fucked up. Usually you wait before you seal.” Zabuza mused. “They could have killed the kid.”

It was irrational to feel guilty but Inoichi still felt it. Naruto was alive by some act of divine fate and the way they spoke those shinobi had known exactly what Naruto was and they did nothing.

“That boy is right.” Naruto was being examined by an old woman her eyes sharp. “I feel as though I should know you in some way. I don’t know all Konoha clans but I know enough.” She ran her fingers over his cheeks. “Did someone do this?”

“I’ve always had this.” Naruto responded his jaw moving the woman’s fingers.

“Then I have no idea who you are.” She said quietly. “Uzumaki have many traits but… someone like you… and your hair.” She chuckled. “Maybe they hide you for your own safety.”

“Safety?”

“Well… let’s believe that you are an orphan. If your parent was someone well known.” The old woman grinned. “And others found out they would stop at nothing to slit your throat.”

Inoichi watched the rest of the fight. Naruto had not been joking about the ass kicking. He knew Orochimaru had been toying with them but seeing it was painful.

“No other Uzumakis that you know of? Then wouldn’t that make any you find a relative?” Haku was brushing his hair his back to Naruto. “You’re determined about this. Does it really bother you?”

“I just want to know.” Naruto said softly.

“Well if you think about it. Clans hide because they had no choice.”

“I know.” Naruto muttered. Haku stood up and sent Naruto a contemplative glance.

“It could be the same as me. The other Uzumakis taking to hiding.”

“I don’t think so.” Naruto murmured.
“Well, me neither. Konoha is different to Kiri. But they will still hide things all the same. Like they hide the reason for your pain from you.”

“Stop it.” Naruto growled.

“That’s better.” Zabuza was flanked by an older man and they were both staring at Naruto. “Cover up the markings and…”

“Nothing.” Zabuza growled. “I still don’t know.”

“I think you should give up.” A dark haired shinobi called out. “Haku will ruin dinner if you tease Naruto too much.”

“If we hide the marks…” The older man frowned. “No one else knows who he is.”

“The hunter nins to this point haven’t reacted either.” Zabuza mused. “Kid.”

“I know.” Naruto sighed. “I know.”

At least they knew why Naruto was so suspicious. They could thank themselves for that. Naruto was oblivious to his own past. But the chances of him running into people that would put together pieces of the puzzle was too high. Like that Suna nin.

Like Zabuza who could see another piece of the puzzle. So could Orochimaru who had the entire story… He must be frustrating to Naruto. Inoichi watched the smug look on Orochimaru’s borrowed face and exited Naruto’s mind.

The boy slumped and Inoichi stepped away. His hands trembled. They all had been briefed. Naruto had been questioned but it was not until he had seen up close did he really understand the shit they were all in.

Shinobi tended to stick to their own villages. That mixing together. The ease they operated and raised Naruto in. and Konoha had taken that away from the boy.

“It’s Orochimaru.” Inoichi admitted his throat tight. “He has been confirmed to have left his organization.”

“Wait.” Naruto panted. “So that is true?” The boy’s blue eyes were panicked. “There were other people after me?” Inoichi glanced at the Hokage hoping for the man to take over.

XXX

“Yes.” The Hokage admitted and Naruto wanted to kick him. He was shaking from the clue the missing nin had given him. From having his head invaded and the feeling of horror drowning him.

“How long did you know.” Naruto hissed. “Why did no one tell me?” He thought of how everyone had been running and running. Their pasts nipping on their heels as they fled everywhere.

“Recently it was brought to our attention.” The Hokage said and Naruto flinched. “It’s another reason we were so determined to get you back. Before they could.”

So even if they had kept running. Those people would have found them and just like how Orochimaru had played with him. Orochimaru’s group would have destroyed them. Even if he had thrown aside his dream and hopes. He would have brought more trouble to them.
This was far worse than before. Before no one had wanted him. Now they wanted him for the wrong reason. Naruto’s hand hovered over his seal.

XxX

His shoulder burned. Sasuke sat pretending that his shoulder and neck were not prickling with flame. He did not want anyone finding out more than they had to. Keeping Sakura quiet was easier than he thought it should have to be.

But she was far more worried about Naruto and wherever he had been led to. Sasuke glanced at the door. He was worried slightly as well and not just because the blond had been led off without a trace. There had been hints in the exam of Naruto’s true nature.

And the way he had not hesitated once. It made him envious. Naruto had been ready to throw away his life. But not just that. His resolve. It had been kill or drag whoever to hell with him and Sasuke was unable to understand how Naruto came to do such things.

He understood the people Naruto had been meant a lot to him. Naruto was still frustratingly closed mouthed about that however. It pissed him off. He wanted to know. That man had been interested in both of them.

And he spoke like he knew Naruto. Whatever was happening to Naruto, Sasuke knew it had mostly to do with Naruto’s past.

The way he had reacted to that name. Sasuke had thought Naruto was the only Uzumaki in the village. He had been certain about it. And yet. Naruto had been compared to one. Fondly. And whatever that Orochimaru had done to render Naruto unconscious. Sasuke knew Naruto would not share what he had done.

Pressure points? It had been more than a punch. Naruto’s had shrieked. A missing nin they had never met before, knew more about Naruto than they did. It worried him. And Naruto’s barely concealed rage. It made this Exam more worrisome.

XxX

“Hatake?” Kakashi looked up from his book at the words. He frowned at the ANBU who settled in front of him.

“What?” He asked curiously. He glanced out the window. They still had time. The second exam could not be over yet.

“I’m afraid I have some bad news.” The shinobi said and Kakashi’s blood went cold. Had he made a mistake? Was it simply too early?

“My team?” He asked. He was aware of Kurenai and Asuma shooting him curious looks but his real focus was on the ANBU before him.

“They passed!” The ANBU reassured. Then they hesitated. “The Hokage requires your presence.”

“What happened.” Kakashi asked as he tucked away his book.

“They were…Something unexpected happened.”

“Did the Kyuubi?” Kakashi asked with a sense of dread.
“No.” The ANBU said hesitantly. “Something unexpected happened in the Forest of Death.”

“Is his team okay?” Asuma touched his shoulder gently and Kakashi appreciated the gesture. “Are they intact?”

“Yes.” The ANBU said hesitantly. “They are alive. But-“

“But?” Kurenai asked.

“You will get the brief later.” The ANBU assured and Kakashi felt his skin chill. “But for now Hatake’s presence is required.”

“I’m coming.” Kakashi reassured.

XxX

“Orochimaru?” Kakashi asked faintly. The Hokage scowled and Anko tried to make herself smaller. That action worried him more than anything else he had heard so far did. “Anko?”

“He said it himself.” Anko muttered. “I could have died out there.” Kakashi eyed her before he turned to the Hokage.

“They are alive.” The Sandaime scowled. “But Orochimaru adds to the growing problem. Inoichi checked Naruto’s account, your team has caught the interest of a dangerous man.”

“And my team?” Kakashi asked.

“Some scrapes but they completed the exams.” Anko hesitated. “But the Uchiha…” She touched the back of her neck and Kakashi’s blood chilled.

“He gave him the mark?” Kakashi demanded.

“We didn’t get near enough to confirm but he’s acting like he has and that’s what Orochimaru said.” Anko said bitterly.

“Itachi’s going to lose his shit.” Kakashi said quietly. “You know that don’t you?” Silence answered him. “What about the other two? Naruto? Sakura?”

“The girl is fine.” Anko hesitated. “Physically anyway but she’ll recover. The boy on the other hand…”

“Naruto is…upset.” The Sandaime murmured as he removed his pipe from his mouth. “When we questioned him he had a few questions of his own.”

“As in how did Orochimaru get in?” Kakashi asked. “I don’t blame him. I’d like that answer myself.”

“The question was who is Uzumaki Kushina.” The Hokage paused. “Apparently Orochimaru decided to taunt him with some information better left alone.”

Uzumaki Kushina.

Kakashi swallowed and leaned back against the wall. “That’s a strange thing for someone like Orochimaru to bring up. What was he. Feeling nostalgic?”

“Naruto is also vaguely aware of the other group searching for him as of now.” The Sandaime
confessed. “The mess keeps getting bigger Kakashi.”

“We were going to tell him eventually.” Kakashi pointed out. “After you gave us permission of course.”

“The boy doesn’t trust the village.” The Sandaime said quiet. “The more secrets he discovers the more distant he gets from us. Which we cannot afford.”

“He doesn’t mind playing nice.” Anko said softly. “He knows the rules and he’ll follow them. But he’ll break them just as easy. Orochimaru…” She paused. “He said he found that boy fascinating as well.”

“Naruto?” Kakashi questioned.

“He actually likes your team Kakashi.” Anko’s mouth twisted in distaste. “I don’t know what he is planning but it can’t be any good.”

“They are alive.” Kakashi said softly. “That’s the first step. Hokage-sama.”

“Let’s get past the first part.” The Sandaime sighed. “The Exam will continue for now.”

“How’s Naruto?” Kakashi asked. Anko looked curiously at the Sandaime but the man only sighed as he blew a plume of smoke towards the ceiling.

“Who knows, Kakashi.”

XxX

The door opened and Naruto walked inside. Iruka breathed a sigh of relief even as he registered the tension in Naruto’s body. Considering the different stances people had on Naruto he preferred the boy where he could be seen.

“How did it go?” Sakura asked and Naruto’s face darkened.

“Who knows. Once they are happy.” Naruto snorted before he slumped in the corner of the room. Iruka blinked before he sighed. He looked at all his former students. Sasuke pretending he was not injured. Sakura who did not want to look away from her team. Naruto with his barely contained irritation. It was going to be a long four days.

XxX

“Well being a Chuunin opens door.” Iruka-sensei urged and Sakura rolled her eyes at the conversation. Since Naruto had come back from who knows where Iruka-sensei had been trying to urge him into conversation and out the mood he had been in.

“What door?” Naruto actually sounded confused.

“Well.” Iruka-sensei chuckled. “To life generally. The missions are better and so is your private life. You’ll have money for dates.”

“What do you mean private life?” Naruto questioned and he sounded so lost that Sakura cracked a smile.

“Well usually lots of people confess to who they like after being made Chuunin.” Iruka-sensei sounded embarrassed. “It’s a way to show that you’ve matured.”
“But being a Chuunin doesn’t show that. They are plenty of dumb people with rank.” Sakura bit back her snort.

“Well, you haven’t gotten your first kiss right? People tend to pursue those who are Chuunin. With your jacket will come your first kiss.” Iruka-sensei sounded proud. “I’m sure of it and that is a mark that you’ve gotten older.”


“Not the children’s kiss.” Iruka-sensei sighed.

“I didn’t mean that.” Naruto cut him off and Sakura froze. She turned slowly to see the reminiscent look on Naruto’s face as he stared up at the ceiling. Iruka-sensei’s face was frozen in an expression of horror as he looked at Naruto.

XxX

“I mean a kiss. On the lips.” Iruka stammered as he looked at Naruto.

“Yeah.” Naruto nodded. “I had my first kiss already.”

“You did?” Iruka whispered. “When?” He racked his memory trying to remember Naruto bringing up a thing but he remained blank.

“When I was gone.” Naruto said and the bottom dropped out of Iruka’s stomach.

XxX

“Did you know? Your first kiss is something you’ll remember forever.” Kaya teased as he sat on her lap. Her eyes twinkled down at him and Naruto was wary. “You’ll remember that person forever no matter what. So you should try and make it memorable.”

“But I don’t care.” Naruto lied and the women laughed.

“That’s not true.” Raiya teased as she leaned forward. “Come on Naruto it is about time you got your first kiss.” She made loud exaggerated sounds. “Kids your age have theirs by now. Or at least they are close to it.”

“So which one of us should it be?” Nina chuckled. Her brown hair tangled around her fingers. Her blue eyes glittered with mirth. “You love us all equally right Naruto?”

“I don’t need it.” Naruto protested but he had picked up on the mood. Light-hearted fun.

“Obviously it will be me.” Alya pouted. “Right Raiya?”

“I don’t know.” Raiya mused. “I think I want to be the first myself.”

They were beginning to look a little on the scary side. Naruto’s gaze bounced around until he saw who he was looking for. “Haku!” He called out even as Nina caught him from behind. “Save me?”

“What are you doing?” Haku asked. He placed his hands on hips and glared at them. “We’re supposed to be on watch.”

“We’re trying to figure out who gets Naruto’s first kiss.” Kaya giggled.

“First kiss.” Haku mused his eyes focused on Naruto.
“It should be the one he’s closest to.” Nina protested “So before you know who gets back let’s decide it among ourselves.”

“If it is going to be whoever he is closest to.” Haku mumbled as he leaned closer to Naruto. A gasp of outrage came from the women. Naruto was aware of cool soft lips against his own. A warm tongue that breeched his lips. He shuddered at the unfamiliar sensation. His eyes fluttered shut and his cheeks caught fire as Haku pulled back. “It should be me shouldn’t it?”

“No!” Nina wailed. “Haku!”

“Deal with it.” Haku smirked. “Come along when you are ready Naruto-kun.” He instructed and his smile was indulgent. “Don’t tease him so much.” Haku instructed. “He’s only ten!”

“You okay Naruto-chan?” Alya asked him teasingly and Naruto’s cheeks caught fire again. “Oh dear.” She laughed and the women gathered burst into laughter. “But you’re going to have to get used to it you know? There are all sorts of jobs for shinobi out there. But at least the first is someone you like.”

“There’s tongue and everything.” Naruto confirmed as he pulled himself from the memory. After that he had been teased by everyone. Even Zabuza. It had not stopped the women from playing with him as they saw fit anyway. Once Haku did not mind anyway. No one wanted to mess with Haku.

“They.” Iruka-sensei’s voice sounded strained. “They kissed you?”

“Well my first kiss was one person.” Naruto confirmed with a shrug. “I didn’t mind and it was getting out of hand. They couldn’t decide who would go first so Haku just went for it.” He laughed at the put out expressions Raiya and Alya had sported the few days afterwards. “But the nee-chans told me a shinobi’s body is a weapon so don’t be hung over that and be happy for the good times.”

“A…weapon.” Iruka-sensei said slowly.

“Yeah.” Naruto mused. “You’ve got to be ready to use any part necessary. That’s what they believed anyway. And it doesn’t really matter. A kiss is a kiss once you’re happy with the person you should leave it at that.”

“I see.” Iruka-sensei murmured. “I…see.”

XxX

Iruka was horrified. Of all the things they had been concerned about they had forgotten the biggest problem. Of course they had.

Those shinobi had kissed Naruto? A child? Even though Iruka had been joking about Naruto’s kiss he had been thinking about the future. And a nice accepting someone. Not the scum of the earth. The missing nins.

And how Naruto talked about it. How easily he brushed it off worried Iruka more than anything else Naruto had told him since he had been back. Iruka was worried. If they had kissed him and he highly doubted it was just that one time.

What else had they done?

And Naruto’s transformations. Hadn’t Naruto told him about his new insight? His talk about the body as weapons. He needed to talk to the Sandaime as soon as possible. He caught the worried
look Sakura was giving Naruto and felt his resolve solidify.

Xxx

Getting the bigger parts of Naruto’s past from his was difficult. It came in trickles and usually nothing important. A quick memory. A name or food, but what had just flowed from his mouth made Sasuke forget about his injuries.

Had he just heard what he had? And the way Naruto had said it. He stared at the boy across the room. He just knew Naruto had not been joking and he knew the blond saw nothing wrong with what he had just said and that scared him.

Naruto was almost protective of those people he had been with. Sasuke knew ‘Haku’ was a touchy subject. Long before Sakura said anything.

The more he learned. The more Naruto made less sense. Still. Sasuke was curious to what made Naruto flip out the way he had back in the forest.

But when this exam was over…he could have some sort of talk with Naruto. He had no idea how and he knew everyone else would be doing it too but he could say something.

Xxx

Finally, the time was up and they had to gather together. Naruto was sick of waiting. Also he knew Iruka-sensei was worried. It had to be something he said. Once again he had relaxed too much and let the unconventional things slip.

He thought his stories about the hot spring dip would make up for whatever was bothering Iruka-sensei but Naruto felt as if he had made it worse somehow.

The teams were assembled and Naruto grinned when he saw Hinata and Shikamaru present. They all made it and that was good. As they got in line he caught sight of the Sandaime watching him. That brought back his irritation about two other things and he looked away for his gaze to land on Kakashi-sensei.

The man looked relieved. His eye roving over him to glance behind him. No doubt he heard about the entire deal in the Forest of Death and most likely knew what the deal was with Sasuke. Naruto had only spoke up as they waited about Sasuke finding a healer once.

Once.

Plenty of teams had made it and some looked plain awful. Naruto guessed they were lucky that they had pushed through. They had time to recover. Or at least he had.

The room’s statue kept gaining his attention. It was huge and it brought a sense of calm Naruto knew he did not currently need. The Hokage cleared his throat and Naruto shifted again. Then he caught it. He had no idea how he had missed it before.

His gaze searched the other participants before they landed on the Suna team. On the red head. Blue eyes met his and Naruto barely resisted shaking his head as he realized where the strong scent of blood was coming from. And he had the feeling that the redhead really did not give a fuck. In fact, he had the feeling that the redhead wished he was next.

Or judging by the terrified looks on his comrade’s faces. That guy was a hair trigger from going on a killing spree. Then his lips quirked in a smile and Naruto knew he had been made. Or at least
partially made. Whatever was wrong with that redhead, Naruto was not in a hurry to find out. The
guy was dangerous. But Naruto was too.

Chapter End Notes

Anyway if i'm in a good enough mood and things get done we should be starting the
next arc of events this coming week....I guess we'll know on Sunday or whatever
Those who passed the Second Exam gathered. Time to whittle down the numbers

Yay! Another update but yeah more regularly like updates for the Chuunin Matches. They are all split up. So think of a Naruto episode....One fight per chapter lol. I think this is the first time I had to write something like this. I like writing Chuunin related stuff but this is a serious eye opener especially since I pick and choose what I'm using from the original (spoiler? idk) So anyway the next 10 chapters are the fights and stuff. You'll understand as I do the chapters

*Yes I know you guys will suffer waiting for each fight but they are split for a reason. It gives me more time and that is what I need tbh.

**explanation for the updates? Um none? Except I was thinking since I started writing this in Jan maybe I should show it? Lol who knows anyway After the prelims are done and imma see what I can do to making the updates faster. Like 2 a week or something idk. Key words. We will see. Making no promises but split chapters are so easy *gross sobbing* it doesn't matter if they blow up beyond the estimated word count or anything so perfect

***thanks for the messages you guys! And comments! Made me super happy I love you darlings!

****no seriously I do love you darlings you make this more fun than it already is

“Congratulations on passing the Second Exam.” Anko’s smirk looked strained. Naruto eyed her as she continued talking. “All of you here. You made it this far because you understood what the Second Exam wanted from you. You completed your mission you used your skills and your teammates and survived even when in dangerous conditions. Congratulations.”

“Many of you have been asking yourself.” The Hokage spoke up. “About the true nature of the exam. That is something I will speak on now.”

True nature of the exam? Hadn’t Anko just spoken about it? Unless the exam the old man was talking about. Naruto narrowed his eyes. Unless the Hokage meant the entire deal about the Chuunin Selection Exam. After all, this was a strange way to pick Chuunins. Sending your best genins off to the enemy. Or tolerable friend and have them put their wits and lives on the line. It was suspicious no matter how you looked at it.

In fact, Based on the history on villages. That was not a smart idea either. This way of choosing
Chuunins. It was strange and it had to be something new. Or at least recent in history. Because villages hated each other. Wars had torn them apart and caused so much despair. But yet they welcomed foreign shinobis. Foreign genins and evaluated them. Naruto… he had no idea why that was.

“Why do we do a joined exam with foreign nations. Allied though they are. Why? To maintain good relations with the allied nations and heighten the level of ninja. That may be a reason you were given. Don’t let that reason and others fool you.” The Hokage’s mouth hardened and his eyes narrowed on them. “This exam is, so to speak the epitome of war between the allied nations.”

“War?” Naruto heard a voice whisper but his gaze did not leave the Hokage. “What does that mean?”

“If we go through history.” The Hokage mused as he chewed on his pipe. “The allied nations right now were neighbouring countries that fought over and over again.”

“Sharing meals with the bloodthirsty Mist.” Nina teased “Oh how they would rage those stupid blind Iwa blockheads.”

“What kind of insult is blockhead?” Tanto complained.

“Naruto-kun is supposed to come back and Haku will fret if he swears too much.”

“How that boy manages to be so polite around something as uncouth as a former Swordsman of the Mist.” Mai snorted. “Miracles never end.”

“To avoid wasting military power, those countries decided to find a place to fight.” The Hokage continued.

“You’re useful until you’re not.” Raiya shrugged. She cleaned her sword with slow strokes. “Ask Kaiza. You get out when you feel your use coming to an end. They won’t want you but no one gets to use you. Every drop of your blood goes to them. Their whims. Their silly pointless fights. You’re a commodity. Your only worth.” She raised her sword up and it gleamed in the morning light. “Well, your worth is your skill. Until they get something better and less troublesome.”

“That is the beginning of the Chuunin Selection Exam. This exam does examine those who are worthy of the Chuunin title. But on the other hand, it is also a place where ninjas fight and put their pride on the line fight and carry their countries dignity.”

“At what point to I do something for myself?” Brown eyes looked at him sadly. “If they claim my gift, call me the salvation and every single part of my life is to carry them… when do I get the chance to really live? There is a thing as too much pressure you know? Not everyone carries that unwavering unquestioning love for their people. Some people can only think of one or two. To love everyone? Save everyone? They try to turn a crowd into saints.”

Naruto shook his head to dislodge the thought. The memory. That did not belong here. This was something totally different. It was. It had to be.

“In the Third Exam, feudal lords and famous people from various countries who may be potential clients are invited as guests.”

“Oh I remember you.” A light purr and Kaya seethed even as she remained knelt. “Has it been four years already?”

“I imagine so.” Kaya gritted. “You request shinobi for your problem?” Naruto watched as the
heavily silk laden woman laughed as she waved Kaya from her kneeling position. When Kaya had said she thought she could get them a job. He had not thought it would end like this.

“Well, you left quite the impression.” A teasing laugh. “I’m having a little trouble with some disorderly… rats.”

“And feudal lords from countries with hidden villages and ninja leaders will see your battles. If there is a significant difference in power the strong country will be flooded with jobs. If a country is seen as weak the jobs will decrease. And at the same time, countries are able to show how their village has grown and possess military power to the adjacent countries.”

A pony show. Exploitation. Naruto seethed as he thought it over. They tossed genins into the deep end without telling them anything. Admittedly it would make them all the more nervous. Also, well many would want to compete. That much responsibility would be too much to handle or even think about.

The teams that had left. Naruto recalled them. Those still wavering. They would have never entered the exams to begin with if they had known this much. But it didn’t change the fact that the political side of the exams made it disgusting. they could do all of this… without the jobs hanging over everyone’s heads. No wonder feudal lords and other clients thought them as simple tools to be thrown away and abused. They were the ones marketing themselves that way.

“In other words, the stronger countries with the better military countries can put pressure on them.” The Hokage said and Naruto turned his head away.

“So why do we have to fight with the risk of losing our lives?” Kiba demanded. Akamaru whimpered in Kiba’s jacket which caught Naruto’s attention.

“A country’s power is a village’s power a village’s power is a shinobi’s power. And a ninja’s true power is only born in a life and death battle.”

Laughter between the two kisses. Naruto watched curiously as Raiya smiled. Her hair was rumpled but she looked so happy. So free.

“I’ve been in a lot of battles.” Raiya whispered. “But nothing made me stronger than what we did earlier.” She grinned down at the woman in her arms. Her muscles relaxed as they stood waist deep in the river. “Not even the chief brought this feeling. I know you can protect yourself.” She hesitated. “But with you at my back I can’t fall.” Kaya giggled softly her entire upper body flushed.

“Spying isn’t nice.” Tanto whispered in Naruto’s ear.

“I’m not. I’m the lookout.” Naruto said dryly before he gave the signal that someone was peeping.

Only born in a life and death battle. Naruto met the Hokage’s eye before his gaze travelled over the gathered shinobi and snorted. He made certain his disdain for those words. His disbelief in those words. He let it show and did his best to show his taunt that he had found something much better show.

“When you have something important to you to protect your true strength comes out.” Haku smiled. Naruto watched as Haku regained his footing. “That something precious, all your own to protect. That is how you truly become strong.” Ice. Beauty. Strength. Brown hair and eyes that promised vengeance. Haku.

The Hokage faltered before he removed his pipe. His gaze moving over the others. “This Exam is
also a place to show off the ninja power of one’s country. Since this exam is one where you fight with your life on the line it has a meaning. And your predecessors have fought and dreamed of being in the Chuunin Selection Exam because of it.”

Naruto’s gaze darted to Iruka-sensei’s curiously. Iruka-sensei’s eyes met his, amusement in the depths before the man gave a sharp nod to Naruto’s unspoken question.

“And it is to promote good relations?” A voice behind Naruto asked. “With our life on the line?”

“I told you not to get confused with that.” The Hokage gruffly muttered. There were soft sighs from the Jounins gathered behind him. “The custom of saving one’s life and fighting to maintain balance…That is good relation in the world of shinobi. This is a life or death battle for your dream and your village’s dignity.”

“Ahh!” An impatient complaint. “I didn’t like you at all you old crone. Dragging me through at least four rocks with your stupid puppets. Who does that? But now. You’re not so bad aren’t you.” The words had softened marginally.

“Youth eventually learn.” Mai sniffed. Then a long pause. “And so do the elderly don’t they.”

XxX

Shikamaru had barely seen Naruto since the Exam started. In fact, he had scarcely seen Team Seven since everything had begun but that just made him more concerned about them. That glimpse he had gotten of Naruto in the test did not count.

He seemed the same especially when he had gotten loud with that mouth of his but too soon had he been doing something crazy and dangerous and Shikamaru had lots of stuff to worry about but worrying about Naruto was something that could not be helped.

Ever since he had reappeared in their lives he tried to act as if it was all the same. And Shikamaru had played along even as the inconsistencies piled up. And sometimes Naruto was so strange. When he had realized Naruto would be in the exam too…. he had thought this would be the chance to get one or two answers.

But as quickly as he had appeared. Naruto had disappeared. Into the forest with his team and even now he was standing stiffly a shield around him. Shikamaru was worried. The more the Hokage spoke about the true meaning of the exam the more he wished he could just sit it all out.

There were strange people around and the last five days if had to be frank been hell. It had been life or death and Shikamaru had seen many of the teams. Seen some alive. Seen some dead and even worse. His team valued their lives. Hell Shikamaru valued his life.

But there was an air around team seven that he just could not figure out. Sasuke looked like he was standing by pure will. Sakura was distant and she was standing so close to Ino and Sasuke that Shikamaru knew that should not be happening. And Naruto, well Naruto was standing stiff and the air he gave off was nothing like the laughing Naruto he knew. He was nothing like the Naruto most of them had come to expect and Shikamaru wondered how much of that was new.

XxX

The team Neji was so interested in had made it. Tenten hid her grin. They all wanted to test themselves. Lee was pumped up but it was more a case of when was he not? And this was Team Seven. The team of their Sensei’s ‘rival’ they had heard so much about this team they couldn’t wait to test themselves against them.
Neji wanted to battle Sasuke for obvious reasons. Lee too. Tenten just wanted to fight anyone strong. The blonde had caught her interest because of how loud and frank he had been.

But, they really knew nothing about that team or even their moves. Lee admitted he had attacked Sasuke but barely knew anything. But the other two, they knew nothing. They had not even run into them in the forest and although Neji had denied it Tenten knew that he had been keeping an eye out for Team Seven.

But even though they knew little to nothing about them. The same was true for them and unlike the rookies they were ready to go all the way. They were not just little horses out the gate. They did well coming this far but they had been training for this for ages.

XxX

There were more Konoha shinobi that foreign shinobi and it was sort of a good thing. At least for Konoha. Most of them rookies too so Sasuke knew that it would come up at one point. In terms of the exam Konoha had shown their strength.

XxX

They looked mostly unscathed but there was no avoiding the fact that they had finished the test early. Even his team had taken a while to get to the end and they had gotten through fairly well.

Kiba looked across at the redhead and shivered. Not many things scared him but that guy did he had never seen something like that before and he did not want to fight that guy. This Exam, the true reason or not this place was dangerous and with beasts like that walking around no one was safe.

Akamaru huddled down deeper in his jacket and Kiba seethed. The answers they got about the exam was not calming him in the slightest. Especially with guys like that guy that just wanted to kill.

XxX

There was only one on the team worth fighting. The Uchiha and Neji was impatient to fight him. Any other distractions would not be tolerated. They had not seen them in the forest and unless they asked they would not find out how long it had taken them to finish the exam.

Whatever happened next, Neji would fight. No matter the opponent. No matter where they hailed from. There were a few that Neji wanted to fight. The boy from Suna for one. Closely followed by Sasuke.

The rest of the team were of no interest to him and just in the way.

XxX

The games had begun. The sound nins were present. And Sasuke was there and standing. He seemed to be fighting the seal but at least he was still alive.

And Naruto was also there his eyes burning and such a sight brought back old memories. Memories better left forgotten if he was being honest.

But it was such a pity. He was testing Sasuke but he wanted to test them all. But for him to do that he would have had to bring more shinobi with him and that would not have done at all.
There were ten teams present. That was thirty people. And somehow the number present. Naruto could just feel that the adults gathered. That the Jounins and examiners were not happy about it. He had seen Anko’ glance over them her lips moving as she counted.

Considering the high number, the second exam had started with, honestly Naruto had no idea why she was so pissed but he guessed somehow that things had gotten more complicated.

More complicated than a S-class shinobi roaming the grounds and playing with them like they were simple dolls. More complicated than that. More complicated than the effort put into what was really a show off show.

XxX

“Preliminary exams?” Sakura was confused. She watched the ghastly pale man and regretted that her questions made him talk more. He sounded deathly. As in on his deathbed deathly and with every cough he uttered she worried even more.

“Yes.” Hayate coughed. “The numbers are currently too big. So you’ll have to fight here to narrow them down. Also if you want to back out now…this would be the best time.”

“This again?” Kiba snarled. “Listen we’re not going to leave at this point and let our teams down!”

“Not your teams, individuals can leave now if they think they can’t carry on. You should evaluate your mental and physical health before you decide to continue. Because we’ll carry out the preliminary exams right away. If you can’t do that. You’ll die.”

“I think I want to forfeit.” A Konoha shinobi murmured. She had a wry look on her face. “I don’t think I would have made it this far and honestly I’m in no condition to continue if we’re going to fight.” She glanced at her leg and Sakura’s gaze followed and she gasped. How the girl was still standing she did not know. That leg had to be broken.

“Yeah.” Another shinobi murmured. “It’s been good and all but a fight right now? I’d get whipped.”

“Who would want to fight after hearing all that anyway?” A choked sound. “I stared death in the face in that forest. I’m not ready to die so some rich bag can feel safe.”

XxX

“I also need to forfeit.” Naruto jumped when he heard Kabuto’s voice. The man looked a little regretful but determined. He looked a little roughed up and bruised but mostly fine. Naruto did not understand. “My levels are too low for this.” Kabuto shrugged and Naruto shrugged.

He was not the one to talk about looking fine after all. And Sasuke was in pain and not going anywhere. Also Naruto could sense Kabuto’s reluctance as he looked over them.

Kabuto had done the maths and did not like the odds it seemed. There were plenty of Konoha shinobi left and Naruto had the feeling that Kabuto did not want to fight any of them. Which was sort of sad. He would if he wanted to but he had a choice now and would rather not.

Sentiment. Not a good thing to have.

“Any others from your team?” Hayate coughed and Kabuto’s teammates shook their heads.
“I wouldn’t have made it this far. I would have left in the second exam.” A voice murmured.

“Same.” Another laughed.

Naruto looked at the examiners. At Ibiki and smirked at the man. Somehow he had a feeling that he was the reason behind the preliminary exam. No. He was certain he was the reason behind it.

“Kid!” Naruto turned to see 3 teams giving him bright smiles. “Uzumaki Naruto right? Thanks.”

“Um you’re welcome?” He answered as Kabuto joined them. With ten drop outs. That left them with roughly twenty people.

“Anyone else to drop out?” Hayate asked curiously. “No? Then we will proceed with ten matches. If there is a clear winner I will interrupt but unless someone gives up or dies you will fight.”

“Until ten are left huh.” Sasuke muttered. Naruto watched Anko and Ibiki and grinned. He had a feeling that ten participants were a far higher number than what they had wanted originally in the first place. And it was because of him. Because he had thrown things off. In the wake of all the other bullshit. It was nice to see that. To feel that.

XxX

“So that’s it.” The Hokage murmured. “The board will decide the order of your fights. Everyone will retreat to the second floor.”

“I want this over with.” Naruto muttered and Sasuke agreed. Although he was grateful that Sakura had not said anything or tried to get him to give up while the rest of the idiots were leaving his shoulder as burning again. He wanted his fight over soon.

“Let’s hope that your name comes up soon.” Kakashi said softly and Sasuke cursed that he had not seen the man move or been aware of him coming up behind him. His hand clamped over his shoulder he laughed softly watching as Sakura and Naruto spoke with Iruka a few feet away.

“You know?”

“Do you want medical attention?” Kakashi asked and Sasuke seethed.

“I’ll fight and I’ll fight like this.” Sasuke snapped. “I don’t see you telling Naruto anything.”

“Naruto?” Kakashi’s eye darted to where Naruto stood. “He seems fine to me.”

“He had something done to him as well and if he’s fine.” Sasuke felt his resolve harden and he removed his hand from his shoulder. “I’m fine. This won’t stop me.”

“Don’t use your chakra. It’ll make it worse.” Kakashi said softly.

Sasuke met his gaze then. “You know what this is.” He said softly.

“And we’ll deal with it after your fight.” Kakashi promised. “If you’re certain.”

“I’m certain.” Sasuke swore. He glanced at Naruto’s back and his resolve hardened. “I won’t lose here.”

XxX

The board started to flash, letters spinning almost faster than the eye could see. Unless it was
rigged. The board would determine their fates. Naruto strongly suspected that it was rigged in some way but maybe that was the memories of Kaiza talking. But he did not think he was wrong after all.

Now who would be first?

The board stopped suddenly the yellow letters standing out ominously. Naruto blinked at the names before his gaze shifted to the two females.

Haruno Sakura. Yamanaka Ino.

They certainly had started the fights in an interesting way. Ino’s face was slack but Sakura’s. She was staring at the board with a distant look on her face.

“Well this will be interesting.” Naruto heard Kakashi-sensei mutter.
Chuunin Selection Exams Preliminary Exam first round is Sakura vs Ino

Chapter Summary

First match, old rivals Ino and Sakura

Chapter Notes

I made it! Thanks for being patient. Pretty sure you didn't expect to see me opening
the matches with Sakura. As always there is a reason for that.
Still here is another update so enjoy it darlings

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first but not only the first match. The deciding match. Who knew that it would be over so soon.
This rivalry of theirs. Ino felt a little sorry for Sakura at the bottom of her heart of course. But at
the top of her heart she gloated. Not only would she avoid the really dangerous ones this was a sure
ticket to the final round.

“You might as well stop trying and give up now.” She taunted. The look on Sakura’s face was an
unfamiliar one but she knew Sakura better than anyone. They had been rivals and someone like
Sakura could never match up.

Sakura’s eyes. Ino frowned. Sakura’s expression was unusual but there was something distant
about Sakura’s eyes as they watched her. Now that they faced each other she was able to see it
from up close and something about Sakura bothered her. Maybe it was the tight bun she wore.
Something she thought she would never do. Had she given up on their pact? On winning Sasuke?
That was the reason they cared for their hair after all.

“What this?” She teased trying her best to read Sakura. “Did you finally give up on Sasuke-kun
forehead girl? There is sense after all. Someone like you.” She smiled. “You’re not hardy enough
right?”

Green eyes flashed at her and Ino grinned as Sakura glared at her but only for a moment. There was
just a little something off about her gaze.

XxX

Sasuke was going to fight in his condition. He still had not told Naruto about what had happened to
them and that pained her. Add to the fact that those terrifying moments kept replaying in her head
over and over and it felt as if she was going to lose her team and Sakura found it hard to focus.

What was with the mark on Sasuke? It pained him and it kept getting worse. And he was going to
fight like that? How long could he last like that? There were going to be ten matches and the longer
Sasuke got the weaker he might become his stamina had been deteriorating.

Add on to the new information about Naruto that had been dumped on her, Sakura did not know
what to do. Her heart was hurting and it seemed she just could not reach them. Sasuke pushed her away. Naruto had a wall up most the time although he lowered it from time to time.

And this exam had put her team through so much. Put her through so much and it felt even if she had her gaze on them that they would disappear any moment and that thought itself was painful. It was so painful it made her arms shake and her blood heat in her veins. It was so painful and she knew what she was feeling and that hurt too. She felt helpless. She just could not help or give the right answer to help and that pissed her off.

Now her first fight was up and it was Ino. Even such a thing was hard to comprehend. Her head swam faintly as she watched Ino. She was not hearing her words but she was reading her lips and what she read distantly pissed her off.

For a long time, she had been thinking to herself that when it came to Ino. She would not lose. And here. In this exam, facing Ino she would prove it. She would put everything on the line.

XxX

Sakura’s eyes were hard when her hand reached up, grabbed her hitai-ate and flung it on the ground as she watched Ino. She had a good look in her eyes. Kakashi could see it from where he stood. Naruto and Sasuke were leaning on the railing watching. Not tensed but believing. Not bad for his team.

“Can she go all out?” Kakashi’s ears picked up Asuma’s murmur from where he stood further down. He eyed the man for a second before he returned his gaze to Sakura. The problem was not whether Ino would go all out. The problem was even if she did, could she keep up with the newly developed Sakura?

XxX

“I have no intention of making this fight about Sasuke-kun.” Sakura said slowly. She saw Ino’s face twist in disbelief but continued on. “You can say whatever you have to Ino but the facts remain. I’m here because I’m not weak. I’ll fight you here and now because I can. Because I want to and because it is expected of me.”

Naruto and Sasuke had their hands dirtied in Wave. They had nearly died they had been toyed with. She looked at her hands. Pale and a little scuffed but nowhere near the level of dirtiest she knew Naruto and Sasuke were. It wasn’t fair. It just wasn’t. And right now, in front of her was someone who didn’t understand their trials and that person wanted to dismiss her pain.

Her hands were still clean but they were far dirtier than Ino’s and that made them different. It made her stronger.

“Who do you think you’re talking to? Don’t get carried away.” Ino sounded pissed but Sakura, her rage was far stronger.

“Carried away?” She said softly. “I’m just finally getting my priorities right.”

XxX

“This isn’t like Sakura.” Sasuke said. He eyes watched the two girls. He would actually like to sit down but it was better to get a gauge on people’s strengths even if they were on the same team.

“She isn’t the type to brag. She is the type to prove.” Kakashi answered. Sasuke saw the man had joined himself and Naruto at the rails. Kakashi stood next to Naruto his arms crossed as he leaned
on a side. “I guess you and Naruto really made an impression she doesn’t want to be left behind.”

“What’s that supposed to mean.” Naruto asked and Sasuke was right behind him.

“Hmm, I guess she wants to face the wall inside of her and show you two that she is strong as well.” Kakashi mused. “You don’t think so?”

“Well Ino has some scary eyes right now.” Naruto frowned. “But Sakura has some good ones too.”

“I think she has been thinking about what you told her.” Kakashi said and Sasuke frowned. He could not recall anything.

“Well then…good.” Naruto said softly. “That’s good.”

XxX

“I’ve bloomed.” Sakura said and Kakashi watched the effect it had on Ino. “And you’ve remained the same.” The girl’s face changed and the kunai she threw was swift and Kakashi felt pride when Sakura caught it. Not dodge. Caught. It would have missed but Sakura went out her way to catch it and it made him proud.

“Nice.” Naruto whistled. “Go Sakura-chan!”

“Rivalries are strange things.” Kakashi said softly. His eye sought out Gai. The man noticed and frowned at him but Kakashi shook his head and looked back to his own student. “They can help in developments. But they can be painful things as well.”

XxX

They moved at the same time. Sakura’s hands formed a familiar seal and Ino scoffed as the clones appeared. She could easily pick out the real one. Why Sakura was wasting chakra was a mystery to her. But then the real one…disappeared.

The pain in her jaw and the force that knocked her backward. Ino hit the ground painfully her body trembling even as the jaw ached. She glared at Sakura. Was that the same Sakura?

“I told you.” Sakura said softly. “I’ve bloomed.”

XxX

“In terms of managing her chakra…she’s better than you two.” Kakashi teased. He got snorts from Naruto and Sasuke but neither turned around to look at him. Too fixated on the match. Sakura remained where she was and Ino picked herself off the ground.

“Sakura’s going to win.” Sasuke murmured.

“Obviously.” Naruto scoffed. “But it’s how that has us curious.”

“No faith in Ino at all? She could have a trick or two up her sleeve.” Kakashi pointed out but Naruto warmed his heart when the boy looked away from the match to meet his gaze.

“As she is now, Sakura won’t lose.”

Kakashi laughed softly because even he believed it but hearing Naruto’s certainty. It was nice. He lightly patted the boy’s shoulder. “If she does really good I might end up treating you guys.”
“You’ll treat us anyway.” Sasuke snorted. “Regardless of the outcomes.”

XxX

Ino had good form and she had blocked her attack correctly but this particular attack was a two-step one. Ino had blocked it correctly. Catching her fist and her arms but Sakura had been sparring with her team for weeks now.

With a boy who was unpredictable as the weather and another who never let the same thing beat him twice. She would not have survived if she had not changed.

Her stance did not change but she used her solid stance to propel her high. She saw the confusion on Ino’s face before she landed back down, tugging Ino forward unbalancing her. Her first kick nailed solid and true, Ino’s lower stomach. Sakura twisted away and formulated her next plan.

XxX

If she tossed a shuriken, Ino matched it. She was good. A formidable shinobi and the evidence of her training showed with every move but Sakura could just feel that Ino had never felt that desperation, that loss that she had experienced and she actually felt sorry for her even as she knew she would show her how she had surpassed her.

She stooped down and picked up her fallen hitai-ate and tied it on properly. It seemed like years ago but it was actually not that long ago they had said those things to each other. She hoped Ino still remembered. She hoped Ino understood what this was. Right here and now.

The Ino put on her hitai-ate and tied it to her forehead and Sakura smiled.

XxX

“Did I miss something?” Naruto asked and Kakashi hummed. He patted the boy on his head and ignored the indignant squawk it got him.

“Well, you could say it is going to get serious? But they’ve reached an understanding.” Kakashi met Naruto’s gaze and nodded. “Even without words, they understand some of what the other is thinking and right not they decided to resolve some their issues. They have something to prove right here and now.”

XxX

When did Sakura get this smart? This cunning? Ino panted as she barely dodged the blow. It still scrapped her and it hurt but Sakura avoided hers entirely and that hurt. How in this short space of time had Sakura changed?

From her strength to her eyes. Everything about Sakura had changed and Ino could recognise that right now she was losing. It they continued with hand to hand, she would lose. When it came to strength and even dodging. Sakura was better and that hurt.

XxX

Matched? No she had overcome. If they were hand to hand she would win. Ino had a firm guard. She was good and her stamina was great but compared to Sakura who had been running herself ragged trying to keep up with boys who did not have an off switch, Ino was lacking.

But Sakura gave her props. Even after coming to realize that. Ino had not given up. in fact, she was
trying harder. That Sakura could respect. She could feel all of Ino’s focus was on her. On beating her and being stronger.

Xxx

“If you fall get up. if you hurt don’t let them see it.” Kaya panted. Naruto wanted to scream even as he kept the three bandits occupied. The only thing they had on them was numbers. Damn them all. “Hear me Naruto-kun, when somebody pushes your back to the wall. Destroy everything in front of you.”

Sakura’s relentless pace. It sort of reminded Naruto of that. The way she attacked and refused to let up. it brought back memories. The plan buried in a plan. Naruto gripped the railing and watched her.

“You can know someone for years and never truly know them.” Nina mused. “People say fighting helps you to understand them better but sometimes it takes you losing over and over. Being trodden on for years for the strength and wisdom to come. Then not only won’t they not see it coming. They can’t stop you and in that lies true victory!” She looked triumphant and her brown hair shone under the moonlight.

“It’s not something to be proud of.” Kaiza snorted. “You were overlooked for years the only reason you got away is because you have the heart of a spy.”

“I didn’t have a choice.” Nina snapped. “And this is far better. The sky is much clearer here.” Her voice dipped low. “I’m not saying it is right but I’m saying it is harder to see when someone who was always weak and inferior to you becomes strong. And that is why I don’t mind if people see me as weak.”

“You’re a little trickster that is what you are.” Raiya laughed. “Are you sure you’re an Iwa shinobi?”

Smoke bombs to block Ino’s sight and in that smoke were clones. That was amazing. Sakura was amazing and even though he worried about her rush to finish the fight quickly he was proud. He kept seeing the strength in her.

“It’s not bad if you don’t want to hurt anyone.” Alya said softly. “It doesn’t make you a waste. Once you make sure that you can protect whatever you have to when the time comes you can feel however you like.” She smiled sadly and Naruto itched to brush away her hair. “I don’t like to fight, but I’m good at it and when I have to I’ll give the final blow. I respect whoever has the guts to fight. I’ll meet their intentions with my own but because I don’t want to actually hurt them I end it as quickly as possible.”

Some of Sakura’s moves. Were made to knock out Ino but as she still was, she could not do it so easily. Because Ino was strong too. Naruto was curious to who would win in a long drag out match. But Sakura had come so far it would be a waste to fall. But actually. As she was now she could not lose to anybody. Their guts were bared to each other and it was beautiful.

“Get up and show your resolve.” Haku said softly and Naruto swallowed as Nina stumbled to her feet. The camp was silent. He had nothing to say there was nothing to say.

“Looks like I’ll be following you a while longer.” Nina said softly and the blood that dripped from her lips made Naruto flinch. But he could do nothing as she limped away to attend to her wounds. The fight had been a fight with pride on the line. His fingers trembled as he fought to shove away the unpleasant feeling.
There was just something about her face. She was fighting. She was hurting but Sakura was not holding back. Every punch had every ounce of her behind it. Naruto could hear the blows. Maybe if Sakura had bided her time she could have worked Ino down first then around this time quickly take her out. But Ino’s pride would not have survived. As it was now, they were both battered and bruised. When the winner emerged. Both girls would be satisfied. And that was the best wasn’t it?

In the shadows of the camp. A long brown haired figure leaned against the shoulder of someone tenser their lilac hair twisted up and away but as the fire crackled eventually that person relaxed enough for the two heads to press together. Content.

“They fought like cats and dogs didn’t they?” Raiya chuckled.

“People are strange like that.” Haku smiled softly as he looked over to the two women. “I don’t think anything can break them apart now. They have finally accepted each other.”

“A double knock out.” Alya giggled. “Who would have thought?”

“I’m just sad we didn’t go with the plan to lock them in a cave and come back for them in a week.” Kaiza sighed.

“What are you smiling about?” Kakashi-sensei asked which startled him out of his thoughts.

“Just thinking.” Naruto answered. He watched how Sakura stood back up her retrieved shurikens in her hands. “And thinking how sometimes how rivalries could be good things.” Kakashi-sensei’s eye was fixed on him and Naruto laughed softly. “Well, they were always at each other but right now, I don’t think they could get any closer than they are at the moment.” He hesitated. “Well they can get closer but right now they understand each other. And no matter what happens next. Things for them will change. For the better.”

A flash of brown and Lilac. The sound of swords drawn behind them and Naruto turned to see the backs of the two women. Facing the approaching hoard. It was haunting. It was beautiful. They could not fall.

“A simple smile but it caught him. A smile for Sakura but full of hope and Kakashi found it hard to tear his eyes off of it. Because Naruto seemed so happy. So free and whatever he was seeing in Sakura, it obviously meant a lot to him.

His little team had grown closer but watching Naruto watch Sakura. Hear his murmurs of encouragement and just seeing him cheer made him feel better about the choices he had made.

Right now no matter how scared he was at letting them in and getting to know all the parts of him. Naruto trusted them. He cared for them and he had faith in them. Even if he did not know it himself.

“Sounds nice.” Kakashi-sensei smiled. “You really think so?”

“I know so.” Naruto responded. “No matter the outcome, they’ll be happy with it and that is what matters.”

XxX

A simple smile but it caught him. A smile for Sakura but full of hope and Kakashi found it hard to tear his eyes off of it. Because Naruto seemed so happy. So free and whatever he was seeing in Sakura, it obviously meant a lot to him.

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XxX

“You think you’ve become stronger than me?” Ino taunted as her feet shook. Her glare was sharp enough to kill and she appeared weakened but she was still fighting. Still going. Her knees
trembled by she was still there.

“You don’t understand most of it.” Sakura smiled. She touched the bun that Naruto had done for her. “You insult me but I’ve done so much. Experienced so much. I’ve become a competent kunoichi even if you can’t see it. My hair is something incredible you know?” She recalled Naruto’s words. “I can let it down anytime and become anyone. My beauty will become yet another weapon in my arsenal. Long or short, my hair doesn’t define me or my abilities. Can you say the same? You can’t hit me and after all the efforts you made to maintaining yourself you think are better off than me.”

“You think that I’m vain?” Ino demanded and her arms shook.

“My abilities mean more to me than my hair.” She lightly touched the bun again. “What about you?”

“Don’t act like you’re the only one who has changed.” Ino snarled. She yanked the top of her ponytail and Sakura frowned. Eyes eyes widened as Ino’s hand moved fast. Faster than should have been possible with Ino’s injuries. Blonde hair went flying. Scattering all over the floor. She stared in shock as Ino dropped the rest of the hacked off hair. “At my core I’m shinobi Sakura!”

XxX

“Well damn.” Naruto murmured. He had to admit he was impressed. The way Ino had just sacrificed her hair and Naruto knew she had been growing it for a while. That she just cut it off without a blink for the sake of proving herself to Sakura. It made him look at her differently if only a little.

“Interesting huh?” Kakashi-sensei sounded amused. “I wonder what Sakura will do.”

“What has to be done because…something is up right?” Naruto pressed. “She was fast and she is low on reserves but not that low.”

“Ahh.” Kakashi murmured as Sakura suddenly collapsed. “Now I get it.”

“She made a seal that fast?” Naruto muttered. Both girls were silent. “What happened?”

“Sakura just had her mind taken over by a clan technique. Ino is a Yamanaka. So right now Ino’s body is defenceless and Sakura’s body is being controlled by Ino.”

“Damn.” Naruto sighed. “That jutsu isn’t fair at all.”

XxX

She was being crushed. Strangled and it should have been impossible. She had not used the jutsu often but she had used it often enough to know that this should be impossible. Sakura’s mind was crazy. Painful she could not get a grip. She could not get control and she feared for her safety the longer she stayed.

“Undo the jutsu and get out my head Ino.” The voice echoed from everywhere and Ino gave in. She opened her eyes back in her own body and felt the pain in her chest and throat.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” She choked out. “You have two minds?”

“Don’t try that again!” Sakura was furious. “It’s not that easy to take over my mind Ino!”
“I wonder what happened.” Naruto muttered and Kakashi shared the sentiment. “Was the jutsu too weak?”

“I don’t think so.” Kakashi mused. “I just think that Sakura’s will was too strong this time.”

“Well then that’s a good thing.” Naruto grinned as Ino swayed to her feet. “I knew it was a trap but Sakura-chan got out and Ino burned a ton of chakra.”

“Now this should be the end of it.” Kakashi muttered. “Both of them can’t continue for much longer.”

XxX

“There’s more to being a shinobi than this.” Sakura hissed as her hand stung and Ino reeled away. Both of them were tired and in pain. “There’s more to me than this! You don’t know how it feels to be right there and do nothing!” She raged.

The feeling she had in the forest rose up again. The promise she made to herself as she stood watch over her teammates unconscious bodies waiting for them to awaken and praying nothing found them.

“There’s nothing wrong with wanting to like someone.” She snapped as she dodged the shuriken. She elbowed Ino in the gut and winced as the girl pinned her arms if awkwardly. “There’s more to a shinobi than having someone! Love is precious and painful and not just romantic love.” Ino got a punch in but Sakura moved with it so it barely hurt her.

“Go Sakura-chan!” Naruto’s voice came to her ears and she choked up before she stopped Ino again.

“My personal hopes aside.” She panted as Ino blocked her punch. “I want to see what the world has to offer. I want to see the sun Ino!” Ino’s gaze widened but in confusion. “I want to bloom and see the sun but under my own strength. I can’t afford to be weak. I can’t afford to hesitate. I have people that are important to me. Not just Sasuke.”

She smiled at Ino’s shock at the way she deliberately left the honorific off of Sasuke’s name. She felt Ino’s confusion and her wariness. So she broke the hold and her last punch to Ino’s jaw, she was pretty sure it was the last.

“I’ve seen so many things since I got put on my team. I’m gotten so much pain and I’ve come to realize I’m a selfish person.” She said softly as she watched Ino’s fallen figure. “I don’t want to lose anyone else and I don’t ever want to feel like that again. I don’t want them to protect me. I don’t want to be a flower anymore that blooms. I want to be a sturdy tree. Even if I am only able to do one thing season after season. I won’t die. And I won’t stop here. This experience like everything else will help me catch up to them.”

She only realized her eyes were blurring when she could not properly see the examiner when he knelt but Ino. “Haruno Sakura’s the winner.” He said.

“Don’t hold it against me Ino.” She said softly. Her knees felt weak. “We can still be rivals but not over something like that.” She slumped her legs too shaky too hold her. She expected to feel the cold ground against her back but instead something propped her up. Her head was dizzy but she still managed to look around. “Sensei?” She asked weakly.
“Good job Sakura.” Her sensei looked away from his book but she could feel his pride. “You did a good job.”

“Did I manage to catch up if only a little bit?” She wondered aloud.

XxX

“And it is off to medical.” Kakashi-sensei said amused as Sakura and Ino were loaded onto different stretchers.

“She did good.” Naruto grinned. He had felt so happy watching her and the resolve she had found in herself. It touched him.

“She’ll be okay?” Kakashi-sensei asked a medical attendant.

“Just a minor check-up is needed.” The man replied.

“So time for the next match to be announced.” Naruto muttered. The board’s letters spun again and he felt anticipation in his gut. Sakura’s match was a nice opening.

“Them huh.” Kakashi-sensei sighed as the board stopped. Naruto frowned at the names. He knew Shino but Zaku? Then he saw the boy who he had seen in the exam step forward. Next was Leaf Vs Sound then.

Chapter End Notes

So there are ten fights to look forward to and I know already lol, 10 weeks of this will be torture I know, I know. Trust me I'm working on something. Maybe two updates a week for this particular arc. Just to speed things along. Idk it depends how long it takes to write one chapter....because just because I have the fights split up does not mean it is that easy....because it is not. Nope.

So yeah there is that. I'll figure it out though so we don't linger in this part of the exams longer than necessary. See you darlings soon!!
Chuunin Selection Exams Preliminary Exam Second round Shino Aburame and Zaku Abumi

Chapter Summary

Sound versus Leaf in the next preliminary exams

Chapter Notes

So I made my decision on how I'm going to be uploading this arc. There are 8 fights left after this. Not in the order as you will have remembered as you would have seen with the opening fight ^_^

I don't want to drag this out and by drag it out I mean I also want these preliminary matches over... but they need to be done so just bare with me

Incidentally I'm pretty certain this is the first time that I've written something like this so you live and learn. I mean I love the Chuunin exams. Seriously I do... But writing this is... wow... an experience

Anyway darlings I hope you enjoy the chapter!

“You’re familiar with Shino right?” Kakashi-sensei asked.

“He has a weird way of talking.” Naruto muttered. His eyes searched out the Sound nin. “I wonder if he can handle that guy.”

“Don’t you have any faith?” Kakashi-sensei asked as they returned to where Sasuke waited. Naruto shrugged. It was not a matter of faith. He knew what the Sound nin was capable of. The same could not be said of Shino. He had always faded away in the background. “It’ll be an interesting fight for sure.” Kakashi-sensei said and that lead Naruto to believe that the man knew something he did not. He watched the tuff of Shino’s hair that peeked out his shirt as the man faced the Shinobi he had seen in the first Exam.

XxX

The sound ninja carried Naruto’s feelings. Kakashi could see the boredom in the boy’s stance. He already was taking Shino lightly. Not a good idea. Kurenai had been fiercely proud of Shino. She would not if there was not a good reason behind it and Kakashi was very aware of the boy’s clan.

Taking the enemy lightly was the first step to failure.

But it was best to make all the mistakes you could as a genin. And hope to survive at least. Because one day you could no longer to afford such mistakes.

XxX
“I won’t even have to try very hard.” Zaku taunted and Naruto wrinkled his nose in distaste. He was a fan of trash talking himself but sometimes it was best to keep quiet. Especially with someone that’s only response to the first trash talking was to remain still and quiet. Shino was like a ghost.

“Begin.” The examiner coughed and Naruto winced at the rattle he could hear from where he was.


“Hayate?” Kakashi-sensei questioned. “He is. Why?”

Naruto rolled his eyes. Kakashi-sensei was not even bothered after hearing such a cough. He most likely was worrying about nothing after all. “No reason. Except he sounds like he’s dying.”

“He’s always sounded like that.” Kakashi-sensei mused. “At least I think so?”

“Don’t ask me.” Naruto hissed.

“Maa don’t get worked up.” Kakashi-sensei laughed. “The truth of the matter is that is a part of him?”

“Exactly how is a cough that scary a part of anything?” Naruto hissed. “He sounds like he is on his death bed. Hasn’t he gotten it checked out?”

“Well…” Kakashi-sensei mused. “I don’t know? Why so curious?”

Naruto flushed. “I’m not.” He muttered. “It just seems so wrong. And it sounds worrying.”

XxX

“Is that natural?” Naruto’s voice was low but Sasuke heard it anyway. “Is that some sort of bloodline jutsu?”

“I don’t think so.” Kakashi said in response. Sasuke took his eyes off the sound ninja to watch how Kakashi looked down at the two genins. “I don’t think something like that air canon is something from a shinobi clan.”

“But Shino got out the way fast!” Naruto said and Sasuke agreed. Shino had good instincts. However, dealing with someone who could blast air from his palms. That was not looking good for Konoha nin. He had yet to make a move and Sasuke hoped what he recalled from the boy in their classes still held true.

XxX

“Bugs?” Naruto’s voice had risen to a high pitch. “A bug clone?”

“Well he is an Aburame.” Kakashi shrugged. He glanced down at Naruto’s figure. “You didn’t know?” He chuckled at Naruto’s tired glance. “Ah yes, you would have missed out on most of the clan briefings wouldn’t you.”

“Not like they did an entire intro to clan bloodlines at the academy.” Naruto hissed.


“Where did he get them from.” Naruto’s eyes were locked on the field. “That many, he couldn’t have hidden them in his pocket or his hair or whatever.”
“Well you are close.” Kakashi murmured. His words brought Sasuke’s and Naruto’s attention to him. “Aburame’s let their bugs live inside them.” Sasuke’s gaze flew back to Shino while Naruto’s eyes widened significantly.

“Inside.” Naruto said slowly.

“Some of the clan carry around huge jars.” Kakashi admitted. “But Aburame’s are a well-known clan even outside of Konoha. Their insect jutsus are pretty famous. At birth they give their bodies to insects to use as a nest. The insects eat their chakra and the clan uses the bugs for fighting. By feeding them their chakra they have a contract with the bugs and the Aburame clan uses the as their primary fighting technique.”

“Wow.” Naruto murmured. His fingers clenched on the railings and Kakashi was given the feeling somehow that he had reminded Naruto of something.

“He’s good.” Sasuke muttered as Zaku was cornered by Shino and his destruction bugs.

“A contract.” Naruto murmured.

XxX

Now that he had an insight to Shino’s abilities Naruto had to say a few things were understandable. But not about Shino. No, not about Shino. To be precise, Naruto had just had a few things explained to him about the people he had seen while away from the village.

Insects. Naruto would not say he had seen Aburame techniques while he was gone but some the shinobi that he had glimpsed from time to time reminded him of them. Controlling the bugs? How many time had he seen something similar? And he had seen Shinobis transporting large jars with creatures before. He had seen bees that one time but they had quickly left that country.

There were many strange clans out there. Naruto could admit that. But as strange as they were. Were there not some similarities? Okay, maybe some the controllers he had glimpsed did not go to the lengths the Aburame’s were prepared to go.

Letting their body become a nest? That took some serious guts. Naruto was trying not to be squeamish but he wondered what that felt like. He never minded playing with bugs. But actually letting them live in him? Crawl over him all the time? Maybe you had to be born with it to understand it.

But it was kind of cool in a weird way. All those bugs. Shino controlled every single one. It was like being the commander of an army. A small one. Naruto chuckled as he watched the sound nin consider his choices.

XxX

Zaku would never use those arms again. Naruto shook his head as the shinobi fell over. His wrists blasted off. The medics rushed in the match long over. Long decided. As it was, Naruto felt a little pity for the shinobi.

But Shino had warned him and Zaku had been cocky. He had risked everything. Certain in his winning but Shino had been the one with the trump card.

“How far ahead did you see?” Sasuke asked Kakashi-sensei.
“Well, after he did the first air palm.” Kakashi mused. “I knew Shino had put some of his bugs on him. It’s standard procedure for the Aburame clan. I only had an inkling of his plan when he warned the boy to forfeit.”

“There are some tough people here aren’t there.” Sasuke breathed and Naruto heard the excitement in his voice.

XxX

“Harsh.” Kakashi heard Gai mutter and he shrugged. They both knew they had seen worst and judging by the genins still gathered, they would see far worse than hands being blown off. But that had been an admirable bit of genius from Shino.

XxX

“You don’t have time to be fascinated Sasuke.” Kakashi said and Sasuke nodded. Kakashi worried that the boy would disobey him and use the seal. “If you use your chakra I’ll stop the match.” He said softly. Too softly for Naruto to overhear. As it was Naruto was too busy looking at where Shino stood.

“Understood.” Sasuke gritted out. Kakashi nodded in approval. He wondered if anyone had alerted Sasuke’s family about what was going on.

XxX

It was Sasuke versus one of the guys from Kabuto’s team. Kabuto had looked tough as it was and Naruto doubted his teammates held the same reservations Kabuto did.

“Konoha against Konoha.” Naruto sighed and it brought Sasuke and Kakashi-sensei from their little discussion.

“Well that’s not so bad.” Kakashi-sensei said easily. “This gives many the opportunity to fight those they wouldn’t be able to otherwise.”

“Sounds troublesome.” Sasuke snorted. His gaze darted to his opponent. “But I can understand the need to test yourself against those even in the village.” His gaze met Naruto’s and Naruto gasped in understanding.

It was to be expected but he had sort of shoved the knowledge somewhere. He knew Sakura’s way of looking at him and Sasuke had changed but he had honestly forgotten about Sasuke’s view on him.

“We can’t afford to lose here.” Sasuke said softly. “Naruto, I also want to fight you.”

Strangely enough, Naruto felt the same way. “Same.” He responded. He wanted to fight but not yet. In a way he was lucky that everything worked out the way it had. Because to fight Sasuke now would not be satisfying.

This maybe had been a long time coming. Since Wave. Maybe worse now because of the forest. Naruto grinned. Sasuke had nice eyes.

“Don’t lose.” He encouraged and Sasuke snorted.

Sasuke turned away to head downstairs so he could start his match and Naruto met Kakashi-sensei’s gaze and held it.
“What?” He muttered. “Isn’t this what most of you were hoping for?”


“I don’t know exactly what’s going on.” Naruto admitted. “With Sasuke, but I know Sasuke. Sort of. He won’t lose here. It’s that shinobi I feel sorry for.” He laughed softly. “Come to the Chuunin exams so many times and get beat by a rookie.”

“That’s a nice stance to have.” Kakashi-sensei agreed. “But let’s see what his opponent can do first.”

“Compared to Sasuke?” Naruto snorted. “I doubt he has what Sasuke has.”

“A talented sensei?”

“An unbeatable goal.” Naruto said dryly.

“You?”

“I can be defeated.” Naruto shrugged. “But I don’t think he thinks that he can. And that’s what matters. Sasuke won’t give up until he reaches there and I hope that the Jounin exams are something like this.” He grinned. “Because otherwise it is going to be a problem.”

“Insightful thing aren’t you.” Kakashi-sensei murmured. His hand ruffled Naruto’s hair fondly and lingered for a few seconds. “It is easy to forget just how much you’ve seen.”

“Shinobi are masters of disguise. And two types of shinobi hide their pain well. Missing nins and prominent clans with something to hide.” Naruto said softly.
Chuunin Selection Exams Preliminary Exam Third round Uchiha Sasuke vs Yoroi

Chapter Summary

Third fight the Rookie's will

Chapter Notes

Lemme just congratulate myself here \o/ because I did not think I would make it in time to upload today. It certainly is interesting writing so many action scenes but I'm looking at it as a new experience.
It's slow going (still) and it is fun in its own way. A long road
Anyway i'm going to do my best so we can get the fights over with. Have some stuff to look over etc etc but i'm honestly looking forward to pushing ahead and getting this part over with ^_^
So yay for an update! Enjoy the chapter

His neck, his shoulder. It burned. It was almost worse than before and Sasuke knew that it was reacting to his chakra. He knew that Kakashi was not playing around. He would cancel the match if the thing on his neck became unstable. Sasuke could not afford that.

So even though the pain was nearly unbearable. Even though he had broken into a light sweat because of the throbbing agony. He walked as if nothing was wrong and he watched his opponent. He did not know him or his capabilities. This masked shinobi was a mystery but he would not lose here. Sasuke could not afford to fall here.

He glanced up to where Kakashi and Naruto stood. He could see the glee in Naruto’s eyes where he stood. He could not afford to trip here. He just could not.

Normal techniques were most likely out of questions in terms of use. The Sharingan as well. Whatever he decided to do. He had to do it quickly.

His neck throbbed again and Sasuke pressed a hand to his neck. He knew it was futile. A simple application of pressure would not stop the pain but such a move was instinctive even if in the long run it did nothing.

So with all these disadvantages? How would he fight? Sasuke felt anticipation deep in his stomach and smiled. He had all these handicaps but he would find a way to win. He was certain of it.

XxX

“Is it me.” Naruto said softly and Kakashi fixed his attention on him. “Or is everyone really intense right now? It’s not the aftermath of what Shino did is it?”

Kakashi paused as he swept a glance over those gathered. Gai’s team were not even bothering to be
subtle. The Hyuuga was leaning over his gaze fixed on Sasuke. Asuma’s team were fixated as well. And the Sand. Well Kakashi doubted anything could tear the gazes of the Sand genins away from Sasuke but it was to be expected. At least a little.

“Well mostly it is because of Sasuke.” He admitted. “Who he is and he has stood out a little since the exam began.”

“And because he’s an Uchiha.” Naruto mumbled. Kakashi sighed.

“Also yes because he’s an Uchiha but because he was the academy’s number one rookie. That is another reason why everyone is so…fascinated.” Kakashi murmured.

“It’s making the room thick.” Naruto muttered and Kakashi laughed softly.

“Well it’s anticipation Naruto. They want to see and they can barely wait. They are expecting to see a good show. A rare treat.”

“Are we?”

Kakashi thought about the seal on Sasuke’s neck the pain he knew the boy had to be in. he thought about the former Sannin lurking around somewhere with unknown intentions for Sasuke. His gaze locked on Naruto. Orochimaru was also interested in Naruto. But right now Sasuke was not in his best condition. Not that he would let that stop him. “Who knows.” He muttered. He just hoped Sasuke did not push himself too far but this was Sasuke they were talking about. It was inevitable.

XxX

His opponent made a seal the moment the match began. Sasuke knew he was gathering Chakra and he envied him even as his hand crept back towards his kunai. All too soon his opponent did the same and their hand was a blur and the shurikens almost were too.

But Sasuke knew the correct way to deflect them while keeping his movement to the minimum. The clash of kunai against shuriken had barely sounded before his neck throbbed and the seal burned. He choked back his cry and stumbled backwards his eyes off his opponent.

Too fast, Sasuke saw the blur even as his neck burned in agony he got out of the way just in time but the gust of wind that hit him let him know that he had missed a critical hit. But he could not retaliate the mark burned and all he could do was get away.

This was not good at all. It seemed that everything he did, the seal absorbed chakra.

XxX

So close yet they held themselves back. Well he knew why he could not act yet. They had to be careful but with the prey in front of them. Orochimaru was a little curious to what the pawns would do.

But for Sasuke. He had the worst opponent and to think fate was the one that had handed it to him. There was no mistake about it. This match was fate, in order for him to further test Sasuke’s abilities.

Was Orochimaru disappointed his shinobi had been unable to confront Sasuke in the forest? Yes, he was and they would later get fully reprimanded for that but he knew the reason they had not been able to get close. He kept his chuckle to himself as he watched the Jinchuuriki.
Absolutely fascinating and the longer he watched all of them the more he would learn and then he would know what else he could do with Sasuke. His intention was to lure the boy. He had to see what else he had to do in order to make such a thing happen.

XxX

First stop himself from sliding too far. Then attack. Sasuke ignored the pain even as he used his legs to trip his opponent. Of course the man did not see it coming. Sasuke doubted that he could have done much even if he had.

Too much effort. Sasuke panted as he used his legs to lock Yoroi on the ground. his left leg braced and trapped Yoroi’s neck and shoulder and he kept the man’s arm in a painful leg hold. The seal was still painful but it was not overwhelming.

He did not know what he expected from Yoroi. Maybe some sign of struggle. Something to show he had gotten the upper hand but the man’s chuckle alarmed him even before the hand he held tightly, gripped him in return.

He could feel his strength sapping away at an alarming speed. The longer he held onto Yoroi the more he just knew he would become weaker. The situation was bad. His grip slackened and he let go of Yoroi unwillingly. The arm was wrenched away from his grip and returned just as fast as it had ben wrenched away driving into his chest and stomach.

He felt Yoroi getting away but he was winded his strength sapped even momentarily. The situation was bad and the seal flared again.

XxX

More of his chakra sapped away. Sasuke gritted his teeth and tried to force Yoroi to release him. It was painful. His strength was leaving him and he hurt all over. His mind was swimming with his senses narrowed to two places only. His depleting strength and the pain in his neck.

XxX

“Are you…my chakra?” Sasuke asked hoarsely. His head was swimming and his hands were no longer listening to him. He had tried to pry Yoroi off of him but he was far too weak.

“Are you noticing just now?” Yoroi asked in amusement.

An unusual ability but there was no denying that the bastard on top of him was absorbing his chakra. Sucking it away with his hands. How much was the bastard going to take? Sasuke could feel the seal reacting with every second his chakra was sucked away.

XxX

“What is going on?” Naruto whispered. “What’s he doing to Sasuke?”

“If I had to take a guess.” Kakashi-sensei replied softly. “I’d say he was somehow taking away Sasuke’s chakra. His grip is not tight enough to cause Sasuke that amount of distress.”

“Then this is bad.” Naruto murmured. He gritted his teeth in frustration. That thing on Sasuke’s neck that he had tried hiding. It obviously was causing him pain. Naruto knew for certain it had not been there when they entered the forest. Sasuke had not had any pain or troubles until after the surprise attack.
But it was really beginning to piss him off how little Sasuke was doing in the fight. Naruto understood the odds were high but Sasuke’s resolve was nowhere to be seen. Had he given up already? What was with the bullshit?

Even with the odds stacked against him Sasuke was not the type of person to give in, letting the other shinobi push him down and have Sasuke only weakly try to force him to get away. The attempt had been weak.

It was almost as if deep inside, Sasuke had already resolved towards losing. And that was not like him. After the display from Sakura and Shino. How the hell could Sasuke expect to go out there and do less?

XxX

His kick had not done much damage, Sasuke could tell but it got the bastard away and far enough that he could manage to sit up. He had weakened considerably. His limbs were listening to him again but who knew for how long. He had to end it all fast.

“You still had some strength left?” Yoroi’s voice was mocking. “You’re just a guinea pig though.” Sasuke frowned at the man’s soft words because-

That was a strange thing to say. A guinea pig? Him. For what? For who? He was just some sort of test to this man? It pissed him off.

“Relax.” The man’s tone was taunting and in no way comforting. “I’ll end this soon.”

As if Sasuke would just sit there and let this man control the pace and decide how it would all end. He wished he could spend the energy to sneer at the man but instead he forced himself to his feet as Yoroi dashed towards him again. He avoided the hand that reeked of chakra instead using as little energy to dodge as he looked for openings. If he was careless then it would be all over. But he had no options.

The bastard wanted close combat. Sasuke realized it after that chakra filled hand barely missed him. He stumbled a little further away his head swimming and his legs weak.

“Oi teme!” Naruto’s loud voice snapped him out of his thoughts. Sasuke glanced to see Naruto his hands clenched on the railings and his face furious. “What the fuck Sasuke! What are you doing? Didn’t Sakura-chan’s match teach you anything? Why are you letting him get away with this? Didn’t we make a promise just now? How are you going to fulfil it like this huh?”

How was he going to get through this match without wrecking anything? Sasuke’s first thought was to dismiss Naruto especially with the way Kakashi was watching him his eye concerned even as he stood right against the blonde. Did Naruto think he was doing this on purpose? He was in between a rock and a hard place and he did not want to lose himself. If he used chakra the seal would get out of control and Kakashi would end the match.

If he was careless this bastard would suck his chakra away and most likely the seal would get out of control and the match would be ended anyway.

“Sasuke! You call yourself Uchiha Sasuke with that?” God was Naruto loud. “Stop acting like an idiot!” Sasuke panted even as his glare took in all gathered on the balcony. He sort of zoned out Naruto. Another sign of his condition. Then his gaze landed on the boy from earlier.

It was a truly desperate sort of idea. But there was someone who did not use chakra the way he had and he still had nearly beat Sasuke. Even without his chakra he could do something. Actually do
something. Even without the skills that were usually his default he could still overcome.

He had proof right in front of him that people could overcome their handicaps. That people could still be devastating without chakra. People could still win without their chakra and still win despite all the handicaps. People like Itachi.

How had he forgotten? He could not lose here and lose to this person. Not only was it frankly shameful. If he did he quite simply would never get ahead. If he fell here he would be left behind. He had become too arrogant and dependent on his chakra and his powers. In a way it was good that he had met Yoroi here.

“You don’t have time to look the other way.” Yoroi laughed. His tone told of how certain that this move would be the last. “This is it.”

XxX

Yoroi’s strikes were sort of predictable. They were fast too that was the trouble but Sasuke knew the moment where an opening would appear. He was not going to try to lunge or escape during that opening however. He kept his stamina just for the right moment.

“Disappeared?” He heard Yoroi mumble and Sasuke felt ecstatic the moment he used his leverage on the ground to slam his foot into Yoroi’s lower body. There might have been a little of his frustration towards the chakra absorption in that kick but Sasuke was busy. He only knew up to a certain point after all.

He flipped over just as he had seen Lee do and launched himself so he was at the same speed and in the shadow of Yoroi. “From here on out it is all original.” Sasuke muttered aloud. “Let’s hope it does what it supposed to and can at least stand out to the thing it was copied from.”

XxX

That move. Kakashi had seen it more than a few times. He had been resigned to Sasuke’s defeat but of course Sasuke had pulled himself together. However, it was unknown to whether Sasuke would be able to pull it off. Curiously enough, this move it was Gai’s.

When did Sasuke have the time to learn this?

“That’s the same thing bushy brows used before.” Naruto muttered softly but Kakashi’s eyes picked it up. His gaze darted to Gai’s surprised one to linger on Lee’s stricken face. Now he got it. Or at least now he got some of it.

Then he heard Sasuke’s cry of pain. He was still in the middle of the shadow dance but Kakashi was able to see the seal taking shape. He swore at Sasuke’s stubbornness and prepared to end the match when a hand circled his wrist.


“Naruto.” He said softly. “You don’t understand.”

“You’re right I don’t.” Naruto answered. “But just wait a sec. He’s fighting it.” Naruto took his eyes off the field to watch him solemnly. “Whatever that thing is on his neck he’s fighting it.”

Kakashi gritted his teeth and looked away from Naruto’s eyes to watch the flames slowly taking over Sasuke’s body. He knew what he was talking about. He tensed ready to slip out of Naruto’s grip when his ears heard it. No, his eyes saw it too.
“Let’s get on with it.” Sasuke whispered and Kakashi watched the flames retreat. He watched the seal withdraw and his eyes went back to Naruto who had a smile on his face.

“Sasuke isn’t that easy.” Naruto smiled and Kakashi relaxed.

“It’s not really a case of ‘easy’ here.” Kakashi said as Naruto released his grip on his wrist.

“Well whatever it is, Sasuke has this.” Naruto responded as Sasuke engaged in a mid-air battle in order to flip Yoroi. Kakashi could see that though the man thought he was blocking Sasuke’s hits that he was not good enough.

“He does have this doesn’t he?” Kakashi asked Naruto softly as Sasuke managed to get a kick into Yoroi’s ribs and then a good leg lock on the other man.

XxX

His hand throbbed but Sasuke did not pay attention to it. His hand ached but he paid it no mind because it was working. His punch to Yoroi’s neck had started the man’s fall.

But it was not enough he knew that. He used his force to spin and aim every single one of his kicks into the man’s abdomen. Sasuke wanted that when they hit the ground that the bastard did not get up. He needed that.

Their force when they hit the ground and his last kick made Yoroi cough up blood and sent him skidding to the other side of the room but he was not down yet. Although his head spun and his limbs were weak. He was not done yet! He forced himself to his feet and waited.

Yoroi was on his back. Limp. That had to be it. It had to be. He was not moving. The examiner eyed them both before he approached Yoroi. “There’s no need to confirm it. He’s out cold.” The examiner said dryly. Sasuke felt relief.

XxX

“Ne, you think he can walk?” Naruto asked as he watched Sasuke sway on his feet. He was grinning from ear to ear because he was delighted damn it.


“You don’t have to tell me that.” Naruto laughed as Sasuke swayed again.

“Well I’ll excuse myself and make sure he’s seen to.” Kakashi-sensei mused. “That’s two for our team Naruto.”

“I know I know.” Naruto chuckled. “I gotta keep it up right?”

XxX

“Time to go Sasuke.” Kakashi said as Sasuke sat on the ground. the boy’s glare was keeping the medic nins from approaching. “Don’t worry. He can walk.” He added on cheerfully.

“No.” Sasuke’s tone was firm. Even though he was sweating and shaking his eyes were clear. “I want to watch Naruto’s match.”

What troublesome little genins he had. Kakashi sighed aloud and met Sasuke’s gaze. “Not happening. I’ve allowed you to have your way too much already. We’re going to get you treated
and to get *that* looked at.” Sasuke clamped a hand on his seal and Kakashi knew the boy understood.

“No.” Sasuke’s eyes were unwavering. “I’ll watch Naruto’s match and I want to watch the others.”

“Your options are quickly diminishing into… be knocked out.” Kakashi smiled. “Or pass out and be carried. I’m growing fond of the first option Sasuke-kun.”

“I can’t miss that.” Sasuke had grown paler but Kakashi could see the boy’s pride had surfaced. “I want to see him fight.”

“So do I.” Kakashi admitted. “So let’s get this over with and see you seen to okay? You won’t last to whenever Naruto’s match is.”

“Damn it.” Sasuke gritted. His gaze darted to where Naruto stood alone and Kakashi just knew Sasuke was upset that he could not last longer.

“Let’s go.” Kakashi said cheerfully. He did not want to miss it either. He urged Sasuke into walking towards the door. His pace lazy and easy from the limping Sasuke to keep up with. Just before they got to the door the next contestants names appeared on the screen and he breathed a sigh of relief. He wanted to see Gai’s students in action of course but he did not want to miss Naruto’s fight either. Next was Gai’s student and one of the Sand Shinobi.
It was now time for the Suna nins to make their move. Temari versus Tenten. Naruto glanced to the excited girl who was on Lee’s team. Then his gaze went back to the Sand and the only female on the team. That was Temari.

He recalled her from the confrontation. She did not seem as cruel as the other two on the first glance but appearances could be deceiving.

Her walk. It was confident. Her head held high although she received no encouragement from the other two or what Naruto assumed was the Jounin Sensei. She walked with pride her steps sure and her faith in herself strong.

This would be the first fight the Sand shinobis would be in that he could watch. And Naruto had no doubt that every single one of their fights would be different.

But not a single word of encouragement. The redhead just looked like he was upset the fight was not for him. The other guy he looked wary of the redhead and the man behind them he was just wary altogether.

But Temari’s steps were sure and true. Her pride in herself not even needing encouragement. She was strong. Naruto could feel it, she was confident every part of her showed it and even though she got no loud cheers she did not need it.

This match would be an interesting one. As it was, Naruto did not know much about Tenten either. She was confident and she was on the team with Lee. Lee trained ridiculously hard it would be fair to assume that she did the same.

And whoever passed, they might face him in a match.

XxX

A fan. A huge fan. That was Temari’s weapon. This might not be a good thing. Naruto could see by her stance. He could tell by her look that this weapon was a sure thing for her. Granted Naruto had not seen many people fighting with fans.

There had been those men when he had been travelling that had slit throats with their dainty fans after their performance but Temari’s fan was too huge for that.

But the feeling that Tenten was outmatched just lingered before the two girls had even done anything. Temari’s guard was good. Solid. And Naruto just had the feeling the longer he watched her that Temari had things far worse than the fan up her sleeve.

And Tenten, she made Naruto nostalgic with her scrolls but… to win she would have to get close and get the fan away. If Temari was as agile as she looked. Tenten would have it hard. This was no joke. To bring something that heavy in, there was no way she would use it unless she was
proficient and quick with it.

People like Temari, they never liked giving people the advantage.

XxX

The silent Sand and the noisy Konoha. Or to be more precise. Noisy Lee and Gai-sensei and quiet Suna team. They were like her personal cheerleaders and it made Naruto smile if only a bit.

They were happy and supportive.

Naruto glanced around himself and sighed because right now there was no one to be supportive towards him. Kakashi-sensei had taken Sasuke to be seen to. Sakura had not recovered as yet so currently he was watching the matches alone.

Not that it was bad but he and Kakashi-sensei had sort of had a little rapport going on during the matches. Saying nothing for this entire match.

It was sort of lonely.

But he knew it was not for long he knew that but… it would have been nice to have someone near to him while the match went on.

XxX

Maybe it was because duels were not new to him that he felt the difference. Maybe it was because of those four years of living with what most considered beasts that he felt the gap and how huge it was from where he stood.

Or maybe it was because he had watched how Zabuza and Haku had controlled and waged their strengths as they led everyone else that he was able to tell the differences between Temari and Tenten before Tenten had finished her move.

Tenten was outmatched. It was not necessarily a bad thing sometimes but the gap was so high that he felt his heart clench. He could see it.

It was not because of their weapons. It was more than that. Naruto knew if Tenten wielded the fan and Temari the scrolls the gap would be just as wide.

From the moment Temari’s eyes changed at Tenten’s first attack, Naruto knew just how outclassed Tenten was.

And he knew by the way that Gai-sensei’s voice hitched when Temari drew in Tenten in order to punch her harshly away that Gai-sensei knew it too. Or was quickly coming to realize it.

XxX

The hardest fights to watch. Were the hopeless ones. The ones where someone had no hope of winning and they just did not know it. Just could not see the distance between themselves and their opponent.

It was different once you could see the difference. When you could look at your opponent and see the gaps and be determined to close the gap by any means necessary even when on your hands and knees coughing up blood. Refusing to fall. Defiance in the eyes and you swore to close the distance.
That was a fight worth watching. A fight where intelligence and guts were shown.

But when the distance was the space between the mountain and the sea and the person persisted thinking the person they were fighting were a mere few steps away.

It was a painful thing to see.

XxX

Temari was not seriously fighting. It was painful to see and the more Lee tried to urge Tenten on the more Naruto wanted to walk over and lay a comforting hand on the older boy’s back. Temari was being cruel yes.

She could have ended the match long ago but instead drew out Tenten. Made her use everything she could because she wanted to taste the despair. Whether to amuse herself or because she was that disgusted Naruto was unsure but he knew Temari was after Tenten’s resignation.

Painful. It was painful to watch. It was horrifying how little she had to do and how she tore everything Tenten obviously believed in apart.

But that was a bit of life. That was how fights were.

Naruto did not take his eyes away from the display as Tenten’s scrolls lay abandoned and empty. The floor littered with kunais and shurikens. He did not look away from the careful stripping apart of Tenten’s confidence.

It was not that he had never seen such a display before. He had, many times and Naruto hoped that Tenten was able to pull herself together after her defeat. Because if she could manage to win from here. She would be a shinobi worthy of Chuunin.

A shinobi worth listening to and following. Not that the loss would mean she wasn’t but Naruto had a soft spot for people who with the odds against them that managed to win.

But he just knew he would not see that here. He knew it.

XxX

He had not wanted to take the mission but he had no choice. He had been told he had to take the mission. So he had set out with only a goodbye and Sasuke on his thoughts.

He was worried but he had a mission and Sasuke could take care of himself and he had watched some of the group’s training sessions. Sasuke and Naruto together on the same team was a good thing. They were not friends. Itachi knew his little brother thought such things were not necessary but they could be friends.

Naruto had a certain air about him and his past might be alarming but he honestly did not wish his team harm.

So Itachi had gone on his simple and frustrating mission and pushed himself. He wanted to get home by the time the second exam ended because then they would go home. Sasuke would come home because he had to make it that far. He would make it that far.

And Itachi would tell him welcome home and good job. He chuckled to himself as he cleaned his sword. And Sasuke would smile.
“Itachi-san!” It was not someone that he knew but they were preventing him from advancing. Itachi sighed before he acknowledged the person. He could pass them but that would be rude and he was only a little late. Sasuke might be home already but not their Father. Which meant he could intercept their Father once he found out the good news and bribe him into saying something that would make Sasuke happy.

Itachi was already resigned to attending meeting after meeting for a few weeks but if it made Sasuke smile…

“What is it.” He asked. “I’m on my way to report to the Hokage.” Not exactly the truth. He would report after he made sure Sasuke was okay. A quick glance would not hurt.

“I’m aware.” The man murmured. “But I was sent to you from the Hokage. He’s at the Chuunin Selection Exams.”

“Still?” Itachi murmured. “There were more participants than expected?” That had not happened for a while. Maybe six or so years. Anko had to be pissed.

“Yes and.” The man trembled. “You see; it is a matter of the village’s security.” Itachi kept his face impassive as he swore inwardly. Had something gotten in again? The unexplained entries from those years ago. Had it happened again?

“I’ll read the scroll.” Itachi said softly. He took the missive from the man and opened it. His eyes ran quickly over the Hokage’s writing a frown making its way onto his face at the Hokage’s instructions to remain calm.

Then his blood chilled. His breathing quickened and he did not realize his sharingan had activated until he heard the whimper from the messenger who had delivered the scroll. Itachi wanted to bathe in someone’s blood. Not just anyone.

Orochimaru’s

“Your brother is safe!” The messenger babbled. “Least he was. He’s still there he refuses to leave the matches. I think he’ll seek medical attention as soon as his part is over.”

Orochimaru. That Sannin had marked Sasuke. A cursed seal with the intention to do who knew what.

“I must make a detour.” Itachi said softly. “But rest assured.” The scroll was crunched in his fist. “I will go to my brother the moment I’ve finished with my task.”

“Yes sir.” The man babbled but Itachi no longer had any time to waste. From what he knew of that seal, it was a painful thing and the chances of surviving it was low. But none of that would make him pause now. Only one thing was his concern. On his mind. Sasuke.

Xxx

“I thought I would have more fun but I can’t expect more from you… can I?” Temari asked. “I told you when you see the third star. You’ll lose.”

Naruto bit his lip as the fan was fully opened. Revealing the third star.

Xxx
Part of him, wanted to know how she was using the fan in order to fly. Naruto could see no strings. There was no serious gust that she could use to sail the way that she was. It was perplexing.

The other part of him felt resigned because this truly was the end. But when her chakra infused wind hit Tenten he knew for certain that it truly was the end.

He heard Lee’s choked voice as Tenten was blasted into the air but all Naruto could feel was deep pity and all he could do was look from Tenten to the person who had dragged out the match far longer than they had to.

XxX

The sound Tenten’s body made when she landed on the tip of Temari’s fan. It was loud and the sound carried. She would be lucky if she had not broken anything. She had to have damaged plenty of things and Temari. She had been cruel, deliberately making Tenten fall the way she had.

“That was boring.” Temari complained. She eyes the girl on her fan. “Very boring.”

“Fourth match winner. Temari.” Hayate said and Naruto was relieved the man did not sound as if he was on his deathbed. Naruto’s gaze sharpened on the grin that formed on Temari’s face and he gritted his teeth in anger.

He knew her intention before she did it and by the green blur that hit the floor. So did Lee. Before Tenten could be thrown too far Lee and intercepted and caught her body in a way that lessened the impact.

“Nice catch.” Temari said and Naruto shook. His hands gripped the railings as he fought back his anger and tried to regulate his chakra.

“Why did you do that?” Lee demanded. “Is that something you should do to someone who has fought their hardest?”

“Shut up and take that piece of trash out of here.” Temari scoffed.

“That.” Naruto swore and in the silence of Temari’s statement his words echoed. “Nobody is calling you trash you scaredy piece of.” The metal creaked under his grip and Temari’s eyes met his.

“What did you say?” She demanded.

“Temari.” The voice was soft and Naruto’s gaze went to the boy that had spoken. “Stop picking fights. You won already.”

That redhead. “At least someone from the Sand has fucking manners.” Naruto grumbled. “It’s a good thing he holds you guys in check right?”

He saw the moment her hand tensed on the fan and Naruto was ready for whatever she could do. Nothing she could do would be up to par to the hell he had experienced in the forest.

“Temari. Leave that loud fool alone.” The redhead again. Their eyes met once again and Naruto snarled. “Let’s move on with the final matches already.”

There was just something about that guy. Whoever Naruto had to fight. He hoped it was not him. Somehow he had a feeling that the current field would not be enough.
After peace came pandemonium except there had been no peace and Kakashi had just really wanted everything to calm down at this point. He had just made a firm decision on what to do for Sasuke while the boy sat and shivered his limits obviously reached when Itachi arrived.

And it was not that things were going to get any easier. The moment Itachi had charged into the room mask off Sasuke had tensed up. Kakashi had not blamed him because when Itachi had exploded into the room the way he had he had tensed up. Because he had seen many faces from Itachi but never one that looked like that.

The way that Itachi’s eyes had locked onto Sasuke. Kakashi had lightly feared for his life. He knew that if Orochimaru was not in hiding wherever he was that the man would no longer be a problem. Itachi’s emotions were bared for the few moments he looked at Sasuke and Kakashi felt as though he was intruding although he knew better.

But he had not been exactly good at this sort of thing. Injured loved ones and the like.

“Sasuke.” Itachi sounded relieved as he let go of the door.

“Are the ANBU out there still out there or no?” Kakashi asked dryly.

Itachi’s eyes darted to him then. Less panicked but wary. Kakashi waited the other man out. “They let me through.” Itachi’s tone was calm although his eyes were not. “The Hokage called for me.”

“That’s right.” The Hokage stepped through the door and closed it behind himself forcing Itachi to move further into the room. Itachi took a few steps towards where Sasuke sat but that was all. Not by choice, Kakashi could see that. The Hokage-

Actually the Hokage’s shadow clone because Kakashi knew the Hokage had not abandoned the exams gave a heavy sigh as he looked at Itachi.

“Hokage-sama.” Itachi had not taken his eyes off of Sasuke.
“Itachi-kun, Sasuke-kun.” The Hokage frowned. “How are you holding up Sasuke-kun?”

“I’m fine.” Sasuke panted.

“We’ve discussed things.” Kakashi said lazily. “Hokage-sama?”

“Itachi-kun. The village is in a rather precarious position right now.” The Hokage said slowly. “I need you to remain calm.” Itachi noticeably twitched. “And listen so we can figure out where to go from here but our decisions will have to be quick.”

XxX

“Well there is no time to lose.” Itachi’s voice was clip. Precise. “I will purge this cursed seal. I have the means to do so. Kakashi-san I will need your assistance but before the seal roots itself we will purge it. Hokage-sama I think after we are done here that you will have to mobilize a unit.”

“Purge… oh that.” Kakashi murmured and Sasuke desperately wished he knew what they were speaking about. “That’s bound to be painful but no different than actually sealing the thing.”

“Precisely.” Itachi said.

“But you know.” Kakashi said slowly. “It’s Sasuke’s choice.” Sasuke looked up to see Kakashi watching him. “The seal is on Sasuke so really what happens next is up to him. We can give him the options but it is up to him to take them. The sealing is up to his willpower and the purging you suggested Itachi-kun well that is a more permanent solution.”

Well honestly they did not know much about the enemy or at least Sasuke did not know. He was certain Naruto had not met Orochimaru before the confrontation in the forest for certain. But for Itachi to purge the seal. Remove the seal. Sasuke knew it would not end right there.

He knew things would not go back to normal if he had the seal purged. The way that man had looked at them Sasuke knew he had an agenda and somehow that agenda concerned him. It made him worry and it made him think.

“Suppress the seal.” He spoke up. “Suppress it right now.” His hand clenched around where the seal lay and he ignored the throbbing pain. There was no other choice here. His will was strong enough and Sasuke knew Orochimaru would not leave him alone.

“Are you certain Sasuke-kun.” The Hokage looked concerned.

“Yes.” Sasuke answered.

“No.” Sasuke’s eyes went to Itachi then his widened and if he had not been sitting he would have stepped away. He doubted Itachi had an idea of how he currently looked. “We’ll purge the seal. We’ll remove that.” Itachi hissed and Sasuke swallowed at the barely contained rage in Itachi’s eyes. “We’ll remove it and we’ll remove it now Sasuke.”

“And then what?” Sasuke challenged. “That guy finds me again and bites me?” The Hokage flinched almost drawing his attention away from Itachi. “You weren’t there.” Sasuke insisted. “Something like removing it won’t stop him. I’m a shinobi Nii-san. He can pop up anywhere because if he did it once he’ll do it again.” His hand twitched but he kept his eyes on Itachi. “And again and again until we stop him or he gets what he wants. Removing it will goad him on.”

“You have no idea who that man is.” Itachi hissed and his one step in Sasuke’s direction had him breaking gazes to look at Kakashi. “I’m not joking Sasuke. I’ll remove that. Seal.” He finished and
the way he talked about the seal made it sound as the filthiest thing in the world.

“No.” Sasuke repeated. “You weren’t there. I’ll suppress it and my will is strong enough to keep it from being a problem.”

“No.” Sasuke repeated. “You weren’t there. I’ll suppress it and my will is strong enough to keep it from being a problem.”

“Sasuke.” Itachi insisted.

“Well then.” Kakashi cut in and Sasuke was grateful. “Sasuke has spoken. So that means it is my turn now.” He said cheerfully. “Itachi-kun your plan can be plan B in case anything goes wrong. And I doubt it will because I have great faith in your little brother. Who happens to be one of my squad.” Kakashi finished dryly. “So unless your sealing method is better than mine…” He trailed off.

Itachi twitched and the tension in the room rose drastically before Itachi turned around for the door. The door slammed behind him and a small noise escaped Sasuke’s mouth as he stared at it.

“I doubt he will go very far.” The Hokage said dryly. “Don’t push him Kakashi.”

“Yes Sandaime-sama.” Kakashi answered. “Now Sasuke. Off with the shirt let’s make this quick so your Nii-san doesn’t come storming back in with a convincing argument.”

XxX

Itachi counted slowly in his head as he guarded the door to where his brother was. He was finding it difficult to remain calm. The ANBU that were supposed to be on guard obviously found his efforts lacking as they were guarding from a distance away.

But not his fault. Orochimaru. That disgusting-

He had-

To Sasuke-

His chakra spiked hard and with murderous intent and the ANBU retreated further away as Itachi wrestled himself under control. Sasuke was a few feet away and he did not need Sasuke getting more worried than he already was.

Damn that missing nin. He had put that look in Sasuke’s eyes and worse yet. He was the reason his brother looked the way he did.

A groan of pain echoed through the door and Itachi froze his breath in his throat as he listened to Sasuke choke and pant his way through the sealing. His heart fell to his stomach and his chakra nearly got away from him again.

Damn the exam.

XxX

Puppetry was an art. Whether it was the simple civilian way or the ninja way. It was all art. Grace and moving fingers. Many things told you about the shinobi that used puppetry.

How they treated their puppets for one. What kind of puppet they favoured and how they used it. Especially how they used it. Their technique and their emotions. Puppetry was a complex art and Naruto knew that not everyone could do it.

It took talent. It took guts and planning. It took wits because puppetry was one of the most exposed
styles of fighting he had seen. Whether the person used one puppet or two.

Puppet fighters were art.

XxX

Even though Naruto still thought the guy was a dick, he could appreciate his skills. He was a smiler. Or at least he came off that way. He enjoyed the fight and he loved all of it. From thinking to actually fighting and Naruto had no doubt that this guy, that this guy was just as good without his puppets.

But he really was something else. The show he put on. It was a shame that Kabuto’s teammate had not caught on.

Naruto had seen the strings long before anything else and the fact that Tsurugi did not… well that just made it another win for Suna. Because Naruto knew the outcome.

The person for Konoha, Tsurugi he knew nothing about Kankuro and he same could be same for Kankuro but Tsurugi was overly confident. And in the first few seconds of battle he had revealed his skill. His, what he thought to be his unbeatable trump card.

Naruto gave him props for acting quickly and if the guy had been aware of his surroundings properly well it would not go down shit creek. But he had been too confident in himself. Nothing wrong with that but this guy had never once contemplated that he could lose.

And of course. That was where he had gone wrong.

First Tsurugi thought he had broken Kankuro’s neck and relaxed his guard. Of course he had talked about forfeiting but it had been known that that would not have happened.

But Kankuro. From his playful demeanour. A direct opposite of the boy Naruto had met before. It was puzzling. It was amazing because with each pull of the chakra string Naruto saw just how invested in it all he was.

He loved what he was doing. He loved puppetry and somehow Naruto knew that he worked on the puppets himself. He had given them names or at least he used the names they had been given. Back when Naruto had been given the crash course on puppets it had been hard to pay attention.

But somehow he felt as if he had heard those names before. Those puppets even though he had never seen the likes of them before.

Mai’s puppets had been different. Crafted special and Kankuro was good. He was good at what he did. But it paled in comparison. Naruto could still remember the puppet that had danced and soared with just one finger movement from Mai’s wrinkled hand.

He could remember the combinations and how amazing it had been. Hear the rattle of the puppet. Remember the shade of the Lotus as Mai let it dangle overhead after battle.

He could still remember it. It was not fresh but it still lingered. That memory, those memories. Sweet and painful but nice.

“Naruto-chan.” Mai’s wrinkled face leaned over him. “How would you like to help me clean Lotus-san today?”

“You never let anyone touch Lotus.” Naruto yawned. He glanced around but most of the others
were gone. Well it was midday after all. “Doesn’t it have poison over it?”

“Well if you follow my instructions.” Mai laughed. “You won’t have to worry about that. And I have the antidote just in case.”

Naruto had known a lost cause when he saw it so he had sat up and rubbed his eyes as he shivered as the kimono fell open. “Fine Mai-baba. Can I move it today?”

“You mean with chakra strings?” Mai’s face had gone blank in surprise before her face changed into a wrinkled smile. “It’s not so easy you know. But you know, you can tell a lot about a person by their puppet and their chakra strings.”

“Ehhh.”

“Well maybe it goes over your young head.” She chuckled. “You haven’t seen any hunter nins from my village with puppets yet, that’s why. But they’ll pale in comparison to me. I won’t lose to the youngsters yet!”

It was a dance from the beginning to the finish. Many would not think so but the careful manipulation. Naruto had found puppets entrancing. Beautiful. He still did. The way they fought. The weapons they pulled and the traps they held.

Naruto watched as Kankuro’s fingers moved to finish the match. Tsurugi pulled into the belly of one puppet. Naruto already knew how it would go. The playful puppets usually had ways to make the endings… gruesome.

But Kankuro’s finishing move… it reminded Naruto of a blender if he was going to be honest. But he was not going to tell the guy that and he certainly was not going to say he had seen better.

But considering the circumstances and the simple fact that this was the second time he had seen the Suna nins fight… Naruto could honestly say… that the Sand were not all that they seemed. They were strong. Naruto was unsure to how strong normal genins were supposed to be but he could feel that somehow… those three surpassed what was supposed to be normal.

But of course… he did too.

XxX

“I’m fine.” Sakura insisted as she sat up. she was sore and more than a little dizzy but in her honest opinion. She had rested enough. “Are the matches over?”

“Ah.” One the medic nins exchanged a look with the other one. “Well no.”

“Good then.” She smiled. “I’ll be on my way.” She continued as she slid off the bed. Her strides were strong as she headed for the door but then she remembered something important. “Is Ino…”

“She’s fine.” A medic nin insisted. “She’s still out though.”

“Oh.” Sakura murmured. She sighed before she opened the door and slipped into the hall. She had no idea how long she had been out but she hoped she had not missed all the matches.

She glanced up and down the corridor before she shrugged and picked left.

XxX

“Ah.” Kakashi laughed as he softly landed behind Naruto. “I didn’t miss your match.”
“But you missed the end of this one.” Naruto shrugged. “And you missed the other one.”

Kakashi wracked his brain and recalled the fight after Sasuke’s had been Gai’s student. “How did that go?” He asked curiously.

“You seriously have to ask?” Naruto asked dryly. “It’s just like that one.” He shrugged as he pointed to the puppet and mess of the floor. “Except Tenten is alive. But the Sand is no joke.” He said softly. “Forget genins… if the two of them are like that…” He sighed

“So what happened here?” Kakashi asked curiously.

“Suna won both their matches. That guy there is a puppet user and the girl uses a huge fan.” Naruto sighed. “She wasn’t fighting seriously and I rather doubt he was fighting too; this was just a game to him.”

“Different villages.” Kakashi reminded him before he recalled who he was speaking to.

“I know that.” Naruto said dryly as he looked at him. “I know how different it can be between villages and that is why I’m saying even for that they are weird. Strong.”

“The puppet user?” Kakashi asked curiously.

“I’ve seen better.” Naruto shrugged. Kakashi recalled in the retrieval an older woman who obviously knew what she was doing with layers and layers of traps that he had read through.

“I suppose you have.” Kakashi said softly. His eye picked up the sight of pink and he turned his head to watch as Sakura re-entered the room. She had apparently woken back up and returned to watch the fights. Kakashi could dearly hope that the same did not happen with Sasuke. But considering who was sitting outside the door with an impassive face and irritated chakra… Kakashi had very little to worry about.

And even though Sasuke and Naruto so easily pushed human limits Kakashi was positive Sasuke was going to stay put. At least, he desperately hoped so. Next was the sixth round and Kakashi took his eye off Sakura to see who had been chosen.

“Ahh Sound again.” Naruto murmured. “Hope they aren’t as cocky as the guy Shino fought.”

“And Nara Shikamaru.” Kakashi murmured. His gaze sought the boy out who wore a look of irritation and boredom, but Asuma looked amused. “Well this will be interesting.” He murmured.
Chuunin Selection Exams Preliminary Exam Sixth round Nara Shikamaru vs Kin Tsuchi

Chapter Summary

Leaf vs Sound again this time the lazy genius takes the stage

Chapter Notes

Only have a few more of the matches left but I think it best for me that I do one chapter a week. This fic is a lot of fun and I really don't want to push myself to write it. It is fun and writing it makes me happy so I'll take my time. Besides we are further than I thought we would be at this stage.

So one a week will be fine. ^_^ I know you guys might have been concerned about the drabbles I was doing but that is a bit of letting off of steam. This fic is going to be huge (bigger and more developed than anything i've ever done before) so I need little breathers where I can think about something else or I'll go crazy lol.

I've been working on SEVERAL projects omg I worry about me sometimes. Anyway I've been trying to see how I can get the ball rolling on a few of my projects and series. I don't want to be scrambling to write because...yeah that is unnecessary pressure so I'm trying to arrange stuff so I can take a day or three off writing and it won't affect you guys. So yeah enjoy the one-shots. Some of them are little fics celebrating little milestones that I achieved ^_^

In short. Relax darlings I know what I'm doing. I chose my pace so things can flow steady. Everybody likes regular updates ^_^ and multi chapter fics are my main focus anyway. The others are plot bunnies that get a little loud and I just write it so I can concentrate or it is me experimenting with an idea to see if I can do it well enough. So just be patient this fic will do weekly updates until further notice. And a week is 7 days lol so only start worrying when it has been like 9 days after the last update and I haven't warned you guys or anything. And if i'm posting other stuff and it has been more than a week then i'm just procrastinating lol don't worry. But I doubt that is going to happen. At least for the next 10 chapters lol.

Sometime next week will be chapter 17 idk when just know next week. Late next week if you want specifics. Now darlings \o enjoy the chapter you have 4 fights left

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After the whole deal with Shino’s opponent… Shikamaru really did not want to do any of this. But because of who his opponent was and who Shino’s opponent had been… he resolved himself to getting in and getting out quickly.

But from what he had seen. The information that he knew he did not have on the recently created
shinobi village. If this girl fought anything like that guy it was going to be troublesome.

And he just had to end up fighting the girl too. Not that there was anything wrong with that but the girls, the women in his life was so damn troublesome. You never knew anything about them and that fight between Sakura and Ino had more than showed him that.

Add into the simple fact that he really knew nothing about his opponent or his opponent’s village and Shikamaru was left wondering how on his guard he should be, back at the first exam that team had taken offense so damn quickly.

Even now, Shikamaru could feel they weren’t all they seemed. But he had no real choice did he. He had to go out there and at least try. And wrap it up as quickly as he could.

By the time Asuma gave him an encouraging pat on the back Shikamaru already had ten working plans on it and had been in the middle of an eleventh.

XxX

Did Shikamaru have this? Naruto certainly hoped so. He aimed a smile at the muttering boy as he made his way to the steps. “Shikamaru.” He spoke up and the boy looked up. for a second his eyes were distant. Miles away be he all too soon came back and locked onto Naruto in a way that made him pause.

He had hung with Shikamaru since he got back but this was another part of him. Naruto knew the guy was smart, but that split second had been something else.

“Naruto?” Shikamaru asked with his hands shoved in his pockets.

“You got this?” Naruto raised his hand and felt awkward for the few seconds Shikamaru just stared at the hand and him.

“It’s troublesome.” Shikamaru sighed then all too soon he raised his own palm and high fived Naruto. “But I got this.”

Naruto knew he had not imagined that Shikamaru’s steps were a little lighter as he went along.

“You’re a personal cheerleader now?” Kakashi-sensei asked and Naruto snorted as he turned away.

“For him?” Naruto asked.

“Well, you seem to be having a field day for cheering so.” Kakashi-sensei did a small one shoulder shrug that said nothing and everything at the same time and Naruto scoffed.

“Well some people need the encouragement.” He teased. “And they get a little shy when down there so I’m here to help with that.” He boasted. “And it is nice right? Having someone in your corner. Your team or someone from the same village.”

“Someone to acknowledge your guts?” Kakashi-sensei asked casually and Naruto hesitated as Shikamaru faced his opponent.

“Well yeah.” Naruto admitted. “But I was thinking more of not knowing you were alone. Of knowing you don’t have to be, that people believe the best can come from you.”

“Sounds like a cheerleader to me.” Kakashi-sensei murmured and Naruto rolled his eyes.

“So you going to be my cheerleader Sensei?” Naruto teased. He flashed a grin and so the small
shake of Kakashi-sensei’s head.

“I came unprepared for that.” Kakashi-sensei said dryly. “The kind we’re talking about would require a full uniform and I left my mission skirt behind.” Kakashi-sensei turned to face him then. “Sorry about that. Next time.” And Naruto’s mouth gaped open even as his brain broke into hysteric. He regained enough control over his functions in order to snigger. Something the man had been aiming for.

“You don’t need to go that far.” He laughed but he was unable to help the quick glance he gave to Kakashi-sensei because he was actually unable to tell if the man was joking about the skirt. And his Sensei was hard to read most of the time but easy to read on other things but he could not figure if the man was playing or not. But Kakashi-sensei caught him looking and the cocky wink the man gave him had him flushing and looking away in order to look back at the match.

XxX

He had seen some teams in the forest. Not everyone, not the people he had wanted to see but he had not seen the Sound in the forest so he had no idea how they really operated.

Those three might have had their premature explosion back in the First Exam but Shikamaru still had no idea how their abilities worked if they had any. The guy Shino had fought did not count. Shikamaru did not have to fight him.

This was all so tiresome and he just wanted it over with already. He had a few guesses about the girl’s abilities but he knew he could be wrong. Most likely was wrong. But at least it was an even ground because she knew nothing about him as well.

Which just might make everything more of a pain in the ass than it was already. All he had to do was get his shadow on her but Shikamaru could tell that it was not going to be that easy. She was wary and cautious and he really hoped she knew nothing about Konoha’s clans. It would be so unfair if she put his name and clan information together and he knew nothing about her or her village.

But this stupid exam was unfair too and Shikamaru just wanted to sit down and relax and have it all over with.

But he couldn’t. So he would do whatever it took to get it over with and quickly. The odds were for him winning but Shikamaru knew that could change in an instant. Another reason to make sure that it did not. This whole thing was annoying, he just wanted to sit down.

XxX

“This sucks.” Shikamaru muttered as he stared at the girl.

“Then I’ll make sure to end this quickly then.” She answered and she looked like he felt. Pissed, but he was pissed at the whole situation and the fact that he had to fight her she-

Well maybe she was pissed the same reason he was. Usually that would spark a little comradery but Shikamaru already knew she was hiding something and honestly. He was not liking how her eyes looked past him. Although that could come in handy.

But right off the bat before he could but his plan into place a senbon came whizzing in his direction. Easily dodged but Shikamaru heard the small tinkle and he saw the senbons in the wall with small bells attached. That was not all but he knew he had to play along.
“That’s an old trick.” He commented. “First you throw two with bells so I’ll dodge. Next you’ll throw one senbon with a bell and one without. Instinct will make me react and dodge the first one but not the second one and I’ll be stabbed. Right?”

“I didn’t peg you for a talker.” She sneered and Shikamaru had a split second to react.

But of course it was not the easy. She had looked as if she was going to throw more but apparently she had enough of it all. She wanted it over with. The mood she was emitting it was not an exaggeration to call it deadly and honestly Shikamaru could feel the malice.

But back to the problem at hand. The sound of the bells behind him. She was using the string to ring them and since he had allowed himself the opportunity to look back she would make what she thought was going to be her final move.

He wanted it over and finished with too but she was a little too hasty, arrogant and eager.

XxX

“So what do you think is the deal with the bells?” Naruto mused.

“Well, maybe she can do genjutsu based on it.” Kakashi-sensei shrugged. Sakura allowed her gaze to sweep from her teammates debating to the field.

“But it is such an obvious trick. Maybe if she were to hide the senbon without in the shadow of the other one.”

“But that isn’t what she was doing.” Kakashi-sensei said softly. “You see it right?”

“Well yeah but even I know that isn’t enough to take down Shikamaru or really anyone.”

“You mean she underestimated him hmm?”

“Well they don’t call it the village of sound for nothing.” Naruto muttered. “But Kakashi-sensei, unless it was something that acted right away she shouldn’t have gone so easy. That’s basic stuff.”

“Well they are a new village.” Kakashi-sensei mused. “You have to go easy on them.” Sakura looked back to the field but continued to listen.

“Well.” Naruto muttered in a lower tone. “If she had done the first two things but hidden the senbon in the shadow at the same time and then followed it up with a frontal attack by the time she did that.” Naruto said dryly as Shikamaru looked back. “Everything would be a lot simpler.” He finished.

“Ahh, the Exams is where you learn.” Kakashi-sensei laughed. “And I think she just figured that out.” He finished as Shikamaru’s opponent froze in her tracks.

“She underestimated him.” Naruto said dryly. “She didn’t even know what he could do.”

“Well now that Shikamaru has gained the upper hand. I wonder what he will do with it?” Kakashi-sensei mused as Shikamaru got to his feet.

XxX

“Shadow copy no jutsu complete.” Shikamaru laughed as he got to his feet. “You thought you had me.” He grinned. “But I got you.”
“Shadow copy?” She gritted out.

“My clan’s jutsu.” He grinned. “Everything I do, you will do and I can restrain your movements with my shadow.”

“But how?” She frowned. “That shouldn’t have…”

“When you were putting up your trap.” Shikamaru shrugged. “I put up mine. Simple. The string was a big help actually. It made things a lot easier. I had plenty of plans and I wasn’t too sure what else you had up your sleeve but I knew once I got my shadow on you that it would be all fine.” He grinned. “And I did.”

XxX

“Man you don’t see Shikamaru grinning like that every day.” Naruto muttered. “It’s creepy.”

“Well his plan was a success with minimum effort on his part.” Kakashi-sensei mused. “He must be eternally grateful for that girl’s help.”

“Don’t say that.” Naruto snorted. “But he’s a great actor. He made it look like he really was caught up in all that.”

“The hardest thing he had to do so far was act.” Kakashi-sensei said dryly.

“But now that he captured her in that jutsu.” Naruto mused. “What is he going to do next?”

“Well it’s a copy jutsu. She will copy him. So the question is what will he have her do?” Kakashi-sensei mused.

Naruto narrowed his eyes. “I know there is more to it than that.” He pointed out. Kakashi-sensei hesitated then nodded.

“Well it is a shadow jutsu but the one Shikamaru is doing now is shadow copy. Something even the sharingan can’t copy.”

“Right.” Naruto breathed. “So?”

“Well let’s see what he is up to next. It doesn’t seem like he is finished acting.” Kakashi-sensei sighed. Naruto blinked before he focused back on the field.

XxX

Shikamaru was living up to his clan but he had that air that was not usually a Nara trait as well. It was something lighter and Kakashi was honestly glad to see it. Because intelligence could get tiring. Seeing the possibilities and having a brain that whirled through things at speeds some were unable to comprehend.

But it was necessary as was not that the real kicker.

For a shinobi clan Naras were special and Kakashi had not met one he had not gotten along with. Sometimes it took time but he got along with them and they quickly synced to him. Or him to them.

Now Shikamaru, the boy had the match read and planned from the first toss. Which was good. Even as his irritation controlled the air his mind and eyes had been clear. It was not perfect. There were things Shikamaru would have to see and experience but so far, for a normal genin it was fine.
Asuma sighed a little and Kakashi glanced at him to see the man wearing an almost resigned expression. Kakashi understood and looked down at Naruto and sighed himself. Jounin sensei was not an easy job. Learning about your students’ personalities and traits could drive you up the wall sometimes.

Kakashi enjoyed his team. Their good sides and perks. But he was not blind to their faults. Like Asuma was heavily aware that Shikamaru had inherited that bit of laziness his father possessed.

And Kakashi was well aware under Naruto’s mostly restrained exterior lay the heart of a prankster. It was revealed in the things he did and said the way he talked and the way he looked at problems. Naruto honestly wanted to bring laughter. Even if he did not know it.

His job was honestly a hard and simple one.

Just like Asuma’s.

XxX

When you have lost your cool. Are no longer aware or your surroundings and have been drawn into the enemies pace. You have stopped being a shinobi. You have become a target. Prey and fights, duels, matches taught you that.

“Ouch.” Naruto chuckled as Kin Tsuchi slumped to the ground unconscious. “But Kakashi-sensei that is kind of lazy.”

“Don’t you know him?” Kakashi-sensei asked. “Do you see Shikamaru doing the long way around when something like this is easier?”

“Flaunting his flexibility?” Sakura laughed softly. “Somehow that seems harder than anything else.”

“Well what he did she did so stabbing was out.” Naruto pointed out dryly.

“Well there were many options.” Kakashi-sensei pointed out. “But quick, easy and harmless was what he was going for.”

“Apparently.” Naruto muttered as Shikamaru travelled back to his team with not so much as a glance back. “So boring.”

“I think that was what he was thinking too.” Kakashi-sensei laughed.

Chapter End Notes

See you guys next week!
Uzumaki Naruto versus Inuzuka Kiba. The board was not lying. Naruto felt exhilaration fill him as he realized finally the wait was over. Finally, he could fight. There were few people left. And from the huff he heard in Lee’s direction he knew others were as antsy about waiting that he was.

But the wait was over now. It was his turn.

“About time hmm?” Kakashi-sensei mused and Naruto tore his gaze away from the board proclaiming his name.

“Definitely.”

“Don’t go out there and lose now.” Sakura pointed out. “You’ll look bad next to me and Sasuke-kun.” She teased. Naruto let a laugh escape because he could feel that Sakura did not believe in her words.

“Well.” Kakashi-sensei sighed. He clasped Naruto on the shoulder and looked down at him. “Get down there eh?”

“Yup.” Naruto did not bother with the stairs and instead hopped over the railing and dashed over to the examiner. Finally, he could fight.

XxX

Not the Sound or the Sand they had gotten lucky! Kiba grinned and ignored Hinata next to him. As far as he was concerned he had dodged a bunch of kunais. If he had caught most of the others he would have had to forfeit. Especially if it had been that Sand guy.

A tremor went through him as the thought of that guy but Kiba shook it away because his opponent was Naruto. Granted he had never fought Naruto beyond when they were kids.

And he had not seen Naruto spar beyond the last year at the academy and even then was only once
or twice he knew he had it in the bag. Because Naruto had landed back in their class all right but he had difficulties then and in the academy he had them as well.

Naruto was not a monster. Not like the Sand guy. Not like Hinata’s cousin. He was different and Kiba could handle it. More than that. With Akamaru next to him he had this in the bag.

XxX

Lee was getting upset. Kakashi allowed himself to watch how tense the boy was. Gai noticed it too but beyond a comforting pat on the shoulder he left Lee to his own devices.

But considering how the fights were going it was understandable why he was eager. Shikamaru’s battle had come down to a matter of wits and simply outsmarting the opponent.

Sasuke’s had come down to will power and guts with a bit of force. Something that had somehow seemed more Naruto than Sasuke but changes happened and it had looked good on Sasuke anyway. The force of his will. Also Sasuke had ‘borrowed’ a technique and Lee still had to be thinking about that.

Sakura’s battle. Well will had been involved but it had been fuelled by more than will and guts. Determination, resolve, desperation. Sakura was really a caring person. Whatever that had happened in the forest with Orochimaru it had shaken her up worse than the encounter in Wave had.

She was looking at everything differently now. Kakashi was unsure to what exactly she had learned, saw. He knew he would have to pull her over and get a bit of information from her sooner or later. Hopefully sooner but the look in her eyes was nice. It spoke of change and strength.

Putting them in the Chuunin Exam had been a good idea. Even if they did not become Chuunins. Their growth had accelerated farther than he thought it would. Even with Naruto around them.

And Naruto. Kakashi was curious for this fight as well. Because beyond the matter on the bridge and the sparring sessions he had not exactly see Naruto fight. The way he had come at him in the bell test did not count.

Even with Wave. That had been quick. Nothing to analyse. And of course Kakashi did not see the fight in the Forest of Death and it chilled him thinking about the fight.

But this little match now? He was honestly curious to how Naruto would approach it.

XxX

“Heh.” Kiba laughed as he faced Naruto. “We really lucked out Akamaru.” The welcoming smile on Naruto’s face slid off and he watched Kiba. “It’s like we already won!” Akamaru barked and Naruto sighed inwardly his glee slowly melting away.

Not only had Kiba gotten carried away. He had also forgotten some things.

“Shut up.” He hissed as Kiba bounced in place. “Can’t you take this seriously?”

“I already have.” Kiba gloated. “And I like the results too!”

It was pointless. Somehow he had forgotten that the people here who slightly knew him were Kakashi-sensei, Sakura and Sasuke. Of course Iruka-sensei and the Hokage were in there too but they were categorized differently.
And now he was getting why Kabuto had backed down. He had sort of ignored it when Sakura and Ino fought. Not really thought about it when Sasuke and that guy had fought. But now he was getting it.

Even though he was underestimating him and being a sort of pain at the moment. Naruto liked Kiba. Kiba was one of the few people that had accepted him back then. Even though it was mostly toleration back then and when Naruto had come back Kiba had no problem with picking right back up from where they had sloppily left off.

He had not asked any questions beyond the bits of vague stuff about his health and Naruto had tried to preserve as much as the old relationship as he could.

Kiba had cared back then. Enough that Naruto could build something when he came back and now… he had to fight that friend.

Naruto watched Kiba’s glee at what he thought would be a quick and easy match and felt uncertain. He wanted to win. To fight but to hurt Kiba? He took his gaze of Kiba and looked over to where Kakashi-sensei was watching. He hoped his glance conveyed enough ‘what am I supposed to do here’ that Kakashi-sensei would understand, and give an answer because he liked Kiba and wanted to respect him in a fight, or a spar but he did not want to kill Kiba.

So what the hell was he supposed to do?

XxX

“What’s wrong?” Asuma asked as Naruto looked back at them uncertainly. “What’s the problem there Kakashi?”

Kakashi glanced at Asuma and Asuma’s team who had drifted down to stand next to them. Kakashi glanced back to Naruto who was mostly ignoring Kiba’s glee and was glancing at him uncertain. Hesitant.

“What’s the problem?” Asuma repeated. “Why is he just standing there.”

“Well.” Kakashi considered. “He just really realized that he is going to have to fight Kiba.”

“And.” Asuma pressed. “So what?”

“Well.” Kakashi chuckled. “He really does not want to hurt a friend.” He glanced down at Sakura as he spoke. “Kiba is one of the few people Naruto bonded with on returning to the village. Although his circumstances are a well-kept secret.” Kakashi ignored Shikamaru’s glance in his direction and lowered his voice. “He really does not want to hurt a friend and he doesn’t want to lose either so he’s stuck.” Kakashi chuckled.

“Kiba’s no push over.” Asuma reminded him. “Kurenai’s mighty proud of her team.”

“She’s got a good team.” Kakashi admitted. “But Naruto has a little something many don’t get. He’s uncertain on how to proceed. Kiba being a friend. Kiba being from Konoha. He’s uncertain as to just what his moves should be.”

XxX

“Well it seems Kiba-kun knows something we don’t.” Lee frowned as Naruto stood uncertain in front of Kiba. “He looks as if he has already won.”
“Lee.” Gai-sensei shook his head slowly. “Earlier we saw someone who thought they had it in the bag and what happened to them? What do you think?”

“That Naruto-kun doesn’t want to fight.” Lee said slowly as he watched Naruto. He could read body language and this was nothing like the calm confidence Shino-kun had earlier. This was someone really uncertain about something.

“Maybe it has finally gotten into his brain the position he is in.” Neji snorted with his arms folded. “But neither of them are anything special.”

XxX

“Well you finally know how to get him to shut up.” Temari sneered and Kankuro sighed. He did share her sentiments though. The blonde was annoying. Had been annoying since they first ran into him and now it was nice to have him actually quiet.

He had not been looking forward to the blonde’s fight. He wanted to root out the actual contenders and he believed he had done so. But Gaara had developed quite the faint interest in the blonde. Even as an annoyance.

Not good for the blonde but as long as Kankuro did not have to get involved he really did not care. And any distractions as Gaara waited would be nice. He was barely keeping himself together. The Uchiha’s fight had Kankuro the most nervous.

XxX

“Naruto!” Sakura’s voice startled many of the participants. Sakura ignored the attention she had drawn to herself to call down to Naruto. “Remember our promise!” She shouted. “Don’t make me and Sasuke-kun look bad now!”

She saw Naruto gape for a few seconds. His emotions raced across his face too quick and too strange for her to decipher but she kept her smile on her face and waved her arms.

“I don’t want you sulking when Kakashi-sensei treats us do your best!” It seemed like a weird thing for her to say but she wanted Naruto to focus. Kiba had the wrong idea and god did she want him to pummel Kiba.

Naruto was nothing like they thought him. He was different and she had known that for certain when they travelled to Wave. Kiba would not have been able to handle Orochimaru like the boys had done. Naruto had so many things to share. He had gone through so many things and the last thing she wanted was for him to get uncertain now.

Just as she and Ino had their meeting here she wanted Naruto do have his. It was not really necessary but some of assumptions needed to go. Naruto was not easy. He was not weak and even if he had been before… he had changed and in time he would become-

Well. She was not ready to jump on the bandwagon for that thing yet.

“Yeah!” Naruto’s face lit up and he nodded his gaze went back to Kiba but Sakura was reassured. Just like how Naruto had cheered for them she would cheer for him.

“Good job Sakura.” Kakashi-sensei said softly and she beamed.
“We’re a team right?” She asked and it was the right answer because Kakashi-sensei smiled.

XxX

He had somehow managed to let go of his pride for a few seconds there. Realizing he was fighting against an actual friend someone he sort of cared about that knew nothing about him really had thrown him for a loop.

Naruto waved at Sakura, thankful for her. He noticed the small nod from Kakashi-sensei and grinned. He looked back to Kiba. As much as he did not want to hurt-

As much as he did not want to kill Kiba he had his pride too. He doubted Kiba would be able to push him to the state of actually killing him. Sasuke had been the rookie not Kiba. Naruto had his pride too and the lessons of those four years burning in his heart.

He had his own way of doing things. So he would do this fight and he would make sure it was one he would not regret. That was the best he could do. The best he should do. And since he cared about Kiba he should make sure that whatever he did Kiba would be able to live with.

Naruto looked back at Sakura. He knew Ino would be satisfied even though she had lost. Those two, their fight had been rough but filled with respect at the end. The way it should be. So no matter what. Naruto should give Kiba that respect and fight.

Kiba gave the challenge, Naruto would be shinobi enough to accept and show his guts.

XxX

“Stop jumping around and get serious.” Naruto grinned. “I’ll take the two of you on no problem.”

Kiba’s and Akamaru’s happy bouncing stopped.

“You don’t even know what it means to take the two of us on.” Kiba laughed. “They are plenty of scary monsters here Naruto. But you smell the same as always. Just you are more carefree now.”

His scent?

Smell scary? It took effort not to look at the Sand Shinobi. Naruto knew now why Kiba had been acting strange earlier. But what had he seen? And when was the right time to ask?

“Two of you, three of you.” Naruto’s lips quirked up. “All the same in the end. It won’t change the outcome at all Kiba.”

“Don’t act tough!” Kiba barked.

“This isn’t an act.” Naruto said softly.

XxX

There was no getting through to idiots. The only way to end this would be to show Naruto. “Stay Akamaru.” Kiba said softly. “I’ll end this.” He wasn’t weak. His training had taken him to new levels. He was ready for this exam.

Naruto had been doing okay from what he had seen but there was a distance between them.

“And this? You seem pretty certain.” Naruto snorted and turned away. Kiba growled as Akamaru jumped off his head. He clenched his fist and decided there would be no holding back. He waited for Naruto to turn a little his way and he ran his punch was aimed at Naruto’s face with his true
strength and his true speed. It would an instant K.O.

Naruto flew back and hit the wall with force. Smoke rose and Kiba wondered if the genins had to pay for damages.

“That’s the end of that.” Kiba snorted. He turned the examiner irritated he had used his true strength.

“What’s the end of what?” Naruto stumbled from the rubble and rubbed his face. “If you’re going to be a shinobi. You can’t be going about underestimating people Kiba!”

“So you got a little something in you. But you look half dead from one punch.”

“That? Weak.” Naruto sneered and then he dispelled.

“Huh.” Kiba gaped at the space Naruto had been.

He heard a whimper of distress and his blood chilled as he looked behind him to see Naruto holding Akamaru up examining him. “Don’t get tricked by little things like this Kiba.” Naruto scoffed as he dangled Akamaru. “Don’t let what you see fool you. Appearances can be deceiving.”

XxX

“Sensei!” Sakura was leaning over the railing gaping at the match below and Kakashi kept his hand hovering nearby in case she went over in her eagerness. “Did you see what happened?”

“Well yes mostly.” He admitted.

“I know he switched out with a clone.” Sakura muttered.

“That crash was not the result of Naruto hitting the wall.” Kakashi said softly. “Naruto faked the crash, the explosion, the injury.” He eyed the boy holding up Akamaru as a prize. “Everything.”

“But how?”

“Well you forget his former occupation.” Kakashi chuckled. His gaze searched until he found the Hokage and Iruka standing next to him. “I’ve taken the time to read his previous file. Those were some well thought out pranks and deceptions. And his transformations have only gotten better. This we know.”

“Now he has Akamaru.” Sakura said softly. “You think he goaded him on purpose so he could get Akamaru?”

“I can’t say.” Kakashi hummed. He did know Naruto was a shinobi of impulse. Going with the flow and then making the river run the way he wanted. Who could really say whether Naruto’s words were to get Kiba go after him alone from the beginning?

But with one trick the air of those watching had changed.

XxX

Naruto. Shikamaru had a feeling that he had been hiding things. More than a feeling but it had seemed too troublesome to actually figure them out and even when he had reappeared at the academy. Naruto would deflect like the best of them.

But this. Naruto had changed and Shikamaru would be damned if he could not admit he was a little
bit excited in Naruto’s match. In Naruto anyway. Kiba could get a little cocky and Naruto’s little shake up was nice. Very nice.

Which might explain why Kakashi-sensei had been relaxed from the moment Naruto’s name had been announced until now. Shikamaru glanced at the man and had his stare returned. Somehow he felt as though the man was silently laughing at them.

Kakashi-sensei was rumoured to be a genius too but far better than Shikamaru currently. Shikamaru usually figured out who would win or lose but he had declined doing it for this match. Simply because there was too little he did not know.

With Naruto’s uncertainty he had been leaning towards Kiba but his senses made him stay quiet. And it was a good thing now.

The academy records and all intel on Naruto. They could be tossed in the trash now. Shikamaru gripped the railing and grinned.

XxX

“So you got a little stronger.” Kiba frowned. “Nothing has changed.”

“Say that when you rescue your partner.” Naruto laughed. “Admit it. You got fooled thoroughly Kiba.”

“Well from now on.” Kiba gritted. “I’m serious.”

“Oh?” Naruto shook Akamaru gently. “Then me too.”

“Let’s go.” Naruto watched the smoke ball spin towards him before he switched Akamaru so he could hold the dog in one hand. It was honestly better to remove the dog entirely but not yet. He wanted to see what Kiba could do and he wanted to show what he could do. So first...

Naruto’s smoke bomb hit the floor a few seconds after Kiba’s own and the entire floor was covered in smoke. Naruto let Akamaru go and chuckled at the soft yip he heard before he used the smoke cover to start running through seals. At the back of his thoughts he ran through his inventory.

Kiba’s senses were going to be a pain to deal with but it was a lucky thing they had that adventure in the Forest of Death.

XxX

“Amazing.” Sakura whispered as the smoke began to clear.

“Well it is going to get even more amazing I bet.” Kakashi-sensei mused.

XxX

Loud growling. The smoke cleared and Naruto frowned at Akamaru’s red fur. What had happened in those few seconds?

“Red?” He asked Kiba.

“That’s why his name is Akamaru.”

“I believe we’ve had this conversation before.” Naruto grinned. “And we agreed to disagree then.”
“It’s different now. We’re going to end it here. Let’s go Akamaru.” Naruto watched the dog jump onto Kiba’s shoulders and frowned at the surge of chakra he could feel.

XxX

“Beast human clone? That’s new.” Naruto breathed. Kiba and Akamaru were quite the sight but now one was Kiba and one was Akamaru but they both looked like Kiba. So what to do? He could copy them… but oh the problems with that. Kiba had said his nose was like a dog’s.

He could disguise his outside with a henge but Kiba just might be able to sniff past that. But he was so used to underestimating Naruto… that he just might think it possible that Naruto would pull off a simple act.

But instead of his first move being to separate the two. He needed to blind them and how lucky… that had been sort of an original plan anyway.

They both leapt at him. Fast speed. High chakra and Naruto was willing to bet enhanced senses as well. It might have worked… it might have put him on the run if he had not trained with people much faster, much fiercer and deadlier.

XxX

Naruto had disappeared. Kiba paused where he was and glanced around looking for the offending orange. He heard Akamaru snarling in human beast form.


Boom?

Then the area below his feet went up in smoke.

XxX

“How?” Sakura demanded as Naruto leapt into the smoke.


“Well he could have doctored it in some way.”

“Ah!” Sakura exclaimed and Kakashi looked at her curiously. “Well nothing really but back in the Forest Naruto did some stuff.”

“I see.” Kakashi mused as the smoke cleared and there were three Kibas. “But he really has a bad sense of humour.”

XxX

When your eyes could not tell you, you depended on your ears to tell you. When you could not depend on those let your nose and tongue guide you. When those could not be depended on your touch and brain will guide you.
But when you have lost all that what are you? A human? A shinobi? Someone capable?

Shinobi uses all tools at their disposal. Their body they harnessed and trained. Naruto had seen ‘crippled’ soldiers and shinobi be the biggest threats.

Shinobi were not out to fight fair. People always tried to get the upper hand. If they saw you dependant on something they tried to take it.

Dependant on your sword? Their fighting will involve ways to block, stop or break it if they can’t take it from you. A partner?

Kidnapped.

Keen senses?

Blinded.

Leaving you blind and depending on instinct. But Naruto knew which one was the real Kiba kept Kiba in sight as he growled at Akamaru.

“What the hell. You can’t fool me with these tricks.” Kiba snapped. A henge won’t fool us. We’ve been together for ages!”

XxX

“He got to him.” Kurenai hissed under her breath. She glanced at Kakashi wanting to blame him but she knew Naruto’s development was more because of outside help. Literally.

Two Akamarus on the ground and whimpering and Kiba did not know which was real but the real problem...was that not only was one fake. That ‘fake’ was not even ‘real’.

XxX

Akamaru down. In more ways than one. Naruto watched as Kiba’s rage built as he stood up. the clone dispelled. Akamaru would be fine. Eventually. He would sleep and wake a little dizzy and plenty hungry.

“You.” Kiba hissed.

“Yeah.” Naruto laughed. “Me. Serious yet?”

“Would be my luck that this would be a clone too.” Kiba sneered.


XxX

In the academy, Naruto and Kiba had been almost evenly matched in fighting. Now was not the case. Shikamaru watched as Naruto used the flexibility Shikamaru was unaware that he had to quickly manoeuvre around Kiba.

It was incredible and the two boys were so focused on each other. This match was hotter than Shikamaru had anticipated. And that low flame that Kiba had sparked with his words. Something interesting. Asuma patted him on the shoulder and Shikamaru looked up to see the man grinning down at him. He rolled his eyes.
“It’s not a joke Kiba. You have no idea what that means to me now.” Naruto hissed. “If you’re ready to put your life on the line then say so. Because for something like that, our fight will tear this building down. It’s not some kid’s pipe dream. Hokage is something serious. If you want to compete with me.” The senbon slid into his hand almost too easily. “I’ll whip you like a dog.” He finished.

“Damn you Naruto.” Kiba’s eyes had settled.

“Let’s end this.” Naruto whispered. Akamaru was out of play. Kiba’s nose was compromised and Kiba was weary. He had taken hits and the only thing Naruto had was a little exhaustion.

“Things changed.” Naruto gritted as Kiba dodged his punch. “People change they have to or they’ll die! If you’re weak today, you can change that. Change yourself but to rely or envy people because of stupid thing like families.” His kick connected and Naruto jumped back a Kiba sagged to his knees.

“Shut up.” Kiba snarled as he got back up.


Instinct made him do it. He caught Kiba’s wrist with one hand kneed him in the chest before he released and used Kiba’s bent back as leverage to go up and to push Kiba to roll on the ground.

“We’re all strong. In our own ways.” Naruto pointed out. “We’ve got our own strengths and we apply them to the same missions.” Kiba rolled over once again. Naruto breathed careful and focused. Kiba’s shuffled run he met with his own faster paced one.

The inspiration was actually from Sakura. Kiba froze when Naruto’s fist hit his jaw. Naruto worried for a few seconds before Kiba tilted and fell backwards.

“We were always arguing as kids huh.” Naruto muttered as he watched Kiba’s still form. “But when you are in front all the time, it’s hard to see when people come up from behind you. But no hard feelings right? We gave it our best.” Kiba was unmoving so Naruto crossed over to where Akamaru lay. He ignored the examiner as he crouched as dug into his weapons pouch and brought out the quick acting antidote.

After all, He had enjoyed fighting Kiba. He did not, had never wanted to really hurt him.

“Seventh round winner.” The examiner wheezed and Naruto picked up Akamaru to go back to Kiba. “Uzumaki Naruto.”

Sakura’s happy cheer filled the room and Naruto met Kakashi-sensei’s gaze and nodded before he gently reunited dog and master. Shinobi and friend.

That boy had fooled them Uzumaki Naruto. He had really fooled them all of them. Kurenai watched and shook her head as she was unable to believe what she had witnessed. Until the very
last she had believed Kiba had it.

But they were wrong. Very wrong. Naruto had it from the very beginning and she was curious. How much stronger had he gotten? Would there be no limit to his growth?

She glanced at Kakashi who was simply watching his student before she sought out the Hokage’s gaze. The man looked pleased and worried at the same time.

Most likely for the reasons that she herself was worried.

The boy was good at hiding. He could not have known he would face Kiba but his simple plan had so many steps so many ways that had to be prepared to take Kiba down. However, the boy’s mind worked… they did not know the half of it.

XxX

Even though he had started uncertain and came to his own conclusion. Naruto had still held back. Kakashi was amused. He had realized it from the get go. The senbon work had been Naruto a little bit serious.

He had faced Kiba seriously. Not underestimating him at all but his true strength he had not shown. And as it was Naruto had not gone beyond simple concealment jutsus, transformation jutsus and clone jutsus. Kakashi wondered when everyone else would realize that.

And after all that worry he had just decided to do what he could without going too far.

That was just like Naruto. Kakashi smiled as he watched him.

XxX

“Well I won’t disgrace the two of us by losing my next match.” Naruto promised. “Heh, I know you’re unconscious now but…” Naruto grinned. “You’ve earned my respect Kiba. Let’s fight again.” He closed Kiba’s arm around Akamaru. “All of us ya know. Training or something. But not in an exam or anything. As friends.” He sighed as the medical nins lifted the stretcher. “We’ll probably argue and fight more in the future but I guess we’re that type of friends huh.” He said wistfully.

Or maybe.

“Rivals.” He shrugged. “But I like friends better.” He glanced to the board which had not started the selection as yet before his gaze found Sakura and Kakashi-sensei. “Yeah, I like the sound of friends better.” He muttered.
Chuunin Selection Exams Preliminary Exam Eighth round Hyuuga Hinata vs Hyuuga Neji

Chapter Notes

This chapter might come across a little emotional (which is good because I was emotional when I was writing this) Many of you were curious to why I I decided to do the prelim exams. Naruto's fight, Sasuke's fight. Sakura's fight even Hinata's fight. Their progress is not only crucial but something I realized I myself needed to write.

And if you look close enough...you see bits and pieces of Naruto's past. You will have questions ^_^ but you have to wait~

Now 2 fights left ^_^ I'm fairly certain you guys are excited for that
*Another thing I updated the tags
**And as we go along the tags will be updated

Anyway darlings I think that is it for now. Enjoy the chapter!

“Good job!” Sakura’s congratulatory pat on the back nearly winded him. As it was Naruto coughed a little before he managed to get enough wind to reply.

“You knew I was going to win.” Naruto gloated.

“But I didn’t know how did I?” She asked. “And that was amazing!”

“What was your favourite part?” Naruto asked eagerly.

“When you kidnapped Akamaru.” She laughed. “I think that was Kakashi-sensei’s favourite part too!”

“Well actually no.” Kakashi-sensei corrected. “My favourite part of Naruto’s fight would have to be…hmm when he used Kiba’s nose against him?”

“Oh I liked that one too.” Sakura groaned. “And how you kept using shadow clones.” She lightly touched his shoulder. “Are you okay? Kiba wasn’t holding back.”

“I’ll heal.” Naruto shrugged. “It’s nothing too bad. Just scrapes and the odd bruise.” The more serious stuff had been healed already or had been a clone.

“Next match.” Sakura mumbled as the board spun. “Who is it?”

“We’re running out of people.” Naruto pointed out. He glanced at Lee. “And some people are getting impatient.” He whispered. Kakashi-sensei glanced in Lee’s direction before he sighed.

“He isn’t the only one impatient.” Kakashi-sensei whispered. “Some people are beginning to look a bit worried.” Naruto glanced in the direction Kakashi-sensei was looking towards and winced at how Chouji stood watching the proceedings.

“Some strong guys are left.” Naruto sighed.
“And so far only one full team has made it through.” Kakashi-sensei hummed. “Lucky.”

Xxx

Hyuuga Hinata. Hyuuga Neji. The names flashed on the screen and Naruto had a split second of confusion. The names were exactly the same… which was weird. He glanced down to find Hinata to find her staring at the board with a sort of horror.

“Maa.” Kakashi-sensei sighed behind him.

“Hyuuga.” Sakura muttered. “The same clan?”

“Who’s that?” Naruto frowned. Sakura pointed him in the direction of Lee and Naruto spotted the guy that had the problem with Sasuke not too long ago.

Brown hair. White eyes.

“Him huh.” Naruto glanced back to Hinata who had not taken her glance from the board. “And Hinata.” Which meant more of that jutsu that he had seen.

“That’s a bad match up.” Kakashi-sensei muttered. “That’s nearly inhumane.”

“Sensei.” Naruto hissed as their Sensei stared at the board.

“Didn’t Lee-kun call him the rookie from last year?” Sakura whispered. “This doesn’t look good.” Hinata’s head was bowed as she headed for the stairs.

“I’ve heard a few things.” Kakashi-sensei muttered. “This has the potential to be very bad.”

Naruto twitched and refrained from saying anything. His eyes were on Hinata as she walked. But her head was bowed and she looked so shy and he could feel others around them. It had not begun and they already thought it over.

Kurenai-sensei looked sick as she looked down at the field and even Naruto knew that she should not look that way at all. It was not fair. The match had not begun and everyone was dismissing the struggle it had taken Hinata to get to this point.

“Hinata!” He called. He ignored Sakura’s jerk of surprise. “Beat him to a pulp Hinata!” His voice reached her. He watched her glance up at him her lost scared expression overcome with surprise. “You can do it!” He cheered.

“Naruto.” Sakura said softly.

“Do your best!” He called again. Kiba would have cheered for her. Shino did not seem the type and honestly Bushier brows-sensei seemed to be the only sensei that would actually do any cheering. So it would be up to him.

Xxx

“I never thought I’d be facing you Hinata-sama.” Neji said softly. Hinata’s heartbeat increased as she saw the barely banked fury in his eyes.

“Neji nii-san.” She murmured. She wanted to cower but-

Naruto had called to her. He had cheered her on and right now he believed in her. He thought her best would be good enough. Naruto thought that and right now he was calling for her. She could
not shy away at this moment. She met Neji’s eyes and straightened her back.

XxX

“That’s what I’m talking about!” Naruto crowed as Hinata straightened her back. “Go Hinata!”

“Quiet down and let the match begin.” Sakura laughed. “You’ll overwhelm her you know.”

XxX

“Siblings?” Naruto asked Kakashi-sensei curiously.

“They are members of one of Konoha’s oldest bloodline limit clans. The house of the Hyuuga Clan.” Kakashi-sensei answered.

“So siblings?” Naruto asked curiously.

XxX

“Forgive me Neji nii-san.” She said softly. “But no.” Her gaze darted back to Naruto. After Naruto’s match. After the way he cheered and sounded like he believed in her strength. She could not back down. That would make her unworthy of everything that had come before and wash away the progress and resolve she had.

XxX

“Those two.” Kakashi mused. “They are members of the Hyuuga’s main house and branch house.”

“Did you say… main house and branch house.” Naruto asked slowly. Kakashi watched the interesting expression cross Naruto’s face before it disappeared.

“Yes.” Kakashi answered. “Hinata is in the main house of the Hyuuga house. That boy he is in the branch house. He carries the same blood but is lower.”

“But they are still family?” Naruto asked.

“They could be cousins.” Sakura answered. “But the branch house most likely serves the needs for the main house right Kakashi-sensei?”

“Exactly.” Kakashi said softly. Naruto’s face changed again a more hesitant expression emerging as he glanced to the two facing each other.

“Must make fighting difficult then. They are family.” Sakura sighed. Lee perked up at Sakura’s words and Gai grimaced.

“Well.” Lee spoke up. “Things have happened in the Hyuuga family over the years. And those two do not get along right now.”

“I’ll say.” Naruto said bitterly. “That guy has a foul look. A bitter look.” He corrected himself. “And sometimes main families do things to keep on top.” He said softly. Lee glanced at him curiously and Kakashi could not blame him. “And the branch is the one that suffers. Sometimes
the main families go and do some things.” He gripped the railing tightly. “And it puts those not in
the main house at a disadvantage because of their agenda.”

“So what? they feel slighted?” Sakura asked curiously.

“Yeah.” Naruto said softly. “It’s not something that sometimes happens either. When the main
house rules with an iron fist, the branch will get upset and if they don’t watch it.” Naruto’s glance
to Sakura conveyed something Kakashi did not catch but Sakura gasped anyway.

“No way!”

“In their quest to protect whatever. Preserve whatever.” Naruto shrugged. “The main house
sometimes get over their head and not all people stand for it but rich blood will run thin eventually
and with work the thick blood will become rich.”

“Did you know?” Sakura whispered softly as Lee turned back to the match.

“One or two.” Naruto whispered. “Branch members.”

“Oh.” She said softly. “Everyone?”

“Just one or two.” Naruto repeated. “And those who escaped a revolt or left before it. They were
full of hate Sakura-chan.”

XxX

“You don’t make a good shinobi Hinata-sama. I’ve watched you.” Neji said softly. “You’re too
kind. You wish for harmony and avoid conflict. You agree with others and let them run over you
without resisting. You have no self-confidence. You feel inferior. This exam is not for you. It
would be best for you to remain a Genin. The reason you’re here. Is because the exam can be taken
only in three and your teammates begged you to. You were unable to refuse them.”

“You’re wrong!” She exclaimed. “I wanted to enter.”

“Don’t lie.” His voice was soft. “Now is the time to forfeit. You’ve come this far but even here is
too far for you.”

“I wanted to change myself. That’s why I entered. I’ve changed.” She pleaded but her eyes were on
his neck.

“You’re so spoiled.” Neji hissed. “People cannot change their selves! Losers are losers. Failures
are failures and they will be nothing more than that. Because people are unable to change
differences are born. Expressions like elite and loser are created. All people judge and are judged
on their values. These factors that are unchangeable are what people base to discriminate and are
discriminated against. And they suffer. People and things cannot be changed just as the fact that I
am from the branch house and you are from the main house cannot be changed.”

XxX

“Hinata!” Naruto roared. His blood was boiling the longer that guy talked. “Don’t listen to him!
He’s talking out of his ass!”

“Naruto!” Sakura choked next to him.

“People change!” Naruto shouted. He leaned against the railings and stared into Hinata’s white
eyes below him. He could still see them the two different pictures in his mind eye.

Tangled orange hair and a raging spitfire and later much later that same damn messy hair but a sweet smile and indulgent tone.

An aloof damaged old woman and later not too much later a kind old woman with sharp wit

“Don’t let that idiot decide things for you! You change! The one who changes is you! Kick his ass Hinata! Don’t let everything go to waste! He thinks he can see you but you’ll have to show him! You got this far, on your own strength right? If he can’t see that change, then the one with the problem is him!”

“Naruto.” Sakura said softly but Naruto ignored her. He felt a cold line of sweat drip down his arm as he thought and thought back. Two images. The same person. How they had come and how they had changed.

“No wonder they can’t recognise me.” Nina said quietly as she gently tugged the hood over Naruto’s head. “I think differently. I act differently. I’m not the me they knew anymore. Isn’t that sad?”

“I think it’s great.” Naruto mumbled around the bean cake. “Nee-chan, don’t you think so too?”

“Well.” Nina mused. “Things change day to day. Even stones. Just we don’t see it but after a long time we see how it has changed.”

“I don’t get it.” Naruto muttered and she laughed and patted him on the head.

“Well it is something old people say.” She laughed. “I’ve been hanging with Mai too long it seems.”

“He’s not some all-seeing deity.” Naruto scoffed. “He can’t see anything. He doesn’t know about your pain. Your struggle and your training!” Naruto stressed. “Are you going to let that go to waste here and now and forfeit? If he doesn’t think you’ve changed who cares? You believe you have changed. You! That’s what is important Hinata!”

“Your eyes have changed a little.” Haku murmured. “They have changed a little.” Haku kept his voice low as they followed Zabuza. His broad back leading them and the Demon brothers trailing behind. “It’s nice. I hope they change more.” Haku smiled then and Naruto swallowed before he smiled back. His heart felt tight.

XxX

“Naruto-kun.” She said softly.

“Stand up for yourself! This is painful to see!” Naruto yelled and she looked away. For some reason she wanted to smile.

“Thank you.” She whispered to the floor. She took a deep breath before she met Neji’s gaze.

“So you won’t forfeit. I’m not responsible for what happens.” He said slowly.

“I won’t go back on my words.” She allowed her eyes to activate and went on guard. “Neji nii-san. We’ll fight.”

XxX
The stance was different to the one Hinata had used back during the spar. But her manner had changed too. Naruto was happy with that. She seemed serious now. She was serious now and unlike the spar back then she seemed more capable.

But would it be enough?

The two of them had the same eyes. Seeing something he could not see. This fight was about to be painful.

They both came at each other and Naruto had a sense of familiarity as if they had fought before. There was a sense of something as they came at each other. The way Hinata deflected Neji’s first arm thrust was quick and almost fluid the same for the way Neji brutally knocked her arm away.

The Hyuuga style was something fluid and amazing to watch.

And they saw something that he could not see.

“It’s brutal but.” Sakura hesitated.

“Graceful.” Kakashi-sensei put in. “That’s what you were thinking. Their clan arts is rather fluid even as it is devastating.”

And it picked up in pace. Naruto watched as Hinata turned, twisted and went up in speed and Neji was going right alone with her but then he saw it the small opening. He grinned as Hinata went for it, then frowned as the strike she made only glanced off.

He had seen her do that move. It had been to him but it was somewhere else and it had stung a bit but that would not take him down now and Naruto knew it was the same for Neji.

“Not deep enough. But she got him!” Sakura grinned.

“That technique. The gentle fist, it is different to most other techniques. The user causes damage by flowing their chakra into the opponent’s chakra coils. A technique that destroys the inner organs. The Gentle Fist.” Gai-sensei said. Naruto rubbed his shoulder and nodded.

“It may not look impressive but you’ll definitely feel it afterwards.” Kakashi-sensei said. “You can’t train your inner body. Even the toughest guy can get a critical hit from that.”

“Awesome.” Naruto grinned.

“It’s a nice bloodline limit.” Kakashi-sensei agreed. “Nice for the user that is.”

“Yeah.” Naruto muttered. “That’s why Hinata said it was dangerous.” He sighed.

“When?” Sakura asked.


“When did Hinata tell you.”

“Before the exams?” Naruto thought back. “When we got back from the mission in Wave. Around then I think.”

“Really? You didn’t mention it.”

“There wasn’t anything to mention.” Naruto said dryly.
There was no doubt that Hinata was good but Neji. That boy from the branch family was better. Kakashi could see Hinata gaining control but he wondered for how long Neji would allow it.

And he knew that if he could see it, there was a great chance Naruto would as well. Or he might have already.

“But how can they do that?” Kakashi tuned back in to Sakura and Naruto’s conversation. “It’s not as if the inner coils system is visible. How do they attack that in the body?”

“No.” Kakashi said softly. “They can see them. With the eyes of those two, with the Byakugan. You would be able to see it. The attacks of the gentle fist is different from normal attacks. You release your chakra from your hands and flow it into your opponent’s body. This is how you cause damage to the inner coils system.”


Blood gushed from Hinata’s mouth and Kakashi barely held in his sigh. It seemed Neji was no longer going to draw it out.

Not yet. She was not done yet. Her vision wavered but just for a second. She ignored the pain. She would not fall yet. She was not done yet.

“So this is the extent of the main house’s strength.” He said softly. She ignored him. She aimed her next thrust higher up. The chest area but pain went up her arm and she froze. Neji secured her hand and she watched in confusion as he jerked the sleeve back to reveal the small bruised spots.

“No way.” She said softly.

“You can’t fully see the opening points can you Hinata-sama. My eyes can see the tiny chakra holes.” She knew where they were and how to react when she managed to close one. But for him to use it so effectively. He really was the genius they called him. But she was not done yet.

She was unable to dodge the next thrust. Her back hit the ground and she winced as she convulsed. The taste of blood heavy in her mouth. She twisted and knelt. Her body shook but she knew she would get off the ground.

“Hinata-sama this is the difference in talent that can never change. The gap between elite and loser. This is the reality that cannot be changed. You were setting yourself up for regret when you said you wouldn’t go back on your words. You must be overcome by desperation by now. No, you are.” A deep sigh. “Forfeit.”

Her hand clenched into a fist. “I won’t go back on my word once I made it.” It took effort but she was not going to kneel over here. “I said I changed. The old me would not have made it this far.” She admitted. She got up a bit more. Only one knee on the ground. “I can’t go back now. Everything would be mean less.” She smiled. “To walk away now, I’d lose the right to call myself a shinobi. Or, the shinobi I want to be, can’t be made if I walk away at this point.” She was hunched over and her vision was blurry. She tasted blood and her feet were a little weak but she was back on her feet.
“Damn it.” Lee clenched his feet. “Hinata-san is so impressive.”

“Yeah.” Naruto agreed. “I knew she had something in her but this…” He took a shaky breath. “I hope that bastard sees it.”

“Good or not.” Kakashi said softly as Hinata choked. “She’s at her limit.” He watched Hinata cough up more blood and met Naruto’s gaze.

“I know she is at her limit.” Naruto said softly. “She knows her body too, but she’s not going to give up here.”

“Neji’s opening points attacks have damaged her and shut down her chakra flow. She can no longer do her gentle fist attacks.” Kakashi said softly.

“Don’t go deciding a match before it’s over.” Naruto hissed. “Hinata! You can do it!” Kakashi watched as Hinata turned her attention to them. “Don’t give up!”

“But she…” Sakura whispered. “She’s damaged!”

“She’s on her feet!” Naruto snapped. “I won’t tell her to lie down after she worked so hard to get there!”

“No way.” Sakura breathed as Hinata launched into action once again. Slower. Clumsier and taking more damage but she was moving.

Kakashi watched. The match was decided in terms of winner. Unless Hinata could pull off a recovery. But when he watched her fight, struggle. He could not help but glance at Naruto and know her new found strength could be attributed to the boy. Naruto had given her hope and courage and even afterwards, Kakashi had the feeling she would still have that.

Hinata fell unable to stop herself. Not even able to brace her fall. But she would get back up. She would get back up somehow.

“You don’t understand anything.” It was hard but her gaze searched and focused until it found Neji. “From the beginning your attacks have done nothing. They can do nothing.”

To her feet. She could do it and her ears were ringing but she could hear Naruto’s voice. Her feet shook. Her chest was in agony but she would not stop. Not here. She would not lay back. She had changed and this pain she would endure it and get to her feet again. She cradled her stomach. Her vision was blurry but she once again found him. Neji.

“Why do you stand?” He sounded agonised. “If you keep pushing yourself you’ll die.” Why did she stand? She was not done yet. Her hands could still move. She could still get to her feet. And in front of the one she admired, she could not look that bad.

“It’s not over.” She gasped.

“Acting tough is useless, you can barely stand I can see that. From the time of your birth the responsibilities of the clan was forced on you and you hated it. You hated yourself for your own
weakness but people cannot change. That is destiny. There is no need to suffer anymore. Let it go!”

“No!” She surprised herself how loud and clear her voice was. “That’s not true Neji nii-san. Because I can see it. Maybe because of who I am but I can see it. It’s not me at all.” She continued. The pain was increasing. “The person lost and suffering in the destiny of the Hyuuga main and branch houses is you. It’s in your eyes.” She choked.

She had barely finished her words when Neji disappeared. She was alarmed but she could not move. Her vision wavered but she got the glimpse of Neji coming her way.

“Neji-kun the match is over!” A back in front of her. The examiner’s. Hinata was aware of three other people.

“Neji give it a rest.” It was Neji’s Jounin sensei. “You promised me you would not lose your head over the main family.”

“Why do even the other Jounins jump in?” Naruto’s sensei. Kakashi-sensei had Neji’s hand in a tight grip. “More special treatment for the main family then?”

“Because our senses are far better than yours.” Kakashi-sensei said softly. She wondered on his words but then her heart clenched tightly. Too tight. Too much. She gasped. She tried to breathe but choked instead she slipped to her knees and coughed blood.

“Hinata!” Kurenai sensei sounded panicked but Hinata tried to wave her away and get back to her feet once again. But when she got there her head went light. “Hinata!”

A warm arm around her back. Had she been falling? “Good job.” Naruto’s face came into view as her eyes slowly closed. But she did not want to close them. He looked so happy for her. She wanted to see it a while longer. But she had changed… right?

XxX

“Her colour’s bad.” Sakura said as Naruto slowly lowered Hinata to the ground.

“Right the match is over.” The examiner said as he looked back to Hinata.

“Good job Hinata.” Naruto said softly. “You tried so hard.” She had fought hard against all the odds.

“Oi to the loud one over there.” Naruto looked up to see the glare Neji was sending his way. “If you’re a shinobi cut out the pathetic cheering for others and another thing a loser is just a loser. Nothing will change that fact.”

This bastard.

“You want to test me?” Naruto snarled. The calm was coming. The leash… once again was slipping.

“Naruto-kun!” Before Naruto could do anything. Lee was in the way. “I understand your feelings!”

“I doubt that.” Naruto hissed. “Else that bastard would have been killed in his sleep long ago!”

“I do understand how you feel but fighting should occur in official matches! I also want to fight him and see whether his theory is right or wrong.”

“It’s wrong.” Naruto snarled. “No village raised-” He broke off and met the Hokage’s gaze before
he gritted his teeth. “No pissbaby like him would ever understand anything like changing.” He hesitated. “But alright.”

He watched as the medical nins placed Hinata on the stretcher before he knelt. Her blood was warm on the floor. He dipped his hand in it. His gaze on Neji’s the entire time.

“Fuck you.” He hissed harshly. “In her place I’ll defeat you. I’ll beat you down you bastard. Whatever hole you’ve gone and lost yourself in I’ll dig you out!” He clenched his bloody fist as he held his hand in Neji’s direction. “The pain you tried to give to her. I’ll magnify it!” The leash slipped again and it took effort to keep his eyes from changing.

XxX

Naruto had some nice eyes. His focus was on Neji and his stance. The way he spoke. It told of protective instincts. It echoed of some sort of past. A past Kakashi knew he would have to dig in eventually but his eyes, when had Hinata become someone that needed avenging to Naruto?

Kakashi watched the Hokage as he watched Naruto and shook his head at the small smile that flickered to life. It seemed the Hokage had come up with something a little troublesome.

But whenever those two clashed it might be catastrophic. Naruto would not hold back and he meant that promise. He had let himself slip. Currently he had an interesting aura. Right now he was the avenger.

XxX

_I promise Hinata._ “You’re going down.” Naruto promised as he glared at Neji. No matter what he had to resort to. He would be going down. His ideals. His ways. His thoughts that he tried to push on others. Naruto would not stand for it.

Neji would topple and it would be Naruto doing it. He would avenge Hinata who had changed and call it justice.
I loved the original Lee fight. Lee was awesome back then...so I tried really hard not to let him down here. I love that little darling

Barely made my deadline lol one last fight guys!

His blood was humming. A low hum and his skin ached. Naruto hated it but he walked slowly to where Sakura waited and to where the others stood. It was time for the next match.

“Poor Chouji. The competition looks really bad.” Sakura muttered. Naruto followed her gaze and had to agree. Even if Chouji got stuck with Lee it would be bad. That Sound Ninja that was left… he was an unknown. Just like the last Sand Nin.

“Well we’ll see just how bad it is in a sec.” Naruto shrugged. “The board is about to pick.”

XxX

“Yosh!” Lee’s voice echoed and Gaara had already gone to the main floor. Naruto guessed the guy really could not wait any longer. Actually…

He certainly had felt impatient. That Gaara.

Lee’s excitement was contagious. Naruto was happy for him. Lee was excited and Lee was excited over his opponent. Naruto was happy for him, but he still was bitter. For an obvious reason too.

Someone like that Neji-

The leash slipped again and it took a second of harsh breathing to set him right.

The time for Naruto to pummel that guy could not come soon enough. Naruto’s fist clenched but the skin was tight. He glanced at his fist unsurprised to see the blood on it. Flaking.

Hinata.

She was strong. Far stronger than he had thought. Naruto had seen some of the truth in Neji’s word. Some. Hinata was kind. Truly kind.

She had asked about him. Worried about him and she had not wanted to hurt him. She considered him a friend. Hinata’s inner strength was amazing.

Naruto brushed his hand over his clenched fist and felt his resolve harden. He had not really thought about the people he would like to see in a village. The small ones they had stayed near or in for any length of time. They had been small and suffering.

Not saying that there were not kind people around but they had been rare and hardened.

But Hinata, people like Hinata were the people he would like to watch over in a village. Hinata was strong. Holding onto her pain and trying to ease someone’s own.
That was the kind of person, he wanted in a village. If there were more people like Hinata, there would not be so much pain in the world.

Or maybe even that thought was a pipe dream.

But bloodied and battered. In pain and agony. She stood up determined to change. Sure that she had and that she would.

If she really was in the main house and as high enough as the others were implying, it would be nice. She was the type that he would like to see and have as a friend when he became Kage.

XxX

“Hey don’t convince him with food. Are you trying to get Chouji killed?” Shikamaru was usually down with bribing but he knew how strong and dangerous these guys looked. He was rarely wrong and he knew these guys would kill.

No matter the opponent. Look at Hinata for example. That guy Neji, he nearly killed her and Kurenai-sensei had looked ready to kill him herself.

The sound? He had fought one himself but that girl she had been looking to take him out. Not even make him forfeit. Chouji was okay but he was out these guys’ league.

“Don’t worry if things get dangerous I’ll jump in and save you.” Asuma-sensei’s tone was trying to be comforting but Shikamaru scoffed. Asuma-sensei had not even gone to help Hinata. Even Kakashi-sensei had gone in.

Hell even Naruto had gone. Lee too but everyone had jumped in.

Except Asuma. If Chouji actually listened to him the one to jump in might actually have to be Shikamaru and would rather not, that be a total drag.

“Let’s go steak! Let’s go steak!” Chouji had succumbed.

Let him go and get eaten then if he let such a small thing sway his mind. Idiot had no sense of self preservation.

XxX

“What do you think that giant gourd is used for?” Sakura wondered.

“Maybe it has a puppet inside.” Naruto mused. “Or bugs? Like Kakashi-sensei was talking about earlier.”

“Whatever it has in… I have a bad feeling about it.” Sakura said softly. “I don’t… I don’t like the look in his eyes.”

“Alright Lee! Go do it!” Gai-sensei was loud and encouraging.

But would Lee be alright? That gourd. That guy… she had a bad feeling.

XxX

“To get to face you this early. I couldn’t be happier.” Lee admitted.

“Pft.” Gaara snorted. “Then you’re the only one here that excited.”
“Ninth match…begin!”

Lee’s first move was a running kick which was quickly countered by…sand. Naruto inhaled sharply at it. Lee was started too as well if the sound was anything to go by but he quickly recovered and dodged the moving sand.

The living sand.

Lee was quick. Fast, but everywhere he went the red head’s sand blocked. There was no opening. The defense was perfect. The guy was an ass. A dangerous sort but he had not moved from his position. He had not done a thing beyond stand still but the sand blocked Lee’s every move.

Amazing.

A thick gathering of the sand pushed Lee back considerably. Naruto heard Sakura gasp next to him and he was aware of Kakashi-sensei tense nearby but he was unable to tear his eyes of the spectacle.

“So the huge gourd was filled with sand.” He mumbled as he watched. Still Lee quickly regained his position and went in a zig zagged position and dashed towards Gaara once again.

Looking for a weakness even as the sand hovered and coiled like a living thing.

He punched. He moved. He kicked. He was fast on his feet but the sand countered quickly. Solidifying and Naruto found it hard to understand exactly how that worked. But the sand was light and quick. Lee was getting nowhere and Naruto could see Lee’s frustration.

“Lee-san’s fast paced movements aren’t having any effect.” Sakura murmured. “He can’t get through.”

“So it seems.” Kakashi-sensei murmured.

“The attacks aren’t working at all.” Naruto sighed.

“Shouldn’t he use something else then?” Sakura questioned. “A water jutsu… something.”

“It’s not that he won’t. it’s that he can’t.” Gai-sensei spoke up. “Lee is a shinobi that can only use taijutsu.”

“Well that jutsu looks impenetrable.” Kakashi-sensei muttered. “He’s using the sand as a shield.”

“Is that… magnet release?” Naruto asked curiously.

XxX

Of all the things to hear. Kakashi had not expected to hear that from Naruto. He looked down at the boy to see him not even looking at him but his gaze instead fixed on Gaara.

“You’ve seen this jutsu before?” Kakashi asked softly.

“No.” Naruto’s voice was sure. “But what he’s doing. I think it is magnet release… it is isn’t it? That’s a kekkei genkai. A bloodline limit I’m sure of it.”

“And have you seen magnet release before?” Kakashi probed. Naruto was distracted enough that he
might let something slip.

“Yeah, it wasn’t like this though but I’ve seen something close enough. He made it move around him. When you said shield of sand… it got me thinking.” Naruto mused before he glanced back at Kakashi. “It was an Iwa hunter nin.” Naruto’s eyes were amused. He knew exactly what Kakashi had been trying to do.

Kakashi shrugged because what else could he have done? But Naruto’s knowledge was once again wider than he had estimated. He knew there were bloodline limits in the group. He just never thought the others would have sat Naruto down and taught him about them.

“I guess he carries it around in that gourd and uses his chakra. That’s why it is so fast.” Naruto muttered. “And it looks almost instinctive. I guess nobody gets close.” Naruto nodded slowly. “He’s a long range type.”

“Yeah I’m guessing so.” Sakura chimed in. “His stance says he doesn’t like to move. He prefers to deal with it from a distance.”

“Which means if you break the shield… that he sucks at taijutsu.” Naruto answered.

“But it would take breaking the shield.” Kakashi pointed out. “Somehow I don’t think anyone has.”

XxX

“Lee!” Bushier brows sensei called out. “Take them off!”

“Take what off?” Naruto asked curiously. “His shoes? Because that sand is fast and Lee is fast but shoes aren’t going to make a difference.”

“But Gai-sensei, that’s only for when I must protect many precious people isn’t it?” Lee had perched on the statue and looked confused. But at least he knew whatever bushier brows was talking about.

“It’s alright! I’ll allow it.” Gai-sensei laughed. His smile was too bright but Naruto looked back to see the amazement on Lee’s face and decided to let it slide.

Lee tugged down the leg covering and Naruto’s eyes widened at the sight of the weights. He had those on the entire time? When he had been fighting with Sasuke? Back in the exam? Amazing. And he was that fast with them on?

“Weights.” Sakura breathed as Lee tugged off the weights.

XxX

“What an old training style Gai.” Kakashi shook his head at the display. Lee tossed the weights aside.

“Now I can move easier.” He announced. Kakashi’s eye was lazily fixed on the falling weights.

Then the explosion rocked the floor. Kakashi raised his hands to his face in horror as the smoke rose and the cracking echoed.

“Isn’t that a bit too much Gai?” He choked out.

“Lee go!” Gai was ignoring him. Typical.
Fast. With the amazing weights gone. Naruto had not been expecting the explosion that had rocked the floor. It was far more amazing than he had expected.

Lee was faster than before. Almost a blur. He was fast. It was amazing. Incredible and Naruto had a feeling that the redhead would not be looking so impassive from this state on.

Which was good. He wanted it that way. Lee zig zagged all over the floor before he headed right for Gaara’s blind spot. Naruto held his breath hoping and hoping that this time Lee would break through the shield.

XxX

Fast. Very fast. Kakashi could see the difference. Lee had not landed a hit but he was getting close enough. In some cases, breaking through but not far enough.

There were hints of a leg breaking through or even Lee’s fist and Lee had not slowed down. It was incredible.

“Even if he can’t use anything but taijutsu. He won’t lose to anyone.” At Gai’s words Kakashi noted Naruto paying attention. “Because he’s a taijutsu specialist.”

He got through. From above a hard kick that Kakashi knew would bloody if it did not dizzy. Gai just might have a point there. A cut cheek. The boy was strong. Kakashi met Gai’s gaze and nodded.

“Lee won’t lose in speed to anyone. He’s strong.” Gai said proudly.

“Now we’re just getting started.” Lee said and Kakashi watched as Gaara changed his stance. An entire stance change for the first time of the battle.

“This is good.” Naruto murmured. Kakashi had to agree.

XxX

“Lee! Explode!”

“Yes!”

They were like their own battalion or something. But Lee’s morale was pretty good. And his speed had just doubled. Had the attacks before simply Lee adjusting to being without the seals? Gai had some seriously dangerous men on his team.

Not that Kakashi did not as well but it was the principle of the whole thing. Kakashi watched as Gaara got caught up in Lee’s after image. Looking and finding Lee after he had already moved. The shield looked instinctive. Rising to grab Lee even as Gaara looked somewhere else.

“Over here.” Lee said just before his fist connected. The sand that had been rising fell to the floor. A break in concentration? Or something else?

As Gaara stood back up the sand surrounding him crumbled and dripped. A strange thing to witness. And as the sand around Gaara crumbled. Gaara crumbled as well.

“Wha...” Lee sounded lost as sand cracked from Gaara’s face.
“That’s a scary expression.” Kakashi said softly. All that time. Gaara had been wearing a sand armour over himself. And now his excited, laughing expression was revealed.

With the sand basically covering his entire body. Gaara was unscratched. Kakashi watched as the sand rose again. Covered Gaara once more and hid the expression from view before and the boy again became impassive. Was that his true feelings buried under there? Kakashi snuck a look towards the Jounin that had accompanied the Sand genins.

The man looked almost panicked. So did the other two. This was definitely not good then. But as bad as it looked. There had to be some hope. That armour of sand… it looked difficult to do. It did not seem as instinctive as the barrier had been. Which meant this armour had to have a weakness.

Most likely the problem with it was stamina. Meaning this match would have to be ended quickly. Covering every part of his body with sand. It must be heavy and hard to maintain.

“Is that all?” Gaara did not sound winded at all. His quiet voice was a contrast to the face he had shown earlier.

Kakashi caught the glance Lee gave to Gai and he glanced at his friend and wondered what crazy thing they had planned. This was Gai after all. But Lee was young and although he seemed to have soaked up many parts of Gai’s personality… he seemed to possess some sort of sense. And Gai loved his team. Both had to know the risky situation they were in currently.

Lee unwrapped his bandages not enough but just a little that Kakashi got an idea what Lee might be trying for. Another Gai move. The lotus.

Good move the Lotus would smash down at a high speed. Lee would have the right idea if he was going for the lotus. That layer of sand might be strong but it was thin. That amount of speed would render the sand useless.

But Gaara was heavier now it just might be harder to get him off the ground. so what would Lee do?

As expected the first kick did not do enough but Kakashi was impressed with how Lee propelled himself and delivered relentless kicks forcing Gaara up high. Gai had a good student.

But the Lotus was self-damaging. It was risky Lee doing such a thing and Kakashi could see the effect it was having on Lee and Gaara saw it too.

XxX

Bushy brows was strong. And smart too. He could only do taijutsu but he was simply amazing. Not to forget the way he could fight.

And how fast and strong he was. He was simply amazing and with every step he made Naruto was simply blown away. Now that he got to see whatever this was… he was awed.

As the bandages wrapped around securing them both Naruto wanted to cheer even as his throat ached from the excitement. Then Lee swung them around and they started to fall. Naruto was simply so excited about this. Amazing.

They hit the ground hard. Well Lee flipped away as the sand rose up. A hard hit and Naruto just knew that the sand guard had been useless.

XxX
It was a solid impact. Damage to the floor and all.

“Is he dead?” Naruto asked as the damage became more visible.

“Lee-san won!” Sakura was excited.

Kakashi remained silent even as Gai got caught up in the excitement. Lee steadied himself and Kakashi saw the exact moment that he realized that the Gaara he had thrown to the ground… was an empty shell.

“When did he leave the sand?” Gai leaned over the rails as if it would change what they all saw. “There’s no way Lee could have missed that.”

“It was when you closed your eyes to pray.” Kakashi pointed out. His eyes drifted back to the large huddle of sand behind Lee that had started to move. “There he is.”

XxX

His style of fighting had completely changed. Before he had stood with his arms crossed his face impassive. Then he had dodged and tried to find Lee with his eyes. Now was completely different.

Naruto watched Gaara drop to his knee and watched his hands form seals. But Lee looked weakened. As the sand gathered Lee looked unable to dodge it.

Naruto winced as the wave of sand slammed Lee into the far wall. Then the barrage began. But instead of dodging, Lee endured.

“Why didn’t Lee-san dodge?” Sakura asked Naruto’s question.

“The lotus. The move Lee used just now is a double edged sword.” Gai-sensei said softly.

“It’s normally a forbidden technique. All the high speed jutsu puts a lot of stress of the legs and body. Right now, he’s feeling so much pain he can hardly move… right Gai?” Kakashi-sensei said and Naruto gaped at his sensei before he looked at Lee’s sensei for confirmation. Gai-sensei’s tightened face confirmed it for them.

“No way.” Another wave of sand pushed Lee further back and even his blocks were failing. “No way.” Sakura whispered. “At this rate… Lee-san will lose!”

Naruto watched the look on Gai-sensei’s face. It was contemplative. As if he were seeing more than the fight. He watched the concern fade and pride rise and he slowly turned back around to watch the fight.

“No way! Lee-san! Any more and you’ll die!” Sakura was distraught. Naruto wanted to tell her something. Anything but he was as caught up in the scene as everyone else.

Then it changed.

Naruto watched the blur dodge the next barrage of sand. Lee’s movement. Was it possible that it had returned?

“Lee-kun is smiling?” Naruto could understand Sakura’s shock. He was amazed himself. And impressed.

“No, now the tables will turn.” Gai-sensei sounded happy. “Konoha’s lotus blooms twice!” Naruto had no idea what that meant. But it sounded good.
“You’re finished here.” Gaara’s voice was quiet. Soft.

“Either way, this will end it.” Lee was tired but confident. Kakashi eyed Gai. What could the kid have up his sleeve?

Wait. Bloom twice.

“No way.” He only realized he had spoken aloud when Gai and Sakura turned to face him. “Gai, you.” He was unable to believe Gai had gone that far.

“It’s exactly what you think.” How could Gai say that in such a manner?

“Then. That genin kid.” Kakashi said slowly. “The eight celestial inner body gates…”

“Yeah. He’ll open them.” How could he say that so calmly? It can’t be. Kakashi peered down at the boy. It was impossible. “He had the ability.” Gai said slowly.

“Even if he had the ability.” Kakashi argued. “Such a dangerous technique like that.” Kakashi knew Gai had not forgotten how dangerous that technique was and for a genin? “The extreme lotus is one technique that shouldn’t be taught!” Gai knew that that! “I have no interest in making you tell me what that kid means to you, and your reasoning… but they are limits.” Gai knew better. No matter how much he felt close to them he should be thinking for them. Their safety. “I’ve lost a lot of respect for you Gai.”

Gai’s eyes came to rest on him. “What would you, know about that boy?” Gai’s gaze was almost angry. Protective. Something that Gai should have been feeling as he decided not to teach Lee that technique. “That kid has a precious thing that he would give up his life to prove. So I wanted to turn him into a man that could accomplish it. That’s all.”

There was more to it than that. Gai might want to lie to himself but they had been friends too long. Kakashi could see straight through him.

Kakashi recognised the stance and bit his tongue from further scolding Gai. What was done was done. Although it was a reckless foolish idea.

“Gai, how many gates can that kid open?”

“Five gates.” Gai said. Kakashi almost questioned his hearing. He watched Lee again. Impossible. Five gates? At his age? In such a short amount of time? It was no longer about hard work. The kid was a genius.

“What... what’s all of this?” Sakura questioned and he and Ga glanced at her. She was looking at the both of them. “What are these eight celestial gates? Naruto? You’ve heard of them?” She glanced at Naruto whose face only showed curiosity.

“Nope.” Naruto shook his head. “I don’t know any taijutsu masters.” Naruto frowned. “This is the first time I’ve ever heard about any celestial gates. What is that?”

“It’s the limit removal that is done in the preparation of the extreme lotus.” Gai answered.

“Limit removal?” Naruto asked and Sakura repeated in confusion.

“Yes.” Kakashi answered as he slipped up his hitai-ate to reveal his sharingan. “In the inner coils of
the body that chakra flows through are eight spots. The initial gate, the heal gate, the life gate, the harm gate, the limit gate, the view gate, the wonder gate, and the death gate. These are known as the eight gates.” He finished.

His eye focused on the two down below. He would use his sharingan to watch the match between those two.

“Incredible. It’s my first time hearing about this.” Sakura whispered.

“These eight gates are constantly working to limit the amount of chakra that flows around the body. The lotus forcibly releases these restraints using chakra. It allows you to release tens of times more power than usual… even as the body destroys itself. For example, the initial lotus is done by opening the first gate.”

“Wait… then the extreme lotus.” Sakura had glanced back to the battlefield her face pale.

“You release the brain’s restraints with the initial gate, then with the heal gate you forcibly raise your stamina. Then from the third gate you enter into the extreme lotus.” Gai confirmed.

“No way.” Sakura breathed. “Even the initial lotus damages the body so much. Any more and he could die!”

“Yes, this technique really and truly is a double edged sword.” Kakashi said softly. “Opening all the gates is called the state of eight celestial gates and for a short time you will gain the strength that will surpass Hokage. But in exchange for that you will certainly die.” He spared a glance at Gai.


The floor once again had taken massive damage.

There were some incredible genins gathered this year.

XxX

Lee had kicked Gaara up, sprinted forward and kicked him up high. The lotus would bloom twice. Naruto watched impressed. It was incredible.

Debris was everywhere. With every move from bushy brow. The place got fucked up. Naruto’s blood was racing. It was hard not to get pumped up for such a thing.

The sand was not keeping up. Lee’s speed had increased and Naruto’s eyes could detect the cracks in the armour. If Lee could keep it up… then he had it.

XxX

The armour of sand was being ripped off. Kakashi was impressed. But his muscles. Kakashi watched as Lee’s face showed the amount of damage he was enduring.

And then of course. The fifth gate.

This kid. He really was something. Kakashi took his eyes off the battle to see that Gai’s other student was watching with a sort of muted shock. Well, that was to be expected. The boy must have
been holding in these techniques as his trump card.

His speed had just increased again. The sand was coming off. And Gaara proved to be unable to keep up with the speed. Now what?

Lee’s force forced the two into the ground, another explosion. More flying debris and Kakashi watched in shock as the gourd turned to sand.

XxX

He had protected himself with the sand gourd. And now he was… Naruto watched as the sand snagged the obviously tired Lee. After everything they had heard, he knew that the lotus would not be blooming a third time.

True this Chuunin exam seemed the place to be taking a stand and performing miracles but already this was incredible.

The sand had wrapped around Lee's hand and leg in an almost vine like hold. “Desert coffin.” Gaara’s voice was rough. Raspy. Lee screamed and Naruto tensed. Lee fell and the sand descended once again.

XxX

Naruto had not seen. Had not felt Gai-sensei move. He had just appeared. Getting in between the two. Stopping Lee from being hurt more. Naruto’s heart was in his throat.

Gaara seized his attack repelled and it seemed as if he were in some sort of pain. He gave a strangled sort of cry. One that raised the hair on Naruto’s neck as he clutched at his head. The specks of the sand armour clinging to him.


“He is my beloved comrade.” Gai-sensei said softly. Naruto’s grip on the railings slipped at the sheer emotion he heard.

“That’s enough.” The sand starting to retreat. Naruto had a glimpse of the red head’s eyes. They were… strange.

“Winner Gaara!”

“Huh?” Sakura said. Naruto was unable to believe his eyes. Lee had… lee he had.

Somehow. He had managed to get to his feet. Blood was dripping from his wounds. At yet. He had managed to get into position. His will. It was strong. Tears came to Naruto’s eyes.

He should not be standing. But he was.

“Lee enough.” Gai-sensei took Lee by the shoulders gently. “You shouldn’t be standing with that body.” He said softly. Lee turned a little his face fully revealed and Naruto gasped as he realized there was no awareness in Lee’s eyes. Gai burst into tears.

Gaara had not left yet. Gai had gather Lee to him mostly taking the boy’s weight. Naruto’s tears. They just flowed.

Lee had gone done fighting. A fight that was amazing and should have been impossible. With all those limits he had gone done fighting and still wanted to fight even when he had already gone. Lee
was, a true strong shinobi. Even when the mind could not. The body could.

“What do you think about that boy there?” Kakashi-sensei asked him softly. Naruto noticed the man still had his sharingan uncovered. “What do you think of Lee?” He made a gesture his hand slowly coming towards Naruto before he hesitated. Naruto quickly realized Kakashi-sensei’s intention and wiped away his tears before he glanced back to Gai-sensei and Lee.

“I think.” His voice cracked. “He’s a truly strong shinobi and he proved a lot today.” He continued. He looked back to Kakashi-sensei and although his vision swam with tears he held the older man’s gaze and continued. “And they… most of them. All of them would have loved him.” He continued shakily. “I wish… I wish they could have met someone like Lee.”

“I see.” Kakashi-sensei answered. He slipped his hitai-ate back down covering the sharingan before he gently patted Naruto on the head. He did the same for Sakura. “I see.” He said softly.

“Sensei.” Sakura sounded distraught. She had a hand on the railings and he body was tensed as though she wanted to go over.

“Don’t” Kakashi-sensei said softly. “You consoling him now will only make it harder.”

“Yes.” Sakura did not sound convinced as she looked at Gai-sensei and Lee.

“There are many shinobi in this world.” Kakashi-sensei said softly. “But those who can show their guts in such a manner, they are the most incredible. The kind of will and Lee possesses is very rare and amazing to see.”

The medical came and Naruto slipped away to join Gai-sensei. Kakashi-sensei let him go.

XxX

“These kind of injuries.” Naruto froze as the man’s voice carried. “With this body, he will never be a shinobi again.”

“No way. It must be some sort of lie.” Naruto felt shaken even though he knew better. But to bloom so quickly and beautifully. Only to never bloom again? That sort of thing was not fair.

“Right.” Kakashi-sensei said from behind him. His grip was firm on his shoulder. “Before you say anything distressing…”

“I wasn’t!” Naruto insisted. He broke off at the look Kakashi-sensei gave him. Well he was going to question the medical nin but nothing else. But it seemed that even that was not a good idea. But it was not right.

But then he knew best of everyone that these things rarely were. But he wanted it to be different for bushy brows.

“This tragedy.” Kakashi-sensei said softly into his ear. “The decision to use even forbidden jutsu to win at all costs. This is the result of that. Listen. To Lee-kun. To Sasuke, Neji-kun, and you Naruto, to fulfill the silent promises you have been making to each other since you entered this exam, he put his life at risk… so he could reach the final stage to fight all of you. Don’t forget that.”

“Gai.” Kakashi-sensei let him go and approached the other Jounin. He glanced back at Naruto his gaze almost contemplative before he turned back around. “We’re in the way for the next match. Let’s go. Let’s go upstairs.”
“Yeah.” Gai-sensei’s voice was hollow. Naruto dashed forward so he could stand at the heart weary Jounin shinobi. Gai-sensei glanced at him before his gaze shifted to his feet.

“Lee.” Naruto said softly and the Jounin looked at him. “He’s someone, they would have done anything to lure away.” He admitted. He watched the confusion bloom on the Jounin’s face before understanding chased it he cracked a smile. His pat to Naruto’s head was rougher than Iruka-sensei’s and Kakashi-sensei’s but it was still nice.

Naruto fought back his tears as his thoughts went back to Lee. Those kinds of guts. Perseverance. It was something Naruto had seen outside the village. That kind of fighting spirit. A true strong shinobi.
“Well then for the tenth and final match. Will the contenders please step forward?” The examiner had managed to get his cough under control. He did not sound as if each sentence would be his last. Which of course was a good thing.

The final match. The last of the Sound nins and Chouji. Naruto did not think Chouji was in any danger of getting killed but who knew. Considering anything went in the exam.

Dosu Kinuta. He was the one that had gone after Kabuto in the exam. Or to be more precise. He was the one Naruto had blocked. Back then… Naruto had gotten a strange feeling from him. He could only hope that Chouji was prepared for whatever could happen.

And the guy had to be feeling something currently. Maybe feeling frantic. Of all the Sound nins. Only he remained.

In fact, there were only two teams currently where all the members had passed. The Sand and the
That guy had to be feeling some sort of pressure if he had been really listening to the Sandaime Hokage. The fate of his village, or at least the standing rested on his shoulders.

With the other two losing. Both to Konoha. This guy who currently was facing yet another Konoha nin had to be feeling… a certain way. Most likely pressured. Which might mean mistakes or cold precision.

Somehow… Naruto had the feeling the guy was going to go for precision. He had only clashed with him for a few seconds but he had seemed like a guy with a plan. The question was Chouji ready?

XxX

Throughout the match and the exams. He had come to realize something. He was being taken lightly. He had to win this fight to fight Sasuke in the finals. Not for Orochimaru-sama. Because through this he had come to realize something. He had not been close to the other two.

Just gotten to know them during the missions. And even then that had not been enough to gain any true fondness. But duty had bonded them together.

Now that he had seen the truth, he would not be doing what Orochimaru-sama wanted anymore. Orochimaru-sama had gone off to find Sasuke. He had given him the seal. They were not here to kill Sasuke. Simply enough, they were here as testers. Orochimaru-sama did not actually care about them.

Orochimaru-sama did not want Sasuke’s death. He wanted his life. Maybe it was a good thing that they had not been able to find Sasuke in the Forest of Death. Even though Orochimaru-sama had radiated silent disapproval. Now he was glad that the plan Orochimaru-sama had worked on had failed.

He was being taken lightly. He did not like it. He gave a glance behind him to Orochimaru-sama who he was surprised to still see there. Orochimaru-sama had looked as if he had wanted to go somewhere after Sasuke’s match but instead he had lingered behind.

But… he would fight here and make it to the next match. For the sake of his pride and the other’s failure.

XxX

Face wrapped up tight. Except for the one exposed eye… the guy looked the same and that exposed eye looked tense almost angry. Naruto wondered if it would affect the boy’s performance. He was hoping for it. For Chouji’s sake after all.

But everyone was concentrating on the match after all it was the last one and there were so few people left. And it was hard to think after the huge display of the last match. The floor was still damaged.

Naruto saw a flash of brown at the side of his vision and he turned his head before he realized what it was. He gritted his teeth and did his best to pretend that bastard did not exist before he did something.

Like let the leash slip fully. Like not wait before he obliterated him.

He was not going to lose. Not to a bastard like that. His gaze shifted again to the three from the Sand and his ire went up. he was not going to lose to them either. Especially not Gaara. Naruto
tried to take a deep breath and calm himself but he could see the hint of brown at the side of his vision.

He took a deep breath and released the railing and moved next to Sakura a little further away and closer to Shikamaru’s team. At least the Sand were on the other side of the room. He could just not look at them.

XxX

Kakashi watched as Naruto tensed before he shifted further down. A little away from Gai. It confused him until he saw how much closer Gai and Neji were to his team. Which would not go well.

Neji was ignoring Naruto. Focusing on the match but he had to be aware of Naruto. As Naruto was aware of him. Something in Naruto had shifted after the Hinata and Lee matches. Something wild and Kakashi could tell it was taking effort for Naruto to keep under control.

In fact, considering the aura he was giving off Kakashi was relieved they had made it off the floor without Naruto dipping his fist in Gaara’s sand and Lee’s blood.

In fact, he had been expecting it and the way Gaara’s eye had locked onto Naruto… well Kakashi had a feeling he was not the only one. He had been a little afraid of those two clashing here. He had been worried about Naruto clashing with any of the Sand shinobi.

He had not gotten the full story about the clash he had gotten a half of a report about it but his team had remained mostly quiet on the incident. So he was left with his speculations.

But Kakashi knew the Sandaime had also been worried about Naruto fighting. He knew the board was not rigged but he did have to wonder on some the fights.

But now they were down to the last one and he hoped the matches for the third round would not be rigged. He did not have the patience for that. And as it was he had to have a talk with his team after everything was over.

Hopefully together.

He really wanted to talk to them all at one time. Naruto privately too. About everything. Especially what happened in the Forest. Also he had to get thinking about what to do with them after this. Missions were off.

Just what was he going to do.

XxX

“You can do it!” Well at least Naruto knew now Shikamaru could get motivating for something. But it was Chouji… some maybe it was different.

“Well then. I guess I’ll skip the playing and get this over with.” Dosu sounded tense. But he did sound as if he could back up his threat.

Dosu’s arms came into focus and Naruto watched in confusion. There were holes in the guy’s arms. What for? Were they natural?

Well it seemed he would be seeing soon enough because Chouji doubled in size. His clan’s jutsu. Naruto knew that. He heard Chouji ramble out it a few times already. “Meat tank!” Chouji had
started to roll forward. Obviously planning to roll over Dosu and end the match.

Dosu dodged the rolling Chouji. Scanning for a weakness. Scanning for something but his arms were still exposed. It made Naruto curious to what the plan was. Dosu was allowing himself to get cornered. Chouji’s speed picked up and Dosu flipped easily over Chouji and-

“What?” Shikamaru had gripped the railing tightly. “What did he do?”

“I don’t know.” Naruto said slowly. “But I guess that’s his jutsu.”


“But Chouji could not have heard anything. He was in that meat tank thing.” Naruto frowned.


“Damn.” Shikamaru sighed. “And he tried so hard.”

“Good effort.” Asuma-sensei looked happy.

“Winner, Dosu Kinuta.”

XxX

“Hey are you okay?” The medical nin sounded frazzled.

“Meat... meat.” Chouji sounded dazed but his words were clear.

“Damn and his opponent was barely even trying.” Shikamaru complained. He had not expected Chouji to advance. Not really but he had faith that he could have. Maybe if he had been fighting someone else.

“Oh well, he lost.” Asuma did not sound too bothered about that. “I’ll cheer him up by taking him out to get some steaks.”

“Are you serious now?” Shikamaru complained.

“Well with this.” The examiner announced. He coughed again and Shikamaru winced. “The preliminary trials for the third round test has been completed!”

XxX

Ibiki, Anko, Hayate. The three of them faced the winners with the Hokage standing behind them. Naruto knew the line-up would be far more impressive if the floor was not so thoroughly wrecked up. but that was more on them than the Hokage and examiners.

But he like everyone else was ready to hear about the third round. He stood between Shino and Shikamaru. Not understanding how he had gotten in that position but not bothered enough to do anything about it.

“To all of you, who won the rights to compete in the third round test in the Chuunin Selection Exams… well one is missing but congratulations to you all.” Naruto tensed at the reminder than Sasuke was missing. Kakashi-sensei had returned and he had not seemed too bothered about Sasuke being elsewhere but it was there.
The reminder that Sasuke was not there because he was not able to. That whatever that was wrong with him had not worn off yet. It could not be too bad. Kakashi-sensei was with them but it was not good either. Sasuke was not present.

XxX

Kakashi caught the glance Sakura sent up to him. Along with Naruto and sighed. He knew those two were worried. They should be worried about themselves but they were cute like that.

Teamwork. They really believed in it now and besides what else could he say? He could point them in the direction of wherever Sasuke was resting now. He had to be in the hospital at this point. He had hung on during the sealing after all.

But would Itachi let them through? Would Itachi let any of them through. Would he stand for the rest of it? It might be a good idea to keep Itachi’s ire away from his team for a bit. Kakashi did know much about how he was currently but he would not worry too much.

The diagnostics when he had left had sounded good.

XxX

“Hokage-sama. If you would please…”

“Right.” The Hokage stepped close. “Yes, well now I’d like to… start explaining the main test rules.”

“Finally.” Naruto breathed. It was about time. The prelim matched had sort of made them forget that they knew the reason behind the big third test but not how it would play out.

“As I told you before, in the main event your matches will be seen by everybody, each of you will fight to represent the strengths of your countries I’d like you to show off all your powers with no reserves. Which is why the finals will be held one month from now.”

“A month?” Naruto squawked. He knew there would have to be time but with everything going on. No even without everything going on a month was a seriously long time to wait. Hell had the old man forgotten he had an S-class shinobi. A missing nin strolling around Konoha assaulting people? “Not here right now?” Naruto asked. “Not even next week?” He demanded.

“This break you can say will be for preparations.” The Sandaime looked calm but the way he met Naruto’s eyes let Naruto know that there was more going on than he thought.

“What does that mean?” Naruto was tempted to tune Neji out.

“In other words… in addition to informing all the various country lords and shinobi leaders, this is the time needed to prepare for the gathering of the event… and this is also the preparation time for you examination students.”

“I don’t understand.” Kankuro muttered. Naruto saw the irritated look on his face and could see how much it took him to admit it. “I don’t understand what you’re trying to say. What do you mean?”

“Basically it is the preparation to get to know your enemy and yourself. It’s the time period where you will calculate your chances of winning by analysing the data you accumulated during the trial competition. The battles up to now had you fight as if you were in an actual combat situation.”
“You have no idea.” Naruto muttered as he thought of the Forest.

“The assumption of fighting an unknown opponent.” The Sandaime continued. “However the trial will not be like this. There are those who showed all they can already do already to their rivals there are those who competed and were badly injured by a strong opponent. To make things fair, the one month should be used by all of you to advance and improve yourselves. Of course it will be fine to rest your bodies as well.”

A month. Something would have to be done. More learning certainly. Maybe some serious thinking. Definitely some private thinking.

“Well I’d like to dismiss you now but there is something that has to be done first.” The Hokage smiled. “There are pieces of paper in the box Anko is holding. So each of you take piece of one.”

“I’ll come to each of you so wait your turn.” Anko smiled and the smile actually reached her eyes. “Just take one you hear?”

Naruto shrugged and waited. He took his piece like everyone else and opened it to see a huge number one. He went to peek at Shikamaru’s but the boy had his hidden in his hand. Shino was the same and Naruto sighed.

“All right you all took a piece. Now starting from the left I’d like you to tell us the number on the paper.” The Hokage told them. They went along and announced their numbers.

“That means he is number four.” Ibiki said as he wrote on his paper.

“It would seem so.” The Hokage muttered. “All right I will now reveal to you, the final tournament!”

“That’s what we drew numbers for?” Shikamaru demanded.

“Yes.” Ibiki responded.

“Show them Ibiki.” The Hokage said. “The final match arrangements.”

Naruto’s eyes darted over the names. He knew where he was but he searched until he found Sakura. Next to the guy who took Chouji out. Not pretty. Then his gaze went back up easily finding Sasuke, then his own.

First match. Him versus Neji.

Good. Fucking perfect. He found the bastard easily. He was smirking and Naruto’s blood boiled. This was perfect. He would get it over with easily one time. He could bring it on. He was going down. Naruto looked back to the board and Sasuke’s opponent.

Gaara when his eyes found him was already watching him.

Naruto glanced back to the Hokage. He hoped whatever preparations they did would be enough. The tournament was going to get nasty, and it might not be his fault.

His gaze drifted back to the bastard.

Not all his fault.

XxX
“Well then you’re free to start strategizing or resting as you like. With this I’ll dismiss you all but are there any final questions?” The Hokage asked. Shikamaru rubbed his head lazily because of course the man could sound happy like that. He had just dumped the most ridiculous demands on them on with a smile.

“Can I have Sasuke’s number?” Naruto asked and Shikamaru’s mind stopped from the half-hearted analysing to see Naruto had somehow gotten from next to him and was talking to Anko. “He’s on my team.”

“I don’t-” She looked behind her to the Hokage.

“Me and Sakura-chan I’ll tell him.” Naruto continued as he easily rooted in the box and withdrew a piece of paper. “Nice.” He laughed. “Sakura-chan.”

“Yeah.” Sakura stepped forward before she hesitated. “Actually, I have something I need to do.”

“Suit yourself.” Naruto shrugged.

“Can I ask a question?” Shikamaru asked as he watched Naruto. The Hokage nodded so he pressed on. “It’s a tournament so doesn’t that mean there can only be one winner? Doesn’t that mean there will only be one Chuunin?”

“God no.” The Hokage laughed. “That would be rather boring now wouldn’t it? There will be judges including myself and the Kazekage, lords of various countries that will make mission requests and other ninja leaders who will be watching the final test. Throughout the tournament these judges will be evaluating your abilities. Those judged to have the necessary qualities of a Chuunin will be able to become a Chuunin even if they lose the first match.”

“Doesn’t that mean there is a possibility that everyone here will be a Chuunin?” Temari asked.

“Yes.” The Hokage said solemnly. “But also there is the possibility that no one will become Chuunin. To advance through the tournament means that you will have chances to appeal to the judges. Did you understand Shikamaru-kun?”

Shikamaru sighed at the way the man decided to focus on him at the end but he got it. Advancing was good. But it was still a drag to think about.

“Well then, thanks for all the effort you exerted for these trials you’re all dismissed until a month from now!”

“Right.” Naruto muttered. His glance towards Neji was cool and Shikamaru found himself tensing. There was an almost tense pause before Naruto sighed and turned away shoving his hands in his pockets as he went.

Shikamaru eyed the others as he ran through what he had observed. He had made plenty of observations and he had a good idea on strengths. Uses. Range. Weaknesses although some of them were monsters.

Then the door slammed closed behind Naruto and Shikamaru’s breath caught.

Range. His gaze darted to Gaara. Gaara he had figured out was a long range type. Judging by the fight with Lee, Gaara sucked in close combat. Neji was good with close combat. The girl, his opponent seemed good at mid-range. Same for the other one. He knew all about Shino too. Sakura was from what he saw close range. The guy that took down Chouji too and Shikamaru was hoping Sakura took him out.
But Naruto.

He had fought from a distance. From up close. From mid-range. Throughout his entire fight…
there had just been tricks on top of tricks. There was no real feel for what kind of fighter he was.
He had matched Kiba… but he had no idea what the boy was capable of.

Shikamaru looked away from the door in time to catch Shino looking away from it. He saw Sakura
doing the same and was unsurprised to see the Sound shinobi doing just like them.

Besides a few tags and of course the shadow clone display. They knew nothing of Naruto’s
abilities. And they only just noticed.

There were five fights. Only 2 full teams had gone through… and they did not have a clue what
Naruto was capable of. What he was hiding because Shikamaru was willing to bet… regardless of
what people thought. They had not scratched the surface.

He was not as blind as Kiba. Something had always been off about Naruto. The answers he had
gotten… well they had sucked but after Naruto had stopped coming around he had pressed.

And for a second. Just for a bit. No, twice. Everything about him had changed. From his
demeanour. To his eyes. He had dropped the cheer and whatever that was… it was not what he had
been expecting.

But they had a month. Who knew what kind of Naruto would show up. in fact, he had better make
sure he was worthy of showing up. Five fights, ten people. One unknown wild card. It was a crazy
thought, but Shikamaru wanted to see Naruto fight and fight seriously. A back against the wall
fight.

Or maybe this exam was just getting to his brain.

XxX

Kakashi was on his way to intercept Naruto when he was ambushed. The Hokage was listening to
Iruka-sensei the academy teacher and Kakashi was surprised to see that Inoichi was there as well.

“Kakashi.” The Hokage removed his pipe to blow a bit of smoke away. “We have a few things to
tell you.”

“Beyond what I already know?” Kakashi was curious. “I thought we covered everything.”

“Iruka had some news.” The Hokage gestured towards the man who Kakashi realized was pale.

“When we were waiting… I instructed Sakura to brief both of you of course.” The man seemed to
find the ground almost fascinating. “He- Naruto.”

“It’s okay Iruka.” The Hokage’s face was impassive.

“Did you know they… the missing nins.” Iruka clarified. “We should have thought about it before.
I know we were just glad to have him back but.” He hissed. “Naruto told me they kissed him.”

Inoichi spluttered but Kakashi remained calm as the Hokage and Iruka turned to him. “Well, I’m
not really surprised.” Kakashi admitted.

“This is something to be concerned about!” Iruka’s hands were clenched.

“Who?” Kakashi asked.
“Is it important?” Iruka demanded.

“Iruka… Kakashi has been with him for a while. If he’s asking it’s for a good reason.” The Hokage frowned. “You have a suspicion?”

“Haku?” Kakashi asked. He knew it but it was nice to get a confirmation. “We too easily gloss over what has occurred. They were missing nins no matter how well they treated him.”

“But-“

“Not all of them were good.” Kakashi agreed.

“Your thoughts?” The Hokage asked Inoichi. Inoichi hesitated.

“When I was in Naruto-kun’s mind, I got glimpses of images. That particular group… how it ran. Two were controlling the group.”

“Zabuza.” Kakashi looked at his hand. “And Haku.” He finished. “I’ve heard Naruto mention Haku a few times.” He said easily. “And from what I saw, Naruto was one of the group’s priority. I won’t make too many assumptions about that.” He continued. “But… I know how power struggles go and in a way…well do you know the circumstances?”

“They couldn’t make up their mind over who would do it.” Iruka said slowly.

“Well as bad as it sounds. That kind of abuse is not uncommon.” Inoichi said softly. “But this Haku swooped in…”

“And claimed him.” Kakashi finished. “I won’t say this doesn’t worry me. Disturb me. But of all the shinobi there. Naruto had favourites and he kept from mentioning certain ones. I’ve even heard him speaking as if he were kept away from certain situation and people. Meaning…”

“That he was protected.”

“I’d like more information on it. If only on knowing how to proceed. Naruto doesn’t fully trust the village.”

“That’s understandable.” Iruka spoke up. “Sandaime-sama, these people connected with him.” He winced. “He considered they friends and family, acknowledging him when no one else would.”

“He confused them a little. Some of them were beginning to put pieces together.” Inoichi confessed. “Honestly, I don’t know how much Naruto-kun knows. But the last four years have developed his understanding in a way that… it is hard to believe but with the new involvement…” The Hokage tensed.

“Iruka-kun.”

“Sandaime-sama.” Iruka hesitated and Kakashi sighed. “He’s still a child regardless of his abilities.” It was said in the Hokage’s direction but Kakashi knew the words were for him. He watched as the academy teacher took his leave.

“Well?” Inoichi frowned.

“Orochimaru is a problem.” The Hokage said slowly. “Naruto did not take well to anything.”

“He’s scared.” Inoichi said softly. “Now that he knows people are after him. A firm understanding of why… and on top of that he has to be normal.”
“But he isn’t.” Kakashi pointed out. “We can’t forget that. And if we don’t relate to that we will lose him. Right now… he’s angry. He is seeing parts of the village he was aware existed but was not ready for.”

The Hokage’s mouth twisted. “Hinata huh.”

“I don’t want to explain to my best friend why my student killed his.” Kakashi said dryly. “I mean I’m hoping it won’t come to that but so far… the boy is doing marvellous at pushing Naruto’s control.”

“I noticed.” The Hokage murmured. “And he was not the only one.”

“But isn’t that a good thing? His attachment to Rock Lee and Hyuuga Hinata. He just met Rock Lee but by your report Hokage-sama he is ready to fight the Sand in his place. Also your original plan for Naruto…”

“Yes I remember it.” The Hokage smiled a soft smile. “Of all the actions we took back then, I think that it was the best one. Starting with his team… no with Iruka and myself, to Kakashi and his team to now Hyuuga Hinata and Rock Lee. Naruto will find bonds and find himself tied to the village.”

“And what… forget his other ties?” Kakashi questioned. “That isn’t going to happen.”

“We know that.” Inoichi sighed. “We can blame ourselves for the lack of trust but part of me… no all of me wants to put faith in this.”

“He’s gone through something no other child in the village has.” The Hokage’s gaze fell heavily on Kakashi. “Once he uses his knowledge for the sake of the village and ties himself to it in the way he did to them… no better than them. Because right now… I see…” His gaze shifted away. “Something I did not think I would.”

“Sandaime-sama?” Kakashi pressed when the man smiled softly.

“This third round will take a lot out of us. We have to be ready.” The Hokage said softly.

XxX

Well it was almost all too easy to find Sasuke’s room in the hospital. Naruto had considered asking at the front desk but he had a feeling he would have been hit with a number of variations of ‘no visitors allowed’ so he had just done what seemed best.

Sneak in and sneak around. Since Sasuke had not come back he had headed for the Intensive Care section and after that, well he had done a little wandering around.

The familiar feeling, a slightly familiar sensation made him go down the corridor he had been planning on ignoring.

It was almost as if he was being led and when he cautiously slid open the door he had not known what he had expected but not really what he saw.

That guy.

Itachi. From that time before. He looked up at the sound of the door opening but remained seated by Sasuke’s bed. His hand was lax on Sasuke’s sheet but…well actually Naruto somehow felt as though he was intruding.
And going by Itachi’s clothes. He had been right to be at least slightly wary. The armour. Not a vest. Armour. No wonder he had been amused when Naruto called him a Jounin. But that of course was not the reason he was there anyway.

Sasuke’s face was covered by a mask and the amount of things he was hooked up to… Sasuke was in a serious condition. But from what? His fight had been nothing. The Forest then and whatever that thing had been.

“Naruto-kun.” Itachi was just as polite as before.

“It’s done.” Naruto announced as he lingered in the doorway.

“I would imagine.” Itachi murmured. “Sasuke is not allowed to have visitors.”

“I see.” But Itachi was there. Unless he was there as not a family member. Naruto would admit to being curious about that. “Um his is the second match.” He said and nodded towards Sasuke. “A month from now and he has the fight the red head from Suna. Gaara.”

“I see.” Itachi glanced back to Sasuke and the hand on the sheet rose before it gently stroked Sasuke’s hair. “Second match.”

“Um…” His mumble brought Itachi’s gaze on him again. “Will he be okay?”

Itachi stilled and his gaze went back to Sasuke. “Yes.” He said softly. “I won’t let anything else happen to Sasuke.” It was not his imagination. The room went a little darker.

“Do you know about what happened?” Naruto asked. “Because I’m sorry.” He said softly.

“You’re not the one at fault.” Itachi said softly. “None of you are. The fault lies with the adults. You, the other children are blameless. We should have protected you better.”

“That thing on his neck?” Naruto asked. The way Sasuke was… he could not see it. Whatever it was.

“It won’t be a problem.” Itachi confirmed. “May I ask when your match is?”

“The first.” Naruto chuckled. “I’ll be opening heh.”

“Well you have a month to get ready.” Itachi smiled and Naruto stilled as the man glanced back to his brother. “I imagine Sasuke will be eager once he regains consciousness.”

“Of course!” Naruto answered before he winced. “Anyway, I’ll…” Leave. He backed away and closed the door.

Well something big was going on and at least he knew Itachi was not down with most of it. Guarding Sasuke… why did Sasuke need to be guarded? All the questions.

And of course he got to see Sasuke but not warn him about everything else. Well he knew the basics. He had to fight that guy he had found oh so fascinating back before. And Naruto… well things had gotten a little personal.

XxX

This was bigger than the Chuunin Exams. Everything looked normal. Everyone around them seemed the same but there was no denying the simple fact that a few days ago he had been attacked. This was more than his teams.
More than this exam. Maybe it was bigger than the village. And yet everything still looked so normal. Was he expected to tuck his head down and ride it out?

Believe?

Well… he had no idea what he was supposed to do.

He had a fight ahead of him. A battle he had to win. That he would win and he would be displayed to everyone. That sort of thing… now that he was thinking about it… it seemed harder than it should even have to be.

“Naruto.”

“Kakashi-sensei!” The man had just rounded the corner hands in pockets.

“Shh, it’s still a hospital.” Kakashi-sensei laughed. “I’m guessing you saw Sasuke?”

“Yeah his brother said he isn’t supposed to have visitors.”


“Me too.” Naruto muttered. “Hey, Kakashi-sensei. What are you going to do now?”

“Hmm look in on Sasuke. Or at least I was going to.” Kakashi-sensei admitted. There was a beat of silence where the tension rose. “About what happened.”

“When?” Naruto snorted.


“Who is he.” Naruto hissed. “Who was he? What is he? What does he want?” He would have asked more but… he could see it. “You aren’t going to tell me anything.”

“I’m sorry.” Kakashi-sensei said and Naruto’s blood boiled.

XxX

“Why?” Naruto demanded and Kakashi inwardly sighed.

“Because most of this is above you.”

“That’s not fair.” Naruto seethed. “All of you. You aren’t playing fair.”

“I know.” Kakashi admitted. “But your only concern for now is training or resting until your first match.”

“Or what.” Naruto bit out. “If I don’t play nice I’ll get disposed of?” Kakashi tensed at Naruto’s burst of speed so he could come right next to him. “Are you going to pierce me sensei? If I don’t play along and stop asking vital questions?”

That tone, Kakashi could have resisted but the angry tone Naruto had taken to him made him yank the boy close to him. “Don’t push it.” He warned.

“Or what?” Naruto demanded. “Everything I had already. It’s gone.” He hissed. “And the one thing I want to know. The one thing I asked for since everything I had was taken from me… I can’t get the answer. But you know.” He said hoarsely. “You know exactly what that Orochimaru was
talking about.”

Kakashi stayed silent as Naruto searched his gaze.

“Uzumaki Kushina.” Naruto whispered. “Why can’t I know?” His tone was sad. Broken.

“Because you’re not ready.” Kakashi answered. “And if I was the one to tell you.” He released Naruto’s jacket to stroke the boy’s hair softly. So different from Kushina’s but just as soft. “I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“These secrets aren’t helping you guys.” Naruto said softly.

“Everything is changing.” Kakashi pointed out. “But not everything is that bad. You have friends now.” He removed his hands. “The thing to focus on now is the exams. You have something you swore to do didn’t you?”

Naruto’s eyes dimmed a little. “Yeah.” He answered softly. “You know, Zabuza said clan showed you who you are… I wanted to see me somewhere.”

“I know.” Kakashi admitted.

“You’ll be training Sasuke won’t you.” Naruto said softly and Kakashi sighed at how easily he had been seen through.

“Yes. But I can train you too.” It might take plenty of effort but he could get things done. “I could also find someone to oversee your training.”

“Really?” Naruto shook his head softly but Kakashi saw the flicker of a smile on the boy’s lips. “I’ll do what I have to but I don’t need some shinobi that you handpicked.”

“Then what will you do?” Kakashi questioned. “You’re more than fairly good. You can manage yourself but it’s better to have someone oversee. You might even want to think about learning a few jutsus.”

“I don’t know what I’ll do.” Naruto said softly. “But I’ll figure it out. I don’t have a proper plan right now but I work best hitting the ground running.” Naruto stepped away again and Kakashi was hard pressed not to follow. “I learned a lot during this exam thing. I think first I need to process it.”

“But you’ll be okay right?” Kakashi pressed. “You don’t have to do it alone.”

“This part I do.” Naruto said softly. He remained silent a few seconds longer before he turned away and disappeared around the corner. Kakashi… he was torn. The talk was a good thing, but the bad thing was his reaction to having Naruto’s mistrust.

Of course it was understandable. But the only good thing about it was that Naruto was not full of hate. It was strange to see but he was glad to see it. That destructive obsession had not overtaken Naruto but in the light of everything… he wished things were a little easier.

Chapter End Notes

No chapter for the next 2-3 weeks!
Thanks you guys! The break was wonderful and did wonders, everyone who wished me well ^_^ Thank you! And Thank you for being patient. It is time to start updating this again ^_^ Marvelous.

Hope you darlings enjoy the chapter!

Why had he let his anger get the best of him? He knew better. He had gotten mad and taunted Kakashi-Sensei and that was not right. Naruto knew how the system worked. Kakashi-sensei had no power so he should not be holding the blame.

Naruto had seen how it worked before. Even among the others there had been order and structure with Zabuza pulling the strings and dictating the moves. He had known that. He knew how the village worked but yet he had gotten frustrated and lashed out.

And that was not right. He had been in the wrong.

But Kakashi-sensei had been the one to talk to him and try and convince him. And when Naruto talked Kakashi-sensei listened even when Naruto knew most of what he said might sound strange or made no sense.

He had just started to feel safe when this happened. He had begun to feel safe with Kakashi-sensei when he should have been on guard and alert because look what had happened.

They had ‘retrieved’ him to make him safe and if that guy Orochimaru had been serious about killing him his guts would have been spilled all over the Forest floor. But he felt frustrated and disappointed.

Because, he had somehow thought Kakashi-sensei would have broken the rules. It was not that he did not want to. Naruto had spent months learning to read whenever Haku or Alya were wavering on decisions. He knew what hesitation looked like.

Whatever the others were hiding from him it had to be big. And as much as he wanted to know… he knew some things had a time and place. Which was why he had not searched the hospital yet. Zabuza had talked enough that Naruto knew where he would have to start looking if he wanted answers about his past.

He had planned to do it slowly. There were lots of graves in Konoha after all.

But he never expected someone to come up to him, threats aside and offer to give him the information. But that person was dangerous. Their eyes… their power, their words. Everything and the way Orochimaru had looked at Sasuke. Naruto was honestly scared for him.

He had seen eyes similar to that before. Not the same because greed always looked different but he knew the look of eyes that saw not humans but tools. He knew how the powerful and the rich looked at those they saw lesser than them. And that guy had looked at them with a mixture of that.
And he would come after them again. Naruto just knew it. The question was would he be ready? Would Konoha be ready? That guy had been toying with them even the bloodlust he had radiated had been toned down. They had fucking amused him.

It was not right. It was not fair. All these secrets. These hidden things and lies. It was too dark. It was honestly funny how similar it was.

Those without a village and those in it. The same troubles. The same darkness. The same pain. But having a place to rest did make all the difference.

That guy Orochimaru he did not carry the air of those on the run did he even have a place to rest? Had he carved a place of his own? What the hell was his plan?

Naruto sighed and shoved his hands into his pockets. He looked up at the stone faces his eyes lingering on the Fourth Hokage. The Hero.

He wondered about the organization that was looking for him. For the Kyuubi sealed inside him.

XxX

He needed to clear his head. He was being irrational. Actually he was just being moody. Not irrational. He did have a reason to be suspicious and angry but his current way of thinking would not get him anywhere.

And the best place to relax… well why deviate from habit at this point? The hot springs had always been a good place to go. In towns when they could have afforded it or sometimes for the service they had provided and sometimes hot springs unclaimed by anyone.

A good place to relax and the few times Naruto had been to one recently, he had not run into much trouble.

XxX

It would be troubling to go back for money to enter now and he really did not want to bathe. Just sitting near the steam and thinking was almost enough. The water was hot however just getting near the steam gave him an almost uncomfortable feeling. But it was nice as well.

Naruto sat on the rocks and shoved off his jacket before he took a step onto the water. Maybe a little practice and stretching would clear his head. He did recall the others doing similar things especially when trying to train the others and up their own skills.

Naruto concentrated he stepped on the water. Building up his chakra but it felt wrong. It was out of control. He had a moment to panic and flail before he slipped through the scalding water.

XxX

That bastard from before. How the hell could he have forgotten about it? It took Naruto twenty fails before he was ready to acknowledge that it was not him. Something was wrong with his chakra. The seal.

Instead of losing his head and snapping at people he should have said something and asked for help. It was completely ridiculous. It was something that felt as if it could be ignored but Naruto was not in the mood to do that.

Because when he tried to build up his chakra to use it, it got out of control. It was uneven it was
hard to focus and he felt as if he could work past it if he tried had enough but he was not going to because he should not have to.

He pressed his hand tight against his stomach as he climbed out the water and lay panting on the ground. something was wrong with the seal and it would have to be from that moment in the forest.

But he did not notice because the most taxing thing he had done since they had gotten attacked was make shadow clones… so the more he tried to be more precise with his chakra the more it got out of control. It was annoying but he needed help.

XxX

Well you could not blame him for trying again. He was stubborn and part of him felt as though he could get through it. Be able to match enough that he easily would float on top the water and after a few wavers he had managed enough but the sight of something white out the corner of his vision that had certainly not been there before caught his eye and he flailed.

Where had that shaggy haired old man come from? Naruto struggled to the surface and he broke out the water with a gasp and stared at the man stooping at the wall his back to Naruto. Naruto was willing to bet all the ramen he had in his apartment that the guy was peeping.

It took no effort to make a clone and send it running at the white haired pervert. But before his clone could do more than shout a warning the old man had spun around and-

Was that a toad? Naruto gasped as his clone was forcibly… Dispelled and the memories merged with his.

“Man keep it down.” The man growled as he sat on the toad’s head. Naruto had the memory of something wet wrapping around his middle and throwing him hard into the ground. “What you going to do if I get caught?”

XxX

“Get caught?” Naruto yelped before he regained his senses. He scrambled out the water and glared at the man. “What’s with that huge frog?” It had just appeared and it was amazing. “Who the hell are you?”

“Alright hold on.” The guy looked pleased to be asked. He changed his stance on the toad and Naruto got a better glimpse of the guy’s face. Long red streaks that looked like Kiba’s but thinner. “Mount Myobokugama’s holy master sennin also known as the Toad Sennin. Remember it!”

Holy master? Sennin. Naruto looked over the guy. The toads were cool and the guy seemed strong. But holy master. “Lie.” He breathed under his breath.

The pervert jumped into the air and the toad. Dispelled. Naruto got a moment to gape in surprise before he caught himself.

“You perverted sennin.” He snapped. “What the hell did you do that to me for?”

“You got in the way of my work.” The guy was not sorry in the least.

“Work?”

“I’m a write. I’m working on a novel.” The man chuckled. He reached into his pocket and Naruto was surprised to actually recognise the book.

“Oh?” The guy looked excited to hear about that. “You know about this?”

“That’s a nasty book!” Naruto roared. He could remember how flushed Kakashi-sensei would get sometimes while reading it and the man’s chuckles and giggles when flushed could not be ignored either.

“Nasty?”

“Anyway what do you mean by work?” Naruto demanded. “All you were doing is peeping in the woman’s bath you damn pervert! That isn’t work that’s being a perv! It’s a total crime!”

“You fool! I’m not just a pervert! Peeping gives me more inspiration to write a better…”

“You’re just fucking admitting to it aren’t you!” Naruto yelled. “And what do you mean inspiration for a better whatever! Anything that comes from such inspiration is bound to be filth! A perverted bastard like you peeping at your age.” Naruto scolded. “I was just getting the hang of it when you distracted me bastard! You’re going to peep on the wrong person and get your eyes removed!”

“Distracted?” The man glanced away from Naruto to where Naruto had been water walking. “You were training?”

“Hell yes.” Naruto scowled.

“Not doing a good job at it were you.” The man scowled. “Gosh I hate rude brats like you.”

“You’re the perverted creep!” Naruto snapped as he made a seal. “Let’s see you try to act unruffled and all-knowing now!” He sneered as he transformed. It was fun to do things like this. He was fairly certain that Kakashi-sensei was unaffected by this jutsu but for the rest of the adults that he currently knew… a hundred percent rate.

“I’m a sennin I’m not going to get fooled by a shrimp brat like you.” The man sneered. “You’re an annoying brat you know.”

“How’s this?” Naruto purred in the new form. He held his hand high above his head to further arch his back and he raised on leg behind him. Going for the adorable look. He had his lips pursed cutely and he knew this form was advertised well.

“I like you!” The man exclaimed and Naruto inwardly sighed. The guy was an idiot. “Wow just my type of girl!” The man exclaimed from behind him and Naruto tensed. This guy… when had he gotten behind him? “What’s this jutsu?”

“I call it the Oiroke no jutsu.” Naruto murmured as the guy looked at him from every angle.

“Oh what creativity!” The guy drooled. “You’re a genius.” Maybe all adults were weak to this damn jutsu. Hell, they all turned into idiots like this. Naruto was slowly losing his faith in adults. Adult men.

“You know I’m pretty strong.” The guy mused. “I can give you a few tips. One condition.”

“Tips?” Not a bad idea.

“In my presence. You must always be like that.”

Naruto dispelled the jutsu. “Inspiration my ass!” He fumed. “I knew it! You’re just a nasty pervert!
See ya ero-sennin.”

“No no. it’s not true. I’m not just a pervert.”

“Yeah right!”

“I’m a super pervert.”

Damn it. He admitted it. “No one should just come out and say it.” Naruto complained.

XxX

“Well that last part was just a joke. Me messing around.” The pervert had managed to pull himself together and no longer look like a crazy perverted loon. “I’ll help you out a bit. Continue with what you were doing earlier kid.”

“Water walking?” Naruto questioned suspiciously.

“Yeah that.” The man looked serious so after a suspicious glance to the man’s hitai-ate which showed no shinobi sign but a strange inscribing of ‘oil’ Naruto hesitantly went back to the water.

He gathered chakra and took a few steps forward and managed to get a few steps in without anything happening but the fluctuations started again and even with his concentration he sank to his ankles into the water. He sighed heavily and turned back to face the pervert sennin to find the man watching him with a strange expression.

Naruto had a feeling that he would be getting more and more soaked so he shrugged out of his jacket. His pants quickly followed. It was only because of quick thinking that he had not submerged after all.

“Hey, pull out your chakra.” The man said from next to him and he was starting to freak Naruto out how quickly he just moved. He knew Kakashi-sensei realized he was bothered by it so the man at least tried to let Naruto know when he was going to move. Not that it worked all the time sometimes Kakashi-sensei simply forgot and just was there.

But this guy, Naruto knew he could sense his unease. And he still did it anyway.

“What?” He asked warily.

“Just do it.” The guy said and he did sound more frustrated than curious so Naruto formed the seals. He peeked open his eyes and saw the man was watching him carefully. Or to be precise. His seal but there was no surprise.

But… whatever that guy had done. Could it be seen?

Naruto met the sennin’s gaze as the man nodded towards Naruto’s stomach. “Your seal was set up so that some of the Kyuubi’s chakra slips out from between the seals and combines with yours.” The man’s face turned contemplative. “But it has been stopped with this five-part seal, your chakra is unable to mix properly.”

“So what?” Naruto asked. The man shrugged and Naruto glowered. “You just figured out was wrong!”

“Stretch up high.” The man said seriously. “Up high.”

Naruto did as he said and grumbled to himself he never saw the man move but the impact and
burning around his seal knocked him to the round and winded him.

“What was that for?” He demanded when he caught his breath.

“Better now?” The man asked. “I unsealed it. Try it again.”

This guy made lots of demands. Naruto glared at him even as he slipped onto the water again. But it was easier, it was perfect. Whatever that guy had done… it was gone now.

“You know about seals?” Naruto asked curiously.

“I’m a strong sage.” The man boasted. “What you think about me giving you a few pointers now?”

Naruto was curious to who the guy was. Besides being a pervert… he seemed pretty okay and he knew about seals and he knew about him. But he did not look at him the way others did. And he was in Konoha.

“Who are you?” Naruto asked curiously. “Are you a shinobi?”

“I’m from Konoha.” The man grinned.

“You didn’t even blink when you saw my seal.” Naruto accused. “Who are you?”

“I told you already.” The man laughed. “The Toad sage. Also a writer.” Maybe that would be enough. After all, he had been thinking about training and this ero-sennin he seemed to know about chakra and seals. And Naruto did want to learn more about himself… and the way he was.

“Fine but don’t try anything stupid Ero-sennin.” He warned.

XxX

“Firstly you need to understand something.” Ero-sennin said gravely. “You have two types of chakra. Have you ever felt a special type of chakra?”

“Two types?” Naruto frowned before he realised what the man was trying to say. “You mean…” He touched his seal gently.

“Yes.”

“There’s my chakra.” Naruto said slowly. “Then there is the other one that I use sometimes. It feels different from mine so I know right away when I’m using it. It feels like red.”

“Good.” The man grinned. “Now it’s getting kind of late now so we’ll meet here tomorrow I want you to think about your chakra until then.”

“Um sure.” Naruto muttered. “Thanks for earlier… doing that thing that you did.”

XxX

Kakashi froze in the doorway of his apartment. Naruto’s scent filled the place. Not that the scent being there was anything shocking he had his team come over from time to time but this was new. Fresh and after the small confrontation that they had he had not expected to come home to that.

For certain Naruto was not there. Kakashi could smell that. But he had been.

He followed the scent until he stood in front of the plant Naruto had gifted him a small note was
next to it. Kakashi felt himself relax as he read the contents.

‘About earlier… I was wrong to say those things… I mean you were wrong too but you’re not in a good place either and I shouldn’t have let my anger get the best of me. Kakashi-sensei I trust you. You’ve done so much for me since I came back to the village. I don’t know why and I know someday you’ll explain. I shouldn’t have said what I said the way I said it. Anyway I’ll be busy training for the tournament. I’m going to kick that Hyuuga’s ass… so, sorry. But the rest of those guys are dicks. I’m not taking that back.’

The letter was so Naruto. And part of Kakashi had wanted to apologise as well. And explaining to Naruto everything… well that would take all day and now was not the time.

Kakashi was worried about the training for Naruto. He had been thinking of getting the boy someone to watch over him with Kakashi making appearances from time to time but Naruto sounded capable.

He would leave his trust in the boy and maybe leave his own letter for the boy to find. With some ramen so the boy would know for certain he had no hard feelings. Maybe some vegetables too. Naruto liked to pretend he did not see them from time to time. Kakashi wanted to let it slip because the sign of pickiness showed Naruto felt partially safe and secure.

But the boy needed to grow up healthy so there were only so much slacking he could do then. The village was doing fine but they were always short on people. And people who would treat Naruto that he needed to be treated… they were sort of short on those. Kakashi was sort of at a loss.

He tucked the little note into his jacket and lightly touched the leaves of the plant that contrary to its name was actually beginning to look, quite cheerful.
He was sort of curious to who the man was but there was just something about him. The guy was
weird and a pervert but he seemed strong. In the way the Sandaime used to get. Not that he was
weak now but sometimes the Sandaime had that air about him.

He used to have it when Naruto was younger, when the whispers would start. When the eyes would
turn away. The air around the Sandaime would change even when his face remained the same but
sometimes his face changed too. And Naruto could remember that.

That feeling, that it was okay to go outside. That it was okay to walk next to this man and trust him.
He just met that pervert but somehow… he seemed trustworthy.

There was the simple fact the guy knew more than he should but every adult in Konoha knew what
he was apparently. It had only been a secret to him and the rest of the kids. And that man had
helped him. Taken off the seal bothering him and explained stuff.

If anything he could give a few more pointers and he felt strong. And at this point Naruto doubted
that there were two S-class missing nins from Konoha running around. That Orochimaru’s eyes
were partly distant and cold. Also bitter, this man’s eyes had a human quality. And what was the
harm in learning a thing or two?

XxX

“So…” The old man began his gaze evenly divided between Naruto and the girls bathing nearby.
Naruto eyed him suspiciously. “Remember the talk we had yesterday? About the two types of
chakra that you have inside you? You said one feels red. Different from your usual one.”

“Yeah.” Naruto said warily. The old pervert visibly changed his attention no longer on the girls
bathing nearby and as thankful as Naruto was he still was cautious. “I remember.” He said slowly.

“Well I want you to release that chakra today.” Ero-sennin said and Naruto gaped at him for a few
seconds as his words sank in.

“No.” He answered.

“No?” Ero-sennin asked. He looked at Naruto in confusion.

“No.” Naruto shuddered. His hands felt cold. “I don’t want to use that.”


“I just don’t.” Naruto answered back. “I can’t.” He could still remember. Still feel and it felt so
creepy. No way. Not that. He ignored the feel of dark laughter inside him. Never again. He had
already resolved himself.
“You can’t?” Ero-sennin looked thoughtful.

“I don’t want to.” Naruto repeated as he wrapped his arms around himself. He could feel the coldness emitting from his hands.

X

“Haku…” Naruto knew he sounded weak but he was honestly scared. Stupid Zabuza had gotten it into his head that Naruto needed to be trained. Again but he was nothing like Haku. Haku was brains and intelligence and so much and he kept pushing himself. Naruto wanted to push himself too. He did not want to be a burden but he had limits.

Sometimes it seemed as if Haku had none… or he had surpassed his human ones long before.

“It’ll be okay Naruto-kun.” Haku’s smile was gentle. “Zabuza-san and I are the strongest ones here. You can’t hurt us.”

“Haku might even be stronger than me one day.” Zabuza boasted from his spot in the tree. “We need to know where you’ll rant at least runt. Be thankful I’m doing this much. Now get in there or I’ll leave you behind at the next town.”

“Stupid.” Naruto hissed. He eyed the scroll Zabuza used as a pillow and resented his weakness.

“Oh?” Zabuza chuckled as he reached back to pat the scroll. “You couldn’t take this from me brat. Now get in there and get dodging. At the very least we need you not to slow us down.”

“Fine.” Naruto hissed. Haku’s face was indulgent and kind but the moment Naruto stepped into the igloo of mirrors… everything changed.

XX

When the person you cared for… feared you. What were you supposed to do? When the person you cared for… brought fear and terror on you how were you supposed to feel? If anything the first crack appeared… that day.

“What the fuck.” Naruto heard Zabuza’s voice but he hurt. He ached. He felt absolutely disgusting. His arms hurt and burned. Everything hurt and he could barely remember anything but he could remember enough.

Haku.

He struggled to turn over onto his stomach to search for Haku and his stomach rolled. Bile churned and he became sick on the muddy ground.

Zabuza held Haku and Naruto knew the man was saying something but even he looked injured. They were all hurt and the clearing looked like an explosion had gone off. And what he could remember. What Naruto could remember… was not good at all.

Fear. A blurring speed and not being able to dodge everything Haku threw. And the voice that had called to him. Offering strength but had drowned him in darkness instead. And Haku.

Haku.

He had done this. To them and it was that fox’s fault. Naruto became sick again the sound echoing through the clearing. When he stopped he managed to raise his head again and his gaze found
Haku’s. Haku, whose body was cradled by Zabuza, whose gaze was fixed on Naruto in shock.

What had he done?

“Jinchuuriki.” Zabuza hissed. “I can’t believe…”

“Naruto-kun.” Haku whispered and Naruto shuddered as he watched the blood covered lips move. He had not wanted to hurt Haku. Just help himself so Haku would be happy. So Zabuza would leave him alone and he could stay with Haku a little longer.

But this was terrible and it was all his- no that stupid fox’s fault.

XxX

“I can’t control it.” Naruto muttered. “It always gets out of control and hurts people. I don’t have any control over the red chakra. If I use it… bad things happen.” Like Haku.

“What do you mean?” Ero-sennin asked.

“I can’t control it. It’s powerful.” Naruto admitted. “But I’d rather not use it. It’s bad and people get hurt when I rely on it.” He yelped when he was punched on the head. He glared at the man that had gotten once again closer than he had noticed.


“What do you mean you will help me? And what gives?” Naruto demanded.

“I’ll help you control your chakra. I’m strong and I helped you before… remember?” Naruto recalled just how the man had helped him and eyed him warily. He did seem strong but Zabuza and Haku had been strong too.

But this man had easily removed what that Orochimaru who had reeked of power… he had so easily removed what the man had done to him. So maybe this guy was of decent strength. Maybe.

“Look.” The man bit his thump and before Naruto could do anything but widen his eyes the man had slapped his hand on the ground and then-

“A toad!” He was impressed. More than impressed and the toad was huge too.

“You like summoning?” The man grinned as he sat on the Toad’s head. Naruto looked back to the toad that seemed happy to be where it was.

This guy could be strong enough.

XxX

“There are plenty of techniques out there that will require lots and lots of chakra. An amount that at your level of control will burn out the chakra you depend on.” Ero-sennin’s arms were crossed and he looked fairly serious. “So you have to be willing and able to pull out the necessary chakra and use it.”

“But…” Naruto protested.

“You like summoning right?” Ero-sennin pressed. Naruto glanced back to where the man had summoned the toad earlier. “I’ll teach you how to do just what I did. It’s different to summoning weapons.”
“Seriously?” Naruto asked. It seemed like fun but more than that it was another thing he would have. Another strength. And to do it using that fox’s chakra…well sooner or later he would not have to. He was determined not to touch that chakra again until he needed to.

XxX

The scroll was huge. Naruto tried not to gape but he was unable to help it. There were so many names and he had to sign in blood? To make a contract? It made it seem even more serious.

He pressed his hand to the scroll and looked curiously at the other prints and names. The moment he started to try to read the letters however the scroll was whisked away.

“Let’s not get carried away there.” Ero-sennin laughed. “Now let us teach you the hand signs shall we?”

XxX

“The summoning jutsu. A space time jutsu.” Ero-sennin sat on a rock before Naruto with Naruto sitting on the man’s feet. “I guess in time you’ll study it. You seem like the type but for now all you need to know is after you sign a contract in blood, which you just did, you call forth the various lifeforms with ninjutsu.”

“Yeah.” Naruto nodded.

“Now the toad contract is passed down through generations. You signed your name in blood and now when you want to call them you press down the hand you made the contract with and produce chakra, the hand signs are Boar, Dog, Bird, Monkey, Sheep. Don’t forget that now.”

“Right.” Naruto muttered. “Boar, Dog, Bird, Monkey, Sheep.” He repeated as he ran through the hand signs.

“Use your chakra.” Ero-sennin said. “The hand you made the contract with.”

“Right.” Naruto muttered. He slammed his hand down using his chakra and focused. He had control but…

He glanced at the ground. a small tadpole with legs. And he felt tired.

“What the hell is that?” Ero-sennin demanded and Naruto glared at him.

“A frog!” He snapped.

“You idiot!” The man snapped as he got up and ran through the same seals and slapped his hand to the ground. Naruto glared at the toad that appeared. “That is a toad you fool!

“Mine is just a baby! I’ll get better next time you stupid sennin!”

XxX

He was tired… Naruto opened his eyes to only see white. He flailed before a big hand wrapped around his ankle. He raised his head and realized he was being carried. The white he saw. It was Ero-sennin’s hair. He was being carried.

Had it really been so long that he had forgotten how it felt to be carried?

“Don’t worry.” The man chuckled as he kept walking. “Just relax. I’m carrying you home.”
“What about training?” Naruto murmured. His eyes were heavy.

“You fainted.” The man laughed. “And it is dark anyway. You need to rest up and get something to eat. We’ll continue in the morning.”

“Ramen.” Naruto whispered into the man’s hair.

“Not a bad place to start.” The man murmured. “But you’ll master that jutsu if I have anything to say about it.”

Thanks.” Naruto said hesitantly. Another thought bothered him but he was so weary and tired he decided to let it go and it was nice being carried. His eyes caught the sight of Konoha’s evening activities from where his head rested. Usually he was doing his best to slip through the village but right now… he actually felt a part of it and that in itself felt strange.
She still stood by her earlier decision. To become not a flower but a tree. A month away, she had that little time to get stronger. She did not know where Naruto had disappeared to. Or Sasuke.

She ignored Ino complaining to the nurse and instead glanced down the hall. Sasuke was serious about this too. She had not gotten to see his match but he had fought with that thing on his neck. And judging how the room was now empty…not just of Sasuke but the shadow that had been there before…

Sasuke had left to train. No doubt with Kakashi-sensei. The man could be so light hearted over the entire matter. But she could go to him for tips. If she knew what to focus on.

“Sakura? Where are you going?” She halted in the middle of the hall and realized Ino had followed her.

“Lee-san.” She smiled as she waved the flowers in Ino’s direction. “Sasuke-kun is gone and he won’t be back unless he falls unconscious and even then he would have to be dragged here. I’ll visit Lee-san like I originally planned.”

“Oh yeah.” Ino said softly. “Him.”

“He’s still here and I’d like to look in on him before I start training.” Sakura murmured as she looked at the two flowers.

“I heard the news.” Ino said softly. “About…him.”

“Me too.” She whispered.

XxX

“No you must not! Absolutely not!” The loud voice stopped her in her tracks. Sakura kept her hand on the door to Lee’s room even as she glanced around for the source of the voice.

Ino looked behind her and before Sakura could say anything Ino had dashed down the hall to stop by the huge window. Where she stopped.

“Lee-kun! Stop this please! Your body!”

Lee? Sakura trembled before she released the door her feet pounding on the tiles as she raced to Ino’s side. Her breath hitched as she saw Lee all bandaged up attempting to-

Attempting to-

Her eyes watered as she watched Lee’s attempts at the push ups. So jerky different from the speed and grace he had held before.
“Lee-kun please stop! Your body!”

“Please be quiet for a bit!” Lee’s voice was harsh even as his words were polite and Sakura felt her throat itch as he eyes watered. She watched Lee’s attempts even as his body trembled and sweat dripped like rain and she remembered the horrifying picture that had been made in the prelim exams.

She had brought the daffodil for Sasuke and Lee. To wish them well. Tears dripped from her as she watched Lee struggle. It was not fair but that was the way their world was it not?

Fair or not. Sometimes things ended.

But for someone like Lee to never be a shinobi again. It was too cruel. She had only known his for an instant but his heart had shown bright.

Lee’s hand trembled once more and he slumped forward. Sakura was unaware that she had moved until she found herself looking down at him.

“I’ll bring a stretcher!” The nurse said and she nodded.

Even unconscious he looked tired and stressed. Even unconscious he was still fighting he could not relax. A tear dripped from her to land on his cheek. People like Lee, they were not rare. These foolish reckless boys. Seeing them push themselves like this was taxing on the heart.

XxX

She fidgeted as Ebisu-sensei gave her his evaluation. She was grateful Kakashi-sensei had done that much for her. So as the man went on and on about her faults and her strengths she soaked it up.

“Of all three of you, you currently have the most chakra control.” Ebisu-sensei smiled. “You have perfect chakra control so you should use that to your advantage. Also your insight is impressive. Although you have to work on your delay in acting.”

“I knew about that.” She muttered. She acted quick enough but nowhere near the level Naruto did. And Sasuke.

At this point I think the most you can do to improve is work on your strategies and maybe find your elemental affinity and pick up a few strong jutsus. Your basics need some work but you already knew that.”

“Thank you.” She smiled. She knew she had faults. She wanted to grow and get stronger. The questions were how and where.

XxX

Naruto was not home. Sakura sighed as she left the complex. She had expected it but considering how their group operated she had thought he would have been home or at least been on his way out. It was still morning after all.

Her gift remained in her hands. She had gotten up early, the plan being to share some food with Naruto and Lee if he was up to it. She already knew looking for Sasuke was a waste of time.

Yet again Naruto was nowhere to be found. He had better be training. She shivered at the memory of the gold eyes. But it was fine. Everyone had promised it would be fine. As long as she held onto
that...as long as she believed that lie things could remain the way they were for a little longer.

She hesitated and glanced back at the complex. She knew how to get in. They all did. Sasuke said it was an invasion of privacy and honestly she never had to go to his place before but she had gotten into Kakashi-sensei’s apartment before. And she had gone in Naruto’s apartment before too.

And Naruto had come to fetch her before. Sasuke too and Kakashi-sensei. This was no different from that. He might not be home but a little encouragement for training might be good for him. She smiled as she headed back to Naruto’s complex. It was actually better this way.

He would come home and see they were thinking of him. She would just leave a little note with it. Naruto was ramen obsessed, it would be nice to eat something different once in a while. This was good for him and it made her feel closer to him. To her team.

She paused as she stopped outside Naruto’s door. Maybe she should leave some for Kakashi-sensei too. She knew he was training Sasuke but that did not mean he did not come home. He had left Ebisu-sensei for her after all.

XxX

“Naruto’s missing too huh.” Ino sighed as they left the training ground together. “I’m sort of surprised.”

“Well he gets really into training.” Sakura shrugged. “So he’s off somewhere most likely working himself into a sweat or something.”

“I hope he’s found someone to spar with him. I’ll keep as your partner when I have the time.” Ino sighed. “Unless that lazy Shikamaru decides he actually wants to fight.”

“Will he be okay?” Sakura asked in concern.

“Who knows.” She shrugged. “It’s Shikamaru. If he gets motivation, he’ll be amazing but if he finds it boring there will be nothing you can do. Besides I think his Dad and Asuma-sensei are giving him pointers.” She barked out a harsh laugh. “Or to be more precise, they are trying to give him pointers.”

“Boys huh.” Sakura laughed.

“I know right?” She stretched and made a small noise of content. “You coming to the shop?”

“I need another flower for Lee-san.” She laughed. “Then I’m going to the library. There’s something I want to look up.”

“You talk about Sasuke-kun and Naruto but you don’t know the meaning of rest yourself don’t you?” Ino smirked. “Each and every one of you can’t keep still. It is tiring looking at you.”

XxX

She needed. Strength. Well she already needed that but she meant it differently. She had graduated top of the class she was smart but she wanted strength. Power. She wanted power. But how could she get it? What was the type of power that she wanted?

In fact, how was she supposed to get in less than a month anyway. She needed tips. She left Lee’s flower in the vase and smiled at how he looked asleep. He was so active when his eyes were open but asleep he actually looked vulnerable.
She recalled how Naruto and even Sasuke had looked unconscious and her hand twitched as she thought back. If she had been stronger then-

Well most likely she would have been killed. That man back then. Orochimaru back then had been incredibly strong and he had been holding back. And had hurt them.

Hurt Naruto and Sasuke physically. And emotionally. They had known Orochimaru had been holding back. She guessed that was why they were so head bent on training.

Orochimaru had been so certain Sasuke would seek him out. It frightened her. She wanted to punch that guy as childish as it sounded. She wanted to break all his bones as illogical as it seemed. She had to turn her current strengths into a better pillar.

She had heard a few interesting things from some nurses as she walked the hallways. Nurses were gossips it seemed. She had gotten a few tips and information just because a nurse or two had something to say and the hospital was always busy.

And they were always concerned.

But her brain was not the power. She had to increase her power. For the exams and for the future.

XxX

The lights were not good in this area of the hospital. There were areas of darkness and Sakura always felt a twinge of pity for the nurses that had to travel the corridor daily. She heard a rush of footsteps coming her way and leapt out of the way in time as a nurse her hands filled of files came running into view.

Her eyes landed on Sakura in confusion before she hurried along her way. Sakura watched her go wondering what the files were for. The nurse made it to the end of the corner and Sakura’s eyes widened as she saw a file slip from the pile and slide to the floor. The papers fell everywhere and Sakura rushed to the fallen file. She glanced around the corner for the nurse but she was already gone.

But the file seemed old. She blinked at the face of the young blonde child. Sakura choked at the birthdate. Confirming that the file was old. She frowned as she looked around. Once again the area was deserted.

But this person. This was their genin report. She felt a little bad reading the file but if she read what it was about she might be able to figure where the nurse had been going and simply deliver the file.

She froze when she saw the name of the blonde child. She flicked through the other pages her heart in her throat because she knew that name. she had heard it so often in school. And this was that person’s detailed progress report? People got this lucky?

Well someone needed the file but she would take a look through it first. A shinobi used all the information at their disposal after all. A smile grew on her mouth and she tucked the file away in her pouch and made ready to leave the hospital.

XxX

“Hokage-sama.” Sarutobi looked up and raised a brow at his Chuunin assistant. “What happened to the files you made us look for?”

“I made a copy of the one I needed.” Sarutobi shrugged. He rooted about in his cloak for his pipe
and lit it with a smile. “You can take all the progress reports back now.”

“Where’s Tsunade-sama’s report?” The Chuunin asked as he looked over the files on Sarutobi’s desk.

Sarutobi grinned as he blew out a plume of smoke. “Who knows.”

XxX

His control sucked. If he could do it successfully once or twice he would never have to worry again. Naruto knew that. But the problem was he was making progress. Just not the type of progress what was actually needed. It was the third day since he started training with the perverted sage.

He had gone from tadpoles with legs to actually frogs…even if they were ridiculously tiny. But actually cute in their own way and some could talk.

While he had been resting he had heard the sage carry on a conversation with his own summon. It seemed fun. He really wanted to master the technique. The toad the perverted sae had summoned had been huge.

Then there was another one with cool armguards. Naruto wanted to get to that level but he was currently down at the bottom. He knew he could trust the perverted sage.

The man was more than he seemed. Naruto knew that but letting go. Just thinking about depending and letting go made his gut twist and his hands shake and his control just vanish. He never wanted to feel like that again.

XxX

It was as depressing as always and considering it was his mind he was talking about…that was really depressing. Naruto saw the grin in the darkness behind the cage and his eyes narrowed.

“Naruto.” A claw poked out the cage. “You’ve finally come…again.”

He could still feel Haku’s blood on his hands. On his face. Hear the wheeze as Haku choked. Remembered the burning shame as he looked at Haku from that point on.

“Kyuubi.” He said softly as he stared up at the huge cage and the beast that lurked inside. So far Ero-sennin had been trying to use Naruto’s emotions to help out with the summoning. But Naruto knew what was needed at least for now.

Which was why he was facing the cage and speaking to the beast that lurked behind it. He needed that chakra. At least for now.

“How amusing.” Teeth flashed as the fox laughed. “But I know what you want. And no games…. I’ll give it to you.”
Naruto narrowed his eyes. “But?”

“Enough is enough.” The fox’s eyes gleamed. “I’ll help you… if you promise you’ll use my chakra more often.”

Naruto frowned that was actually…a strange request. The fox actually wanted to help?

“I won’t lose. I won’t let you take over.” Naruto warned. He could still remember Zabuza washing Haku’s hair. Could feel the drying blood on his skin. Still see the ice melting along with the streaks of blood. Could still feel the burn in his mouth. The taste…the wrongness of it all. “I won’t lose.” He hissed even as the Fox leered at him.

XxX

He was back in the real world again with the new chakra energizing him. He ran through the seals and slammed his hand on the ground and used the chakra within him. Right away he could feel the difference. The explosion blew him upwards. Ero-sennin yelped and leapt to his feet and Naruto he gaped at the red mass under him. Far bigger than what Ero-sennin had summoned.

Was this a toad?

“What is this? Why am I in the outside world?” A voice bellowed. Naruto’s eyes widened and he cheered in victory.
“Ah Shit.” Naruto heard the sage mumble.

“How am I here. Who summoned me?” The voice bellowed and Naruto scrambled so he could peer over. It was a huge Toad. Extremely huge and he had finally gotten it right.

“I did!” He called down and got a change in the body under him. He yelped as he was picked up and dangled. Just like in the forest but this time. It was by a huge toad that was smoking a pipe.

“You?” The Toad demanded. “A little squirt like you? I don’t believe it.”

“You better had.” Ero-sennin muttered. “Of all the troublesome…it just had to be you.”

“Jiraiya!” The toad roared and Naruto yelped as he was slammed down on the back of the Toad’ head. “You summoned me?”

“Nope.” Ero-sennin sighed. “He’s telling the truth.”

“I can’t believe it.” Naruto whispered. “You are huge!”

“How rude.” The Toad snorted. “But I don’t see why I have to take you under my command and make you my subordinate.”

“Subordinate?” Naruto questioned. “Aren’t you supposed to fight with me?”

“And who are you that I have to work with you? Running around on top of my head. I’ll knock you off and go home.”

“So if you don’t.” Naruto said slowly. “You’ll listen to me?”

“I’ll make you my subordinate.” A plume of smoke rose. “But that ain’t happening kid.”

“How long do I have to stay on your head?”

“A day.”

“Fine.” Naruto hissed.

XxX

Even though he was being grouchy. Gamabunta was actually enjoying himself. Jiraiya chuckled around his pipe as the Toad thrashed around trying to do his best to buck Naruto off.

At least that was how it would look to many. If Gamabunta was actually serious about tossing Naruto off…well, he certainly would not be tossing his head about only.
Something that Naruto would learn later on he guessed. He blew out slowly and smiled at the noise of chaos.

Maybe when Naruto reached a majority age, Gamabunta would ask him to prove himself again. Just as he had back then.

Xxx

Near death experience...drowning. He could now check that off the list. Naruto gritted his teeth and tried to keep his hands locked on the Toad’s coat. He had...another six hours left. So far. They had jumped off a cliff...jumped off a waterfall. Gone bucking through the forest where he really nearly had fallen off.

This guy was strong. Huge. Naruto wanted to fight with him and he was not going to give up. Not when the matter of getting him on Naruto’s side was something as simple as this.

Xxx

“Do you remember, another stubborn blonde headed little kid Jiraiya?” Gamabunta asked as he used his tongue to remove the boy that had fallen asleep still clinging to his back.

“Well who knows.” Jiraiya laughed softly as he took Naruto from Gamabunta. “But he does resemble him doesn’t he? The Yondaime.”

“I haven’t tasted the outside world for quite some time. Call me again soon Jiraiya.”

“So he passed your test?” Jiraiya chuckled as he adjusted Naruto.

“It’s night.” Gamabunta snorted. “It’s enough for now.”

“We’ll be counting on you sometime soon.” Jiraiya warned.

“I hear you.” The Toad boss grumbled before he dispelled. Jiraiya ignored the rocks that were sent flying and instead focused on the boy in his arms. Body lax and even snoring a little. Uzumaki Naruto was an interesting boy indeed and he had reached his limits.

For the day at least. First a rest, and then more training.

Xxx

Naruto opened his eyes slowly. He was being carried. Again. Ero-sennin’s back was warm. He lifted his head and moved his hands from the white hair they had been tangled in. he glanced around at the small lights everywhere. It was night.

“You’re awake.” Ero-sennin said softly. “Which is good.”

“I passed out.” Naruto grumbled. He buried his head in the man’s hair and sighed.

“You passed. Sort of. You stayed on until evening. It is a past so rest for now. Tomorrow, we use what you learned and you will be burning plenty of chakra.” Ero-sennin chuckled.

“Umm.” Naruto mumbled.

Xxx

Sakura had been there again. Naruto smiled at the wrapped food sitting on his table. It felt nice to
come home and find food. Not that there was anything wrong with making some. He had his cup ramen. He could go out to eat.

But to come home and find food?

It was something different. The first time Kakashi-sensei had left behind a basket of vegetables he had been frozen on what to do. So he was glad the man had been already gone.

He had stared at that basket for a long while. And he had felt conflicted but so happy. The same with the stuff Sakura had left the day before. She had been thinking of him, and made something for him. Naruto smiled as he took a seat at his table. He gently unwrapped the bundle and chuckled at the increase of food.

“Thank you for the food.” He said softly.

XxX

“So my job today is to summon over and over and over again?” Naruto demanded. He eyed the old man suspiciously. That did not sound like training to him.

“Idiot.” Ero-sennin huffed. “You’re doing it so you get a proper gauge on your abilities. The more you summon the better understanding you will get of your current limits. It will help you in a pinch and you’ll know then how to plan.”

“I don’t get it.” Naruto sighed.

“When you know how much you can do. Then you will work out how much it takes to do at your current level. Then in a fight you’ll plan out your actions so you don’t end up exhausted of all chakra.”

“And summoning the Toad Boss…” Naruto said slowly…” Is going to help me? Isn’t it going to piss him off?”

“We will get there when we get there.” The man huffed as he waved his hand. Naruto guessed it was supposed to be in a soothing manner but he just felt his nervousness increase. It made sense and all but the old man had not been the one clinging for dear life.

But he could say he had gotten to understand a bit more from wielding that amount of chakra and using it.

His chakra control was not perfect. There were many things he could not do. Would still be unable to do. But he wanted to do it so maybe this would help. His stamina was one of his greatest strengths and something he used in his strategies. The fact that he would hold out longer.

But there were other people who could hold out even longer…so summon until he reached his limit. It was sounding better and better by the moment.

XxX

“Jiraiya.” The Toad roared as it appeared. Naruto yelped as he rethought just how he summoned the Toad Boss. He had gotten blown right onto the Toad’s back. Not that he minded. He got to his feet as started to head towards the toad’s head. Just that the one that would most likely dislike his current position…something wrapped around his waist and Naruto sighed. “Walking on my head like a tiny ant.” The toad muttered as he dragged Naruto around. “What you want this time kid.”
“Ask Ero-sennin.” Naruto shrugged. “I’m supposed to summon you for a certain amount of times until I don’t get tired.”

“How’s that working for you?” The tongue moved him and shook him lightly. Naruto barely held back his groan as the world slanted. He was still using a shit ton of chakra to summon one toad. He was trying to cut down on the waste. You never knew when the fox would decide to be stingy with chakra.

“After you go back…I might be able to summon you three more times?” Naruto guessed. “I don’t know.”

“You think I don’t have anything else to do but get summoned back and forth? Does this look like some child’s game?”

“It might seem so to you, but it isn’t. That is just part of it.” Ero-sennin spoke up. Naruto sighed as the Toad let him back on the ground. His feet nearly gave out but he ruthlessly controlled himself. “First we find his limits. Then we work on what we currently have. Right now we are seeing how much he can depend on summoning.”

“Back and forth back and forth. So what you really mean is…” The Toad’s webbed hand inched towards its dagger. “I won’t be fighting.”

“No yet.” Ero-sennin shrugged.

“Might as well sleep for the next few hours.” The Toad boss grumbled before he disappeared.

“He just might kill us.” Naruto said softly. “Aren’t there anymore like him?”

“Yes, but you didn’t reach for them…you went for him.” Ero-sennin eyed him. “Later on we will fine tune who you reach for but for the moment we will work with what we have and currently…that is it.” He grinned. “It also is the best option; I’ll show you eventually but we really lucked out. Now let’s see how many times you can summon him without passing out. Keep an eye on your chakra levels.”

XxX

It took them about ten tries before Naruto was unable to resummon the Toad Boss. There had been a moment of silence where he and Ero-sennin had stared at the small frog that had appeared instead of the towering back of the Toad Boss.

“You messed up?” Ero-sennin asked slowly as they eyed the orange frog.

“No.” Naruto said slowly. “I guess that is it.”

“Ten, so in a fight you should assume your limit is five.” Ero-sennin said softly. “Right build up some chakra, take a break. We’ll come back and summon him for real.”

“Yo.” The toad said.

“Hi.” Naruto grinned as he knelt closer. “Want something to eat before you go back?”

XxX

“Right it is time to make you my underling.” Naruto leaned away from the smoke wafting in his direction.
“I can’t drink until I’m twenty-one.” Naruto said slowly as he eyed the bottle the Toad Boss had appeared with.

“Who cares.” The Toad snorted as he opened the bottle.

“I do!” Naruto yelped. He turned to see the old man had ignored the entire thing and was sitting a few metres away on a rock puffing on his own pipe. “Ero-sennin!”

“A sip won’t kill you.” Was the man’s response. “But just one, your body will run it through fast enough.”

“I can’t believe this. You’re an irresponsible adult you know that?” Naruto sighed. He frowned at the way the man’s gaze darted to him. “What? I can’t be the only one that has said that to you.”

“Well no. Not for a while.” Ero-sennin muttered. He turned away but not before Naruto saw the smile on his lips.

XxX

“So what does being an underling involve?” Naruto asked as he sat on the Toad Boss’s head.

“Well there is a bond between us and I have to protect you my underling and when I need you, you will come.”

“So the summoning really does work both ways. But if you have Ero-sennin why would you need me?” The Toad Boss laughed and Naruto frowned. “What?”

“Your worth is far more than you know kid. But different people for different situations. Just as how you will need different ones from our place.”

“I get it. I think.” Naruto mused.

“We will need you one day. I’m sure of it.” The Toad Boss laughed.

XxX

“So what is it like?” Naruto asked. The Toad Boss paused and Naruto heard the Toad inhale slowly. “Being a Boss.”

“It is what it is. Responsibility. Protecting. Guarding. Learning. Every day is an experience.”

“I expect so.”

“You learn what you can do. And you be grateful for those that do what you can’t do. You gather them. And you learn how good it is to have bonds.”

“Sounds awesome.” Naruto said softly.

XxX

“So how do we fight together?” Naruto asked.

“Well in combination attacks you are looking to match your partner. For example, the old perv over there can do fire jutsus. I can shoot oil from my mouth.” Gamabunta paused. “See where this is going? Coordinated fighting can make bigger and better jutsus. Some combinations bring something unique to the table.”
“But I…” Naruto frowned. “I don’t know what I can do as yet.”

“Give me a list of what you can do. We’ll go from there.”

XxX

“It’s not perfect.” Ero-sennin commented. “But it’s good for today.”

“Wow.” Naruto whispered.

“It’s going to be a prime bathing spot now.” Ero-sennin continued. “That’s a pretty big jutsu.”

“The forest.” Naruto said slowly. “It’s gone!”

“Not something to be excited about.” Ero-sennin scolded. “But this is good. Gamabunta! We’re done for today.”

“See you around kid.” The Toad Boss said before he disappeared. Naruto hopped down easily.

“Wow.” He repeated.

“Still is not perfect.” Ero-sennin muttered. “But it will be good for now. You should work on holding your transformations as well.”

“Yeah.” Naruto answered as he stared at the debris. “Yeah.”
Falling unconscious was starting to become a habit. Naruto opened his eyes slowly and sighed before the smell hit him and he winced. It appeared the old guy had decided that the hospital was a better place for Naruto to go than his own place.

And considering how he felt. Naruto turned his head and stared at the IV hooked up to his arm. It was actually a good decision. He had no idea how long he had been out but it had been night when he had been last aware.

The light outside spoke of afternoon. Maybe early afternoon. But it was still afternoon. Meaning technically, he had slept a day away. Or more.

Most likely more considering how good he felt. It could not all be whatever that was in the IV. Naruto sighed and moved so he could take the IV out. It took a firm tug but the needle came out. He lifted the sheet and snorted at the hospital dress before his gaze bounced around the room searching for his clothes.

His eyes spotted the neatly folded clothes peeking out from an open drawer and he sighed in relief. He was quick to get out the bed to fetch them. He winced at the light breeze that hit him the moment he slid out the bed. Hospital clothes were certainly many things. Fun was not one of them. Certainly not.

The hospital dress hit the floor as Naruto reclaimed his pants. He eyed his medical chart as he buttoned himself but he could make no real sense of it. It said he had been out for the night and other stuff but he could not understand it.

But a day was enough. More than enough. But now he would have to search for Ero-sennin. Or maybe not honestly. The man was sort of predictable. Naruto doubted he would have to search more than one bathhouse before he found the man in the area.

And was that not sad? He slipped back into his mesh shirt, checked the bedside table to see if he was missing anything before he slid on his jacket. He was about to zip the jacket and be finished with the entire matter when he sensed someone approaching.

The door slid open and Naruto frowned at the sight of Shikamaru framed in the doorway.

“You’re supposed to wait to be released.” The boy said dryly. “And if you attack the nurses it will
just get troublesome.” He waved the small basket filled with apples in Naruto’s direction. “I don’t know why I thought you would still be asleep.”

“In this place?” Naruto snorted as he released the IV needle he had grabbed absentmindedly. “Who would? Especially when I could be training? It’s better than being poked at and whispered about all day long.” He muttered.

“Well I wouldn’t like it either but I’d know my limits. And complaining would be tiresome. Actually I’d just sleep until I could leave.” Shikamaru shrugged.

“Different opinions.” Naruto shook his head slowly. “So you came here with all those apples for me?”

“Two apples were for you.” Shikamaru corrected as he glanced at the basket. “I brought them for Chouji and then I heard about you.”

“Chouji? He’s still here?” Naruto frowned.

“He overate.” Shikamaru said dryly. “It’s not what you are thinking. Asuma-sensei gave him barbeque as a reward. He ate until he got sick.”

And you’re bringing him food?” Naruto laughed.

“It’s the thought that counts.” Shikamaru lifted the basket higher. “What you say about seeing Chouji with me? We can peel them in front of him.”

XxX

They were about halfway to Chouji’s room when Naruto felt it. It was a feeling at the back of his neck. It made his senses go haywire. Something was nearby. Something bad. Something wild.

He had not realized he had stopped walking until Shikamaru leaned down into his line of vision. “You okay Naruto?” He asked. Naruto heard him but he turned slowly around to the direction he could feel the wild thing from.

It felt so dark. So wrong and dangerous he did not know how anyone else could not feel it. But he felt it and really that was all that mattered.

“Woah!” Shikamaru grabbed his hand as he turned around. “What is it?”

“There is something.” Naruto said softly. “There’s something here.” He said softly. “And it means bad news.” Not killer intent. At least, not yet.

“There’s nothing down there except those in intensive care.” Shikamaru argued. “Aren’t we going to Chouji?”

“You go.” Naruto muttered. He had to check. To make sure because this felt bad and was getting worse with every second. It was wild and it was on the hunt. “I need to check this out.”

XxX

“This is dumb.” Shikamaru hissed at him as he headed down the corridor.

“No one told you to come.” Naruto hissed back. The feeling was worse.

XxX
Whatever he had been expecting when he opened the door. Naruto knew it was not what he saw. Shikamaru had allowed himself a split second of shock before they both exploded into action. Naruto gritted his teeth as sand dripped from Gaara’s face after his kick.

Gaara was immobile thanks to Shikamaru and the look he gave them was filled with rage but that was not what really concerned Naruto.

“What are you doing to busy brows.” He growled. “What are you doing in this room!” This guy needed to be stopped.

“You.” Gaara said and the almost calm way he spoke bothered Naruto. It did not feel natural. It did not feel real. It felt wrong. Every single part of it.

“What are you up to.” Naruto growled. “What were you going to do to bushy brows.”

“I was going to kill him.” Naruto flinched at how easily Gaara said that. He had heard worse but Gaara… he felt different. As if something was broken. Or missing. Or fucking loose.

“Why is there a need to do that?” Shikamaru sounded freaked. Naruto could not blame him Gaara was trapped but he still sounded calm. He was still calm. “You won the fight! You have some grudge against him?”

“I don’t.” The redhead paused. “I’m just going to kill him because I want to kill him.” His voice was still so calm. Almost as if he had no problem with being restrained. As if it did not deter him.

“You must have had a messed up childhood how self-centred can you be?” Shikamaru’s voice had calmed down by a bit but Naruto could feel Shikamaru’s caution.

“If you get in my way, I’ll kill you too.”

“Don’t get over yourself.” Naruto snarled.

“Don’t rile him up Naruto!” Shikamaru hissed. “His strength is like a monster!”

“I won’t lose to the likes of him. I have my own monster.” Naruto hissed.

“A monster?” Gaara’s voice had changed. Contemplative. “Then it’s the same for me.” Naruto froze. Shikamaru’s arm was still on his but he barely felt it. “As you said, I had a messed up childhood. When I was born I took the life of the woman I would have called mother. My father through ninjutsu attached the incarnation of sand to me to make me the ultimate shinobi.”

Naruto’s stomach dropped to the bottom of his stomach. He felt cold all over. He twitched as he listened and the fear slowly crawled up his throat. He was in denial. He knew he was in denial as he listened and hoped he was not going to hear what he thought he was going to hear.

“I was born a monster.” Gaara’s eyes had changed. “Called Shukaku it was sealed in a tea kettle. A living beast. Now inside of me.”

“A possession jutsu that allows one to be possessed before birth. Going that far is crazy.” Naruto glanced at Shikamaru and his pale face. He glanced back to Gaara. Gaara now looked different.

Deep inside of himself. Naruto looked back at the heavy cage behind him. Red eyes watched him and he shuddered. Facing him was someone who knew that exact feeling but they were nothing like him.
Or were they.

“Is that something a parent does? What a strange expression of love.” Shikamaru said bitterly. Naruto glanced at Shikamaru and felt a moment of sadness.

“Love?” Gaara snorted. “Don’t measure me with that stick. You know what kind of connection things like family means to me?” Naruto felt his dread rise higher. “It’s simply pieces of meat, connected to me with murderous intent and hatred.” Naruto flinched. “I became the village’s masterpiece by sacrificing my mother’s life.”

Naruto choked and trembled. Gaara’s eyes… he knew that look.

“My father taught me shinobi secrets I was spoiled and allowed to do as I pleased. I thought that was love.”

Naruto swallowed and felt a bitter taste on his tongue. Thought. Past tense but for that time there was no doubt that Gaara had accepted that bit as love. Searching for it and acceptance.

“Until that incident of course.” Gaara said softly.

“What incident?” Shikamaru pressed.

Gaara’s face twisted. No longer calm but angry. No not angry. Crazed with the need to strike out at something. Anyone. “From the time I was six years old for the past six years my father has tried to assassinate me countless times.”

“Huh!” Naruto gasped. He blinked to keep the room in focus but a dull roar filled his ears. He could hear Gaara and Shikamaru but he could hear other things too and it took everything he had to not clasp his hands over his ears.

“My powers unlocked the day my father tried to kill me after killing my mother. I was no longer his son. I was no longer even a human being. I was a monster. In my desperation and need to live…”

Haku trailed off and tried to smile. “Well I try not to think about that now. The country of water… was different back then.”

“You father spoiled you! You just said so!” Shikamaru’s shout roused Naruto from his thoughts.

“A being too strong can become an existence of fear.” Gaara’s tone had calmed down a little. “Born through jutsu, my spirit was unstable.” No… Naruto touched his stomach gently. The problem had to be the seal. “It seems the idiots in the village finally realized there was a problem. To my father. The Kazekage, I was a trump card for the village. But I also was a dangerous being. So by the time I reached six it was determined that I was too dangerous. I was the village’s dangerous tool.” Gaara’s voice was bitter. “I was used with only care. To them I am an existence from the past that they wish would disappear. Then why do I exist? Why am I alive?”

Those words. Naruto’s mouth fell open and he was helpless against it. He was…helpless.

“I am what I am.” Alya gently ran her hands through his hair. “I thought my only purpose was to exist there until the end of my days. In a way Zabuza-san saved me.” Her smile was bright and Naruto blinked sleepily up at her. “I’ve found happiness and freedom. And meaning.” She continued. “Well, you might not get it Naruto-chan.”

His throat ached and itched.

“When I thought about this I could find no reason.” Gaara continued. “But as you live you need a
reason, otherwise it is the same as being dead.”

“What’s he talking about.” Shikamaru hissed.

Naruto could understand it. Weapons thrown away. Like Raiya. A reason for existing. Himself, Haku, Alya. Hell all of them in the end. The feeling of being completely alone. Of being abandoned. Of not being wanted. He understood them so well.

“Then I came to this conclusion. I exist to kill everyone except myself. I finally found relief within the fear of death of never knowing when someone would try to assassinate me… by continually killing the assassins I understood the reason to continue living.”

So wrong. He was so much like Naruto that it hurt but what he was saying. It was so wrong. That reason for existing was so lonely.

“Fighting for yourself. Living for yourself and loving only yourself. If you think that everyone simply exists to allow you that experience. There truly is nothing is better than that feeling. Nothing in the entire world.” How could he say that so seriously with such a convinced calm face. “As long as there are people in this world for me to kill and continue to feel that joy of living… my existence will not vanish.”

The difference between himself and Gaara…was that he had found people and learnt what it felt like to be alive and not alone. But Gaara. He had remained alone and still was. He learned how to feel alive by killing others. A big difference. How they saw the world was different. Except.

Naruto glanced at Shikamaru. Shikamaru would be unable to understand. In more ways than one. Naruto also knew the feeling of brushing too close to death and coming away alive. Not all those times had felt great. But he had come away enough times with a stronger grasp on himself and his existence.

But Gaara. He was so very different.

“Now let me feel it.” Gaara hissed and Naruto jumped as the sand moved forming a spear. Shikamaru's grunted as he stepped back his shadow returning in a quick snap.

“Enough!” The door slammed open. “The finals are tomorrow don’t get so excited.” It was bushier brows sensei. He barely glanced over them before he continued. “Or do you want to stay here starting today?”

“Ughh.” Gaara fell to his knees his hand holding his head. Naruto stepped back cautiously. Not stable but it was more than that. His glare at the man that watched them it was more than crazed anger. Gaara grunted and his hand clenched in his hair and Naruto retreated another step. But Gaara regained himself and stumbled back to his feet and started for the door. “I’ll kill you guys, just you wait.” He hissed when he reached the door.

“Who the hell is gonna- “ Naruto allowed Shikamaru to use his hand to muffle his voice as the redhead vanished out the door without a glance to the Jounin by it.

“Stop it. Please.” Shikamaru begged. “You know what?” The hand on Naruto’s mouth trembled before Shikamaru slipped to sit on the floor. “I’m done. I’m done. You have no fear and something like that is in the exam.”

“Yeah.” Naruto said softly. “He’s the worst outcome.”

“Of what?” Shikamaru asked.
Naruto thought on the people that had joined Zabuza’s group and how they had changed. He thought of himself. In the village surrounded by hatred and disdain. He thought about Iruka-sensei and what might have happened if that first bond he had never gotten. He thought and felt his stomach twist at what he could have become with no one around. Just because he had not had assassins, did not make it any easier.

“He is…” Naruto trailed off as he realized Bushier brows was still there and staring at them. “He’s what anyone can become if they get pushed far enough.” He said softly. He understood Gaara. He felt it so much it hurt.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter gives you a lil Kakashi... I know you guys have been missing him ^.^
They loved me

Chapter Notes

Small chapter, with any luck I will be able to update again during the week... if not then Sunday again.

It was hard to eat after that confrontation. Naruto kept hearing Gaara’s voice in his head. He kept seeing Gaara’s eyes. So similar to what his had been like. To what all their eyes had been like.

It had been chilling to hear the same tone the others like Zabuza and even Mai used to speak about life, being used by Gaara like that. It was startling and heart-breaking and it was understandable.

Naruto sighed as he gave in and finished the bowl in front of him. It was nearly cold. It was hard to eat or even think and the bottom of his stomach felt sluggish. They were exactly the same. Except for some small differences.

But he was so much like Naruto. But he was still wrong. He felt wrong and talked wrong. Naruto wanted to know more but… He pressed his hand to his lower stomach. Where the mark would show and winced.

“Troubles?” The old man asked as he stopped bustling around the ramen shop. “I don’t remember the last time you ate only one.”

“Me neither.” Naruto mumbled. After he had come back. He guessed he had been overcompensating but this was a place that was something good to him. He had many good memories here. Ayame Nee-Chan sneaking him extra noodles. The old man saying the meal was on the house.

The way they encouraged him to eat more and never rushed him. They looked him in the eye and they laughed with him. They scolded him too.

He had also thought about it when he was gone.

The meals with the Hokage the man patting his back before he was summoned away. The way they sat next to each other and it felt nice. It was a warm feeling even though it had been rare.

It had kept him going and Naruto suspected that had he remained. He might have hung in for a bit longer. Longer than Gaara maybe. After that? Who knew? But the small things that had kept him going. But his thoughts had been just like Gaara’s.

That kind of darkness. That kind of hell and hatred. The denial and loneliness. The way people looked at you. Even if they never knew they did it.

He had feared what would have happened and back then he had been so tired. It had not been his only option but Haku’s hand… he would never regret taking it. Ever.

XxX

But Gaara was like him. A monster. He called it an incarnation of sand. That was not enough
information but Naruto knew that deep inside Gaara, when he looked behind him. There was a beast waiting to take him over.

With that kind of pressure. That kind of personal hell and no support. Naruto understood. Because when you were not needed you needed a reason to exist and he guessed Gaara had not guessed what his reason sounded like.

Spite. Live to spite those who sought to kill you. Naruto knew of that. Those who sought to ignore him. Erase him. He had fought to be seen. To know he was still here. Alive. But it was different now. The child that craved any sort of attention.

That Naruto had left a while ago. He was not demanding their attention. He was looking to change that look in their eyes.

Because being acknowledged was one of the best feelings in the world.

His feet dangled on the railing as he sat staring at the Hokage mountain. Not the ideal position for it. He could barely see the Sandaime’s face but the Yondaime’s face was staring at him and that in itself made Naruto feel better.

Gaara’s eyes were so cold. Dark almost dead and they no longer saw the real world around him. They saw something darker and painful. Gaara’s eyes reflected the hell of the world that he knew.

And the reason Naruto did not look the same would have to be because of Iruka-sensei. It had been years since that moment. He could still remember how he had tasted fear and rage. How his hands had shaken, but he had been determined.

He had been so scared of losing the thing he had coveted a few minutes after getting it. The other stuff had been painful but being hugged. Being acknowledged and loved. That feeling was worth getting up over and over again.

Iruka-sensei had given him something had had not even known he was losing until that very moment. His humanity. Being alone was painful. Being denied. Being hated without a reason. Nowhere to shout his frustration.

Haku showed him he had not been alone. Zabuza had shown him the world outside the village was not fair. The Nee-Chans had shown him that even with all the pain you can still care.

He had been loved.

He still was loved. He would carry that pain. Those memories forever.

Freedom was something people killed for. Fled for. It seemed wrong but the people Naruto knew that had been strong, they all had something they believed in that they thought was worth their life.


He and Gaara saw things so differently. But because Naruto had that something to hold onto… he knew he would never become Gaara. Because he had been hurt. He had been protected. He had suffered and he had caused pain and he would do whatever it took to hold onto what they had left him.

It was one thing to live yourself. Fight for yourself. But Gaara was doing it wrong. Sasuke would have a fight on his hands.
Kakashi had not expected them to be alone for long. Especially with the new situation and the fact that Sasuke was barely out of hospital… he knew something was going on between Sasuke and Itachi. A sort of rivalry that honestly looked only to being taken seriously by one person. Sasuke.

Because Kakashi knew Itachi, he had worked with him. Seen him and Sasuke was only fooling himself if he thought that Itachi would leave all the matters alone.

Kakashi was sticking to his decision on sealing the curse mark. This was Orochimaru and Anko had been shaken up. Anko who usually was amused at the thought of death and people trying to kill her. She had been resolved to doing something many would see as stupid but Kakashi had understood.

And she had been shaken. Orochimaru had an interest in Kakashi’s team. In Sasuke. Naruto too and Kakashi was counting his blessings he had not set his eyes on Sakura too.

But with the current many problems it would be foolish for Kakashi to take his student and just start training without a note. A warning. Something.

He had not told Sasuke’s father about the training but a note was basically the same and it was not as if Itachi did not know exactly where he was after all the ANBU had drifted closer on the first day but no Itachi.

Kakashi was positive that whatever concerned Itachi and Sasuke did not concern him. Did not involve him in any way but he had to admit he was curious.

Many things drove Sasuke and his progress. People. Circumstances. The past. Failures and the scrapes to success but the biggest thing in front of Sasuke’s eyes would have to be… Itachi. Kakashi thought about Naruto’s observation and sighed at how easily Naruto had them pegged.

He eyed Sasuke’s unconscious figure on the blankets and sighed.

As if it were an invitation Shisui flickered into view, Itachi at his side.

“Training.” Kakashi tsked as they approached. “You are a worrier. I think I’m insulted.”

“It’s not your abilities Kakashi-san. That have me worried.” Itachi said as he swept past Kakashi. Kakashi watched as the man dropped to one knee by Sasuke’s side and watched him.

“You were watching all day.” Kakashi pointed out. “He didn’t know but you choose the moment he closes his eyes to approach?”

“My comfort, my help. Sasuke wants none of it at this time.” Itachi said. He shifted, sitting by Sasuke’s side cross-legged. Kakashi sighed before he frowned at how easily Itachi lifted Sasuke to bring his head into his lap.

“He’s unconscious.” Kakashi pointed out as Itachi dragged Sasuke closer. “And wouldn’t it be easier to just go to him and hug him?”

“IT’s never that easy.” Shisui moaned as he lay back on the ground. “They have always been like that.”

Kakashi hummed and looked away when Itachi dragged his brother closer to him. For Itachi’s sake he ignored the hitch in the other man’s breathing. It was not as if he could not guess why.
“This year is an unlucky one eh?” Kakashi asked softly.

“He’s gone.” Shisui sighed. “In the wind. We know… nothing. We have his declaration of war and that is it.”

“Whatever he is planning can’t be good.” Kakashi spared a glanced towards Itachi. Itachi’s eyes were closed and Sasuke’s face was pressed into the man’s shoulder. It had to be hard for Itachi. Orochimaru, back again. Looking for the one thing Itachi needed to protect.

And Kakashi did not use the word need lightly.

“Maybe he is after the sharingan again.” Kakashi said quietly.

“He never stopped going after the sharingan.” Shisui mumbled. “But there are other young Uchihas.”

“It also could be a trap.” Itachi said softly.

“But you don’t think that.” Kakashi responded softly. Shisui rolled over and tossed a stick into Kakashi’s small campfire a blank look on his face.

“The mission you took a while back. The C-rank that went wrong.” Itachi’s voice was too calm for someone who held their twelve almost thirteen-year-old brother in their lap as though he were a child. “Can you give us, the exact circumstances in which Sasuke awakened his sharingan.”

“If I recall, no one died and Sasuke doesn’t get to know people easily.” Shisui picked up softly.

“No one died.” Kakashi answered. He tilted his head in Itachi’s direction as he stared at the flat landscape. “Except for maybe ourselves.”

“You are referring to their innocence?” Shisui frowned. “But that is how things are. That mission had plenty of men but in the end it is a simple fact of life. Painful but true.”

“Their old world died.” Kakashi recalled on how Sakura had looked during their return and after. The way she watched Naruto and Sasuke. The way she had stared at them after the second exam. The confused way Sasuke had watched Naruto in the face of everything. “Your first kill, it changes you.”

“I had a friend that almost quit being a shinobi.” Shisui said softly. “Killing is not easy but sometimes it is necessary.”

“And sometimes the line blurs.” Kakashi pointed out. “Sometimes in order to find your enemy, you have to understand him. And sometimes in your enemy you see something you are not ready to see.”

“He was distracted wasn’t he.” Itachi said softly.

Sasuke had gone out of his way. Kakashi looked away before he slid his hitai-ate over his eye. “Loss is not easy.” He reminded them.

“We should call off the exams.” Shisui sighed. Itachi tensed and he sighed again. “But we won’t be doing it.”

“There was a message.” Itachi said slowly. “Naruto-kun left it at your place.”

Kakashi tensed.
“About Sasuke’s opponent. It sounded weird when I read it.” Shisui spoke up. “But he wants Sasuke to be extra careful. Gai said that there had been a run in at the hospital but…”

“Did you give the note to the Hokage already?” Kakashi sighed.

“Nope.” Shisui laughed. “Hatake-san. It is your note. We just delivered it and we got the warning to you on time.”

“Will he be okay?” Itachi asked as he slowly moved Sasuke back onto the blankets.

“The only reason he is like that is because he pushed himself.” Kakashi dismissed with a snort. “No one is supposed to get that far in shape manipulation in a day without problems.”

“I know Sasuke will be okay.” Itachi’s hand touched Sasuke’s face lightly. “After all, he is my little brother.”

“Uchiha.” Shisui mumbled. “It’s because he is an Uchiha.”

“Well Naruto is Naruto.” Kakashi said with a small shrug. “But if he is worried for his team at a time like this then he has to be fine. He kept most his talents hidden in the exam after all.”

“I would have loved to see the genins fight under normal Chuunin exam conditions.” Shisui sighed. “But we will have to settle for whatever we can. But at least you only have one student to worry about.”

“Not true.” Kakashi smiled. He lived for Sakura’s daily progress reports and he would have to nip away from Sasuke at some time to test her properly. Naruto on the other hand… he was concerned but he had faith Naruto would pull through. And considering that the Chuunin exams were most likely going to end badly… he could be forgiven this time around for botching things.

And Naruto was strong enough already. He would just have to show it. In front of those gathered. Those lords, those Jounins and Chuunins. He honestly was looking forward to it.
The pressure of a deadline

Their sense of time had certainly changed. At the end of the preliminary rounds a month had seemed endless. Stretching on far into the future to them. With the feelings burning inside them they had not wanted to wait to go on and fight.

But now it was different. As the days went on as they evaluated and speculated they were coming to realize that a month simply was not enough time. Their opponents were plentiful. They were not fighting one person but most likely fighting plenty.

There was more to it all. There was more to think of besides defeating the first opponent. If they felt they could get that done. They had to live with the fact that their opponent was getting stronger and stronger and knew about them and was also working in order to defeat them too.

It was really annoying. It was almost too complicated. It was unnecessary pressure on them. That whole one-month thing. It had gone from being too much to being not enough. Because with the limited information they all had. There was no way that all their fights would go smoothly.

Shikamaru knew from the first fight he would have trouble. From the very first. He had watched her. He had speculated and hypothesised. She was strong. Very strong and in the month break she would only get stronger and like he had watched her, she had watched him.

Her abilities, she had only shown a bit. He could come at her and pretend to be weak. Hide himself as he sought out her real weaknesses. Try to play possum. Except it was risky to do that again. She might see through him.

No, she would see through him. Playing up to her ego and pride would just go bad for him in the long run. There honestly was no other way. He had only seen one fight. He had not seen her in the forest. Her fight had not even been that technical that he could have picked up more.

He was in trouble because he knew she was strong but not how. He did not know if she had any tricks up her sleeve and what tricks she would be adding to her sleeve. All he could do is train. Train and hope he was getting something right.

This sort of thing. It was troublesome and the fact that it was part of the Chuunin Exam just made it more troublesome. He wanted to get it over with quickly. Even if he managed to finish her off… there was still the matter of the other Suna shinobi. Shino, Sakura, the other Sound shinobi. Even when he finished and had a fail proof plan.

Because of how the Third Exam was set up… he had to worry about those he would face when he did win. And that plan… would be harder to execute because his opponent from that point on… would have analysed his fights. His moves and change their plans to suit.

Meaning, he would be fighting the opponents after the first round half blind.

And he had less than a month now to think of how to deal with that entire mess. The Chuunin Exams… were a real annoyance.

Shikamaru huffed loudly as folded his arms behind his head. His eyes were closed. What he wanted currently was a nap not to watch the clouds. When he got back up he would tackle the problem again.

XxX
Naruto was aware of time moving. Faster than he would like. He was doing fine or at least it seemed so but his rate of progress could be a simple drop in a well compared to someone else’s that was how it went. A month to train. The others would be too.

Who knew what cool thing Kakashi-sensei was teaching Sasuke. Naruto had sent a note to warn Kakashi-sensei to caution Sasuke. If anything the one Naruto wanted to face was Sasuke. Although… part of him was not entirely certain about that as well.

But he really and truly wanted to advance. Become Chuunin. Get even stronger. It was the way to the goal but when he started to think about his opponents…well it was hard to not let the bloodlust rise at the thought of going against that bastard.

But he had to think about the others too. He was the first match. The opening show and that bastard had been strong back then too. With a month who knew how strong he would be?

He had no injuries to recover from. He had most likely started training right away. To face Sasuke. Naruto chuckled a little. He knew he was being underestimated. It was annoying but nice too. Because one of the best feelings in the world…was the look on someone’s face when they realized they had severely fucked up and you were the one in control. Not them.

But thoughts like that were a little too dark for what he had planned. Maybe a little darkness he could let seep in. But not a lot. He had a point to make and he was going into this fight for them. Hinata. Lee and of course for himself. He was not taking the hat of ‘Hero’ he was going for the one that was marked ‘justice’.

XxX

She was against the Sound. The one that had taken down Chouji in a matter of minutes. It was no laughing matter. She just might have a problem on her hands because she lacked information. And her opponent had more information on her than she did on him. Was that not just hilarious?

But she did know that whatever he did those strange arms of his were involved. Although it might be rude to call his arms strange. Kakashi-sensei had talked about actual sound. Manipulating sound to cause damage. And if she were to somehow go over what she had seen… the answer would be there for her.

Because she was not going to go down in the first round. She had made it this far, she would make it the entire way. Because Naruto would barrel his way through. Sasuke too. There was no way she would get left behind.

So she would review what she knew…and review everyone on her block and be ready for anything to happen. She could still feel the elation that had risen in her chest as Naruto fought Kiba. How he was not one or two but in some cases five steps ahead of Kiba. Outsmarting him. Leading him into traps that startled even as they brought a smile to the lips.

Sakura knew what she wanted and thanks to the files… she had an idea of how to keep on going. First her opponent. She could put no name to the technique but when she figured out how it worked… then she would move from there. She already had a few clues about the weaknesses the technique had.

She had been named the best female ninja of her year. Praised for her analysation skills. She could not stop here and falter. Naruto, Sasuke, they were waiting for her under the warmth of the sun.

XxX
There had to be a reason his Dad had dragged him away from Asuma so that Shikamaru could watch him play Shogi and talk about Suna politics. Shikamaru knew the moment his Dad started talking that it would benefit him in some way. He just wanted to know how.

He hated to admit it but his Dad was sort of cool and Sasuke’s Dad… he was not bad either. The two of them playing Shogi together was an interesting affair even if the game was over fairly quickly. Shikamaru knew he would have lost. But Sasuke’s father took the defeat with a smile and one last word on chakra natures and summons.

It really was a drag but he really needed the reminder of how political all of this was. But their amusement at his expense was not funny at all. And even if he managed to pull it off… he still had the other Sand or Sakura or Shino or the Sound. And even if he made it out of his block okay.

He still had Sasuke, the last Sand that creepy guy, Neji and Naruto to worry about. No matter where he looked it was bound to be trouble. He doubted Sakura would be easy. The way she carried herself had changed. She was stronger now and turning into someone as strange as her team members.

Naruto blew hot and cold. One minute the simple Naruto. The next a complete stranger and sometimes a mixture of the two but with an attitude that spoke of someone far older. Shikamaru did not have any idea how to deal with that.

And a month was really too much and not enough. His Dad had taken the time to start cramming jutsus into his head and some strategies and Shikamaru approved of it. He was grateful for it but he also knew that he was at the disadvantage. The others had plenty in their various arsenals and the skills to wield them well. Who knew what Naruto was hiding. Who knew what Sakura would pick or what she had not used as yet and of course, who knew what the Sand and Sound had up their sleeves.

Shino had always been a mystery anyway. Shikamaru could hope to control the bugs but if one got on him it was really game over.

This entire tournament. Just thinking about it all was frustrating. But in a good way. A half smile escaped him and Shikamaru settled himself better on the grass. He hated to admit it but this was beginning to get a bit exciting but only a bit.

XxX

They were still a team and there was no way Kiba was going to leave Shino by himself. Granted he had thought it would be the three of them moving onto the finals and if not the entire team and least him and Shino but that was not how it ended up working out.

But he was sort of fine with it. More than fine with it. He had gotten cocky a little rude and he had gotten knocked on his ass. There was nothing wrong with pride. His mother said so all the time but when pride got in the way of common sense well that was when the problem started.

And he had certainly fucked up royally there with Naruto. Even until the end he had not seen Naruto and that made him feel guilty. Or it had at first. Naruto had met him equally and fought him. The only one that knew they were equals had been Naruto.

So it could be said that he had done some thinking. A lot of thinking. It was to be expected after all. And the moment he had gotten up and made sure Akamaru was okay he had gone to check up on Hinata and gone to see Shino.
Kurenai-sensei had told him everything about Hinata’s fight and it pained him. But hearing that Naruto had cheered her on? It made him feel better because he had wanted to give her some sort of support. But that she had gone against Neji? And Neji had tried to actually fucking kill her?

Kiba had read the medical charts he knew about that bastard too. There was no doubt. He had been trying to kill Hinata.

Hinata could have died in that exam.

But that bastard was going to get his. He had a lot of pride. Smarts to back it up too but that sort of thing never lasted forever. And Naruto had promised.

“Shall we resume?” Shino asked his hands shoved in his pockets. Kiba nodded as Akamaru got to his feet. It was strange how he did not feel tired and he and Shino had been sparring for most the day. It was his duty as Shino’s team member after all.

A month to get ready. And not only that, Kurenai-sensei was training him too. Trying to push him. He was the only one from their team to make it. Kiba was not ashamed. Well not too much.

But he really wanted Shino to get far and win. His lost showed him he was not ready for Chuunin yet. He had been over his head and had not noticed until he had drowned. And even the hot feeling in his gut that he got when he thought about Hinata. He had to grit his teeth and stand that too and leave the ass kicking to Naruto.

Because that guy, he had promised to kick Neji’s ass and Kiba believed he would do it. And that was the same guy that after all Kiba had goaded him, insulted him by underestimating him, that guy still thought of him as a friend. He had healed Akamaru at the first chance, carried Akamaru over to him and fought him like an equal. He was a weird kind of guy, at least that had not changed.

XxX

This event was an opportunity. There were many things on the line even though their participation was not a team effort anymore. They were going against everyone, it still felt like a team effort.

Naruto had left a message for her and she knew that he had left the same message for Sasuke. As if she needed that warning. Not to mention, the little brief he had given her about Shikamaru’s opponent. It had made her smile early in the morning as she read the note.

Naruto was certain she would make it to at least Temari. Even though her opponent was a mystery. He had faith in her. They were taking this as a group effort. She so badly wanted to meet one of them in the finals. Even as those in the way seemed immense.

It was a group effort.

She had been doing plenty of reading when she was not training and sparring. It was a good thing she had been observing the last few matches. Chouji’s match had been short but she had seen plenty. Add the simple fact that she had a little boost to learn from and she was growing fairly confident.

So far, for her own match she had ten plans ready. Half were based on him making the first move. The others were on the first move she made. She needed to shake him up in the first few moves for that however.

So she was going to make a few more plans based around letting him lower his guard. He had seen
her match. That brawl with Ino... he most likely had made up his mind about her strengths and weaknesses. But he did not know her. What fueled her. Her determination and even her reputation.

She had things to live up to. Which was why she had forcing herself through the routines. Cramming as if it were one of Iruka-sensei’s dangerous quizzes. She was going to shake it up and come out on top. The boys were already standing out. She did not want to be left behind.

She had already made her decision. She would not be left behind. She had something precious and that feeling that she had felt. That the missing nin. That man with his eyes on Naruto and Sasuke. Orochimaru. The feeling that man had made her feel. She would not feel that again if she had a choice.

She was not something to be protected. She would become strong and protect. Those two liked to rush ahead. She would protect their vulnerable backs. Against those that would harm them. She would use her intelligence and see through plots. When they were weary... they would rest on her. Not a flower to be admired but a tree.

It was a nice thing to talk about. Which was why she was trying so hard. The village of Sound with their various strange looking abilities. The would not crush the Leaf. They, no he would only help her drift on the wind. Dance and gather enough to become stronger.

Mere sound would not make her fall.

XxX

Well their personalities and rivalry was good for something. So many things she had pushed herself into learning for the sake of being the best. With that she had become pretty good at learning to say things without speaking. And looking for things that would send her feelings without her being there.

Sakura smiled at the flower she had picked before she nodded for Ino to wrap it up. Despite the early hour, Ino was wide awake and running the store.

“Visitors aren’t allowed until seven you know.” Ino sighed. “Every day without end. You’re so persistent.”

“More like kind hearted.” Sakura smiled. “I don’t want Lee to give up, so every day I’ll bring him a flower. He is still fighting. I won’t discourage him from it.” Her smile dimmed as she thought back to the exams. “It isn’t right to wipe away his struggle because it might turn to nothing.”

“I know.” Ino slumped on the counter. “It still sucks though. He keeps escaping the room I hear.”

“Something has to be done.” Sakura said softly. “But for now I can’t do anything more than bring him flowers.” She cleared her throat. “He isn’t ready to see me I think.” He kept looking away from meeting her eyes.

“Well with you taking care of him like this, he’s bound to be a bit embarrassed and touched.” Ino smiled as she rested her chin or her arms. “A pretty girl leaving flowers every day. It’s just pride for now.”

“It’s more than pride.” Sakura admitted. “It’s more than pride. Lee-kun is angry too he is aware of time moving.” Of her training. She had caught his glance towards her hands. They were far rougher than they had been a week before. She was thinking of getting gloves soon. But someone like Lee would know the meaning of her hands.
“He feels like he is getting left behind huh.” Ino muttered. “Of course he’ll feel like that.” Sakura watched the resigned look grow in Ino’s eyes. “It’s only natural. But he can’t do anything about it now. He might not be able to ever again.” Sakura felt her heart dip.

“I know.” She said glumly. She glanced at the wrapped flower before she forced a smile on her face. “But for now, we don’t know what will happen.”

“No we don’t.” Ino answered. “We really don’t.”

XxX

Just when he had been getting his hopes up. Naruto glared at the empty clearing. No pervert in sight. Nothing except a glaringly obvious scroll.

Considering the Ero-sennin’s nature, when they made plans to meet Naruto had expected another Kakashi-sensei. He thought he would turn up only to wait and wait. But no matter what time he got there the pervert was waiting. No matter how early.

Naruto would get there at sunrise to find the pervert sitting waiting patiently. As if he had nowhere else to go and after seeing off Naruto the night before he just waited right at that spot for Naruto to return. It was strange but Naruto liked it. He liked knowing no matter how early he got there, the pervert would be waiting for them to start the day.

And he was still wary of the man but he had accepted that the pervert had secrets too.

But this morning. He was nowhere around and he had left a scroll behind. It reeked of abandonment. At least, that had been his first thought. After he thought it over, it was more like the man had sneak ed off somewhere. They trained morning until the late night.

A pervert was a pervert. There was no curing them. So all this meant was that was that the pervert had sneak ed off somewhere to do something. He left a scroll behind. Or at least Naruto hoped the scroll was Ero-sennin’s own.

So he might be back. And as it was, they had accomplished a lot. Naruto sighed heavily before he marched over to the scroll. A simple twist of his fingers and the string binding it snapped. The scroll unwrapped and Naruto sighed as he began reading.

He frowned. Ero-sennin would be gone for a few days. Something had come up. Suspicion nagged at him. He had refrained from asking anything because he did not want to get dragged into anything not his concern as he trained… but no matter how he looked at it, it was weird.

But a few days was nothing. He would continue to train. He was getting pretty good at combinations. But now that the pervert was nowhere near, he could think about adding in some stuff.

Naruto would admit to being curious to where the man had gone. What he was doing. But in cases like that, the information eventually came out. He would just have to wait. And for now he had to train. He wrapped up the scroll again and dropped in on the rock it had been on.

He bit his thumb before he ran through the required seals. He had been building up a decent amount of chakra. This should do perfectly. He had met a few of the Toads and he wanted to learn how to call for the ones he wanted. Who knew when that would come in handy.

XxX
Two weeks until his match with Neji. It was a little less than that now but the time was close. He had gotten a lot done. Especially thanks to the pervert.

To think that he would have to say such a thing. Thanking a pervert. Naruto snorted to himself as he kicked off his shoes as he entered his apartment. He was tired. He had summoned, sparred and trained. It was different without the pervert around but he had said only a few days.

He had not said anything but Naruto knew he was impressed with Naruto’s development. The agreement with the fox still stood. Naruto had taken a bit of chakra. He was still wary. He had only taken a tiny bit. Just to see his limits with a bit. He was lucky the fox had not started back his taunting. Happy with just a remark and laugh every now again.

Naruto’s jacket hit the floor as he shrugged out of it. He sighed a little. He needed food and a bath. Another bath anyway. He had gotten flung in the river in the afternoon. A shower sounded so good. A warm shower. His lips curled up in a smile as he thought about it. He wanted that shower.

But his stomach growled and his limbs felt weak. He needed food. And after a good shower he doubted he would be in the mood to go and enjoy making food even if it took a few minutes. No, he would just want the comfort of his bed.

So food first, then a shower. Then he could collapse in bed and sleep until the next day.

Less than fourteen days left. Naruto smiled at the display on his kitchen table. Less than fourteen days and still his team found time to continue with their normal habits. Naruto had been aware the moment he opened his door that someone besides him had been inside.

But because things like this kept happening, he was not as wary as he would have been. A soft laugh escaped him at the basket and wrapped lunch on his table. Kakashi-sensei and Sakura. What was he going to do with them?

Kakashi-sensei kept on nagging with the vegetables. Naruto liked having a choice of not having to eat the first thing he saw. He liked having the choice of being picky. But he could admit the man had a point. And Sakura, well it was nice to know that she was thinking of him too.

Less than fourteen days left. Naruto slowly pulled out a chair and dropped into it. He smiled before he carefully unwrapped the food Sakura left behind. It would not be ramen. Sakura tended to be passive aggressive about things like that. He grinned at the rice balls. He felt his heart clench as he reached into the basket for what Kakashi-sensei had left behind. He was getting used to this.
Their separate understandings and resolve

Kakashi had plenty to be proud of when it came to his team. He was not the sort of person to go about gushing about them, but he would not be stingy with the praise either and they had been making good progress since becoming genins.

The exams he allowed them to enter because he felt they were ready. He could not picture all of them as Chuunins and with new events changing them day by day, he could honestly say their progress was still a mystery to him. He had his hopes. He had plans for training in the future but because of what was happening, he had no real clue how it would turn out.

Because even as his team trained. The threat still loomed. The threat that they all knew hovered. Except they had very little information. Hell, they were going into this blind. All they could do was be on guard. The tournament was going to end in a mess. There was no way it would not.

Kakashi sighed as he set down the hill. His shadow clone was going to keep an eye on Sasuke. He had been worried a bit about the other members of his team. Actually he had been worried more than a bit but there was little he could do. ANBU watched the members of his team when he could not.

It was the least he could do and even that was too much with the village as it was.

But it was now time to check up on Sakura. Her opponent was a strange one. With abilities that made Kakashi a little wary. Wary for his team not himself. He could tell Sakura how to deal with the problem she faced but that would not be fair and that would defeat the point of the exam. Which was why he could only train them and give them hints.

They would have find the various solutions for themselves. He would teach them how to stay safe, how to protect themselves as they found the answers for themselves. It was the only thing he could do.

Xxx

Despite the early hour, Naruto’s house was empty. Kakashi was only a little bit surprised. When he dropped off food, the time was usually late but the room was still empty. He had seen back on their mission that Naruto was an early riser for training.

So he had set off looking for his students after finding Naruto’s and even Sakura’s house empty. It was on his trip to the training grounds that he found Sakura. She was carrying herself differently and it looked as if the reason she had been missing so early was because she had been to the hospital. Kakashi could admit to being happy about that.

Gai had sent a message Lee got flowers daily. Of course, Gai was fairly busy too. Kakashi had his own hopes for the friends his team would make. Lee had touched their hearts. Well, Lee had touched the hearts of Naruto and Sakura. He had touched Sasuke’s interest. Kakashi had read that. He had also caught Naruto’s interest as well. And admiration. What had happened was nothing less than a tragedy but the future was unknown and Kakashi made a habit of hanging with shinobi that defied the odds. He would not accept Lee’s condition as final. Their world was too unpredictable.

Sakura was kind and her feelings would only help her to grow. Kakashi could see that. Naruto’s words before the exam. They had changed her. Changed her feelings about herself. Sakura could only improve from this point.
He waved to her when she spotted him. His arm froze when he recalled that he had never gotten around to talking to her. He had promised himself he would have. But it had slipped away from him. Sakura’s pace picked up and Kakashi remembered how Iruka had spoken how shaken up Sakura had been after the Forest incident.

Hell, Kakashi had noticed how shaken Sakura had been. Plenty of things had happened. There was no time like the present to find out what exactly Sakura knew.

“Sensei.” She smiled when she finally made it to him. “It’s strange to see you so early in the morning.”

“That’s so rude Sakura.” He laughed as he patted her head. Already the texture had changed. And she was using the style Naruto had taught her.

“Are you looking for me?” She frowned.

“Something like that.” Kakashi leaned back against the wooden fence his gaze sweeping over her again. “It’s sort of late, but about what happened in the forest…” He trailed off. He watched the uncertainty flash across her face. “Can you talk about it now?”

“All of it?” She asked.

“Whatever you want to talk about.” Kakashi said softly.

“Sensei.” Sakura said softly. “I’m glad you let us enter the exam.” Her voice was soft but determined. “Even with everything that happened, I’m glad you let us enter.” She smiled, “I’ve learned so much during this. About myself. About them.” Her tone turned sad. “I’ve seen parts of them I didn’t even know existed.”

“That’s to be expected.” Kakashi said softly.

“Sasuke-kun.” She continued. “He is always so unfazed you know?” her tone wavered. “I’ve seen him scared. Terrified. Because of that man. I would have never seen him like that. He would have never let himself be like that around me. I’ve seen a part of him I would have never seen.”

“And how does that make you feel?”

“Normal.” She sighed. “I feel normal now that I’ve seen that. I didn’t know how much had had fallen behind before this exam.” She shivered. “But Naruto.” She said softly. “I’ve never seen that sort of Naruto either.” Her eyes were wide, distressed. “When that man, Orochimaru started to taunt him.” She broke off. “It was like he had snapped. Naruto does not do that. That wasn’t a Naruto I know. Naruto doesn’t do that. He isn’t like that.” She scoffed. “That was the first thing I thought.” She sighed deeply. “He worries me. Both of them do.”

“Are you okay?” Kakashi asked. Sakura met his gaze before she turned her gaze to the sky. It would be a clear day. Hot maybe. Most likely. Not a cloud in the sky.

“Yeah.” She smiled. “Because of everything, I came to realize a few things. I think I was putting pressure on them with my own expectations. I see them differently now but not in a bad way.” She flashed him a bright smile. “I won’t let them get ahead of me Sensei.”

Sakura in the last few weeks had changed. Kakashi was happy to see it and even more curious to what exactly was fuelling her. He knew it started with Naruto and Sasuke. Their teamwork might be the catalyst for it but it was not the end. Whatever resolve she had now… it would lead her far.
“But I’ll be late for sparring.” Sakura laughed. “See you Sensei.”

“I can spare some time.” Kakashi spoke up. “If you need more help?”

The smile she gave him then. It gave Kakashi a sense of déjà vu but he could not exactly place where. “I’m getting plenty of help.” She smiled smugly before she took off for the training grounds. Kakashi folded his arms as he wracked his memory looking for where he had seen that exact smile before.

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She had mixed feelings. She felt sad but determined. It was pushing her forward. They were pushing her forward. Her people to protect. She wanted to aim for something else as well but for now. One thing at a time.

She burst into the clearing she and Ino used before her eyes widened. She came to a stop as she looked back behind her. She had just come up with another idea and her Sensei was actually the perfect one to teach her it.

“Ino!” She called as she caught sight of the blonde waiting. “Give me a quick sec!” She had just come up with the coolest idea.

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His heart was much lighter. Despite everything else looming. He was feeling much happier. He could see the change. He could feel it too. Sasuke. Sakura. They were changing and developing at a rapid pace. He could not be any happier.

What Sakura learned had changed her but for the better. What Sasuke had learned was fuelling him. He really wanted to fight Naruto after all and in Sasuke's mind, Naruto would not lose to Neji.

Sasuke so far was the one closest to understanding Naruto’s strength. There was no question to how far Sasuke would push Naruto if they fought.

Kakashi gave a little contented hum as he left the store. He would leave the things he had gotten for Sakura then resume the hunt for Naruto. His shadow clone was still doing well. No real strain to his chakra. Despite the quick use of the sharingan.

XxX

Naruto was even more curious to where the pervert had vanished to. Four days had passed so he might have left the village. So Naruto was thinking less perverted deeds and more serious deeds the pervert had gotten up to.

If it had been a day or two, Naruto would have accepted the man having sneaked off to do something pervert related but he was certain now that it was anything but that. The man that had been teaching him would not have left so abruptly without any warning for such a long time for anything but something serious.

When Naruto had found him, there was no doubt he had been relaxing. Taking time off maybe but the man had a sense of duty. He was seriously teaching Naruto. Guiding him and he knew a lot.

When all of this was over, Naruto would find out who the guy really was. Naruto knew he was a huge pervert. Most likely a shinobi of Konoha, he knew too much and he might be friends with the Sandaime. Still he really knew a lot about Konoha. How to move through it. Things about it.
But he did not stay in Konoha. Naruto was certain about that. Now wherever the pervert had gone, Naruto knew it had to be serious. Which meant that he could not slacken.

He placed his other hand on the ground to steady himself before he switched hands. The clearing still looked the same. With the pervert gone he could have gone to train somewhere else but honestly he did not want to.

And this was more fun. And quiet and far from everyone else. He did not have to worry about anyone intruding. Getting in the way and his attacks could be as huge as he wanted. He released a slow hiss at the strain in his arm.

He grunted before he gave up placing both hands flat on the ground before he flipped back over. His time was still longer than before. He was getting used to it. His muscles too. Two hundred each hand. He was getting stronger and quicker at this. He could still remember when he could not get it done with both hands. Could not manage more than ten before he fell over.

Times changed. He laughed before he fell back. Time to get serious.

He had improved by a lot. Not just his chakra managing. His reflexes were a little different. His sparring was a little better too even though he had not actually fought Ero-sennin. Yet. The Toads however, thanks to them Naruto had improved by plenty.

He had so little information on the Hyuuga clan. There was what he had seen but that was not enough. He doubted he had seen everything. There would be some of that close up style he had seen Hinata use but there would be something else. Naruto was certain of it.

But that bastard Neji would be in the same boat. Knowing nothing about him. That was if he was bothering to take this seriously. Naruto had made him angry but that was good. He had pissed off Naruto too. He had to go down.

He would go down. But he wished he had more information on the Hyuugas. Their bloodline limit sounded tricky. Sounded difficult. Hell, it was going to be a pain in the ass. He had fought some bloodline limits before. And won only once and he would not call that a win. That was a loss no matter how he looked at it. Because that was not him.

He had to beat Neji as himself.

But just thinking about that idiot pissed him off. Naruto huffed before he bit his thumb running through the hand signs. He was faster than the day before. Another improvement. He wanted to shave down his time.

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Well he had done another look around and he honestly would need more time than he had to actually find Naruto. That just told Kakashi that he was seriously training. Or getting into serious trouble and he honestly did not know which of those options he would prefer. Naruto was a prankster still. Even if that part of him was so rarely shown. Naruto liked to laugh.

But wherever he was, he still came back home. The evidence was there. Naruto’s room was full of life and not just the plants. The books and scrolls that were different positions every time Kakashi visited. The laundry that was done amusingly often. The ramen that appeared and disappeared. The messily made bed.

Naruto was training hard. Kakashi smiled as he looked around. He was worried about Naruto over
training himself but Naruto knew his limits. Or at least Kakashi hoped he did. Sasuke was one to ignore his limits. He hoped Naruto was not the same. He seemed to know his body well after all.

But Kakashi had seen Naruto’s body. Naruto did know his limits or he had then. He knew how to keep going. Even under the circumstances of running often he had developed. With such a long time rooted, would he still know his limits?

From morning until evening. Training. He did have the stamina. He was eating the food. Alarmingly fast. Kakashi was concerned. But he did trust that Naruto knew what he was doing. Kakashi placed the basket on the table gently. The once a week deposit had quickly turned to a twice a week deposit of vegetables. He did not mind.

He hesitated before he placed the bag of cup ramen on the table as well. He was not encouraging the habit but there was nothing wrong with a reward. Especially with the way things were going. Naruto was resolved to his current path after all. He was training hard, Kakashi could not wait to see what Naruto would show after the month was up.
There was only a week left now and even with all the plans in place, Kakashi did not think they had enough plans. He sighed as he read over the scroll as Sasuke ate. The first time they had tried this Sasuke had waited, staring at Kakashi before Kakashi had to inform the little genin that Kakashi had eaten long before Sasuke had woken up.

The flash of disappointment that had flickered across the boy’s face had been hilarious. At least before Sasuke had bottled it away and gone right back to thinking about training.

Kakashi had not been lying anyway. When he rose he ate quickly, bathed and returned to wake Sasuke. Sasuke had not yet mastered that ability to wake at the slightest change of his surroundings, whether or not the surroundings were friendly. That would come later. Or if Itachi had his way… never.

But back to the problem at hand. The vast amount of plans that the Hokage had. Nothing wrong with the plans of course. Kakashi supported them but it seemed that they were trying to stay one step ahead of Orochimaru and they did not even know where the man’s step was.

The clues the man had given them simply were not enough. He wanted Sasuke. He wanted the destruction of Konoha. They knew the last and honestly, he was more certain that Orochimaru wanted an Uchiha more than he wanted Sasuke. Sasuke was good but… he had his limits and flaws. There had to be a reason for Orochimaru’s moves.

He would not be surprised if it ended up being a ruse. Sasuke’s mark an elaborate annoying trick as the Sannin came at another angle and stole all he wanted. He was slippery like that and there was no predicting a Sannin. No controlling them either.

Kakashi wanted the Sannin far from his team but as the days trickled on he was less and less sure that his team was what the man wanted. He was half treating the man’s actions as a ruse. Because exactly would he want with Naruto? A Jinchuuriki? He could have stolen them right in the Forest and it would have been far too late for them to do anything.

He had stirred up trouble for them. Warned them. Drawn a target on his back by attacking Sasuke the way he had and then telling Anko the things he had. The Sannin had an agenda and they could not see it. There was a reason. Maybe some misdirection. The Sandaime knew that. That was the reason for all the precautions and plans.

The only thing they could all agree on was that the Chuunin exams were going to go to shit. It might not start at all. It might start and get interrupted half way. Most likely that was the reason.

Another important thing was that Orochimaru was not acting alone. They could be certain on that. He was far too confident which meant backing and not a small country. Not a small village either. Someone was ready to ignore the treaty and betray them.

Well the treaty. The treaties were flimsy to begin with but it was no small matter. If only they could figure out who it was exactly without drawing too much attention to themselves. Kakashi honestly wished there was a way to figure out what exactly Orochimaru had planned. To see who he had in Konoha. Because there had to be a spy or spies. More than the ones they were aware of.

He rolled up the scroll with a heavy sigh. But currently he could not help. He was training his team. Mostly Sasuke but he was giving Sakura pointers too. So for now he would just be on his
guard. In case Orochimaru was really serious about taking Sasuke.

And he had to be on his guard with Naruto too. They had just got him back. That would not happen again.

XxX

The village was huge. There were people Naruto had never seen and people he guessed he would never see. People he would ever know. That was how big the village was, although it seemed that everyone knew him.

That part of the deal was not fair. They knew him. Hated him and he did not get a name back. But not everyone was like that. Some people were willing to change. Willing to accept him or just not care about his circumstances and Naruto could hold onto that.

He hesitated at calling out. He looked busy but this was the first time he was seeing him since the Chuunin Exams and the disaster it had turned into. Naruto sighed as he stared at Kabuto.

The man looked a little anxious but he seemed well enough. Naruto had wanted to see him fight, but considering how bad it all ended up it was better it ending the way it did. Those lucky souls that left the exam early. Hopefully next exam they would not have that stress to deal with.

Hopefully.

Naruto sighed again. He really wanted to get closer to see if it really was Kabuto. The man had been nice to him, to all the rookies. A little amused by them too but he had been polite. Naruto could count on one hand the amount of people that met him and continued to be nice. Or were nice from the get go and had been a citizen of Konoha.

There were not much. But he had been polite in that way and he had smiled so easily. And he had thanked Naruto. Tried to look out for him even when it was obvious the situation was bad. Naruto liked those sort of people and in his experience polite people had a lot to teach.

The other polite person he had met, they had seemed too wrapped around some serious business and Naruto honestly did not want to get caught up in the clash. Because Itachi was polite. And pretty.

But really polite. But the air around him? So different from the air around Kabuto. Naruto sighed again as the figure he was watching strode further away. He could call out but that would draw way too much attention. The negative attention he was used to receiving, he did not want Kabuto to see it. Because polite people always had the heart tugging sort of heartbroken faces. But the village was huge but their occupation was the same. Naruto honestly believed they would see each other again soon. His gut was telling himself that.

XxX

“Don’t go overboard. There is still time before payday.” Iruka-sensei lightly scolded before he tousled Naruto’s hair. Naruto slid him a grin before he pulled the first bowl towards himself. He could see the steam rising.

“I can’t wait for seconds.” He hummed as he started the first bowl.

“Seconds? Okay but no more than that.” Iruka-sensei murmured. There was the click of a purse being opened and the man’s soft mutterings. “That stomach of yours never changes does it?”
Naruto swallowed as he was reminded of bitter cold and the realization that anything would do, no matter how small. Just that he needed something so he could keep going. Something beyond water. “I’m a growing boy.” He laughed before he continued.

“Well that’s true.” Iruka-sensei’s voice was softer and when Naruto glanced at him he saw the man had propped up and had an indulgent smile on his lips. “You’re still growing.”

“Iruka-sensei?” Naruto asked curiously. There were a few noodles in his lips but he was certain his words had gotten through fine.

“I’m so proud of you.” Iruka-sensei said softly. “So proud my heart could burst. Entering the exam. Getting it this far. There is no more I could ask from you.” A flush rose on his cheeks. “Especially when I doubted your capabilities. I worry too much.” Iruka-sensei admitted. “So from this point on, I just want you to do your best. It is all I want from you. No matter what that best is and what it does, I’m fine with it. It’s all I want from you.” Warmth pooled in his chest and Naruto looked away to his bowl. “Oh, but be careful! We don’t know what other shinobi will do at this time. So you your best but be careful… if you understand that.”

“I think I do.” Naruto murmured. He felt ridiculously happy. Iruka-sensei was worried about him. Worried for him. Little things like this, it affected him. “But don’t worry. I’ll kick his ass!” Naruto cheered and the laughter from Iruka-sensei comforted him.

“If your best will achieve that, then I’m fine with it.” A short pat on his head made him smile again. “I’m so proud of you Naruto.”

“If you’re proud now.” Naruto chuckled. “Then what will you be in the future when I do more awesome stuff?”

“Hmm.” Iruka-sensei mused. “I don’t know. Is there a greater feeling than what I feel now?” He winked at Naruto. “Don’t think so.” He bit his lip. “Well… when you become Hokage… I might feel more pride than right now. So there is that right?”

XxX

It had been a while since he actually saw Kakashi-sensei. And Naruto meant saw as in person to person. The vegetable baskets were still making appearances. Now with ramen and Naruto was curious as to what brought that change about. It could not be about the fight because they had cleared that up and the basket after that had no ramen in it. Although that would have been the perfect time.

But Kakashi-sensei was strange like that. There was no figuring the man out when he made it so obvious that he would shake you off if you went too fast.

But it had been a while since Naruto had seen him or heard his voice. Since he had gotten on Team Seven the longest he went without seeing Kakashi-sensei had to be five days because the man was always around in some form or fashion.

He had not seen Sakura or Sasuke either but considering they were actual rivals, that was actually to be expected. His sensei was something different. Naruto was curious to what he was doing.

He knew he was training Sasuke, or to be more precise he was aware that his hunch was correct and Kakashi-sensei was really going all out in training Sasuke. And giving Sakura some tips too if the note she had left recently was anything to go by.

But Naruto had been getting used to how the team felt. The last time he and Kakashi-sensei had
spent actual time together, a sort of relaxing time together would have to be the night before the Chuunin Selection Exams had started when Kakashi-sensei had just slipped into his room.

Naruto was missing the talks they had. The things that would slip from him. He tried to keep most of the past to himself as much as he could without lying. He wanted to keep some surprises to himself after all. It was nice to see the looks of the faces of those who had thought bad about him. He had plenty he was not going to share. Some he could not share because the circumstances were different.

His first kiss had shocked them so much. It was a good thing he had not let slip everything else that came after. Naruto was unable to stop the smile from forming. Eventually he would own up but there was no need to currently.

But it would have been nice to continue some of the talks he and Kakashi-sensei had. They were a bit nonsensical he guessed. About everything and nothing. People. Things. Dreams. Silly things, weather and food. Knowing Sasuke was hard at work with Kakashi-sensei made him feel a bit lonely. Especially since the pervert had not returned yet.

But one thing he realised during his training. Through the break for the tournament was that he would beat Neji. He was not alone. He was not blind or isolated. He would beat Neji. There was no if about it. He would beat him for him and those who wanted to but could not.

And then the fight after. Sasuke. Or at least he hoped it would be. Naruto thought back to Wave. Meeting Sasuke’s eyes and seeing red. Did he have a plan for that? Well it would be like fighting Kakashi-sensei he guessed. He had a few ideas but he just knew it would get wild. He was looking forward to it. A fight with Sasuke. Like Kiba but less restraints.

But that was if everything went right. Naruto could not ignore the looming threat that was Gaara. Gaara with those eyes of his and thoughts that Naruto understood far too well. Sasuke despite Naruto’s warning just might not be able to pierce Gaara’s shield.

Honestly, Lee had Sasuke on the defensive and look how that had ended up. A month of cramming might still show a gap. Sasuke was a genius but Naruto hoped the other boy knew enough that he could recognise the type of eyes Gaara had. Recognise and know how to deal with it, because Naruto knew those eyes.

He recognised them. And as he thought about having to face Gaara instead of Sasuke. He honestly did not know a proper way to go about it other than head-on. And that showed him how unprepared he was.

Considering they had a threat, a vague one only a month ago the plans they had come up with were rather well. Everything was going to go to shit. Everyone from Chuunins up knew that the final tournament was not going to go until completion. This was Orochimaru they were dealing with.

Everything was going to go to hell. But plans were in place that going to hell or not, casualties would be lessened and they really needed that. They would protect Konoha. No matter who threatened it.
The opening ceremony

Chapter Notes

Almost there to the fight you darlings want to see so desperately... however I almost was going to tell you guys that I was going to take another small break... but it would be rather cruel to stop here for a week or three so I'm thinking my next break will be chapter 50, I could do it at 40 but that would be just as cruel (you'll see eventually darlings)

I'm behind on one of my very very important future projects and I want to give that as much of my attention as I can. This fic is fine for at least the end of the month hopefully I would have finished all my outstanding projects...September is fast approaching and...yeah lol I want to do a good job and have some fun.

I've said this so often but goodness this is a really huge fic you know? I'm irritated with myself with having so many action and fight scenes but they do have to be done. Still for July we will have Sunday updates...except for the 17th the update will either be the 18th or the 16th because I refuse to do work on my day lol lol.

I'm going to be doing my best for the next 2 months I'm just glad i'll be able to give you weekly updates for this. So guys, enjoy the chapter and feel relieved that you don't have to worry about me taking a break for a while longer. And also... new tags will be added very very very soon, see you next week!!

The Sandaime let the last forms fall on his desk as he stared outside his dark window. Time was up this was as much as they could accomplish. From now he could hope that his orders would go through perfectly.

Xxx

Naruto tended to wake up early these days now he was back in Konoha. Different from the years of travel. Whenever he had managed to fall into a proper deep sleep it had been in the early morning light so he had woken late.

Having to switch back to normal time had been strange at first but without having to run… it changed things.

So the morning of the tournament he had woken at a time that when he was on the run with the others he would have fallen asleep. That sort of time when the air was changing. Cold but not freezing. Not even the faintest light but it was still morning. That was the time he had awoken.

It made all his worrying needless. The alarms he had set worried he would somehow oversleep. Pointless in the end really. Naruto laughed as he looked out his window. He had not gotten to the point where he could keep it closed at night.

He just could not relax enough for that. Maybe he never would.

But first would be the opening ceremony. The crowds and parades. And he would certainly make
sure to avoid that entire mess. He wanted to see it but he was better off behind the scenes. Like a real shinobi.

His cover slid off him as he moved. Naruto’s feet touched the ground and he sighed at the cold. Eventually he would look into doing something about that but for now it was another sharp reminder to wake up. His gaze fell on his clothes set out.

He had been so nervous that he had set everything out. Double checked everything. It was sort of funny because planning had never worked out good for him. Never had. So many plans they had before. Haku, Nina or Mai and they all fell through until the chaos flooded over him. Over them.

But that was what made the times worth remembering. Good plans that were so simple and straightforward ending up until simple chaos where people got messy. There would be the sigh of resignation before people helped out and that was what made them who they were. He missed that.

XxX

“So noisy.” Boar muttered.

“What did you expect?” Cat was amused. “It’s a parade.”

“So noisy.” Boar repeated. “But do you see that?” Boar waved towards a direction a little off from the parade and those watching it. The ANBU gathered turned their heads and quickly spotted the flash of gold on the roof.

“Doesn’t he want to get any closer?” Sparrow sounded disappointed.

“I think he’s good with this.” Boar answered as Naruto got to his feet and leapt away. “Not as if getting closer would change anything.”

XxX

From the moment she opened her eyes her heart was calm. Sakura slid out her bed easily. She did not have to be shaken awake. Her mother found her in the kitchen finishing her breakfast. And her parents were proud.

And her?

She had a smile on her face from the moment she had awoken. The sun was shining and she had missed her team. She had Kakashi-sensei’s shadow clone for a bit but she wanted to actually see them again.

It had been an entire month and she was certain they had learnt lots of things. Now they would show each other.

“Do your best.” Her mother said softly from behind her and Sakura froze as she shrugged on her shoes. She looked back before a giggle escaped her. Her mother’s face was worried but proud. She was looking forward to getting back home.

“Yeah.” She smiled. “I’m ready.” Her tools in her pouch and she even had ‘that’ prepared. The boys were in for a surprise. Or at least she hoped they were. Beyond the notes he left for her she had not seen Naruto. Kakashi-sensei had kept Sasuke from them.

But the match was today and she could not wait for the results. But for right now, her hand gently grasped the doorknob and she pushed open the door her eyes quickly adjusting to the shining light
that was outdoors. She was ready.

XxX

Not only was he a genius, Sasuke was a genius in his own right. Kakashi eyed their surroundings warily. He was impressed. In such little time Sasuke had come so far and there was the sense that he would go further. It was a good feeling.

“Right now.” Kakashi warned the figure backing him. “Your limit is just that. Don’t under estimate chakra exhaustion.” Sasuke flinched and Kakashi inwardly sighed. He would not pretend to understand everything motivating Sasuke but he could read between the lines enough to know that Sasuke was under a lot of pressure. “A good shinobi knows their limits Sasuke.”

“You’re saying two shots is it?” Sasuke sounded upset. More than that. Partially empty.

“You can try a third if you want to die.” Kakashi said lightly and Sasuke whirled to face him then. He chuckled lightly at the rage on the boy’s face. “Sasuke. You shouldn’t be frustrated with your current limits.”

“Why not?” Sasuke demanded. His hand trembled and Kakashi’s eye immediately went to it. There was no sign of damage but it looked like they had stopped in time. “I’ve tried so hard and this is where I have to stop?”

“I never said you have to stop.” Kakashi pointed out. “I said this is your current limit. Right now you can only manage two shots of chidori the way it is. I can only do three. That’s my final limit with my chakra levels and my chakra control.”

“What are you saying Kakashi.” Sasuke was eyeing him suspiciously and Kakashi chuckled.

“We’ll get to that another time. But what you have now, it is perfect for you know. You grow and so do your limits. You still use too much chakra.” Kakashi hesitated. “If you had Sakura’s control you might be able to do five shots.” Sasuke’s gaze immediately went back to his arms and Kakashi bit back the rest of what he was thinking. Because five was toning it down. If anyone had the amount of control Sakura had. They might accomplish a hell lot more.

And Kakashi was not certain but he had a feeling that Sasuke’s reserves were even bigger than his. Naruto’s he knew they were massive. Not worth counting. If it ever came to stamina, Naruto would win. Because he was a jinchuuriki and because of the Uzumaki reserves.

But Sasuke was pushing his progress. Not a bad thing in the shinobi world but that was usually in times of war. Even though a different sort of war loomed on their doorstep Sasuke and even Naruto and Sakura should not rush themselves.

But his team was different. And he could not wait to see them perform. But Kakashi had seen plenty during his time training Sasuke. Sasuke should not be frustrated at his current limit. Or maybe he should so it would help fuel him forward because Sasuke would continue. They all would. Kakashi felt a little sorry for those who were still underestimating his team.

XxX

Since his fight he had not seen Naruto. Itachi had told him that he had turned up at the hospital. Kakashi had told him that he had left them a message. The idiot had another run in with Gaara. There was something going on and Sasuke could not lay a finger on it.

He had been in pain the last time but he had not missed the look exchanged between Gaara and
Naruto in the waiting room and the first time they had met the Suna shinobi Naruto had toned himself down almost immediately. So quickly Sasuke doubted he had known he had done it.

But this was a chance to fight Naruto. He was not scared of Gaara. Kakashi had given him enough information but he wanted to fight Naruto. Naruto was strong and the image Sasuke had of him was not clear. Not yet.

Even when he looked at him with his Sharingan he was unable to figure out Naruto. Which made him a worthy opponent. Things were still unresolved between them. Sasuke wanted to test his strength and this was the perfect way to do it. It kept him from thinking unnecessary things.

But with Kakashi training him, he wondered how the other two had done. Kakashi had mentioned someone giving Sakura pointers but for the entire month what had Naruto been doing?

At least he would make it on time to see. With or without Kakashi he was going to get there on time. Naruto exposed himself when he fought. Sasuke needed to see it. Because they would clash.

XxX

The saying was better late than never but beyond avoiding the parade and noise there was no benefit in getting to the actual thing late. And his Dad had made so much damn racket the night before that Shikamaru was honestly finished before he had even begun.

But if he stayed at home any longer his mother would come and nag him and that was something he really did not want.

There really was no choice was there. It was time to go.

XxX

There was no need for anyone to ask if he was ready because if he was not ready at this point there would be no point in him going. He was ready and the nod he got from his Father as he set off was more than enough.

Especially as he recognised that this tournament and that this day was unlike any other day. There was simply too much activity. The bugs had told him of unfamiliar movements and that was enough for him. He was prepared for various situations. And of course he was prepared for his opponent.

XxX

The streets were still crowded so Naruto took the back way. Not the main roads but through the hills and mountains. It was quieter and the atmosphere was calmer. He was still early but he kept his pace up as he started cutting through the training grounds.

He had been almost out the last training ground when movement caught his eye. He turned his head in time to see Hinata shrink back as if she were deciding on whether to call out to him. There was no time to stop but he kept walking just backward this time. He raised his hand towards her his fist clenched as he grinned. The same hand he had dipped in her blood.

At this point it was more than her, more than bushy brows but it was still about them. But it felt as if they were backing him up in battle. Even if he had not yet spoken to Lee yet. Naruto turned back around as a smile flickered across Hinata’s face. She was still looking flushed though maybe it was too soon for her to be out the hospital.
The stands were partially filled when most of them got there and they just kept filling. Lee wondered if many of those unable to find a seat would sit on the seat instead. It was not a bad idea and since so many came to see the matches it would be a shame to stand.

Especially since he had not expected it to be such a huge crowd. The amount of Chuunins and Jounins from the village startled him. He had expected there to be a fair amount of people from Konoha but this was actually beyond his expectations.

And there so early as well.

The actual ceremony had not yet begun. The first match was still some time away yet the crowd was eager. Lee squeezed his crutch to him as he looked around. He had left the hospital because he needed to see Naruto’s match. For himself he had to see it with his own eyes.

He would not profess to knowing the future but he had carried his own hopes. He still did. He still carried his own beliefs and he just knew that at least this first match would be enough for him.

“You’re so stubborn.” A soft touch on his shoulder. Lee glanced behind him to see Tenten shaking her head. “Come sit down already.”

“Tenten.” His relief must have come across in his voice because she eyed him suspiciously.

“You didn’t think I would come?” She questioned as she directed him up a row. “I’m a member of Team Gai too.”

“Tenten what do you….?” Lee hesitated before he took the last seat. “Never mind.”

“Today is going to be special. You can feel it in the air.” Tenten said softly as she shifted in her seat. Lee’s eyes caught sight of the two scrolls hanging out her pocket. He was fairly certain that those were the scrolls that she carried only when it was going to get serious.

Lee glanced around them at the sea of serious faces and felt his apprehension rise. It felt as if he was missing something vital.

XxX

He as not imagining it. The people around were tense. The Jounins especially. Forget Akamaru feeling the tension, Kiba could feel it and it was just pulling at him not to react. And he was not the only one to have it figured out.

He saw that Ino could not keep still. Her head moving as she glanced around the stands. And there were so many shinobi. Expected but not like this. They knew it was a big event but the air that so many of the people carried it was totally different to what you would expect from spectators.

Something was happening or something was going to happen.

And the ceremony had not even started yet. It was infuriating. No, it was more than that. Because they had been told nothing. The cloth had been wrapped around their eyes but it had slipped just a bit. The tiniest bit that they could peek and see.

But it was not enough. It simply was not enough and Kiba knew if he was to ask a question he would be shrugged off. After all his mother was queen of deflection when she was ready.
Kurenai-Sensei was the same. But all Kiba was concerned with was the first match. All he wanted to see was Naruto fight Neji. The others he was not so concerned about. Shino would win no questions. The guy was scary like that and Kiba had been working with him.

Being Shino’s testing partner and the amount of ideas Shino was currently walking around with. There was no way he was going to lose. Kiba bit his lip as he watched what was obviously a patrol start working their way around the stands. Something was obviously up but he hoped it waited until Neji got what he deserved.

XxX

Before going into a big fight, people tended to carry charms with them. Talismans. For luck. For protection. Naruto did not feel as if he needed the luck but as he stared at the small bag he carried he knew he wanted something with him. He tilted the bag so the contents slid out.

It was not much. A hair clip, incense wood chip, piece of fabric the original colour long gone. Plenty of little things. But these small things were actually precious. They were a part of him and his past. Naruto scooped the entire pile up before he slid them into the pouch he had prepared.

A quick stitching and it would be complete. His charm. The only personal thing he would carry into battle for now. Carrying the memories and feelings of those that had loved him.

Who would have wanted to beat the shit out of Neji too. So it was fitting. It would be his fist making contact. With the force of many behind it. Sort of poetic.

XxX

Shikamaru looked like he needed sleep. He usually looked lost or bored or both but he just looked tired. Absolutely done with the entire tournament business before it had even begun and the more Naruto thought about it he realized that honestly was Shikamaru’s reaction a majority of the time when things got too hectic.

Still he inclined his head when Shikamaru got closer. Shikamaru’s eyes swept the waiting room before he sighed heavily.

“You’re first?” He asked before he sat on the bench next to Naruto.

“Who knows.” Naruto sighed. “I didn’t go looking around yet.” He had been busy trying not to stab his fingers with the needle. He was not usually so clumsy but it had been a while since efficiency and speed were a regular need and occurrence.

“I want this over with.” Shikamaru muttered. “I’m tempted to give up first chance I get.”

“But?” Naruto asked curiously.

“I really don’t want to have to go through this bullshit again.” Shikamaru sighed. “I just can’t.”

“I know.” Naruto laughed. “For you that would be the most troublesome right?”

“Yeah.” Shikamaru met his gaze just then and the mood shifted. “Say Naruto-” Then he broke off his gaze going to the door. Naruto followed his gaze already knowing what he would see. Somehow Gaara had gotten even more menacing. It was barely controlled. Or Naruto had just gotten better at sensing it. “Shit.” Shikamaru said softly. He tensed but Naruto kept his body lax. Gaara’s gaze swept over them before he gave a small snort. Then he kept walking right past them.

“I don’t have the nerves for this.” Shikamaru complained.
Naruto glanced over him slowly. Considering the moves Shikamaru could have made a few moments before. The fact that he had just tensed up in case Gaara made a move and did nothing else spoke volumes. “I don’t know.” Naruto mused. “I think you’re just fine.”

“He’s in your block.” Shikamaru frowned. “Sasuke or you better deal with him. Because I’ll forfeit right away.”

“So sure I’ll deal with him?” Naruto questioned. Shikamaru sighed before he pushed him hard. His shoulder against Naruto’s.

“After you finish your match of course.”

XxX

A grin spread across his face as he saw the boy slowly trudging up the steps. Naruto glanced at the entrance to see the sun lightly beaming down on Sakura’s bright hair. More people had turned up and he had to admit he had been nervous at not seeing either of his team mates.

“Naruto!” Sakura called out as she hurried forward. Out the corner of his eye Naruto saw Sasuke react but he was too busy getting an armful of Sakura that had put on an unexpected burst of speed to jump at him. He smiled at the unexpected hug.

“Sakura-chan.” He said lightly. “Long time no see.” He pulled back so they could properly see each other’s face. “Even though we’ve been talking all this time.”

“You were never home.” She scowled. She wiggled an arm free to lightly tap him on the forehead. “You better had rested good enough okay? I won’t forgive you if it turns out you strained yourself.”

“That’s the last thing you have to worry about.” Naruto snorted before Sakura pulled away. She gave him a curious glance and he shook his head. “Did you manage with your training?” He frowned at the almost secretive smile she pulled at his words. “Did you?”

“I had an evaluator and then some things came my way.” She laughed. “And Kakashi-sensei helped a bit too.”

“I knew he wouldn’t have the time.” Naruto snorted. “Who did he send to help you?”


“Pervert?” Sakura looked confused.

“Sakura-chan.” Naruto shook his head sadly as he patted Sakura’s shoulder. “You don’t know the danger you were in. That guy is a super pervert.” He confessed.

“Super…pervert?”

“You see.” Naruto cleared his throat. “When I used my sexy jutsu…”

“What are you two talking about?” Sasuke huffed. Naruto rolled his eyes. He stepped away from Sakura to see that Sasuke had finally reached them.

“Sasuke-kun!” Sakura sounded happier. “You managed with your training?”
“Of course.” Sasuke shrugged.

“He had Kakashi-sensei.” Naruto muttered. “I’d be offended if after all that time and one on one that he sucked.” Sasuke glared at him and Naruto huffed. “And I had to do it on my own!”

“Ebisu-sensei would have helped you.” Sakura insisted and Naruto snorted.

“That pervert would have been knocked out on the first day.” He scoffed. Then he recalled the help Ero-sennin had given him and he shrugged. He hoped he would see the guy again soon. “But I got through.”

“Well then we all did.” Sakura smiled. She grabbed his elbow and then Sasuke’s. They both blinked at each other before they glanced down at the girl now between them. “We can do this.” She said softly and she sounded so happy Naruto found himself smiling.

“Was there any doubt?” Sasuke scoffed before Sakura started pulling them to the front of the waiting section.

XxX

“Stop looking around.” The guy ahead of them hissed. Naruto eyed the guy’s back warily but he found it hard to do that. No matter how he counted he still came up with the same exact thing. Nine people. Sakura met his gaze and he saw the confusion on her face. Shikamaru and Shino were standing with himself, Sasuke and Sakura and even though Shino was pretty blank he could see Shikamaru doing the same count thing he was doing. “Face the customers.” The guy hissed to them and Naruto only barely bit off his retort of what the ‘customers’ could do with themselves.

“Relax Naruto.” Sakura said softly. “This changes nothing.” And he guessed it did not but then he spotted it. The hastily approaching figure. So he was just late not missing.

“Good now you’re all here. In this tournament.” The man chewed on his senbon before he glanced back at them. “You’re the stars here so look at them right now. You won’t get the chance to take them in later.”

XxX

“Everyone! I thank you for coming to attend this Chuunin Selection Exam!” The Sandaime’s voice carried around the entire area. “We will now start the matches with the ten participants who made it through the preliminaries. Please stay and watch until the very end.” The Sandaime chuckled. “But first… we have to make a few adjustments…”

XxX

“Can nothing in this place be straightforward.” Naruto hissed. Sakura brushed her hands with his and Naruto squeezed hers back but he stared up at the figures of the Hokage and the Kazekage with mistrust. He could just smell the trouble coming.

“There’s been some minor changes to the matches.” The guy mumbled. He looked put out. Sort of like Shikamaru. “So check to make sure you still have the same opponent.”

They did. Naruto stared at the paper the guy held up. But something had certainly changed…the timing. He was still first…but Sasuke’s match was no longer second. He glanced at Sasuke in time to see impatience cross the boy’s face.

“Why?” He asked curiously and then the man met his gaze.
The man’s face broke out into a wide grin that shocked Naruto. “Because it is fun.” He answered.

Naruto eyed him before he gave in and sighed. He was still first but Sasuke had been pushed back but it would work out. And he still was the first. There was an ass kicking that was overdue after all. He had to look around Sasuke and Shikamaru to do it but his gaze still found Neji. That bastard.
He had been waiting a long time for this. It actually seemed longer than the month he had endured. People like Neji, they just brought up such anger in Naruto. Not just because they were wrong but because they were so limited but they spoke as if they had the world in sight. The entire world figured out, when they were simply in a cage.

They were in a cage. They knew they were in a cage but they still acted different. They obeyed the cage and lashed out at those that did not. That was a tool no matter what people said and Naruto had lost his patience for lost tools a long time ago. If it was not an intentional thing, he wanted nothing to do with it. Absolutely nothing.

He was in Konoha. Konoha’s Jinchuuriki once again. He knew about cages, about being trapped. He could sympathise. Or he could have before Neji revealed what a humongous dick he was.

Naruto was unable to stop his scowl as he stood facing Neji. The guy just rubbed him in all the wrong ways. His hand itched with the remembered feeling of Hinata’s blood. It itched to plow into Neji’s face. He could hear the whispers of his past pulling at him.

With everyone watching, Naruto could feel the world contorting and constricting. But he still wanted to kick Neji’s ass. He would. He had to no matter what he pulled out his ass. They would get bloody. They would both hurt at the end of it but Neji would hear what he had to say. Neji certainly would feel the rage, the anguish and suffering that he had caused.

Justice. That and no more.

Hopefully a few broken teeth on Neji’s side. For certain… this was absolutely nothing like the things that had happened before. If only because Neji had spat on the thing they had all believed in, and he had gotten in the way.

There was no doubt about it. It was going to happen.

XxX

“He’s come pretty far huh.” Kiba glanced at the Chuunin who was close to his seat. He looked familiar and far too excited at the match. “What do you think?”
“It’s a Hyuuga.” His friend snorted. He rubbed his bandaged nose slowly. “The kid is good but this is a Hyuuga and you know what they say about him.”

“But this is that kid.” The man said softly. “Who knows what he can do. He pissed off Anko you know that?”

“Yeah but that was those things. What can he do here?” His friend argued and Kiba slightly agreed with him. Because the answer was that they simply did not know. That was the good thing. But if for a moment you underestimated Naruto that would be the end. He knew that now.

XxX

“Looks like you have something to say.” Neji said softly and Naruto’s mouth twisted. He raised his right hand towards him the hand that ached with the remembered feel of Hinata’s blood and scowled. “You’re going down.” He promised. “I have tons to say but you only seem to understand bullshit and propaganda. You can’t hear me.”

The Jounin snorted and Naruto’s attention was diverted for a quick moment. The man looked amused as he met his glance. Naruto glanced back to Neji to see the veins around his eyes had bulged. Activating that part of him. Whatever Neji was looking for… it was bound to be negative but the only dark thing about him… Naruto knew for certain that he couldn’t see.

Else he would have never challenged Naruto the way he had unless he had a death wish.

“Now the first fight. Begin!”

“This is what makes it worthwhile it will be fun to watch you discover reality and watch as you fail.” Neji said as he brought his arms up, a slow movement that told Naruto he was ready to use that unique attack again. Two seconds in the match and the guy had managed to piss him off more than he had before.

“You know nothing of reality Konoha brat.” Naruto snorted before the tag went flying towards Neji. Naruto leapt back just in time and ran for the smooth wall before the first explosion went off.

XxX

“Oi isn’t he Konoha too?” Tenten questioned as she frowned down at the match. After she spoke she could feel the entire air around her tense. The Konoha shinobi around her and Lee. The Jounins and the Chuunins, she was not imagining it. They had just tensed.

“Gai-Sensei said…” Lee trailed off and she watched his brows furrow. “That Naruto-kun wouldn’t think like most Konoha shinobi think.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Tenten muttered. “I know there are a few whispers about him…” She trailed off because there was more than a few. There were plenty and they always stopped when people realized when she was near. When they did not realize she was around, well the information made no sense. But this last month she had trailed with Neji, watched over Lee. She could honestly say Neji was different but she had the feeling Naruto was too but not in the same way.

XxX

First numbers. Naruto gathered fifty kage bunshins as the smoke cleared and sadly showed Neji standing. He was still fine. Not standing exactly where he had been but he had not exactly been
expecting a slap and go.

He had expected a charge. Because that was what Naruto would have done if it had been Kiba. But there was a big difference here. Naruto liked Kiba. He was his friend. He wanted to meet Kiba as equals even though they were so different.

He did not like Neji and they were not equals. They had a few similarities but only a few. Very small amount and Naruto wanted to take him down. He needed to.

Naruto stood on the wall and glanced around the area to the entire arena. It felt like a cage. The feeling that had slowly left him when he came back. With every noble. With every lord he could spot in the crowd, it was rushing back at a fast pace. A ridiculous pace and he did not like it.

He could not even savour it.

He looked back down to Neji and tried his best to put them out of his mind. He clenched his right hand and remembered the cooling feeling on Hinata’s blood on it. He took a deep breath and allowed his mind to full settle. His clones stood around him and as he reached out he could feel it. Them and he could remember the past.

He was very different to Neji. No matter what, Naruto had suffered in and out the village.

XxX

Kage Bunshin. Ino bit her lip at the sight. There were so many. Even the guy Naruto was fighting looked a little bothered. It was not four or five. It was a good set. Fifty? Naruto had that much chakra? Maybe some normal clones were mixed up in there? That had to be it.

Sakura had said somethings but she never spoke about something like this. And as she watched as the clones armed themselves Ino had to admit that this opening fight just might be the best of them all. Everyone was quiet and the shinobi around her in the stands were so tense she could feel them.

XxX

“If you’re coming come!”

“Man.” One clone muttered. “People like you.” Another laughed as he stuck out his tongue. “They just exist everywhere don’t they?” Naruto laughed as he and two of the clones exchanged high-fives and he passed them new tags. “Stop. Disrespecting. Me.” They said in unison. “You might not believe it but you are going down.”

XxX

“So that’s how it goes huh.” Naruto muttered. He winced as he sorted out the memories form a safe distance away. Neji had treated the clones he sent as if they were the real one and the strikes hurt too. And he moved as if he had eyes at the back of his head.

“You think you can become Hokage like this?” Neji snorted. “I can figure it out with these eyes. Talent is decided at birth. You could say everything is decided when you are born.”

A tired figure. Naruto smelt the blood from their hands. Their wounds had opened again. She was not using her usual weapon. She would not be so tired if she had been. Kaya was the one that had suggested they all learn from each other and Raiya with her muscles and her hard headed nature was doing her best so she could get stronger. So she could protect them better. It made him feel weak. Especially as he saw the curved blades in her hands. Fallen momentos. They had not stayed
long but those two. They had brought laughter to their lives.

“Shut up.” Naruto hissed.

He could still see Haku, backing Zabuza, who Haku lived for. Hear the tired note in his voice when he refused to come back to the camp. A few more hours of training were needed. Refused what Naruto had come to know was a special time between Haku and Zabuza. All to improve all to study. He could recall the smile on Haku’s face when a plan worked. When they evaded capture or his skill improved if only by a little.

“Shut up!” He snarled. “Why the hell. Who the hell. Why. In. The Hell! Do you always automatically decide things like that?”

“So you’re saying anyone is able to become Hokage with hard work?” Neji scoffed. “Only a handful of shinobi are chosen as Hokage candidates.”

“Even I know that much idiot. And even I know there is more to that than becoming Hokage. If it was a simply matter of hard work.” His tone lowered. “I wouldn’t be here.”

“You’re the one that doesn’t understand. Take a closer look at destiny! Those that become Hokage are born into that destiny you don’t become it by trying. It is decided by destiny.”

“You must have sucked at the academy.” Naruto said softly. “That isn’t how it works at all. Don’t you know that people have overthrown Kages?” He allowed his gaze to flick up to where the two Kages sat. “You’ve never heard of revolution? Fuck destiny. Fuck you and that shit. Anyone can become Hokage but they need something. It is hard work but they need more than that.” His gaze went back to Neji. “I know that. Idiot.”

“You speak foolishness people must live in their own unchangeable flow the only one destiny that every person shares is death.” Neji’s eyes changed at the last words and Naruto held hard onto his anger as he understood and recognized the look. But not now. Or at least not yet.

“I-“ He recalled the muffled laughter when he when got back up after Zabuza ‘trained’ him. He recalled the pride on Ryu’s face when he came back day after day to ask questions and talk. He recalled the stories and the people that changed before his eyes. The hopes they all whispered. The pact they shared silently. The one they had broken with him. When he thought about that and listened to the guy in front of him there was honestly no other option. “I’m not good at giving up.” He sighed. He formed another seal and made twenty more clones. He watched the blank look on Neji’s face.

“I’ve already seen through you.”

“And I keep telling you stop automatically deciding things. You can’t win a war before it has begun stupid.” Naruto hissed.

XxX

Iruka sighed as he sat at his desk. He wished he could be there to see the match. His talk with Naruto soothed him a little. He knew he would try his best. But it was that Neji after all. But for certain Naruto had been determined. He would try his best he had promised.

But it was okay to worry right? His gaze went to the window and he sighed again. He wanted to see it.

XxX
“I told you.” Naruto said softly as Neji slowly turned around. The clones held tags up and big grins. “Stop automatically assuming things.” He took a step back as the area exploded with kunais. “I know how people like you think. You underestimate me. That is how you lose.” A flash of blue and chakra and Naruto bit his lip as he watched the clones and the kunais disappeared and got deflected.

Gathering the memories, he frowned as he tried to understand exactly what he had seen.

“I knew you had some freaky clan shit up your sleeve.” Naruto grunted as he saw the perfect circle around Neji and not a single clone or kunai around him. “I don’t know what this is though.” The crowd around them got louder and Naruto sighed. “But I guess it is something renowned and famous again. I swear.” He grunted as he took a few steps back. “It would have been nice if someone had given me a crash course on clans’ secrets that are actually useful.”

It was not altogether bad. He still had chakra. Plenty. He did not need the Kyuubi. He still had plenty left. A dark chuckle brought his attention to the cage deep inside him and Naruto eyed the cage and the leering occupant with suspicion.

“He seems strong. You might need my chakra after all… Naruto.” Right, definitely not if he could help it and he needed to beat Neji as he was. The guy had plenty of fucking hang ups. There was so much fueling him. Naruto could not afford a struggle now. Especially with the weird thing in play.

“I don’t need you, take a nap.” Naruto said softly as he focused on the boy eyeing him.

“Hakkeshou kaiten. You can call it my defense system. You won’t be getting past me Naruto.”

Neji said softly.

“I’m liking you less and less the more you talk.” Naruto muttered. “But that was actually good.” He deliberately looked at the crowd his eyes searching until he managed to locate the really distressed people. “Should you be able to do that?” He asked curiously. “Because there’s a guy with a quickly failing poker face up there.” He gestured with his thumb at the people watching.


“Just stop talking.” Naruto muttered. “Please. How many times did you think you had it in the bag for this match? Are all Hyuugas like this? You sure you don’t belong to another village? I can think of an overly cocky one.” Naruto said. He patted his knees quickly and sighed at the dust that flew up.

“Gentle fist, sixty-four palms.” Neji’s stance changed and Naruto’s body tensed. From what he had gathered. Letting Neji touch him would be a bad idea. After all, considering what he had just done and what he had seen him do to Hinata. Naruto could still remember the pain when he and Hinata had sparred. More than one of those and he would slow down and he needed the speed.

XxX

“Fuck you. You don’t know what you’re speaking of. You don’t get to call me worthless.” Naruto stood up and winced as the clone Neji had hit with his jutsu vanished. “Not someone like you who doesn’t understand yet. Who doesn’t see it. Forget being worthy on my pity, you aren’t even worthy of my fucking attention. Or at least that was how I would think. But gods is Hinata right. Your house is fucked up.” Naruto hissed. He could feel the pain even though it was a clone.

“Replacement jutsus.” Neji murmured.
“I’m not good at giving up. for years now and that shows that you can’t knock hope out of people.” Naruto sighed. Deep in his subconscious the fox leered and he rolled his eyes. “I have a grudge against you, you know why? Because people change. Things change they have to change. Things don’t stay the same way forever. People who think like you are the first in line to get their heads chopped off.” Naruto bit out. “You’re strong.” He admitted. “You’re a genius.” He continued. “A one in a lifetime or generation or whatever but I can see that you’re smart. But you even with your eyes. If your eyes are so good. If you see so much. Why the hell did you attack Hinata the way you did? People like Hinata.” His hands clenched. “She was so strong.” Naruto choked up. “Why the fuck would you do that to Hinata? You came after her mentally. You tried to break her. Why?”

“That is none of your business.” Neji’s voice had gotten angry.

“Insulting Hinata. Deciding she’s a loser. It was the first crack I saw in you since I met you.”

Naruto snarled. ‘I’ve seen plenty. Main family, branch family I don’t give a fuck right now but you shouldn’t have done it. I can’t forgive people like you who decide people’s fate and call them losers based on some fucked up system you only understand. When you don’t really understand anything at all.”

“You won’t forgive me?”

“Damn right.” Naruto hissed.

“If you’re willing to go that far for that girl I’ll tell you. About the Hyuugas.” Neji’s voice had gotten darker but as he looked at Naruto. He could tell that Neji no longer saw him.

XxX

“The main family have a special ninjutsu that is passed down. It is a curse seal jutsu.” Neji said and Naruto froze. “The curse mark resembles a bird in the cage. It symbolizes being tied down to an inescapable destiny.”

Naruto watched in confusion as Neji reached up and undid his Hitai-ate. He watched and his eyes widened as the green mark came into focus. There right on his fucking forehead. A seal.

“That’s allowed?” His voice broke. “In Konoha?” His stomach clenched and he bitterly shook his head slowly. “What am I saying?” He looked away from Neji so his gaze could search the stands. “Of course it is. Shinobi will do anything it seems.”

“When I got this when I was four. It was carved into my head the moment Hinata-sama turned three.” Neji said softly. “My father and Hinata-sama’s father were twins. My father was born second so he went to the branch family and Hinata-sama’s father Hiashi-sama became the heir and became the main family. I became the branch member that day.”

“I bet they are regretting that now huh.” Naruto interrupted. “That’s a dumb idea you know?” Neji frowned and Naruto waved at him. “Continue but I’m just saying that was dumb. You don’t know what children will become.”

“Sometimes I wonder what would have become of me if my mother had known what I would inherit.” Haku said softly as he sank lower in the hot springs. “If I had shown my abilities earlier…”

“Well you didn’t.” Naruto pointed out and Haku glanced up at him. “Because you would have never met no brows.”
“Right.” Haku smiled.

“This mark is not a decoration. It controls us. This curse seal is absolute fear of death given by the main family to the branch families. With a secret hand seal, the branch families mind can be destroyed. The seal will disappear after death, sealing the Byakugan along with it.” Neji said as he ran his thumb over the mark. Naruto shuddered in disgust.

“That’s sick.” He said softly. “The way that power can be abused…” He trailed off. It was just disgusting. that he was seeing it and he was confronted with clan nonsense yet again. Maybe it was better that he was the only Uzumaki around.

“The Hyuuga clan is valuable and so with this jutsu, the branch family exists to protect the main family no disobedience is allowed by the main family. They control everything and through that they are able to protect the advanced Byakugan Hyuuga blood. An incident occurred… my father was killed by the main family.”

“Huh?” Naruto asked softly. Hadn’t Neji just said that his Dad and Hinata’s Dad were twins?

“Hinata-sama was kidnapped. The perpetrator quickly dealt with but he wore a mask. When everything was sorted out it was discovered that Kumo had been after the Byakugan all along and had infiltrated the village. Kumo threatened war demanding compensation. Konoha wanted to avoid war. They agreed to a backdoor deal. Kumo wanted Hinata-sama’s father’s corpse to study. They got my father instead.”

Naruto swallowed as he took in those words. He looked from Neji to the man he now recognized as Hinata’s father. His gaze swept to the Hokage. He closed his eyes as the memories rose once again.

“Kumo, forever greedy.” Zabuza muttered.

“Well, they love collecting things.” Ryu said softly before he groaned. “Damn it I hope they didn’t recognise me. Kumo hunted my clan years before.”

“That when they fled to Kusa?” Mai asked curiously.

“Anything better than Kumo.” Ryu grunted. “Although they got a few of us the first time. I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“They were twins. Their strength virtually the same. Yet because one was born first. The other second. Destiny was decided by just that. How do you like that?” Neji asked. “Destiny was decided then just as how it will be decided now. For you.”

“I was right. Your clan is fucked up.” Naruto admitted. He tapped his pocket until he located the right scroll and he unrolled it slowly to make sure it was the right one. “I’m not saying it isn’t hard. I’m not saying I don’t understand because… main families usually get too full of themselves. What they did? What they do? I’m lucky I wasn’t born a Hyuuga. Because I can’t imagine even on the threat of death… to protect a bunch of people like the ones you described.”

Neji frowned. “But…”

“Shut up!” Naruto yelled. “But Hinata’s different! Even if the rest need a taste of their own medicine. Even if they need an ass kicking and dumping in the nearest river. Hinata is different! You can tell that! Gods she’s trying to change. She’s actually good. No matter how much you hate the fucking main family. Hinata should have been your ally. Your resentment should have never touched her!” He bit his thumb swiped the bleeding thumb over the scroll and rolled it up quickly as he concentrated.
For a second he thought it had gone wrong as he bit hard on the scroll between his teeth. For a second he doubted himself and then he felt it the flow of chakra and the response and he closed his eyes as the area around them changed.

“Rain?” The Jounin spluttered as around them water exploded from the scroll to scatter around them. Naruto used the opportunity to move then.

“You’re supposed to be a genius. And you call people like Hinata. People like me losers. But you are the real loser if you want to stay where you are without trying and trying and raining hell.” Naruto said softly. He gave a moment to enjoy the water falling. It was a sad imitation of what he knew but it would serve the purpose.

His right hand… it ached.

XxX

“Naruto!” Sakura cheered and Sasuke grabbed the back of her dress when she leaned over the rails before Naruto vanished from the field and a small haze formed. “Go Naruto! Kick his ass!”

“Were you this noisy during his fight?” Sasuke demanded. Sakura twisted so she could glare at him.

“You hear anyone else cheering? And he has this.” She pointed out. “I’ll cheer for you too Sasuke-kun so you two better cheer for me.”

Sakura was… Sasuke sighed as he released Sakura and instead focused on the field. After the month the had injured. The frustrating words from Kakashi and the fact that he had not seen his family since the exams… this was actually relaxing him. The bantering was familiar except it used to be himself and Naruto. But Sakura had changed. She was changing.

“Two loudmouths to a team.” Sasuke muttered as he watched the mist thicken. “Damn we can’t see anything.”

XxX

“I can’t excuse it.” Naruto said softly. “I just can’t. It was hard. It sucks what your clan does you know? I don’t know how much it hurt you to lose your Dad. But to think that is it?” Naruto demanded. “You give up at that? You talk about death as though it is some inevitable joke? You. You thinking that everything. That destiny is decided by that is just a huge mistake. Didn’t you love him? You just chalked it up to destiny after that? To the fucking fate of the Hyuuga clan? That’s fucking it? And that’s why you tried to tear down Hinata?” Naruto gritted his teeth as he tested the ground and retrieved a few kunais.

“Kyuubi.” He said softly. “If I need it. Be ready.”

“Oh?” The Kyuubi grinned. “This looks good.”

“To you. I’m a loser.” Naruto said as the mist started to fade away. Preparations were complete and he watched as Neji slowly turned to face him. The field held just then. “Compared to you… well no wonder you underestimate me right? I mean you were the number one rookie. And I’m not stepping in line with your plan.”

It just bothered him as he looked at Neji. Plenty of things. But the seal, the fact that he was a Hyuuga. The place they were fighting in. the fact that they were both caged and Neji couldn’t see it. He seemed almost content in it. And that fucking hair. It all bothered him.
“You wanna wallow in your fucking so called destiny and fate so be it.” Naruto growled. “But I’m the one that will become Hokage. I have changed and I’m going to continue changing. Don’t get… in… the fucking way!”

Neji had been prepared. That Byakugan made sure that he dodged the hidden transformed clones. But Naruto knew he would see through it. And he knew that Neji would catch on quickly so when the explosion rocked the area he was not surprised to see most the grass gone but Neji unharmed dropping back down onto the ground.

Naruto grinned when Neji’s gaze met his and he saw the kunais in Naruto’s hand. Naruto waved his empty hand mockingly in Neji’s direction and got to register the boy’s shock before a second explosion rocked the area. This time from directly above.

Xxx

“Shit.” Kiba breathed. “Is he trying to kill him? I mean it is deserved and all.” He muttered as the dust cleared again. Neji had gotten onto the wall and he looked pissed, almost murderous.

“Kage Bunshin!”

“More clones. How much chakra does he have?” Kiba hissed. But he grinned widely.

Xxx

Haku had been a genius. Naruto had known that. Long before Zabuza gloated. Haku was a genius that had suffered a fate and what he had done for himself. For them all. What all of them had done. What they had believed in.

Neji was wrong!

Destiny? Fate? Death? He had spent four years with shinobi who had defied everything in order to achieve their goals. Clan? Abandoned. For something else. Zabuza who had left everything behind. Risked everything. They who had run instead of stayed. Running was so much harder than staying.

They had fled and the thing they had in common was the thing they had wanted was worth dying for to them. When he thought about them. When he thought about that. Neji’s words were nothing more than mumbles because he had lived it. Tasted the hardship and heard stories of pain and rage. Or regrets.

He had watched love fuel people. He had watched love break people. He had seen people control people. And he had the exact same feeling as back then. Those who didn’t know about the hardships of risking everything. Didn’t get to say anything.

“You’re a coward. Whining about destiny destiny.” Naruto muttered as he readied for the final charge. “As if I’d lose to someone like you. You don’t know the true price of choice. Or freedom. Or change.”

“You can’t lecture me! You don’t know what it is like to be burdened with a symbol you could never rid yourself of!”

“Oh gods.” Naruto laughed. He could not help it. He squeezed his eyes tight and laughed. Hysterical laughter bubbled up. “I hope you have a good memory you stupid genius.” He laughed. He gritted his teeth as his stomach burned with the reminder. He opened his eyes slowly to see Neji’s face. But not the hatred that he was used to. Everything was fucked up but at least he did not have to worry about that yet. “But I can… I do. So what?” Naruto laughed. “Stop acting cool. You
aren’t the only one different. The only one special. Hinata tried to change herself. You can’t even see you are trying to change and defy destiny yourself. You aren’t protecting shit for the Hyuugas.” Naruto snorted. “Everyone is changing. It’s on the wind.”

“Why do you go against destiny so much?”

“I was a loser. I still am when I think about it. I’ve lost a lot.” Naruto admitted. “But I have something that demands I put everything on the line for. When I think about that. I just can’t give up.” Naruto said softly.

“Enough, I’m going to kill you.” Neji stated.

“You can try.” Naruto said softly. “But not while you’re stuck in that fucking cage!”

XxX

“Here I come.” Naruto promised. He could feel the chakra running through him. He had grabbed just a bit from the Kyuubi. Just enough. Not to consume him but to keep the clones up to speed.

Like he was. He started to move. He was nowhere near the speed the others had. Haku. Alya. Katsumi. He was nowhere near their speed.

He gritted his teeth as Neji managed to knock away the first set of shuriken. Then he went for the trap.

XxX

“You’re finished.” Neji wheezed. He glared down at Naruto. “All of your ports are closed.”

“Stop assuming things.” Naruto groaned before he disappeared.

XxX

“You can sit on your ass if you’re too scared! You don’t have to do a fucking thing!” Naruto snapped as he kicked Neji in the chin. Neji rocked back disoriented by Naruto used his clenched right hand that had been burning the entire time to sock him hard in the chin. And then he did it again. “I don’t know about this hatred for the Hyuugas or anything but it seems to be too much for you to handle. You don’t have to do anything anymore! I’ll become Hokage and change the Hyuuga!” His next blow was blocked but Naruto’s strength carried him forward.

Neji was strong but Naruto had years of actually fighting in life and death situations. People who used blocks to get an advantage. Neji was swept back again and Naruto charged forward once more his right fist held high. “So don’t spit on the rest of us that have the strength to change everything!” He snapped before his fist connected to Neji’s chest. It hurt him but he felt satisfaction when Neji spluttered and from his lips blood flowed. “You’re an asshole.” Naruto grunted as his final blow hit Neji in the cheek. He stumbled back.

“People suffer in many ways. But that look can be removed from our eyes. And one day, the pain will be gone from us all.” Haku smiled. The way the firelight played on his skin made him seem otherworldly to Naruto. “Once we all follow Zabuza-san.”

“You ruined it with talking about that no brows.” Naruto pouted and Kaya shrieked with laughter from where she stood on the other side of the camp.

“Well just forget that last part for now then.” Haku smiled.
“But I won’t abandon you even though you’re an asshole.” Naruto panted. “I sucked at the academy. I came back better but I had to work really hard to get where I am today. There were plenty of incidents.” He chuckled as he stared down at Neji. “But gods… I sucked. I sucked up so much and everyone around me was amazing. But I kept going. I didn’t leave the things I sucked at behind. Bunshins… replacement jutsu. Concealment. I sucked at them all now people think they are my best ninjutsu. They come easy to me now because I never gave up, and I’m never going to.”

Naruto sighed and winced at the feeling of his ribs hurting him. Contrary to what many might think. Neji had gotten him quite a few times. Just he thought Naruto was the clone. He needed a good sit down. Especially with the last clash.

“Bunshin jutsu was my worst jutsu.” Naruto admitted softly. “Destiny can’t be changed blah bleh whatever. Don’t talk about things like that.” Naruto grunted. “Because… you’re not like me you’re a genius. Don’t underestimate that title. Or yourself. You might have to put some effort into it but don’t just give up.” Naruto paused. “And I don’t care if it is illegal. When I become Hokage… Hyuugas have to change their hair. I don’t need my memories getting messed up when I’m kicking one of your asses. Or maybe just you. Cut your hair.” Naruto grumbled as he turned away. “It’s giving me the creeps when you talk that nonsense like you do.”

“Heh. Winner Uzumaki Naruto!” The Jounin grinned at him and Naruto’s face froze before he grinned back. He refused to touch his ribs where they really hurt but he did wave to the crowd as he searched for Hinata and Lee.

XXX

Kakashi wiped his hand across his pants to get rid of the damp feeling. Even though he knew Naruto’s past. He knew Gai was the one training and pushing Neji. To see a fight like that. To see the way Naruto moved, thought, manoeuvred and listened.

When he heard the declaration… his heart had shifted and he caught himself thinking how predictable that all was. Neji had picked the wrong one to talk about destiny to. Because to Naruto… the people he called family had done the right thing and spit in destiny’s face and Naruto was determined to do the same thing too.

He looked around at the crowd on their feet. The genins not participating laughing or staring in shock. The Chuunins nudging each other. The Jounins exchanging looks as they applauded and the Lords and attendants exchanging looks as they too applauded and he had to smile even though it was not seen.

Naruto had gotten far. Kakashi had been honestly worried but he could see that Naruto had managed. He had pulled through. He had come so far and Kakashi had to wonder how far he would go, but first. He hoped Naruto enjoyed the fact that these people wished him well and that they appreciated his talents.

He dearly hoped so and he had a twinge of regret that the Chuunin exams most likely would end in chaos and war. Because… he wished he could have a dear deep talk with Naruto for a bit. See where his head was. And maybe later he could give Naruto a proper crash course on Konoha clans. Current only or something. Or he could invite the boy out for sparring and ramen. Kakashi chuckled from behind his mask. That did seem the better option there. He smiled again as Naruto waved as he walked off the grounds.
Shikamaru was actually finding it hard to speak. His mouth had been open for almost the entire of Naruto’s match after all. Seeing how strong Neji was and seeing how Naruto countered it. His thoughts were actually a mess.

Or at least a part of his brain was. He was still functional but that match had blown him away. Almost literally. The gust that last clash had blown right to them where they waited. It had been amazing. He knew Naruto had been holding back but he had no idea it had been that much. There were some seriously strong people fighting alongside him.

If Naruto was like that. What was Sasuke like? Naruto seemed so certain Sasuke would succeed. Had Sasuke seen Naruto fight up close? Had the two fought? Questions kept bubbling up when Shikamaru knew he should be focused on the girl that was his opponent.

At least she had been as shocked as him. That was the only good part about it all. Now he had to go out there. And preparation? Half done.

XxX

Her opponent had come late. Not that she was entirely bothered. She had done plenty of studying the entire month. She had a trick up her sleeves and she had the feeling that for her match only one person was prepared… her.

But that was further down. She glanced to where the boy stood. His gaze was fixed on the field Naruto and Neji had wrecked.

“So we fight on his leftovers? So like Naruto.” Sasuke sighed. “They should have thought about this.”

“Sasuke-kun.” She sighed back. “I’m sure they didn’t think Neji and Naruto were going to scrape away the grass. They expected a few impacts… not.” She winced at the field. “That.”

“Whatever is left by the time I get there… it will make who has to fix this cry.” Sasuke snorted. Naruto reached them then looking a little battered but happy. “Messy.” Sasuke snorted.

“Did it look like I could keep it clean?” Naruto grumbled as he took a spot next to them. “Shut up already. I said I was going to kick his ass didn’t I?”

“And you did.” Sakura smiled. She recalled the frustration in his voice and on his face during Hinata’s match and the crease that had made its way onto his face between his eyebrows back then had melted away. Naruto could be so honest with his emotions. That fight and everything was resolved. “Feel better?”
“I just did what I had to.” Naruto muttered.

“Gave us a hell of an opening act you mean.” Sasuke mumbled.

Xxx

“Well you’re eager.” Genma muttered as Temari used her fan to get her to the field. There was something up with the sand shinobi but especially after the match that had just ended, he hoped these two could keep the crowd entertained. “Shikamaru! Come!”

Xxx

“Nervous?” Naruto asked as Shikamaru sighed.

“You made this so flashy. Now I have to go out and no matter what it won’t beat you and Neji. You just don’t consider others do you?” Shikamaru sighed. His eyes flicked to Gaara. “But what I said still stands.”

“Get down there.” Naruto grinned.

Xxx

Why was she so eager? So hyped up? Not just her. It was all of them. Shikamaru wanted it over with too but he could feel their reasons for wanting the match over were different.

He sighed as he got onto the field. He could feel the air changing. The crowd, he knew why they were really here. Not for this match. Not for the Sound’s with Sakura. The real reason why everything had been switched around was because the two big shot clans were fighting on the same day.

Hyuuga. Uchiha. And Naruto had flamed their interest. They had to be dying inside having to wait to see the other famed house.

Nobody really cared about this fight. There was no sense in doing it either…but.

He really was not looking forward to going through the entire mess again. So for that reason he gave in and gave a bored look to the examiner. The man’s lips twitched in amusement.

Before the examiner could finish his sentence. The girl ran at him. Shikamaru sighed… another girl another troublesome girl.

Xxx

“I really don’t want to fight. I don’t care too much about being Chuunin at this point.” Shikamaru admitted. “But I’m not losing to you.” He shook his head as he stood on his kunais that he had stabbed in the wall and quickly balanced on top of.

Her fan snapped open and Shikamaru sighed before he moved. He had no choice now. And she seemed loath to let him get away. A really stubborn sort of girl.

Xxx

“For a guy so lazy, he can move quickly.” Sasuke muttered.

“I felt the same way in the other matches.” Naruto sighed. “He goes so slowly and complains so much but he can really move when he has to.”
Shikamaru crouched behind the tree. He knew she had spotted him. She knew he used shadows. The reason she was using her fan was simply because she did not want to let him get too close.

He sighed and lowered his head. When he thought about it, he only became a ninja because he thought life would be more interesting. The clouds above them all were lucky. Lucky and free he really envied them.

Naruto was just going to get disappointed. Shikamaru could hear his cheers and he knew he could hear Ino’s too. This entire thing… such a drag.

His gaze bounced around the area of destruction thanks to Neji and Naruto. Then his gaze locked onto the spot Naruto had delivered the final blows. He grinned. Things might end not being as simple as he thought.

“She used that in the exam.” Naruto whispered to Sasuke. “It knocked away everything.”

“Really?” Sasuke murmured. “It seems to have limitations. And she is losing her cool.”

“My, they are only Genins in the end.” Kakashi shrugged. He knew that if his team had been in Temari’s position they would not have fell for it.

They would not have wavered.

Especially Naruto. The girl had not even noticed it had turned into a deceptive game. He had his suspicions on exactly what Shikamaru was planning but it would remain to be seen whether it would be pulled off.

“That’s not a seal right?” Naruto whispered.

“If it is, it has to be some new development. A half of a seal or something.” Sakura muttered.

“But the air has changed.” Naruto pointed out. “I think he’s just gotten really serious!”

Stamina, he was going to have to work on that. With that jutsu of hers he was really doing plenty of running and dodging. It was pissing her off so that was good. He wanted her pissed. He wanted her distracted.

Shikamaru crouched behind the tree as her jutsu battered at it. She really was chasing him and she was determined to keep at least fifteen metres between them. Perfect.

“You saw through it.” Shikamaru laughed.
“You waited for the sun to lower so the shadows would stretch further.” She glared at him. “The closer to sunset the more the shadows will grow. You really can’t underestimate your shadows can you?”

Shikamaru refrained from saying that she already had and instead shifted his stance. A warning call came from her team but it was already too late. Shikamaru wanted to appreciate her shocked face but he was too busy using the shadow from the parachute to get closer to her. She dodged trying to get out the way and it took effort to keep the grin off his face. The pincer trap idea had come to him when he saw the hole Naruto and Neji had left behind.

“Finally. Complete.” Shikamaru grinned as he watched her eyes open in horror.

XxX

“Want to see what’s behind you?” He turned his head so she would see the hole directly behind her. “With the area so messed up, there are all sorts of changes you have to think about.”

He started walking. Forcing her to shorten the distance between them. He considered, hoped that he could do it even as she struggled.

“It’s about time to end this.” Shikamaru muttered. He formed the seal and concentrated. He watched as her feet were consumed by the shadow. But his control fluctuated. It was still not ready. The hands would not form and he had already used too much chakra. As it was… he would only hold her for another minute and since she would mimic his every move there was no way to get rid of her except the jutsu he thought he would finish.

“Damn this.” She muttered.

The shadow dropped from her legs. Still keeping her captive but no longer creeping up her body and Shikamaru sighed. “I give up.”

XxX

“What?” Naruto yelped. He had not seen that coming. Granted he didn’t know much about Shikamaru’s clan or jutsu but he thought Shikamaru had this. He seemed like he had this too.

“The hell?” Sakura grumbled.

“I was actually getting interested too.” Sasuke grumbled.

XxX

“You give up?” The examiner looked amused.

“I’ve used too much chakra. I can’t hold her for much longer. The jutsu I was depending on to finish this I can no longer do. I had depended on that and I had thought ahead to some other things but I simply don’t have the chakra.” Shikamaru glared at the examiner. “I’m done with this. This is enough for me.”

“Then in that case. Winner Temari!”

Shikamaru released his shadow and turned away. He rubbed his sore shoulders. “Man I’m tired.” He muttered as his eyes scanned the area for his shirt.

XxX
“Part of me wants to leap over there and give him a scolding.” Naruto complained.

“But the other part?” Sakura questioned him. Naruto grinned.

“Well the other part thinks that it was all pretty cool. Even giving up.” Shikamaru was really smart, and as he looked down at him Naruto could see he had not lost his cool. That kind of cool headedness. It made him think of the past. But in a good way. And Naruto’s ears could pick up the interested murmurs from the crowd. And as he looked around. He could see most of the murmurs were shinobi. A diamond in the rough had been revealed. Or something like that.
Things were moving along. Not the way that they had been expected but they certainly were moving. If Sasuke could get an answer for why two of the Suna ninjas were like cats on a hot roof, then things would be better than fine.

It had not really bothered him at first but now their behaviour as things moved along really made him focus. Because it was not normal. Sakura’s opponent was completely on his own, no teammates and yet he was quieter and more composed than those two.

And even though she had won… she looked shaken. Something was up. He did not know what it was exactly, not yet but he did know there was something wrong with that team.

Shikamaru had lost yet the one that had stood out in that match was Shikamaru and considering what was at stake. The country’s standing. The girl, Temari did not look as concerned about that as she should be. She had been far more interested in ending the match as completely as possible.

Now it was the other boy’s turn. Sasuke found himself more curious than he should have been over what the boy’s next move would be.

XxX

“No way.” Sakura breathed. “He forfeited? Just like that?” She eyed the boy suspiciously. This was getting out of hand. She had been expecting a fight. After the strange but exciting match Shikamaru had treated them to she had expected another showdown between Sand and Leaf.

Except… instead of a break it looked like she was going to be up next. She was prepared but it was weird. The guy… he did not look scared but he looked nervous.

XxX

If he was going to forfeit when he got there what was the sense in coming? Now Shino had a win but judging by how stiffly he held himself he was not happy about that. He was not happy with the outcome and who could blame him really?

Now there was only one match left in the A block. Sasuke’s with Gaara.

Which meant now the fight would jump to the B block. Sakura’s and Dosu’s. The guy that had turned up late. Naruto was a little curious about that. He glanced at Shino’s back. The guy’s back was so stiff. He had to feel slighted. Naruto could not blame him.

All that training… preparation and then the opponent avoids you. He himself felt so much better if a little battered after his fight with Neji. He had gone in knowing he would not lose but fighting and listening to Neji had done something for him. He felt a little lighter. A little happier and he knew he would be able to face Lee and Hinata with a better feeling in his gut.
It was certainly getting interesting. Kakashi’s eye searched until it found his students. Sasuke had slid a little away and was staring at the field. Sakura and Naruto stood next to each other but both looking different directions. Sakura to her opponent. Naruto’s gaze was fixed on the one that had just forfeited.

Things were getting interesting. Interesting and strange too because it was a weird move to do. After the Prelim exams and the month of training, To cancel just like that… those actions would usually reek of someone who was afraid but Kakashi had a deep suspicion that the puppet user, Kankuro had something to hide.

He wished he would be allowed down where the others were but he had to content himself with the stands. The area certainly was interesting. Even though the atmosphere kept changing.

He really regretted the fact that the Chuunin Exams were going to end on a sour note. Because his little team had come so far. Done so much and learned plenty and it might all be for nothing.

Well not exactly nothing. But not the Chuunin jacket they so obviously were aiming for. But he was still impressed with Naruto’s control and force. A month away from him and this was the type of Naruto he showed.

They had a month to train. He was curious about what Sakura would do now. Especially after the very strange questions she had asked him. And after their month together… he wanted to see Sasuke fight someone on his own level and see the results. Kakashi hoped Itachi would get there in time. He also hoped that whenever whatever happened… it waited until he could see Naruto fight again.
Heads up you will have to bear with me darlings, some things have come up and I'm a little behind of some stuff I had planned so instead of weekly for August every two weeks until further notice, sorry but I really did think most the things I was doing would be done by the end of July but... no they weren't.

So don't worry next chapter should be the 14th of August unless by some miracle I get everything that needs to be done, done this week which I know it won't lol. So sorry in advance next chapter for this will take a while but enjoy this chapter okay? Thanks Darlings ^.^

Deep breath in and savour the calm. Sakura repeated the words in her head over and over as she slowly relaxed. Honestly, inside her anticipation grew. After seeing the others. After watching everything it had only made her want to fight even more. The stupidity was catching.

But now it was her turn. Everything she had learned and thought about for the last month would be shown. To the crowd, to her team and she really wanted them to watch her. To look at her back and her cool moves.

After everything that she had experienced, she definitely would not let anyone down. She would not. She could not, she had a new goal in her sight and she would not lose to anybody.

Now all she had to do was to apply everything she had learned to Dosu and win.

X

“Sakura-chan looks determined.” Naruto said softly. He watched the way Sakura adjusted her gloves. The gloves were something new. But the way she tugged at them made him smile. Her eyes were alive. She looked excited and she looked confident.

“Obviously. She doesn’t want to lose to us either.” Sasuke muttered.

X

“That’s going to cost us.” Kakashi laughed. He had wondered why Sakura had asked him to teach her that particular jutsu but now that he saw how she had managed to pin it down… he could admit that it would work in Konoha’s favour. Any shinobi with Iwa connections present would be rather nervous at how good how her Earth eruption was. Kakashi was impressed and he had only taught it to her a few days earlier.

But he wondered on her plan. Her opponent’s jutsu was suspicious. Highly suspicious. Highly dangerous. Contact had been needed before but after a month of training who knew how much of that had changed but that genin was against Sakura. There was no way she would miss a single hint.

Xxx
Dosu did not think much of her. Sakura could see it in his eyes. It was funny, when had she gotten so good at reading eyes? Gazes? So good at feeling out emotions? She just kept changing it seemed and she could feel her opponent’s dismissal as if it were a living thing. He had watched her prelim match and obviously not been impressed.

After all her match had been a personal slugging overcoming trial where she had gone against her rival. Her equal and overcome. This guy had overcome Chouji with the least amount of trouble. Beaten him so quickly that even Naruto had been surprised and put out. Been startled. She had done plenty of research. Done plenty of thinking on how to take down her opponent.

She adjusted her gloved and clenched her fingers. It had been good luck, no it had been a blessing that she had come across that file. It had made her think about her tactics differently. Naruto had inspired her and so had Sasuke but she had spent the entire month thinking about becoming a Chuunin not just winning. She who had always relied on what she had learned. She knew she had come across the answer.

The fact that Dosu had remained unimpressed after her simple display just made her want to laugh. That he had not moved beyond his position made her chuckle. That he thought he still had the answers, that Sakura was nothing to worry about. That his secret jutsu and jutsus were everything that he needed just meant that he had fallen completely into the trap.

Concentration. It took precious little time to get the focus that she needed. She clenched her fist and aimed at the dirt that she had pumped up the the eruption jutsu. It was weaker than it should be but she had literally just learned that jutsu only a while back and the full strength would have been over kill.

And she needed to use as little chakra as possible if she were to pull it off correctly. And she would pull it off correctly. Her fist slammed into the ground in a hard crack. She felt the ground shudder under her fist and she felt time slow down before the explosion. She grinned as around her the dirt flew into the air. Perfect camouflage.

XxX

Shikamaru had used his brains and had understood his limits. Him giving up, it was so him but it showed he really did understand himself and how the shinobi thing was done. Sakura knew her limits. They did not define her and she from this point, for the rest of her life would push at them.

Her control? It could be better. Her limited amount of chakra? Nothing to be done about that currently but goddamn, she could and would wreck havoc with the amount that she did have. She would win with what she could. She would do what she could do and make it work. If she could not do something. The for right then, she could not.

That boy’s arm it would not touch her, his jutsu, from the moment she had started the fight… he would not touch her but she would certainly wreck him and that was what really mattered.

XxX

Her speed could use some work but it was better than Dosu’s. Sakura grinned as she used her hands to cartwheel over Dosu’s shoulder. She had noticed before that he had problems turning. He was quick but not quick enough and his vision actually was limited.

That and his arms were the key to his jutsu after all. He had come at her not noticing everything was a feint. Taking his arms out would be the end of it all. Just as she had deduced. Her zig zag dash to put distance between gave her enough ground and Sakura concentrated before she punched
the ground to bring up a cloud of dust and dirt again.

Xxx

She had almost been denied such an opportunity. Sakura bit back a grin as she avoided Dosu. She had almost been denied the chance to fight this guy. She had been prepared to fight them all but through this fight she felt herself change and grow. To be denied a fight was a shame. Everyone had something to show, to teach.

She was grateful for the chance to meet Dosu. What he had to show her, teach her. She was grateful. She smiled as his hand finally reached her. Then she grinned as his face changed to confusion, right before the jutsu broke and Dosu realized what he held was nothing more than an Earth clone.

Xxx

“That’s an A-rank jutsu.” Raidou breathed and Sarutobi grinned even as he hid it in a cough. “How did… and Naruto knows the Kage Bunshin too. What is it with Kakashi’s team?”

“They are full of surprises aren’t they?” Sarutobi remarked. “This fight has made me feel almost a bit nostalgic for a moment there.” He laughed softly. “Her control could use some work… but those punches were magnificent.”

Xxx

It had been a trap. Dosu tugged at his hand and growled when it would not move. He had known that something was off when he had managed to catch up to her so quickly. He had been distracted. His plans ahead. Thoughts of how to get to Sasuke.

He had dismissed the girl. In fact, his thoughts had been how to get to Sasuke before that blonde did. Now it looked as if the entire team had sleeping monsters. She had been so emotional and raw in her fight he had dismissed her.

But none of that was present. There was nothing but calm in her eyes. Dosu had thought he had her. Then his fist had gotten stuck in the mud. It took no genius to understand that from the first punch he had been hers. That smile when he caught her. He had known he was in trouble.

He had limited options. He just had to hit her once. Once and it would be all over. He concentrated on breaking down the mud that kept his fists captive. One blow and he could finish the rest.

The ground under him vibrated and Dosu swore. He recalled her punch at the ground at the beginning of the match. He had thought that it had been to intimidate him. Disturb him. Instead he realized that from the beginning she had hidden herself.

What the hell was it with Konoha? He swore again as under him the ground tore apart and she appeared. Her smile was wild and almost happy. His fists were still captive. It was not fair.

“Damn it.” He swore as she brought both her fists up. He knew what her target was. “Damn it!” He had wanted to prove Orochimaru-sama wrong. Prove his worth but it turned out he was just as useless as Orochimaru-sama had guessed. He could not even judge his enemies correctly.

Xxx

She had watched Naruto’s match eagerly. She had watched Shikmaru’s as well. She had taken from them and changed up things in her own based on how they had fought. She had not gotten to
see all the matches in the preliminary but she had heard enough from Naruto.

She had been sparring and training for this moment. Her fists slammed down on Dosu’s arms and Sakura held her breath until she heard the shattering and cracks. Her smile grew and she silently cheered even as the result of her releasing so much chakra so suddenly blew both her and Dosu back.

She managed to fall correctly and she got to her feet to see that Dosu had not fared well enough. She had seen the resignation in his eye when she had appeared from underground.

A little trick she had gotten from her Sensei actually. Kakashi-sensei, well he liked to play dirty. A shinobi had to look everywhere for their target. One lesson she would certainly never forget. And one she hoped Dosu learned and kept close to his heart.

She had burned a lot of chakra so far. The clone, the jutsus. The punch. There was no doubt she had burned a lot of chakra but she knew she could still keep going. Her stance changed and she eyed Dosu’s fallen form.

XxX

Forget talented… the rookies were some monsters. Genma shook his head and chewed on his senbon as he crossed over to Dosu’s side. He had already known the kid was knocked out. He had been watching from the moment of the explosion. Head injury. The kid would be out for a while.

But Kakashi’s team certainly had fucked up the field. Genma glanced up to the stands and shook his head at Kakashi. He had no idea that Kakashi’s team were capable of something like this. Naruto… well the kid was not normal but Sakura?

He glanced back to where the kid stood. At ready her fists up and her eyes shone. No doubt she enjoyed it. She was ready for another bout. Genma almost hated to disappoint her.

“Winner, Haruno Sakura!”

XxX

Kakashi closed his eye in happiness as around him the stands erupted in cheers. Sakura had surprised them all. She had picked up more than stubbornness from their team and she had made him, made everyone proud.

Kakashi was curious about some of the things she had shown. He would have to pull her aside and see about some of those things. He doubted Ebisu had taught her. But still she had done everything perfectly. She had shown off her talent, her skills and her brain. Everyone just saw why she had been the best female of her year. He could not ask for more from such a wonderful team.

They had exceeded his expectations. It made him look forward to the future. They had changed and they would keep changing, maybe soon. After the exams were over he would pull them aside and ask them the same thing he had asked them when he first met them.

He knew they would have different answers. Or at least Sakura would.

XxX

Sakura had certainly come far in a month. Naruto felt his fingers tremble as he gripped the railings. It was silly but he so badly wanted to hug her. He was reminded of his past.
She had grown in such a short time. She had become amazing and he could tell that it was the first step. He grinned as she relaxed her stance. The slow turn that she did as she backed her opponent, the examiner and the crowd and looked at them made him grin.

XxX

The Chuunin exams had not been a waste of time. Sasuke released the railing as her contemplated Sakura. She had changed. He could say that she had changed since the Forest. In the month they had been apart something had grown in her. That was a good thing.

He had thought to himself that Dosu was nothing really. He had gotten the rundown of his abilities from Kakashi but had not been bothered. Hard to be bothered when he really thought about it all. Still, this was another point for their team.

Naruto had proved himself and now Sakura had.

XxX

Her body still hummed with the energy. Sakura took slow steps back to where the others waited. Everything had worked out and there was a sense of accomplishment in that because she knew things did not always work out.

Strange things happened. That was why she had so many plans and still had been open for weird things and error. Until the examiner had said she had won she had not relaxed. That was how it was with shinobi right? She glanced back and saw that the examiner was watching her a smile on his lips as he chewed his senbon.

She honestly had not thought it would have been over so quickly but that showed she had grown more than she had thought. That was honestly a great thing. She would soak up all the knowledge and experience she could get her hands on and grow. To think she had almost been denied such an opportunity. She was glad Dosu had turned up, thanks to him she had made yet another big step.
Thanks for being so patient, no seriously thanks. I'm really sad that I have to do this currently but there are some stuff I have to take care of. There are some things I want to get finished and out the way so I can focus fully on writing this fic.

Firstly I'm behind on the deadline I set myself and September is swiftly approaching (omg) I so badly wanted to do this KakaNaru week and yeah until I have every single fic out the way I won't be able to rest I'm nearly done just one or two giving me trouble.

Secondly, having a tiny bit of trouble focusing on the stuff I'm supposed to be writing (ouch sorry darlings) but that is the main reason I'm so behind and I'm trying my best because my marvelous headstart is melting away and I promised myself I wouldn't fall behind this year.

So what does this mean? No chapter next week but the week after you get the chapter hopefully by then I'll have wrapped up most the fics I'm setting aside for the KakaNaru week and I'll have organized the other surprise properly (my problem is that I get too distracted too easily and I do too much too fast)

So nope haven't abandoned my fics just need time to focus so I can put these things behind me. Hopefully in 2 weeks I can happily tell you guys that once a week updates will continue. I have my fingers crossed for that like seriously. So thanks for being so patient with me I know this is a huge fic (honestly y'all have no idea). Still, enjoy the chapter ^.^
He knew he was strong enough to keep it calm. He was not weak. He glared at the stands. At the people gathered. He could not see any dangers but that did not mean there were none. He and Kakashi had spoken long about the fights.

He had been fighting the entire month. He knew he was ready he had new tactics and new jutsus up his sleeve.

He froze as he remembered the warnings Kakashi gave him and the warning Naruto had passed onto him through Kakashi. Kakashi had warned him of his limits. Naruto of his opponent. Naruto had not given him any more information on Gaara but Sasuke had not planned on dropping his guard in the first place.

His own limit pissed him off but currently there was nothing that Sasuke could do about that. He would beat Gaara with what he currently had.

After the show Naruto had put on. After the show that Sakura had put on he would not lose. Not to them or their displays. He would not let them down either, the reason they had tried so hard it had been for their selves and for the team. Sasuke knew that.

Naruto’s and Sakura’s pride in being team seven. Their fight had showed pride in themselves and their development. The grins they showed. It for for the team too and Sasuke was part of that team. He had played team captain plenty of times, his fight would show it. This was for them all and it was also for him. He would win this fight.

XxX

Something was wrong with Gaara. Sasuke could attest to that. His eyes were different. Different from the eyes he had when Sasuke had first met him. Different to the look he had in the exam. Gaara’s eyes they were wilder than before. Sharper.

He seemed almost desperate to fight. Sasuke had known he had not been the only one put off at the delay but it was different with Gaara. He narrowed his eyes as sand whirled around Gaara and took him from the waiting area to the wrecked field.

He was not entirely worried but as Sasuke exchanged a nod with Naruto and Sakura he had to admit that something about Gaara was off. Sasuke would not let his team down, his guard was still up but he could admit that Gaara was very strange.

His face was calm but not his eyes. His face was uncaring but his eyes… they were like a wild beast. Not like the boars he had encountered when he was younger. Strong and looking to defend itself.

No, Gaara’s eyes. They were full of something he had never seen before. Or at least something he could not place. That wild look. That desperate wild gaze was filled with something else and it made the hair at the back of his neck stand up and made the seal on his neck pulse.

Sasuke gritted his teeth as he walked towards the examiner. He would not let himself be intimidated. He was stronger than that. He was an Uchiha. Many before him had faced similar things. He would figure out the why before it ended up a problem.

Whatever was wrong with Gaara. He would figure it out before it became a problem.

Gaara was strange. Dangerous too. Sasuke could feel the mild bloodlust. But even so he still
wanted to fight him. He still needed to fight Gaara. If Gaara made him afraid then he needed to fight him all the more. Fight and overcome. This was what it was all about but it was more than that too.

Fight, overcome all while keeping cool. That was the purpose. That was why he would challenge all that came for him. Those that came for his name, those that came for his bloodline. Those that came for his strength. He would overcome.

“Uchiha Sasuke. Gaara.” The examiner looked at them both before he gave the signal. “Begin!”

XxX

“Sasuke.” Naruto said softly. His fingers gripped the railings tightly. “Don’t you dare lose to a guy like that.” He gritted his teeth. “Don’t you dare.” Sasuke had seemed unbothered by Gaara so far but Naruto could still see that look in Gaara’s eyes.

He could still hear how Gaara had spoken. He could still hear the words echoing and deep inside him he felt the twinge that had risen up when he recognised the look in Gaara’s eyes.

“I really want to fight you Sasuke.” Naruto whispered. “So don’t you lose. Not to a guy like that. Don’t give into a guy like that.” His fingers clenched on the railings harder than before and Naruto ignored the pain.

XxX

“Everyone is excited for this fight.” Tenten said softly. “Plenty of upsets all around but they are hyped up for this one.”

“I’m not surprised. It is Sasuke-kun after all.” Lee admitted. Tenten glanced at him unsurprised to see how the boy’s head was lowered. “After Naruto-kun fought so bravely they expect the first round to end in an exciting manner as it opened.”

“All the fights were good.” Tenten scanned the field. “But to go against that Suna nin. He might be another genius but that does not mean he is exactly prepared.”

“He’s Sasuke-kun.” Lee said softly. “After Sakura-san and Naruto-kun’s performance. I don’t expect any less from him. He has the ability to adapt quickly. There is no doubt in my mind that he has a plan.”

XxX

“Not going to say anything?” Kakashi took his gaze off the field to glance at Gai. “Lee is going through something isn’t he?”

“Naruto-kun beat Neji who Lee couldn’t beat. Sasuke-kun is about to fight the opponent Lee couldn’t beat.” Gai looked away and leaned on the column instead. “A man has his pride Kakashi.”

“So he does.” Kakashi admitted. “But a shoulder to lean on is always nice.”

“I know.” Kakashi watched as Gai pointed to Lee where Tenten had leaned against him slightly. “That is why your team is always there to prop you up.”

“And after that down moment. He’ll be fueled up more than ever right? And the sadness will pass and he will be happy for them right?” Kakashi asked softly. “Crafty of you Gai.”
“Chuunin exams is a learning experience.” Gai said softly. “For those who progress and those who trip.”

XxX

It was quicker than expected. The sand surged out of the container and Sasuke evaded the first attack. His eyes caught how the sand came at him in a broad sweep. More of a broad sand hand than what he had expected.

“Don’t get so angry.” Gaara rasped and Sasuke felt the hairs on his neck stand up at Gaara’s tone. The boy covered one of his eyes as he slumped forward. Sasuke took another step back out of caution. The boy’s face had changed. No longer was his eyes wild and his face calm.

His face matched his eyes.

He heard Gaara mumble something else and Sasuke was unsure to whether being out of hearing range was a good or bad thing. He had no idea what Gaara was speaking about but he thought back to the almost cryptic message Naruto had sent to him.

Had Naruto faced Gaara like this?

XxX

He had removed his hand from his eye but his panting was loud enough that Sasuke could hear it from where he stood. But the wild look had also faded. Gaara’s face and even his eyes were calmer. “Come.” Gaara said softly.

Sasuke hated to do as he was instructed but he knew if he did not make the first move he would lose all hope of regaining the pace. Gaara’s strange behavior had already upset the flow.

“Here I come.” He muttered. His shurikens flew forward and he watched them attack Gaara as he sent another set and then another. The sand surged up in a shield just as he had been told to expect but he froze as the huge amount of sand turned into a hand and then a slowly melting figure of Gaara that slowly crushed the caught shurikens.

Sasuke had a feeling that this part of the show was entirely new. He already knew that he had to get close in order to defeat Gaara. His fingers trailed over his altered kunais before he made his move.

His throw was almost too fast for the eye to see but the sand caught them anyway. He followed the charge up with another set as he counted down in his head. Then another as he made the dash. He was unable to resist his smile a split second before the sand clone exploded.

XxX

The sand reacted just as he thought it would. Sasuke used the arm that had been captured as a way to remove the sand clone’s neck that had been holding his arm hostage. His wrist stung slightly after the way he had slammed his hand against it but it had been worth it.

Gaara was fast. His sand was very fast and just like Sasuke thought, he used it to protect himself firstly. As expected his punch was blocked but a wall of sand but an opening appeared and since that had been the target all along Sasuke had no problem making a dash for it to deliver a hard kick to Gaara’s side before he flipped backward.

He got a blow in by the sand was quick to defend. Just as he thought and unlike the first defense.
The sand rose on all sides. Like a curtain. Sasuke regained his balance and fought away his smile. As strange as Gaara was, the fight was good.

XxX

“I know I didn’t hurt you that much.” Sasuke said as the sand lowered. “The sand of armour. I’m certain it took most of that just now. Now you… come.”

XxX

“Sasuke-kun!” Sakura gasped. She had known Sasuke had a plan. She had known that he had been confident in himself but the fight with Lee had lingered in her mind.

Still to see the Sasuke she knew challenge Gaara right back made her happy, it made her feel confident. She grinned and leaned on the railings and added her voice to the crowd above.

XxX

Fluid and fast. Sasuke knew what others would see. He had worked on his speed worked on his movements and when he felt the blow connect to Gaara before the wall of sand could stop him he felt justified in his laugh.

It was enough to knock Gaara onto his back. Gaara’s eyes finally locked onto him and the surprise faded from the other boy’s face. “Is that it?” Sasuke asked as he lowered his foot slowly. That sand armour, he would rip it off with his hands if he had to.

Close range. Gaara was definitely bad at it. He also had his guard too high. That he could simply duck under the wall of sand was almost sand. When his hands clenched into Gaara’s front it was no knee jerk reaction when Sasuke yanked the boy into a headbutt. He wanted Gaara at least dazed. He slammed Gaara’s face into his knee and when the boy’s face bounced back up he silently swore at the dripping sand on the boy’s face.

He followed up his attack with more blows to the boy’s head and chest hoping to stun him enough to lose his senses. Even as his knee connected to Gaara’s chest Sasuke knew he had to retreat. He leapt back in time. The wave of sand was slow and sloppy but still a threat.

He stayed low down his hands they dug into the earth as he looked at Gaara’s bruised face, the sand cracked armour and tried his best to catch his breath.

XxX

The curtain of sand now had a cover. Sasuke eyed it suspiciously as Gaara was wrapped in a ball of sand. It was packed tightly. Sasuke used his kunai to test it and frowned when it bounced off harmlessly no different than if he had thrown it at a rock. And Gaara did nothing.

Wrapped up so tightly. It could be considered an absolute defense.

XxX

The sand was no longer smooth, in fact, around Gaara there had been some more changes. Sasuke took the time to wipe sweat from his forehead as he eyed the ball Gaara had wrapped himself in… and the new addition.

It was an eye. He was certain it was an eye. From the leftover sand an eyeball had formed. And it moved and it focused with the focus Sasuke.
No doubt a jutsu from Gaara. Sasuke had no idea what exactly Gaara was up to in the ball but he knew Gaara needed time but he needed to keep an eye of Sasuke… hence the eyeball.

It worked out really because he also needed time if he were to break through the ball. Gaara had helped them both.

XxX

“Sa...suke?” Naruto asked slowly as he watched Sasuke’s form on the wall. He could sense Sasuke’s concentration but what he could also sense. The growing chakra? That feel…whatever Sasuke was doing he could feel it from where he stood.

He could see the chakra forming in Sasuke’s hand but that was not all…

“What is…” Sakura said slowly. “What is going on in his hand?”

“Who knows right?” Naruto frowned before he saw something crackle in Sasuke’s hand. Then Sasuke moved a quick dash down the wall and straight for the shell Gaara was in but Naruto’s ears picked up a strange sound.

“What is it? That sound? It’s like a bird!” Sakura exclaimed. “Did he know this from before?”

Naruto took the chance to look away from the field and instead searched the crowd for their sensei. “I don’t think so.” He said softly. “It still seems sort of rough for Sasuke.”

“Meaning… Kakashi-sensei taught him?” Sakura asked. “I wonder what the name is.”

XxX

“Chidori!” The stab went not only clean through but it shook their area. Sasuke smiled even as he heard the small cracks. He withdrew his hand slowly as the hairline cracks grew bigger and bigger. His hand on the other hand…

He was not surprised when he withdrew it and blood covered his fist. Not his.

He leapt back a safe distance as the ball cracked further. He glanced up at where he had last seen the eyeball. Gone. Not surprising.

XxX

“What is this warm stuff? Mother… what do I do?” Gaara’s voice was completely different to how Sasuke had heard it so far. Different from the first meeting. Different to when they had first started the match.

There was no other way to describe it. That grating calm but not calm tone. Childish but also rage filled. It crept him out. His instincts told him not to let down his guard so he did not but he did not take his eyes off the hole he had created.

“Waaa! My blood! My blood! I won’t forgive you. I won’t forgive you!”

XxX

“What is that!” Naruto yelled as he focused on the field. “What the hell is happening?”

“There’s something.” Sakura yelled back. “Something is coming out from the hole Sasuke-kun made!”
This guy had to be completely crazy and not only that. Sasuke eyed the claw that had emerged from the hole. He had no idea what the hell was happening anymore. Was it a summon? Was that part of why he had wrapped himself up in the ball?

That claw was bad news.

The claw slowly retreated and Sasuke was unable to look away. Then the ball finally cracked and melted down. Gaara was revealed. Bleeding and hunched over his hand covered in blood along with his shoulder.

But the eyes he showed. They were not the eyes Sasuke had just seen watching him from the hole. He knew he had not imagined it.

“What the hell are you?” He demanded as he stood up. He had another shot at Chidori but Gaara was notably exhausted.

XxX

Sasuke had barely spoken before he heard an explosion come from the stands. His gaze jerked to the the stands were he saw a cloud of smoke rising. His eyes traveled over the silent spectators. Took in their limp forms before he spotted the shinobi leaping up that did not look friendly in anyway.

He heard another explosion. This one sounded further away. Not in the arena but he clenched his teeth as he thought of what it meant. Fighting. An attack. Which meant his Dad would be out there protecting the civilians. Which meant… everyone was in danger. Konoha was in danger.

A flash of red caught his attention then he took a step back at the other two sand shinobi and their guardian landed by Gaara. Their words sounded like gibberish to him as he took in Gaara’s deteriorating state.

“How are we to do this without Gaara?” The girl demanded and Sasuke concentrated on them properly. They needed Gaara.

His resolve hardened at the implication.

“Abort the mission. Take Gaara and retreat. I’ll join the fighting here.” The guardian gritted and Sasuke felt himself settle.

These people needed Gaara. Gaara was their trump card in some way. Just because he was currently out of action did not mean that would change. The two sand shinobi grabbed Gaara and hopped over the wall. Sasuke’s gaze locked on their retreat.

“The leader behind all this. Is it Orochimaru?” The examiner gritted out.

“Who knows.” The Suna Jounin shrugged. “Let’s join in the fun shall we?”

“You don’t plan on making it easy do you.” The examiner sighed. His senbon clicked against his teeth hard. “Kid. The Chuunin exams are over. You mind going after Gaara and the others? You’re already at Chuunin level already. You’re Konoha right? Go make yourself useful.”

“I was already planning on it.” Sasuke grunted before he gathered enough chakra to run up the wall in pursuit. Like hell would he allow these bastards to roam free. Firstly, the fight was not finished.
Secondly, he could not allow them to retreat. They were too much of a risk. Plans were thought of and discarded as he picked up the Suna shinobis trail.
Attack in the stands

Chapter Notes

Begging for your continued patience as the next chapter will take another two weeks as I finish up some things but it will be the last time hopefully, I admit this was easier on me but I want to continue ahead and return to updating and writing this fic a bit more regularly

So enjoy, wish me some luck and next chapter in 2 weeks!!

Naruto did not want to say that it happened too quickly that he and the others were unable to notice it. The truth was he, that everyone else had been too god damn distracted to notice it until it had been too late. His fear for Sasuke had been growing and his focus had been on the field by the time that he realized that something…

That everything felt wrong. The atmosphere felt wrong. By the time he had noticed that and turned around to actually do something… it had been too late. He had cursed even as he felt his knees buckle. He swore he saw white feathers before his eyes closed and he hoped that his distraction had not cost him his life… had not cost him everything.

XxX

A split second too late. Kakashi acknowledged that just before everyone in the stands fell unconscious. Not everyone of course but enough that he and Gai fell into readiness. He had known everything was a trap. He knew that the attack was coming but it still sucked that they had been taken off guard.

To see the crowd. The visitors slump over asleep hit him in his pride. They were supposed to be protected. They would be unable to get in the upcoming fights, technically out of the way but he knew they were sitting ducks.

Anything could happen. From this point on, anything would happen. And yet the mastermind was no where to be found.

XxX

She had recognized the genjutsu the moment she felt it begin. After the humiliations at the hands of her Sensei when their team had first begun, Sakura had sworn to never be tricked like that again. Back then it had been because of pride but then she had continued to improve and look for ways to easily dispel any manipulation on her because she simply could not waste time.

So when she felt the disturbance she quickly shrugged it off. It was more forceful than she had intended but she smiled all the same even as she felt people dropping around her. A glance up to the stands showed her that those in the stands had not gotten so lucky.

Then she spotted a flash of silver hair… and the people approaching. She bit her lip as she ran through her remaining weapons as she watched the stands slowly turn into chaos. A flash of colour caught her eye and she found herself freezing in horror when she watched the three Suna nins hop
over the wall… and a few seconds later… Sasuke in pursuit.

She had heard Naruto and Shikamaru fall. She grittered her teeth as she sank to her knees between Shikamaru and Naruto. There was no time to waste. Those attacking… she was fairly certain that they were Suna nins.

Naruto’s face carried a harsh frown and Sakura wasted no time. With a quick flick to his forehead she imparted enough chakra. Naruto’s eyes snapped open immediately blue eyes almost focused and she sat back and leaned over to Shikamaru.

“Don’t bother.” Shikamaru said as her hand reached for his shoulder. “Damn it.”

“Shikamaru?” She asked. “You weren’t…”

“I was looking to avoid something troublesome.” Shikamaru said as he rolled over. His face showed his frustration. “But that doesn’t look like it is going to happen.”

“Course it isn’t. We need to get to the stands now.” Naruto said as he sat up. “Damn it. What the hell is going on.” His gaze went to the field. “Wait…”

“Sasuke-kun has gone after the three from Suna.” Sakura reported as she dragged Shikamaru to his feet.”

“Damn it.” Naruto swore just before they heard an explosion.

“Another one?” Sakura said softly as she looked around. It was fainter. Sounded like it was close to the main gate. She looked around their area. Suna was gone but she knew they would not have acted alone.

Xxx

“This is something else.” Naruto grunted as they reached the stands. They were rudely welcomed by a few shurikens. He ducked but he laughed when he heard them knocked away by Sakura who was behind him.

“Not the time.” Sakura hissed as they trotted up the steps. Naruto’s attention was caught by people that he knew that were fast asleep.

“You guys!” A voice called out, Naruto reacted just in time. A quick moving blur inserted itself a few steps where he had been. The sound of kunais connecting rang out as Kakashi-Sensei glanced back. “You came over here.”

“Sasuke has gone after Gaara and Gaara has company.” Naruto answered. “We’re going after him as back up.”

“That Gaara is bad news.” Shikamaru spoke up.

“That isn’t the only bad news.” Kakashi-sensei said bitterly. “A large number is coming and on top of that.” He nodded towards one of the roofs. “Barrier ninjutsus.” He did not say anything else but Naruto had picked up enough from his tone.

He heard Sakura say something. He knew she was saying something. Spoken to him but he had gotten caught up. He turned slowly his heart racing and when he looked at the barrier and who stood in it he felt a surge on anger and a jump in his chakra.
“Orochimaru.” He gritted as his gaze locked on the man that stood next to the Sandaime. “Is he here for Sasuke?” He asked before he dismissed the notion. No there were opportunities to do that before. Whatever business Orochimaru had in declaring himself… Sasuke was not at the top of the list.

“Yes it is.” Kakashi-sensei said softly before he sent a rain of kunais past Naruto into the Sound nins that had creeped up. “Orochimaru. About Sasuke, I don’t know.”

“And Sasuke has gone after Gaara.” Naruto hissed. “Kakashi-sensei!”

“This will be your first mission you’ve had for a while.” Kakashi-sensei said softly. “Listen carefully, for the first time since Wave Country, you will be going on an A-rank mission. Just this time I won’t be by your sides.” He stood with his back to them as he watched the Sound and Suna shinobi attempt to get closer. “But, I know you’ll manage it fine enough.” He spared enough time to look back at them. A Suna nin took that chance to try to jump and Naruto watched Kakashi-sensei’s kunai slice down the jumping man’s chest and stomach. Not unlike slicing a fish.

“What kind of…” Sakura asked softly. Naruto heard a low groan and out the corner of his eye he watched as Ino and Chouji slowly came awake. “What kind of mission?”

“You, Naruto and Shikamaru will pursue Gaara and Sasuke.” Kakashi-sensei said. He fell silent and Naruto took that opportunity to scan the grounds for anyone else they knew.

“Why so little people?” Naruto questioned as Shikamaru leaned next to Ino and Chouji his words too fast and to low for Naruto to pick out.

“You would know best Naruto.” Kakashi-sensei answered. “A bigger group is lower in speed and harder to keep hidden.”

“Yeah, that was at the academy.” Sakura muttered. “Are you okay Ino? But wait. Who is the fourth person?”

There was a loud familiar sound and Naruto looked around Kakashi-sensei’s legs to gape at the small dog that had appeared. “This guy Pakkun will be able to track Sasuke by scent.”

“This little dog is the last person?” Sakura demanded and Naruto felt her jostle him slightly as she tried to get closer.

“Oi missy.” The dog was fast. Naruto had barely blinked and the Dog had gotten up close and to their faces. “Don’t call me a cute little dog.”

Naruto raised an eyebrow as he ran back over Sakura’s words. He felt the back of his neck tingle and he whirled around to confront the enemy but before he could launch his attack a flash of green sent the Sound nin back and through the wall.

“I’ll repeat your mission. Follow Pakkun and get Sasuke. Get him to a safe location. You’ll escape through that hole.” Kakashi-sensei stated. Sakura, Pakkun, and Shikamaru fell into whispers as they readied themselves to escape but Naruto glanced back to Kakashi-sensei.

A few steps took him to Kakashi-sensei. Naruto was highly aware of the atmosphere around them. He heard the small explosions. The clash of shurikens and kunais. He heard the screams of pain. He glared up at their sensei and the man simply looked down at him. Silence fell between them.

“Naruto.” Kakashi-sensei said slowly but Naruto cut him off with a wave of his hand.
“Everyone is fighting.” He hissed. “Can you handle this?” He used his hand to indicate their surroundings. The utter chaos.

“Yeah.” Kakashi-sensei’s hand moved quick. Naruto’s eyes widened in shock as the man stole a senbon from his pocket and sent it flying behind him. Naruto peered around Kakashi-sensei’s back to watch as the Suna nin sank to their knees the senbon only a tiny gleam in their throat and to think Kakashi-sensei had not even looked behind him. Or even shown his Sharingan. “The village…” Kakashi-sensei hesitated. “My friends are here fighting. We have each other’s back. We have this here.” Kakashi-sensei said softly.

Naruto took a step back at Kakashi-sensei’s surety. He saw Gai-sensei give him a nod obviously having had overheard part of Kakashi-sensei’s words. He sighed. “Don’t die.” Naruto whispered before Sakura made the first leap through the hole Pakkun on her head. “Don’t die.” He repeated before he made the leap to follow Shikamaru.

XxX

“They care for you.” Gai said his voice amused as his kick sent a shinobi through the roof.

“Obviously.” Kakashi pointed out as he slit one Suna nin’s throat to then switch hands and use that kunai to gut a Sound nin. “They are my team you know.”

“But it is different with Naruto right?” Gai asked as his kick disarmed his opponent. Gai’s reflexes made the man catch the falling kunai before he used it to slash his opponent's throat. “What was he so worried about?”

“Me dying.” Kakashi admitted as he ducked into a quick roll to avoid the two shinobi attacking him. They crashed into each other and Kakashi dispatched them quickly before they could separate.

“He is worried for you? A great turn of events.” Gai huffed as he landed on his opponent's sword. “I don’t know why others worry. The boy has obviously adapted. His team means something to him, by the way Kakashi are you keeping count?” Gai’s opponent fell and Gai leaped away as his fallen opponent choked grabbing at his now destroyed throat. “I have gotten twenty-nine so far.”

“Really?” Kakashi mused as he jerked his legs to the right. His own opponent's neck broke with a harsh crack and he toppled backward. Kakashi removed himself before he could fall with the man. “That was thirty-one.”

“So fierce so cool Kakashi.” Gai groaned. “But never fear, our rivalry will roar on!”

“Is this the time?” Aoba demanded. “Because normally this would not be the time!” He snapped.

“It really isn’t.” Kakashi admitted before he tensed up. He swore and leapt towards the hole his team had escaped from but he saw he was too late. A small group of shinobi had made it through. “It isn’t the time.” He hissed as he watched the shinobi escape. “Damn it.”

Gai spared a moment to pat him on the shoulder as he hopped past. “They are your team Kakashi.”

“They have enough to deal with and I just want them safe for this bit of madness. Is it too much to ask?” Kakashi hissed as he jerked his head to the right to escape a kunai.

XxX

In the medical bay the room creaked open slowly. The sound that followed was the soft clacking of
wooden shoes. The steps did not slow or falter. Instead they kept going until they reached the bed. There was a moment of silence. A rustle of sheets before the shoes retreated, clacking on the floor tiles until they left the room. The door closed with a soft click.

XxX

“This is getting worse by the minute.” Aoba panted. “Kakashi! Stop worrying. Of all the genins… Your team has to be the most prepared right now.”

“Naruto-kun is the one the most equipped. He is familiar with being hunted.” Kakashi ignored the pointed glance Gai gave him.

“I know that.” Kakashi admitted. “That doesn’t make it any better. Those people they are hunting… it won’t be that easy. It should be fairly manageable as long as they don’t get in too deep. But this is them…” He glanced around and sighed at the new wave of shinobi that had poured into the stands. He could only hope that Naruto would be safe. That all of them would manage if only for a while longer.
Pursuit and defend

Chapter Notes

THANK YOU for your patience darlings seriously. I was half fearing what the response would be for me taking so long to update this fic. I really really really did not want to start back uploading until I had a handle on other things and I had turned my attention back to writing this.

Of course not everything is perfect, I went back to work in September and my scheldule is totally ridiculous not to mention that I can't squeeze in some night writings for reasons and... honestly that is one my fav times to write so that sucks. I'm trying my best to get as much writing done as possible but things happen for one and simple sometimes I wont have the time or motivated or I'll be distracted (plenty of rl stuff atm)

Still your patience is why I love you darlings so much, your faith in me, i’m so grateful. Now I promised myself that I wouldn't post until i had met some conditions. I haven't met all but i’ve met enough and I think I can handle the week coming... sort of Friday may mess with me so no promises but I want to go back to weekly updates for this fic but I gotta get back my head start first. I had a nice lovely one and that's gone now so imma be trying to get that back in my free time if I can.

Still, thanks for waiting guys

They were not running stupidly. They had noticed the exact moment that someone started following them. But they had things to worry about besides that. The simple fact that the person they were trying to get away could and would kill them in a split second and would without a second thought.

The fact that the plan had been ruined and this now, their running away was the new plan. Those two things were far more important than the tail they had picked up. Temari spared a glare behind them as they carried the muttering Gaara with them.

She was honestly terrified. He had not fully recovered. It could go from okay to catastrophic in just a few seconds. Gaara was on the hair trigger and the last thing they needed was whatever the person behind them wanted.

But she could guess what it was about. Kankuro met her gaze as they leapt from tree to tree. Their tail, Uchiha Sasuke. They had gotten a bit of information about him. Their sensei had been clear about their instructions regarding Sasuke too.

But considering Orochimaru had not objected to Gaara and Sasuke fighting, Temari at least had assumed the boy had been expendable because no one beat Gaara. No one stopped Gaara when he was on the rampage. And Gaara wanted to kill Sasuke, there was no doubt about that.

With the plan failed were they still playing nice with Orochimaru? Because with Sasuke on their tail, maybe they could slow him down and keep him alive. Maybe but they doubted that. But even then, Sasuke was low down in their list of objectives. Gaara came first.
The fight was not finished, and even if it had been Sasuke could not afford to let them escape. They did have a lead on him but he would not lose them. He knew what he had seen if only for a split second. Gaara was dangerous but it was more than that.

They had entered Konoha with the intent to bring war. They were part of it all. He could not afford to just drop back and hope things took care of themselves. He could not afford to, none of them could. There was the evacuation plan he had heard his Father discuss numerous times but it was more than that.

It was bigger than him. Sasuke landed on a tree branch and swore before he jumped back the branch he had been standing on exploded. Sasuke landed on the ground in a crouch and seethed. He knew they would pick up on their being followed but it felt as though they wanted to delay him not fight him.

Which meant he had all the reason to continue to chase them even if they lead him to the very border. Even beyond it if he had to, they could not afford the risk. He could not have Gaara or even the other two turned their wrath on the rest of Konoha. They had to be taken down, removed. Defeated.

The attack changed everything. In order to keep just a little more of his life together… these three had to be taken down so he would not be shaken off. He would pick them off, bit by bit until they were no longer a threat.

His leap back up to the trees was aggressive but his pace was double what he had started at, he would tire, he knew that but he would not, could not afford to let them escape or even recover. Far away there was a loud roar and Sasuke’s resolve hardened.

“Don’t worry.” Sakura said and Naruto allowed himself a moment to cough. “I’m serious! Sensei is a special Jounin. He’s safer than we are right now.”

“Sakura-chan, numbers aren’t everything and neither is rank.” Sakura’s face fell and Naruto winced before he spoke again. “But I am worried.” He admitted. “I knew Gaara was bad news but I had no idea that Suna would do this.” But he still felt uncomfortable with the entire situation and pissed too.

Everything was chaos. The stands had become a battleground and that was so wild, so crazy. Not only that, Sasuke had run off after the bastard that Naruto had taken the time to explain was dangerous. Had he ignored Naruto’s warning?

Sasuke had reeked of exhaustion. He had to be tired but he had gotten up and ran after the Suna nins without backup. Sasuke was not thinking clearly. That Naruto knew.

And himself, well he was not exactly thinking clearly himself. As he followed Shikamaru, the dog and Sakura he had to admit that part of him was calm, because they were running, chasing and that was all too familiar. Even though before it had not been chasing it had been fleeing.

There had been some chasing too but those times had been too far and in between. But now with the village the way it was he could not help but be worried. Naruto had seen war before, granted they had been smaller but war was still war and he knew how fights ended.

He had gotten Kakashi-sensei to make him a promise. Kakashi-sensei had plenty of secrets but
Naruto knew he would try his best to keep his promise. Sometimes Kakashi-sensei acted like a part of the village, something disposable. It made Naruto happy to hear him talk about people at his back.

They were going after Gaara and the other two but that promise he had just gotten warmed his stomach because so many times he had made the ‘be careful’ conversation. They had no home but it had been natural to insist to whoever was leaving to come back.

“Have you had anything like this before?” Sakura asked and Naruto jolted out of his thoughts. The dog was in front and he allowed himself a moment to think before he answered.

“I can tell you how they should be thinking. Not Gaara but the other two. They should catch on quickly that they are being followed. They are still in good condition.” Naruto hesitated as he continued to think. “It looks bad no matter how I think about it.”

“Yeah, if Sasuke-kun makes a move before we get too close it will get bad fast.” Sakura muttered.

“We have to get there before he confronts all of them. It is one thing to go after Gaara but unlike Gaara the other two have their heads on straight.” Naruto muttered Sakura glanced back at him and the worry on her face only magnified his own.

“We can’t be that far behind.” Sakura muttered as her pace picked up.

Naruto winced when he heard a loud explosion from behind them. He really did not want to think about it but the village was being wrecked.

Then Naruto’s awareness sharpened. He had a second to acknowledge that if he had not allowed himself to be so dulled he would have caught on a bit sooner but he still allowed himself a moment to be irritated.

“We have a tail.” He announced. The dog and Shikamaru looked back at him sharply.

“Damn it.” Sakura hissed. “Okay, we need a new plan.”

XxX

“We can’t let them follow us. We are already out numbered.” Sakura pointed out. The dog on her head nodded and Shikamaru made a murmur of agreement. “If they catch up to Sasuke-kun and the others we will be in more trouble, for all we know Sasuke-kun has already engaged with them.”

“Sasuke is still moving.” The dog answered and Sakura’s sigh of relief was loud. “But those following us are getting closer.”

“We need to take them out, lay down some traps or something.” Naruto pointed out. “They are following us but maybe some fake trails, enough to delay them enough.”

Something drew his gaze to Shikamaru, the other boy had not said anything but something in him had shifted enough that Naruto paid him more attention even as he tried his best to think of a plan.

“You know… I really didn’t want to get dragged into this. It is all troublesome.” Shikamaru spoke up. “It’s not as if I have some deep need to save Sasuke either but there is no other choice. We have to split up.”

“Not yet.” Sakura answered and the glare she sent Shikamaru should have sent him on fire. “Not yet, stop being impatient.”
“There’s someone else up ahead the dog said and Sakura groaned. “Something is strange about his scent. It doesn’t smell… human.”

“What about Sasuke?” Shikamaru asked and the dog looked back at him.

“He’s not that far ahead but he isn’t alone.”

“We don’t have any time to waste.” Shikamaru said grimly. Naruto gritted his teeth when Shikamaru slowed down.

“Catch.” He yelled as he tossed his back up envelope of tags. “Don’t anything too stupid.”

“Shikamaru!” Sakura called as she slowed down. “These are possibly Jounins. Can you do this?”

“I’m the best person for it. My clan’s jutsu is perfect for delaying. I won’t buy you any more than ten minutes.” Shikamaru gave them a small glare. “I’m not looking to die.”

“Good.” Naruto smiled before he took the lead. He was tempted to leave behind a shadow clone or something but he knew that he would need every bit of chakra he had… and he could not afford to be distracted. He spared a glance back to Shikamaru to see that the boy had gotten up from his crouch a serious look on his face as he slowly tossed the envelope Naruto had tossed him.

“You think he’ll be fine?” Sakura asked when she caught up to him. Naruto allowed a moment to pass between them as he considered the question.

“Shikamaru isn’t like everybody else.” He smiled. “He’s lazy and he’ll tell you that something is bothersome but he is strong too and really smart. He’ll be fine he knows himself.”

“Let’s hope that is enough.” Sakura breathed.

XxX

“Shino!” Sakura gasped right before Naruto knocked her off course.

“Bad idea.” He grunted as he helped her regain her footing. “You don’t get near a puppet fight. We have no choice we have to go around.”

“That’s one of them but no Sasuke-kun.”

“I guess Shino wasn’t going to accept that forfeit.” Naruto mumbled as the dog transferred from Sakura’s head to his. “Is it him that you smelt earlier?”

“Yes it was him but I smell some of Sasuke’s blood too.”

“We can’t waste time. We got lucky with Shino but…” Naruto sighed before he grabbed Sakura’s hand to tug her onward. “We need to get to Sasuke now.”

XxX

“You’re not going to like what I have to say.” Sakura muttered and Naruto spared a moment to glance at her resigned expression before he focused ahead.

“Then don’t say anything.” His voice trembled at the last word before he could help himself. A hard mission and they had already left one of their own behind no matter that Shikamaru was smart enough to be able to handle himself, it was way too similar to his past.
“You need to get to Sasuke-kun.” Sakura continued as if he had not said a single word. “I don’t think she’ll let you get any closer, you and Sasuke-kun… no you need to get to Sasuke-kun.” Naruto spotted a flash of colour ahead and while he felt relief that they were closer he felt his throat dry at Sakura’s words.

“What are you going to do?” He asked and Sakura glanced back behind them.

“More are going to follow. Everyone is fighting hard, I’ll buy some time and keep them away from you and Sasuke-kun.”

“Sakura-chan.” He warned.

“We got lucky with Shino, Shikamaru is buying us time. She isn’t going to sit back and let you save Sasuke. Gaara is a little off but she isn’t.” The glare she sent him made Naruto gave in. “And this is my fight anyway.”

“Damn it Sakura-chan, the two of us can take care of it quickly.” He tried to convince her but he knew it was futile.

“Just get to Sasuke-kun, I’ll catch up to you guys later.” The smile she sent him was filled with her determination. “This match is mine.”

“Be careful.” Naruto warned as the people ahead came into view.

XxX

Part of her knew that when she thought about it later on she would be terrified. Things just kept happening. After the entire ordeal of her training and the fun from her match… she thought she had something under control. She thought she had it all under control.

Her match had unlocked something in her, a strange feeling of gratitude, a deep feeling of compassion that she was determined to nurture, it would only help her to grow she was certain of it. There were so many things at stake that she could only think about the simple ones first.

She would deal with the problems as they came, she could do nothing else. She was concerned, she was so worried but all she was able to do was focus those emotions deep into her body and concentrate. She used her rage and fear for her friends to boost her speed.

She doubted she would do it perfectly, she was so far away from the concentration she had read about in those files but she was so worried, so pissed that as she drew close to her opponent and her opponent noticed her, her rage filled boost allowed her to not only strike first, it allowed her to drive the girl from Sasuke and drive them both to the ground.

There was no time to fall properly, in fact the sound that echoed in the forest, she had a feeling that it carried further than she knew.

XxX

Shisui did not have to ask to know how Itachi felt, since the moment Itachi had gotten his orders he had been irritated, distracted and Shisui could not blame him, as they waited for the counter attack to start he kept a wary eye on Itachi as the rest of his ANBU team waited at the memorial stone.

“Jiraiya-sama is back.” Iris said softly. “We’ve gotten lucky to have him back here to face Orochimaru.”
“Even if it is last minute.” Boar snorted.

“I wonder if they will hold there.” Cat muttered as he went over the map. “Maybe we should send someone there as reinforcements.”

“Kakashi-senpai is there along with Gai-san.” Iris shook her head. “Only the best is there, everyone will be fine. There will be the lowest number of casualties.”

“The police have managed to evacuate most of the civilians we will be moving soon.” Monkey brushed his hand over the cool marble of the stone. “Itachi-san, your father is leading the charge.”

“I know.” Itachi answered just before they were all rendered silent by the sound of something far away cracking.

“Say…” Boar said slowly. “Did Tsunade-sama come back to help as well?”

“You’re imaging things that’s just things heating up.” Monkey dismissed.

“You’re too young.” Boar argued.

“You’re too optimistic, Jiraiya-sama is one thing… Tsunade-sama isn’t going to come back ever.” Monkey looked to where the sound had come from. Shisui watched how Itachi’s fingers twitched as he looked in the same direction the explosion had come from. Shisui was very certain that the tournament was carrying on not too far from where the noise had come from.

He hoped the noise was Kakashi or the Hokage fighting. He hoped that it was one of theirs getting really enthusiastic. That Gai had gone overboard.

“He’s fine.” Shisui said softly to Itachi. “He’s fine, we can go get him later. He’s one of Kakashi’s he’ll be safe.”

Itachi did not answer him, instead his carefully blank gaze met his and though there was no sign of Itachi’s thoughts Shisui felt the pressure of Itachi’s disbelief as if it were a living thing but just then from the corner of his eye he spotted the white sparrow and he sighed in relief.

“It’s our turn.” He spoke up and he attached his mask onto his face and patted the sword on his back to reassure himself. “Let’s go.”

XxX

Her first move, she had managed to take Temari by surprise, Sakura knew that doing it again would not be easy. Her first punch had dealt some serious damage but Temari had managed to fend her off before she could follow it up. Naruto had already escaped, chasing the heels of Gaara and Sasuke leaving her to take down Temari, leaving her to buy them time.

This however was her fight, it was owed to her, they would have fought anyway. She had watched Temari’s match with Shikamaru, she had not gleaned much but she had gotten enough from it, Shikamaru’s loss was… Shikamaru but Temari was strong.

Temari glared at her as she stood with her fan half open, Sakura knew if she had not been blocking the way to Gaara and Sasuke… Temari would have taken the chance to flee.

She was fighting because she had something to protect, she did not want to repeat the incident in the forest again and as she stared at Temari something nagged at her.
“Konoha shinobi.” Temari hissed, her fan was a blur of speed and Sakura reacted not moving up or
to the side but using the earth to hide in to avoid the win. She was fighting for the others, to help
Naruto to protect Sasuke and for the village but mostly because she wanted to keep those important
to her safe.

Unlike Dozu who had underestimated her, Temari did not, she could not do such a thing, not
because of the match but because of the consequences of arrogance. Just like how Sakura was
fighting so she could get to Sasuke and Naruto, this girl fought because she did not want to lose.

“I don’t have time for this. I’ll deal with you and I’ll deal with the other two.” Temari snarled at
her and Sakura felt something twist deep inside her at the tone the girl used. “I won’t let you hold
me back!” Sakura cut her connection to the earth clone above her as she focused enough chakra
into the jutsu. Around her everything exploded, shooting up at a rapid pace and she ignored the
bruises and the pain as she was shot into the sky along with the earth.

Her body took the most of the wind attack but because Temari had been unsettled it was not as bad
as Naruto had warned it could be. Still when her fist hit the fan and it shattered she felt deep pride
along with loss. She saw horror in Temari’s eyes when the fan shattered and she recognized the
despair in the girl’s gaze even as something sharp grazed her arm. Gaara and the other one, Temari
valued her team greatly, Sakura could see her horror at the realization that she would not be able to
help them or even save them.

Sakura fought with her friends and family on her mind. So did she, just as how Sakura had suffered
back in the forest, Temari would carry the pain, they both had people they wanted to keep safe, that
was why she had felt the same way she had but she was the victor. They had the same thing
powering them but Sakura was the victor, maybe it was because her need was different. Her team
had almost slipped through her fingers and her new strength was dedicated to not letting that
happen again no matter what. To become as big as her name and shelter them, become that strong.

Her strength was not complete, so many things were not right but her punch smashed Temari
backwards and when Sakura heard the other girl’s back hit the tree she charged forward again. Her
blow to the chest was not to kill but to incapacitate for as long as possible, the ground under Temari
cracked and shuddered and the girl choked but Sakura knew she was unconscious. She spared a
moment to check the girl’s pulse and her breathing.

She won but there was no sense of victory that she had felt with Dozu. No sense of great
achievement, instead she felt calm she felt almost empty. She felt attuned to everything around her,
with a sigh she rifled through her weapon pack. She gave a quick glance behind her to where
Sasuke and Naruto had gone and gave a prayer to their safety before ran forward to lead the other
pursuers on a merry chase, she so badly wanted to chase after them but she knew she was better off
watching their backs. She was worried but she had faith, the two of them were there together.
It was not as if he had a choice about leaving Sakura behind, he didn’t like it but he had no choice, Sakura had sprung at Temari her entire body focused on bringing the other girl down. All he could do was trust in her and go after Sasuke like he was supposed to, he did not like leaving her behind but he had to trust that she knew what she was doing.

After all, he would have had to watch the fight between Temari and Sakura if the matches had continued the way they had and he would not have been able to intervene, of course in those matches there was the presence of a referee. Something largely lacking in the whole battle now.

This war, there was just fighting, no one telling you when to stop, whether you had gone too far, no one on the side-lines there looking out for both your interests. Orochimaru was around and Suna currently were their enemy.

Shikamaru could look after himself at least to a point, Naruto knew that and Sakura she had changed, she had gotten stronger and judging by the noises she created, she would do fine he just had to trust in her.

But as worried as he was about Sakura there were other things to worry about, like Gaara and Sasuke and whatever was happening back behind them. It was a strange time to be worried about the others but Naruto hoped his friends were safe especially with all the destruction around them. He especially hoped that Kakashi-sensei kept their agreement.

He felt a little foolish over the promise he had forced but he had needed to. Back before when the others had dropped back to buy them time his stomach had never felt good, going on ahead with the others rarely did good and most of the time not everyone returned.

He still felt out of place in Konoha, Kakashi-sensei had said to trust in his team and when it came to certain things Naruto could but there were some things that he was not ready to share and some things that they were not ready for.

Of course Kakashi-sensei was different, he got most of it and he treated him differently. Kakashi-sensei had given them this mission because it had to be done and because he believed in them, also because he really did believe in the thing he had told them and that made Naruto think about the man a little differently.

XxX

It had only been a few seconds of distraction but Sasuke and Gaara had pulled ahead again. The small dog on his shoulder was a warm weight as Naruto tried his best to increase his speed. That Sasuke was still going after Gaara even when he had gotten injured told him that Sasuke was far more reckless than he had realized.
He doubted Sasuke had missed Gaara’s condition, obviously Sasuke would not know what Gaara was, things like Jinchuurikis were big secrets just as how he was. Unless people saw a jinchuuriki in action they did not know about them unless they were upper class shinobi.

Of course it looked like Gaara’s village was different. Obviously not everyone broadcasted the existence of a jinchuuriki, there were bits of information passed down and around but not that much, one day Sasuke would know everything… if he managed to live long enough that was.

“I can smell him; the scent of blood has increased as well.” Pakkun said and Naruto nodded in response as he picked up his speed.

XxX

He had to remember this so he could bring this up again. In company, often, maybe every single day if Sasuke did not kill him or try to wipe his memory. Sasuke slipped from his arms and Naruto tried his best to shake off his disorientation as he grinned. “Knight Naruto to the rescue princess Sasuke.” He teased and ignored Sasuke’s glare. He instead focused on Sasuke’s torn pants. “Okay?”

“Poison.” Sasuke grunted and Naruto stifled a curse.

“The puppets got you.” He guessed as he kept an eye out for Gaara, he had managed to get the drop on him and sweep Sasuke to safety but he doubted that the area was silent because Gaara had decided to give up and run away.

After having to deal with Neji he could not say he was looking forward to facing Gaara in the same way. Neji had irritated him, his willingness to close his eyes and accept things as they were, they just pissed him off.

Gaara was the same way too but he was similar to Naruto in a way that Neji was not but there was still a big difference.

“I’d just like to say now… I’m not a battle type.” Pakkun announced and Naruto snorted as the dog landed on the branch.

“I could tell.” Naruto muttered as he kept an eye on his surroundings. The air was tense. There was no telling where he was exactly but he had to be around. He saw a flicker of red at the corner of his eye but he stayed as he was, he knew better than anyone how people used sight as a distraction.

“The one I didn’t kill that time.” The voice was disjointed and it was so inhuman that Naruto twitched before he stopped himself. He was confused at what he saw as he looked to his left. It was Gaara, he knew that but only half of him, the other half… that thing he looked monstrous, enough that Naruto wondered if it was Gaara that was speaking to him.

One blue eye and one black one, both were looking beyond him and filled with hatred and bloodlust. Still hadn’t he faced plenty of hatred already? In the end weren’t they all alike?

“Gaara.” Naruto called out. “I’m not going to let you kill any one here.”

“As if you could stop me.” The arm that shot out, bulky and yellow in colour looked to be made of sand but Naruto stood his ground as Gaara’s screamed. “Die Uchiha!” there was no time to move Sasuke but he moved with the blow and ignored the pain to his chest as he wiggled away. His shadow clone, a last minute summon hastily moved Sasuke further away yet again and Naruto, his real body stood between them again.
“Cut it out your people aren’t going to win!” Naruto yelled. “Konoha is going to beat your people back!”

“I don’t care.” Gaara hissed and his hand moved to his forehead slowly. “I don’t care about that. Mother just wants blood and I’ll give it to her. The fighting… I don’t care about any of that. Confirmation of my existence, that is all I want. It’s what I’ll have when I kill him, when I kill you.”

“No way.” His clone dispelled and Naruto glanced back to see Sasuke had made it to his feet, Pakkun next to him. They could try for a retreat but he doubted it would go well.

“What is he… what are all of them to you.” Gaara hissed and Naruto’s attention was dragged back to Gaara. “The other one from that time, this one here. What do they mean to you.”

“They are my friends obviously, idiot.” Naruto answered he wished he had more stuff but what he had would have to do. “I’ll kick your ass if you lay a hand on them, any of them.”

“Oh?” Gaara’s gaze remained fixed on him. “Is that so, then why don’t you try it?”

“There really isn’t any other way with you is there.” Naruto muttered. “Just like him, you’re so blind.” The kunais he threw were quick but he knew they would miss, however he doubted Gaara expected the tags to come flying right after. He leaped back enough to clear the explosion.

XxX

Gaara’s guard was a problem, it was not as if Naruto was not getting any hits in it was just that they had little to no effect. Fighting Gaara was different, his reactions were different than what one would expect. If he had time he would wear him down, Naruto believed that but he did not have time.

Every time he tried to take a breath Gaara immediately went after Sasuke and that was warning enough for Naruto. It was a taunt and he knew that. So he had to take Gaara head on no matter the consequences.

It was hard to believe such a reckless plan could come from someone like Gaara but Naruto knew the guy had more than a few screws loose. Still it was hard to hold onto sympathy while facing someone like Gaara and hearing him talk.

“I fight only for my sake!” Gaara roared and Naruto gritted his teeth at how angry that made him. It was foolish but he punched Gaara in the face… except it was not Gaara’s face that he saw… that was the problem he had to stop thinking about the past.

XxX

It had been a foolish move and by the time Naruto had raised his fist for another punch Gaara had hit him with a barrage of sand assaults. He hit a branch hard and only reflexes kept him from hitting the ground… that and Sasuke’s hand but it was mostly his reflexes, when he got another look at Gaara Naruto was confused to what he was looking at.

Yellow with cracks… a huge tail Gaara looked more beast-like, Naruto had no idea what he was looking at but he knew it was bad news for himself and Sasuke. He had practiced enough with Ero-sennin and he knew his limits on chakra… it might be foolish but honestly it was looking like the best option.

Still that monster had such sad eyes. It was hard not to recognize them and to hear Haku’s
lamenting their shared pain.

Because without Haku, without Iruka-sensei, without everything he had gone through he could have ended up like that. Relying on the beast inside him and convinced that living for himself was the only way. Being accepted, loved it was such a blessing, that loneliness was hell, an unnatural pain. It was not that hard to think about what he would have become if he had remained alone, even though he had lost so many he had learned enough that he could keep going, that he would not give up.

Gaara was like him but the worst outcome, someone like Gaara who had suffered and lost, could Naruto even help him? Could he even change him? But then again hadn’t all of the group started that way? And Zabuza who he had likened to an unmoving mountain, hadn’t he changed in the end too? It might not happen right away.

“What are you doing?” Sasuke hissed as Naruto bit his thumb hard.

It might take a few tries and quite a few failures but he could bring people around, he might just have to soften their heads a little.

XxX

What he felt was a combination of fear and awe, it was why he had messed up too. Naruto gaped at the impressive figure that Gaara made. The poor clearing… actually poor all of them because Gaara’s form had gotten rather scary in a few moments.

But that was okay, Naruto had a few things that could match something that size, or at least he hoped. The seals came easily and he could be excused for the silent prayer he did when he slapped his hand down.

He knew a little about himself and he tried his best to keep away from the fox inside him so there was plenty about Jinchuurikis that he did not know, he had memories from the incident with Haku but he wondered if what he saw with Gaara… if he was capable of that.

The beast that Gaara lived with… it looked like that? That was the creature Gaara looked behind him and saw? Naruto had no more time to think on that because the summon worked and he was shot up high by the Toad boss’s arrival.

XxX

He had a streak of recklessness in him he knew that, a deep pit of desperation too and it had only gotten worse by his return to Konoha but he could honestly say that his determination had doubled by being attacked by Gaara.

It was silly but he really hated to lose, it was childish, it had gotten him laughed at more than once by the others. Raiya would hide her face and laugh. Tanto laughed in his face and Zabuza would tease him. But Naruto hated to lose, he hated it and there would some people he would not accept a loss from no matter what happened to him.

Kaya called it a bad habit, Kasumi had been proud about it but the fact remained that it was still there. The costs of losing were too great, Sasuke was poisoned and he was injured. Sakura had remained behind, Kakashi-sensei was fighting all those people with the Jounins as backup but he was still outnumbered, honestly he couldn’t afford to lose.

“I don’t let my comrades die.” Kakashi-sensei’s voice and the way he had looked so happy saying such a thing, that only upped his determination further. Even if he died, he would not lose to Gaara
and he would not let Gaara kill him either.

Gaara was like him, he had the same eyes but he didn’t know strength, his strength wasn’t real. His solitude didn’t give him any strength, he didn’t care for anyone and anything but himself.

“You and Zabuza-san,” A soft touch to his cheek as Haku smiled at him. “You are my important people.” Soft lips to his forehead even as Haku wrapped his arms around him, erasing the feelings of the cold. “Because I want to protect both of you, I’ll get even stronger so you have to get strong too Naruto-kun so we can protect each other and Zabuza-san.”

The need to protect, that was what made you strong, having something allowed you to really push yourself.

“You ready kid?” A stream of smoke floated up from the Toad boss’s pipe. “Like we practiced right?”

“Exactly.”

“Hold tight now boy, you’ll be thrown off if you don’t” Naruto’s grip on the Toad’s jacket spared him from being blown off as the Toad charged forward, while the Toad boss slashed with his sword Naruto concentrated and ignored the fox watching him as he gathered chakra. “Now boy!”

He had seen it down a few times but replicating it was hard even with all the practice, still it went perfectly. The oil, the explosion tag and his gust of wind. He sagged forward and felt a twinge inside him. When the smoke cleared he frowned at what he could make out.

“Did we put him asleep?” Naruto asked before the creature burst into laughter that was definitely not Gaara’s.

XxX

“He’s the medium, those possessed by Shukaku can’t get a decent night of sleep, look at the bags under his eyes.” The Toad boss said grimly. “It’s because of the terror, if they sleep then their personality is eaten away bit by bit by Shukaku. Until they disappear, the lack of sleep causes them to become unstable. With the medium awake Shukaku’s powers are suppressed… with him asleep…”

“We’re in for more shit huh.”

“Exactly. Now we’re going to wake that kid up then it is up to you kid.”

“Sure thing. And remember how last time I couldn’t think of a good image? I came up with a decent one, so you’ll be able to hold him while I wake Gaara up.” Naruto grinned. He made the seal and tried to push down his amusement at what he was about to do.

XxX

He had not imagined it; he had managed to shut up the fox for a good minute. He could have picked so many things, he had seen a Tiger up close before, a bear as well but he had used an image that he was far more intimate with.

He knew what the claws were supposed to feel like, he knew how it looked and he knew how the body moved. One reason why he had used it was because he did not want to run from it, he was the jinchuuriki to the Kyuubi and he did not want to run away from that simple fact.
There was a lot he was unable to let go of, plenty of things he had done that he was ashamed of but he never tried to forget what he learned. He knew if he tried to brush the bad things away they would be used against him, he had learned how to stand against the Kyuubi simply because he recalled the consequences of being foolish.

Gaara had felt that because he was a Jinchuuriki that he had the monopoly on pain, he was so lost in his anger and pain and Naruto found it hard not to sympathize. Another reason he had picked that form to grapple in. Jinchuuriki to Jinchuuriki, things were easier to accept when they came from one of your own.

From people who understood you or at least your pain, your personal hell. Naruto never wanted to feel that loneliness ever again. That bitter cold that was almost worse than blizzards. They all needed someone, something.

Gaara currently did not have it, he was not even looking for it and that was so very wrong. It was too dangerous to let him go as he was currently. Not just for the people Naruto wanted to protect, it was for Gaara himself. The Toad Boss had said it himself, the beast inside was waiting for the chance to consume him from the inside.

Naruto knew of that fear and that temptation. He knew how sweet the call could be but it was never worth it. You always lost too much, having your existence denied already took so much of yourself, why sell more of your soul? Even for anger, even for revenge. There was more to life and there was always the chance to start over no matter what you had done.

“Grab him and wake him up!” The Toad boss commanded and Naruto leapt off the fox’s head. The illusion held even as he transferred to the huge Tanuki. Gaara was still slumped over and his charge up the Beast’s nose did not go unnoticed. Sand grabbed at his feet but Naruto used his kunai to keep going, he would sacrifice his shoes, his skin if he had to.

He gritted his teeth at how limp and peaceful Gaara looked. Sand stopped his hand from punching Gaara but Naruto just swore before he head-butted him. “Fuck.” He grunted as he himself got stunned for a second, sand cracked and he watched blood pour down Gaara’s face as he felt a sting on his face, a simple notice that he had damaged his own head.

But so worth it, the grip on his hand loosened and he watched Gaara’s eyes open slowly even as their footing started to dissolve.

“You.” Gaara snarled before the sand exploded.

Naruto was unable to make it back to the Toad Boss and instead allowed himself to fall onto the branches of the nearest tree. He used another branch to steady his footing as he glared at Gaara on an opposite tree. “Me.” He replied. “I’m going to stop you here.”

“It will be worth killing you.” Gaara hissed and Naruto’s grip tightened on the tree branch. He took stock of the energy that he had left, he could still fight but between what he and the Toad Boss had done, grappling and jutsus, the rearrangement of the forest that he hoped would be blamed on the Suna invasion, he was coming close to the end of it all.

The only good part was that Gaara had to be feeling the exact same way.

The fight with Sasuke, the chase and the fact that between the two of them they had pushed Gaara into using what was obviously some last resorts. Naruto actually felt confident about his chances.

“I’m not going to lose to someone like you.” Naruto answered as he kept his eye on Gaara. The air
was tense as they both waited, the two of them calculating the other’s move then the Toad Boss disappeared, the summoning contract dispelled and Naruto leapt forward to meet Gaara’s rush.

XxX

Blood dripped right above his right eye as he dodged the first kick, it was a sign of Gaara’s fatigue that instead of Sand coming to block him Gaara fought on his own. His dive to the left to avoid the kick placed him at a low point to dodge Gaara’s fist before Naruto head-butted Gaara in the stomach.

It hurt, it pained both of them. Gaara grunted as they fell and Naruto’s head throbbed again even as he thought about his footing.

But Gaara was not weak, he had enough strength to not fall onto the ground below and Naruto had enough sense to flip himself onto a branch. They eyed each other again. Blood covered both their faces but Naruto ignored the pain and the sensation as he watched Gaara’s every movement. It was the small shifting and the slow exhale Gaara did that warned him just before the tags flew in his direction.

He had no real way to know what they were but he knew it was best to assume the worst possible situations. He used a bit of chakra to launch himself upwards, he gritted his teeth when the tags he had jumped to avoid had not exploded.

Gaara’s immediate chase told him that he had been right not to duck or even jump down. Instead as he raced up the tree trunk in a spiral, Gaara behind him in the corner of his eye Naruto prepared himself. He waited until he had gained enough speed before he released his chakra for a split second.

He knew from trial and error the tree walking was a complicated technique. Still there were many ways of using it for your advantage. Ways to get the jump on an opponent just by using your speed.

Still Gaara was no fool, the moment Naruto started to fall, Gaara had slowed as well, his body turned just enough so that when Naruto landed on the trunk yet again and started his race back up that Gaara had already settled in a stance.

Naruto’s first punch he dodged, his first kick from his left foot as well and his counter forced Naruto to bend backwards. Naruto went with it his body contorting enough and his legs curled close to his body before he kicked again with both feet.

His right foot caught Gaara’s wrist as his hands braced him on the trunk while his left foot grazed Gaara’s cheek. Blood dripped and Naruto watched Gaara’s gaze sharpen as he glared at Naruto.

No one had ever said it would be easy. Naruto carefully flipped back over as Gaara lowered his guard slowly, the blood from Gaara’s cheek bled freely but Naruto knew it was nothing serious. They eyed each other once again.

This time Naruto made the first move, tree shook when they clashed. Instead of dodging him, Gaara blocked his first punch, trapped his knee between his legs with the next move and his second punch went wild. Naruto did not even have a moment to be stunned or impressed before a sharp painful feeling began in his neck and he shrieked before he could help himself.

Honestly, he did not mind dirty tactics. He just never thought Gaara would have ever resorted to biting.
So they were even sort of, Naruto had managed to graze Gaara’s cheek and Gaara had taken a bite out of him. Not expected and maybe Naruto’s fault because he had underestimated Gaara’s need and desperation but they were still clear headed.

Naruto resisted the urge to press his fingers to the side of his neck and instead kept his body relaxed as he waited for the next attack. Gaara’s face was flushed and he had not missed the slower movements. Gaara was close to exhaustion, his focus more on making each movement count. There would be no waste of chakra, that was the only thing Naruto could depend on.

Unless Gaara had something up his sleeve and considering how the bite had taken him off guard he most likely had.

“We’re the same you know.” Naruto scoffed, Gaara’s expression remained the same but he continued on anyway. “But I have things you don’t, it is why I can’t give up!”

Hard headed, thick skulled idiot, Naruto would not be surprised if Gaara’s entire body was made of hardened sand. His hand hurt, so did his fists but he felt great satisfaction at Gaara’s face as he spun away and fell.

But he was tired too. Too tired to even break his fall properly and that was how he knew he had really reached his limits, but for certain Gaara had too. It was the end, finally. Finally, it could be over, well not exactly.

His stomach, his ribs and definitely his legs. He was not even going to think about the pain he was in and the possible damage. He could not be careless, he had to keep going, just a bit more and make damn certain that Gaara was down.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Gaara demanded and Naruto could only muster enough energy to laugh weakly in response as he dragged himself forward. He had certainly heard that tone and those words before. They had all been a bit crazy when one thought about it but still...

“Being totally alone in this world, there’s no other feeling is there?” Naruto croaked and he watched the shock and horror cross Gaara’s bloodied face as he lay on his back and stared at Naruto.

“Stay away!” Gaara’s voice shook and Naruto felt his eyes close slightly as he laughed again as he continued his slow pace as he wiggled and crawled.

“Being alone, living for yourself, it is a deep deep hell that I wouldn’t wish for anybody but so many people know that hell.” Naruto continued. “But I don’t live that way, not anymore, I have friends, people who care about me people who loved me.”

“If you trust them you’re a fool! They will betray you, you can never ever let your guard down.” Gaara’s eyes were wild but not with bloodlust. “No matter what you do they will always betray you.”

“Well you won’t hear me say that people won’t betray you.” Naruto snorted, he paused and lay his head in the dirt as he gathered his thoughts. He took a deep breath and watched as the sand and dirt wafted around before he looked back up to Gaara. “You can love people with all your heart and
give them everything. They can save you from that hell of being alone, unwanted, unacknowledged and then they can betray you, leave you.”

Gaara stared at him and Naruto felt a wave of relief that instead of telling him to stay away, Gaara just watched him.

“But one person doesn’t represent everyone. Sometimes to deal with the pain, people would become something useful just to escape the hell. That dark loneliness where only hate exists, special people take you from that hell but the memories you create with those people.” Naruto clenched his hand in the dirt before he crawled forward again. “Those memories help you make new bonds, and even more new bonds and your existence continues in those people and they give you trust, love and acknowledgement and it is so damn worth it.” Naruto swallowed and winced at the feeling of his dry throat. “People will care for you and betray you, lie to you anyway but what can you do but hold onto the good memories and move on?”

“We’re going to be together forever okay?” Soft laughter as he huddled among them. Alya’s grey eyes and her soft smile before she dragged him forward. His face was buried in her hip and the thin dress scratched his nose. “Don’t worry about it.” The howl from the winds dampened her words. “We all have the same goal so we will share the same fate, the same future forever.”

“So don’t worry about that okay? Only embrace it when the alternative is something very very bad.” Haku patted his shoulder and Naruto fought Alya’s grip in order to look behind him. Haku faced west where they heard the faint call of dogs. Ice glittered in the nearby trees as their group scanned the area for the others. “The end by our own terms only and only when Zabuza-san says…”

“So don’t worry, we won’t leave you behind.” Alya pressed his face into her dress once again as the sound of hounds grew louder. Naruto blinked and stared at the grey material of her dress as the sound grew louder and louder.

“People lie.” Naruto repeated softly, “But you hold onto the good memories and keep trying until you find people worthy of you and then you let people know that you are a person too. You don’t go back into that hell. You just don’t.”

He felt so guilty, disgusted with himself but there was nothing he could do. He had thought he would have been thrown away and Haku’s gentle hands made it worse. His hands had trembled when he had helped Haku change the bandages and wash his hair.

“I think I’ll let it grow out some more.” Haku smiled and Naruto looked away. He did not understand what was so bad about Haku. Haku’s ability was beautiful, Naruto on the other hand he had almost killed them all. The only thing the Kyuubi inside him could give was hate and destruction. He liked Haku, but when he had reached out he wanted to hurt Haku and destroy everything. It was safer to ignore.

“I can feel what you feel.” Naruto admitted. “So much, it hurts.” His last words shook as a few tears escaped. “It’s so painful.” He admitted as he struggled forward. “It’s so painful.” He whispered. “Alone, trying and failing and trying again. It isn’t easy and it is always behind you. The beast inside you watching… that cold hell waiting no matter how much you put between the two of you, you can’t forget.”

He shook his head lightly to clear his vision from the tears. His forehead still stung, his stomach was hard to ignore with every drag against the ground he made and the feeling in his leg worried him but Naruto knew it was not wise to stop. He knew that he could not afford to.
“Being alone, unwanted, I’ve seen plenty of things but there is nothing like that. You hate everything, everyone and even yourself. Fighting for yourself, continuing to be alone, there is a difference between living and existing. You are fooling yourself if you think you’re living as you are now. To turn your back on everything means that even yourself loses value and…” Naruto managed to snort and ignored the pain from his side. “Not like we were valued that much anyway.”

But the thing about living was that things changed, for good, for worse. Nothing remained the same. Living was so much sweeter, so much brighter than existing. You needed something to look forward and smile about, even if the smiles were fake in the beginning, eventually a smile could become real and that day was always the brightest.

“Aren’t you cute? Naruto-kun it is on the house okay? And you can have another bowl! I’ll put extra toppings too so tell me what you want.” Her voice echoed in his head and Naruto huffed in embarrassment. That he could still remember that time… that he could still smell the ramen and the way the owner and his daughter had smiled at him and the feeling on his face when he had smiled back. It really had been a long time since then. He doubted they even remembered.

“You’re not some relic for them to get rid of. There is more to life than village, plenty of people out there will smile, take your hand. Expect nothing from you except some manners and they give you so much in return. People matter.” Naruto said hoarsely, “And we’re people too. Sometimes we get left behind but we have to stand back up and endure that.” He blinked away his tears and struggled forward again. “Because people die, people betray you people get lost but you can’t give up you should never give up, friends can save you and you can make your own family if the ones you were given suck.” His breath shuddered when he finished but he continued forward.

They were gone now, Zabuza’s troupe but he remained. He had his memories, the time he spent with them. The lessons he had learned the things he had decided for himself, he had lived through that and he would remember and keep it close to him because it would make him stronger. They were his family; they were no longer all he had but they were part of him.

“I’m never going back to that hell.” Naruto whispered. “If you try to take the people I care about, if you try to take my future from me I will kill you.” He promised. “I’ve lost everything once you try to take it from me, I will rip you apart.”

XxX

He continued to drag himself forward even though Gaara had fallen silent after his words. Gaara stared at the sky and Naruto hoped that something he said had reached him but he could not take the chance, even if he had to bite Gaara to unconsciousness he would manage somehow. He would drag his body over to him regardless of his own injuries.

Until he heard for certain that it was over it wasn’t he couldn’t afford to pause, to have mercy before things were absolutely certain. Gaara was like him, it was not over until it was said and shown so, because he respected Gaara because they were so alike and the fact that-

Well, he would crawl forward and even if he had to bite Gaara’s arm and hold him down and away from the village he would do it. He had to.

“God stop already.” Naruto jolted in surprise and his head spun as he tried to look around him, he had been so focused he had heard nothing, he still couldn’t sense anything. All his awareness was towards Gaara. “Enough already he’s down Naruto.” The soft touch of a hand on his back along with Sasuke’s voice next to him told him that Sasuke was kneeling next to him.
But Naruto was still intensely aware of Gaara and he saw his vision blur as he trembled. The pain was sharper in his awareness but his body remained tense. “Sasuke.” He breathed. “You—“

“I’m fine you took him down, you don’t have to finish it on your own you know, you can take a rest now.” Naruto knew Sasuke’s words were meant to reassure him, was about teammates but the wave of nostalgia made him close his eyes sharply because he could remember so vividly.

Raiya’s grin as she waved the smaller and weaker of the group forward to deal with the bandits she had mostly beaten up claiming it was for practice. The way Ryu would spring forward if one the others waivered. He wasn’t alone that was what Sasuke had meant and he really felt it. His eyes itched and next breath was hitched as he held back his sob. Instead he lowered his head into the dirt and allowed his body to relax.

“It’s nice.” Naruto said softly as he raised his head again he could feel the dirt on his forehead. “Being at someone’s back and having them at yours. Being in someone’s corner and knowing they’ll be in yours. Having a friend, having someone acknowledge you, there is no other feeling in the world.” Gaara turned his head slightly and Naruto cracked a smile when their eyes met.

XxX

With the other two by Gaara’s side Sasuke was cautious. The girl looked worse for wear and was missing her fan. She didn’t look victorious and neither did the puppet user so he had to go with the assumption they had recovered enough to escape. That was scary in itself.

He was crouched in front of Naruto with his leg throbbing as he eyed the two behind Gaara. Gaara was no threat. Whatever Naruto was, whatever he had done it had taken them both out, how they were still conscious after expelling so much chakra and fighting for so long and for so hard he didn’t know but he did not want to risk chakra exhaustion for Naruto.

Gaara on the other hand. His hair at the back of his neck had not settled yet, falling to chakra exhaustion might not be a bad thing for Gaara.

“Enough.” It was surprising how quiet Gaara’s voice was. “You… what’s his name?” Sasuke glanced behind him to where Naruto had rested his head again obviously at the end of his ropes.

“Naruto.” Sasuke answered. “His name is Uzumaki Naruto, he’s this village’s most reckless shinobi.” And kind hearted, Sasuke had overheard most of the things Naruto had said, he couldn’t understand it but he had heard the pain in Naruto’s words. “I don’t know if he said it or not but…” Sasuke glanced back to Naruto’s form. “He’s wants to become Hokage. The Hokage of this village you tried destroying.”

“Uzumaki Naruto.” Gaara stared at the sky as his companions eyed him almost nervously. Sasuke did not blame them in the slightest. “Hokage… he’s too honest.”

The acceptance in Gaara’s voice almost made Sasuke relax. “Really? He’s too of something that’s for certain.”

“Kankuro… Temari.” Gaara stared up at the sky as he slowly spoke. “Let’s go.”

“Are you certain?” Sasuke asked.

“Tell him, we’ll meet again.” Kankuro slowly picked up Gaara and Sasuke frowned as he looked at Gaara’s expression. Not fully blank. The wind picked up in speed and he shook his head to avoid the sand from blowing into his face, instead it pooled on the leaves on the ground. “We’re going.” Sasuke watched as they set off without a look behind them. They were bruised, battered and
honestly he had other things to worry about.

He turned back to Naruto and winced as his leg throbbed again. “Both of you should get to the hospital.” The dog said from above him and he did not bother to answer. Instead he scooped his arms under Naruto and ignored his leg as he got Naruto to stand and lean against his good side.

“Huh?” Naruto mumbled as he swayed. Sasuke said nothing as he got a good hold of Naruto’s waist and launched them both up into the trees. The dog would follow. He had plenty of questions and concerns but his main one was to get them to help as soon as possible. Their departure from the new clearing was followed by strong wind and sand blowing into the surrounding trees.
Quick PSA, look darlings I really didn't want to have to talk about this okay? Like I have something to gush about in a sec(this chapter n my feels for it) but I am pretty sure I have to say this okay?

I am very very very VERY aware of all my current projects okay? Look there are many things I'm doing and many things I have to do and I haven't forgotten any of them okay? Not one of them. I'm aware I haven't updated Damsels since like July and I am working on that just not as much as I can or want to. I'm enjoying writing this fic now. But I'm only one person one human being like everybody else, I work I have a personal life. I have other things I enjoy too you know? But I enjoy writing this and I know others enjoy reading it so I do my best to make sure that I can keep writing this.

I organize or at least try to organize myself so that in case something happens I won't fall behind and frustrate myself because I've fallen behind my personal goals. Look I stopped writing new chapters for this fic in June okay? I only started back properly in September... late September darlings. But I was still updating right? Even though it wasn't that often. That's because I had a 10 chapter headstart that I worked hard as hell to get, frustrating and tiring myself to get there.

I have mentioned before that writing just this alone would drive me mad. Let me repeat that, I can't nor do I want to write and post just one thing especially this. Working on different projects and series keeps me happy and active. There are sooo many things I want to do you know? Some things I wanna write but they won't fit here or they don't belong here or I get inspired or I want to take some time off and share some love.

Because I don't want to fall behind when i start a new project(which I'm always doing) I try not to share it until I have a good headstart or I have it completed. (61 days I finished around April-May this year big projects I'm trying to plan in advance so all I have to do when the time comes is post them) I use my time and inspiration to the best of my ability. The free time I have I try to write another chapter for this fic as well as work on my other stuff. I even try to write beyond the chapter for this fic so that I can get back a headstart so that I won't fall behind if I get busy or get sick or simply don't feel up to writing. Darlings hear me out okay? I'm really busy and really trying here. I know how the fic goes, I know how it ends I'm trying to write it in a way I can feel happy about to share.

So what I've gone all around the bush to say is... look I know the status of my stuff and it frustrates me okay? There are series and fics I pushed back simply because I know I can't give them the attention they deserve atm. Things I have in reserve working on when I have time and inspiration for them as well as other things that capture my interest because this is supposed to be fun for me.

So darlings I'm begging you to restrain yourselves please. Do not, please do not message me about updates or act like i've forgotten fics okay? I have not, this fic has gone back to weekly updates for the time being. Sunday updates for this fic even if I update at like 9pm my time. Still Sunday darlings.
I know some of you may be upset about me saying, Don't confuse me about updating/continuing but listen, you are upsetting/distressing me here. It doesn't feel good at all okay? I get frustrated at myself and that is no mood for me to write. Sorry but really this HAD to be said, I was beginning to feel a little miserable and I don't want to lose my love and enthusiasm for this fic. I love hearing you darlings enjoying it, just don't talk about updates because I'm aware and making plans so I'll be able to finish stuff. I know this is a long complaint but this is the best way I can put it without sounding mean. Just no, lol. Seeing messages and comments about updates takes my mood to an all time low. So this is me telling you no matter what it looks like no I have not forgotten about my multichapter works. Hope that clears up things now.

Now that I've talked about that I can finally talk about this chapter. Been planning this for ages and writing this got me so excited because i'm a sucker for character development you know? This isn't just a KakaNaru story(yes it will get there eventually) This is a Team 7 story as well and I love love LOVE writing team dynamics. Honestly I've been waiting to get to these chapters for a while now lol. I can only hope you will enjoy this chapter as much as I did, see you next week!

He had kept his injuries to the minimum but he had still gotten injured. The enemies they had been facing had dwindled. Hell it was more than that, it was finished they had successfully thwarted the invasion. Those they faced currently were the stragglers nothing else.

It did not make it any easier to think about. He had a few shallow wounds, he had not used his Sharingan but it had ended up being necessary. Yet even with his mind of the current fight he could help worrying. His team were out there on a dangerous near suicidal mission.

He had known the Chuunin exams wouldn’t end well but he had not expected it to get that bad. Orochimaru was still on the scene or at least Kakashi thought so, the area by the roof had gotten loud and there were simply too many seals up to get a good look, but he just couldn’t spare a moment to get a good look.

Fighting with worry in his gut for his team and his Hokage. Not a good mind set, he was lucky he hadn’t lost a limb yet or gotten deeper cuts but then again he had promised, hadn’t he? Kakashi doubted Gai or anyone else who had overheard knew what that tensed question really meant.

He doubted they had heard the real meaning behind it. They would have to know Naruto to get the boy’s meaning. Not that Kakashi knew the boy that well, he was still mystified. Still struggling but he was trying and that was what mattered.

He doubted many would thank Naruto for his deeds today. He doubted many shinobi who knew some of the boy’s circumstances would understand and be grateful for the decision Naruto had taken but it was okay, they would understand soon he could feel it.

But that did not stop the worry. His gaze darted around the arena counting the few enemies left, he judged it few enough for him to help down on the ground. he leapt over a fighting pair of Jounins and while overhead stabbed his kunai into the enemy. He heard the brief thanks but his focus was on the two still on the grounds.

One had infiltrated Konoha and ANBU ranks. The other was Suna. Both were a threat and both had
to be disposed of so the fighting would end. Either they would retreat or they would die. He had enough chakra left that if he had to he could pull off two lightning blades. However, he had something just as good.

“Glad you can join us.” Genma grinned before he clacked the senbon against his teeth. “This was starting to get a little bit hairy.”

“I highly doubt that.” Gai proclaimed. “You’re too filled with coolness and youth Genma!”

“Maa well hairy or not it is looking a little better.” Kakashi mused. “It’s a party now we were just a little late but instead of you staving them off Genma we can all play or gang up.” He finished in a warning. He caught the tears in Genma’s clothes before he reassessed the battle field once more. They would go down or retreat, the fight was done even if they did not know it.

XxX

“Temari, Kankuro.” Kankuro almost dropped Gaara at the boy’s soft voice. He exchanged a glance with Temari who looked as spooked out as he felt before he responded.

“Yeah Gaara?”

“Sorry.” Gaara whispered. Kankuro trembled and almost dropped Gaara for real. In all their years together he had never-

Hell, as it was he wasn’t too sure who it was he carried in his arms. The Gaara he knew was violent and cold. This boy in his arms that apologized, he simply just didn’t know what to do. He met Temari’s gaze before he picked up the pace. The sooner they were away from Konoha the better for them.

XxX

The spy had retreated but not before he had injured the lot of them. Kakashi had to admire the man’s talents even when he wanted to string him up slowly, but Suna had retreated, it was finished. Finally. Orochimaru had fled with a small team and while Kakashi gave the ANBU that pursued props he knew it was a waste of time.

Orochimaru was a Sannin, that was a league different from ordinary Jounins and even ANBU. Sannins were whispered about the same way people did Kage and that should never be taken lightly.

“Check the dead, count the bodies and start organizing them.” Gai instructed. Kakashi wanted to say something about the cuts freely bleeding from the man’s shoulder but instead turned his attention to the stands and those still asleep as well as those that were undoubtedly dead.

“Good plan.” Kakashi spoke up. “We’re going to need some teams, those who need the medic nins will in the meantime check the stands and begin removing the bodies or restraining those alive but in need of medical treatment. We have to be mindful of the political situation so don’t wake the Lords.” Kakashi winced. “Konoha can’t afford that so let them sleep for now.”

“People who can leave start getting your asses out for clean-up, if you run into any other of the teams give them a rundown of our situation but the forest side should be your concern. Any of you in the Hokage platoon with enough energy will accompany me.” Genma met Kakashi’s gaze before he looked up at the quiet roof. It looked ridiculous, trees had grown, water was dripping down the roof from what Kakashi knew had to come from a strong water jutsu but there was only silence.
But Orochimaru had fled, that was the only comfort Kakashi could take from that. But everywhere was silent, even the direction his team had fled. He turned to that direction and took a deep breath to steady himself before he nodded at Genma. “Let’s clean up here.” He instructed. “Scatter!”

XxX

The scene after a war was never pretty it never left one feeling good but there was a different feeling in his throat when he led the team to the forest. Hell, Itachi aside, Shisui liked the current genins. He did not know them that well he knew them from small glimpses, most of it from his watch on Naruto but he did not wish them dead.

He might sound like an old man for thinking it but he saw the chance for change in them. That was so very important.

So, when he looked over the state of the forest he had to fight very hard not to wince, not to put back on his mask and pretend that all was fine. He had a job to do. They had gotten word of Suna’s Jinchuuriki fleeing but not before causing a disturbance.

Just the words alone chilled him. To think that Suna’s Jinchuuriki had been so close the entire time and not only so close, so unstable. The words in the report had chilled him to the bone. Naruto’s cute little warning to Kakashi made more sense.

Konoha had a Jinchuuriki too but to pit Naruto against that? Pit Sasuke against that? Only the gods knew what really happened to Naruto during his disappearance but Shisui had read reports of what Suna liked to do to its Jinchuurikis. Their Bijuu might have one tail but the Jinchuuriki had always been someone not to mess with.

No one wanted to face a Jinchuuriki in battle, sometimes not even a young one. A young unstable one? Everything made far more sense and Konoha had been luckier than most of them had been aware of. They had skimmed by barely.

There was too much silence. No signs of anyone and no sounds of battle. Usually one would fear the worst but Shisui knew better. There would be something he was sure of it, there would have to be some sign of a loss. He knew Sasuke even though the boy was as prickly as they came now. Sasuke wouldn’t roll over just like that and with his friends as backup there would be a bigger sign. There had to be something. Something beyond the small marks in the trees something like-

Good god.

Shisui stopped immediately, he was aware of his team stopping behind him and he was grateful that Itachi had taken another team elsewhere.

He knew this forest, he had run, played, had missions here. He knew this place. This was Konoha this was home. He knew what should be there, the paths through the forests, the trees with the best grip. There should not be a crater there. The lack of trees… the amount of sand on the ground.

It made him think back to the strange sounds that had carried to them before the operation and he winced even as he looked around. He could make a guess of what could have made some of the damage. A small guess but a guess none the less.

The sand, the debris, the Jinchuuriki had used his full power but yet… his eyes darted around the clearing searching desperately for a sign. The black cloth on a branch a small distance away made him relax.
He darted to it, seized the torn cloth in his hands and smiled at the small amount of blood around it and around the branch.

“Sir.” One of his team stood on the ground where sand covered the area, some leaves had fallen onto the sand. “Signs of retreat.”

Shisui eyed the cloth before he rubbed it between his fingers. The genins mission had been to retrieve Sasuke but judging by the amount of destruction had they managed to complete both missions? Sasuke had rushed off to apprehend. The others had gone to back him up and rescue him. Signs of a fight but no death had they found another way? During such a war. Their first he was certain of it, was such a thing even possible?

Shisui’s thoughts went to Naruto the unknown variable and he snorted. He was fairly certain the boy had seen at least a version of war. So the question nagged, what had he done? Did he have enough influence to turn the others away from whatever decision they had made? There was only one way to find out.

“Any retreat paths back to Konoha?” Shisui asked.

“One, two people, one being carried.” The answer came back to him. Shisui nodded.

“We’ll follow that one, be on your guard there may still be some factions still fighting.”

XxX

“God there’s a limit you know.” Naruto moved his head at the sound of the voice. His eyes strained even as he became aware that Sasuke was slowly letting him go. “Look at the two of you, take at look at your face! What even happened?”

“We’ll need him to get checked out for the poison in his system.” Kakashi’s dog said. “Shisui the brats are fine but only for now.”

“You almost made it back too.” The man said, Naruto shifted so that the man’s dark curly hair came into view, at his shift the man turned to look at him. They had a moment where they blinked at each other before the man smiled. “You’re awake.”

“Sakura…” Naruto’s lips were dry and they hurt but the hurt was nothing compared to the rest of him. “Shikamaru, they split off to be a distraction. Shino joined too.”

“That boy.” Shisui muttered before he motioned to an ANBU nearby. “Let them know we found two of the retrieval team but let Asuma’s team know they have to find two others. I’m fairly certain the boy’s father was with Asuma so he might have already used his bugs to track him down.”

“Is it over?” Sasuke asked softly. Shisui’s face changed at Sasuke’s question, from the man giving orders to something kinder and reassuring.

“We won.” Shisui said softly. “It’s just cleaning up and taking accounts at this point. A lot happened but the civilians are safe.”

“You guys knew.” Sasuke muttered. “That they were going to be a fight.”

“Well… we can talk about that another time.” Shisui easily lifted Sasuke into his arms and at that moment Naruto felt himself being lifted. He shifted to look up at who held him but all his mind registered was the mask of a Monkey. It was too much effort to focus, the relief of everything being over helped him slide into unconsciousness.
Kakashi did not have to see Raidou’s face to know that it was bad. The medic nins had immediately been called and rushed onto the roof and the fact that Raidou had reappeared almost immediately with stiff shoulders told him it was bad.

He felt his own shoulders slump for a moment before Genma took the lead. With large steps Genma crossed to Raidou’s side. Kakashi lingered behind in time to watch Genma’s shoulders relax. A few more moments passed where Kakashi lingered behind.

“The Sandaime’s alive.” Genma confessed when he crossed back to Kakashi. “Not in good condition.” He glanced at the trees that covered the roof, the water still trickling and shook his head. “He’s alive but it’s not good, he’s lucky to be alive I think.”

“Sandaime-sama always wanted to retire.” Kakashi sighed. “It’s why he so easily and happily gave everything over to the Yondaime. To have to take back up the mantle… he was already strained.”

“I know. We all know that.” Genma bit harshly on the senbon in his mouth before he sighed and shifted it instead. “If we had been able to get inside of the seal he wouldn’t have had to push himself that hard and Orochimaru escaped.”

“For now.” Kakashi warned. “Only for now.”

Genma gave him a blank look and Kakashi shook his head. “He didn’t win now but he made a point. He still got a few victories. We stopped the invasion but I doubt that is all that he had planned. Suna and Orochimaru… if we had not caught on then it would have been far worse.”

“Our losses would have been greater.” Kakashi admitted. He groaned before he settled his hands on his hips. His gaze swept the area before it shifted to the forest where smoke still rose. There was silence and he could not help but wonder where his team was. If they were okay.

“I’m going to head out to the forest for clean up.” Genma muttered. “Raidou’s staying until the Hokage is moved to the hospital. The council will be around for the rest of the clean-up.” They both exchanged looks of distaste before Genma flickered away.

Just the thought of the council put him in a bad mood. Suna had retreated and Kakashi knew how things would play out. In order to save face and prevent a war, unconditional surrender would have to be given. Orochimaru had retreated there was no knowing if his deal with Suna was still on or not.

However, there was no way that Suna would be able to defend itself against Konoha if they were to retaliate for the betrayal. Suna had lost plenty in the defense and the counter attack. There was no ignoring that simple fact.

There had been plenty of Sound for certain but Konoha had taken down plenty of Suna shinobi and their village had not been a village with countless shinobi in the first place. The loss alone from their betrayal would make them take a step back or so Kakashi hoped. It would be for the best if the Sandaime dealt with the betrayal.

If the council were the ones to do it, it certainly would not go well for Suna at all. While the Sandaime was always called stern but kind, the council members were cold and merciless. All of them, former students of the Nidaime yet only one had the heart for Konoha, Kakashi guessed that was why the Sandaime stayed Hokage.

Xxx
He was tired and he had six tags left. He was not in the mood to die but he was done with the entire deal. He knew that Sakura and Naruto had been bought more than enough time. He had promised them five, yet like an idiot he had strained for twenty.

There was a limit for stupidity he knew that but he had no idea what had pushed him to try so damn hard. After he had trapped the first three he could have run. He should have fled; it was one of the better plans.

But the way Naruto was. Shikamaru just could not find it in himself to run away. Hell, whatever luck he had been coasting on it had to be gone by now. What the hell had he been thinking.

He had not wanted to get involved in it. He had smelt the trouble coming yet he had gotten caught up in it anyway. That was just stupid, wasn’t he supposed to be a genius? His hand slowly went for the remaining tags as he took in his surroundings. He should run, he still could. He would get some injuries but fleeing was the best choice.

But… he just couldn’t. he was blocking the way to the others. Of course, he knew some of the group would have gone around him but it did not change the fact that he was guarding the way. Why wouldn’t his feet move?

He glared at the closest Suna nin before his hand went for his kunai. Asuma always talked about staying and fighting, about a need and he had always rolled his eyes at it. He knew what he was capable of, he knew his strengths. Why stay in a bad situation?

Yet he simply would not move. He glared at the shinobi’s ahead before a strong wind froze them all. Too fast to be seen, Asuma.

Shikamaru fell to his knees in gratitude and his kunai slipped from his grip. “About time.” He complained. “What were you up to?” He was so done with this entire fight.

“Had some cleaning up to do first.” Asuma grinned before he jumped down to offer his hand. “Let’s go back.”

“It’s over?”

“Yeah.”

Shikamaru’s thoughts went back to Naruto and Sakura and the one they were supposed to retrieve. “Naruto? Sakura? Sasuke?”

“We got them.” Asuma confirmed. “And Shikamaru…” The man looked around the clearing before he grinned. “Good job, you really used your brain.”

“This whole thing is a pain.” Shikamaru grumbled. “I only did what I had to.”

XxX

His Sensei always had loved Orochimaru the most. Orochimaru had always been the smartest of the three of them. Their sensei had seen something in all of them but whatever he had seen in Orochimaru even when they were simple children Jiraiya had known their sensei looked at Orochimaru differently.

It had been frustrating growing up, especially since he had been slower than the other two. Tsunade had always been quick to throw back barbs. Orochimaru had always left him alone until he had been in a better frame of mind to accept advice, to learn.
Of course he had not realized that was the bastard’s intention until he became an adult. Still, their childhood had been a frustrating one for him. A team with two quick learners. Geniuses, he had really felt the strain but he had become their equal been acknowledged by their sensei as well.

He had come to realize he and his sensei had plenty of things in common as well. Not things others would praise them for. It had been so disappointing to realize the man so renowned as the second coming as the god of shinobi could be as lecherous as the common man but it had made him seem more real.

Well not really that disappointing, when it came down to it their Sensei had opened his mind about a lot of things. He would not say his knowledge of the human heart came solely from the lengths he went to spy but he would say that his stealth techniques had become like none other because of it. That had been a thing between them. Their Sensei knew that no matter where he sent Jiraiya that he would not be discovered. The pervert became a spy.

But Orochimaru had always been different to their Sensei, the things they discussed, the way the man looked at him hell even the orders he had given Orochimaru had been different. The tensest moment between them had to be when Orochimaru started to pull away in slight rebellion in order to do things for himself. Even then he had been the most loved.

Their sensei had never let go of the childish image of Orochimaru. Jiraiya knew that, because he had that problem himself in the beginning but only until hell had hit Konoha. Then he had seen the craftiness emerge. He had seen anger grow, disillusionment, lots of negative but understandable emotions.

Orochimaru had always been different to them, his eyes looking to where not even their sensei could see and that had made him wary, made him determined. Jiraiya had not wanted to fall behind, he had put all his all to stand beside Tsunade and Orochimaru.

Of course Orochimaru had considered them all equal but him better. It had been annoying thing to put up with. But it had been so Orochimaru that he had struggled on with a smile.

Admittedly towards the end of the third war they had grown apart. When Minato became Hokage he had been so happy so delighted that he had forgotten his friend. By the time he found him again Orochimaru had draped himself in work and there had been a wall between them.

Their sensei was a great man but there were some things he could not do. He loved too much, from Asuma that he had let run from the village to Orochimaru that he had been unable to strike down. Jiraiya knew his sensei too well. It was why he had dedicated so much of his time and life to tracking Orochimaru down and bringing him in or down by himself. He knew his teacher’s limitations. He didn’t hate him for it he just wished that he was not so obvious about it.

Their sensei was why Orochimaru thought he had the advantage. Orochimaru knew his talents his abilities but as always he dismissed him as a naïve fool. Every single time. No matter how many times he proved him wrong. It was getting old at this point.

But he guessed that Orochimaru understood it better now. Even though they were far too old to be doing this nonsense. They were getting in the way of the new generation. Jiraiya looked at the corpses left behind before he sighed heavily.

No one delighted in killing but shinobi understood the necessity. He had known what Orochimaru was up to. He had known how obsessed Orochimaru had been with Tobirama’s forbidden jutsus and it was so like Orochimaru to want to fiddle around with it and even improve.
He had done just that the genius bastard but he had not expected Jiraiya. He never had and he had never expected a counter. Neither of them had, sensei or Orochimaru. He knew his sensei had planned as a last-ditch effort to die with Orochimaru, the silly old man. Just knowing that made his younger self resentful and envious at the bond that still existed.

But of course none of that had happened. Sarutobi-sensei still held his life although there was not that much of it left. But in exchange there had been quite the few sacrifices.

Using the same seal Minato had used before he died. His sensei did not know how lucky it was that he was so predictable, that Orochimaru was so predictable. Orochimaru always had liked a little psychological warfare. It had been a surprising part of him. He usually had a quiet nature, or at least he had back then.

That he would use the enemy’s mind against him had always stuck with Jiraiya. He had guessed at some of the moves Orochimaru would make. That he was not wrong really disappointed him. Using the dead, it was a lucky thing Minato had not been resurrected as had been Orochimaru’s obvious plan. That was one thing they did not need next to the First and Second. That was a nightmare for any opponent, something that he really did not want to see.

Still, taking a life especially such a young one. Even when it was obvious that Orochimaru would have disposed of him eventually, it still put a bitter taste in his mouth. Jiraiya looked away from Dozu’s unseeing eyes and instead focused on the flakes that surrounded him.

There was still too much that they did not know about that reaper death seal. Honestly if he had not been playing around and training Naruto he would have never decided to go off and research it so thoroughly.

Most of his work had been for the edo tensei and although he had managed to thwart Orochimaru he knew the real victory lay in the fact that Orochimaru had lost the most. The invasion had been unsuccessful. Sensei had not died by his hands and Orochimaru had lost the use of his hands.

The face he had made, the horror and anger. It had made Jiraiya sad like he knew it must have made Sarutobi sad but unlike Sarutobi he would not have left it there. He was not going to leave it there either.

Sometimes being a shinobi made you endure plenty of hard things. Physically and emotionally. Jiraiya was unsure to what part of the fight was harder, the actual fighting or the blows to his fond memories and his emotions. He could not even smile over the way that Orochimaru had seethed over realizing he had underestimated the naïve fool. That even Sarutobi had underestimated him.

He swore sometimes that they all forgot that he had trained Minato. Konoha had survived, a win in most people’s thoughts. Jiraiya shook his head slowly when he looked at his unconscious teacher with the medic nin's attending him. His gaze lingered on the man’s peaceful smile and he wanted to throw something before his gaze settled on the corpses.

It was simply just too sad to contemplate really. But it was better than the alternative. He mentally said a silent apology to the departed Dozu, he had known what he was doing when he had retrieved him after all. The only thing he could reassure himself with was that it had been painless. He had never even woken up. Quite the opposite for the Suna spy he had caught, that one had suffered and Jiraiya could only feel the sorry for the pain he had caused.

His gaze drifted back to the fallen Hokage and the man’s smile. Considering that Orochimaru had been the thing he had been facing before he fell unconscious he guessed that was where the man’s thoughts lay. Towards the past, Jiraiya wished he could do the same. He wished he could take
comfort in the old Orochimaru. The one that would look back and watch carefully. The quiet one with the small smile. The one that considered their team worth fighting for and had made many rash decisions in order to keep them together. He wished he could lose himself in thoughts of that Orochimaru.

Instead he looked at the trees the edo tensei First Hokage had created on the roof, the water the Second Hokage had summoned that still trickled off the roof and the spot that the third coffin had come up from but had not opened to the relief of himself. He looked from that to Konoha where smoke still rose from various places and he was certain most of the trees in the forest had disappeared. He looked at all of that and found it hard to think of any good memories to take away the horror from the reality.

Xxx

“Iruka-sensei?” Iruka paused in the middle of his roll call to face the ANBU member that had dropped down from the ceiling. He had done the roll call several times already but it helped keep order.

“Yes?” He asked curiously. He knew the fighting was over, he had been aware of the last stage beginning because Anko had left like a bat out of hell. He had never been so glad in his life to be a Chuunin before, but when he looked at the Iris mask of the ANBU he felt himself grow wary.

“What is it?” He thought to the tournament where Naruto was to fight. He could not help but wonder if the ANBU had come because of that.

“We just retrieved Uzumaki Naruto.” Iruka paled before the ANBU continued. “And we have taken him for medical attention.” The ANBU hesitated. “He’s just tired, he overworked himself but he’s fine Iruka-sensei.”

“Oh.” His vision misted and he froze. “Oh.” He repeated before he laughed softly. “I knew he would be fine.” He gasped before he laughed in relief. “Thank goodness, thank goodness.” Because he had been trying desperately not to think about the devastating noise outside. He had pushed his worry to the back of his mind by sheer will but it seemed it had only built up.

“He played a vital part. You should be proud.” The ANBU said quiet. Iruka wiped away his stray tears so he could nod at the cloaked Shinobi. “That’s all.” They said before they disappeared.

Iruka became aware of the whispers from the civilians behind him and he sighed when he recognized that his visitor was the cause. Still he had a job to do which he could do with a clearer mind now that he knew for certain Naruto was okay. He had done just fine.

He glanced back towards where the ANBU had stood and bit his lip. It was almost silly that he was worried about how Naruto’s fight had went. Ridiculous even.

Xxx

“Let me know when that street is clear we want to start moving civilians back into their homes immediately and without distress. The evacuation was already distressing; nothing more should bother them after this point don’t let there be a stray kunai on those streets or in those homes.”

“Sir!”

“Uh Uchiha-san.” The timid voice came from above and Fugaku barely tilted his head to where the ANBU clung to the wall.

“We are almost done.”
“Yes yes! It isn’t about that though…” The weasel masked ANBU muttered. “It’s about Sasuke.”

Sasuke. Fugaku turned fully towards the weasel masked ANBU. “Yes?”

“He was injured but he played a big role in saving Konoha! He’s at the hospital.” The ANBU finished in a mutter. “Do you want me to tell your wife as well or…?”

“I will inform my wife.” Fugaku stated. “Thank you, you may go now.” He watched the ANBU flicker away and gave himself a few moments before his shoulders lowered in relief. Two of his sons out fighting. He knew Itachi was strong but in the world of shinobi the strongest fell just like any other. No shinobi was immortal and he had wanted to see Sasuke’s fight.

But from the sound of it his sons had done well. He had ended up in the hospital, most likely from pushing himself. Fugaku looked at the empty street with a sigh. They were not leaving a good legacy for the younger ones to inherit. There were stepping up almost too early. In times of war that would have been wonderful, but he wanted things to settle down.

Still even with the knowledge that something was going down it simply had not been enough. The evacuation had gone well but evacuation was one of the last and final plans. Fugaku looked towards the Hokage mountain with a frown. He could not help but wonder if the path they were on was good enough to save them.

Xxx

It was amazing how quickly Konoha leapt to action to remove the signs of war. The bodies, the blood. Of course the buildings and streets showed the bigger scars but everything else everyone tried to remove.

They were so kind to their innocent civilians. Keeping them distant from the too harsh realities. Keeping the politicians from seeing what the games they played looked like in real life. They played too hard at it all.

They had repelled the invasion; they would clean themselves up and silently ready themselves for the next one. Try and forget the horrors and fear they had experienced. The genins who had witnessed it would never forget it.

But that was just how things went. Shinobi life was not easy and villages had to accept that betray could be right around the corner. Peace was just a concept but it should not be. Not because they were from different countries or villages.

Kakashi had never felt so strongly about obtaining true peace until- 

Well he guessed until they had retrieved Naruto. Trust and faith was possible no matter where someone was born. He was still upset for the state of his village however, but no matter the eventual verdict, he would obey it. That was simply his way of shinobi. Provided he did not have to abandon his friends after all.

Xxx

“Any left?” Sakura turned her head at the voice behind her in time to see the Jounin that had been the referee for the tournament.

“You’re…” She trailed off before she got back to her feet and dusted off her knees. She had landed on her opponent and driven him to the ground in order to knock him out. The strong force she had used against Temari she was no longer able to do. Frankly she was running on fumes. “This should
be the last of this group that I tracked down.”

“Good job then.” The man gave a nod to the masked cloaked men behind him before they all sprang off in different directions. “You picked off the entire team by yourself? Kakashi’s team is good.”

“Half of the team.” Sakura corrected. “You expected any different from Kakashi-sensei’s team?”

“I guess not.” The man laughed. “I guess not, look I’ll take you to the hospital to get cleaned up.”

XxX

“Even for a Jinchuuriki those sort of injuries.” The hushed whisper from the nurse made Shisui wince before he aimed a look back at the two in the room. He already knew that all the good medical shinobi were dealing with the high priority case. Still, the actual list of the boy’s rapidly healing injuries had him feeling slightly ill.

Sasuke had mumbled most of the accounts and when he had passed out Kakashi’s dog had filled them in and what Shisui had heard was enough to make him want to sit down with a few drinks. He had been watching Naruto since the boy had been brought back. He had no idea that the boy was capable of that.

Hell, he had not known the boy had a bloody summon. His pain tolerance was… ridiculous and that Sasuke had pushed himself so far too. Gone after the three genins from the sand and the fricken Suna jinchuuriki. The kids were lucky that they were even alive to be frankly honest.

Forget the poison, the bruises that had cropped up on Sasuke’s body told him the boy had taken a good beating. It was scary, they had run into them and the way they had looked. Damn it all, did the kids know how close to death they had come? That they still might be?

Shisui doubted it. He really did.

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They were alive, not in the best possible condition but they were alive. Kakashi lingered outside of the hospital room and allowed himself to breathe. He could feel his injuries. He had gotten a quick glance over from a medical nin but he still felt the exhaustion.

The fear he had been carrying was still there. It could finally melt away in the face that Sasuke and Naruto were fine. The mission had been a success and they were fine. He was aware of Gai by his side but Kakashi was unable to acknowledge his friend.

His entire focus was the two members of his team. The nurses bustling around them made him not want to interfere but before he could shift from the direct line of sight Naruto’s head shifted and his eyes met his.

Kakashi froze at the awareness and joy that appeared in Naruto’s eyes when the boy’s gaze met his. He gave a small wave with his unbandaged hand before he paused, the memory of the promise before the mission came to his mind. The look on Naruto’s face before he pressed him for an answer.

It was the memory of that, that made him step forward into the room. It was what made him gesture for Gai to follow as well. He gave a nod to Sasuke and ignored the boy’s eye roll before a nurse continued to bandage him.

“I guess so.” Naruto’s voice was a little scratchy. “You made it back.”

“I said I would.” Kakashi hummed. “And you did your part too.”

“Yeah…” Naruto trailed off when the nurse adjusted the IV before she turned away. “We did it, mission a success or whatever.” Kakashi was aware of Gai retreating back into the hallway but his gaze continually switched between Sasuke and Naruto in the beds. He fell silent when the nurses left.

“I’m glad you are okay.” He sighed. “I was a little worried.”

“You had no faith.” Sasuke snorted.

“Well…” Kakashi coughed when Naruto’s eyes settled heavy on him. “It was a very difficult situation… and you haven’t been in a war before…” His gaze locked on Naruto. A moment passed between them where he read the understanding and deep sadness. He sighed before he continued. “Most of the current genins have not seen war before, granted this was an attack it still is war in its own way… you are my precious team members, of course I worried.”

“We’re not that bad.” Naruto said softly. “We just got a little over enthusiastic fighting the Suna shinobi.” Sasuke snorted. “Well we didn’t really have much of a choice…” His eyes went to the door. “Have you heard from Sakura yet? Shino? Shikamaru?”

And somehow Kakashi felt that it was so much like Naruto to worry for others in his condition. He was aware how it must feel to Naruto to be in such a situation and not be able to see those he cared about. Know that they most likely were still in danger but have no real way to help.

“She’s on her way. I got word that she met up with one the other squads. She’s fine.” Kakashi said softly. He watched Naruto relax visibly, his shoulders slumping before he glanced outside the window to the wreck that was outside. “All of those things can be fixed.” He said softly. “It’s the people that make the village.”

“I know.” Naruto said softly. “I know.” Kakashi raised a brow when he saw Sasuke throw off his bedsheet and lean forward to press at his bandaged leg.

“Sasuke-kun…” He said slowly when the boy slipped out of the bed to sit down hard on Naruto’s there was a startled yelp from Naruto before Sasuke leaned over him. Naruto frowned at Sasuke while Sasuke remained silent his eyes roaming over Naruto’s face.

“What?” Naruto asked crossly while Sasuke adjusted his seat on Naruto’s bed.

“You don’t look like you are on the edge of death like you were earlier.” Sasuke said slowly but Kakashi heard the suspicion in his voice. His eyes were on Naruto’s eyes as if he were looking for something deeper.

“Can’t keep me down for long.” Naruto muttered before he looked away from Sasuke’s gaze. It made Kakashi want to know exactly what had happened on the forest. It was a good thing that Pakkun had gone along, he would be able to ask his hound at his own leisure.

XxX

Shisui made sure that he intercepted Itachi way before the other man could get on the same floor
as Sasuke. The aura that surrounded him, his stare straight ahead was scaring the nurses and that was how Shisui knew he had done the right thing.

“Stop.” He said softly with his hand stretched out as a barricade. It could never stop Itachi but he hoped the symbolism of it made the man think before he rushed ahead to do something he would regret. “You can’t go charging up there Itachi.”

“Give me the diagnosis.” Was the only answer he got and Shisui sighed before he unrolled the paper. He felt relieved when Itachi stayed and read it but swore mentally at the expression that settled on the man’s face.

“Itachi no.” Shisui breathed. “This isn’t your fault.”

“He-“

“No!” Shisui snapped. “It isn’t your fault and there was nothing you could have done. We had our orders. He had his own. Can you think of a plan that would have allowed for us to do what we had to do with the exact results and allowed you to run off to save Sasuke?” He sighed at the stony face he got in response. “You know you can’t. If you had run off someone would have been sacrificed. This is the best-case scenario. He isn’t a child anymore. Orochimaru did not get near him today.”

“His injuries…”

“He’ll be damn proud about them. You didn’t see how he was bringing the kid in. Sasuke’s a shinobi too. He’s just starting out but there is no way Sasuke would have accepted you saving him Itachi, after today he’s a shinobi now. When you go up to see him you have to treat him as such.” The almost haunted way Itachi looked up at him then tugged at his heart. “I know Itachi. I was scared too.” He confessed.

Those kids had no idea what they were up against. The reports had chilled him to the bone, waiting for the kids to wake back up. He had sat and tried to figure how he would explain it all to Itachi, hell Mikoto and Fugaku.

When Sasuke had flailed from them extracting the poison, hell when the nurses had surrounded Naruto because the boy was close to chakra exhaustion. And all he could do was sit outside and think about how young they all were.

The relief in Sasuke’s eyes when he recognized who he was. Not the cool distant look Shisui was used to seeing. The careful way Sasuke had checked to make sure it was him all while holding onto Naruto with a grip of steel.

He had thought before when he realized that Sasuke had awakened his Sharingan that Sasuke had become a shinobi but it had been that moment that he knew Sasuke was on his way to be a damned good shinobi. One worthy of following, a little reckless but loyal.

It still did not make it easier to accept though. Orochimaru still lived, gods knew what his plans would be… the genins had to fight on way too many fronts. They had stopped the invasion but the event had ended up sparking the development of the genins.

Or maybe their spark did not have anything to do with that at all. Shisui’s mind went back to the clearing. Where he had known trees, hell a proper forest had stood before. His mind went back to the boy whose interactions were causing ripples everywhere he looked. He could not exactly say the war was fully responsible for the changes.

XxX
Tenten looked up at her Sensei and the carefully blank look on his face before she looked around her. ANBU kept coming and going, nurses were running around the halls, she had seen Kakashi-sensei a few times but she had to admit it had not been like that.

He had always seemed half indulgent of her Sensei. There were always those ridiculous challenges that her sensei kept pushing but Kakashi-sensei had always been indulgent about that too. He had seemed a little hard sometimes, his eye distant at times but he had always laughed with her Sensei.

But the aura around him was so intense that honestly it made her shiver. The entire day had been crazy. From Neji losing to the village being attacked. She had ended up fighting too but nothing like what she guessed Kakashi’s team had ended up doing.

She could feel Gai-sensei’s worry as he stood next to her, it made it hard to leave. She knew she could leave, go check up on Lee or Neji. See if Neji’s stubborn pride had returned or if the incident had given him some sort of peace, she could do that.

But instead she remained at her teacher’s side as they waited outside the door.

XxX

“You’re pushing it. It is too soon to be sitting up I can see you wincing.” Kakashi scolded. Shisui blinked at the man’s tone when he stepped into the room. He was slightly horrified to see Sasuke out of bed already and sitting on Naruto’s bed but the sight of Naruto sitting up a heavily bandaged hand pressed to his side made him feel ill.

Shinobi were known for pushing it but they should have limits too. Hell, deeds aside they were still genin it was okay to take it easy. Only stubborn Jounins and ANBU tried to act like they weren’t injured after all.

“Sasuke.” Itachi said softly from behind him and Shisui bit back his sigh. The dark look that Itachi had been wearing when he got to the hospital had disappeared but that would not mean Sasuke would be in the mood to see him or be coddled. Hell, Sasuke would disembowel them if they tried to coddle him.

“Nii- Itachi.” Sasuke tilted his head in their direction. “You’re okay too.” He gave a quick once over of them both and his shoulder relaxed a bit more.


“I didn’t do it for the praise.” Sasuke dismissed.

“No you had that squirrel fleeing syndrome.” Naruto muttered. “They dashed away and all you could think about was running after them… like an idiot.”

“Letting them go unchecked wasn’t an option.”

“Sakura-chan and I were right there! Twenty seconds from where you stood all you had to do is yell ‘come’ or something like you usually do with your egotistical self and we would have told you how stupid it all was and come up with a plan with a Jounin adult… like Kakashi-sensei.”

“A waste of time.” Sasuke huffed. Naruto glared at him and leaned forward so they were almost nose to nose. The bedsheets had dipped enough to expose Naruto’s heavily bandaged chest. “You would have taken too long. We couldn’t afford that.”
“Gods help me. You’re an idiot.” Naruto hissed. “You went to take on three. One very very crazy shinobi that I warned you about. I went out my way to warn you!” Naruto half shrieked. “One shinobi that hadn’t fought and whose fight you hadn’t seen, if Shino hadn’t come your ass would have been handed to you.” Shisui guessed that Naruto’s rant would have continued if not for Genma’s arrival at the door.

XxX

“Amazing team you got there Kakashi.” Genma looked impressed as he strode in. “It’s like the brats have been Anko trained or something. Your girl there she’s got a good brain and some good moves on her too. You should see how she took down the squads and tossed about orders it was something to-“ Genma cut off at the body that pushed past him to enter the room.

Sakura stood frozen in the doorway, leaves in her hair, her dress torn and a few of her weapons pouches missing. Bruises and dirt covered her exposed skin. Yet when her gaze landed on the two on the bed her body trembled. “Guys!” She exclaimed before she made a leap for them.

Sasuke and Naruto shared similar expressions of shock before they reached out to the girl falling towards them. Kakashi’s heart twanged in his chest when he watched the startled boys catch Sakura between them.

“Sakura.”

“Sakura-chan.”

They boys exchanged an amused look over Sakura’s head while her arms were clasped around them. Then their expressions froze when she started to cry. “Thank goodness.” She sobbed. “Thank goodness you’re both okay. I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry.”

“Sakura-chan you didn’t.” Naruto began before he shook his head. “We’re the ones that should be apologising to you.”

“Sorry Sakura, we put you through a lot.” Sasuke whispered. Sakura’s shoulders tensed before her crying increased. Sasuke and Naruto exchanged a sad look between them before they pulled themselves closer to the girl between them.

“Next time, I’ll be stronger and I won’t take so long, next time…” Sakura sobbed. “Next time I’ll be right behind you.”

“I think it should be us saying that, Sakura-chan we didn’t have a choice.” Naruto’s free hand snaked up to where Sakura’s hair was wrapped in a bun. A quick movement of his fingers and her hair tumbled down. “It’s all over and next time we will be strong enough that we don’t worry you.”

“Was so worried.” Sakura cried. “All that noise and strong chakra and I had to… I had to lead them away.” At her words Naruto and Sasuke squeezed the girl between them tighter and shoved their faces into her neck. Kakashi felt his eyes itch with unshed tears and he looked away.

“Well damn… I would have never known she was holding it all in.” Genma whispered. “Your team is something else Kakashi.”

“Let’s give them a minute.” Shisui muttered when the three showed no signs of letting go.

XxX

He was so happy for his team. There was so much that he did not want for them, that he had been
focused on what not to let them be. Yet what they had become, what they would become now made him happy.

He had been worried, so worried that he had not let himself think too hard. Not every team was perfect. Some were just polite enough to get along. Some had conflicts that got in the way in progress, some had too many problems that would lead to eventual chaos and pain.

Like his own but he had been all the problems. Unbending, stubborn, foolish. If he had changed sooner so many things would not have happened.

But yet, his team had that foundation for everything to be better. Sakura who had changed, Sasuke who was still changing and Naruto who had changed the most in ways that had yet to be seen. Kakashi was proud of them all.

Especially Sakura. Genma was not one to dole out praise. Her actions had to have been beyond the normal genin caliber. He was so proud of them all, the Chuunin Exams had been ruined but they had all gotten something instead.

Seeing his team develop a deeper bond, seeing them determined to protect each other. Well it was more than he could have asked for. Kakashi tilted his head back and sighed when his hair made contact with the wall. He was happy and tired, not an unfamiliar combination. There was so much to do but he could at least bask in the happiness for his team for a while longer before he dealt with the serious business.

XxX

She pulled back slowly at the sound of the door reopening. Her tears had dried and just holding them to her had calmed her down. All her fears…they had just flooded back at seeing them. But they were fine, they had come back to her.

But they were so injured. Her hands twitched with the need to pull them to her again but they had already comforted her. As it was they were the ones in need of attention. Naruto’s blue eyes blinked up at her curiously and her hand moved to his scarred cheeks before she could have stopped herself.

So, battered, so bruised but he had saved the village and Sasuke. They had all helped the village. They had all dirtied their hands. It was strange but she felt happy and sad at the same time.

Sasuke’s eyes were as unreadable as they always were. Sometimes emotions flickered through but those had always been the negative ones. Her hand moved to his cheek too and she smiled when he allowed her. Sakura was aware of the nurse behind her as her hand gently stroked the boys faces.

She pushed her emotions back down with deep breaths. She pulled back a little further so the boy’s faces were closer to each other before she took a deep breath.

“Idiots!” She snapped and yanked their heads together. Naruto and Sasuke grunted when their cheeks collided. Sakura heard the gasp behind her but withdrew her hands to place them on her hips. “You behave from this point on you hear me? Or I’ll break you in half! Don’t do anything stupid!”

Sasuke rubbed his injured cheek shock on his face. Naruto’s face remained blank before it softened. “Yeah!” He nodded in agreement.

“You expect her to believe such a thing coming from you?” Sasuke sent Naruto a disgusted look. “You’re the one we have to worry about.”
“I want a verbal promise from you too Sasuke-kun.” She gritted out. “Listen to the nurse and behave.”

“Alright already.” Sasuke glanced away before he sighed. “I’ll behave and listen.”

“Good.” She glanced at the two of them and itched to gather them to her again. She forced herself to take a step back. “We can’t afford you running off, neither of you.” She nodded to the nurse before she took off for the door. She slid the door open and glanced back at them. The Nurse already had engaged Sasuke pointing her finger at Sasuke’s bandaged leg. Naruto had a grin on his face. Sasuke looked annoyed with the nurse and Naruto but he sighed before he allowed the nurse to pull him off Naruto’s bed.

With that image to cling on to Sakura stepped through the door and closed it behind her. Her fingers trembled again and she forced herself to take a deep breath, over and over until she was able to release her hold on the door handle. She had to think rationally, the fighting was over but it wasn’t over. There were things to go over, reports to be made. She had just taken a small break, there was still more to do.

XxX

The Chuunin had given her a funny look when she had asked for the papers but she had given them to Sakura anyway and that was what mattered. She sat on the bench in the hospital the clipboard in her lap, the pen in her hand but she was unable to write a thing.

Her vision wavered with the first tear but she blinked it away furiously. Her body shook and she gritted her teeth against the action and forced herself to remain still. She got to filling out her name before she lowered her head.

“It’s never easy.” A soft voice said. Sakura’s head flew back up to meet Tenten’s gaze. She took in the girl’s torn clothes and singed hair before she gave a thought to her own messy hair. She moved a bit so that she was not occupying the entire bench before she responded.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s your first time right?” Tenten sighed. She took the offered space and slung her hand outstretched behind the bench. “Seeing your boys in such a position.” Sakura froze before Tenten shook her head softly. “The first time is always the worst, when you see how human they are, how easy it is to lose them.”

“I almost lost them before.” She said softly. “But I promised myself, I worked hard so that I wouldn’t have to feel so helpless but—” All she could do was lead off the trackers and trust them to take care of themselves. “It’s different to that time.” She insisted. “It’s different but the results, they… I”

“They never think what they put us through.” Tenten said softly. “They have their reckless ways and never think about what they do to others. They put themselves in all sorts of danger and expect us to stay back and watch.” She met her gaze before she grinned. “It drives us kunoichi mad in the end you know? But it is worth it.”

“I just want to make sure they come home.” Sakura blinked down at the report sheet. “I don’t want to lose them.” She took a shaky breath. “I was fine until I saw—“

“The worry never goes away; they’ll worry for you.” She huffed. “Or at least concern themselves about your well-being.” She finished. “But that’s what makes you a team, but you grow from this.
You get stronger, because those sorts of idiots can’t be left of their own for too long. They get carried away and do stupid reckless things.”

“I can’t lose them.” Sakura whispered. The report and the clipboard fell from her lap and clattered onto the ground. “I put it out of my head but I was so scared, I was so scared.” A warm hand pulled her forward and she shook in Tenten’s embrace. “I was so scared.”

“We all are.” Tenten said softly. “We care so we’re scared.”

XxX

“We got some good genins out of this didn’t we?” Shisui asked softly. Itachi glanced at the man carefully balanced on the wall and rolled his eyes before he returned to looking out the window. “Am I wrong?”

“No.” Genma said slowly. “You aren’t. Kakashi’s and Asuma’s genins are something else. Chuunin levels on many counts. Kakashi’s entire team and of course Nara Shikamaru.”

“Thank you.” Kakashi said wryly. “Although I’m sure I heard you refer to my little team as a bunch of little monsters chomping at the bit.”

“Well that’s true too but the girl? Haruno?” Genma laughed. “What the hell did you do to those kids Kakashi? I haven’t seen something like that since.” His smile faded. “Well… during the war.” They all fell uncomfortably silent for a few moments more.

“What did she do?” Shisui asked curiously.

“She was bait but she took them out and put them on a merry chase. She outlined the plan to me.” Genma removed the senbon from his mouth to wave it at Shisui. “Merciless, that was what it was, precise and merciless. Just the right amount, no wastage. She took them out quickly with as little damage to herself and then she went looking and leading away more. Perfect.”

“What did Shikamaru-kun do?” Kakashi asked curiously.

“Well he’s stronger than I thought. He was supposed to buy them a bit of time according to Asuma and Haruno.” Genma’s lips twisted up in a smile. “Asuma found him still holding them off… you could say the will of fire certainly lives on.”

“It’s what the Sandaime would say.” Kakashi said softly.

“He’ll pull through.” Genma insisted. “It’s the Sandaime.”

“Only one good thing has come from this mess, we just might have gotten ourselves some new Chuunins.” Shisui said softly. “Their heads are in the right place.”

“So many Jounins saw them in action… someone is bound to recommend them… if it happens it will be a surprise to them. They wouldn’t expect that.” Kakashi laughed softly. “Their mind wasn’t on something like being promoted.”

“It was on their friends and family, right?” Itachi asked softly. “Which makes it perfect.”

“They did good today; the Will of Fire has been carried on to another generation.” Asuma announced.

“This is a hospital put that out.” Shisui frowned.
“Sorry sorry, bad habit.” Asuma leaned over Itachi to toss the cigarette outside. “How are they?”
Itachi tensed. “Beyond the injuries.”

“They’ll recover.” Kakashi spoke up. “All of them, they’ll recover. How’s Shikamaru?”

“I handed him over to his mother.” Asuma grinned. “He refused to get more than a brief check-up.”

“Punishment instead of reward? You’re evil Asuma-san.” Shisui shook his head. “I don’t want to become an adult like you.”

“Shisui you are already an adult.” Itachi sighed.

“So? What were you talking about?” Asuma asked curiously.

“Maa well, people think that Shikamaru-kun and Sakura’s performance was outstanding in our crisis.” Kakashi answered.

“It was.” Asuma said softly. “We got something good out of this.”

XxX

He couldn’t help but wonder even as he watched Sasuke get wrestled back into bed by the nurse where Gaara was at that moment. The Gaara he had met had been so different to the one he had last seen. He just couldn’t help having it on his mind.

Wonder how much of his words had reached him. He had stopped fighting and decided to retreat but how much of his words had Gaara understood? Where was he? Had he made it back to Suna? Did he have plans in place?

There had been more of a person in their last interactions. More of Gaara not the monster deep inside. Not the monster that could be made from them all. It just bothered him, he could not help but wonder if Gaara saw himself as a proper person now.

Sasuke had said that the guy had seemed different but still… someone like him. Someone like Naruto existed in the world. There were bound to be others, but would Gaara be okay? Would he move past it that was the real question.

Hell, moving on from a defeat wasn’t easy even he knew that. Call it rite of passage but most of those that had been in the group had met defeat at the hands of Zabuza or Haku. Some had never gotten used to that fact but most had come around.

But they all knew loneliness; they all knew pain and they all knew lies. Naruto looked outside the window to where smoke still rose. He was glad they made it through but that did not mean everything was okay. Just what would happen now?

With Gaara, with those who had witnessed what the Chuunin exams had turned into. Naruto’s gaze shifted to Sasuke. All of them had seen a lot. Also, he had not been careful, who knew how much Sasuke had seen and really heard. Not like he wanted to hide everything, just there was a time and place and he could not exactly blurt out everything, could he? The Sandaime had wanted to keep it a big secret.

But now Gaara knew. Well, keeping him from finding out would have been the problem. But everyone was alive, that was what mattered. He had managed to protect something. His mind went to Kakashi and he relaxed. He had people he could trust to stay alive for him and that was not all, he did not have to run anywhere.
But he could not shake the feeling that something was going to happen. Maybe it was because of all the years fleeing that had upped his sensing abilities. It just did not feel over yet. Konoha had won but Naruto felt like Orochimaru was the tip of the iceberg. He clenched his hands under the sheets before he stared at the white ceiling. There was still too much he didn’t know, still too many secrets.

But still, those Jounins had said he had done a good job. He had been thanked, praised. He had not done it for that but having it said made Konoha feel more real, more worthy of his effort and protection. A village was more than its physical location he knew that; it was what it possessed and he could not allow Gaara to destroy that.

He wondered when his thoughts had become like that. The faces of those he knew flashed through his mind and he sighed softly. He wondered if there were kind words in Gaara’s future, he wondered what the boy, what they would all do now.
Zabuza's second wife

Chapter Notes

Didn't get as much as I wanted to do this week but since the chapters are going to be longer for a while it is to be expected. Idk how much I'll get down this week but I do want to get a chapter done and at least half way into the next but... so much to write lol. I'll find a way though... hopefully

Oh much better news I've been waiting to write this since... chapter 2 I think? I had this mini arc planned (yes mini arc) And I've been so excited and frustrated because it took me so much to get here but finally omg I'm getting somewhere-ish (won't spoil you so I'll leave it at that.

So I hope you enjoy this chapter darlings I'll see you next week for this!

He was grateful to his rapid healing ability. It guaranteed that he did not have to stay long in the hospital. He had no idea what Sakura and Sasuke suspected about his body but they did know that he healed quickly. He guessed they might have put it towards his large chakra reserves or something.

Still he had grinned when he was allowed to leave but Sasuke had to stay for observation. The glare Sasuke had given him when he had cheerfully waved had gone a long way towards cheering him up. The news had come to him, to everyone and had just gotten worse as time went on.

They had won but the damage had not just been to the physical village. Naruto had known the chances of no casualties were so low that they were laughable. No matter how good Konoha was supposed to be in clashes such as the one they had experienced there had been only one outcome.

Losses in one way or another. Not the amount that Suna and Orochimaru’s people had been going for obviously but still there had been losses. When he had heard about the Sandaime his heart had clenched deep in his chest, he had felt devastated.

When he had left the man behind in the stadium somehow he had not been worried. Although he had faced Orochimaru face to face and understood how powerful and dangerous the man was he had never been afraid for the Sandaime.

Obviously a mistake. Naruto had never questioned how sure of the man’s power he was, there had just been something about the old man, back then and now. He had seemed so assured that Naruto had just accepted it. He was an old man, a meddling secretive one but his power, his strength had shown through everything.

It was not the old stories that had kept him wary it was the certainty. After all the old man held the title he coveted but he was still old.

The news of the Sandaime’s condition convinced him like nothing else. He had driven Orochimaru away but he lay in a coma because of it. The village was disturbed as a result of that. They had won but the Hokage had fallen.
He was still alive but even Naruto knew how dangerous it was for the Hokage to be in such a position. There was also the fact that those in a deep sleep did not wake up. Naruto did not want that, not for the old man but he was not blind to the reality. The longer slept the least likely it would be that he would wake up. the longer he remained in a coma the riskier it became for the village.

The fight itself was over but they still had to put themselves back together. they could not let themselves forget that. The Sandaime’s condition weighed on all their heads. It was what it meant to be part of a village. He had fought to protect them no matter the costs to himself.

Naruto would never tell the old man that but… it made the Sandaime look like more than the perverted meddling old man that he was. It made him seem really cool.

XxX

“Even with everything Konoha has to continue on as normal. You can say that because of it Konoha has to continue as normal and even do better. To show any signs of weakness at this point would lower our standing.” Iruka-sensei sighed before he shoved his stack of papers to the side to smile brightly. “Everyone will be overworked until we get on our feet but even this we are in a sense prepared for.”

“What do you mean?” Naruto asked curiously. He leaned on the wall closest to Iruka-sensei’s desk and did his best to tune out the rest of the Chuunins nearby. “There’s a plan in place for this too?”

“The Jounins will shoulder most of the work load during this time. We’ll be flooded with requests.” Iruka-sensei winced. “There is no other choice but to accept as many as possible without compromising village security which of course means Genins step up too.” He flashed Naruto a forced smile. “We’ll be depending on you guys some more, it is another reason you were allowed to leave so early.” Iruka-sensei murmured something under his breath that Naruto was unable to catch before he continued on. “Sasuke too, he along with any other Genin deemed fit enough for duty.”

“That sounds…” Naruto trailed off to sigh. “Like a lot of work for you guys. Are you taking missions as well?” The resigned look on Iruka-sensei’s face made him sigh again. “School still cancelled? Konohamaru and the others will throw a fit.”

“Only until next week.” Iruka-sensei groaned. “Then we’ll have double classes to make up and yes I do have a mission after my shifts here.” He groaned again. “I don’t think I’ll be able to take you for that celebratory ramen Naruto I’m so sorry.”

“Iruka-sensei.” Naruto said softly before he smiled. “You don’t have to worry about something like that.” The hug the man had wrapped him up in when they had met again had been more than enough. Sasuke had told him that when he had fallen asleep after their visitors Iruka-sensei had come by and sat with him.

Iruka-sensei was an important person to him. No matter how far he went, no matter how long he had been away he had been unable to shake the man from his mind. His words had been imprinted on his heart. It was hard to explain that itself to Iruka-sensei but every time they hung out he hoped that it conveyed.

The pride and worry in the man’s eyes when they were together warmed him. Having the man praise him over his win and his support in the attack. It was a lucky thing his face had been pressed into the man’s shoulder. His eyes had watered just a bit.
“Ugh, I’ll think of something to make it up to you.” Iruka-sensei mumbled. “Since we can’t do the dinner maybe we can put it off?” He frowned “… maybe we can do it for Sasuke as well or maybe Kakashi-sensei has plans for your whole team so I can’t do that.”

Naruto snorted at the thought of Kakashi-sensei throwing them a celebratory dinner. Getting the man to part with his money was ridiculously difficult and made no sense. He did not spend it, at least not in ways Naruto was aware of. The apartment was mostly empty except for a few books and the rent in that area of the village was cheap. Naruto had checked. He had no idea what the Jounin did with his money but he highly doubted that the man was spending it.

“We’ll figure something out.” Naruto reassured. “Wait does that mean I have to do a mission too?”

“Well not right away I have to process or someone has to process your medical release form but your team will be doing some D-ranks or your own or even separately.” Iruka-sensei lowered his head to his desk and gave a loud sigh. “Ask me when we get the paperwork sorted out.”

XxX

“Sasuke will be released this morning.” Kakashi-sensei said lazily. His book was lowered from his face so he could better see Naruto.

“I knew that already.” Naruto panted before he got back up. Early morning in the training grounds were still the best time to train. It had been a year and some but his body was still used to activity at night and small naps during the actual morning. He could function normally but… he could still do it. “Any change in the Sandaime?”

Silence greeted him, he glanced up at Kakashi-sensei and stayed silent at how the man was lying down on the tree branch. It took him a few moments before Kakashi-sensei sat up, his book disappeared into his jacket and the man clung onto the branch before he looked down at Naruto. “No change.” He said softly but Naruto heard the hurt in the man’s voice.

The Sandaime meant someone to him of course even though there was some time missing when he had not seen the man but for his sensei who had grown up with the Sandaime as his Hokage, with Kakashi-sensei who had the Sandaime as a figure in his life for so long. The old man’s current position just had to be distressing for him. Kakashi-sensei was aware of the current situation.

Even better than Naruto did. “No change.” Naruto repeated. Time was moving on. He had completed some simple D-ranks missions while they waited on Sasuke, Kakashi-sensei had been pulled to plenty of meetings, maybe some missions as well.

“We still have our part to play. After how our last C-rank mission went I’m a little wary but we will take every precaution.” Kakashi-sensei shrugged. “After Sasuke is checked over properly and reunited with his family.”

“I can’t believe he didn’t try to escape earlier.” Naruto muttered. “If he had pushed he could have gotten released a little after me.”

“And put on a strict bed rest.” Kakashi-sensei said dryly. He dropped down from the tree easily before he crossed over to where Naruto had tossed his jacket before he started to train. Kakashi-sensei easily took up the material from where it had hung over the training stump before he tossed it in Naruto’s direction. Naruto caught the jacket and used the outside to wipe his face before he put it on. “I guess he wanted to be mission ready before he decided to leave.”

“ Weird.” Naruto snorted. “I would have never lasted that long.”
“I’m well aware.” Kakashi-sensei sighed. “But with the current state of things we have to take the missions and we have to complete them as quickly as possible.”

“Then onto the next mission.” Naruto murmured. He scowled at the ground before he glared at Kakashi. “So routine and boring, how long is it going to be like this?”

“Until it slows down.” Kakashi-sensei sighed. “Or until we find someone to take the reins. We are just lucky that we have the shinobi to take up the slack but we can’t compromise village security after such a bold attack so everyone will play their part and have to take extra missions. Things will be cancelled. Things will be put on hold until we have someone to lead us.”

“By someone, you mean the Sandaime right.” Naruto said softly. A cool breeze blew through the training ground, cooled his body slightly.

“By somebody I mean a Hokage, of course I would prefer it to be the Sandaime.” Kakashi-sensei said softly before he crossed the bit of distance to face Naruto. Naruto tilted his head up so he could look up at the Jounin. “But I know how these things work.” His hand ruffled Naruto’s hair lightly before his hand rested on Naruto’s shoulder. Naruto was unable to find words to say while he looked at Kakashi-sensei. He felt sad as well but he knew his grief would be nowhere near Kakashi-sensei’s. He did not know anything of Kakashi-sensei’s past but the Sandaiime touched everyone in his own way. For those that knew him longer the wait must be unbearable.

XxX

The sun had not risen yet but Naruto was already awake. He folded his sheets as he looked around his room to make sure he had everything that he needed. He had woken too early and decided to take the time to actually clean his room.

Team seven had a proper mission ahead of them and they had to set out early. Their first mission with all of them together since… well since before the Chuunin Exams had begun and the mess that had followed.

A small ding made him startled and Naruto turned his attention to the little timer Iruka-sensei had gifted him as a sorry for cancelling their dinner celebration. Naruto knew the timer was supposed to be used with plenty other meals… he knew exactly why Iruka-sensei did not get the little three minute ones that Naruto knew existed. The light hinting the man was doing touched him that could not help but use the timer when he really did not need to for every ramen meal.

It was still fun for him, and having such a thing around was like a symbol or Iruka-sensei’s feelings. Such simple things made him feel connected. He eyed his pack by the door before he started on his meal, speed was what their missions was about. Kakashi-sensei had said so when he had sent the dogs with the message and Naruto was going to have words with the man about sending the dogs when a shadow clone would have done as well.

Four hours until dawn but he was ready and his body was ready. Memories of night travel had his body tense and flowing but of course it was not going to be like that. Naruto eyed the cloak on his bed, light green in colour it had been awaiting him when he had gotten back from a boring D-rank mission. He had never thought clearing a potato field would take so much time and effort.

But the cloak had been gently spread out when he came home with a welcome home note with it. The note had contained a joke that shinobi tended to wear that when travelling and Naruto had been unable to throw the note away. It had been unsigned but he had known who had left the cloak. Of course he had known, who else would it be?
“He better not be late.” Sakura muttered through her hairpins. “Sensei had better not be late after he took this mission last minute.”

“He told us about the mission this morning.” Sasuke snorted. “My mother was not pleased about the path his dog took to my room. He’s lucky that he still has a dog considering how paranoid my father is.”

“Well we are all here.” Naruto shrugged as they stood by the gate. Light fog prevented them from seeing too far ahead or behind but that was just how it was for the early morning in Konoha. Naruto liked it. “He’ll be here.” Sakura snorted as she used the pins to create a huge bun on the top of her head.

“Maa more like he is here.” The voice came from above them and Naruto had a moment to look up before the shadow came from above. “Morning my little hardworking shinobi.”

“Suck it Sensei, Pakkun nearly broke my mom’s vase.” Sakura grunted when she adjusted the pack on her back. “Did you have to wait last minute?”

“I picked the mission the moment I got back and told you three right away.” Kakashi-sensei chuckled. “Did you need more time?”

“Was looking forward to more solo missions.” Sasuke muttered. “You said this is a C-rank? Are you certain?”

“Because of the time restraint it is a C-rank otherwise well it would be a high D rank or low C rank.” Kakashi-sensei admitted. He withdrew a box from his pack and shook it in their direction before he replaced it. “Unless one of you want to carry the item.”

“We can switch at breaks.” Sakura offered. She sighed heavily. “Not a soul is awake at this time, we might as well leave already.” She glanced at the guard hut and Naruto followed her gaze. There were the two unfamiliar Chuunins there, the night shift but other than them there was just the morning fog.

“The sooner we go the sooner we get back.” Naruto tugged his cloak tighter to himself and grinned, anticipation made his fingers tense. “What are we waiting on?”

“Obviously not some decent light.” Sakura sighed. “Sensei, can we go now?”

“Of course we can. We’ll talk on the way but for now, be on guard.” Kakashi-sensei said slowly. “Remember which direction we are going in now let’s go!”

Xxx

Since speed was a requirement their pace was fast but not as fast as Naruto knew that Kakashi-sensei would go if he were on their own. If the village had not been in such a vulnerable position they would have taken their time, set out at a decent plan and had a travel path that would be safer.

Their speed was not just because the item had to get where it was going fast. No, the reason was because of the place the item was going and the quickest path to get there. After leaving Fire Country they had to stray along some lands where Konoha was not given king treatment.

Which was why they had to be on guard. Then there was the simple matter of the item in their possession. It was a C-rank also because people wanted it to never make it to its destination.
Naruto would be lying if he were to say that their mission did not make him excited.

Kakashi-sensei in the lead while he, Sakura and Sasuke followed on his heels, alert and wary. The only sound their progress made was the occasional rustle of the leaves. With every mile, they got away from Konoha the blood rushed harder in Naruto’s veins. It was all so very familiar.

But all so very different.

XxX

“What is it?” Sasuke asked from around his nutrition bar. “You sense something?” Kakashi-sensei had given them a twenty-minute break but only five minutes had passed and most of them had already fuelled back up.

Naruto crumbled his snack wrapper before he glanced at the rock statue at the side of the path that they were by. “It feels familiar.” He muttered.

“Speak up.” Sasuke threw a crumb at him and Naruto sighed when it bounced off his nose.

“He felt familiar.” He gritted out. “I didn’t have a map back then you know? I wouldn’t have known my way back to Konoha unless you pointed me and walked me there but…” He trailed off at the stone and the broken forgotten pipe behind it. “Some places we went by were once you know? Some places I know exactly where they are…”

“So you know the area.” Sasuke muttered. “That could work out for us.” He went back to his snack without another word. Sakura tilted her bottle up to check the amount of liquid she had next. The soft snap of a book closing startled Naruto before he looked around to see Kakashi-sensei contemplating him. He thought the man was going to say something but he did not.

XxX

The sun was bright enough for them to see the paths ahead and that they had entered the mountainous terrain. It was when they had passed over the trail that Naruto knew that he was in familiar territory. Sasuke had taken the lead, which meant their Sensei had to drop back.

He did not know how Kakashi-sensei picked up the change in his mood but he had looked across and met the man’s contemplative gaze. It was amazing how much emotion the man showed with only one eye exposed and the rest of his face hidden.

Naruto peeked down at the forest path below them before he glanced at the mountains. He knew them, he was so familiar with this area and it made his heart ache just a bit but how to speak up? He knew what the plan was... but time was something they did not have. It was that simple.

But god, it had been a few years but the area had not changed that much. Nature had reclaimed it some more but it was uninhabited as always.

XxX

“Another break, this makes two.” Sakura mused before she dipped her finger into the stream. She gently licked her finger before she nodded and dropped her container in the stream to gather water. “But we’ve made it pretty far considering.”

“We could be on our way back by tomorrow at this pace.” Sasuke sounded slightly impressed. “I like that.”
Naruto listened to them as he refilled his own container but his gaze was on the mountains and the mountain path that he knew was there.

“Something to share with the class Naruto?” Kakashi-sensei said softly. It was so soft that Sasuke and Sakura who had started talking about possible pursuers would be unable to hear.

“I know this place.” Naruto admitted softly. He looked at his hand in the stream holding the container and released a heavy sigh. “I know this mountain, this stream, this area. I know here.”

“How well?” Kakashi-sensei asked softly, his hand gently removed Naruto’s hand and the container from the stream. “Any chance of shaving off a few minutes of travel?”

“We can go over the mountain.” Naruto said softly. “There’s a path that leads right through to the area we are going without having to get too close to the border.” Kakashi-sensei stilled next to him.

“You’re sure?”

“I didn’t have a map back then but I know what is at the top of that mountain.” Naruto placed the container in his pack before he knelt properly and scooped up water in his hands to drink, he swallowed before he continued. “This isn’t someplace I would forget so easily for one. And we were here long enough that I know how recognize it. At the foot of the mountain… there will be an idol stone with a funny umbrella.” Naruto admitted. “If you doubt me.”

“I don’t doubt you.” Kakashi-sensei answered. “Sakura! Sasuke!” When those two turned in their direction again he continued. “Slight change of plans, we are not going around. We are going up.”

Xxx

“No one would think that we would go over this.” Sasuke grunted as they took the path. “Does anyone even come this way?”

“No.” Naruto admitted as he saw that they were close to the top. “I think our group were the last to come this way.” He could see the tree hanging over the edge at the very top. Back before the path had seemed so long and tiring, but twenty minutes and they were almost at the top.

Things really had changed, it made him wonder how different that place would look like to him now. If it would look the same as his memories. Untouched and symbolic. Whether it would have the same feeling.

But there was no sense wondering about that because they were almost at the top.

Xxx

“This is-” Kakashi-sensei tried to stop them from approaching any further by keeping his arm out but Naruto easily went around him and ignored the man’s sound of protest.

“It’s okay.” Naruto reassured. “It’s been like this for a long while.” The houses reclaimed by nature. The places where fields had been. The lost village, almost as he remembered it. “Let’s just go, this place is harmless.”

“There isn’t anyone?” Sakura asked softly when she caught up to him. Naruto knew the signs of people would be bothering her. The discarded items still visible through the grass and trees.

“They died a long time ago.” Naruto answered when they reached what was the village’s centre. It
took him a moment but he located the path they needed. “You don’t need to worry about them. It was a small village Sakura-chan people didn’t even know they existed. They were more of a small clan.”

They had started up yet another incline and Naruto felt anticipation in his gut because the lost village was one thing but the place they were going he really wanted to see. He wanted to think of that again.

They saw the roof first. Naruto heard the confusion from his team as they eyed the perfectly split roof. The path that they needed to complete their mission was right past the broken temple but Naruto was unable to move his feet.

Half and half. Perfectly broken temple. His lips twitched in amusement before he forced himself to look away. He was aware of the others behind him. He was aware of them watching him and when Kakashi-sensei’s hand gently rested on his shoulder while they stared at the ruin of the small temple Naruto was not surprised. “What is it?” Kakashi-sensei questioned.

“I- no We met Alya nee-chan here.” Naruto said softly. He could still remember it. How freaked out he had felt just wandering around the place even on Haku’s and Zabuza’s heels. When Alya had appeared in the temple’s doorway she had looked like an angel to him.

She had offered them food and a place to rest. She had been so kind, so cheerful and understanding.

“Who was that?” Sakura asked curiously.

“Ahh she was Zabuza’s second wife.” Naruto chuckled. “She only answered to Zabuza and Haku and she was in charge when Haku was doing something.” He waved in the direction they had just come from. “She was a priestess of a sort and tied to the temple but everyone got sick and died out so she was alone.”

“Illness?” Kakashi-sensei said softly. “Plague?”

“Whatever it was, it was bad enough that the village went in a matter of days but Alya had been meditating… when she got back…” Naruto shook his head. “Everyone higher than her was gone. The temple belonged to the local lord but he died too so she couldn’t leave because of her vows. She was trapped.”

Naruto smiled at the split temple. He could still recall how Alya had stood in the temple. How she had gently touched the wooden floors and the stone posts while she told them of the people’s history. Still hear her resignation to her vows.

“I had not even known there were people, that there was a village and system here.” Kakashi-sensei glanced back to the way they had come. “Now they are gone and no one will nowhere they came from.”

“The records are still in there somewhere.” Naruto nodded to the broken temple. “All the records and information Alya left there. She was good was scrolls.” He remembered.

“She was a priestess.” Sasuke mused while he stared at the temple. “Shinobi?”

“No.” Naruto shook his head. “She could use chakra and she was really good at scrolls but all her skills were for being a priestess. She wasn’t a fighter; she was a scholar.” He smiled. “It was why Zabuza couldn’t leave her.” He nodded to the even split. “He said that if she was bound to the building he would destroy it and he did.”
And she had been grateful, she had given her loyalty at that moment. When Zabuza’s sword had split the building in half she had become his. Everything she had she gave to Zabuza and Haku. She had deferred to Haku out of respect but she had held the joking name for a very good reason.

Why they had slipped past as many radars as they had, the reason had simply been because of Alya. She had been the brains to guide and protect them, the unhunted one that had joined because Zabuza had earned her loyalty but Zabuza had given it back, given her protection. She had always travelled in the middle with Naruto.

He missed her, her soft hair, her words and her lessons. He missed her hands on his when they got surprised and had to run faster than expected. Just looking at where he had met her for the first time made him miss her so much. She had been so regal when they first met her and over time she had become so casual.

“Let’s get going.” Naruto said softly. He turned away from the temple only by reminding himself that they had to travel back this same way. It was the only way he was able to convince his feet to move.

XxX

The box was easily delivered and by the looks on the attendants’ face Naruto knew that they had really impressed them. They might have heard of the rumours and wanted to test Konoha in some way but the fact remained that they had out done themselves here and sent a message.

A silent way of warning people. A silent way of telling everyone else not to underestimate them. Naruto might be looking forward to their lazy days again but he certainly did admire Konoha’s current ‘Don’t fuck with us’ attitude.

A sign of weakness was just asking for the hoard to come after you. Konoha was showing that regardless of the wounds they were still stronger and better and sometimes it was what was needed to keep the beasts from the door.

War was always lurking. People always were ready to test your strength. Greed was always the motivator. It had not been so long that Naruto had forgotten that.

He got so lost in his thoughts that he was startled when Kakashi-sensei brushed his arm. When the man nodded towards the door Naruto gave him a quick nod before he made a path for the door. It was a relief to be heading back home. The sun was still in the sky too.

XxX

“Wait.” Kakashi said softly when they reached the top of the mountain again. He ignored Sasuke’s pointed look to the quickly setting sun and instead looked at Naruto. “While we are here isn’t there anything you want to do?” He nodded at the ruined temple. “There might be still something inside.”

He had seen the evidence of the villagers still around the place, he doubted anyone had gone into the temple since Naruto’s group had left. The split was daunting in its own way. A warning not to go in, any suspicious or superstitious person would give it a wide berth but then again no one would have continued through the village so easily. Not after seeing how eerie it looked.

Naruto looked at him before he glanced at the temple. He saw the way the boy twitched before he held himself still. Kakashi was aware that the possessions that they the ANBU had brought back with them had been passed onto Naruto but he knew that those possessions were sparse things.
Things for the run not proper keepsakes.

Sometimes the little things were not enough, and if Naruto could find something to hold onto that was not covered in blood and loss then that was a good thing.

“You really don’t mind?” Naruto asked softly. Kakashi shook his head and the smile that spread across Naruto’s face before he sprang forward towards the temple made Kakashi’s heart clench in his chest.

XxX

Other than the huge crack that split the temple in two, the temple was mostly untouched. Dust and plants grew wild inside but Naruto knew that was simply nature reclaiming. He checked the damaged living areas first, relying on his memory to tell him where Alya had frequented.

Her simple room he saved for last and he dropped the things he gathered on the floor while he looked around. On the table, covered in dust he saw a small hook and a small pair of earrings on them. He knew it was Alya’s room. Her ears had been pierced and he recalled she had lost her pair after they had to flee just after they had stopped to wash one morning.

He guessed she had reasoned she only needed one pair. Naruto blew the dust off the earrings before he opened the small wooden desk. It creaked and stuck before he managed to wrestle it open. He glanced at the small scrolls before his eyes fell on the small number of hairpins.

With them, Alya had simply never bothered with hairpins and it made sense. Naruto removed the entire contents from the drawer before he shoved them in his bag. Before he went to leave he spotted a limp shrine dress on the wall. He remembered how she had looked wearing it. He smiled, bowed to the dress covered in dust hanging on the wall before he closed the door. He felt lighter, better and closer to Alya than he had since he had been returned to Konoha and it was not a bad thing.

Grey eyes that he swore were silver a few seconds before blinked up at him. Soft lips curved into a smile before she mouthed his name and slim hands reached up for him.

Haku and Alya, their heads buried together while they spoke. Alya carefully explaining and Haku soaking up all the knowledge.

And of course, Haku far younger than most their group commanding and Alya, a few steps behind ready to carry out orders. Those memories had faded slightly, or maybe he had not wanted to bring them up as yet. But he could remember and he felt good.

XxX

“Find anything?” Sakura asked when Naruto emerged from the ruin. Naruto chuckled before he patted one of the ruined stone posts.

“Found some stuff.” Naruto admitted. Kakashi watched him and determined that his mood had changed, he had seemed hurt, wistful and a little angry when they had gotten to the temple but he had relaxed and seemed to be fine. Kakashi knew he had made the right choice.

“Good, let’s try to use the remaining light we have and get as close to the Land of Fire as possible eh?” Sakura immediately got back up from where she had taken a seat on a nearby stone and dusted off herself, Sasuke merely put away his water container.

Naruto glanced up at him when Sasuke and Sakura took the lead and seemed to be stuck on what to
say before he looked away. “Thank you.” He said softly.

“I didn’t do anything.” Kakashi pointed out.

“You listened.” Naruto pressed, Kakashi met the boy’s eyes and the thanks made him reach out to clasp the boy’s shoulder before he let go. “You trusted me and you listened. That is something.” Naruto jogged off to catch up with Sasuke and Sakura and Kakashi watched him go before a low chuckle escaped him.
Warning this chapter is full of flashbacks... proceed with caution

*Also... omg I know I can kiss that idea of a cute 25K 5 chapter mini arc goodbye now. I don't even know why I bother hoping things will remain cute, small and manageable. But anyway, who knows how big this little not so mini arc will be time I finish it... I'm still fighting to get back a decent headstart but being only a chapter and some ahead just makes me anxious. Still hard to pull ahead with chapters being bigger than what I envisioned. Oh well spilled milk and all

Darlings it is the month of November, I finished one no two crazy things in October, 61 days and some Halloween fics and ficlets(learnt a lesson there too uploading so much is tiring 0/10 don't wanna do that again) As much as I wanna say I'll be taking it easy in November... I won't I was dragged into nanowrimo by some crazy insane darlings of mine but instead of the normal sane 50K so many people go to that I would be able to handle no problem...100K oh my word(save me from these crazy darlings)

What's even crazier is that it looks like I'm going to make it and we're only day 6?? Wtf? I'm like 36.5K right now. Obviously I'm not working on just this fic alone. (That's dumb and so not going to happen. Too many plot bunnies and series to continue and other projects to continue... so noooo) Feels nice to feel inspiration for certain projects and stuff again and to build up a queue of sort for series in case I don't get time to work on them or lose a little inspiration. So November is going to be pretty busy for me... constantly writing etc etc. I'm hoping for at least getting to finish this mini arc and start the next one this month... hoping big I know I know

If any of you are doing nanowrimo too good luck!! I'm just lucky I have so much free time atm so i'm taking advantage of that so that when i'm tired, uninspired etc etc I have something to fall back on. So that's what is up and will be what's up with me for the month. Nanowrimo is difficult though just saying, so if you're doing it and you feel a little stressed, do a break okay? Writing is hard but it is fun too. Don't get yourself down. (And ignore people like me who have too much free time on their hands)

So darlings I hope you enjoy the chapter, See you next Sunday! Also 200K uploaded for this fic \o/ omg omg!!

It was not funny how quickly he had adapted to the damage that Konoha still had. The invasion had been repelled but that did not stop the fact that the damage that Konoha had faced Naruto was simply already used to.

There were plenty of missions for village repair but priority was more on security. Naruto could see that. Shuffling off the small repairs to the Genins was a good move but it did mean that things moved slowly. There was only so much they could do and at the end of the day they were shinobi not master craftsmen.

Naruto had a few skills but he knew he could not fix half the damage that the village suffered.
There was probably some plan in place that he did not see or just did not know about but the fact did remain that he was too use to the sight of the destruction.

But there was still that high edge of urgency in the air. Simply too many missions to be done and the requirements to most were just ridiculous. They had to finish, quickly and perfectly Naruto knew that he was not the only one longing for the end of it all.

Iruka-sensei was being run ragged. There were bags under his eyes and although he always had a bright smile for Naruto whenever he spotted him. Naruto had switched their eat outs to baths. Iruka-sensei enjoyed it much better and although Naruto enjoyed the ramen nights better, he knew a break was what Iruka-sensei needed.

There was the school, the missions, the man’s shifts at the mission desk and on top of that Iruka-sensei was worried about the Sandaime as well. The man still had not woken up. with every passing day everyone got tenser and tenser and the news refused to change and the village remained in what Naruto thought as scramble mode.

To do as many as possible as little time as possible. The only thing good about the whole thing was that they made a fair amount of money as a result. Not that he had that much to spend it on in the first place. Most of the things he wanted for himself, well he did not have to go buy them in Konoha he could find them other places.

Like his plants… and well things he found that he liked. Parts of him still clung to the mentality that to get only the necessary things. That get things that would help the journey not hinder it. He had his plants now but there were so many things he could get but he could not make himself get. It had no purpose in his eyes.

But he was trying. He smiled at the team photo by his bed. He had a small plant beside it, the plant was a fussy one. Not too much water or sunlight was needed, Naruto had yet to come up for a name for it but he was certain he would eventually. With a nod, he made his way for the door, another day of missions after missions and none of them with his team.

XxX

His window was open and he had not left it that way. Naruto paused by his open door his keys in his hands. He could not sense anyone in the room but that did not mean that no one was in it. Still, the window was open, a sloppy move if someone wanted to search his place when he was not there.

It did not feel like he had interrupted a search. It did not even feel like his room had been searched, someone had been there but… his eyes fell on the item on his bed that he definitely had not left there. Green and rolled up tightly, Naruto eyed it suspiciously before he stepped inside his apartment.

He closed the door but left it unlocked, his keys in hand he made his way carefully towards his bed. He saw the note but his eyes were unable to leave the sleeping bag. He poked it carefully before he unrolled it and shook it briefly to see if it contained anything, when only the note fluttered to the ground he dropped the sleeping bag back onto the bed and picked up the note instead.

The artful handwriting caught his attention but not as much as the beautiful and accurate portrayal of a sparrow in flight at the bottom of the note. Naruto traced the drawing with his fingers before he read the note.
“Kids shouldn’t sleep on the hard ground, and cover your stomach you’ll catch cold.” A simple blunt note with a hint of caring in it. Naruto traced the sparrow again. He dropped the note on his bed before he knelt on his bed and leaned out the open window. He stared up at the sky with a smile on his face.

It was really nice. The twittering of birds caught his attention and he watched them soar over a few rooftops before his view went to the clouds. It felt really nice.

XxX

It is not as if he would see them if they were watching him in the first place but the sleeping bag told him that some of them had been watching him. He remembered different animal masks or glimpses of them when he had been in the Sandaime’s office.

Sparrow had left him something but not only that, they had left a note that sounded almost caring. He knew he had been told that the village had changed but it was only in instants like these that he dared to believe that.

People who looked him in the eye, people who talked to him politely. It still took some getting used to, having people from the village worry about him. Being treated like a child. Naruto locked his door and stared at his key for a moment. His thumb rubbed over the small pendant Kakashi-sensei had given him before he tucked it away.

He still had missions to do, but he could not wait to use the sleeping bag. He was used to sleeping on whatever was nearby and useful and when there had been nothing a lap or shoulder or someone’s nearby body part to rest his head on.

He was used to sleeping while cold and sleeping while sweltering. It had been his reality. The sleeping bag felt like a luxury and that was seriously funny. Something so simple, something that was mission standard not actual luxury felt like luxury to him because he could have never had that. He doubted a shop would have sold it to him in the village back then and they simply could not afford to run with such things.

Things changed, people too.

XxX

Naruto had almost forgotten about his order with the way that the village was. He had known it would have been delayed because of the village but when he had come back to his apartment only to be informed he had a package he had been surprised.

After the attack on Konoha the last thing he had expected to hear was that the items had arrived. He guessed the arrival of merchants again showed that Konoha was almost back on its feet. Still when he took the box into his apartment he had felt light deep inside.

Finally, the materials had arrived. It had frustrated him that the things needed to fix the fan he would be unable to get in Konoha. He had wanted to fix it for himself, not trust it to someone else, especially not when it was apparent that the someone else would be a travelling merchant. Naruto was a shinobi he knew how easily that could be lost.

He had been a runaway with missing nins as well, he knew how vulnerable those sorts of people were. Some people made livings off merchants and their valuables. It was why merchants insisted on hiring shinobi most of the time.

He sat at his table and opened the brown package. All the materials needed finally he could fix her
fan. That it had been reduced to such a state hurt his heart but he could not have stood to throw it away. Naruto smiled at the sight of the materials before the smile faded. That he was so happy about some materials arriving. It was a little sad.

But he had watched her for so long he wanted to keep a piece of her with him. All the things she had taught him, the things that had went over his head back then he wanted to remember them. Now that he was older, now that he understood more he wanted to look at her, at them again and see if he saw anything different, if he understood her better.

Naruto left the box of materials on the table before he went to his bedside table, he carefully opened the bottom drawer before he removed the false bottom. He carefully removed the box inside and opened it, he removed the battered fan with a smile. He had wanted to fix it since he had been given their belongings. It was one of the only physical things of them that he had left. It would take some time but he would bring it back to it’s former glory. He had even ordered paint too.

XxX

“Mission?” Naruto asked curiously to the man leaning against his front door. “You could have just left a note, or sent the dog like last time.” He fumbled in his pocket for his keys. “But couldn’t you have the message passed along? It isn’t like I wasn’t with someone who couldn’t have told me.”

And it really did suck that the little meetings still continued an entire year and some after he had returned to the village. It made Iruka-sensei happy to hear that Naruto had to meet with the people and talk to them but Naruto was tired of it. Sure sometimes they let him get away with not talking but the questions got so repetitive. Being told he had to go once a month made him happy but he really did not want to have to go at all. He hated that there were questions he could not answer simply because he was not sure but he did not know if he was angry at them or himself.

Kakashi-sensei pushed away from the door before he opened it. Naruto stopped his search for his keys to glare at the man. Kakashi-sensei gave him a half wave while his eye closed in what Naruto knew had to be a cheeky smile. “Let’s talk over some tea?”

What tea? “I don’t have any tea.” Naruto frowned, the Sandaime had given him some green tea but all of that had been gone long before the Chuunin Exams and he had been sort of spoiling himself with as many sweet things as possible. Not that he had not had those things while on the road.

Just back things were more eat and drink because you had no other choice than because you really liked or wanted it. There was a difference there. You ate and drank what you could when you could because you never knew when the next chance would come.

“What are you saying?” Kakashi-sensei’s voice was the perfect degree of shock as he walked into Naruto’s apartment as though he lived there. “Of course you have tea.” Naruto followed the man inside and leaned against the closed door as Kakashi-sensei easily found and filled the kettle with water. Of course he knew his way around, he could not keep out of Naruto’s place after all.

That night before the Chuunin Exams must have been an open invitation or something. Like a vampire. He had been doing the cute little vegetable run before but those had been non intrusive mostly. After the night Naruto had told him not to go the man had simply come and go as he pleased leaving signs of his presence everywhere.

Food drops, little notes… most of those during the month break before the finals. The finals that had turned into a clusterfuck of a situation. Now that Naruto was out of the hospital Kakashi-sensei treated Naruto’s apartment like an open house. Within limits of course. Naruto never came back
and found the man inside. Most of the time Kakashi-sensei made his invasions when Naruto would not have been able to cross paths with him.

With the village how it was with the missions and back to back missions requiring everyone to scramble. Not seeing his sensei was more likely than one thought. Iruka-sensei was being run ragged and he was just trying to pick up the remaining slack.

“Tea?” Kakashi-sensei asked before he opened a drawer by the sink. Naruto gaped at the tea bags before he shook his head at the man.

He pointed a finger at his sensei’s triumphant figure before he spoke. “You just brought those don’t act otherwise.”

“Naruto…” Kakashi-sensei sounded hurt. “What are you even saying? You just forgot you had these.”

“You mean you planted them.” Naruto snorted as he watched Kakashi-sensei grab two mugs and place them on the table. “Whatever you have to tell me is it that bad?”

“No.” Kakashi-sensei’s voice was serious for a moment before he relaxed and took the seat closest to the sink. Naruto let his arms fall to his sides before he strode over and took the opposite seat. They eyed each other over the table as the kettle boiled in silence. “I just wanted to relax a bit before I talked about our next mission.”

“Our?” Naruto questioned. “A C-rank? Or something like it? Another delivery mission?” it seemed the only time they did group missions was when they were C-rank and above.

“Team seven.” Kakashi-sensei confirmed. “We have to do some traveling to meet the client.”

“How far?” Naruto asked, the kettle whistled and Kakashi-sensei reached back to turn it off without looking away from Naruto’s face.

“We’re going to the sea.” Kakashi-sensei answered before he used the kettle to fill the mugs. “It is a C-rank but it may end up an B rank. It depends on the conditions.”

“Got it.” Naruto nodded before he blew across the top of his mug. The grey mug was warm in his hands and the steam wafting out of it warmed his nose. “Treat it like a B-rank then.”

“Exactly.” Kakashi-sensei nodded as he held his own mug. Naruto waited before he sipped the tea. He waited some more and sipped again as Kakashi-sensei held his mug in his hands.

Finally Naruto placed his mug on the table with a soft thump. “Aren’t you going to drink?” He demanded. He had hoped that Kakashi-sensei would have removed the mask to drink. It was why he had not objected to the tea that much.

Kakashi-sensei looked down at his mug before he looked up at Naruto. His eye closed and Naruto knew the man was smiling at him. “Of course I will.” Kakashi-sensei smiled before he raised the cup to where his mouth would be if his face had not been covered by the mask. Naruto watched in shock as the man drank from the cup… through the mask.

“Oh fuck off!” He barked out in laugh. “You’re the worst Kakashi-sensei!”

XxX

They were a mile away from the client’s house when they passed a field full of workers. The sun
was still high in the sky and the workers were full of cheer some of them were singing songs and laughing. It had to be harvest time and things had to have gone well for them. Naruto smiled until the actual song drifted to him.

His smile softened as nostalgia washed over him. He could still remember the words and unable to help himself he hummed the tune under his breath. He was aware of Kakashi-sensei looking down at him but Naruto looked away as he hummed along with those in the field.

It was an old old song, a song for the weary and hard working. A song not that many knew but he was glad to hear it. He could remember the first time he heard it, just the tune not the words. The first time he had been taught the words, the time when it had been explained that everyone had different versions to the song.

The tune as they walked, his hand in Haku’s or walking side by side by that person. A song could bring back so many memories.

XxX

They had barely sat down in the client’s house to discuss the mission before Naruto understood just why it had a possibility for a B-rank. In fact, forget B-rank the possibility of it turning to an A-rank was there too he could feel it.

A small town with trouble but it was more than that. The client was an important man in his village but it was more than that. He lived simply enough, his house by the sea with no exaggerations of his wealth and status until you looked around. He had important people in his life, people who gave him things.

It was more than the village having trouble. The man was in danger and he had to know and he had to know why. Naruto hugged his pack to himself as he sat on the ground and listened to Kakashi-sensei and the client talk. He watched the man’s gestures and he listened to his choice of words.

He was aware of Sasuke standing at a good spot by the window obviously listening as he was aware of Sakura close by the door but out of sight from anyone looking in. They were all on high alert. Even their sensei, he had no openings.

The house was so strange to Naruto, he had seen rich houses, he had seen poor houses before but the inside of the house was a mixture of both. The client was no ordinary man and it made him wonder who it was that the client was connected to.

The client had their pride it was obvious from the floors, fixed with care and the walls and the few possessions that were undoubtedly the client's bought by himself or given to him from the villager’s or their children. But the rest of the things that were so out of place but given positions of honor. It made him really wonder who it was that the client was so obviously important to.

The vase in the corner of the room, far from the ine of sight if one were to look from the window or door. That piece alone was expensive and well done. Far beyond the means of a simple villager. It would not look out of place in a Lord’s house. Naruto sat and listened as the talk wore on and on.

XxX

“It’s too much.” Sasuke said the moment that the four of them secured their room. “There is just too much to do and look for.”

“I agree.” Kakashi said with a sigh. The back of his neck had been itching since they had gotten to the village. “There is a lot we have to look out for but something we can all agree on is that the
client is in danger.”

“The whole village is in danger.” Sakura sat with her back to the wall her pack by her side. Her gloved hands rested on her knees. “But he’s in the most danger, they may be playing with attacking the villagers and sabataging but they want him dead.”

“And we’ll stop that.” Kakashi agreed. His gaze went to Naruto who had fell silent from the moment they stepped into the client’s house. Naruto sat in the open window his face carefully blank as he searched around. “Naruto?”

Blue eyes flicked to him and just as quickly moved on to settle on the encased fan on the wall. Kakashi knew that the fan was beyond their and even the village’s means. An expensive piece shown by the rare dark colours and the golden thread.

“Just thinking.” Naruto said softly with his gaze on the fan. “I think I have it.”

“Really?” Sakura looked interested. “Give it.”

“Well I’m not entirely certain.” Naruto laughed. “But it will take some recon around the village first to see if I’m right.”

“Want company?” Sasuke offered, Kakashi barely kept his face impassive as he watched Naruto.

“You can come if you want.” Naruto shrugged. “Won’t do much. Right now the place is safe.”

XxX

“You’re an old soul.” The old woman smiled. Kakashi lingered behind Naruto as the boy assisted the old woman to her house. “Your eyes show the people you carry with you.” Naruto stilled for a second before he carried on. “Your shoulders are heavy.” She sighed when Naruto lowered her bags at her door. “Be careful young one.”

“You aren’t from around here are you.” Naruto said softly when he straightened up to look at the old woman.

“I’ve been here longer than I’ve been in my homeland. I’m here.” She smiled. “Why?”

“When you talk, I see echoes of a different place.” Naruto said. Kakashi lowered his book to contemplate the two. He wondered if they had forgotten his presence. “A lost world on your shoulder.”

“It’s been years since the sea reclaimed my land.” The old woman sighed. “Years, but the world changes and the sea will always retake its own. You too?” She pressed.

“No, I just knew someone with ghosts on her shoulders.” Naruto said softly. The old woman cradled his face with her hands and Kakashi contemplated them both as understanding passed between them.

XxX

“Shinobi or something else?” Sakura asked as she eyed her notes. “Someone was hired but what was their goal? How strong are they and where did they come from?”

“They are assassins. Not a big group.” Naruto chewed onto the toffee they had been given. “This doesn’t concern a village. This isn’t really a shinobi thing.”
“It’s the same thing.” Sasuke pointed out.

“No it’s not.” Naruto snorted. “Shinobi answer to someone. They answer to no one when the job is done they’ll move on. We are more than murders.” Naruto said softly. He sighed at Sasuke’s look. “An assassin’s job is just that to kill. No matter what they have to do it. We just may have discovered the reason they are doing it this way though.”

Sasuke’s gaze sharpened. “The reason?”

“They can’t just kill him outright, there would be an uproar.” Naruto’s gaze went to the fancy fan. “The old man he’s in the way, an eyesore and someone wants him removed but not obviously. So they come at the town so important to him. They chip away and make it look like bandits did it. Lawless people looking for a place to ravage before they move on.”

“And how do you know this?” Sakura frowned. “You got this from recon?”

“I got that from the house.” Naruto hopped up easily and made his way to the fan. He tapped the case lightly before he looked back at them. “The old man is somebody’s important lover.”

“What do you base that on?” Sasuke questioned, he folded his arms. “He’s suspicious alright but to jump to that kind of conclusion.”

“Trust me on this. That’s why I went about on recon. The reason why he’s so important is because he saved the place.” Naruto gestured to the house. “They get good deals on trade, people know where they are. They can survive and it is because he saved them. He cut a deal with someone.”

“Doesn’t make them a lover.” Sakura pointed out. Naruto nodded before he gently removed the fan from the wall, he ignored Sakura’s gasp.

“These kind of gifts.” He said dryly. “If you’re giving them out to servants and just friends you need to rethink your relationship. And he’s a simple man that just wants to live in his village by the sea for the rest of his life.” He eyed the fan. “This was commissioned.” He said softly. “And it is very important to the old man. He looks like the type to cling on to his pride so he won’t accept something unless it had some sort of value. That’s why the place looks like it does. He isn’t going to toss away momentoes from a lover.”

“Okay say that you’re right. Why kill him then? Why hide it up?”

“Simple.” Naruto gently replaced the fan on the wall. “He’s in the way. An eyesore. Someone wants to remove him because his current existence is a threat. Maybe an embarrassment. Maybe whoever his lover is never got married. Maybe he is married.” He said softly. “Whoever his lover is or was, someone doesn’t want them around our client.”

“So how do we solve the problem. Drive them off? They can just come back when we are gone.” Sakura sighed.

“We can go to the source.” Sasuke said softly. “Would require us confronting whoever it is.”

“That will be harder than you think. Death before dishonour and all that” Naruto sat back down before he sighed. “The fishermen, people in the field. Hell the field itself. All of them are targets. We are here so their plan will change.”

“We won’t get out of this without a confrontation will we.” Sasuke frowned.

Naruto contemplated him before he reached for another toffee. “Did you think for a moment that
we would?"

XxX

The woman had managed to take down the demon brothers with almost no trouble. They had all startled each other, in the dark of the night trying to make their way through the area as quickly and silently as possible. When they had become aware of each other they had just simply reacted. She to bring down the demon brothers.

Haku’s reaction had been to grab him and tug him further into the woods. Naruto had went without a struggle certain that Haku was going to jump into the fray but instead of coming after them, the woman had used the dim light to attack Zabuza.

All Naruto had heard was the rushing of something before the sound was cut. He had been plastered to Haku’s front as they peered around the tree. The dim light showed Zabuza, the scroll still on his back but his sword in his hands in a position Naruto had never seen before. One hand on the handle of the blade and another on the blade itself almost as if he had used it as a bat to bunt something away.

Curiosity burned at him along with a healthy dose of fear as the woman and Zabuza stared at each other. Naruto would have ventured to say that they were not even breathing. The moon slid from behind the cloud and before Naruto could do more than eye the woman’s pale orange hair and browned skin she had launched herself at Zabuza with a snarl.

Her dress was white but appeared to be more like a roll of bandages stitched together than any real dress. Zabuza’s stance changed again his grip changed for something far more familiar to Naruto. The woman changed direction with a simple side step and the fan she withdrew as she twirled in the air fascinated Naruto like nothing else. He knew she did not have a chance at winning but her rage, with her movements Naruto could see the shadows of thousands at her back. It did not make sense.

“What’s your name.” Naruto clung to the back of Haku’s pants as he peered around Haku’s legs. He had thought Zabuza was going to kill her. It made sense, it was what he usually did when they encountered someone that attacked them but… at the last moment he had stopped.

“You don’t need my name to send me to the afterlife.” Her voice was strange and the way she talked made Naruto tighten his grip. The way she stressed some of her words, the drawl in her voice. She was unlike anyone he had ever seen. Her eyes reopened and met his and he almost flinched back at the dark brown eyes.

“We aren’t going to be sending you to the afterlife.” Zabuza huffed. “That would make this encounter a full loss.” He used his sword to point to the demon brothers. “You’re good and you’re wicked. I like that.”

“This appears to be a misunderstanding.” Haku said softly. “We were not looking to harm you.”

“You’re shinobi.” She snorted from his position from the ground. “I had just finished a job in the town. I didn’t have time to think about bloody missing nins.”

“What did you do to them?” Haku asked. “Their endurance is good. They should be back up by now.”

“Who knows.” The woman spat before she looked at Naruto again. “Who is that? Yours?”
“Yes.” Haku’s voice was cold. “You’re welcome to travel with us but if you interfere with him in anyway that Zabuza-san or myself don’t allow.” The air around them chilled rapidly and Naruto flinched at the sound of rapidly forming ice. “I’ll kill you.”

“So it’s like that huh.” The woman snorted from her position on the ground. she looked up at Zabuza and snorted. “It’s die or join you huh? And I can die and take two of yours from you. I’m not scared of death.” She stated. “But I’ll be damned if I have to die by some small fry shinobi.” She sneered.

“Your name.” Haku spoke up. “What’s your name?”

“Kasumi.” She eyed them before she glanced at the demon brothers. “I’m an assassin.”

XxX

“Naruto? Oi.” Naruto shot up before the hand could make contact with his shoulder. The blanket slid off of him and he and Sasuke eyed each other in silence. “You have to take watch.”

“Right right.” Naruto muttered. He shook his head to dispel the remaining feelings of sleep. He was aware of Sakura sleeping in the corner her bag and weapons pouch in easy reach. Kakashi-sensei was with his back to the wall slowly flipping through his book giving the appearance of not paying attention. “Yeah I’ll take over.” He shoved the rest of the blanket off him and eyed the burning candle.

“Your dream just now…” Sasuke trailed off and Naruto looked up at him curiously. “You were smiling…”

“It was a good dream.” Naruto admitted, he guessed it was the village that was doing it to him. That song too but the parallels were too good to ignore. Kasumi, people changed in such strange ways.

“You’re hopeless aren’t you?” She stopped her stretches to laugh at him. “Young shinobi are so weird.”

“I guess it was.” Sasuke murmured before he went to where his sheet was laid out. Without another word he curled up. Naruto left his sheet how it was before he sat by the window and concentrated. He could feel the cool wind to his back, he could hear the waves far out and he could hear the rustling of the trees. He could feel all the nearby life staying still, resting.

He opened his eyes after a long while to find Kakashi-sensei staring at him, not even pretending to read the book anymore. Naruto frowned in confusion before Kakashi-sensei nodded at him and got to his feet, still he remained confused until the man walked over to him.

“There are people going towards the water.” Kakashi-sensei whispered.

“It’s morning, technically.” Naruto whispered back. “They need to go and fish.”

“If you were going to make a move to scare, or a move to distract what would you do?” Kakashi-sensei’s eye watched him and Naruto bit his lip as he considered the question.

“Meaningful collateral damage.” She brought her fan up to her face and winked at him. “People who are troublesome in one way or another. It’s why Zabuza-san said I can go as wild as I want.”

“I don’t get why I’m getting my hands hurt helping you pick these.” Naruto sulked as yet another thorn got him. “Aren’t you already a poison woman?”
“I am.” She said before she lowered her fan. “But the rest of you aren’t. I’m completely immune to the ones I like to use. Most of the ones I use.” She pursed her lips as she played with her fan. “They are there to help me take down my prey, they aren’t the easy way out they are a step of the entire process.” She trailed off to snort. “Forgot I’m talking to a child.” She reached over easily to ruffle his hair. Naruto yelped in protest which made her do it harder. “We don’t want anything to happen to you, but I wouldn’t mind starting the Mithridatism process.” She muttered before she smiled. “But Haku would kill me if I tried wouldn’t he?” Her bark of laughter echoed in the small meadow. “But if it is against paralyzing agents should be just fine.” She reached down to grab his hand.

In hers Naruto was made aware of how small he was. She turned his hand over and the curious look she gave his hand made him squirm. Following along in conversations were harder than they should be sometimes especially when it went to things he did not know. He compared their complexions as Kasumi remained silent. When he compared himself to Haku he felt different but next to her he felt different too.

“It’s already healed.” Kasumi breathed before she stroked his wrist. “Amazing.”

“Those who could piece together the story.” Naruto answered. “I would go after them because if the job is supposed to be set up a certain way I wouldn’t want an investigation. When I’m looking to strike I would do whatever I could to distract as many as I could so that they would come back to chaos. The fishermen return at a certain time. We would have to investigate if they went missing.”

“Interesting.” Kakashi-sensei breathed. “So? Then what?”

“They know we’re here… a distraction. Anyone new that we haven’t met before should fall under suspicion. We know they are somewhere close.” Naruto muttered. “We just can’t locate them.”


“I’ll do it.” Naruto eyed the dark night. “I’ll protect them.”

XxX

“I’m alone.” She took the stone from his hand before she expertly skipped it across the lake.

“Still don’t get why you’re going to listen to him.” Haku was a few feet away from them but Naruto sat down on the lake’s shore and frowned. “Doesn’t make sense.”

“Have you ever heard of this place?” The word she said after made Naruto blink at her in confusion. “Of course not, it was a small island, full of normal people. Non shinobis, just islanders living their life and staying out the bullshit shinobi like to get themselves in.” She placed her hands on her hips then. “You know what happened to it?”

“What?” Naruto asked softly. Her back seemed bigger, her voice deeper.

“Someone decided they didn’t want us there anymore.” She turned to him with a small smirk on her lips. “So they sent their dogs and they killed us all. No matter who. They turned the island to ash.”

“How did you survive?” Haku spoke up. He and Kasumi exchanged a look and a few seconds of silence.
“Whatever I had to.” She said softly. “I killed those that came for me. I killed and killed and when I finally was able to escape I realize how naïve we had all been. Everything my island had been, everything they had accomplished. The knowledge, the trade all disposed of like trash.”

“So you became an assassin?” Zabuza’s lazy voice cut the mood and Naruto looked away.

“I had never been good at anything but I learnt how to kill. Everything I did after; it was to better that skill. I didn’t fear death, not after crossing my homeland and seeing so much of it. I think I better understood it.” She murmured. “It doesn’t bother me, to move on I need to get better at killing.”

“And you’ll do anything to get your target.” Zabuza chuckled. “You really are perfect.”

“Painful, painless. Still going to die.” She snorted. “But I’ve earned my name.”

“Sweet angel of death.” Haku mused. “I’ll have to see that in action to believe it.”

Send the disposable grunts to do the easy dirty work. Do the important part yourself. Naruto watched before he stood up and dusted off his pants. He unzipped his jacket and allowed it to fall onto the ground.

It was still dark but he could still hear, still feel and taste and he could feel the approaching danger. He already knew what was going to happen. The fan slid into his grip and Naruto took deep breaths as he waited and watched the night sky. If he failed he would have to be quick but he doubted he was going to fail.

The smell of the sea was slightly distracting along with the sound of the waves but when Naruto looked at the clear night sky he felt calm. How could he feel anything else. He was on familiar territory and although it seemed like he was alone he was not.

Everything was still with him and his team was nearby.

Was this what the others had felt when left behind? When they leapt in to deal with threats? This anticipation and certainty? Naruto certainly thought so.

The flicker of light caught his attention before the flicker became a line of light. He grinned before the fan opened and he took aim. He was not very good with it but the fan made a good amplifier after all. The gust of wind cut off the burning arrow.

Naruto turned his head to the direction the arrow had come from and smiled.

Xxx

The real difference was the behaviour. Shinobi stood out. They worked hard that people would not notice them but they never tried to blend in. Assassins were different. They became like everyone else for that one chance, that one opportunity.

For someone covered in tragedy she was able to laugh so easily, smile and interact and make it look so simple that it had confused him. He understood now that Kasumi had worn a mask in order to do better her work. In order to better her skills.

It had confused him how with each place she would pick up something new, something she found fascinating and she would share it. She would master it. The simple dances, the songs and their many parodies and bastardized versions.
Naruto really did think he had come to understand her a bit better. The way she would smile so easily, the joy she got from attaining her goal. Her genuine happiness at being around them. It had seemed so strange back then the way she thought. The way she talked and teased, it had went over his head before but he had always known every part of her was a weapon.

Haku had been Zabuza’s tool to use as he saw fit. Kasumi was the weapon to be unleashed when he saw fit with an ever changing method. Ryu had joked that she was what people meant when said a wrath of a woman should never be taken lightly.

A smile one minute, violence the next. A dance to seduce and tease and of course, a dance of blades. Assassins were different from shinobi, a good assassin you never saw coming. An assassin made you doubt everyone, made you lose faith, made you withdraw and it always ended up the one you allowed yourself to trust in the end was the assassin.

Murders, deceivers that was what an assassin really was.

Which was why people did their best to take them out after the job was done. Shinobi are one thing, no one wants a lone wolf out there that you could not collar and control. Those without someone to answer to had it the hardest.

XxX

There were things he wanted to do that he could not do yet. He was working his way there; he was trying but he knew his body had limits. But he knew he could do some of her dance. He knew that for grunts like these, her dance would have been perfect.

The fan was a weight in his hand, cool in his grip. Naruto stood in the middle of the road in plain sight an easy target and he waited. He knew what they saw, a child on his own, cocky. They would feel underestimated.

He heard the sound of the knife before it even got close. The hard spine of the fan knocked it away and Naruto easily stepped aside to avoid the others. He waited out of caution before he opened the fan. He kissed the tip before he spun to avoid the man that appeared above him.

The hard tip of the fan scrapped the man’s underbelly as he passed overhead. Naruto ignored the yelp and instead focused on the new comer approaching. If he were stronger, if he knew more then the one swipe would be all that he would need but he needed to concentrate too much in order to use the fan properly. His goal was to be able to do it absently.

His fan met and pushed back his attacker’s sword. Naruto smiled at the man’s startled eyes.

XxX

“You really don’t know anything.” Naruto muttered as he eyed the twitching men on the ground. “What? You didn’t think only you guys use poison did you?” He reopened his fan and licked the tip before he winked at the twitching men. “You had lost before you had started.” He murmured.

He tapped his fan against his leg as he watched the men. They would die for certain, not by the paralyzing agent he had coated the tip of the fan with but certainly by their comrades.

“I’ll be your angel today.” Naruto sighed before he reached into his third weapons pouch. It just held spare tags and a few vials and powders. “Sweet dreams.”

XxX
He had sliced them up pretty good with the fan. Naruto easily slid the fan back where he had hidden it before as he walked back to the client’s house. He had a pretty good idea what they were going to do next.

A small struggling village like this one. It had managed to survive. That someone wanted to get rid of everything out of selfish reasons. How could he not think of Kasumi? She had been the only one to survive, the only one that could have avenged her people. Now Naruto was a bit of the same.

They were still with him, all the memories. The good the bad, he was the one that remembered and recalled. The troupe lived on, in him. That was just how it worked sometimes.

Which meant, somehow the village would live on too. In someone even if it crumbled away. Or at least that was what he could hope.

XxX

She made it look like art. That was what made her amazing. Killing could be crude, ugly but she just made it beautiful. She made your feet still because she was a vision in itself. Her dress was usually stained in red when she allowed herself to get carried away. Streaks of red across the dress, across her arms and face but it just made her look more beautiful.

She was what she was and she made no apologies about it. That had helped him, Naruto had not even realized how Kasumi’s acceptance of herself had ended up helping him. Her confidence, her curiosity and pride. He had been drawn to her and part of him had been healed because of her.

He could choose to cling to the image of her dancing, laughing and teasing but she was more than that. There was more to her than that. She had not been a shinobi; she had been an assassin and she had helped him more than he had ever known.

A cup of tea was nudged across the table in his direction and he glanced up in time to meet Kakashi-sensei’s gaze on the opposite side of the table. He glanced down at the tea and grimaced. He was not in the mood for it. Kakashi-sensei tapped the cup with his index finger and Naruto glared at him before he took up the cup.

It was only when he had taken a sip that his sensei looked back at their client who had chosen to sit by the window and eat.

Dawn had come, they had to come up with a plan. Dawn had come and he sat so casually as if he had not killed two men. Life of a shinobi. He eyed his Sensei who obviously felt the stare but remained relaxed as he watched the client.

XxX

“What the hell is that man doing?” Naruto froze the cup of tea halfway to his lips as he sat on the steps. Kasumi had just roused herself from sleep and it was the first time for a while that they had managed to find shelter in an actual house. The broken monastery was not the best but it was abandoned, they had shaken the hunters off their trail and they had food.

Still Kasumi was looking at Ryu’s back as he sat facing the wall his head bowed, the silver scarf he usually used to tie his hair simply draped over his head. Naruto glanced at Haku in curiosity because how could Kasumi not know? Granted there had been no time for Ryu to really take the time and do what he needed to even Naruto knew that he was praying.

“Ryu-kun is praying.” Haku looked up from where he had been rubbing oil into Zabuza’s back. More of a massage than anything else and Naruto greatly envied the way Haku poured so much
attention and care to Zabuza.

“Don’t you believe in gods nee-chan?” Naruto piped up. Kasumi froze at his words and Naruto’s fingers froze around the cup at her carefully blank look.

“No.” She said softly. “I don’t want to believe in things like that.” Her eyes dulled. “I can’t.” With another glance at Ryu’s back she left the room before she could even get something to eat. Naruto looked at Haku curiously and got negative shake of his head for his troubled. His gaze went to Ryu instead.

“What does it mean that she can’t?” Naruto asked curiously. Zabuza snorted and he glared at him.

“Just accept it brat.” Zabuza grunted. “Leave it alone, it isn’t any of your business.”

“It’s not that I have a problem with it Ryu.” Naruto paused on his way to the bathroom. Ryu and Kasumi stood together by the window to the courtyard both their arms folded as they conversed. “I would never stop you. I don’t have a problem with it. Just I just can’t.” She stressed. “That isn’t for me.”

“I can accept that but do you mind me asking why?” Ryu sounded so curious.

“After everything I’ve seen. I can’t accept the existence of any gods. Any god. To accept would turn everything I’ve believed in… I wouldn’t be able to cope, if there was a god, any gods, I’d have to kill them.” She said softly. “The things I survived, the things that happened to my people. I’d rather accept that the world is cruel and ugly than that some god had a part in it but you can believe.” She reached out to hug him. “It’s good that you can still believe in the face of it all.”

“But you can’t.”

“And I never will.”

Naruto exchanged a look with his sensei before he jumped down to the people they had knocked out. They only had a few moments, he knew exactly how they would react and they could not afford that. They needed answers, these people had to live.

He used his hand to rip off the mask the one closest to him was wearing. Naruto ignored the scars on the face and instead gripped the person’s jaw tight. He only had a few moments. He was aware of Kakashi-sensei doing the same next to him.

Kakashi-sensei made a startled sound when Naruto shoved his hand into the person’s mouth his fingers tracing over and around their teeth until he found what he was looking for. Kasumi had been thorough in her teachings and Naruto was well aware of where to look. It was now that he was older he understood the why. Why her methods worked and why they were necessary but he had already been schooled on the how.

Assassins had pride in their work too, they were so similar to Samarais with that. The whole death before dishonour thing so many of them had. Shinobi had that too but assassins were a different sort. His fingers scrapped around until he felt the groove he was looking for. He grimaced before he tightened his grip and yanked hard, chakra on the tip of his fingers to help him.

Out came the tooth and capsule but blood as well. Naruto flicked both objects away before he shoved his fingers into the person’s mouth once more. There were always some sort of back ups and tricks. He searched until he was satisfied before he traced his fingers over the person’s front
teeth. He used his clean free hand to rummage in his pocket until he found the gum he had bought. He ignored Kakashi-sensei as he used the gum to stick to the foam he had borrowed from Sakura before they had left.

The gum and foam he carefully spread over the top and front teeth. It would make it hard for them to talk and it would certainly stop them from biting off their tongue.

“Amazing, that’s not something you learn at the academy.” Kakashi-sensei’s own victim was loose in his grip and the capsule was on the ground. “Well done.”

“How are we going to interrogate them?” Naruto asked as he kept a firm grip on the captive’s chin.

“Like this.” Kakashi-sensei said almost lazily before he uncovered his Sharingan.

“Yeah…” Naruto muttered. “That would work.”

XxX

He had done it himself but he could not get the sight of Kakashi-sensei doing it out of his head. He had seen the man fight before, seen him kill before, the memory of the fight in the stands when he had so easily stolen a weapon from Naruto and used it without a second thought came to mind.

Yet as they lay out their plans on how exactly to solve the problem Naruto was unable to stop thinking about how easily Kakashi-sensei had dispatched the assassins. When they had gotten the information they had wanted Naruto had gone for his kunai in order to end it and move on but the easy way his sensei had slit the assassin's throat had caught his attention.

Quick, easy and almost absentmindedly. It reminded him that his sensei was a strong man. Naruto was not afraid of him but it did remind him of why Kakashi-sensei was with him in the first place. The man was dangerous but Naruto was too.

He bit on the end of his pen and ignored Sakura’s sigh at his action as he read over the information they had gathered. His gaze was drawn to Kakashi-sensei’s fingers as the man pointed out various places on the maps he had acquired to Sasuke.

Naruto had no idea where his sensei had gotten the maps from. Still he was prepared for the final plan. After this they would be able to go home… maybe even see a happy ending.

Still he had to work in a small tease at Sasuke’s expense because he had been right about the client after all.

XxX

It had ended up being a coin flip on who would end up completing the mission. Naruto did not know if Sakura and Sasuke had figured out that the thing had been rigged but he knew for a fact that their sensei had no plans on letting them be the ones to complete the mission.

Did not mean they did not get to tag along. Naruto tugged the hood over his head with a small angry jerk. He was a little upset and who wouldn’t be? Hearing the reason behind the assassination just pissed him off. Jobs were jobs and you couldn’t be picky but he had knew that if he had to take a job like that the client would have to watch their back.

Still they had their own job to do. He sat on the roof and watched as Kakashi-sensei easily slipped into the woman’s bedroom. He could see why she was jealous. Their client had all those gifts of affection. The vases, the paintings and fans all given over the years. The place was a shrine in
itself and she had nothing beyond what she had gotten herself.

He understood it but there was a limit. You couldn’t get love by force. It was that simple.

It was over quickly enough. Kakashi-sensei had sat on the bed, leaned over to wake and speak to the woman before he fed her the poison. Naruto had been in favor of slitting her throat or smothering her with a pillow but subtlety would help them more so he had gone along with the plan.

XxX

“Thank you.” Their client chuckled as they packed their bags to go. “I never dreamed that I was the cause of it all.” A distant look came to his eyes. “It’s been years since it all began and we’re all old now. He has his duty.” His gaze shifted to a painting on the wall, a view out of a window to a field of growing corn. “We’re all old now.” He repeated sadly. “I haven’t seen him in years. Once a year he sends something but that’s because we are also friends.” Grief filled his face then. “I can’t imagine what the news of this will do to him.”

“He’ll do his duty.” Kakashi-sensei said before he shoved his hands into his pockets. He rocked back and forth as he stood at the door. “It was a marriage not for love or political means but because he needs heirs. He’ll pick another just as easily I suppose.”

“I suppose so.” The client sighed. “We’re all getting older.” He mused. “I can’t help but wonder if he’ll be okay.”

“I hope whoever he picks understand her position more.” Sakura muttered.

“Love is a powerful emotion.” The client said sadly.

“So is envy and greed.” Naruto pointed out. The client’s gaze fell on him and he shrugged. “And insecurity, I don’t think love had much to do with it in the end.”

“I imagine so, but at least the village is safe.” The client smiled. “As always we can trust in Konoha.”

“Guess so.” Naruto mused.

XxX

They had only been there for a short while with the mission that had in no way been a C-rank but Naruto had to admit the place had sort of grown on him. The smell of the sea, the feel of it had calmed him. The evidence was in his dreams and the contentment he had felt. He had recalled some good memories.

They had to take the beach path in order to leave and with every step Naruto could not help but feel good. There were many places he had been with the troupe. Many places he knew he would return to but he was not alone in the world. Remembering Kasumi, honouring Kasumi reminded him that he understood her a little better now.

That was a good feeling in itself even though he missed her. He trailed behind Sakura’s and Kakashi-sensei’s figures as they walked along. His ears picked them up before he saw them. The fishermen bringing in their catch. Their laughter and that old song.

A smile came to his lips as he listened to the old folk song and he tightened his grip on the straps to his pack before he started to hum along. With every step he felt content. With every second that he
hummed along he felt at ease and not alone. Not that he was alone now, just that like Kasumi he carried a clan on his shoulders. The fond memories made the weight easier to walk with.
Chapter Notes

Hope you darlings enjoy the chapter, didn't get much done on this fic this week. Wasn't in the right mood so I'm hoping I can make up for it sometime this week. Chapter is slightly late because I refused to upload until I finished what I should have. So I'm partly on track just hoping I stick to it this week.

Really hope you darlings like it. Been soo eager to do this mini arc and finally writing it out after planning and waiting... well it is fun its own way

He was greatly appreciative of Kakashi-sensei taking the time to tell them he would be out the village and unavailable but he still thought that a cute note would suffice. Naruto was tempted to ask what happened to the notepaper with small puppies on it that he used to write his messages with when he brought the unasked for and totally unneeded vegetable basket.

Still it was a pleasure in its own way to come back and see his sensei waiting patiently for him or to wake up with a knock at his window or door because the man had something to tell him.

There was plenty of that going on with the village still in the scramble mode. Iruka-sensei had told Naruto the only good thing about it was that it would look good on his progress report but Naruto dearly wished for the village to just stop.

But if anything, it had intensified with no signs of slowing down in any way. There had been even more strain, even more missions flooding them and with them unwilling and unable to turn down the missions they were simply strained.

Konoha had no one to guide it back to normal so everyone had to do their best to plug the holes in the ship as they hoped it would not sink. Everyone was doing their part and beyond but it was not enough. With every stack of missions completed, two more took its place.

It was getting ridiculous. It was certainly suspicious in its own right. Naruto stifled a yawn as he sat at his table and Kakashi-sensei made himself comfortable opposite him. The more missions they took, the less time they had to themselves. They started earlier and finished much later.

“I shouldn’t be gone that long.” Kakashi-sensei announced as he toyed with the spice set Naruto had on the table. It had just appeared there after a mission so he had kept it. The clear bottles and silver top were kind of cute if plain. “But you guys will be on your own while I’m out the village so you won’t be able to leave the village.”

“Really?” Naruto asked curiously. “We won’t?” He asked. “Or just me?”

“Orochimaru is out there.” Kakashi-sensei pointed out with a wave of his hand. “Without myself or another Jounin sensei to keep an eye on you and Sasuke it is better to keep you around the village.”

“The man broke in Sensei.” Naruto pointed out dryly. “At this point I don’t doubt that he could come snatch us in our sleep if he really wanted to.” Kakashi-sensei flinched at his words and Naruto focused on him. “You are aware of how strong he is right sensei? He walked in here and
nobody knew, he’s that strong and if he had wanted to he could have taken us all out of the village that time.”

“But he didn’t.” Kakashi-sensei acknowledged. “But that might have changed, or at least it might have for now. Back then he had been certain of his victory. After his failure… he may have decided to move differently. Act differently so without a Jounin to guide you. You shouldn’t leave the village.” Kakashi-sensei chuckled afterwards. “I’ll be back soon enough and we can do missions outside again.”

“Whatever you say.” Naruto muttered as he tapped the floor with his bare feet. “Konoha’s a mess right now.”

“We’re in negotiations with the Suna council right now.” Kakashi-sensei shrugged. “Neither of us have a Kage and we’re being flooded with requests. Most of them a waste of time, a way of testing us but the money is good for something.”

“But you still won’t treat us.” Naruto pouted and his sensei laughed. “I know we can’t look weak in front of the other countries but this sort of thing is dangerous. People are going to wear down eventually.”

“We can only hope for the Sandaime to recover.” Kakashi-sensei sighed. “It’s hard now and if it continues until the next graduation class we might have a bit of strain.”

“What about retired shinobi?” Naruto pressed. “They can at least handle a few D-ranks or some C-ranks, right?”

“Retired.” Kakashi-sensei chuckled but the sound was laced with sadness. “You really think there are that many?” The or any at all went unsaid and Naruto sighed.

“What about the council and their bodyguards? They could be picking up the slack.”

“And by that I know for certain that you haven’t met them yet.” Kakashi-sensei chuckled. “As much as I’d love to see that everyone is doing what they can until proper order can come. Hokage is the head of the village and they run it, they make all the important decisions and their authority guides us all.”

“The old man needs to wake up.” Naruto muttered. “Any change?”

“He’s stable but he isn’t waking up.” Kakashi-sensei sighed. Naruto glanced at the window and the darkness outside. Dawn was coming, it was evident by the change in the air.

“You have to get going soon. Have you already told Sakura-chan and Sasuke?”

“I left them notes.” Kakashi-sensei got to his feet before he pushed the chair back under the table. Naruto gave him a blank look and the man looked amused. “What?”

“They get notes?” He asked pointedly. Kakashi-sensei laughed at him and he glowered. “Hey!”

“I can’t just enter the Haruno’s household as I please.” Kakashi-sensei chuckled. “And Sasuke’s house is another thing entirely. Much easier to leave a note.”

“And me?” Naruto pressed.

“Well, we get to have a talk the same time, don’t we?” Kakashi-sensei shrugged. “And I do enjoy the talks that we have.” He closed his eye and Naruto knew that under the mask the man was
smiling. “Now aren’t you going to wish me luck and send me on my way?”

“That’s the real reason, isn’t it?” Naruto muttered. “Fine fine, good hunting.” He sighed. “Hurry back, why don’t you?”

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“Least we don’t have to wait on him.” Naruto muttered as they headed for the training ground. He had been surprised when Sakura and Sasuke had placed the meeting time so early. Not that he had a problem with getting up, just his own wake up routine had been greatly shifted because of it.

His sleep had been recently interrupted and his body felt strange as well. He was aware and resigned to growing pains but the changes to his body especially as he went from day to day were an inconvenience to him. It bothered his mind too and Naruto really needed his mind as clear as it could get.

The problems with his head and body came and went so he could not just open his mouth at his next session and talk about it and get recommended to a proper nurse. It sounded like a nice idea but Naruto knew that a good destressing session or two and his mind would clear.

Still having to train without their sensei sort of made him uneasy as well. It was reassuring having their sensei there. With him Naruto could slip a bit because he knew their teacher was there to stop him if he went too far.

To train on his own with Sakura and Sasuke. He did not want to say it would be more him fine tuning them but that was how it felt to him. So far he had not gone all out in the training sessions. The one on one challenge spars Kakashi-sensei did with them once in a while were the closest he went to going all out on friendly terms.

The perverted old man had easily handled him but Naruto had to put the old pervert at the back of his mind currently.

Over the month they had all gotten stronger. Sakura had showed devastating progress in her mind and body. She might not have noticed but Naruto had. She had changed, her eyes different to how they had been back when he had first seen her again after his return.

Sasuke had changed too there were still things in him Naruto did not understand but he was not there to pry. He was here to train and learn, to relearn himself and grow. To take the weight on his shoulders and move on.

He dropped his pack onto the ground and shrugged out of his jacket. Since they were there and their teacher was there to stop him if he went too far.

“What first?” He asked curiously and Sasuke surprised him by answering first.

“Chakra based exercising then physical and accuracy. Then we’ll finish by small spars. Then we head to the mission office and pick up something we can handle.”

It was actually a pretty good plan. Naruto had no problems with that. He took off his mesh shirt and dropped it over his jacket and did a few stretches to test his mobility. He was about to answer Sasuke when he remembered something very important. With a sheepish smile, he slipped the mesh shirt back on and the jacket and ignored Sakura’s curious look and Sasuke’s suspicious glare.

“Sounds pretty good! Let’s get started.”

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“Did we have to get all the lost animals today?” Sakura muttered as she stretched her hands above her head. There were scratches running up and down her arms and she was covered with a light layer of dust. Not that Sasuke and Naruto were any better. They all had went diving and racing after the lost animals and on several occasions, been thoroughly outsmarted. The only good thing was the additions to their wallets. But of course, that did not do much for their pride.

Forget why someone would have a pet pig, someone needed to explain to him why the thing had been so hard to catch. Along with the ostrich that he was glad Sasuke had to deal with. Naruto had taken one look at its eyes and declined. He knew the look of evil when he saw it.

“Someone needs to put these animals on a leash.” Naruto muttered. “I’m sore and really tired of this. If we aren’t looking for them we’re fixing something broken by them or we’re getting injured by them.”

“These missions are necessary for some reason.” Sasuke muttered. “Least we didn’t have to take the field one.”

“Like hell am I doing that one for that amount of pay.” Sakura snorted. “I’ve seen that field. That would take us half the day and the pay is what… the pay equal to catching a cat? We would have caught six cats, walked four dogs and weeded someone’s garden in that amount of time. I would take that if I was just out the hospital but we’re all fine.” She sniffed. “Just now we’re sore.”

“And dirty.” Naruto pointed out. Sakura’s shoulders slumped and he laughed. “It’s to be expected, we dealt with animals.”

“I want Sensei to come back and save us.” Sakura complained. “He wouldn’t make us do this.”

“Yes he would.” Naruto pointed out. “And he would definitely give us the most hell raising catch missions and he would certainly go pick the most back breaking work for us to do.”

“So should we do something else?” Sasuke wondered. Naruto fell silent as he considered it.

“Let’s wash up first.” He wrinkled his nose. “Then we can go pick.”

“Home or bathhouse?” Sasuke questioned.

“Bathhouse. No way am I stepping in my house looking like I do.” Sakura snorted. “You guys have enough? I have the straight fifteen hundred yen.”

“I have enough.” Sasuke responded. “We just got paid.”

“Yeah but you might have it already saved up. Plans for it.” Sakura waved her hand absentmindedly. “Didn’t want to assume.”

“Let’s just go.” Naruto interrupted. “I wanna get this stuff off me.”

Sakura looked up from where she was working on her section of the plot of land. Since they had started Naruto had fallen into a sort of mood. He was not ignoring them but he was far more interested in the planting than she thought he would have been.

But that just meant his thoughts had pulled him somewhere and based on what she had observed it was probably thoughts of the past that had a hold of him. When Naruto had showed them the temple he had been happy.
But he had been happy at the sea side too and that had nothing to do with his past at least she thought so. Naruto had been amused and a little playful on their mission and humming songs Sakura did not know but she was certain he had not been there before.

Then again Naruto was still a mystery. She felt closer to him, to Sasuke too but she knew had some ways to go before she could be what she wanted to be. Her dreams were fine but sometimes she jolted awake the sight of Naruto’s and Sasuke’s bodies stretched out in front of her fading from her mind.

Orochimaru was still a threat coming for them. That was why they were still in the village when genins like Tenten took missions by herself outside the village.

Not that she was complaining. With the village, the way it was she wanted to stick close and help out. Everyone was tired. Iruka-sensei looked on his last legs every time she saw him, people were constantly working.

On her street half of the things had been fixed, the things that did not really matter. Everyone was thinking more about security rather than simple decorations. She had seen the Uchiha and Nara patrols when she went home at night. She had also seen how worn out those people were looking.

Like everyone else she was worried about the fate of the village. She was worried about the Sandaime. The man that had picked flowers with herself and Ino. The kind man that always had listened, it was hard to think about him in such danger, that he had fought for them made her heart clench.

She was positive in all their hearts was the feeling that they had to do better. But currently she was limited in what she could do.

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“Do you have shame or not? Make up your mind.” Sasuke snorted. Naruto paused in the middle of putting on his jacket to eye the other boy curiously. “One minute you act like us seeing you half naked is a bad thing and the next you don’t have a care in the world. Pick one.”

“Oh.” Naruto bit his lip. He really didn’t care about being seen. Privacy in the group depended on location and mood. He had bathed with the women more than the men. He had bathed with Haku and Ryu too but he did not see anything wrong with that but he knew that was not what Sasuke was talking about. The thing was he was aware that his seal became visible sometimes.

Sasuke and Sakura were observant. If they caught a glimpse of it questions would start. Naruto was not hiding it from them but it was supposed to be a secret and Kakashi-sensei had not told them about it either. Besides what was he going to say to make them understand? The group had possessed some knowledge of what he was and what in entailed and not everyone had been made aware of just what was inside him.

Honestly he would love to spill the beans, especially after the easy way Ero-sennin had just accepted him and helped him out but he did not want to put that on them. Sakura and Sasuke still were not over the whole missing nin thing.

Hell, Naruto knew some the things that he did or said freaked them out. The filter for his mouth seemed to be malfunctioning around them because some things just slipped out when he knew better. But they had fought together, they had seen and heard so much after the attack.

Naruto did not know if it had been the Sandaime’s idea for others to just figure it out but Sakura
and Sasuke had picked up on plenty of irregularities when it came to him. After his fight with Gaara, a normal person would have been hospitalized around two months. He had pulled through after a few days emphasis on few.

He was not normal and you couldn’t wave it away by talking about missing nin training. Sooner or later Sakura and Sasuke were going to get tired about the tight lip policy the other adults had around him and then everyone was going to be in trouble. So, what could he say to Sasuke?

“I’m cool with whatever.” He said slowly and honestly. “But you guys aren’t I mean aren’t civilians and clans really really reserved?” Understanding bloomed in Sasuke’s eyes and Naruto felt relief sweep over him. “I didn’t have anyone tell me about that sort of thing but I know what I would do with them.” He emphasized. “Doesn’t work here. I can’t just take a bath with you and Sakura because we’re team mates. If I was to train in my boxers in the grounds someone would take offense.” He snickered. “If I did half the things I got used to doing the village might collapse in shock. Better safe than sorry, better some modesty and avoid an incident than risk…” He trailed off and Sasuke sighed.

“Were you with missing nins or a nudist group?” He muttered. “Keep your clothes on then. You can ask Sakura about that bath.”

“I don’t mean it like that.” Naruto rolled his eyes. “I meant all of us.”

“All of us doing what?” Sakura’s hair was still up as she walked from the women’s section. “What happened? I swear I finally feel clean, thought the dirt was going to stick to me forever.”

“I’ll let Naruto explain.” Sasuke smiled before he slipped through the door. Naruto rolled his eyes and shrugged at Sakura’s curious look.

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“Finally he’s coming back.” Sasuke muttered. Naruto nodded as he continued to eye the tags. He just could not make himself buy explosion tags at that price, especially when he knew better existed. He shook his head at Sakura and they said goodbye to the shopkeeper and continued on their way.

Naruto glanced back warily but he was surprised that the shopkeeper didn’t immediately sprinkle the ground with salt and the like. He was still watching after them warily so that part had not changed. Or maybe he was holding back on the salt because Sasuke and Sakura were with him.

Whatever it was, it still felt weird to be looked at and treated like most other people. Not everyone but enough shinobi and civilians who depended on shinobi. It still felt weird. He guessed it would always feel weird to him. He had built up what Konoha would be in his mind. He had planned and prepared for how they would look at him when he came back to be Hokage.

He had imagined their obvious distain. Their obvious hatred and he had imagined himself as someone strong enough to shrug it off. His dreams had been sort of big but Konoha was nothing like he had thought it would be, it had changed and Naruto guessed some of the people had too but it was hard to hate something that was not there too.

A flash of something caught his attention and his gaze locked onto the two men that appeared in the middle of the street, he knew them both but he knew that Sasuke knew them better. His gaze shifted in time to see Sasuke spot the two men and his face go carefully blank.

Itachi was Sasuke’s big brother. Naruto was not sure about the other man’s relation to Sasuke but
he looked like an Uchiha and he had been the one to find them in the forest after the attack and fight with Sasuke.

He watched them both as they approached, just before they reached them both of their gazes flickered to them. Naruto watched the reserved almost resigned expression cross over Itachi’s face when the man spotted Sasuke before his gaze shifted to Naruto and Sakura. Naruto watched the smile come to the man’s face before he nodded at them.

Naruto’s gaze shifted to the other man’s in time to see the sympathetic look cross his face as he looked at Itachi before it smoothed away to polite interest for when he turned back to Naruto and Sakura. Of course, the changes of expression in both men had been quick. If Naruto had not had a few years of needing to read expressions as quickly as possible, he would have never spotted it in time. He would have missed the unguarded expressions and only seen the polite façade. But he had spent some time looking past polite facades.

“Hi there.” The man greeted as he smiled at them. “Finished a mission there Sasuke?”

“We’re going to go meet up with Kakashi.” Sasuke responded with a shrug. Naruto guessed he was being a little too obvious in his curiosity because Sasuke’s gaze flicked to him quickly. “Oh yeah… Sakura, Naruto this is Uchiha Shisui and Uchiha Itachi.” He nodded towards the two men reluctantly. “I don’t know if they had introduced themselves before or if you remember the hospital that much Naruto.”

Shisui had picked them up, waited outside for them and had brought in Itachi. Naruto remembered at least that much. He nodded before he glanced at Itachi. Itachi’s gaze was resting on Sasuke and although Itachi’s face was not showing that much emotion Naruto just knew the man was holding back saying anything.

“Hi.” Sakura smiled before she offered her hand to Shisui. “Thank you.”

“Wait for what?” Naruto mumbled. Sakura rolled her eyes at him before she shook Itachi’s hand too. The man looked amused.

“I’m glad your team was the one to find them.” Sakura smiled at Shisui. “Thank you for backing up my team.” Naruto exchanged a smirk with Sasuke because to hear Sakura take responsibility for them like them… there was nothing wrong with it. Naruto actually liked it. Sakura had changed a lot since the Chuunin Selection Exams, she took charge more. She worked harder, she was stronger and she was working on being stronger and the best part was that she looked out and cared for them. They were hers. Not that he would forget the way she had cried on his and Sasuke’s shoulders anytime soon.

He doubted Sasuke would forget it anytime soon either. Sakura’s tears were a reminder to him of what he still had. Iruka-sensei’s tears were the same. Ryu used to ask a question fairly often and it had always spooked him whenever Ryu brought it up. “Who will mourn you when you fall?” A question that many in the group had not wanted to answer.

Naruto knew why no one had wanted to answer it now. No one wanted to think about people left behind like that. Sakura’s tears, Iruka-sensei’s tears he had people who cared for him again. He could not waste that. Next time he had to do better. Missing nins were already dead men running. It was their fate when they chose to run but it was different now and death should not be so inevitable for him.

“All my team did was pick them up.” Shisui laughed before he scratched his curly hair. He exchanged a sheepish look with Itachi who only raised an eyebrow at him. “I didn’t do much
“We’re thankful for that.” Sakura answered and Naruto got to watch the amused look go through the other man’s eyes before he gave a small huff.

“I’ll take your thanks then. So, you’re off to meet Kakashi? What time did you say?” He glanced up at the sun in the sky. “You might be… a little early? Isn’t he out the village?”

“Yes but he has to go to the Jounin lounge when he comes back.” Sakura answered before Sasuke eyed her. “Well he usually goes straight there after a mission so we’re going to wait there and cut him off.”

“Least that way we won’t be stuck in the sun until he finally shows his face.” Naruto muttered. Sasuke hummed an agreement and Naruto eyed the two men. “What are you two doing?”

“We were supposed to go to the Jounin lounge and meet up with someone.” Itachi answered before he crossed his arms and eyed Shisui. “We were planning to go in a few minutes.”

“But…” Naruto asked before he caught Shisui’s light wince. “There are still missions being given out every which way right?” He asked and nodded at the man’s chuckle. “And you’re tired.”

“Exactly Naruto-kun.” Itachi tilted his head at him as he eyed Shisui. “We’ve been working a lot lately.”

“Just two hours to myself. Not asking for much.” Shisui muttered before he stretched. “Fine, I’ll go already.” He glanced at Itachi. “You have a Jounin jacket you know.”

“I’m aware.”

“Then why don’t you ever wear the thing?” Shisui poked at his own Jounin jacket before he pointed at Itachi’s plain black clothes and silver arm guards. “Wear it!”

“I’d rather not.” Itachi turned around to give Shisui his back and Naruto’s attention was drawn to the short sword strapped to the man’s back before it fell to the man’s ponytail that bounced against the sword at Itachi’s turn. Shisui fell into step behind Itachi before he glanced at them and waved.

“Since we’re going the same place we might as well go together.” He smiled. Naruto shrugged and followed along before Sakura’s light touch to his wrist made him glance at her. Her knowing look at Itachi made him roll his eyes.

“What makes you think I’d only find one attractive?” He hissed softly so Sasuke wouldn’t hear. “I’m not going to trip over every long-haired person I see.” Sakura just snorted before she sped up to catch up to Shisui and Itachi. When she reached them she turned around to stick her tongue out at him. The silliness of it made Naruto snort with laughter.

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“For grounding us so long we should make him go on a C-rank right away.” Sasuke stated as they entered the Jounin lounge. “We shouldn’t give him any breaks. He knew exactly what kind of missions we were going to have to deal with in his absence.”

“Give Sensei a break.” Sakura sighed before she nudged Sasuke and Naruto out of the way so she could properly enter. “Let’s at least give him a few seconds to rest and get new clothes before we drag him across the country for a mission. I want a proper mission too but I want one worth it with a team ready for anything.”
“Sasuke has a pretty good point Sakura-chan.” Naruto said as his gaze bounced around the Jounin lounge. Plenty of Jounins sitting in chairs, or on tables or on the couches or on the window sills or on the beams in the roof. Naruto was more impressed on how everyone acted like nothing was strange in the lounge. Whenever he went to visit Iruka-sensei everyone was so correct. In chairs and busy but with decorum.

There was no difference between the Jounins and the brats currently in the academy when it came down to relaxing. There was the slight feeling of wariness in the air. A feeling that had intensified with their arrival and had not gone away although everyone was acting like nothing was amiss.

Naruto wondered if Sakura and Sasuke had caught it. No eyes had gone to them when they had entered but everyone had known and tensed at their arrival in their own ways. It had not gone away with the arrival of Shisui and Itachi either.

Naruto trailed after Sakura as she made her way towards a fairly empty couch while he kept his eyes on the two older Uchihas. He was behind on his politics when it came to Konoha and no one had seen fit to properly teach him things he did not know. He had sort of suspected that some would prefer him ignorant of the deeper politics in Konoha.

Still he had never thought so many shinobi would be so tense in their own village in their own space. That thought had barely run through his head before he sighed at himself and rolled his eyes. Of course, they were on edge and paranoid. The attack had just happened, they had no real orders, Orochimaru had insulted them all and on top of that they felt vulnerable.

Sakura had taken the edge of the couch with Sasuke immediately taking the other end. Naruto sighed before he sat in the middle. He was aware of Itachi standing by the nearest window as Shisui went to a paper covered desk that a Jounin sat at his head wrapped with bandages, Naruto had the strangest feeling the longer that he looked at the man that the man was not injured. It made him curious.

He reluctantly looked away from Shisui to the couch facing the one they were on. The lazy looking man facing him looked vaguely familiar until it clicked that Naruto had stood next to him during the Second Exam. Shikamaru’s Jounin sensei. The man looked bored his cigarette unlit as he flipped through the report in his hands while muttering.

Naruto’s eyes flicked over the man lingered at his waist before his gaze flicked up to the man. For some reason the man sitting there as he fumbled through his report reminded him of something but it was hard to focus enough to bring the memory forward. Instead he could only watch as the man sat there across of him and feel a bit of contentment.

It was rude to just look at the man’s face as he tried to place his feelings so Naruto’s gaze dropped to the man’s report instead. He guessed looking at it would be just as rude but the last thing he wanted to do was give Sakura or even Sasuke ammunition.

Sasuke’s smirk when they had run into Kurenai-sensei after a mission had made him feel embarrassed. The woman only had wanted to ask about his injuries and her relief had made him feel a bit light headed. Having people show concern for him like that, it made him feel good. Still the look Sasuke had given him afterwards… the bastard had not said anything but Naruto just knew he had gotten the wrong idea.

His gaze fell on the upsided down picture and he frowned slightly before he tilted his head to get a better look. The report Asuma-sensei was doing on missing nins and tracking. Naruto frowned on the picture and he spoke before he knew it. “He’s already dead.”
‘Excuse me?’ Asuma-sensei jerked his head up and his eyes met Naruto’s before it went back to the report. “Did you say something?”

Naruto bit his lip before he sighed. He had already put his foot in his mouth. Might as well go the whole way. He got up from his seat between Sakura and Sasuke and took the empty space next to Asuma-sensei and pointed to the shinobi on the page. “He’s already dead.”

“I see.” Asuma-sensei blinked before he ripped out the page from the report and tossed it towards the garbage. Naruto blinked himself because he had expected something more. Questions or something but the man had just accepted it and moved on. The stillness in the area alerted Naruto and he glanced around as he became aware of how silent the station had become. No one was looking in their direction however.

“Yeah.” Naruto muttered. The man next to him hummed before he started flipping through the reports. Naruto jolted when the report was shoved in his face.

“How about him? You know him?” He asked and Naruto carefully looked at the report.

It took a bit of imagination before he was able to put the picture together and he nodded. “He had a scar here.” He traced the picture by the man’s nose. “He’s dead too.”

“Really.” Asuma-sensei murmured. He did not rip out the page but instead he tapped his finger against the photo. “Say do you know where he is buried? General location, a country or a place.”

Naruto stilled as he recalled the sound of shattering ice, the feel of cold blood on his cheek and the cold look in Haku’s gaze as around them water glistened in the morning light. “There was nothing to bury.” He said softly. Asuma-sensei nodded slowly as he tapped his finger against the report.

“Ahh another bounty gone.” Asuma-sensei muttered. “Would have been nice if we could at least retrieve the item.”

Naruto bit his lip as Asuma-sensei’s hand crept to the top of the page. “Wait.” He said softly. “He had someone with him, a subordinate maybe they have it.”

“A follower?” Asuma-sensei mused as his finger tapped the page again. “It is a possibility. A small one.”

“He left with everything he had.” Naruto recalled. It had been Haku’s show of mercy. More of a dismissal anyway but he recalled that much. “He wasn’t that well known. He could have been picked up.” Naruto considered it. “Or he could have hidden.”

“Found one!” Sakura’s voice made Naruto look up again. She had snagged a list of missions and had apparently been flipping through them. “A perfect C-rank. We’ll be helping out in a temple.” Sasuke sighed loudly before he slumped lower. Sakura rolled her eyes before she leaned forward to pass Naruto the sheet. Naruto eyed the top of the sheet where C-rank was indeed marked but there was a huge question mark next to it. Sakura gave him an innocent look when he eyed her so he just snorted and continued to read.

A smile came to his face when he realized that there was a place nearby that he certainly knew by name and they had some good sweets too. Just a simple border town but he had passed through several times. He gave another glance at the question mark on the page before he shrugged at Sakura. “I’m in, I always wanted to know about the humble side of life.” He joked.

“I don’t mind going undercover.” Sasuke muttered lazily as he leaned forward enough to slip the paper from Naruto’s hands. He scanned it before he eyed Sakura. “But I am wary about why a
temple would need shinobi help C-rank or not.” He tapped the paper. “And with our luck…”

“I don’t know much about temples but I’m certain it will be a straightforward job.” Sakura answered before she snatched the paper away. “Maybe there is someone who is a threat to them and their ceremonies or something.”

“And they need shinobi?” Sasuke asked with a raised brow. “We need to do more research on who they are before we even consider taking this.”

“Stop jumping to conclusions.” Sakura rolled her eyes. “It’ll be just fine.” She stressed. “It’s probably something easy, like sniffing out a traitor or someone selling import temple secrets or even finding a spy.”

“Sakura-chan just what do you think a temple is?” Naruto snorted. “You’re talking about it like if temples have politics in there.”

“If there is a head…” Sakura began with a glare.

“We don’t even know…” Naruto pointed out before Asuma-sensei cleared his throat. They all glanced at him. He leaned forward with a smile.

“I know a bit about temples and temple politics.” He grinned. “Sakura here does have a good point.”

“Huh.” Sasuke snorted, Naruto rolled his eyes at the victorious look Sakura gave them both.

“I have a friend.” Asuma-sensei confided with a grin. “He’s a powerful monk and sometimes even they need shinobi help in order to keep order. Of course, they help us too.” He grinned. “My friend is really powerful. Almost as strong as me.” He winked at Naruto. “Maybe stronger but I’m sure I’m stronger. We used to belong to the same team for a while.”

Naruto eyed him for a few seconds before his gaze dipped again to Asuma-sensei’s waist. Sasuke started the conversation again but Naruto just sat back and thought to himself.

A shifting in the room alerted him before Kakashi-sensei hopped in the window nearest to Itachi. Both men eyed each other before Kakashi-sensei landed on the floor. Itachi had not moved instead he closed his eyes and resumed leaning against the wall.

Kakashi-sensei’s eye found them. Naruto watched the amusement in the man’s eye before he chuckled. “You decided to lay in wait?”

“You had to come here eventually.” Sasuke pointed out as he eyed the man. Kakashi-sensei did not even have a pack with him just a few extra weapon pouches.

“I sure did, didn’t I?” Kakashi-sensei looked amused. Naruto did not realize the conversation between Asuma-sensei and Sakura had continued until he overheard Sakura’s giggle.

“There are plenty of mysteries in the shinobi world.” Asuma-sensei laughed as he brought out his lighter. There was a loud cough from the ceiling and just as smoothly as Asuma-sensei had brought out the lighter he chuckled and replaced it. “Plenty of monk and Priestess fighter out there. They have to protect what’s theirs too and their style is different.” He tapped the arm of the chair. “Different teachings, more spiritual but they can be just as strong and scary as shinobi.”

“Priestess.” Sakura trailed off. Naruto was surprised at the way her gaze landed on him. “Naruto! Could Alya fight too?”
Naruto snorted before he was able to help it. “Alya wasn’t a combat priestess Sakura-chan.” He chuckled. “That’s really funny.” He laughed. “I’ve seen combat priestesses.” He admitted. “But the mannerisms of those who are combat monks and priestesses are completely different.” He announced with a smile. It had been something he had been taught so that he could quickly place those in the temple that posed the greatest threat.

He got to his feet and gathered enough chakra. A bunshin of himself appeared and he ignored the silence that happened around them as he eyed himself. The bunshin concentrated with visible effort before it transformed.

The smoke had barely cleared before Naruto winced and shook his head. The bunshin transformed again and Naruto nodded in satisfaction as the woman came into view. He had placed her in the simple dress she had worn after she joined them.

The Bunshin of Alya closed her eyes before she did a small bow. She turned her hands over to show the smooth palms that Naruto remembered. Before he was able to help himself, he took the hand in his and his eyes slid shut at the feeling that he remembered.

He reopened his eyes to look up at the grey eyes that he had known. “Combat? Fighter?” He laughed softly. “Not her.”

XxX

Naruto’s transformation had caused a reaction in the lounge. Shisui who had been sitting sighing as he ignored the papers placed by him went pale immediately. Itachi had not moved but his eyes went blank. Several others in the room had stopped what they were doing and Kakashi had felt his mouth dry.

“Hot.” Genma drawled before he leaned over the couch Sasuke and Sakura were on. “Now that’s some religion I can get behind.” He chuckled. Kakashi had to give the man props because the rest of them were unable to move, unable to react. For a very good reason.

“Now that you say that… I wonder if he had a vow of chastity.” Asuma muttered. “I can’t remember but I know not everyone has that vow. Not every temple has that sort of thing.”

“That’s disgusting.” Sasuke muttered as he pressed against the edge of the couch as if he wanted to get even further away from Genma.

“I can’t believe you two.” Sakura looked disappointed. Genma’s surprised glance towards her made the girl look away.

“ Totally didn’t miss that sort of talk.” Naruto muttered dryly. The bunshin disappeared and he shook his head. “ Seriously? Those sorts of things are off limits.”

“You need to learn more about the world.” Genma chuckled as he nibbled on his senbon. “And she’s cute. I like that sort of thing.” Kakashi was glad his genins were not looking in his direction because he knew his body language alone would call Genma out as the liar he was.

He wondered if Naruto had managed to see it. See that the look in Genma’s eyes had not been anything more than curiosity. But there was more to it than that. Naruto had never done that before. When it would have made sense to make clones to comfort himself when he was alone. When it would have made sense to cope with the loss.

Naruto had transformed into one of Zabuza’s group to do something he could have easily done with words. It was peculiar. Genma and Asuma had saved them although he doubted Asuma knew just
how much.

“We’re picking the mission.” Sakura muttered.

“And we’re going to get snacks and neither of you can ask for us to bring anything back.” Naruto muttered dryly.

“Okay.” Genma chuckled as he stood properly. Kakashi glanced back to Shisui to see that Itachi was standing by his side his hand lightly resting on his shoulder as colour slowly came back to Shisui’s face. Shisui… always too kind.

His mind was still on Naruto’s transformation, a slim woman long black hair and grey eyes. He knew what he had been remembering. He knew exactly what Shisui had recalled.

“Let’s go Kakashi-sensei!” Sakura called as she got to her feet. Sasuke and Naruto fell into step behind her and part of Kakashi was amused at the sight but another part of him was aware of the atmosphere in the lounge.

He glanced around at those in the station, at Itachi whose gaze was not on his team leaving but Shisui who was looking shaken. To the others who also had been hiding behind masks on that trip. He met Genma’s gaze before he looked back to his team. Kakashi sighed heavily before he started to follow them yet he could not shake the image of the same woman Naruto had said was not a combat fighter. And remembered the sword she had wielded expertly. The way she had held her own against Shisui of all people. He thought it over as he followed his team and wondered why the woman Alya and Haku had lied.
The one that holds my leash

Dawn always came so gently in the village. The sun came up slowly, the air changed and the village came alive. Naruto opened one eye to glance at the changing atmosphere before he firmly closed it again and focused on his breathing. The metal of the roof was not the comfiest thing to sit on but he had sat on and slept on worse.

Besides, outside always brought a sense of calm to it. He had gotten up early and instead of training his body he had decided to go for focusing and relaxing it. Simple breathing techniques as he relaxed his body and tried to relax his mind.

Except that had not been going to well. It was a constant problem. The amount that he was sweating Naruto swore it had doubled over the last month. He usually ran hot body wise but sweating was something he did only when he pushed himself physically and the little D-ranks and cute C-ranks they did were not pulling anything from him. His own training did make him tired and sweaty but he had not changed it in any huge way. He honestly should not be sweating the amount he was sweating.

The changes in his body was why he had decided to sit down and get meditation down. Feel his body out and relearn it again because obviously, something was going on. He was not sick, he knew that. He had done a double take in the mirror the other day when he had walked past it naked because Naruto had been tracking the progress and the development of his body. He had poked at the slight swellings before he had shrugged it away. It had gone away quickly enough so he had to

Forgive me if I babble a little bit but i’ve wanted to write this particular chapter for soooo long. I had it planned and named since like... chapter 4 and i’ve been so eager to get here (a little sad we took so long but I’m okay with it now, mostly) I didn't get to touch on everything I wanted to here but it is okay because the things I wanted to touch on but didn't get to touch on fully I'll touch on sooner or later. It's important but not really drastically important to anyone but me (and those still carrying a grudge since chapter 2)

I got... work done this week lol. I did what I considered as my quota this week (a chapter and a little) I have tons to do this week which includes tweaking the outline for the next arc so yeah hopefully i get lots done there. But we hit 500kudos! And that's amazing in itself, like wow seriously thanks darlings this fic has already gone beyond what I expected.

I also wanted to let you know where we are storywise, I'm planning on taking a break after the next arc which will end at chapter 50. So whenever I get to 50 I'm taking a well deserved break because we'll be 1/4 of the way storywise. I'll figure out the technicalities of my break as we hit december, but we're over 200K and 500Kudos and honestly, i'm just satisfied at how things are going. So sorry for rambling a bit.

Also... if parts of this chapter bother you I'm so sorry I wanted to make things a bit clearer with out stepping out of line. If you don't catch everything that is fine too, things will get clearer as we go alone. So thanks and see you next week! (hopefully)
guess his body was doing strange things.

Still concentrating and focusing was far harder than it should be which told him he should be doing it far often. Another reason why he had picked the roof. He took a deep breath and held it as he counted in his head until he reached five before he released and started counting again.

It took him a few minutes but Naruto ignored the village waking up around him as he focused and focused. Eventually he was able to feel the light tingle of relief he used to reach. It had taken a while to get there but he had managed it. Tension he had not known he carried made his shoulders relax. Naruto smiled before he chuckled to himself his eyes closed tightly. Doing this made him recall the past and people he missed but in a good way. The good parts to him.

XxX

He had gotten a bit carried away in the whole thing. Naruto got to his feet and stretched and a groan escaped him. A quick glance at the sky told that yes it was still early. He looked around the tops of the village that he could see before his gaze went to the Hokage mountain. His eyes lingered on the Sandaime’s stone face before he hopped off the roof to his go to his apartment.

He easily slid back through the window before he stretched. His feet felt nice on his floor. Going barefoot onto the roof had not exactly been a smart plan but he had wanted as little things tying him down. The only thing he had allowed himself had been a loose pants.

His stomach rumbled and Naruto rubbed it before he grinned. He had things to eat that was a good thing. Being to eat whenever hungry. He scanned his table and pretended not to see the huge basket on the centre with a ridiculous bow that from where he stood looked as though it had puppies on it.

Three guesses who had left it and Naruto did not even need that many guesses. He walked past the table to open his cupboard and chuckled at the carrot and potato that lay in wait for him. With a smile, he took them from the cupboard and placed them in the basket. He spotted the cup ramen and felt his stomach rejoice before he spotted the other items. He shook his head even as he took out the takeout breakfast. The smell of eggs and rice was so strong that his mouth watered as his stomach rumbled again. He guessed ramen could be later.

XxX

Naruto played with his keychain, his thumb stroking over and over the small dog that he now knew to be Pakkun as he patiently waited outside the administration office for Iruka-sensei. It was before office hours but the man was already there.

The village needed to get back on its feet if only for the sake of those picking up the slack. Naruto had just taken to lightly patting the keychain Pakkun when the door opened and an exhausted looking Iruka-sensei steepped out. He brightened up when he spotted Naruto but it was not that much.

The man as happy to see him but he had obviously pushed to his limits. Naruto tucked away his key even as the man wrapped him in a tight hug. Naruto hugged him back just as tightly and held on. It was not part of their routine but it was what the man seemed to need.

“Sorry Naruto.” Iruka-sensei yawned. “I just needed something good to jump start the day.” The man easily released him with a pause to ruffle Naruto’s hair. He looked so exhausted that even his smile did nothing for the look in his eyes. Iruka-sensei dragged a hand through his own hair and sighed heavily. “There’s still no change and the council is trying all they can but they simply are not the Hokage.” He sighed.
“What are they doing?” Naruto asked curiously.

“Trying to figure stuff out.” Iruka-sensei muttered. “Would be nice if they could come to an actual decision instead of running around like chickens with their heads cut off. We need orders proper orders and agreements and leaving everything up to them…” He sighed before he forcibly shook his head. “Let’s not talk about that.” He smiled. “Team Seven is getting plenty of missions done aren’t they!”

“So is everybody else.” Naruto pointed out.

Iruka-sensei just patted him on the head. “But we’re all helping the village anyway we can and Team Seven is bringing back plenty of good reports… and recommendations.” Iruka-sensei’s face looked exhausted again. “Have you eaten? Let’s not think about food for a while. I’ll pay for…” He reached in his pocket to pull out his purse. “Three bowls of ramen for you and not a bowl more.” Naruto’s heart leapt and he grinned.

“Let’s go!” He laughed and it took Iruka-sensei only a few seconds before the man chuckled and ruffled his hair again.

XxX

Kakashi sighed as he dragged off his shirt. His nose wrinkled at the smell of blood and sweat on him, his sweat but not his blood. The missions came hard and fast and maybe for others it would be difficult to switch from one mode to the other. For Kakashi it was easy and simple to go from a hit list A-rank mission to missions with his cute teams.

He felt a little tired because he had pushed himself to return back before too much time had passed and he just knew several Jounin missions would be waiting for him when he was finished with his team. As the days dragged on he had less time to himself.

Only time he got to relax and reread his book was on missions with his team but most of the time when he was with them he didn’t want to. He did pull out the book in order to give them some privacy. So, he would not be intruding on their little conversations with each other.

The looks of wonder on their faces on some of their missions as some of them saw things for the first time and of course the soft contemplation on Naruto’s face as he relearned things. They were making memories as Team Seven and Kakashi had to say he was enjoying it.

He glanced at the sky again before he grabbed his towel. He had just come from a mission but he would be taking his little team on one immediately. After he cleansed himself properly. Naruto for certain would not blink at the lingering scent of blood. Kakashi had seen him in action after all and the casual way the boy ignored the blood on him until the battle was done told him for certain that Naruto understood the hazards of shinobi life. Whether Sakura and Sasuke would be the same or at least similar remained to be seen. Still Kakashi sort of liked them how they were he wanted them to progress at their own pace. Make leaps and bounds when they were ready.

Which of course meant he should still try his best to keep the paths ahead of them reasonably clean. They would become incredible shinobi, all of them and he was going to enjoy every step of the journey.

XxX

Morning found Team Seven at the village gates checking themselves to make sure that they had everything. Sakura was not bothering to hide her yawns as she finished checking checking her pack. Sasuke
had given up on not pretending to be out of it and sat by the gate as he slowly sipped whatever it was that he had in his secondary drinking container. For his sake, Naruto hoped it was coffee.

The sun had not even come up yet, dawn was still a distance away and the chill around him Naruto was used to but that did not mean it was not serious. Kakashi-sensei had an apologetic air around him but Naruto had already spotted the amusement in the man’s eye when they had met up.

Yet another mission. Another rush, another trip around the countryside. He had to miss his morning training but he had managed a few moments to himself to breathe and think. Clear his head and of course… give thanks.

That small thing made the outside seem so much brighter. It made everything a little better. Naruto had not forgotten the lessons, the teachings. It was just now that he felt he could do them honestly and clearly.

Kakashi-sensei tilted his head at him clearly amused at Naruto. Naruto scoffed and turned away to stretch. He was ready to set out but only when they were ready. When the dog had dropped off the note about the mission he had gotten ready immediately.

One thing made him curious, something he would have to find time to talk to their Sensei alone about. Because when they were knocking about the village mostly aimless and doing D-rank after D-rank Naruto got to observe things. He got to see people and teams going about their business and there was something about their team and just maybe the other teams that didn’t add up but it could wait.

“We have a long way to go.” Kakashi-sensei said cheerfully. “Everyone ready now?”

“Yeah I have everything.” Sakura closed her bag with a small snap. Sasuke sighed before he tilted his cup back and finished everything in it. He got to his feet with a small lurch before he also nodded.

“Naruto?” Naruto was startled the way Kakashi-sensei turned to him. “Ready?”

Well he had been standing with one foot over the gate line the entire time. Naruto eyed his sensei before he nodded too. Their sensei nodded in return before he looked behind them. Naruto followed his gaze all the way back into the village and up to the Hokage mountain. Naruto’s gaze went to the Sandaime’s rock face and lingered there before he looked back to their Sensei who was looking out the village.

“Let’s get going then.” Kakashi-sensei said before he stepped past Naruto. Naruto let Sakura and Sasuke pass him before he shot another look at the Hokage mountain then he followed his team.

XX

Travelling early morning with his team, Kakashi was getting used to it. There was nothing really weird about it when it came down to it of course. He was used to travel, he was used to early mornings, late nights. His career as a shinobi gave him no real preference for what time to work but setting out early before dawn with his team…

Having the only sound be the sound of them moving and in some areas, not even that. Him taking the lead or him dropping back and watching them taking the lead…

It was when they had reached a patch of long grass that his gaze had lingered on their backs as they raced through the dew. They all had different ways of moving. They were still genins although not for much longer, they were growing, they were changing.
It was when Naruto leapt over the last area of the grass sending dew flying that Kakashi’s gaze lingered on his back. He guessed Naruto was still unaware of how he looked at times like these. Early morning travels… late night rushing back.

He guessed Naruto did not know of the calm, the peace that spread across his face when they ran. The first time Kakashi had tried not to look too closely, it felt private, as though somehow by watching he was somehow intruding on a memory, on a moment.

The soft smile that came to his mouth that Kakashi would swear Naruto did not know came. Whenever they picked up speed a smile would form, soft, sweet and it was obviously that some part of Naruto’s mind lingered on the past.

He had adapted fairly well to them but there were still instances that caught Kakashi’s attention that he wondered if Naruto knew that he did it. The way he surveyed the spots they stopped. The stance he took on watch, the loneliness that came to his face when there was only silence around the fire.

But there was more to it than that. His smile at the simple things. Finding water, getting lucky on the mission. The way that he was so respectful but unaware that he was doing it. It kept Kakashi’s gaze on him after all what else would he show.

He got reports on Naruto still. Honestly there were so many things he wanted to know but he knew he had to wait to find out. So many things he wanted to know about. So many things he felt that he could not pry into. After all, they held secrets too. Did not stop him from wondering.

Still Naruto’s sheer happiness over the simple things stuck with him it was hard to dismiss it. The way Naruto smiled at the simple things. The deep relief at things Kakashi did not understand, the respect for other things that had to come from somewhere.

The boy was a mystery. Kakashi had no idea what those missing nins had been training Naruto for. He tried to guess, he was still trying but all he saw was a boy, a little bruised, a little battered, obviously hurt but still a boy.

The scent of the wind changed, less cloying and became fresher and easier to breathe. Kakashi watched the delight grow in Naruto’s gaze and felt his questions grow. He just wanted to know more.

But if he was to think about it, maybe Naruto just enjoyed the signs of life.

XxX

Naruto had plenty of thoughts on his mind that did not concern his mission. He guessed it was because the morning was so beautiful. Mornings like that had not been rare for them. Them moved around simply because they had to but plenty of times they had shaken off their pursuers long enough to enjoy life. Or to heal and rest.

Maybe that was why he thought of Ryu so much. Until Ryu, Naruto had never met someone like him. Alya had left everything behind her bringing only her skills but Ryu had been different. He had lived and breathed his beliefs and it had made him stronger.

It had been difficult in the beginning to see someone who spoke about life and gratitude fight so easily and viciously but Ryu had earned his place in the group. It had been strange that the person he had been closest too was, well Kasumi but Naruto, now that he could look back saw that they
had plenty in common.

After all they had all suffered but there was a difference to it. Still, Naruto had no idea how he had forgotten how peaceful it could be. Or maybe he had not been ready to feel that again.

He had gotten caught up in the loss of the people around him. Maybe if it had not been so sudden, if it had been bit by bit he would have been able to cope easier but not so suddenly. He had not been ready. But he was getting there.

Naruto laughed even as below him Sakura and Sasuke mumbled curses towards their sensei. The man had just told them to run up the large tree trunk. Naruto had wondered about the mission but their sensei was the Jounin there so he had leapt to the closest tree trunk that was so thick and huge it made Naruto wonder how old it was before he began the climb.

When he finally reached the top, he was unable to speak. Morning had come but there was more than that, below him a sea of green, yellow and red. His hand grabbed the top of the tree to steady himself and he used his other hand to shade his eyes as he looked around.

Fire country in the morning from such a high point. Naruto had seen many things. He had gone many places but such a thing… such a sight. He could see so far. He felt so small. He heard Sakura’s gasp when she reached the top and Sasuke’s silence as he reached as well.

It was beautiful, it was perfect. All far as the eye could see, he felt his eyes itch and Naruto snorted to himself before he wiped away the little tears. It was good to focus on the precious little things but it was good to be humble too. He guessed he had forgotten that.

Naruto had no idea how long he and the others stood there looking around at everything before they went back to the ground where Kakashi-sensei was waiting. Still when he reached the ground and they started to make plans to take off again, continue the mission. Naruto lightly touched the inside of his sensei’s wrist before they could take off again. No words could come to him so he smiled instead.

The man’s eye widened before it closed, an obvious smile back. Naruto breathed a sigh of relief before they took off into the trees again. Their minds back on their mission.

XxX

Kakashi-sensei had taken the lead again, slightly deviating from the path that they should be taking. Which could only mean one thing. They were going to stop for the night. For certain Naruto was used to traveling in the dark of the night, Kakashi-sensei as well but Sakura was not and neither was Sasuke.

What they had done in the exam was not enough to prepare them for frankly everything. Shinobi worked best at night but genins were never taught how to really treat the night. Or at least not the ones in Konoha.

The night was a cloak to be worn, or sometimes something to tread carefully through. It was beautiful, deadly and never to be underestimated. Travelling through the night, it was like playing hide and seek. Safe was ‘home’ wherever that was. Except there were plenty of others playing hide and seek and you had to figure out if to avoid them or whether to have them on your team. Dangerous but still heady.

The evening shadows made the trees look menacing. Naruto nodded to himself when Kakashi-sensei signalled for them to stop. His head turned to where he could hear water rushing by
something. Out of the corner of his eye he was able to see clear water. He glanced at his sensei, had he sniffed it out or something?

XxX

“Oh my.” Raiya choked as she stood waist deep in the water. Naruto looked up from where he had been slowly getting accustomed to the water’s temperature. “Haku… you’re a… I see.” A flush ran up her neck before she looked up. “You’re a guy guy.”

“You had your doubts?” Haku looked amused not offended as he used a shell to pour water over his head.

“Don’t let the cute face fool you.” Kasumi chuckled before she made an exaggerated look in Haku’s direction. “I understand why our fearless leader needs a few breaks now and again.” She chuckled. “Haku’s so cute and slender and delicate. Then of course there is that… not delicate at all.”

“So that’s why I was invited to bathe with you?” Haku sighed before he sunk into the hot springs. “This feels so nice. I don’t even care.”

“Everyone is allowed to make mistakes.” Alya tried to reassure Raiya as the woman sat on one of the rocks. “It’s okay that you assumed.”

“I knew he was a guy… but I didn’t think he was...” Raiya broke off in a sigh. “I still have a long way to go it seems.” She sank back into the water with a groan

“Isn’t Haku the misleading one?” Kaya yawned before she turned to glance at Ryu... “And he’s not the only one with more than a cute face.”

“Why am I here.” Ryu groaned.

“Why it’s so pretty.” Kasumi murmured before she wrapped her arms around Ryu’s neck pressing herself against him and driving a yelp from the man. “It’s doesn’t suit your cute face at all Ryu!”

“Let go!” Ryu yelped before he wiggled again. “Naruto’s right there!”

“Well if you wanted to do something you should have just said so.” Kasumi purred. Ryu snorted before he splashed water in her direction.

“Kasumi...” Haku said softly. His eyes reopened as he watched the woman carefully. “I’ve been thinking this for a while but... you’re not really interested in this sort of thing outside of a job, are you?”

The hot spring fell silent. Naruto glanced around wondering just what he was missing before Kasumi chuckled low in her throat before she crossed to Haku.

“That’s right...” She breathed. “I don’t. it’s just work really and that is what makes me perfect. I won’t get distracted, I won’t get hung up over foolishness. It is just me doing my job no matter the costs. Then it is done… and I come back to you and Zabuza-sama.” She glanced back at Ryu and grinned. “Of course, if it is for Ryu-kun I’ll try anything... it won’t last but I’ll give him all my love.”

“Before you poison me you mean.” Ryu muttered as he sank until only his chin was above water. “The only love I have is for my gods Kasumi as much fun as I have watching the rest of you... everything I have is already dedicated.”
“Alya…” Haku said softly. “You too right?”

“All I have is my dedication.” Alya smiled. “I don’t feel the way you do.” The two of them considered each other before Haku’s gaze fell on him.

“You’ll understand when you’re older.” Haku smiled. “You have a long way to go and plenty of things to learn.” Haku’s fingers gently flicked water in his direction. “Before you step into our world Naruto-kun.”

“Don’t make it sound all scary and mysterious. He’s just going to learn about life.” Kaya laughed. “Real life… and love.”

“Wrong place for a child to learn about love.” Raiya grunted before she heaved herself out of the water. She grabbed her shirt from the ground and used it on her upper body before it fell to her lap. “But he’s better off with us who knows what those idiots would teach him.”

“Raiya… Ryu-kun and I are men. Naruto too.” Haku chuckled. “We’re supposed to bathe with the others.”

“But we would rather you with us!” There was a large squeal and splash from Kasumi as she glomped Alya. “Don’t you agree?”

“You’re all something else.” Haku sighed. “I’m going to miss this place.”

“Me too, hot springs, good game and food.” Ryu sighed before he tilted his head back. “So far this is the best place we’ve run to.” He glanced at Naruto and winked his eyes were always a fascinating thing to see, black in the very centre of the pupils, gold rings followed by ivory and they changed like a cat. “It’s a good place to rest.” Ryu smiled.

XxX

Naruto woke with a dry throat and the sound of laughter fading from his head. He remained curled up for a few moments, let his breathing settle before he sat up. the fire still crackled on, the traps around their makeshift camp were still set but he just couldn’t breathe.

He glanced around at the small camp, at his sensei, Sakura and Sasuke and felt a longing for a much bigger camp where something was always going. Where there was more life.

His body felt tense so he rolled his shoulders and winced at the tight feeling. He took a deep breath and released it before he gave up and used as much stealth as he could to creep away from the camp. He followed the sound of water until the campfire was a small flickering behind him.

When he stepped into the small clearing Naruto felt tension leave him. The stream would not have been enough but the little pool before him. That would work. He slid off his shirt and dropped it on the grass, his shirt following before he waded into the cold water.

He shivered before he grinned. He took a deep breath, held it before he released it. He could feel hands on his shoulder, the memory of Ryu’s hands on him as he spoke and guided him. Naruto bowed his head before he took the stance he had been showed.

Knees bent, back straight. Breathe in, hold it… release slowly then punch. Wind moved and nothing else, the water was barely disturbed but Naruto’s mind eased and that was what he needed. Switch hands. Breathe in, hold it… release and punch. Switch hands.

Water trickling along, the sounds of his breathing, the sound of his punch and nothing more.
Breathe in… feel the world surrounding. Breathe out slowly… adding part of yourself. Use the strength you have. Evaluate and start again.

Not alone, never alone. Not as long as one had breath. Naruto could feel Ryu’s words. He could feel his spirit. It almost felt as if he were to look behind him he would see the movement of Ryu’s green hair as the man did the same thing but Naruto knew better, so he did not look behind him and continued on instead.

He was older now. He missed them he would always missed them but he was so grateful to them for what they had done. Those feelings would never fade. They would never fade from his heart. Breathe in, feel the world around him. Feel the life, recognize that he added to that life, give twice of what he took. Breath and strength and begin all over again.

XXX

Kakashi was jerked out of sleep by the movement of someone near to him. Shinobi instincts, some things you just could not let go of. There was that eternal awareness that lingered on and on and in unfamiliar situations and places sleep was difficult to find for many… and for those it was easy to find for them it was difficult to hold onto.

For Kakashi it was a bit of both and he had three genins to take care of. A Sannin to watch out for and various other threats. Sleeping deeply was a laughable fantasy. So, when he had sensed someone shifting not in a way that resembled sleep he woke up, no drowsiness, he just came awake.

He remained still as he wondered what Naruto was up to. It was only when Naruto started to walk around that Kakashi realized Sasuke was awake as well. That Sasuke had woken as well at Naruto’s sudden awakening.

As curious as that was, as much as Kakashi wanted to find out just why Sasuke had awoken and even how he stayed still as he pretended to remain asleep as Naruto left the camp. His ears picked up the slow way Naruto walked and the boy had left his pack behind so Kakashi felt no real hurry.

Kakashi instead watched Sasuke as the boy turned over to look in the direction Naruto had departed. There was curiosity, suspicion but Sasuke still turned back around his body tense. Kakashi waited a minute, then two, then five. It took fifteen minutes but soon enough the tension faded from Sasuke’s body as the boy went back to sleep. Unwillingly too he was willing to bet. He was fairly certain Sasuke had been planning to see when Naruto returned when his body betrayed him. It was sort of cute.

Mindful of his cute team sleeping Kakashi used far more caution than he usually would have before he got up to follow Naruto. He checked carefully before he left. They might be developing at a fast pace but Sakura and Sasuke were still far from tricking him.

When he was certain that they were actually sleeping Kakashi used his nose to track Naruto’s scent. He followed the scent until he heard the change in the water. Kakashi slowed his pace and supressed his presence even as he concealed himself behind a tree.

If it had not been for the moonlight he would have missed him. The sight of Naruto’s bared chest confused him until he saw the discarded shirt and pants on the ground. Kakashi watched Naruto’s slow progress. He had seen something familiar before… a mission long before. He had seen some training monks but their rhythm had been faster. It had also been under a waterfall so there was that.
But still, Naruto’s slow progress, the way he was knee deep in the water so focused. Kakashi watched for a while as he pondered over just what to do. It was not exactly something you were told to expect. He guessed Gai might have run into his situation.

Actually, Gai might have put his own Jounin sensei in the same damn situation. It was amazing in its own way but the fact remained for a child to be in the cold water so late at night training, fighting away personal demons or whatever he was doing… it was Kakashi’s job to let him know he had limits to respect.

Kakashi had just made his decision when the moon fully shone down on the little clearing, the water and Naruto. Naruto moved from his stance to stand straight. Kakashi watched Naruto’s hands move from clenched fists to relaxed hands and he watched the slow way Naruto clasped his hands together in prayer, his hands clasped right over his heart.

Naruto’s eyes were visible with the new light, Kakashi was unable to move from his spot. Naruto had such old eyes. On the face of a child… to have such old eyes.

Kakashi had seen many things. His time as a shinobi had not been easy it had been filled with plenty of losses and hardships.

Obviously, he was aware that although many might want to treat Naruto like a normal child or a normal village raised shinobi child the boy simply was not. Yet one look at Naruto’s exposed and what he was guessing a tiny glimpse at the boy’s true self reminded Kakashi that Naruto was not fully a child.

He was in body, some parts of his mind too but the things he had seen, places he had gone. The things he had discovered for himself. The things he had been taught had simple ruined the blindness so many people had.

Kakashi doubted he could make an expression like the one Naruto had. He doubted he could have eyes that showed the struggle of balance like Naruto did.

Naruto was smart, it was better that they did not forget that. Kakashi’s mind went back to the peaceful look Naruto had worn before. It was there… but buried under whatever the rest of that was.

Naruto bowed slowly, his head almost touching the water before he sighed again and let his hands change to fists again and he took his original stance. The tension in Naruto’s body even the look in his eyes had changed again.

All Kakashi could do was watch.

Xxx

The fields were a dark green, the crops taller than his little genin team. For Kakashi it came up to his shoulder but for his little team it was above their heads. It was amusing to see while he walked behind them.

The mission had been taken care of pretty quickly, even by the estimation they had already drawn up for themselves. Kakashi had found himself watching Naruto’s back, the memory of the boy’s eyes lingering at the back of his mind. It was a hard thing to have to forget.

It was a hard thing to remember too. Such old eyes, not unfamiliar but so old. They weren’t exactly ANBU eyes either. Kakashi had looked in the mirror and at his friends long enough to actually know that look and those kinds of eyes at a glance.
Still Naruto was opening up to them bit by bit. The Sandaime had wanted the boy tied to the village and Kakashi could see the bonds forming. There were still some ways to go but the bonds were not one sided. In fact, Naruto had a strange effect on those he came in contact with.

The most obvious would be Team Seven then of course little Konohamaru and his friends, the ANBU watching him, the other teams and from what he had gleaned from reports... maybe some Suna genins.

Sakura’s conversation about their mission made him tune back into the conversation if only from curiosity. “But isn’t that the type you would fear the most? I mean they pull people because of fear.”

“But conflict will follow Sakura-chan.” Naruto shook his head, his hands tightened on his backpack briefly before he let go. “I mean they are loud and seem scary but those types are mostly bluff.”

“So, what do you think then. I mean about the whole thing, such a big fuss the factions clashed but why?” Sakura sounded frustrated.

“Remember what I told you after we came from Wave?” Naruto asked softly.

“Yeah.” Sakura answered softly.

“The answer lies there.” Naruto answered, he reached out his hand and grabbed a stalk from the field. “People with self-worth can be pretty strong, they are arrogant too but people whose sense of worth, their reason for living, if it comes from somewhere and not from themselves. If their reason for fighting comes from something or something else…”

“They are weak?” Sakura asked softly.

“They are scary.” Naruto confessed. “They’ll do anything to defend it. They’ll do anything to keep what they have and honestly... it is kind of sad.” He dropped the stalk on the ground. “But they are still scary, they’ll push themselves to unbelievable limits. They’ll surpass limits. They’ll kill anyone just to keep what they have. It is like an addiction.”

“So, have you seen that?” Sakura asked softly.

“Obviously.” Naruto laughed softly. “I saw it up close many many times.” He fell silent and so did Sakura. She took the lead and Sasuke picked up the pace as well as Naruto dropped back a bit further. Kakashi glanced down at Naruto’s face, his blue eyes showing that he was lost in his own memories before he looked away. It felt like he was somehow intruding.

XxX

“I don’t need you that much. That’s one thing I will never stand for! Disgusting get your hands off him you won’t do such a thing in front of me!” Naruto had no idea what had happened. They had picked up the old woman where the mountains met the sand. Zabuza had recruited her and Naruto had seen some of her puppet work.

Not much of it, Kaya had listened to Haku’s orders and kept him in the back with Alya. Yet the way the old woman had leapt up when they should have been getting ready to sleep puzzled him. Zabuza had his hand low on Haku’s back and they had been getting ready to leave for a while as they did time to time.

Yet from that action alone and made the old woman, made Mai so angry, her puppets rattled and
Kaya and Alya slowly dragged him back as the others did as well. Zabuza remained lax his hand still on Haku but Haku…

Naruto felt the air chill and took his eyes off the puppets overhead to glance around the clearing. He had a bad feeling.

“Don’t touch him with your filthy hands you Baba!” Haku’s voice, loud, angry. The sound of ice forming before it exploded. The feeling of wet snow on and ice on his face. Old Mai, her puppets broken and frozen and Haku in front of Zabuza his eyes wild and his hair askew but his face. The rage in his face froze Naruto.

“Haku.” Zabuza sounded amused. “I think she gets it now.” He stepped next to Haku and chuckled. “We don’t need you that much old crone and I’d watch what I say. Haku does what he wants.” He glanced down at Haku. “You proved your point Haku.”

“Don’t ever interfere with my relationship with Zabuza you wrinkled bitch.” Haku snarled. “Or next time it won’t be your puppets I’ll freeze and explode.”

The smiling, gentle Haku that he knew. That he could look like that, say things like that. Naruto felt Kaya’s fingers digging into his shoulder. He could feel Alya’s almost unnatural stillness, he could feel the bloodlust in the air and the silence in their group was deafening.

XxX

“It’s the polite ones you have to be scared of.” Naruto admitted, he felt Sasuke look at him but Naruto kept his eyes on the road.

“I’ll bite.” Sasuke said softly. “Why?”

“I mean the ones that are always gentle and act like they don’t have a single violent bone in their body. Always polite. It is those one you have to fear the most.” Naruto recalled Mai shivering by herself by the campfire then later on trailing behind the group. Then even later fixing her puppets and after that when Haku and Zabuza left to be alone for a while, she acted like she did not even see it.

“So why?” Sasuke pressed, Naruto turned to meet his gaze finally.

“You don’t know how bad they’ll get.” Naruto said softly. “How far they’ll go. You can’t predict their limits. When they stop being polite you’re in new territory. If they are good they’ll bottle their frustration and annoyances and you’ll never know that under it all, under every formal word and polite exchange they wanted to gut you. You just never know with them. Polite people are the most dangerous.” Naruto shrugged. “Least in my experience.”

XxX

“Sensei?” Naruto asked while they waited for Sasuke to come back from refilling his water container. Sakura had taken advantage of their fifteen-minute break to take a nap.

“Hm?” Kakashi had opted to lean against the nearest tree as he waited for the break to end. They were making fantastic time of course but a little rush never stopped anyone and with the village how it was, Kakashi was eager to return. That and of course the fact that having Naruto and Sasuke out the village for long periods of time away from Konoha’s borders made him anxious.

“You usually take missions when you aren’t with us right?” Naruto asked softly. Kakashi considered the boy, he told his team about missions that affected them but the truth was when he
was not with them he was on a mission but he knew they would have figured it out eventually.

“You could say that.” Kakashi shrugged. “It helps us all.”

“I know that.” Naruto hissed. “Just, going and going, it isn’t good for you sensei. You need some
downtime and don’t tell me you get some. I know you consider these small missions breaks for
you because you’re a Jounin but you’re too on edge to be using that excuse you know.”

“Am I now?” Kakashi considered Naruto. His eyes showed irritation but determination and
honesty. “So what can I do? Missions are assigned to me as well.”

“Us too.” Naruto pointed out, we don’t have to do Team Seven missions all the time.” He glared at
Kakashi. “You should rest. You do more missions than we do you need more rest even if it is just
you relaxing and reading that stupid book start to end without interruptions.”

“That’s an interesting way to describe rest.” Kakashi chuckled.

“You’ve been shinobi for years.” Naruto’s eyes raked over him. “Your body can survive this for a
bit longer and I have seen you sleep when with us so your body is getting some rest…”

Kakashi considered Naruto. “But?”

“Your head needs a rest too.” The boy pointed out. Kakashi paused as he considered it before he
nodded. He was right after all, Kakashi was not even close to burn out but it was a legitimate
concern, that Naruto could say such a thing…

He patted Naruto on the shoulder and was unable to stop his smile he was certain it showed
through the mask. “I guess Team Seven should plan a lazy day huh?”

“I meant rest alone.” Naruto said dryly.

“Where is the fun in that?” Kakashi chuckled.

XxX

Kakashi had picked up the sweet scent long before they got to the crossroads. Either road would
have done them well, either road would have taken them back to Konoha but after watching, after
observing Naruto Kakashi needed to do something.

It was not guilt that led him, not fully compassion either. He understood and it was hard not to. He
was full of guilt as well but compassion bubbled in him with every change of Naruto’s eyes. With
Konoha Naruto had only known pain, he relearned war and he had bonds but what Naruto needed
was something gentle.

Something to celebrate, it was not the point of a shinobi’s life of course but honestly Kakashi felt
that they could be excused. Just this once, no, every time he got the opportunity he wanted to make
Naruto smile and he wanted the boy to delight in life.

Not just be grateful to it but to enjoy it. That was what had kept him silent and rooted in that
clearing. There should be more to it than just gratitude, that sort of thing should be shown in people
years older than Naruto. That sort of understanding and appreciation, that look was too old for his
young eyes.

He was a shinobi but he was still young and he should act like it, have his eyes open in wonder.
Soften in appreciation. He could laugh, he could delight but gods above he should be a bit more
selfish. Delight in things beyond the village and the mission.

The past would always stay with him, Kakashi knew that from experience but it did not mean that he should ignore the present on his way to the future. Whatever things in Naruto’s memories that kept him so silent, Kakashi was certain he could help him feel joy. Make him feel connected and alive.

When he had been lost in his own memories and regrets, there had been some things that cheered him up and made him feel connected to everyone else.

Xxx

“I forgot how beautiful this sort of thing was.” Naruto whispered. “Pity they are too small for actual fireworks.”

“You like fireworks?” Kakashi asked as he shifted on the tree limb. They had picked the largest tree to watch the village’s festivities but instead of sitting at the top or even with Sakura and Sasuke, Naruto had chosen to sit with him his hand pressed to the tree trunk but Kakashi knew the boy’s balance ensured he did not need it.

Maybe it was to ground himself.

“Fireworks are amazing, the sound, the light. Huge flowers in the night sky.” Naruto sounded wistful as the sound of dance and song reached them, the air was still sweet with the harvest celebrations. Kakashi shifted as he took off his pack and brought it to his lap. He glanced up into the branches where his other two students sat.

Sakura high above and on a branch, that gave her a perfect view of the things below and Sasuke even higher up and further back his thoughts somewhere else even as he looked at the people below. Kakashi shrugged before he opened his pack.

His gift got him a curious look from Naruto before the boy took a bite. Kakashi watched recognition and happiness spread across the boy’s face when he bit into the buttered corn. “It’s good.” Naruto smiled.

“They have a reason to celebrate.” Kakashi nodded to the celebrations below.

“Well somebody blessed them.” Naruto’s tone was half teasing. “This is really good it doesn’t even need the rest of this.” He glanced down. “This is so nice.” Kakashi had to fight really hard to not rest a hand on the boy’s shoulder. He and Naruto exchanged another smile before they turned their attention to the celebrations.
Some people can't go home

Chapter Notes

So there are some parts of this chapter that might come off a little dark without going into details with the introduction of another character (don't kill me please) but I've been slowly dying to introduce this character into the story, had so many ways to introduce him and I had to discard at least 4 but that was when the direction of the fic was going to be a lot darker(luckily I changed my mind)

So technically this is the last of the mini arc(Not mini at all omg) Next week I'll fully explain my new plan so just for the time being enjoy this chapter and I'll see you next week!

Asuma’s excitement was a little too obvious. Kakashi did get it, in their time of stress and need, having a friend send word and condolences, especially when it was a good friend tended to lift the spirits. Still Asuma had looked delighted when he had gotten the letter delivered.

“It’s political.” Asuma laughed. “But I haven’t gotten out of Konoha in his direction in years.” He sighed wistfully. “He rarely leaves the temple and the time that he does I never get to see him.”

“I get it.” Kakashi nodded. “It’s a team thing… no, it’s the elite gathering.” He pretended to pout.

“Come on Kakashi.” Asuma looked a bit embarrassed as he tucked his letter away. “Back then I needed this and it did change me for the better.”

“That remains to be seen.” Kakashi sighed as he scanned the mission he had taken. He still had to be mindful of outside dangers, as much as he wanted to take all the C-ranks in the Land of Fire he could not do that. He had to think about his team’s growth that and Naruto would give him pointed looks if he even tried to keep them around home.

That and he enjoyed letting his team see the world and make their own opinions and in Naruto’s case see him relearn it and hopefully adapt his thoughts to suit. It was already happening, the great thing about living was that things changed, people too and their opinions. Kakashi was a great example and even he had plenty of change ahead of him.

Well at least Asuma had this to look forward to. Kakashi on the other hand had to sell a boring simple mission to his over eager genins. He had to make it up to them somehow, maybe a mission with some guarding, hunting something to keep them on their toes. Next time of course.

XxX

Nothing like getting back to Konoha. Kakashi was not exactly tired but he was glad to be back his team by his side, a little smudged and roughed up but their eyes were shining with their accomplishments. Honestly Kakashi was at the point that he felt that any easy C-rank had to have something dirty lurking behind it. It was getting old fast.

If the Sandaime was well he would have given Kakashi so many disappointed looks. As it was the Chuunin Iruka already did that with every report delivered.
Kakashi allowed himself a moment to sigh, it honestly was too sad. On their way to the mission office he caught the sight and scent of Asuma. He lightly shook his head at the smoke he smelt even as his eye darted over Asuma’s monk companion.

He did not have to guess who it was, the matching scarves on their waists was enough. As his team got closer to the talking pair Kakashi eyed how happy Asuma was to be talking to his friend Chiriku. Kakashi decided to leave the friends be and just nodded as his team swept past.

He wondered if he would have missed it if he had not fallen into the habit of watching Naruto. Still he did see it, it was so quick so sly, if he had not been looking at Naruto he would have missed it.

The blue eyes going dark and the slight smile of mischief that appeared when he and Chiriku crossed paths. The quick intake of breath Chiriku took when he looked at Naruto’s face. Kakashi continued on walking, he pretended he had not seen the exchange.

The sly smile and the widened eyes. How the hell did they know each other? And even more telling just what was going to happen?

XxX

It had only been a split second but he had been unable to dismiss it from his mind. He knew what most people would have done but the lack of information made Kakashi pretend that nothing was wrong even as they made it to the mission office.

He had only a second to make his decision but he decided to trick Sasuke and Sakura into giving in the report. Naruto escaped with a laugh after sticking his tongue out at Sakura as the girl groaned. Sasuke just shrugged when Kakashi gave him his instructions.

Kakashi watched Naruto’s blond hair disappear towards the academy and that was odd enough behaviour that he knew he was justified for his suspicion. Iruka was in the station, Konohamaru and friends were near the academy but Naruto never interfered with their lessons.

Kakashi patted Sasuke and Sakura on their heads and watched them disappear into the office before he took after Naruto silently.

XxX

Naruto had spent plenty of time relearning the academy after his return. He learned corridors, schedules and of course places that could be private if need. He sat in the broken window his pack on the ground and fished out a sweet.

It was a matter of time of course. He knew what was going to happen. Naruto had been surprised as well to see him but there had been that feeling at the back of his when he had seen the other scarf. It could have been a coincidence but Naruto did not have that much faith in things like that anymore.

But it was amusing. He could have gone along, looked away but they needed to talk. Naruto chuckled to himself as he sucked on the sweet. Anticipation claimed his gut, he could have left this alone. Turned his back on it all.

But he couldn’t. Those four years were not erased, they were just hidden deep inside him, every encounter. Every deed every feeling and the memories he carried inside of himself. He could not let it go, he would not.

But it was ironic… how close he had been to home and he had not even known it. The world was
Kakashi had barely concealed himself a small distance in the corridor when Asuma arrived. The tense line of the man’s mouth made Kakashi sigh even as he made room for the other man.

“Okay?” He asked softly.

“I don’t know what’s going on.” Asuma muttered tensely “but that’s too much to ignore.” The sound of footsteps approaching made them still. Naruto sat up almost eagerly and the smile that came to his face startled Kakashi as the monk approached. His eyes still carried the slyness but at the man’s approach Naruto seemed delighted.

“I knew you wouldn’t say anything.” Naruto laughed softly. “Long time no see old man. Fancy seeing you in Konoha.”

“Where’s Sora.” The man responded when he drew level with Naruto. Naruto stayed perched in the window and smiled at him. “Where is he.”

“I don’t know.” Naruto shrugged. “Didn’t Asuma-sensei tell you about me?”

“If I had only known.” The monk growled.

“Well you certainly would have put them on our tail but you weren’t able to stop us then.” Naruto chuckled. “But we did make a run for it thanks to you.”

“Where’s Sora.”

“I just told you.” Naruto stressed. “I don’t know.”

“He left with you people.”

“He ran away, don’t make it sound like you sent him off with a wave and food he joined us and nobody was more surprised than us.” Naruto lightly tapped the window sill. “Of course, considering what staying meant… can’t blame him can you?” Chiriku stayed silent and Naruto laughed softly. “When I saw that scarf, and heard Asuma-sensei had a monk friend that was pretty strong I started to wonder but I still can’t believe you’re in Konoha. That you belong around here.”

“I came for political reasons.” Chiriku sounded pressure. “Listen… boy.”

“Naruto.” Naruto cut in. “Uzumaki Naruto, if only you had known my name back then huh? If only you had known what Konoha was looking for.”

“I just want to know where Sora is. You’re here, he isn’t.”

“Konoha took us down.” Chiriku jerked at Naruto’ words. “Sora’s gone, like I said old man. I don’t know where he is. He left a while ago.”

“I see.” The relief in Chiriku’s voice was obvious. The man lightly sagged against the wall. “That’s good, I feared that he…”

“Well I don’t know where he is or how he is now.” Naruto shrugged. “But there’s that. Although I don’t know why you want to know so badly.”

“After my encounter with your group…” Chiriku’s mouth twists in distaste. “I realized I had plenty to attend to, many things to clean up and inspect.” He and Naruto exchanged a quiet look. “You
might want to call it a house cleaning of the temple.”

“I see.” The laughter and slyness had vanished, Naruto’s face was carefully blank.

“Yes.” Chiriku and Naruto eyes each other. “Sora can come home now. Everything that wished
him harm, that would have upset him is gone and will never come back.”

“I told you I don’t know where he is.” Naruto said softly. “But you’re dreaming if you think he can
come back because of some house cleaning and because you took out the trash that should have
never been there in the first place.”

“Naruto-“

“Do you understand how much he’s changed?” Naruto asked softly. “The first day he joined us,
after you know… you ran off the rest of us. We stopped in a little mountain town…There were
some bandits…” He trailed off to meet the monk’s eyes. “We took them out of course but there
were some that had taken some women and children away… having fun with them.” Naruto tilted
his head. “Sora attacked them and there was this man… Sora cut off his dick.” Naruto said softly.
Kakashi barely withheld his flinch and horror while Asuma flinched and Chiriku took a step back.
“You understand what I’m trying to say right? His first day with us. He cut off that man’s dick and
made him eat it.”

“My gods.” Asuma whispered.

“Sora…” Chiriku said softly.

“You think Sora can come back to the temple after that? Some spring cleaning and he’ll be the boy
everyone loved and remembered?” Naruto snorted. “Old man I didn’t take you for stupid.” Naruto
shifted before he tapped his feet and eyed the monk. “He can’t ever be the Sora you remember
again. In fact, for a long while before he joined us… he wasn’t that Sora.” Naruto shrugged. “But
the group split, Sora went with them. That’s the last time I saw him. A little after that and I was
brought back to Konoha.”

“I see.” Chiriku murmured. “I see.”

“So again, I have no idea where they are.” Naruto shrugged. “I’m stuck here. You have a better
chance finding him given your wandering habits. Since you are looking for him.” Naruto shook his
head. “Waste of time and now you know why.”

“It may be a waste of time to you.” Chiriku said softly. “But for me my message is of utmost
importance. Naruto… if you cross paths with Sora let him know he’ll always have a home at the
temple if he ever should need it.”

“You’re stubborn.” Naruto tsked. “Not going to happen, he can’t go back to that kind of life and
that place is going to hold some horrible memories for him. You’re better off torching the place
and building elsewhere. That might get him reconsidering visiting.” Naruto shook his head.

“Well if you see him.” Chiriku smiled. “I fear I’ve left Asuma waiting. I gave no reason just said I
had to take care of something.”

“Yes, seeing a glimpse of someone that could lead you to yet another someone. Just this someone
is important to you, getting a glimpse of that person in the last place you would expect them to be.”
Naruto smiled. “Nearly gave you a heart attack huh?”

“I had no idea who you were and that saved you.” Chiriku bowed. “Also, Naruto no matter the sin,
I’ll forgive it.”

“For me? Or for Sora?” Naruto questioned. “Because if for Sora alone you gotta talk to someone about that soft spot of yours. If you are talking about me… I’m coming to terms with things like that.” Naruto said softly.

XxX

“Asuma must be worried since I took off so quickly.” Chiriku looked away towards the direction he had come from. Naruto’s eyes dipped to the scarf that had fascinated him before.

“You should go back before he gets suspicious.” Naruto pointed out. The man nodded before he reached into his pocket. Naruto eyed the talismans the man retrieved and frowned when he offered them to him. “I have my own.”

“I am sure that you do.” Chiriku’s mouth turned up in a half smile. “This is for Sora for whenever you happen to run into him.”

“I told you, you have a better chance at that than me. He isn’t around these parts anymore.” Naruto asked. He still took them, he kind of got what Sora had seen in the bald man. Naruto had assumed it was his strength but now he guessed that in the temple of hell, the monk was the only reprieve Sora had.

Not that it had helped him any. Leaving and joining them was one of the best things Sora could have done. The bald monk gave him a tight smile before he strode away. Naruto watched his white robes before his gaze dipped to the scarf at his waist. Sora had one of those too.

Seeing the old man made him a bit nostalgic. Worried too, he knew Sora was most likely safe. He knew where he should be too. He had not lied to the monk. He knew where Sora should be but whether Sora had stayed there was another thing.

Sora was not one for staying in one place. Sora might have been a year or two older than Naruto but his eyes had been darker. Unlike others who wanted to settle, stop wandering and find a home… Sora could not have done that the way he was.

It was why he had left in the first place and it worked out in the end. Naruto sighed, he wondered where he was, how he was doing. If he had heard the news yet.

XxX

“I gotta go.” Asuma whispered. Kakashi nodded and accepted the man’s soft touch to his shoulder before he left. To intercept Chiriku Kakashi was guessing. Meanwhile Kakashi watched Naruto.

The boy remained in the window but his expression seemed lost. He was thinking, reminiscing again. Kakashi was getting good at picking up those moments on Naruto’s face. But he had to admit it was rarely as open as it was currently.

The smile on Naruto’s lips as he tilted his head back, enjoying the sunlight coming through the window. Kakashi watching Naruto tuck away the talismans without a second thought.

He wondered if Asuma was going to press Chiriku for answers. The confrontation between the man and boy had only left him more confused. Chiriku had lost a follower but it was more than that.

“He’s someone they would have done anything to steal away.” Naruto’s words to Gai that he had
overheard. Kakashi turned them over in his mind. He had never considered whether Naruto was the only child.

It did make sense, Naruto easily integrated himself around other children. Kakashi had chalked it up to being constantly on the move, the missions the group had him on or Haku’s careful upbringing. Now he thought differently.

There had been no children around on the day of retrieval and Naruto had sounded so certain. He wanted to find out more, but those sorts of thing would come in time. Naruto would reveal himself and share more of himself in time.

It was already happening, the unguarded way he slept sometimes. The things he shared, Kakashi thought back to the mountain village and the temple that Naruto had shared with them.

Naruto’s secrets would come in time. After all, after everything they had taken from him, they could let him have a few harmless secrets. Providing… that the secrets were actually harmless of course.

XxX

With the village, the way it was, it was so easy to forget the other parts. The other people struggling and healing. Naruto had been jumping from rooftop to rooftop his jacket unzipped on his way back from the mission office after a rather boring D-rank when from the corner of his eyes he spotted them.

He had not forgotten but it certainly had not been to the front of his mind either. He knew Kakashi-sensei had his friends and his secrets. Naruto was ridiculously aware of that but when he saw the two men together, Gai-sensei’s head bowed a bit with Naruto’s sensei’s hand resting on his shoulder Naruto recalled Lee immediately.

He had not forgotten. Not with Sakura buying and delivering flowers every other day when they could. He had not forgotten but with the business of the village the pain of it had dimmed. But not for the others. He knew as a Jounin Sensei, Gai-sensei still had missions on top of missions to do for the village.

He still had to run his team and Lee… no wonder the man looked so down. But he had Kakashi-sensei there with them. He had a friend to turn to, Gai-sensei had called them rivals, Kakashi-sensei had called him his best friend.

A bit of both but it obviously was something they both needed, something they appreciated each other for. Naruto’s heart ached for Lee and for the Sensei that obviously cared for him and felt helpless. He could sympathize, he knew how that felt.

Still the scene did not look like something he could intrude on. He did know the meaning of privacy after all. Naruto gave himself a few moments to watch the two men before he shook his head and took off again.

XxX

The village had put it off long enough, Naruto guessed that they were waiting to see whether the Sandaime’s condition would worsen. As it was it was finally time to mourn those that had fallen during the attack.

Naruto personally thought they had waited a long time but he got it, the village could not have afforded to mourn so quickly putting themselves at risk. It was sad but a true fact but now they
could put them to rest.

He had worried about mourning clothes. It had not been on his list of things to buy after all but after a trip to the mission office, Iruka-sensei had greeted him with a bag and a soft voice to tell him about the mass funeral.

Naruto sat on his bed as he watched the clock. The clothes were strange and the village that had felt busy and alive felt so quiet and still. The sky was overcast as well.

Finally, it was late enough that he could go. Naruto got off his bed and pulled at the black material. His pants ended at his calves and he was glad that he had switched shoes for the occasion.

He had no idea how he was supposed to feel. There was the mourning feeling hanging over them all of course but no matter how he looked at it, it was different. He was no stranger to grief. People fell regularly, people sacrificed and were sacrificed for them to continue in the troupe.

That did not make the loss go away, that never made the anger go away. They used to just turn their backs and move on but in a village, there was something to come back to, someplace to continue to mourn.

To be put to rest, that was what it was all about.

XxX

Kakashi-sensei had not met up with them. Naruto had shrugged along with Sakura when Sasuke asked a question. Sasuke had sighed and led the way Naruto was satisfied to fall into step behind him. When they finally reached there he saw Iruka-sensei and Konohamaru right away.

Konohamaru seemed stuck between grief and confusion and Naruto knew why. The Sandaime was still alive but he was still in grave condition. Naruto looked at the various photos on the table. When considering the scale of the attack the number of dead seemed small.

But no matter how you looked at it, it was still too many and any of them could have joined them and had their photo up there as well, the Sandaime as well but they were lucky this time around.

XxX

There was the saying, better late than never after all. It had taken some time… about half way through the ceremony when the rain had started to drizzle before Kakashi-sensei appeared. Naruto had not called any attention to it but he had allowed himself to stare at the man for a few moments before he looked back to the front again.

Kakashi-sensei looked down and Naruto could only guess why the man had been late.

XxX

Such an empty feeling and the looks on the shinobi leaving did nothing to change that. Naruto spotted what had to be Sasuke’s family leaving but they were gone so fast he had not gotten a good look. Sasuke had left quickly too.

Sakura hugged him before she left, Naruto watched her catch up to Ino before the two girls hugged each other. He watched Iruka-sensei and Konohamaru hug. Iruka-sensei had tried to divide his attention between Naruto and Konohamaru, Naruto appreciated it but he knew who needed Iruka-sensei more.
His gaze switched to Shikamaru by his father’s side as they left. He sighed ignoring the rain still drizzling. He would have made to leave the graveyard as well if it had not been for the warmth he felt behind him. Kakashi-sensei was not looking at him but he was staring at the sky.

The last few weeks, the last few months were stressful to them all in different ways. Naruto thought to Kakashi-sensei’s friend. To Lee, the obvious pain his sensei had to be in worrying about the Sandaime.

He did not notice when Kakashi-sensei had stopped looking at the sky but he allowed himself to rest against his sensei as he fought for the right words. “I don’t know what to do now.” He admitted.

Kakashi-sensei stayed quiet for a moment before his hands lightly rested on Naruto’s shoulders. “We go on.” Kakashi-sensei said softly but Naruto had the feeling that the man had heavily edited what he wanted to say.

XxX

They had not changed but they had headed to the market place anyway. It felt so weird, almost like an out of body experience. In their mourning clothes, they walked the streets of Konoha side by side in silence.

It was only when he had felt a light tug on his sleeve and Kakashi-sensei had nodded to a vegetable stall and Naruto rolled his eyes before he gave in. After Kakashi-sensei got a basket and enjoyed himself loading the poor thing to the brim did they start to talk.

It had been almost awkward at first, their answers quick and stilted but they kept going anyway until Kakashi-sensei steered the conversation to the funeral.

“I’m guessing it was different for you.”

“Sometimes there wasn’t a body a bury, sometimes the person was not someone you wanted to bury.” Naruto had admitted before he caught the apple his sensei had bought. “But that was us, I’ve seen funerals before but this time it felt different.”

“I think it is because you were part of the fight. You didn’t know them but you felt a connection.” Kakashi-sensei switched from Naruto’s left side to his right putting Naruto closer to the stalls and a bit further from pedestrian traffic. “And the Sandaime’s condition hangs over us still.”

“Yeah I know he isn’t gone but with everything…” Naruto trailed off. “But what can we do?”

“Keep it together for a while.” Kakashi-sensei stopped in the middle of the street and glanced down at him. “Would you like to see them today?”

Naruto knew what he was referring to but he was in no mood to go from one grave to the other. “No,” he said softly.

“I see.” Kakashi-sensei answered softly. They stood there together lost in their thoughts before Kakashi-sensei asked softly. “I didn’t think you would go.”

“It’s my village too.” Naruto responded just as softly. “Even though I was… am a member of… even though I left and I learned away from the village I still want to become Hokage and for that I need to see and understand the village and the people that live there.” He fell silent. “I want to learn about me too.”
“We all would.” Kakashi-sensei said softly. Naruto snorted in response. “But we do.”

“We all have our secrets.” Naruto said softly. “Of course, it is only a matter of time until things get revealed usually but we all have our secrets Sensei.”

“That we do.” Kakashi-sensei admitted. “You want to know my secrets?”

“Just the ones that involve me.” Naruto snorted before he paused. “One day I’ll share everything. One day I’ll feel safe enough, secure enough to admit everything with a smile on my face but I’m not ready and neither are the rest of you.”

“It’s not that we want to keep things from you.” Kakashi-sensei said softly.

“Some of it is for my protection?” Naruto asked softly. “All of it?”

“Some.” Kakashi-sensei admitted. “As for the things you’ll one day share, hearing that one day you will is good enough for me. Seeing you make friends, seeing you learn the village and interact with others.” Kakashi-sensei sighed. “You’re already amazing, having you safe and in the village, is good enough for me.”

“One day… you’ll tell me why you talk the way you do.” Naruto frowned. “I know you know who I really am.”

“You’re Uzumaki Naruto, you don’t have to be anything else.” Those words were so similar to Haku’s own that he closed his eyes for a brief moment to settle himself.

“I know.” Naruto said softly. “This isn’t the best day for this kind of talk.” Kakashi-sensei shoved his hands into the pockets of his pants and nodded. They turned to face each other, Naruto was only able to see one of his sensei’s eyes but it was enough. “You should get some rest.” He said softly. “Even elite Jounins need some downtime.”

“I guess you’re right.” Kakashi-sensei sighed, “But it is hard to do that when you know there is work to be done.”

“Think of us then, a tired, injured sensei is of no use to us. Rest for our sake.” Naruto whispered. “We should be your concern too.” He relaxed when Kakashi-sensei’s eye crinkled into what he knew was a smile.

XxX

Something was bothering him but he could not put his finger on it exactly, he could be excused for that because he could barely remember when he had a proper night’s sleep. It had been hard to relax when Naruto had been missing and hard to sleep the sleep of the content when he knew most of what the boy had experienced.

Then there was the whole thing with the attack and the Sandaime, the man had cared and watched over him since he was a child. Knowing the man might be on his deathbed did not ease Iruka in the slightest and those were just his mental worries, they did not even get close to the hell that had descended onto Konoha.

Missions and more missions, paperwork and more paperwork. Assignments and even more, the fact that they had no one at the top so they had to go through the council and that was another bag of worms on their own. He was just so tired, teaching was his only reprieve, looking down at the little faces, the future of Konoha. Seeing their determination soothed him while their worries and fears made him fret, they were too young.
Something he found himself thinking almost every time he saw worry flicker across one of their faces. After the attack, they had changed, they had been sheltered, they had not seen the actual attack but that did not mean it had not affected them.

They had heard the sounds, heard of the losses, seen their village, their home burning and although there had not been too much damage, there had been a minimal amount of losses the Sandaime aside the fact did not change that they had witnessed in a way something horrific to them.

As children were able to do, they were able to process most of it, dismiss most of it but the facts remained for them to look over at another time. The facts were still there for them to go to another time, to wonder over and that made Iruka’s heart clench because they were too young.

They had gotten a better look at how the shinobi world worked and it made his heart hurt, that sort of thing should have taken time. They should have grown more, observed more and then become genins and see the world and make decisions for themselves.

The attack had rushed things but as much as Iruka lamented he was grateful so many were safe. He was just tired, the Sandaime usually had words of wisdom and comfort to give and now that duty fell on everyone to give those words of comfort to each other as they fought to weather the storm together. it was a rough road but it did not excuse what was nagging at him.

He frowned and tilted his head as he looked at Naruto. He had been glad when the boy had left the hospital and stayed out of it. He did not get to spend as much time with Naruto as he liked because when Naruto was not training he had his talk sessions and that Iruka would not change for the world.

Even though Naruto hated them and did not understand why he needed them, why anyone would need them. Iruka was just glad the boy was still going. Feeding Naruto, seeing him when he came to the office and of course the occasional trip to the springs was all he could grab and those times were too far in between because of the work for the village and because Iruka was so weary when he was not working.

A long cycle.

Still he stared and frowned at Naruto as the boy sat a fair distance away before he figured out just what was bothering him so badly. He shook his head, got to his feet and strode over ignoring the looks he brought.

His hand ruffled Naruto’s hair and while his hand sank into the blond strands and the boy smiled up at him Iruka was made very aware of how wild looking and long Naruto’s hair had gotten. “Naruto…” He murmured as he tugged at the strands at the front of the boy’s head. “You need to cut this.” He laughed. “It’s getting out of control!”

Blue eyes showed shock and instant rejection of that idea and Iruka’s hand froze before Naruto’s gaze softened and his own hands reached up to tug at his hair. “I guess it might be getting a little long.” He huffed. “But I won’t cut it Iruka-sensei.”

“When’s the last time you did?” Iruka frowned. He gathered a bunch of it in his hands and snorted before he tugged Naruto’s head up gently. “It can almost be tied to the back like this, keep it up and you’ll have it falling into your eyes.” He frowned as he released the hair then ruffled Naruto’s hair a bit. “It already is.” He said dryly. The sides of Naruto’s head were where the hair was the longest. It made Iruka wonder how far long it would grow before he reminded himself that Naruto’s appearance would resemble a mountain man and not a shinobi before long.
“Not since I got back.” Naruto shrugged and Iruka’s heart dipped because he knew Naruto would not have gone to do anything that involved something so personal with strangers. The memories of the village’s anger and distain just might have kept Naruto from doing anything.

“You’ll end up looking a state at this rate.” Iruka frowned. “It’s all spiky and the bangs will get out of control.”

“Nothing wrong with having long spiky hair.” And Iruka knew he was not imagining it, Naruto was thinking of someone when he said it. The amused look in his eyes was enough of a sign. “You want to do it?”

“Cut your hair?” Iruka gaped before he cleared his throat. He barely did anything with his own hair besides wash it and give it the occasional trim but if Naruto would let him… and the boy did trust him. He could at least make him look a little more presentable. “I’ll do my best to give it a trim.” He tugged his own hair and winced. “But I’ll give yours a go.” A smile escaped him. “The future Hokage has to think of his image you know.” It was the right thing to say because Naruto’s answering smile was as bright as the sun, and it went a long way towards soothing Iruka’s own heart.

XxX

“Oh.” Naruto looked up at the sound of his sensei’s voice. “Well then.”

Naruto chuckled weakly before he dragged his hand through his hair. “Iruka-sensei said it was getting out of control so he decided to trim it.” It certainly had been an experience. He had sat in a chair in the other man’s apartment by the window and just felt. It had been calming, soothing and nice, he had cut too much just put it in how he called manageable. Naruto wanted to grow out his hair, for his own reasons but the smile on Iruka-sensei’s face when the man had finished had made him happy too.

“I noticed it was growing.” Kakashi-sensei mused as he shifted, the white bag in his hand swaying slightly. “But now that it has been… cleaned up a bit… it really has gotten… longer… especially on the sides.” He finished in an almost whisper and Naruto narrowed his eyes at him. “But it suits you.” Kakashi-sensei closed his eye in what Naruto knew to be a smile. “It’s cute.”

Naruto scoffed at the man’s tone before he started to fish around his pocket for his key. The keys jingled and he easily picked his, letting Iruka-sensei’s drop back to the chain. He eased past Kakashi-sensei and rolled his eyes at the man’s obvious curiosity. “Iruka-sensei gave me a key.”

“That’s nice.” Kakashi-sensei hummed when Naruto unlocked the door. “How does that make you feel?”

Trusted. “Happy.” Naruto said softly. “I like knowing he wants me around even when he isn’t there. I mean there is an open invitation he says come and see him.” Naruto babbled as he shuffled out of his shoes and his sensei did the same. “I can break in easily no trouble and all of us can but he gave me a key and…” He sighed. “It’s a different sort of welcome, it feels sorta normal even though shinobi are anything but.”

“That is true.” Kakashi-sensei brushed past him and made his way to the kitchen table and settled the white bag onto it. Naruto crossed his arms and huffed when the man easily slipped out of his Jounin jacket, tossed it to land on the counter before he went to wash his hands. “But it still feels nice to get that key, makes you feel trusted.”

Naruto shook his head when his sensei slipped back on his gloves. The dark blue long sleeved shirt
had that damned mask attached, his sensei was simple too wary. “It’s a nice feeling.” He joined his sensei at the sink and washed his own hands before he nodded on the table. “What’s that?”

His sensei chuckled before he crossed to the table and pulled open the white bag, the smell of barbeque and fried rice made his stomach rumble before he frowned at the man silently laughing at him. “It’s dinner.” Kakashi-sensei said sweetly.

“For me?” Naruto mused. “How nice. Did you buy it yourself or trick someone to doing it?”

“I bought it myself.” Kakashi-sensei looked proud. “I know you would have been good with say ramen or something but I know you like this too.”

Naruto dried his hands on his dish cloth before he tossed the blue and white material back on the counter. “If it comes down to it I’ll eat anything.” He peeked into the bag and his stomach growled. “But this is a nice choice, what’s the occasion?”

His sensei merely looked at him before he pulled out a chair and sat on it. Naruto rolled his eyes when he watched the man pull out several of the containers. Barely restraining his sigh, there was no sense in arguing or fighting. If he had not wanted the man in his house he would have said something, it was just that he was so curious and biting his tongue had never been an easy thing for him.

It took him a while to remember the exact drawer he had tossed the item in. the last thing he wanted to do was actually go searching for it and give his Sensei a good look at the items in his apartment. His sensei had not moved from where he sat and he eyed the huge menu Naruto had gotten from a place he and Iruka-sensei had went recently. “Here.”

“We are ordering?” His sensei took the huge menu in confusion. “We already have food?”

“I know that.” Naruto sat on the opposite side and snagged a few of the containers before he met his sensei’s gaze. “but that’s tall enough that if you prop it open on the table it will go to your nose.” Kakashi-sensei stilled and the look he gave Naruto then, it nagged him that he was unable to figure it out. “What?” He sighed.

“Nothing really.” His sensei propped the menu up and Naruto swallowed when the man reached for his hitai-ate and slipped it off. “Just that you never fail to surprise me.” Having the black and red eyes fixed on him should have been unnerving but for Naruto he could only smile.

“You didn’t answer me.” Naruto opened the first container and sighed at the greasy heavenly sight. “What’s the occasion? Even with missions you don’t do this. No cute note, and you aren’t looking like you have another mission away from us.” He speared the pork and brought it to his lips. “I don’t think we’re celebrating anything either and if it is team related wouldn’t Sakura-chan and Sasuke be here?”

His sensei’s eyes watched him from over the menu. “You’re right. We aren’t celebrating anything, we’re…” black and red eyes slid shut. “Hanging out.” Naruto groaned at the older man’s tone.

“Great pull the other one.” Naruto grumbled. He broke off to eat the pork and smiled happily at the taste, warm and greasy but so tender, his sensei had picked well. His eyes reopened to see his sensei still watching him. “What?”

“Nothing much.” Naruto heard a container open on Kakashi-sensei’s side. “How much do you know about Suna?”

“Does this have to do with your turning up and dinner?”
“Maybe… so what do you know?”

“They run the same as us but the council of elders and the council of clans have plenty of say so. They like their Kages to come from a certain bloodline in order to benefit the village.” Naruto frowned as he picked his next course. “Of course because of the mess with the third Kazekage? They changed the structure so that shit wouldn’t happen again or something but the clan and council have a lot of say but there is another council of elders and it is pretty small now.” He paused to eat his noodles as he racked his brain. “Most of them died out by now. But I don’t know that much.” Naruto shrugged.

“You know more than the basic Konoha genin.” His sensei shrugged. Naruto heard a soft slurp before he continued. “You know about the final council and that is something most Konoha Chuunins and Jounins don’t know. You might not know anything else but what you do know is still vital and important.”

“Why is it so important?” Naruto asked softly before he bowed his head to continue to eat. “And you know this thing too.”

“I’m not a normal Konoha Jounin.” Kakashi-sensei said and Naruto could feel the man’s smile just by seeing his eyes. Naruto rolled his eyes and the man chuckled. “You know more than you understand.” His sensei continued. “It’s something I’ve come to realize.”

Naruto eyed him suspiciously before a huff escaped him and he returned to his noodles. “What is that supposed to mean.”

“I’m sure you already know.” His sensei mused. “You don’t always see the full picture the first time, sometimes it takes others looking, sometimes you need to look again, and again and again and sometimes you need to walk away take a breather and come back for you to see the picture.”

His sensei’s eyes were on him but Naruto had no idea what the man was getting at but he did now understand his sensei’s line of questioning. “Negotiations with Suna aren’t going well?”

“They surrendered, they had to.” Kakashi-sensei shrugged. “They lost face but currently they are without a Kazekage and they have been in that mess before.”

Naruto winced. “That’s what caused most the problems.” He muttered, repeating what he had heard Mai say too many times. “The Yondaime Kazekage was too easily influenced, too prejudiced.”

“That’s an interesting thing to say, met him?”

“You know I haven’t.” Naruto snorted. “But I’ve met the people he failed.” Gaara came to mind. Mai had been hurt not just by the Yondaime Kazekage but by the whole Kazekage system. It was easier but using bloodline to determine someone’s fate was not something Naruto wanted to be behind.

“He’s left behind a lot of problems.” Kakashi-sensei said softly. “Succession is currently unknown.”

“I’m not surprised.” Naruto snorted. “What the hell was he doing?”

“Trying to keep his village alive. It’s what Kages do.”

“At the cost of what?” Naruto asked softly. “Alive but at what cost? He was just breeding darkness that would have swallowed the village anyway… and honestly… if he had been glad, had been
satisfied with keeping the village alive under those conditions while darkness grew and grew in the corner…”

“Whatever happened to the village would be his fault?” Kakashi-sensei had his head tilted as he watched him. Naruto pushed around the food on his plate as he frowned.

“It would deserve- no. He would and those involved but not everyone but hatred and darkness goes after everyone not just the guilty and everything would be his fault. Keep his village alive… by coming after us? Betraying Konoha?”

“They were given an offer they couldn’t afford to refuse, everything was in their favour. They had nothing to lose. That is how they thought and… for them the old wounds they have from Konoha still ache.”

“I’m sure the reverse is true.” Naruto sighed. “But after so much loss will they be able to pull themselves back together? There is only so much the council of clans can do, only so much the council of elders can do. Someone will have to step up, take responsibility.”

“And then what?” Kakashi-sensei had leaned back slight and Naruto’s eyes drifted to the scar over the man’s eye.

“Suna needs to change.” Naruto said softly. “Or they’ll blow away, thanks to Orochimaru they’ve already started to crumble.”

“Well said.” Kakashi-sensei looked proud. “But I’m sure they’ll bounce their way back; change comes slowly but it is always the new generation that gives a fresh look and a new hope.”

“You’re saying we’ll bring change?” Naruto chuckled.

“Hm I’m saying you already have.” Kakashi-sensei shifted, the mask obviously being brought back up to hide his lower face again before the menu was removed and placed on the table. Naruto eyed his sensei’s empty containers as he went over the man’s words… somehow the ‘you’ did not sound like a plural form and that made him feel confused.
So I did plenty of thinking and I'm disappointed too but I finally came to a decision. I know I promised my next break would be 50 but the upcoming arc is just wayyy too big for me to be able to handle in the deadline I assigned myself. Also I have tons of stuff I want to finish so this chapter 45 is where I take my break. I really really wanted to end at 50 (and by end I mean take my break not finish the fic) because 50 would be the 1/4 mark plot wise. (And something really cute is there but whatever we'll get there eventually) Or maybe 1/3 it depends on how big this ends up being in the end. I'm guessing around 500K or so tbh but it may end up being more.

I want to get some things out the way before I start back uploading like at least finish the upcoming arc and get to a point where I can easily get ahead and stay ahead chapter wise in case I ever just wanna take a break. I'm still happy with how everything turned out because this fic is huge as it is. There are plenty other things I want to do besides this and this break will help me with that. I am not too sure how I'll return and do updates. Depends on how things go writing wise. I want to put more focus into my other WIPs so I'll use my break to do that too and that does sound weird doesn't it? I'll be taking a break but I'll still be working hard as ever lol.

Because I'll still be writing I just won't be uploading this until like Late Jan Early Feb I'm thinking. The upcoming arc is going to have some huge chapters and I'm not talking 10K or something I'm thinking these are going to be a lot bigger than that based on the detailed outline which is why I am saying I need some time to put that out the way. Thing is these chapters are so huge and the original plan was a chapter not an arc so you can see the problem there :/

To sum things up I'm taking a break from updating this fic for a while. No I'm not abandoning it, just wait until Late Jan Early Feb for updates to start again, thanks for reading this far and see you in 2017

It had been a rather nice day. Another day of taking it easy after a bone tiring mission. His genins were coming along well in their own ways and Kakashi was proud of them. It was rather nice after a long’s night mission to sit back and call out helpful advice to his little team as they went through several D-ranks.

Kakashi wondered if they knew just how amazing they currently were. Their speed at finishing D-ranks was quickly going beyond anything ever heard of before. It was average for a newly created genin team to complete three to five D-ranks daily but they had surpassed that so long ago.

Did not matter the type of D-rank it was quickly done together and they were off to the next one. The speed in which they found lost animals, took care of yard work, did normal tasks, training or took care of animals. They blew through at least four of every type of D-ranks. Kakashi had tried to keep them away from the childcare types of missions not because of himself because he feared the reactions Naruto would witness.

Obviously, he had wasted his time because when he checked up on what his team was up to in his
absence he saw the glowing reviews marked for the childcare missions that he had so studiously avoided.

He had been surprised that team seven had been assigned childcare at all but to learn that the kids had taken them on and done well had surprised him even while it pleased him.

Up with the sun and down with the moon, that was the current state of his team. They never slacked on training but they were constantly busy. He knew Naruto’s routine once the boy stuck to it. Sasuke squeezed in training and was out the house before the sun had risen properly and food was on the table most days and Kakashi had learned that from a tired looking Itachi. Sakura did not leave at the crack of dawn but she did leave early enough. She had her visit to the hospital to do before she did her own training.

Kakashi had spied on them all. Watched them all go about their various ways. Sasuke’s determination and focus, his refusal to accept his current limits… Kakashi had to find a way to get the boy to think outside the box. Sakura’s kindness and her determination just might create a shinobi of the likes that Konoha had not seen for a long time.

Then there was the mostly unpredictable Naruto. No matter how much Kakashi spent time talking to him, observing him and watching him there was always something new. There was always something lurking, Naruto kept his secrets pretty close to himself but things that he felt were common knowledge he shared freely and easily.

It amused Kakashi. Still Naruto was up to something based on how his workouts had changed, there was more meditation and Kakashi really wanted to know why but he also knew he was better off waiting for Naruto to share.

Still it was nice seeing Naruto get used to village life and their team, the scene in the hospital had changed the dynamic between the three and that was the only reason Kakashi was grateful to the hell of the attack that Konoha had endured.

But they were growing at a rapid pace even if they did not notice it. Naruto trimming his hair had only made him realize just how fast their bodies were growing and how they would change. Growth spurts were on their way… there was the rest of puberty to look forward too and Kakashi could look back on his own and sympathize lightly.

He knew how others in the village were thinking and feeling when they watched the current and recent genins working so hard and showing such growth. They were disappointed in themselves, they had wanted them to hold onto the light for a little longer.

They just did not understand; the attack had banded the village together in a way that Kakashi wondered if anyone had seen it before. For him there had been war then the attempts at peace before more death and destruction. Just loss, loss and more loss.

But in the genins he saw determination and hope, the right seed for the generation to take over with. Kakashi had no idea what his team would grow up and become but he knew he would do whatever it took to get them to the point where they could make a difference.

Because they wanted to make a difference, they wanted to do something and Kakashi could see it. The need to protect, the need to understand. He had seen it in Sasuke’s eyes at the hospital and he had seen it in Sakura after the Second Exam and after the fiasco that had went down during the tournament.

If he had to guess, it might have started with them not knowing just what to make of Naruto. It had
opened their eyes just a bit. Now with all that had happened their eyes were not fully opened but they wanted it to be.

They had questions that could not be answered and questions that would be answered in time. The thing was, Kakashi doubted they could be that patient. They were thinking ahead, evaluating themselves and it was a wonderful thing to see.

He was proud of his little team seven, he just knew they would surpass everyone’s expectations.

XxX

Kakashi froze the moment he opened his apartment door, the sense of someone else being there was so strong he could not even pretend otherwise. He sensed no danger from the presence but he was aware just how quickly those sort of things could change. He lingered with his hand on the doorknob before a chuckle floated to his ears.

The familiarity made him relax and shake his head. He stepped into his apartment and closed the door as the man came into view Kakashi’s entire book stash in his hands. “Long time huh Kakashi?” Jiraiya looked pleased with himself but he had always liked yanking Kakashi’s chain and teasing him. He had always been that sort of man but Kakashi was glad to see him, it had been too long.

“Jiraiya-sama.” The relief in his own voice made him pause a bit. “I thought you had left.” He had known the man had been around for the attack, gotten a glimpse of his back but they had simply been too busy to chat. Having the man seek him out… well usually it was outside not in his house but times changed.

“Yeah.” The man chuckled before he tossed Kakashi’s books back to the shelf. “I wanted to talk to you about something, kind of overdue.”

“Jiraiya-sama?” He sounded, fond, amused but serious at the same time and Kakashi could not remember the last time he had heard such a combination in the man’s voice.

“I’ve been training the kid a bit.” Jiraiya shrugged. Kakashi blinked and the man sighed. “I ran into Naruto a while back.” He shook his head. “Cute kid, really nosy and noisy too!” He barked out. “He had…” Jiraiya went serious. “He had a seal over his seal the first time I ran into him, I took it off but he was more skittish than a cat on hot coals. Took him a while to warm up to me and I’m not too certain that he fully has!” The man finished in a laugh.

Kakashi stared at Jiraiya as his mind whirled. “Would this be during the break between the second exam and the third?” He asked softly.

“Yes.” Jiraiya nodded. “I was supposed to give my report about Orochimaru but the Sandaime was caught up in some business so I took time to do some research. The brat caught me and made a serious racket. He was having some trouble with his chakra, then I saw what Orochimaru had done.” Jiraiya frowned. “Like I said, I ended up giving him some pointers.”

“And giving him the toad contract.” Kakashi nodded. That was one mystery solved. After Pakkun had told him everything that had occurred in the forest he had wanted to ask, to press but he had wanted to be told more.

“Like I said, cute kid.” Jiraiya smiled. “But I want to talk to you a bit about him, that’s why I’m here.” His smile faded. “I know you’ve been watching over him and it shows, you’ve done really good Kakashi but I want to borrow Naruto for a bit.” Kakashi stared at the man unable to
comprehend what he had just heard.

Xxx

“Borrow Naruto?” Kakashi was still stunned. Jiraiya had wandered over to his window and he was a bit too close to the plant for Kakashi’s comfort.

“Just for a bit.” Jiraiya laughed. “I’ll give him back but I need him to help me with something.” He eyed Kakashi curiously. “You object? He’ll be safe even if Orochimaru pops up.”

“It isn’t his safety I’m worried about.” Kakashi frowned, “It’s whatever you need help with that needs a genin.”

“It isn’t really a shinobi I need.” Jiraiya chuckled. “If it’s him with that bratty mouth of his it’ll work.” A distant look came to Jiraiya’s eyes. “Nothing else would but if it’s him he’ll get a nice reaction. With that bratty mouth and those eyes, not to mention he looks-” Jiraiya cut himself off to shake himself before he gave Kakashi a wide smile. “It’s just for a little bit.”

“Well I can’t stop you but I am curious.” Kakashi eyed Jiraiya. “Where are you taking him?”

“Konoha’s in trouble right now.” Jiraiya’s tone had switched back to serious. He crossed his arms and looked at the floor. “The Sandaime won’t wake up and with the current level of medical nins he won’t be waking up anytime soon and we can’t afford that.”

“We can’t.” Kakashi nodded. The village was coping so far, the strain of not having a Hokage was taking their toll. They needed either the Sandaime or step in Hokage. “What does this have to do with Naruto?” He paused. “You said current level of medical nins?” Jiraiya’s mouth twitched into a smile.

“Before Danzo that old war hawk can make too many moves in his favour and before I’m roped into a role I don’t want.” Jiraiya chuckled. “I’ll get two birds with one stone. Bring back our lost princess.”

Lost… princess. “What does this have to do with Naruto?” He got a grin in return. “Jiraiya-sama.” His tone was low and reproachful.

“Have you heard the things that come out his mouth?” Jiraiya laughed. “Sometimes, it is like an echo from the past. Even that woman will stop to think when confronted with something like that and she’s the best choice for Hokage, she has the skills and her bad habits aside.” Jiraiya’s hands dropped to his sides. “She has the temperament. “I think if those two meet, something good will happen.”

“Does Naruto know who you are?” Kakashi asked curiously. “He’s a kid but he’s pretty sharp.”

“Does he know who you are?” Jiraiya snorted. “It will be fine, Sarutobi-sensei’s original plan was to let him find out when he was able to defend himself. I think he’s on his way there.” He paused to snort. “Well against small fry and maybe medium sized fry but he knows enough.” Jiraiya’s eyes narrowed. “The village can’t continue the way it is now.”

“True.” The only rest he got was with his genins, everyone was being worked overtime and the requests kept coming but everything that involved the Hokage’s office came to a halt because it had to go through the council and that was an entirely different bag of worms. “You have an idea where she is?”

“Of course.” Jiraiya smiled. “And I’d like to get to her before anything happens.” His face
darkened. “But I’ll take good care of the kid, maybe train him a little bit.”

“Uh Naruto’s skill set is already…” Kakashi cleared his throat. “Is that wise?”

“I saw what you’ve been doing with the others. I saw their fights before everything went to hell.” Jiraiya eyed him. “This gives you the chance to focus on them in a way I bet you haven’t been able to since the month’s break am I right? There is only so much you can do in front of those two and it is only a matter of time until the Uchiha learns how to use that sharingan correctly.” Kakashi frowned and Jiraiya shook his head. “He’ll see the truth about Naruto if we aren’t careful Kakashi.”

“He wants to tell them too,” Kakashi admitted, “But he’s also afraid of it.”

“He’s afraid of using his power too.” Jiraiya paused. “Least he was before I started on him. Some things in his past keeps him shackled. I was planning to work on that but it seems he’s started that on his own.”

“There’s a rather huge shackle.” Kakashi warned.

“You mean Haku.” Jiraiya smiled. “It has come up before but don’t worry, I’ll see what he’s made of.” Jiraiya chuckled. “The last time I taught someone… it has been too long.”

“Have you told Naruto yet?” Kakashi questioned, he got a laugh in return. “You haven’t?”

“I had to sell it to the council first. They don’t want me leaving or Naruto leaving either, I have a time limit.” Jiraiya grinned. “It’s exciting.”

He was still the Jiraiya Kakashi had known. He sighed heavily before he folded his arms. “I guess I’ll be missing a member from my cute little team for a while.”

“I’ll give him back.” Jiraiya said dryly. “Your mournful tone doesn’t work on me you know, try that hurt tone with your little team. They might fall for it, it is just for a little while. I want to get to know the kid a little better.” Jiraiya flashed him another grin. “He’s something else.”

“Be on your toes.” Kakashi warned.

“As if my guard is ever relaxed.” Jiraiya snorted. “Nothing is getting the slip on me especially not that little brat. I know whose blood runs through his veins.”

“It isn’t just a case of blood.” Kakashi warned. “The people he was with…”

“He was really fond of them I know.” Jiraiya smiled. “Exactly why he’s perfect for this. After everything he wants to become Hokage?” Jiraiya’s smile widened. “The brat might come back a little different Kakashi so brace yourself.”

XxX

He had cut his training short in order to focus his mind instead. He had spent double the time he usually did focusing his breathing and his thoughts. Thinking of the past, then his current state before his thoughts went to the future.

Then he gave thanks, another day and he would carry on. He had to, he had to live but it was more than that he had to accept. There were things he did know, things that he was coming to understand but something he knew for certain was that he had waited long enough.

A year and some, he was not getting all the looks he expected but there were plenty of looks he did
not understand. He had played alone long enough and it had been a good thing too, the appearance of the sleeping bag had told him a watch had been placed on him but the strain of the village was the best opportunity now.

At best there would currently be a light watch on him and never when he was with Kakashi-sensei. That would be a waste of resources.

His routine changed, fluctuated but it had similar routines from the morning, meditation or training or both. It was after that, that he changed. Missions, hanging with Iruka-sensei, teasing Konohamaru and friends… it changed day to day.

But he had no real clue where to start, the graveyard had been a good idea until he had realized how big it was, the memorial statue had so many names. There was no quick and easy answer, he would just have to wait.

For certain he had already changed. He still longed for the feeling of someone’s hand in his, someone’s back against his, someone’s body to rest against or to curl up with but as much as he missed it he liked his current circumstances too.

Not having to run, having someone to tell him welcome back, that he did a good job, having somewhere warm to return to not having to say goodbye… at least not yet.

Not to mention, staying somewhere for such a long time was so nice. The talks he had to do were still so annoying but putting words to his feelings was harder than he thought it would be. There were things he couldn’t talk about.

Things he wondered if he would ever be able to talk about although he wanted to. He was Uzumaki Naruto, a shinobi of a village once more with souls on his back that were so heavy but he did not want to lose a single one.

It was real, they had cared for him, loved him and he never wanted to forget that. They had changed and so had he, so would everyone. For that he was grateful. But the past still remained he wanted to know who he was and he guessed that feeling would not go away until he got an answer.

But he had people that acknowledged the current him, or at least the him that they knew. Kakashi-sensei who knew everything or most of everything. The Anbu, Sasuke and Sakura who barely knew much of anything but liked him all the same. He was thankful for that too.

He had something good going in Konoha, he felt more connected to it than he ever had before. The people looked at him, the people who smiled at him, the people who talked to him, people who gave him things. All of that, he was so glad he was alive to experience it.

Which led to his conflicting feelings. He was so glad he was alive, even though they weren’t, was it even fair to think that way?

But even Zabuza had come around and saw that it had meant something and he knew better than anyone that he couldn’t protect people from themselves. He had already seen how events changed and warped people, he had already seen that what some would call saving another would call a burden.

Hell he had been braced for the upcoming fight himself. He had ignored the whispers and looks, now that he was older, now that he looked back he could see that his hope had been far more difficult than he had thought he knew.

To save Haku, meant having to fight him, change his mind when he had been desperately trying to
do the same to Naruto. His eyes closed and he swore he could feel the slim hands slipping around him to hug his back to Haku’s front. He had been loved there was never a doubt about that but he had known how valuable and dangerous he had been to Haku at the same time. Just because Haku had never flinched away did not mean the scars from that moment had been removed.

His guilt had remained and with everyday his need to improve, to help and please had let him understand Haku a little better.

It was different without them, they had shown him plenty, shown him a way that Naruto no longer wanted to go. He had people that would mourn him, rage for him if he were to fall, he was thankful for that and it was more than that, he could see the chance at a better beginning.

Even though there were obstacles in the way. His hidden past, the secrets Konoha help, that guy Orochimaru, the group looking for him and Naruto did not want to think too much about that. And of course, there was the whole problem of what Konoha was going to do now.

Zabuza’s words about him being an abandoned child hung in his mind but Naruto could not make himself cling to the words. Even though he wanted what so many had, a blood family he had already experienced love and a different sort of family. He wanted to know his roots for an entirely different reason.

XxX

Nothing like a good bowl of ramen to properly start the day and by start the day Naruto meant after he had finished all his other little routines. Still ramen was a good way to start the day to face other people. The old man always slipped him a little extra and his daughter always laughed and talked with him.

One day he was going to find the words to tell them just what they meant to him. It was more than service, it was genuine fondness and the way they asked after him, asked about his plans and his day. It was a rookie thing to babble everything but when faced with such kindness, Naruto was still weak.

He had just finished his third bowl and was contemplating if to use the coupon for a fourth when the sound of wooden shoes on gravel made him look up and behind him. He did not know what he had expected but he certainly had not expected the flap to be lifted and to be confronted with the Ero-sennin’s surprised looking face. “You’re actually here!” The man commented before his gaze shot from Naruto to the bowl. “I think I’m disappointed. Everyone I asked said you would be right here and I actually find you here.” The man chuckled.

Naruto was not laughing along. The last time he had seen the man he had not been given a clue that the man was going to up and disappear. He might have left instructions but that had not erased the fishy fact that he had appeared, knew way too much then disappeared so damn easily now he was back! He nearly choked on his mouthful of noodles and instead swallowed furiously so he could point at the amused looking old man. “What the hell are you doing here!”

XxX

The old pervert had only laughed at his exclamation, exchanged greeting with the shop owner and then proceeded to pay for Naruto’s ramen and a bowl for himself. Naruto’s question had been ignored but he was way too busy examining the fact that he had been right to be suspicious about the old man.

He walked around Konoha without a care, he had asked around for Naruto. He had been
recognized and treated well then there was the fact that he had taken Naruto home that first day. Suspicious.

Naruto did not always listen to his gut feelings but he did acknowledge the uneasy feelings he got. He eyed the man before the owner and his daughter mostly left them alone.

“I heard you did pretty good.” Ero-sennin smiled. “With the village, good job!”

“How did you hear about that?” Naruto frowned.

“Well I was here too.” The man shrugged. “But I was a little occupied… but I heard what happened, great job facing down Suna. Your team must be so proud of themselves, and you.” Naruto glared at the old man and the fond smile he got in return made him frown before the man ruffled his hair. “You’re really good for a brat. Still noisy though.”

“Why are you here.” Naruto grumbled when the hair ruffling finally stopped. He lifted his bowl to slurp the remains of the soup before he paused. “Why were you looking for me?” He watched an excited glint grow in the old man’s eye and he shrunk away a bit. “I got a bad feeling.” He muttered.

“Don’t you want to stretch your legs for a little bit?” The man asked so suddenly that Naruto almost dropped his bowl.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I helped you out didn’t I?” The man grinned as he tilted his head in Naruto’s direction and ate quickly from his bowl. “I trained you right? I need your help with something.”

“What could I even help you with?” Naruto frowned. “And what you mean stretch my legs for a bit?”

“I’ve got to do something to help out the village a bit, which means leaving it for a while.” The old pervert tilted his bowl so he could drink the remains of the soup. Naruto watched him finish before he rested the bowl back down with a thud. “I could use your help. Not like I’m asking for it for free.”

Naruto glared at him. “I have my team and my missions I can’t just take off when the village is like this.”

“Like I said, I’m not asking for free.” Ero-sennin chuckled. “I heard you know, saw it too about Sasuke’s new technique. That’s your sensei’s own creation you know.” Naruto’s eyes widened. “Chidori.” Naruto had not had the opportunity to actually quiz Sasuke on his new technique and he had not known how to bring it up to his sensei to teach it to him next either. “Help me out and I’ll teach you something even stronger than that.” Naruto’s gaze locked on the old man’s ones. “Not everyone can handle the jutsu I’m talking about, but if it is you then I’m certain you can handle it.”

Naruto glimpsed it again in the old pervert sage’s eyes, that look that showed that he was looking at Naruto but through him as well. That certainty that he knew what Naruto was made of and he knew his potential. He had remained so guarded when they first started training but Naruto had seen that look far more than he thought the man was aware of.

He did not exactly want to run off and leave his team but the chance to learn something. The chance to explore outside the village mostly unobserved tempted him. Still he could not trust the old man so suddenly so fully.
“If this is a test it is a waste of time.” Naruto snorted. “Why do I have to run off with you? How do I know you’re not a threat too?” It got him a wide grin in response. “What?”

“Hm nothing nothing.” The man snorted. “But I didn’t go to all that trouble from the council and your sensei for permission to be regarded as someone suspicious. Granted I understand why you would think so, but Orochimaru didn’t exactly walk through the village in broad daylight did he?”

At the man’s name Naruto barely resisted a shudder. “You know a lot.” He whispered.

“Yes I do.” The old man looked pleased. “I’m a shinobi, it is our way of life.”

He knew a lot, he was not an open book but he was promising a jutsu, a knew a lot and he had helped him before. No one knew the risks better than Naruto but he had been frustrated on where to start prying while out of sight of those who had to be keeping an eye on him. Maybe he could start prying at someone instead of places. Maybe the first clue was right before him.

“I don’t want to but are you really going to show me a new jutsu?” Naruto asked curiously.

“And in one sentence you go from cute brat to uncute.” Ero-sennin sighed. “So disappointing.”

“Why do you need me already.” Naruto frowned.

“I’m looking for a woman, an old friend of mine. I need to talk to her, she can be hard to find but she’s really strong.” The old man’s smirk widened. “Also she’s the best medical ninja to currently live. She’s performed miracles.”

“Miracles?” Naruto thoughts bounced to the Sandaime still in his condition, to Lee whose condition was still bad. He thought of Kakashi-sensei’s figure that time he had passed him giving comfort to Gai-sensei. “You’re going to ask her for help?”

“That’s just the beginning. She can be a little argumentive, Konoha is not her favourite place right now. She has a lot of demons here.” The old man’s smile faded.

“That’s where I come in right.” Naruto murmured. The man paused before he shrugged. “Hard to convince someone to come back when they don’t consider the place home right?”

“She’s gone through a lot. I’ve known her for a long time. We’re old teammates. She’s put in her time so to say, whatever peace she can get she’s welcomed to it but we need her.” The old man’s eyes turned serious, “We can’t afford to stay the way we are right now.” His gaze softened. “So you’ll help me?”

“I’m not turning down the chance at a new Jutsu.” Naruto snorted. “And you say she’s a medical shinobi? The best ever?” The old man nodded. “I want her to do me a favour.”

“Oh?” The old man sounded delighted. “Do you now.”

“Yeah.” Naruto breathed, he thought of Lee, his cry of pain. His determination, how he had gotten back up his body fighting even when his body had reached obvious limits. That sort of thing should never gone to waste, people like Lee were so valuable. That kind of heart, Naruto would want to live surrounded, backed by people like Lee. “So is she near here?”

“She was spotted not too far from here.” The man chuckled. He reached into his pants pocket to withdraw a photo. He placed it on the counter and Naruto inhaled at the picture of the young woman, brown hair, brown eyes and a soft smile on her face as she looked at something beyond the camera.
Naruto nodded before he remembered the old man had said he had known her a long time.
“Where’s the recent picture? Didn’t you say you’re teammates?” He frowned at the picture. “What
does she look like now?”

Ero-sennin tapped the photo. “Like that.”

Naruto let a moment pass as he stared at the old man before he looked back at the picture. “No
way.”

“I’m serious.” A smile teased the old man’s mouth. “This is how she looks right now sometimes
she makes herself look even younger.”

Naruto scowled as he looked at the photo. “But she’s an old lady right? Isn’t she supposed to be
around your age?” He glared at the man. “She’s lying!” He insisted and got a laugh in response.
“This isn’t funny!”

“She’s a little vain with her looks.” The man chuckled. “But this is how she stays and she’s fairly
recognizable. She’s famous in a good way and a bad way. That bad way is how we are going to
find her.”

Naruto shook his head at the photograph. “That granny is a liar.” He snorted. “She should just
accept it already.”

“Be careful of saying that to her face.” Ero-sennin snorted. “She’s well known around gambling
dens.” Naruto frowned. “She’s really smart but she has terrible luck, especially when it comes to
money and gambling.” He shook his head and the fond smile that came to his lips made Naruto
pause. “Doesn’t stop her, never had and I know it never will. She’s awful at it and they all call her,
the Legendary Sucker.” He burst out with a laugh. “She’s always on the run because of her debts.”

He continued talking but Naruto had gotten lost in his own thoughts. He had heard that name
before. Tanto had once lamented that he had never once run into that same ‘Legendary Sucker’ the
amount of times he had claimed he would have made a fortune off the woman.

Legendary sucker and she was from Konoha too. And that was who they were going to look for?
And she sucked at gambling? Part of Naruto felt tired thinking about the mission he was about to
take by himself for himself and the other part of him delighted at the chance at a new jutsu, more
training and of course a chance to pry.

But the others had not gotten a chance to meet her, he would do it in their place and no matter what
it took, he was dragging her back to Konoha. Her skills were needed.

XxX

He had actually been surprised to see his sensei outside his door. The old pervert wanted to leave as
soon as possible so Naruto had begged for twenty minutes so he could prepare. His sensei had been
leaning against his apartment door a notepad and pen in hand and he looked just as startled to see
him.

Naruto was pleased to see the cute notepaper had made a return. His sensei’s eye quickly raked
over him and Naruto swore he tensed for a quick second before he relaxed. “I thought I wasn’t
going to run into you.” The man hummed before he tucked away the paper and pen. “Looks like
you’re in a hurry.”

“Going to help this guy…” Naruto trailed off as he brushed past his sensei to open his apartment
door. “He gave me some help during my training. For the tournament.” He glanced at his sensei.
“He wants me help him find someone. I don’t know how I’m going to be any real help but…”

“I didn’t know if you would refuse or not.” His sensei snorted. “It’s why I’m still here, didn’t know what to write.” He leaned against Naruto’s table and Naruto eyed his sensei’s crossed arms before he went to his bag and started to pack. “I- I didn’t expect you to say yes.”

“Not going because I want to.” Naruto grunted as he wiggled half under his bed to grab a stack of tags and other minor things. “I have to, this lady she’s a medic nin.” He shoved the things into his bag and his gaze went to his desk before he started to grab clean clothes. He wanted to take the sleeping bag but he knew he had to leave it behind. “He said she’s really good. Miracle working and stuff.”

“She is the best currently living.” Kakashi-sensei agreed. Naruto tucked his talisman and frog purse into his bag before he eyed his sense. The man was still tense, almost uneasy.

“You don’t want me to go?”

“My head knows you be the safest you’ll ever be.” Kakashi-sensei said softly as Naruto finished packing his bag. “However…” He trailed off. “It’s easier when I’m with you leaving the village, I know you’ll be fine.” The man’s eye closed the way it usually did when he was smiling but Naruto knew whatever smile lurked under the mask it would be forced. “I guess I’ll just miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too sensei.” Naruto smiled as he picked up his pack. Kakashi-sensei’s eye reopened and his hands dropped to his sides. “It’s just a quick break. We’ll find this old lady, drag her back and we’ll be doing missions again.” That got him a quick sigh of relief. Still, he now had more information to consider. He had never thought about how his sensei thought about him being out the village and not in his sight.

In the years he had been gone Kakashi-sensei had claimed he had looked for him. Naruto believed him but he had never stopped to think that the looking might have taken its toll. There was Iruka-sensei who was so delighted he was back that he mostly smothered Naruto and worried about him when he was able.

So for Kakashi-sensei, maybe he just could not believe Naruto was really and truly back? Maybe he feared Naruto disappearing again? Naruto knew others worried he would up and leave Konoha but for his sensei maybe the threat of Orochimaru and the group that wanted him were taking their toll.

Still he had a new light to consider some of Konoha’s residents. Maybe they did not watch him from suspicion, not all of them anyway. Maybe it really was concern, it was sort of sweet and sad.

XxX

Just what was he getting himself into. Naruto shifted his pack on his shoulders and eyed the man ahead of him at the gate joking along with those on duty. There was a bit of awe in the guards as the man laughed with them.

Still who knew how long he would be gone. Not a ridiculous time after all, but the chance at information, the chance of more training and a new jutsu kept him excited, still… Kakashi-sensei had not come out and said it but he had not wanted Naruto to go.

Naruto had not been lying, he would miss his sensei and Iruka-sensei and his team but Ero-sennin was right about a few things, he did want to stretch his legs out the village without a mission. Of course he was not just doing this for the village or the Sandaime or even Lee it was more than that
he wanted to take the ease of his sensei’s shoulders and this was a step towards that. Still his gut was telling him to be on guard.

Naruto glanced behind him his gaze shifting to the Hokage’s stone faces. His gaze lingered on the Sandaime’s face and his resolve hardened. He took a determined step towards the old sage and swore he felt eyes burning into his back but when he glanced behind him he saw nothing and felt nothing. Did not mean he had imagined it though. He reached the old man and got a soft clasp to his shoulder before they nodded to the guards. Naruto gave one more glance behind him to see if he could see anything before he focused on the open road and the man next to him. They had an old lady to find and he had a jutsu to learn. No reason to feel guilty, he was helping the village and his friends. Then finally they would be able to get back on track and the village could focus on other things besides their image. He did wonder what his team would do without him though.
There was still something really fishy about how easily Konoha had just handed him over to the old pervert. He still seemed like someone important but Naruto had thought they would have been followed for a bit. Like how he had seen shadows the first few times for a few miles on his team’s first few missions outside the village.

He knew now he had not been imagining that. Still the old man was fishy. They might be teaming up because their goals were the same but that would not mean Naruto would drop his guards right away. For him, that Iruka-sensei trusted the old man and obviously knew him was enough for Naruto not to try to sneak off while he slept.

Not that he would get that very far. Naruto had never allowed himself to forget how quick the old man could move. How he could easily get behind Naruto and how easily the old man read him, knew what Naruto had realized and still did what he did.

He was a strange old man and considering that they were going to find his friend. Well the old man had strange friends too. A woman who hid her real appearance. Not that Naruto could not judge much on that it was just the reasons behind it that stopped him from accepting it and moving on.

Some people hid their real appearance because they had no other choice, being hunted or it was easier to be thought to be something, to be someone else. When it was a mistake it was harder but to hide because of fear? Naruto understood that, but he doubted the acquaintance of the old pervert was hiding her true appearance because of something like fear.

“How far out are we going?” He asked as he eyed the man next to him, the man did not have that much carrying with him which was weird for Naruto. Just a simple pack although it was much bigger than Naruto’s own.

“Some miles.” Was the answer. Naruto scoffed and shook his head. “We’re going west first then we’ll check the towns close after. There’s a specific area we’re keeping in.”

“What kind of area?”

“The kind with gambling.” The man laughed softly. “You’ve been around, you know not every
town has games.” His gaze held Naruto’s as they walked, he was unable to look away from the old man’s easy gaze but he was right. Not every little town had gambling.

“What kind of gambling does she like? Is she going to hit little shack dens? Big gambling only?”

“She’ll leave the small wins alone so towns with only an old man playing cards while his people lurk in the back she’ll leave alone.”

“Big populations.” Naruto said softly.

“Easy for a woman to hide.” The old man shrugged. “Even with one with a reputation as hers. You’ll know who she is but only if you’re that sort.” His gaze left Naruto’s to flick to the well walked road. “Or you know people with bad habits and like to gossip.”

“What about you Ero-sennin?” Naruto pressed, his hands tightened on his straps as he eyed the man next to him. “What about your reputation? Who are you?” He paused and rolled his eyes. “Besides a shameless pervert who wrote an even more shameless perverted book.”

He did not expect the man’s laughter. It made his eyes widen as the man laughed loudly next to him his entire body shaking with it. He had expected him to lightly snap at him, protest being called a pervert. Not for the man to laugh as though what Naruto said was the funniest thing in the world.

XxX

“You’re a good one kid.” Ero-sennin said when he finally managed to stop chuckling. Naruto had not bothered to stop him. Obviously he had found something funny, something that made him slow to low chuckles as they walked along the road. It was nice to hear as it was weird. The big shaggy haired old man laughing with a distant look in his eyes and a smile on his face.

Just because Naruto let him laugh did not mean his curiosity had disappeared. He was just waiting. He could be relentless, he would be relentless. Who knew how many days the mission would take and it would take time to get back to Konoha. Naruto was willing to subtly and obviously pump the old man for information.

There was a feeling sometimes when the old man looked at him that not only did he know something but he was willing to share. However, Naruto knew with those sorts of people either a price had to be paid, or something had to happen for them to think that it was the right time and if he were to think about the ‘right time’ for information to be shared he would end up thinking about his sensei and what he had to be hiding.

Kakashi-sensei was another sort of problem even as Naruto had warmed up to him considerably. He believed in the man, when Kakashi-sensei said he cared, that he wanted to protect Naruto, that he had been looking for him. Naruto believed him, he did not even have to look at the man to know it was truth now. He could listen to his sensei’s voice and hear it. The man did not expose much of his face but Naruto was learning to read the one eye and the skin around it along with the movements of the mask.

People had looked for him Naruto was certain many or all of them that had looked were ANBU or had been ANBU but a mission was a mission. There was no reason for someone to be emotionally involved for looking for a lost weapon, a lost child. But Kakashi-sensei, there was no doubt, Naruto’s disappearance had been personal to him and all he wanted to know was why.

Who was Uzumaki Kushina that an enemy could throw that name in his face and say it like Naruto
should know who that was and almost as if they were angry at Naruto, at Konoha for Naruto not knowing? Who the hell was the old man walking with him that he knew Orochimaru so well?

Naruto had jokingly said he needed a crash course on the village, clans and important people but he knew that it was no longer a joke. He needed to know and as much as he was tempted to find out by all means necessary he knew that was not the way, it would lead to mistrust and limits. The small bits he had were not enough but he would occupy himself. He really had no other choice.

“So kid.” Ero-sennin finally stopped laughing, he had moved onto wiping his eyes with the tips of his fingers. It’s ridiculous. “You want to know who I am?” The smile is still there, just smugger and Naruto distrusts the look. “Beyond my work on the Icha Icha of course.”

“You’re so eager.” Naruto answered dryly. “I’m not too sure getting an answer on who you are is such a good idea.”

The man laughed like Naruto had told the greatest joke. “Really now.”

“Uh huh.” The road is rough but the grass on the sides is low and pale green. Naruto could be forgiven for wandering away from the far too happy old man to his surroundings.

“I’m going to tell you anyway.” The man grinned. Naruto rolled his eyes.

“Jiraiya-sama, holy master, toad… look Ero-sennin you’re still an Ero-sennin.” Naruto pointed out as he hugged the big scroll to himself. The old man sulked and he rolled his eyes again. “All that told me was what I already knew, you’re a perverted old sage and you trained in Mount whatever you call it.”

“You’re such an uncute brat.” The old man relieved Naruto of his burden and they were travelling again. “Don’t you ever worry about an adult’s pride?”

“You look like you would survive. Besides someone like you most likely had someone bring you back to earth often.” Naruto sniffed loudly. “You need it, since when do girls find sennins popular? Don’t you have to be pure of heart to be a sennin? You peep then you write books about it!”

The only good thing about the trip was that he was going to get paid. He had gotten three Chuunins to confirm that. That was the good thing in case they were unable to find the woman the old man wanted to find.

Naruto knew about runners, if she had been running for years she might be better than them and know the exact moment they got close. Naruto was a little dull, a year and plenty out of practice but he knew that people on the run easily blended in with the feel of a town and city. Something out of place rippled. Someone out of place was quickly spotted, giving the runner time to run. Or attack.

But the old man had not said she would react violently. Naruto had the feeling that mentioning Konoha might make the old lady kick up a fuss. Then again you sometimes never knew. He watched as the old man gave a small sigh before he turned off the path, marching across the low-cut grass to a roadside shrine.

Naruto followed him and frowned when the man dropped his pack and sat down with a smile
before he fished out a container of water. “A small break.” He smiled and Naruto’s frown widened. He could keep going, the pace was not that fast, it was not as if the old man was tired either. He was not even winded.

Naruto allowed his pack to drop near the man, not too close but neither too far before he investigated the shrine. It was simple. Most likely was only really visited during the new year and holidays. There were two large bells and he itched to touch them. The ribbons were clean, the huge bells shiny meaning someone had to be nearby to care for them.

Instead of playing with the bells, Naruto watched them move in the breeze. He stood there for only a few minutes before he looked over his shoulder. He knew Ero-sennin was looking in his direction but he was looking above him, not at Naruto. At the bells.

Naruto glanced back at the bells for a few more seconds before he walked back to where his pack was. He dropped to the ground and pulled his bag to his stomach and stared at the old man until he met his gaze.

“You know, I was getting a bit nostalgic there.” Ero-sennin smiled. “Bells reminded me of better days. Just two.” He said softly. “Always just two.” His gaze sharpened. “Matter of fact, you’re on Kakashi’s team so you did it too.”

Naruto tilted his head and eyed the man. “Did what?”

“The bell test.” The man laughed. “Who ended up being tied to the log?”

“No one.” Naruto frowned. “Why do you know about that?”

“First I’ll answer a question that’s got to be knocking about in your brain.” Ero-sennin laughed. “Why you? Why am I teaching you and going so far to get your help?”

“It would be nice to know.” Naruto grumbled.

“A long time ago.” Ero-sennin’s smile was distant again. “I taught the Fourth Hokage. You resemble him a little bit. Call it an old man’s whims.” Naruto’s jaw slackened slightly before the man laughed. “And the Fourth taught Kakashi. Also, when the Third was young.” Ero-sennin rose to his feet and dusted off his front. “He taught me. He taught me, the woman we are going to look for.” His gaze got serious when he looked down at Naruto. “Orochimaru too.”

Naruto swallowed before he got to his feet and carefully put back on his pack. He was certain that the old man was done sharing for now. Maybe finished talking until they reached their first destination but that was okay. Naruto had plenty to think over.

He could still hear that man’s voice. Feel his touch, his delight and the whisper of secrets. So much he wanted to know especially with what he now knew but he could still hear Orochimaru taunting him at the back of his mind and he could still remember the way he looked at Sasuke. Naruto’s grip tightened on his straps as he walked beside Ero-sennin.

XxX

“I heard something about being sent back to the academy if you fail the bell test.” Naruto glanced at the older man walking next to him. “What’s that all about?”

“Well you’ve heard about how Kiri used to do things.” Ero-sennin snorted. “Bloody and no vision, not to mention it broke something in them. It’s good that they finally abolished it but it took losing all those-” He glanced down at Naruto and shook his head. “Everyone tests genins differently. You
know better than anyone else that school room and the real work are completely different things. You want to send them out there only knowing about what they knew in the classrooms? You expect Jounins to take on the cute little blank slates you are and not test them? See if they can work with them and help them do jobs, help them survive?"

“Is that what they are doing?” Naruto questioned.

“Every team works differently. You kids have to get used to working with each other and Jounins have to work with you, keep you safe and guide you as well. It looks easy but they do have to teach you things. Some kids have their own special things they have to learn. Clan things, clan secrets and you have to learn that and then they are ones like you who have to learn control.”

Naruto lightly shuddered, he knew it was just in his head but he could feel cool fingers on his stomach again, on his seal. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Konoha can’t afford to be weak, we need man power.” Ero-sennin answered. “The test is to see if the kids given to you can handle your personal style and have the guts to be someone of use to the village without getting killed first mission. Not everyone gets it right but it is usually good enough. You see what they are made of, their strengths, weaknesses, how they think, how they value, what they want.” Ero-sennin laughed. “Jounins do have the final say in a genins career. You know your sensei never passed any team until yours.”

“Really?” It was not that unbelievable, especially since Kakashi-sensei had been out searching for Naruto in the first place. “Ours is the first.”

“Jounins are eccentric, what they look for in genins can sound crazy to normal people.” Ero-sennin huffed. “I thought Gai was the weirdest one but of course it had to be Kakashi with his teamwork nonsense.” His tone was half resigned half wistful, Naruto could feel that there was a story there but he could also feel that prying was not the answer. Soon however, very soon.

“Kakashi-sensei did the bell test?”

“Hm.” Ero-sennin chuckled. “His team worked together and got one. M- That brat always did go easy on his team.” There was no ignoring the wistful tone in the old man’s voice. “Everyone does it different. I know Team eight does a tracking hunt but they are going to be a tracker team, good brains that Kurenai.”

“You know so much about Konoha.” Naruto breathed. He tucked away the information on team eight as he eyed the man next to him. “Why on earth do you ruin it all by being a Ero-sennin?”

“It’s my passion and my destiny.” Somehow it did not feel like the man was joking.

XxX

“I knew the old man was old.” Naruto muttered to himself as he refilled his container by the standpipe. “But he’s seriously old!”

“When he was young he was the student of the Shodaime and the Nidaime.” Ero-sennin smiled. “When I was young he gave my team hell. With that bell test I fell for every trick.” The old man laughed loudly. “I was so young, a real brat.”

“Young.” Naruto muttered, from the corner of his eyes he eyed the old man and tried to picture it desperately and failed. “Umm.”

“Little brat.” A pinch to his cheek made him yelp. “We’re old now but we were young once.”
“It’s the Yondaime’s jutsu.” Naruto glanced at the old man. “It’s one of the jutsus he made himself, right?”

“One of his most powerful jutsus.” Ero-sennin yawned as he lay back on the grass. “I’ve broken down the learning process for you and I have confidence that you’ll master the jutsu.”

“The Yondaime.” Naruto said softly. “You really taught him?”

“Yeah.” The old man smiled. “I did but that was long ago.”

“Can I see it?” Naruto pressed. “Can we start now?”

“Such an eager brat.” Ero-sennin snorted before he turned onto his side. “There are several steps to this all requiring your concentration but not yet. We’re not going to start teaching you the first step while we are on the road.”

Naruto frowned as he eyed Ero-sennin’s back. That certainly was a strange condition. “Why?”

“Because.” Ero-sennin answered. “We just won’t.”

XxX

“So, she’s a drinker and a gambler.” Naruto played with a blade of grass before he sighed and tossed it to the ground. “Is she really any good?”

“Shinobi drink too even in Konoha.” Ero-sennin snorted. “She sobers quickly.”

“That isn’t reassuring.” Naruto muttered. “First we were going to check all the gambling dens but now we have to hit bars too? Decent establishments or any hole in the wall where you can get a drink?” He glared at the man. “Are you going to send me in bars by myself to check too?”

“That’s a little dangerous for me.” The man choked. “We’ll go bit by bit and narrow it down. We find where she was and we will get on her trail. Then it is a matter of time.”

“Can you find her when she’s close by?” Naruto asked curiously. “A certain distance?”

It took him a few moments before he realized that Ero-sennin was not going to answer. He looked up at the old man to find him contemplating him with a blank expression. “Not exactly.” The man said softly. “Can you?”

“Track? I never even met this Baa-chan.” Naruto pointed out. “I don’t know anything about her except she likes to look young, she gambles when she should stop and maybe she drinks way too much and that she was a shinobi. That isn’t enough.” Naruto point out. “Looking for a shinobi that wants to hide, whose motives and thoughts I can’t understand. A shinobi living like a civilian.”

Naruto snorted. “You want me to find someone like that on my own with the area we have to work with? Who can even do that?”

“Hmm maybe you have a point there.” A warm touch to his shoulder. “But it would be easier.”

XxX

“You’re buying that?” Even though Naruto had told the man he could wait on the other side of the road he had tagged along. Honestly who was the adult here? Could he not stay in one place while Naruto bought something in clear view of the man?
“Yes I am.” Naruto handed over the money and watched the seller wrap up the incense sticks before handing them over. When his hands touched the paper the scent drifted to his nose, it took everything in him to not inhale deeply. Press his nose against the sticks. Burn them right away and to close his eyes.

“Places like that in Konoha you know.” Ero-sennin pointed out from just behind him, his shadow falling onto the stall.

“No scents like this in Konoha.” Naruto pointed out as he slid the package into his bag. “Shouldn’t we get going?”

XxX

Naruto opened his eyes to a dim room, he heard the soft breathing nearby. He knew where he was, there was the hard bed, the thin sheets, the silence of a town but he was fully awake and it was night.

To call the place Ero-sennin insisted they stop a town was generous. It was just a place to stop for a while. The biggest draw was the inn, everything else was just people living their lives. Still the fact did not change that Naruto was well rested and awake and everything else was quiet and asleep.

A few hours. Less than five and he was well rested and ready for the road. Old habit came back to haunt you. He was not cold, not sleepy just awake and ready. But there was nothing to be ready for, there was no mission, no time to flee, no journey and no distractions like there had been during the down times.

There was just him. Him and the memories that he carried. In those memories, they lived on and in those memories, was a solution to his problem. There was nothing to do, he could not exactly go out and train at the late hour. Even if Ero-sennin ended up not having a problem if it got back to other people it would be a problem.

Naruto shoved the thin sheets further down the bed as he sat up straight. Since he could not go anywhere physically and would not be able to go back to sleep, he might as well try and focus his mind.

Would be difficult to try and focus with all the thoughts in his head. Konoha, the current state and the Sandaime. His team and how they were faring with him gone. The countless missions everyone had to take and how even ANBU members were dragged into it. The strain of the village, how he could take advantage of that and dig if the strain carried on any longer.

Which he would have done if he had not been reminded that he was still under observance of some sort. If ANBU members could leave him gifts. Have observations about him, sympathize with him but he had not even known they were around that was another problem in itself.

Which was simply why he had done nothing. If the opportunity had presented itself he might have caved but there had been none. Only thing he had done was narrow down where to look and what to look for. Sakura’s story about her luck at the hospital had caught his interest. That the location of the files had been just dropped in his lap like that with no effort had made him cautious about charging in too quickly.

One missing file reappearing suddenly was bad enough. The last thing anyone needed was Naruto disturbing some sort of security system. Something he had been unsure Konoha used for certain departments until one of their simple delivery missions. There had been guards and traps to unravel
and that had just been the civilian zone information.

Of course, even if ANBU were busy with missions. Naruto had been rudely informed of other people in Konoha that could check up on him that did not seem to have the back to back crazy amount of missions everyone else had. His eyes reopened and he sought out the other bed and Ero-sennin’s sleeping figure.

That was a mystery that he needed to solve. The old man had not been looking for him but he knew who he was. There was no doubt in Naruto’s mind that Ero-sennin found the situation and their positions amusing. Ero-sennin had known what and who he was and had not been looking for him but he was now. There was a story there, there was something there he could feel it and leaving it alone made his skin itch. But he knew some things you had to wait before you pried. Did not hurt that the man dropped plenty of helpful information for Naruto.

Naruto still wanted to know who he was. So, he used to live in Konoha. Why did he leave? Where did he go, why didn’t he stay and why did he know so much about Naruto? Why teach him? Naruto was not going to buy the old man looking to relive youth ploy Ero-sennin had been trying to pull.

If he had tried to pull that while being the nasty old man he usually was drooling all over unsuspecting and unknowing women, well Naruto would have thrown his hands in the air and accepted that but not this, not something that was so much work.

The answer to it was there somewhere but he just could not find it. His breaths slowed as he thought it over, doing his best to look at it from all angles. Doing his best to see the whole picture even with all the missing pieces.

He did not have enough information he knew that but he felt as though the old man had given him enough that he could find most of the answer. His thoughts slowly drifted, his focus on his surroundings lessened as he was drawn into his thoughts.

Sandaime, Ero-sennin, Yondaime, Kakashi-sensei. Naruto was just missing something. It was turned over in his head over and over again until his awareness of time itself slipped away from him.

XxX

Jiraiya had really found himself something interesting. He sat the entire way up no longer worried about Naruto noticing. He had been curious when the child had startled awake. He had pretended to sleep just to see what Naruto would do but he had not expected that.

He knew what it was, he was impressed, that level of focus. That kind of intensity, Jiraiya was willing to bet the kid did not even know exactly what he was doing, he just did what he knew, what he saw and that was what made him fascinating.

It was also what made him dangerous because it was one thing to observe, it was another thing to copy, it was an entirely different thing to learn, to teach yourself because if someone had taught Naruto something like he would eat his getas.

Kid had put himself in a trance. Jiraiya shook his head and snorted to himself. It was still low levelled and he would love to know what the kid was concentrating on so seriously. Still whenever he managed to pull himself out of it, whatever he had been thinking about he would understand a bit more clearly but he doubted the kid understood what he was doing. He needed a teacher.
But he had some, Jiraiya knew in the hands of that troupe that Naruto had not been unattended for long. Someone would have seen the kid trying a few things and he had no doubt in his mind that they would have done what they could because Jiraiya watched Naruto’s hands, the kid had slick fingers. Not something he had known before he had left and certainly not something he would have had a need for before he left. And the easiest way to teach a kid something was to make it fun.

The Sandaime’s grandson, Konohamaru, he really did like the coin tricks Naruto did and Jiraiya was certain that when Naruto had first saw it, it must have been fun too, learning would have been fun as well until it had to be stepped up.

Jiraiya slowly turned over backing Naruto. No sense interfering, if he was not out of it by morning, Jiraiya had a few ways of bringing him back to awareness without startling him too much. Still, he had known Naruto had hidden talents, during their time together he had been watching the kid and listening to him but it felt like it was not enough and wasn’t that funny.

Upping Naruto’s strength was a smart move. Teaching him the rasengan was simple common sense. They couldn’t protect Naruto forever and the kid had an open mind with enough time he would be able to finish what the Yondaime had started and wouldn’t that be a thing to see.

Chapter End Notes

So I’m back, late but back.
They heard the city before it came into view that was the thing about towns. The sound of carts, people selling wares, the sound of life, activity that was what a city was and Naruto was unable to stop his steps from quickening and his hands tightening on the straps to his pack.

There was just something about cities. There was a promise of something. Back, way before there had been the promise of food and jobs maybe rest if they were lucky. Now it was the beginning to the mission he had been assigned.

He was aware of Ero-sennin standing beside him as they stared down at the city. It was large but he knew larger existed. He had seen larger but that did not change the fact that it took a while to look over the entire place. It would take some time to cover the entire place.

“Looks like some fun is going on down there.” Ero-sennin’s voice was contemplative. “All around the market place. We’ve come at a good time, haven’t we?”

“We are here for the Baa-chan remember?” Naruto scoffed. “And you have to start teaching me the jutsu remember? We can’t goof off now.”

“I know I remember I haven’t forgotten.” Ero-sennin started down the trail to the city. “But that doesn’t change the fact that taking a break now is a good idea. There won’t be any breaks once we start. This is more your last chance to relax so why not take in the sights? You won’t have the time or even the energy to be doing that after we leave here.” The man’s tone was light but when he glanced back at Naruto his face was serious.

“So, I’m to play about at the festival?” the sound of people got louder the closer they got, Naruto caught the scent of food in the air. “By myself?”

“Well I am going to get some work done.” The old man chuckled. “You get to take a break. I on the other hand, I’m going to start the search.” He side-stepped a tottering drunk and Naruto did the same as they finally made it to the street among the crowd of people. “I know what I’m talking about, you need this before we start, my treat there won’t be anymore.”

“It feels more like you’re ditching me for a while.” Naruto muttered before he threw up his hands giving in. “Fine, give me a place to meet you at. Or do you want me to track you down in the unsavoury parts of this place?”

“I’ll search out a place.” Ero-sennin mused. “We’ll be here for a few days, we’re both shinobi. Once we stick to the city we’ll find each other. It’ll be easy for me to find you.” The man’s mouth twitched in a smile. “But of course, if you want to come find me when you have had your fill then you are welcome to try.”

“You really think I can’t.” Naruto muttered. “Pervy old man, you’re making it sound like a real challenge.” He rolled his eyes before he eyed the paths ahead crammed with stalls and people. He
wanted to see a bit of everything so his eyes roamed trying to find the path that mostly appealed, he would go down one way come back up another and go down another until he had covered them all but the question was which one first.

“Well before you dart off.” Ero-sennin cleared his throat. “I have a few warnings, a bit of advice for you. There are these things you see, the three-“


“Oh.” Ero-sennin smiled. “Don’t take the vices lightly. That same woman we are looking for two of those vices ruined her life she can’t stop moving because of her liking for money.” He shook his head.

“Money is money.” Naruto pointed out. “I only get the things I know I’ll need, that I know I will use.” He made a face. “You do know I was on the run for four years, right? I saved like crazy and spent it only on things I thought were really important. It’s different now.” He stressed. “I have somewhere to keep stuff I have but… I’m thinking ahead, of things I need. Don’t have much of things I want.”

“Such a sad little kid.” Ero-sennin shook his head. “Just don’t spend too much or make yourself eating too much.”

“As if I would do that.” Naruto grumbled. “And you have a lot of guts bringing up the Shinobi vices when you’re all over women the moment they appear. You want to play the responsible adult and warn me about money? What were you going to do? Make me take a small amount to play with?” The old man smiled. “You have no shame you know that? None!”

“Fine, get going already you brat.” Ero-sennin crossed his arms. “I’m going to go gather information.”

“If that’s what you want to call it.” Naruto muttered before he rolled his eyes. “You know, I’ve already been in those kinds of places and seen those kinds of people. Sending me off isn’t protecting me in anyway. I already know what it is like.” He huffed in irritation. “You are wasting your time if you are trying to protect any sort of innocence of mine.”

“That isn’t the case at all.” Ero-sennin’s hand ruffled his hair. “I just wanted you to have some time and relax. The training will be rough on your body, your mind too. That isn’t the case at all because when you get a handle on things we will be looking together.” The man smiled down at him. “I’m not keeping you from it.”

“Right.” Naruto eyed him doubtfully. “Then I guess I should thank you.” The man’s smile widened. “Or maybe not.” He backed away a few steps but Ero-sennin remained in place watching him. “Fine then, I’ll find you when I’ve had enough.” The man chuckled so Naruto stuck his tongue out at him before he took off for the first street.

XxX

The press of people, the sound around him as he dashed and wandered the streets. How was it that he did not feel alone? Not just the troupe, he could Sasuke’s feigned disinterest almost feel Sakura’s hand in his. Feel Kakashi-sensei’s amusement at his back even as his mind caught and catalogued everything around him for fun and looking for danger.

A being of two worlds. He really felt like that.

He had just skirted over a small bar when something caught his eye. He was always looking for
something, always on guard and in new territory no one to watch his back his hackles were up. What was strange was not him catching sight of the disturbance.

It was that they had not caught sight or sensed him at the same time or even before him. He flattened himself against the wall as he suppressed his self. His ears strained as he listened doing his best to tune in so he could get most of the story.

The loud crash did not make him jump, the sound of things breaking did not make him flinch. Neither did the sound of violence. He could help, maybe help now. He had not been able to before. Things were different. He could feel his kunais burning against his thigh.

When he heard the first cry he did not move. The second cry and his kunai was in his hand before he slithered forward his teeth clenched.

XxX

Things did not change, they really did not. Chuunins? That had to be stretching it. A flick of his wrist and the blood flew off the end of his kunai. Naruto frowned down at the two men. How they had not gotten picked up by some Jounin group was beyond him.

They had not even been trying. Posturing, threatening trying to be bigger than they were, huddling together hiding from the bigger threat and still being nothing. Threatening civilians? Too easy, they could not fight like shinobi could.

They were cowards. Hiding from their village, calling themselves missing nins and they had no purpose other than ruling over a small town. At least Zabuza had a dream, a purpose even though it had been insane and bigger than everything else.

Money power, a town to keep quelled. As if shinobi could be satisfied with that. They were just men to begin with if that was all they wanted, all they needed deep down. To be king in such a small pond. Zabuza would have laughed at them before he killed them.

Their dream was too small. It was all too small too pathetic and the way they used people meant they had lost sight of their own self long before. The hounds had stopped nipping at their heels. They had grown safe. There was a certain look that came with that.

When you thought you were safe was the moment you lost. Once you start running you never stop, not unless you have something waiting to save you forever, a strong enough card. The sound returned to him and he looked up from the bodies. He was being thanked, it was in the murmurs surrounding him. In their voices, in their faces but he did not want to be thanked for this. He stopped these, there were plenty others he had left behind.

XxX

Their dreams had been bigger than those Chuunins he had killed, Naruto was still sceptical on their Chuunin status. Iruka-sensei was a Chuunin and he seemed far more capable than they had been. The memory of that night between them still lingered for him.

The way he had spoken to Naruto, stood up for Naruto, cried for him and the way he had fought for him. Iruka would have taken down the Chuunins in seconds Naruto was convinced.

Everyone had goals and even in the troupe, Zabuza had been a means to an end. It had not just been the place he had offered. Everyone else had a goal. A reason to keep going and it had seemed so big and amazing to him back then, he could look back now and acknowledge that the things that had kept them going had been actually little things.
That did not make it any less amazing, their goals their motivations but it made what they had been planning to do even more frightening. Naruto’s goal seemed even bigger when he looked back. But their goals had kept their feet moving, kept them living and hoping, fighting and when splits happened, when someone had to be left behind, they had fuelled the fire.

Nothing like those men, absolutely nothing like them. They were cut from a different cloth. It took effort to run and keep running, everyone’s reason for running was different but there was always a choice for how to live. Maybe if they had been working for bad people but those men had been working for themselves and for Naruto that made it worse.

Civilians, shinobis, elite, assassins, they all shed the same blood, cried the same tears, felt the same pain. How could those so alike want to bring down others like them? People were not disposable and they were not tools, they meant something to somebody, even if the only person was themselves.

Naruto sighed before he slipped back into the crowd. He still did not feel alone but for a few seconds he wished he were.

XxX

It took some effort but he was able to enjoy the festival again, he was almost able to relax. His fried corn had been large and generous the laughing man with grey in his hair had taken half the price before rushing him on his way. Naruto had never forgotten how happy festivals made people.

If things were good people were good too. Looking out for strangers and sharing smiles. Nothing bothered them because deep down they were good people wanting good things for everyone. It was those sorts of people he wanted to see more of.

While he licked, his fingers clean he eyed a figure ahead. He did not know what it was about them that bothered him. They wore a simple kimono and their arms were folded but every time they looked around he could feel Raiya.

They looked nothing alike. Raiya had been a large woman with a booming laugh. But she had not always been that way. She had been lying when they first met. Naruto tilted his head as he eyed the figure ahead, he watched them interact watched others speak to them and the way they watched others.

He was not certain but he still pushed through the crowd to approach them. He cleared his throat and tilted his head back a little to look at them. Brown eyes looked down at him in amusement before looking behind him. “Are you lost?” A low chuckle.

“How did you.” The woman glanced both ways before she nudged Naruto into an alley. Naruto went willingly. “How on earth did you.”

“Just because it is easy for you to pretend doesn’t mean others can’t see.” Naruto pointed out. “And not everyone is going to think someone who looks like you is pretending to be a guy instead of being a guy.” His heart throbbed. “But you’re not.”

“I didn’t mean to upset you just you reminded me of someone.” Naruto cleared his throat. “Wanted
to make certain, I mean I wasn’t sure but…”

“It’s okay.” The woman glanced behind her. “Just don’t tell anyone okay? It’s easier to keep pretending for everyone else.”

“You should have someone you don’t have to lie to.” Naruto said softly. That got him a hand ruffling his hair.

“Maybe one day.” She said softly her voice hoarse. “But not now.”

XxX

“You’re a weird kid.” She shifted her stance as they stood at a stall. Naruto’s gaze had slid over the game and the masks but she had tugged him to a stop before picking up a ball and handing over a few coins. Naruto would have paid but something in her eyes told him she needed to do it.

She was not Raiya, it was easy to remember that but she made him long for her. For her awkward smiles when she misunderstood something. The way she would laugh at them far younger than her. The way she treated her sword, the way Kaya had fit so perfectly at her side. Her sword came first, the mission next and Kaya third and Kaya would not have had it any other way.

The group had taught him much but Naruto had been taught about beauty and love because of those like them. There was the gentle beauty, Haku at rest or any other time when he was not blinded with rage. Alya fit in there too. There was the fierce kind of beauty, Kasumi at work with a smile on her face, Raiya fighting or protecting them. Or just being herself.

Contrary to what Sakura and Sasuke liked to think it was not just the physical that pulled him, it was their eyes. Kind, loving, accepting he liked those kinds of eyes.

He watched the woman next to him throw the ball and grinned when it knocked over three stumps. “Cool!” He laughed. He did not know everything, would not pretend to know everything there was no way he could. There had been so many things that had gone over his head back then that he had been incapable of understanding.

The only thing he had been really able to do was listen and he had done that. Listened to them. Listened to their voices and done his best to remember it. He still did not understand everything but he was coming to understand enough.

“I fought for them, by them for so long. For so many years and when I tried to tell them the truth I was no longer their friend. No longer valuable but I didn’t want to keep lying. I thought I’d lied enough but before I could do anything me and the rest of us were thrown away. Our skills no longer needed.” Raiya’s voice had not been bitter when she had confessed to Zabuza. Just accepting.

“Don’t lie to me.” Zabuza had tapped the hilt of his sword. “I’m not going to make you pretend to be someone you aren’t. I won’t lie, I want your sword, I want your talents that’s all I don’t care that people thought you were a man, that you fought as a man, be who you want to be once you fight for me.”

And she had, with a smile on her face. She had been wary at first, shooting wary glances at Haku all the while before she had relaxed and gotten closer to Kaya. She had fought with them listened and watched them and done what she wanted. She had been good at lying, good at pretending even when she did not want to.

“See anything you like?” Naruto blinked at the question as his eyes trailed over the owner of the
stall and his good-natured expression. His eyes lingered on the festival masks. They had always fascinated him, when he had been a child he had always wanted one. Never found someone willing to sell him one willingly. On the road, the ones he had seen that he could buy he had not wanted to, then there had been the ones given to him taken, stolen.

His eyes fell on the hound shaped mask and he smiled. “I want that one.” But not for himself.

XxX

The smells of food and the sound of laughter was what really made a festival. Naruto had bid goodbye to the lady at the end of one street. Her wistful but grateful smile had made his throat clench painfully. It was not as if he did not understand.

Just because the group had been mostly accepting did not mean he did not know what others thought. He just did not care. He knew how people thought about two men, he had seen others challenge Haku and been disgusted by him and Zabuza after all.

He had heard the way people spoke about Raiya in the beginning and the way Alya prevented anyone from using certain words. Naruto knew that the way others thought was not how he had been encouraged to think. He had been encouraged to accept and although he had many issues with other things that was one thing he was glad about.

He was vocal about his interests, he was not shy or ashamed about what he knew was natural. He had loved them and they had cared for him. He could never forget that and it was up to him to remember them, their dreams their goals as he went on with his own life.

He knew what they had been risking and they had done it anyway. It had been worth it anyway. Except Naruto had stopped running and there was no one to run with. If not running, people were hiding, cowering, good people and that was never fair, would never be fair but he was still too weak.

His dream… it was not just about strength. Naruto felt a burst of warmth in his chest as he finished off his fried octopus. A smile crept onto his face because his entire body felt warm all over. He shifted on his small bench and tilted his head back to look up at the sky. Never alone, not now.

XxX

There were so many little things to do and see, so many people around, his chest did squeeze a little tight every time he saw a child with a family. Before it had not bothered him. He had Haku holding his hand, or Alya’s hand in his or sometimes Kaya and Raiya holding both his hands on a rare venture to events together.

He had Kasumi and Ryu arguing while teasing him. He had Nina by his side and so much more. There was so little to miss back then. He did not have blood family back then but what he had back then had been family and something no blood family would have been able to give him. He still wanted to know where he was from, who he was. It was a need that burned through him. Knowing who he was would help him in knowing what to do and what he could do. He was still conflicted.

Still without the others as a buffer he felt it strongly. When he overheard fathers and sons, when he saw three people families his mind wandered and he envied a bit. How could he not, but he had loved them he would not change that and them for anything in the world but it did not change the simple fact that he lacked information.

Information that was being kept from him. Information that he needed and that was so close he
could taste it just he could not find the right door to open but he could not get too mad could he.
Was not like he was sharing the secrets he had left after all.

XxX

He had enjoyed the festival enough; the old man’s taunt had been lingering at the back of his mind
the entire time. Try, Naruto was welcome to try as if Naruto would not be able to find that
perverted geezer without even trying.

In a place like this there was only one place he would be looking for information, even if Naruto
could not find him by feeling him out, he could find him by doing what the old man had claimed
he would be doing. Gathering information.

Of course Ero-sennin was a pervert so the best place to look was not the broken-down bars with men
drinking away their troubles but half decent establishments with pretty ladies to draw you in, and
rob you blind. Naruto smiled to himself as he wandered down the streets keeping an eye out for the
shift in architecture.

He made it half way down town before he found the area, no one gave him a second glance. He did
not feel anything out of the ordinary but he kept his steps slow as his eyes darted over the people
lingering outside and passing on the streets. The two ladies with cat ears on their heads caught his
attention immediately and the way they looked over him before dismissing him let him know he
just might be in the right place.

A smile opened doors, it also stirred caution but shyness and hesitation would not get him
anywhere with these sorts of people. Instead he shifted the weight on his back and smiled at the
women until he was standing before them. They had amused looks on their faces now.

“Can we help you boy?” The one on the left laughed as she tugged on the hem of her dress.
“Looking for your daddy?”

“Something like that.” Naruto smiled. “He’s a big perverted old man with long white hair.”

XxX

“Congrats to me or something like that.” Jiraiya stopped laughing and looked behind him to better
see. “Try you said.” Naruto dropped onto the opposite couch a scowl on his face. “Wasn’t even that
hard and look at you, the hell happened to those damn vices?”

The drink had not gotten to his head just yet, he was more than a little tipsy but he could still focus
and still think. He released his grips on the girls and when they did not immediately wiggle away
he tapped them lightly on their waists. Jiraiya watched them leave before he turned his gaze back
to the annoyed youth facing him.

He had actually found him and wasn’t that amusing. Jiraiya had not been trying that hard to hide
but he had made it difficult. It was far sooner than he would anticipated. The sun was still in the
sky, the kid was really amazing but Jiraiya was not going to let on just how good the kid was yet.

Instead it would be more fun to play the drunk and see what the kid next.

“Well I’m not indulging.” He played with his cup and allowed his grin to widen as Naruto’s scowl
deepened. “You’re done already? Maybe you need to learn a bit more about having fun kid.”

Naruto’s eyes darkened before he rolled his eyes. He slumped in his chair and scoffed at the
ceiling. “As if you would know about my idea of fun.”
“This is work kid, work.” Jiraiya smiled playfully, he allowed his gaze to sweep past Naruto to the women still around.

“I’m glad I didn’t let you run off with my wallet, Gama-chan would be flat and empty.” Jiraiya barked out a laugh because Naruto was not wrong, even though he had his own money. Plenty of it that the likes of him could spend in a good amount of years.

“Did you bring something for me?” The boy’s bag looked considerably heavier than it had before. Not by much but the slightly bigger bulge indicated that Naruto had bought something.

“If you wanted something you should have gone for it yourself.” Naruto waved his hand as he scowled at Jiraiya until a woman came to stop by them. “Some water please nee-chan.”

“Least you know to stick to water.” Jiraiya snorted.

“It’s for you.” Naruto snapped. “Sober up you sloppy drunk I want to train already.”

“The day is still young.” Jiraiya laughed. There was a low buzz to the front of the store, more activity. “Still plenty of fun to be had, more information to get.”

“Gonna find it at the bottom of the cup or down the nearest nee-chan’s dress?” Naruto muttered. “Why did I get sent with you.”

“I’m the sennin Jira-“

“Just stop.” Naruto held up his hand before he could continue. “I’ve heard that too many times and I still don’t know who you are.” And that was such a strange thing to say but one thing he had come to notice was that Naruto was a strange child. Jiraiya could still see in his mind’s eye the sight Naruto made and he sat on his bed and focused, pulling himself deep into his own mind. He was mouthy and a real brat when he relaxed enough but what else was to be expected?

It was honestly better this way, if he had been quiet, almost worshipping with moments of scolding and condescending words slipped in so one would not notice, well Jiraiya certainly would not have been able to handle it then. Naruto as he was, it was enough it was the perfect mix inside and out and it soothed his old heart.

“How the world changes.” He whispered, it got him a harsh glance in return but Jiraiya’s eyes had already moved back to his glass. “Almost the perfect time.”

“You better be talking about the jutsu.” Naruto muttered as he shifted in his chair. His head was tilted towards the front of the shop his tone distracted. “I knew all along your mumbling was just so you can run off and be a waste of adult.”

“From time to time doesn’t hurt.”

“It does when you have something to do. You had something to do and I don’t see how this is getting you anywhere. If you had wanted to convince me.” Naruto broke off to take a glass from a waitress. She gave a jerky bow before escaping to the back room. “Then you should have had only one drink and not have been falling into the chests of those nee-chans.”

“All part of gathering information.”

“Right, if you wanted to convince me you shouldn’t have been falling into your cups Ero-sennin.” At the front of the shop something broke. “Now what.”
The atmosphere had changed, had been changing for a few minutes but Jiraiya had been enjoying his exchanges with Naruto. So far, the matter, whatever it was did not concern them but that did not mean he was not curious.

“Pay up! You know how much this cost?” So, it was that sort of situation. Those sorts of people, everywhere you went, no matter how much time passed those people always seemed to remain. He got to his feet, he was still curious.

XxX

And the old drunken pervert had walked away from him, lurched away was more like it and Naruto had indulged in a few seconds of well-deserved eye rolling before he got to his feet to follow him. He could hear the men ahead, just like those he had run into earlier.

Loud, entitled and smug, troublemakers riding a high. This was supposed to be a festival but the bad sort was always drawn by the promise of a good time. They even enjoyed ruining it.

“Loud mouths and nothing else.” Ero-sennin had dropped into a chair close to the entrance. “Don’t you have something better to do?”

“Old man you must be senile.” A loud scoff. “You have any idea who he is? He’s a Jounin from Iwa, you really want to mess around with someone like that?”

“A jounin?”

“A real legend.” Naruto inched closer to see the two men posturing at the front of the shop shattered bottles around their feet. “He’s legendary.”

“Legendary is he?” Ero-sennin tilted his head back. “Say Naruto.” His fingers twitched at the unexpected sound of his name. “Watch closely.”

“Don’t look away from us you forgotten old man!”

It was hard to see, Ero-sennin moved so fast for someone of his size and age but there was something about his right hand. There was something in and Naruto could feel the power from where he stood. He saw the force it had when he watched the man spin out of the shop.

No, he had been pushed, thrown. The impact of whatever it was. It had thrown him out right into a stall on the opposite side of the street. Naruto stood in the entry way, where the man had stood only a moment before. Ero-sennin was already outside kneeling next to the man he had sent flying. Scattered balloons littered the streets.

“Oh this is cute, really really good.” Ero-sennin muttered as he tossed a balloon into the air. He reached almost absentmindedly with his free hand for the man he had felled. Reached into the man’s coat and pulled out his wallet. “Sorry about that my good man.” The wallet went flying to the gaping owner of the stall. “That should cover it and I want a bag full of these.” He turned then to meet Naruto’s gaze and that smile should have worried him. “In fact, I’ll put a little more with it I want all of them.”

XxX

Small but powerful, blue and confusing. Naruto still felt the hairs of the back of his neck standing up. it was incredible and there was nothing that he wanted more than to learn how to do that immediately. The old man had sobered up and lead them away from the scene of destruction.
Thankful customers, unconscious thugs, a broken stall but a well-off stall owner and of course the thankful girls. Naruto was not even going to hold a grudge over the kisses that Ero-sennin had accepted for his help. The old man had only accepted two and he had kept moving. That was showing some of restraint considering how perverted he was.

Naruto had not expected for the training to be done in the heart of the town but when Ero-sennin started to lead them to the hills above it… almost in the direction out of the town he had been highly suspicious and wary.

Still he followed in silence, cautiously eyeing the old man’s back until he suddenly halted in the middle of a small clearing.

“This is good enough.” Ero-sennin muttered as he looked around. “Can’t do that much damage here. Not that you are going to be doing that much damage to begin with.” He chuckled as he placed his hands on his hips. “Let’s get started kid.”

“Just to make sure.” Naruto said cautiously. “What are we starting?”

“I’m going to start your training now, we’re going to teach you the Fourth’s technique the Rasengan. You saw it earlier.”

“Finally.” Naruto breathed. “The rasengan.” It even sounded cool and it had looked so powerful. At the back of his mind he recalled Sasuke running down the wall a ball of lightning in his hand. Could it even compare? But Ero-sennin had said that it could.

A new jutsu, a new strong jutsu. Naruto had to take a deep breath to steady himself. He let his pack drop to the ground before he braced his feet.

“Let’s start.” He breathed. That got him an amused look from Ero-sennin.

“To learn the Rasengan you have to do it in stages, you are not going to learn this right away or even in a few days. Each stage is tough, tougher than the last which is why it is a high level jutsu.” Ero-sennin grinned at him. “But that does not mean it can’t be fun, which brings us to the first stage.” He reached into the bag he had brought along and picked out one of the water balloons.

“Now the first stage, you will be using this.”

XxX

The real mission would be to teach the kid, to be a kid again if only for a while. Jiraiya had seen the boy’s eyes sparkle from excitement from time to time. He had seen a real smile, he had seen excitement leak through so why not see it more?

“So, what am I going to do with this?” Naruto tossed the water balloon into the air, caught it before he lightly squeezed it.

“You saw what I did earlier right?” Jiraiya asked as he watched Naruto give the water balloon another squeeze.

“I would have noticed one of these.” The brat replied as he gave up squeezing the balloon.

A long journey ahead of him, Jiraiya could see it stretching on before him, not strangling the brat at least once would be a miracle in itself. He gave a large sigh, hopefully expelling all of his other intentions, like ruffling the boy’s hair a tad bit too hard before he focused on the boy before him. “What did you see from the jutsu?”
“That guy he spun, it was all crazy and he was launched back!” A sparkle of excitement.

“I guess it would look like that, it is a part of it.” Jiraiya relinquished the balloon from Naruto’s grip and focused his chakra. He watched blue eyes focus on the balloon that started to shift and move in his hand. He saw amazement but he was old and tried, under the wonder he saw speculation, a mind taking in as much as it can and analysing and he could only smile to himself. “From a normal point of view, it would look that way, they spin!”

Naruto’s gaze narrowed and his brows furrowed as in Jiraiya’s hand the water balloon shifted and trembled, rocking from side to side in his hand. The boy’s face alone told him how much he was going to enjoy teaching him. He might get a little caught up with it. Hell, he was going to enjoy this.

“Now during the tree walking training that you did, the chakra level must be maintained by focusing your mind and keeping that concentration. I’m sure you’ve noticed how difficult it is to get that perfect balance and keep it.” That got him a nod as Naruto’s gaze followed the shaking water balloon. “When you were doing the water walking exercise, the way you used the chakra that you used then, you released a fixed amount of chakra continuously. I helped you with that one.” The balloon exploded, blue eyes widened and Jiraiya shook his head to rid himself of the water that remained. “To make the water in the balloon spin, you already know the two steps.”

He reached for the bag and picked another balloon and easily tossed it over. Naruto caught it before he rose it a little higher his gaze fixed on it. It took only a few seconds before his gaze darted back to Jiraiya. “What am I to do?”

“The way you use chakra for water walking, that’s how you are going to spin the water in the balloon. Give it a try.”

“A continuous flow is supposed to spin it like that?” Naruto eyed the balloon again and squinted. “I know this is just step one but…”

“Well.” Jiraiya coughed. “To fully understand the jutsu means to be able to read the elements and predict the outcome. First what you have to do is use the principle of the tree walking exercise and maintain a moderate amount of chakra in your hands and then the principle of water walking by releasing it continuously.” He saw understanding dawn in Naruto’s eyes and his heart warmed considerably.

“Okay!” Naruto looked pumped. “So, until it bursts do the training!” And the boy looked so eager to begin, it was hard for Jiraiya to keep his smile to himself, but he managed it.

“You’ll get good at this.” Jiraiya chuckled. “Let’s train to dark!” That got him an eager response and Jiraiya barely repressed his laugh, dark came rather early to these parts. Naruto would be disappointed when Jiraiya hustled him back to the inn but someone had to keep an eye on the boy’s progress and his body.

XxX

Naruto dropped the balloon for a moment so that he could strip off his jacket. He was covered in sweat, his hands had started to tremble from holding the balloon and exerting so much chakra. Still the balloon refused to burst. Naruto knew he was doing something wrong but as the balloon rocked and trembled he could not figure out just what it was.

A drowsy mumble from behind him made him glance behind him to see that Ero-sennin had woken up. the man had claimed he needed a nap but Naruto suspected that alcohol still lingered in
him and he needed to sleep that off.

So, he had not protested just allowed himself a small roll of his eyes because he knew what was really afoot and it was not as if the old man had been shouting anything helpful anyway but wasn’t that how it always went in the beginning?

See how you do it before they show you someway that was better or adapted your way, was that not how teachers operated?

“Right and left.” Ero-sennin said as he approached. “Visualize, which way is it revolving?” Naruto glanced at the rotating water balloon in his hand clearly rocking continuously to the left.

“Well only to the left.” He admitted before he relaxed, the balloon falling still in his hand.

“You’re coming along very well.” He gestured for Naruto to come closer and while he was curious to why he did so. Eros-sennin smiled down at him and patted him on the head Naruto would have rolled his eyes even as warmth flowed through him if it had not been for the old man’s suddenly alert expression.

“What is it?”

“Heh.” Ero-sennin broke into a grin. “Like I thought.”

“What?” Naruto frowned he was missing an entire conversation. “What is it?”

“Like I thought. It’s right rotation.” The old man smiled.

“Right rotation?” He asked slowly, it was not unfamiliar at all. He eyed the man before him and he could also hear an amused laugh from the past.

“Anyone can learn to train the rotation of the chakra from within the unconscious mind.” Ero-sennin smiled. “You should build up the essential energy to blend chakra. The rotation’s chakra is either right or left so everyone is different. For this lesson spin the water in the balloon in the opposite direction of your own rotation using energy the chakra flow will be disrupted when it is not in harmony with the rotation.”

Naruto’s mouth felt dry but he met the old man’s gaze. “How did you know I was the right type?”

That got him a big grin from Ero-sennin. “From the back of your head! Your hairline shows it. A right swirl becomes a right rotation, left swirl left rotation.” Naruto’s mouth still felt dry. “You okay?”

“That’s an old wife’s tale you can’t really know just by that.”

“Bet I’m right.”

“More like you have ridiculous luck and can guess well.”

Naruto swallowed. “Someone told me I was right rotation, a long time ago.” He would have never remembered if it had not been so familiar. Kasumi had checked his hair in a similar way. “Rotations, chakra natures.” He met the old man’s gaze. “I’ve heard it before.”

“But you weren’t taught it were you.” Ero-sennin said softly.

“No.” It was the truth, it was just one of the many things he had been near enough to hear or one of the things casually talked about, sometimes explained when it was noticed that he was listening but
no one had sat him down and taught him things like that. He would have remembered and it would have made a big difference. No, it was part of the little moments, little snatches of knowledge passed down unknowingly. “Just something I heard.”

“I see.” Ero-sennin nodded. “Well you do have a right swirl at the back of your head. So, use the energy of the right rotation for the spin.”

“Then right now it won’t work until I use that type of energy.” He had been labouring away until he sweat for nothing.

A soft pat to his head. “Bring out the jutsu in you! Don’t worry about learning the seal just chakra is good.” Another soft pat to the head for him. “You don’t have to memorize such a difficult seal!”

“All right!” He felt a surge of determination energize him again. “It’s be easy if I use up all my energy for this jutsu.” He’ll put everything he had and a little more. “I’ll move beyond this step in no time!” He had to put everything into learning it. A difficult jutsu… a jutsu the Fourth Hokage had created, he could not afford to waste time.

“This Jutsu took the Yondaime three years to master.” Ero-sennin said softly. “It’s a very difficult very powerful jutsu. To appreciate the degree of difficulty of it, he was six grade levels above the second A rank ultra-high grade level.” Ero-sennin’s voice was even and his voice was serious as he leaned forward. “In order to comprehend the jutsu you need to be at third grade level jutsu. This water balloon is the first stage.”

The Yondaime… had taken three years. Naruto lightly shuddered. That genius shinobi. He had to appreciate the A-rank level difficulty that the man had left behind. It made him want to know more about the man Ero-sennin had taught, more about the shinobi that had saved the village, more about the shinobi that had been so adored and powerful. Naruto’s grip on the water balloon tightened.

“… And to be able to clear the first stage like him. Explaining this advanced jutsu to you would be worthless. You’ll find your own way on your own. This can’t be rushed. It’s going to take time kid. I’ll be going back to the inn for now.”

Naruto heard him but his gaze remained on the water balloon. The jutsu that the Yondaime had left behind was now being taught to him. Actually, being taught, figure it out on his own? He had experience with that.

“This? Brat you can’t hold this don’t even think about using it.” A dark laugh. “You can’t now and you won’t be able to later.”

There was nothing wrong with trying and learning as you went along. “I’m not going back yet!” That got him a startled look that faded to amusement. Ero-sennin gave a small wave as he set down the path back to the town. For Naruto, he looked at the water balloon with a new sort of appreciation.

Xxx

The silence had gotten to loud to ignore. If he strained, he could hear something from the town but Naruto could no longer ignore the darkness around him. He would have tried but his fingers hurt, they were red, they tingled.
He needed more than the little breaks he had allowed himself so far. He needed to go back to the inn. There was something he was still missing. There had been more activity in the balloon but it had not burst yet.

He was not satisfied with thoughts that it was still his first day. He knew there was something vital that he had missed. But the fact remained that he could barely hold the balloon in his hand anymore. He needed to tend to his hands, eat something because the food from before was no longer enough.

Not with the effort he had been putting in. His hands trembled and shook when he tried to put on his jacket. His hands ached when he fumbled with the zip so he left it. The balloon rolled away a ridiculous amount of times until he finally grasped it to take back down with him.

The only consolation was that it came faster. He had improved his speed, he had not completed the first stage but Ero-sennin’s voice still lurked at the back of his mind reminding him that it had taken the Yondaime, that genius shinobi three years to do it. Three years to master it. Just because Ero-sennin made it look simple did not mean that it was. The activity in the old man’s hand had been incredible.

But it did make him wonder how long it had taken Ero-sennin to master it. It made him wonder if the Sandaime had learned it, just another question added to the list to ask the old man when he woke back up. Least it was a question the old man might actually answer.

XxX

He might have just over done it just a bit, walking to the town had been no problem but there had been a dull ache in his hands the entire time. He had tried to relax them at his sides but with every unintentional brush against himself his hands had burned.

Too much strain.

Somehow, he had worn himself out yet there was still something he was missing. The ache in his hands accompanied him all the way back to the inn. All the way Naruto turned over in his head the day’s training over and over in his mind. He replayed Ero-sennin’s words.

He replayed the feelings, the images, how each action had felt. He was tempted to hold the water balloon in his hand again and feel for something but the ache in his hands told him how unwise that was.

Also, his stomach was really empty, he needed to eat something soon. The streets were dim, not too many people out and about but it was not deserted either. The night life now beginning to surge. Maybe if he had not worn himself out he would have been more curious. More interested than keeping an eye on his surroundings.

The sight of the day’s festivities littered the streets and every now and again Naruto spotted someone attempting to clean a part of it. Most likely shopkeepers getting a head start for the next day, or people who lived around the area or maybe just people who wanted to help.

There were those that stumbled along, obviously had indulged a bit too much and was looking to indulge more. There were those passing through. Cloaks high their eyes straight ahead and although he only saw a few they stood out enough to be given a wide berth and for him to watch them until they actually disappeared. Old habits were hard to break, if he had not been so tired he would have followed to ensure they went on their way.
But he was tired, he was hungry and the work of the day left his hands sore and his mind racing with the knowledge that he was missing something. Something important about the first step.

It had taken too much time and no time at all to get to the inn, it reminded him of his apartment, it was built the same way with the same materials except that the towering style was smaller than his own apartment.

That and the inside was vastly different. The rooms were the same size, removing the bathroom and eating area of course. It made him think of home, of his own apartment just a little bit. It was too different for him to actually feel at home. It just felt similar.

Also, that he had to share the room with the old man took away all sense of familiarity. Waking up and glancing to the left and seeing a shock of white hair really let him know where he was not if he were to forget himself.

As if he would. As if he ever could forget himself. Even in his sleep he would know he was not home, not safe. But for now, they were there, it would do. He had to eat, he had to rest and he had to figure out just what it was that he was missing, that he was not seeing.

It was a familiar feeling just that it felt as though he would actually solve the problem this time and wouldn’t that be nice. Get something done, get an answer, for once.

Xxx

Naruto was not certain to whether the cat was friendly or it just liked him. It had woven its way in and out and around his legs while he tried to walk. Followed him to his room and tried to come in with him and only given up when the innkeeper had spotted it and told it to stop.

Then when he had tried to eat it had appeared again this time stretching across his foot to snooze, then lazily bat at the forgotten ribbon on the floor.

Naruto had not seen it doing any of that with any other guest but he and Ero-sennin had just gotten there and he had not exactly been hanging around the inn or other guests. He knew the cat was around to catch any brave or daring mice and considering how fat the cat was, Naruto suspected that hunting did the cat well and some inn food was a side dish.

He grumbled lightly when he managed to sit up, he was sleepy but the real problem was that he could still feel his hands ache. It was a dull ache but he could still feel it. It was not comfortable but the way he had tended to it a few hours before had given him relief.

Ero-sennin’s snores were almost enough to wake the dead. Naruto eyed the man stretched out on the bed happily snoozing away and shook his head as he stumbled out of his own bed. When he saw the old man like that it became harder and harder to understand why the village had just handed him over so happily.

Naruto knew that the old man was dangerously strong. He could still remember how during their first meeting how quickly and silently the old man had moved. How he during the training how he had crept up on Naruto and gotten way too close before Naruto noticed he was there or that he had moved.

He had been a student of the Sandaime, he had taught the Yondaime but he acted like a lecherous old man. He really was a lecherous old man, it was hard to believe he was revered enough and respected enough that the village would hand over the Jinchuuriki they had searched so hard for so easily.
There was a mystery in that too. Naruto knew he would get an answer eventually just not right away. It was hard to believe after they had tried so hard to make sure that he never left the village without the team he had been assigned to.

Figuring that out had not been hard at all. Naruto opened the door and shuffled his way to the bathroom. Whether Ero-sennin woke or not he was going to start training again. He had fallen asleep turning over the training over and over in his mind until he had drifted to sleep.

He yawned before he balanced the water balloon on the balcony. He would burst that thing today even if he had to squeeze the stupid thing until it popped when night fell.

He sighed when he locked the bathroom door behind him. He did what he had to but he concentrated on the feeling of his hand in he thought about what he had done and what he was missing. It was when he caught himself watching the water in the toilet swirl after he flushed that he snorted loudly at himself and washed his hands.

He would eat first then it was back to work, no more thinking about it. His hands were sore but they were getting better, he would take it easy at first then build up. He had always healed quickly after all; this time was no exception. He had something to do and he would do it.

When he unlocked the door, he was greeted with the sight of the almost empty hallway. Almost empty because the very large purring cat had somehow gotten its hands on the water balloon and was batting it around the hallway.

“Ah!” He yelped as he remembered that cats had very sharp claws. “That isn’t your toy!” He darted forward but he might as well have saved his breath because the cat did not flick an ear in his direction.

Determined the cat batted the balloon back and forth even with Naruto right above it. Naruto was not exactly in the mood to get scratched and he did have other water balloons but he had been set on getting everything done on that one.

The balloon rolled back and forth, bulging with every bat of the cat’s paws. Naruto glared at the cat ignoring him while he looked for a good time to snatch back the balloon when the balloon bulged and exploded startling the cat and him.

The cat darted off and Naruto froze where he stood half bent over where the cat had been. He bit his lip and closed his eyes the moment the balloon had exploded replaying in his mind because of course. That was it, that was what he had been missing. That was what had been so damn different.

XxX

He had it now. Naruto grinned as he stood above the sleeping old man. He could have waited, he could have gone down to breakfast but his body was singing with energy, he was excited, he felt accomplished and smug and he deserved it.

He was going to give the old man a good waking up. With a new water balloon in his hand he grinned. “You could at least wake up Ero-sennin. Unless you need a little help.” The man mumbled and continued to snore, if a bit softer and Naruto chuckled softly. It was time to begin, even focusing did not take away his delight.

It took a remarkably shorter time than the cat had, maybe five or six seconds shaved off total but in time he would change that. He would improve it and quicken it in time, but for now…

The balloon burst, sloshing the water right into Ero-sennin’s face. The man’s face wrinkled before
he spluttered awake. Dark eyes focused on him but Naruto only smiled before he showed his wet hand. “First stage cleared.” He grinned. The look of shock on the old man’s face was worth it all.

XxX

Jiraiya had to remind himself that during his long life he had been woken worse ways. Sure, the little brat was being brattier than usual but a little water was not the worse way he had been woken up. He had been on a team with Tsunade and Orochimaru after all and Sarutobi had never been the lenient type when it came to sleeping in. When compared to that a little unexpected water was nothing at all.

Besides if the kid could pull a prank like that, well if the kid was willing to pull a prank like that, it meant Jiraiya was getting somewhere with getting the kid to loosen up with people outside the chosen team. A kid with dreams as big as his needed to open up more, obviously not too quickly but he had to do it eventually.

Last thing they needed was a standoffish Hokage who never smiled for anything or anyone. The only motivation being the damn mission, the physical village itself and the village’s reputation, but it was too early to be thinking such depressing thoughts. It was better to focus on the brat that had woken him almost way too early with unexpected results.

Jiraiya dabbed at his face with a washcloth while he squinted at Naruto. It was still too early for all of this. The boy was still in his nightclothes but he looked ready to take on the town but Jiraiya did want to see the process, considering he had only seen, well experienced the results. “Well.” He stifled a yawn. “Let’s see it then.”

“Alright! Play close attention.” The boy’s eagerness woke Jiraiya up a bit more, a tiny bit. He squinted when Naruto drew back his left hand as the water balloon remained in his right. Jiraiya’s focus kept drifting back to the left hand because by Naruto’s stance the boy meant to use it.

Then it began, Jiraiya saw it and not only that he felt it as well. There was the surge of power in the room, the chakra that he saw gathered in Naruto’s left hand. Jiraiya’s intentions until the boy began to strike the balloon hand moving so quickly that to others it would be a mere blur.

He knew a smile had crept onto his face as he watched the chakra in Naruto’s hands. He watched the balloon twist and turn, rock and shake with the chakra until it finally exploded. Water dripped to the floor while Naruto’s blue eyes shone with accomplishment and glee. “All right! See? See? See Ero-sennin?”

Why did the boy have to look so damn gleeful, it made Jiraiya’s chest tighter than it should be. But still the boy had done good and while he sounded as he should, like a child happy over what they had done in his eyes shone the pride of someone who knew they could do whatever they wanted once they tried. A look he had seen on another’s face long ago.

He had told Naruto he had to figure it all out but to come up with such a concept. He had thought Naruto was an on the feet sort of person, a person that could easily adapt and he had been right but Naruto seemed to be better than he had originally thought. To hold the water balloon in his left hand, repeatedly bring forward his chakra infused right hand into it to make the water swirl was an unusual concept. Not one that others would come up with no matter how long they considered it.

But he did have to ask. “But how did you figure out the trick to this problem in such a short space of time?” Jiraiya had left him stuck at a standstill. This was the last thing Jiraiya had expected to wake to. Or at least it was among the things that Jiraiya had last expected to wake to.
“Oh.” Naruto turned away quickly darting outside their room to Jiraiya’s puzzlement before he darted back in a multi-coloured cat in his arms. Naruto raised the cat to chest level. “His name is Shu!”

“Shu?” Jiraiya had somehow, somewhere lost track of the direction of the conversation. A cat? The cat in question waved its paws seeming in no hurry to be put down.

“I saw this guy bouncing the water balloon back and forth with his front paws over and over again. Then I realized when that because he hit the balloon so many times, the water inside was moving in all different directions!”

“Oh?” Jiraiya allowed himself a smile.

“Then everything came together for me.” Naruto grinned as he let the cat down. It got him a soft mew and a head rub to the boy’s ankles before the cat trotted away.

“What came together?” Jiraiya felt on the edge of his seat and he was amused by it.

I remembered that when Ero-sennin gave a demonstration with the water balloon it was all dented and deformed.” Naruto’s mouth turned down for a moment. “But all this time I was only turning in one direction so my balloon kept its shape. It didn’t look anything like Ero-sennin’s one because I was only spinning in one direction.”

It was so hard to keep his true reaction from showing. To stop the anticipation, the glee and the rising nostalgia buried. This boy, how his mind worked it was magnificent. Jiraiya had known the boy caught far more than it looked like he did. Most of it instinctive but he had been raised by cunning shinobi for four years. He would bet his books someone had noticed how Naruto operated and had started to teach him how to refine it. Started to because it was still incomplete. For now.

“I realized then.” Naruto continued. “Was that the reason Ero-sennin’s water balloon was looking so misshapen was because you were spinning the water in all sorts of different directions.” Jiraiya was unable to help the smile from slipping free because this boy. The boy before him, he was going to do so well. “I did some improvising.” Naruto looked sheepish before he grinned happily again. “And it worked!”

“It sure did. Stage one complete!” Jiraiya laughed. Complete and in such an interesting way. Naruto was still far off from being able to spin chakra in one hand but eventually he would get it. His way was good for now. The kid was still a kid after all and he had just started to learn. But if anything, the way he had come up with his own solution showed how good the kid was and how he would get over all future hurdles. Jiraiya really wanted to see that.

“Yes!” Naruto cheered, Jiraiya watched in amusement as Naruto clenched his hands into fists into pumped them into the air. Then the amusement dropped when he saw the boy wince. The strain was affecting his circulatory system, it was no real surprise but stage one was nothing compared to stage two. The boy would not like to hear him tell him to take it easy but he would have to listen. A break before stage two. Hopefully a full stomach would make the news go down better.

XxX

It did not, the food did not make the news go down any better. If anything, Jiraiya would venture to say that if anything it made it worse along with the fact that it put his face and clothes in danger. Naruto eyed his tea in a way that told him that the boy was considering throwing it at him.

It was cute but it really was not going to help anyone. Jiraiya would have been more worried about
the tea if he had not seen the way the boy moved his hands, gingerly without him noticing half of the time. Those hands had to be burning. Good mood or not the boy would let his healing catch up to a decent point before he even attempted to use chakra in his hands again.

“You’re joking.” Naruto seethed, blue eyes darted back to the steaming tea on the table. Jiraiya knew how badly the boy wanted to argue, throw something. He was frustrated, he had just started yet there he was being told he had to put on the brakes just after they had gotten the ball rolling.

He did not blame the kid, he really did not but facts were facts. Considering how hard the next stage was, how hard it would be it made sense for Naruto to let his body do some healing, do some soothing. It would make the second stage a little easier on his mind and his body.

It would be easier to work without his body constantly taxing him. It was better for his body in the long run as well. Pain was a sign. That Naruto tried to ignore it was not a good sign, that he was willing to push through it showed the strength of his will but it was too soon. That sort of thing could wait for a little while longer. There was no real need for the boy to push himself to the point of serious injury. Many things could be healed with aid but somethings took time.

A lesson Naruto needed to get acquainted with soon and there was no time like the present.

“Look.” Jiraiya sighed as he toyed with his fried fish. “Your hands hurt, they hurt because you have been taxing your circulatory systems the thing you are learning to use the jutsu. I’m not joking around give your body a break so it can get used to you using those parts of your body in that matter. Eventually it won’t hurt.”

“That isn’t going to help me now.” Naruto frowned. His fingers trembled when he flexed his hand. “I completed the first stage!”

“And I won’t even hint to you about the second stage until it looks like you can handle it without passing out or causing serious damage.” Jiraiya sighed at the mulish expression and gentled his tone. “Look I didn’t even expect you to get so far so quickly. We still have work to do in this town so why don’t you take it easy on your hands and rest for today? A body like yours you’ll only have to rest for a day or so. Anyone else I’d be saying take a week.”

That got a reaction, the automatic rejection in Naruto’s eyes at the thought of having to cool his heels for a week. The understanding that he was different from others and while it caused him pain in some ways it made him lucky.

“You can rest willingly or I can have you sleep until I think your hands have healed enough.” Naruto scowled at his words and Jiraiya grinned. “Want help wrapping up your hands?”

“No.” Naruto muttered. “I can do it myself.”

“Well we can buy some salve and add some special herbs to it.” Jiraiya mentally ran over his inventory. “I have a few things to make it work.”

“No need.” Naruto returned to his tea and managed to bring it to his mouth without his hands shaking. “I’ve got my own. Used it last night too.”

This boy was just full of mysteries. “Oh? That’s good.” Jiraiya hummed. “That’s real good.”

XxX

Finally, some good information that he could use. Jiraiya tossed back the drink he had bought and watched the man opposite do the same. Naruto was miserable so this had come at the perfect time.
Now they could set out from the town.

A smile teased his lips, he was eager to see her up close after all this time of course but he was more eager to watch her meet Naruto. Things might just get a tiny bit violent at first but if they were lucky they might take to each other like ducks to water.

And Jiraiya’s luck had always been better than Tsunade’s. Always. “Oji-san.” His companion smiled. “Looking forward to meeting this woman?”

“You could say that.” Jiraiya smiled. “You could say that.”

XxX

His hands felt much better but he was not going to tell the old man that. He was not going to act grateful either. Naruto sneaked another look at the man as he packed his bag. Finally they were going to move on, in stages and from the town.

Naruto would love to know how the old man had come across the information he had come back with when he had come back stinking of cologne and whiskey. Ero-sennin had ignored his side eyeing but Naruto knew that some of his disbelief must have sunk in.

But it was really great. The next stage, it looked like he was going to be learning it on the road but that was actually okay with him. Perfectly fine actually. There was not that much he and Ero-sennin could talk about without him running into a wall or the man making him roll his eyes at how perverted he was.

“Catch brat.” The moment he had finished zipping his pack a rubber ball came flying in his direction. Naruto caught it before he brought it to his face. He squeezed it, testing the elasticity before he eyed the old man eying him from across the room.

He lifted the ball higher and waved it at the old man. “What am I going to do with this?”

“It has to do with the second stage.” Ero-sennin smiled. “So hold onto it for now. We’ll talk more on our way to Tanzaku Gai.”

“Tanzaku... Gai.” Naruto squeezed the rubber ball. “Don’t they have this cool old castle?”

“Someone’s knowledgeable.” Ero-sennin snorted.

“So, is she there?” Naruto pressed as he stood up.

“That’s where she was heading. We should catch up with no problems. She’ll be indulging and wasting money.” Ero-sennin snorted. “In a hurry?”

“I told you I want her to do something for me.” He could still recall how Gai-sensei’s shoulders had slumped and how Kakashi-sensei had laid a comforting hand on the other man’s shoulder.

“The second stage is going to make the first stage look like child’s play.” Ero-sennin warned as he shook his head. “But you do have that sense of urgency in you don’t you.” A smile grew on his face. “So we should get going, we have a lot of ground to cover if we want to get close enough to Tanzaku Gai before night falls.”

“Won’t we be slowed by me?” Naruto eyed the rubber ball.

“Nope, it won’t affect your feet at all, but you will be distracted.” The old man laughed. “Hope you
weren’t planning on taking in the sights before getting to Tanzaku Gai.”

“I can take them in when we are going back.” Naruto snorted. “All of us, included the Baa-chan. And I’ll be taking in the sights because I’ll have mastered that Jutsu by then.”

“Is that so.” The old man said softly. “Then we best get going then.”
“Break the ball?” Naruto frowned. “Isn’t that like the last time?”

Ero-sennin snorted before he reached into his bag to withdraw another rubber ball. He squeezed it once before he held it up in one hand. Naruto locked his gaze on the ball but he was startled when it suddenly exploded in Ero-sennin’s hand. “This is at least a hundred times harder than the water balloon.” Ero-sennin chuckled.

That sounded like an understatement. Naruto eyed the rubber ball in his grip before he let it rest in the palm of one hand. He started to focus as he withdrew his other hand. You never knew for certain until you tried.

He felt sweat on his forehead but he ignored it as he focused the chakra in his hands. Right away he felt the difference. The rotation went fine but the ball. Even as he worked he noted that the ball barely moved at all. It changed shape but when it should have exploded like the water balloon, it instead slowly went back to its original shape. It was expected but still frustrating.

He glanced up at Ero-sennin to find the man already watching him. Amusement was in his eyes and he gave a small snort better he made a gesture for Naruto to toss the ball over. “First step is to spin.” Ero-sennin smiled. “The next step is power. You need to add power to the spinning, if there is no water it is harder to feel the chakra moving so it is hard to power up and control it. You’ll have to practice like that for a bit.”

The ball was tossed back to him lightly. He caught it and eyed it warily. The same skill he had used before to burst the water balloon. Obviously, the exact same thing from before could not be used, it was too hard to sense and burst the ball. He could not even get it to warp properly.

“Want a hint?” Ero-sennin asked distracting Naruto. He eyed the old man before the words registered. A hint would actually be good.

“Yeah!” He lowered the ball and his hand before he flashed a grin at the old man. He was pervy and really fishy but maybe he was alright after all.

The old man’s face went blank before he outstretched his hand. “Money.” He said plainly. It did not register with Naruto’s ears at first but when it did it took everything he had not to throw the ball at the old man’s face. He should have known better, he really should have known.

“Great legendary shinobi my ass!” He snapped before he turned his back on the unhelpful Ero-
sennin. “You talk a lot but you’re just a dirty grown up!” He knew he heard a soft laugh at his words but he was no longer paying attention to the man now behind him. His focus was on the ball in his hand.

Obviously, he was on his own. He would have to figure it out all on his own. There was no problem with that, a hint would have been great. Especially since Ero-sennin had helped him out so much in the beginning.

Granted plenty of things had contributed to him getting through the first stage and the first stage had not exactly been easy either. He could still feel the phantom pain. Still feel the frustration of not getting it but knowing the solution was right under his nose.

To get this one down he would have to remember exactly what the old man had said and of course remember what he had been shown. Keep it at the front of his mind so that when something inspired him he would know how best to use it.

Like the cat.

Naruto looked over his shoulder in time to catch the smile on the old man’s mouth. His suspicion had never gone away. Neither had his need to know but his certainty had grown with every moment he spent in the old man’s company.

Right now, he was busy learning the jutsu and tagging along looking for the old friend of Ero-sennin’s but he would have the jutsu mastered by the time they started for home and one thing he knew for certain was that old people liked to reminisce.

He would just have to keep quiet and keep his ears open. Something was bound to slip. Even if it did not have anything to do with him. He would take what he could get.

In his hand, the ball lurched and his attention cut away from the old man to his task at hand. It was going to be a long few days. He could feel it.

XxX

It had to be in the build-up. The old man had told him that power was the key. The rubber balloon was so much harder to do than the water one. Naruto’s arms ached from the strain and only a few hours had passed. Every movement of his arm gave him pain.

All Ero-sennin did was eye him as they walked along. Naruto knew he had not reached his limit. He was still walking after all. Still he just knew the old man would cut in if he felt Naruto was doing too much.

Total silence between them beyond a few huffs from the old man and grumbles, cursing and various mutterings from Naruto himself.

Breaks were the best things to happen because he was able to take in everything he had done and try to see where the problem was. He scowled at the open road as he sat on the grass. He needed to build up the power, more, a whole lot more.

What he needed to do was clear his mind and focus it. Build up enough no matter how long it took because he could always shave down the time later on, what mattered now was getting the damn ball to do more than shiver and move.

He shifted on the grass and brought his hands into his lap, the ball resting on one of his hands. He closed his eyes and focused inwards. The sounds of the open disappeared. The birds, Ero-sennin’s
breathing, the sound of the man’s drinking. It all faded away.

Naruto heard the low growl of the fox but he ignored it. That was not what was important there. He kept focusing. He breathed slowly as he focused and gathered, not yet, not yet. It needed to build. He had to build enough before he could spin.

XxX

The kid had been at it all day. Frustrated with his progress even as Jiraiya noted at how quickly the kid was grasping it while he did not notice he was grasping it. He had given them a large estimated learning time for the jutsu. He had assumed they would be still at it when they got back to Konoha.

Considering how quickly the boy got it, fancy little adjustments or not, they just might have a little something to show when they finally tracked down Tsunade. Not the full jutsu… or at least for the time being Jiraiya assumed so.

Still it had been fun reminding the kid to eat. The frustrated look the kid gave the ball even while he crammed something down his throat… what they were doing was serious but Naruto made it so much better. He liked this kid, he really really liked this kid.

Jiraiya stifled a yawn as he watched Naruto’s eyes close and his mouth snarl as the kid concentrated. He had already seen that before. He was not going to help. He simply could not, not only did Naruto have to navigate from this part on his own, the kid was almost there.

That was why Jiraiya was keeping their pace slow and taking as many breaks as they could squeeze in. there was no need to rush. Not only did Naruto’s body need to heal as they went along. The kid needed to have small breaks in his thoughts. He was the type to hyper focus but without new information he would get stuck in a rut. So, he needed to take that breath before he went down focusing on that one thing.

It was really amusing.

It was really cute. But the fact remained that Naruto was going to be at it for a while. The kid took his words like a challenge but there were some things that people just could not do, the boy was already pushing his body.

The atmosphere changed a slight bit. Jiraiya watched the boy focus, his face calm before he shrugged and looked at his bag thinking of the sake still remaining. He could indulge but that was just setting a bad example. He could at least wait until the kid was asleep. Not that it really mattered since the kid liked calling him out anywhere and for anything. Ero-sennin indeed. Cute kid.

Something made him turn to the kid again. His focus had changed, he looked more like he had that night in the inn. Jiraiya waited for a few moments unsure why he was watching but his instincts had kept him alive this long so he listened to them. For a few moments, all that was heard was their breathing along with the sound of the wind and the birds nearby. Nothing to worry about, but Jiraiya’s gut still felt concerned.

He should not have anything to worry about. Even for a feel as they go type like Naruto, he needed to take more time. Jiraiya allowed himself a small sigh before he got to his feet and dusted himself off.

He could say that but his gut was still on guard.

XxX
His hands burned, they were damp in a way that Naruto knew was more than nerves and sweat but he could not focus on that. He had to focus on building his chakra, build enough and make it explode. Even if he did it just once it would be enough but he could not afford to slacken. It had to be done with everything he could put in it.

He had to do it that way, he had to pour everything he could and make it explode or the stupid ball would never break. He had to build until he could not take anymore, until his hands dripped if it were necessary. Then he had to make it explode, he could not afford to be apprehensive about making it explode in his hands. It would all heal eventually, what he had to focus on was the building.

Then would come the spinning along with handling all that energy. When he got results then he could afford to think for even one moment about the consequences. Sweat dripped down the side of his face and he ignored it. His eyes felt heavy even while his heart remained strong. He had to keep building, keep focusing because it was not enough yet.

He could feel the energy inside him and it was not enough yet. He knew time was passing but to think and worry about how much time was passing was ridiculous. Shaving down time would come after. He needed to get it done now. Later would be the fine tuning.

His hands were slick and he could feel a low burn in his palms. That told him more than anything else how much he had gathered. Was it enough to make the ball pop? Who knew? But he knew he could gather more energy if he focused more, so he did just that, let go of more worries, focused on himself alone and continued to build and focus. He could see nothing else, he could feel nothing else, it was a slow fall as the chakra built and built.

His breath hitched when the chakra rolled inside him, it did not feel like a block but he had drifted so far in his head he had forgotten about so much. It was almost a comfort, just building chakra, still with the rolling of the chakra he became aware of something else, something else he had pushed to the side of his mind and labelled as unimportant.

But it was very important and impossible to ignore. It took so much out of him to remain calm and to focus on getting ready to release the chakra instead of flinching away at the sight of red eyes watching him. He had not intended to come to the Kyuubi but there he was, but he could not focus on that. He turned his head away and ignored the low growl that came with his action. Another time but not now, not when he could feel the answer on his fingertips.

The pain told him the amount of chakra that he was releasing, he had been building and building up chakra, if he were to release it all, charge it, spin it then release it. Then it should burst but first he had to spin it, he had to spin it more. Concentrate and feel all that energy and chakra mixed together, the only thing he should focus on was the chakra everything else would come later.

The ball rocked in his hand before it bounced, Naruto allowed himself a small smile even as his eyes reopened. It was not time yet, he could feel the energy but it was not time to make it burst. His hands trembled, sweat dripped down his face and into one eye but he barely felt it.

Then he felt the change and knew that it was time. Everything had slid into place and he could feel the chakra swirling as if he could see into the ball itself. In the middle of the swirling he could focus and see something else in the middle, something untouched, an eye of a storm.

He grunted as he focused the pressure, it was enough, his hands burned, the ball vibrated in his hands. It happened so quickly. He had been prepared for something to happen, for it to explode but when his hands burned he was surprised even as he was aware of being thrown backward.
No time to be afraid or worried, there was just triumph. He did not care what happened next, he was tired. He did it, he finally got it. His body went lax and there was nothing he could do to stop it, he had reached his limit.

Something stopped his fall, it caused him to hiss because that was all he had the energy for. Instead of blue sky and green leaves, white came into his vision and that was not a bad thing, the shocked look on Ero-sennin’s face as he held him was worth it.

His fingers felt cold, his body was numb but he knew his body would eventually take care of that. What he really needed was a nap. His body was demanding it. It was not perfect, he needed plenty of work on cutting down the time but for certain he had gotten it. He had managed it and that was what mattered.

But for now, everything could wait until he woke back up. Ero-sennin’s mouth was moving but Naruto’s ears were no longer working. He wondered if he was smiling because he felt the slight tug at the corner of his mouth but that did not really matter. What mattered was that he did it, it had felt incredible, powerful and he could not wait to gain proper control over it.

In the palm of his hands he had held something incredible. The Yondaime was more than a genius, he had made that by himself and now Naruto was being taught it, what an incredible man.

Ero-sennin’s face was getting dimmer, Naruto’s eyelids heavier. Everything could wait until later.

XxX

What a reckless kid, what a cute reckless powerful kid. Jiraiya held Naruto over his arm dangling as he looked at what had become of the clearing. What a powerful little kid, he kept soaring over the goals, not even leaping but soaring.

Rasengan was a powerful technique but one thing Minato had despaired over was the fact that as powerful as it was it was not complete. Jiraiya had tried some he understood Rasengan, knew a few tricks to make it a little better but to go beyond whatever Minato had seen? Minato had always seen what he could not. It had been enough to make it right next to Minato.

But Naruto… He glanced down at the unconscious boy over his arm before he slowly sat down and brought the boy to lay over his lap. “Second stage complete.” He said softly as he shook his head. He curiously picked up Naruto’s hand before he flipped it over so the palm faced upwards.

Then he gave a low whistle as he examined the damage. To concentrate chakra to that extent, to the point where it burned his hands. The boy was really amazing. Jiraiya could smell the burned flesh. To think the crazy kid had kept going, of course he had to heal before Jiraiya uttered even a hint towards the Third stage.

Still, the kid was good, really good. A smile twitched to life on his face before he gave in and allowed low chuckles. He was really enjoying this now, Naruto was something else but someone needed to look after the kid. Jiraiya shook his head before he patted his pants looking for the small tube of salve he had decided they really would need. Naruto’s body would heal the damage but a little help never hurt anyone.

XxX

But he was ready for the third stage, he just needed that thing that he really did not want to hear especially from Jiraiya. Especially since they had taken a break at a small hot springs inn. Was it Jiraiya’s fault that so many pretty ladies were having a retreat? He didn’t call them there but what
was the harm in enjoying the view?

Sadly, Naruto was not having any part of it. Since he had woken back up the sulks had came back and stayed. If the boy pushed his mouth up any further it just might leave his bratty face.

Jiraiya’s eyes dropped to the boy’s bandaged hands, they were half healed, not bright red but more of a harsh pink. Most of the skin had regrown but it was still healing, no time for the boy to go train. He needed to train more before he did some serious damage.

Not that he would listen to Jiraiya, not that he even believed Jiraiya. The brat believed he had seized the opportunity to slack when that was the furthest thing from the truth, this time.

It was not something like Jiraiya decided to make them stay one place to perv on some pretty ladies, it was more like they were ahead of schedule and the boy needed to heal. They were ahead of schedule, really ahead and he had no doubt that the boy would exceed expectations once again.

Jiraiya was looking forward to it. Ahead was Tsunade and they would catch up in no time. Would have caught up already if Jiraiya had not been dragging the kid along but the kid was important and dragging him to Tsunade with his hands looking like that was just asking for trouble.

But honestly, the boy had to know just how special his body was, how different it was from everybody else yet he persisted in acting like his healing was normal and his progress was somehow behind. It was ridiculous, it was hilarious it was also dangerous.

It was not as if Naruto did not know about his own limits and how to carefully extend them, he had trained with the boy before. No, it felt as though Naruto had abandoned all limits daring fate to throw what it could as he fought beyond what he could handle but lifted his head daring for more. It was reckless and dangerous and he was not entirely sure why.

It would be stupid to claim he or anyone currently living knew what motivated Naruto. He knew the boy had some hero worship going on, some promises he wanted to keep and a dream that was enough to encourage him but to throw aside limits regardless the cost. Did the dream of Hokage push so much? Hover so intently? Had the battle for Konoha removed scales from the boy’s eyes?

Jiraiya shifted on his pallet his eyes now fixed on the boy sulking on his own pallet of the other side of the room his arms carefully bandaged held aloft and folded against Naruto’s chest. Somehow it did not seem so easy.

Even with a past like his he was still a kid with hormones now rushing through his body. Could it be the normal kid nonsense? A rival, an expectation? Or something more realistic, a need to protect, an awareness of mortality?

Or maybe he was thinking too hard and it was something as simple as the passing of time. Too quick yet not quick enough. Naruto’s gaze met his and Jiraiya shrugged which earned him a snort before Naruto turned away. Maybe he was thinking too much into it but how could he not? He would have to keep a closer eye on Naruto for the third stage.

XxX

“All right now.” Jiraiya’s hands tightened briefly on the straps to his pack as they stood on the road leading out of town. “Let’s get going!” Naruto had been the one cooped up and healing but it had ended up taking a toll on Jiraiya too. He was excited to be back on the road. He was eager, just as eager as Naruto had to be to be away from the inn and back onto the trail looking for Tsunade and learning the Rasengan. Finally, the third stage could be explained.
A loud huff behind him let him know Naruto was not too impressed before the boy deliberately shouldered past him with a sigh. “Don’t go jumping around screaming like a kid.” Naruto muttered.

“Someone’s in a bad mood.” Jiraiya pointed out as his gaze swept over Naruto’s healed hands.

“Somebody stopped me from training.” Naruto gritted out. Jiraiya gave a small nod because that somebody was him and he did not regret it. “Three steps to this jutsu, I finally managed to get the second step down and instead of starting the third you made me stop! Now you haven’t told me anything about it! I’m not dumb you know, I know we are close to where ever this old lady is.”

“True about being close, not so true about not telling you anything. We can do the third stage while we continue to travel.” Jiraiya shrugged at Naruto’s scowl. “It’ll even be fun.” He rummaged about in his pocket until he found the simple balloon. Naruto eyed it in his hand before he blew it up and tied it securely before tossing it to the boy.

Naruto’s eyes never left his even as he caught the balloon. “There’s nothing in it.” He said slowly. Jiraiya allowed himself a smile. “Exactly.” The confusion on Naruto’s face was worth it. “Let me explain, the first step was to spin the chakra, you did that when you burst the water balloon, you spun it so much that it burst.” That got a nod from Naruto. “The second step was power, that time you got a balloon much harder to burst showing you how to build up and use that chakra.” Jiraiya reached in his pocket for another balloon.

In almost no time at all he held in his hand a simple balloon just like Naruto’s with nothing but air inside. He lightly squeezed the balloon in his hand and had to hide a smile at the light that appeared in Naruto’s gaze that was fixed on the balloon.

“Now the third step.” He held the balloon in his hand and focused his chakra while he watched Naruto. The boy’s eyes were intently focused on the balloon in his hand but beyond a small shift nothing seemed to be happening. Jiraiya waited patiently for the outburst.

“What the hell is this?” Naruto demanded. “There’s nothing going on!” There it was, the outburst he had been waiting for. He hid a smile even as he continued focusing his chakra.

“You know it might seem like there is nothing going on with the balloon but that’s not true. I’m doing more than holding the balloon out, let me show you in my other hand what is going on in the inside of the balloon. Now focus on my left hand.” Jiraiya extended his hand carefully. “Inside of the balloon, this is what is going on.”

The widened eyes, the slackened jaw along with the excitement deep in the blue eyes and the awe. Bratty mouth aside Naruto was a cute kid, smart too teaching him was no trouble at all. Naruto inched close to his outstretched hand his eyes focused on all the activity and Jiraiya smiled, teaching really was not a hardship.

XxX

So, the Ero-sennin had not been messing with him. After the rather flashy displays of the last two stages Naruto had not expected the calm of the third stage but even though it looked like nothing, the real thing was nothing calm. It was controlled fury.

It was simply beautiful; the chakra was spinning rapidly and increasing in pace right before his eyes. Yet it was maintaining a perfect orb. No wonder he had not seen a change in the balloon. There were no bulges, no rocking. It stayed right there it’s shape maintained but the chakra kept
moving.

If he had to compare what he saw in the old man’s hand to anything he would have to say that it closely resembled…

“A small typhoon right?” Ero-sennin was smiling at him. Naruto swallowed before his eyes went back to the man’s left hand.

“Yeah.” He replied softly. “So, the ball in your right hand is the same as your left hand?” That got Ero-sennin to smile at the balloon in his right hand.

“That’s right.” That was so cool. Naruto’s gaze lingered on the still balloon in the man’s hand even as apprehension nudged him. The jutsu was hard enough and difficult to do as it was, yet Ero-sennin had two of them and he did not even look winded.

Naruto knew the old man was stronger than he looked and acted but right before him was the proof that the old man was a bigger deal than he could have imagined. It was cool.

Yet with that much chakra the balloon did not even twitch. There had to be more power and speed to it than when Naruto had popped the rubber ball and hadn’t that been a trial in itself? But Naruto was still looking forward to it all the same, he had no other choice, he would learn this jutsu he would master it. He had to, he could not afford not to.

“Listen up.” Ero-sennin said softly. “The third stage is about taking all you learned from the previous two stages and charge it.” Naruto blinked in confusion and it got him a small smile from the old man. “Basically, you max out the spin and power of your chakra but you will make a wall within the balloon and concentrate your power.”

“So I do the spinning exercise.” Naruto murmured. “And do my best to not pop the balloon.” That got him a grin from Ero-sennin. “I got it then!” Ero-sennin’s grin got wider. “Oh shit.” Naruto whispered as his gaze darted back to the old man’s hands. It was going to be nothing like the other two stages before and saying aloud just what he had to do only made it more obvious. Combining everything and not popping the balloon?

He recalled his hands and the fact that he had destroyed plenty of surrounding areas during the second stage. Naruto swallowed and could feel the pain in his hands from the power he had created. It was certainly not going to be easy, worth it in the end when he finished? Certainly.

But combining the two stages and not popping the balloon and walking along looking for the old lady friend of Ero-sennin’s? “Oh, fuck me.” Naruto groaned before he sat on the ground. He needed a moment to catch himself before they began.

XxX

Naruto had just resigned himself to the upcoming headache and multitasking before he realized he had forgotten to ask something very important. He sat up and met Ero-sennin’s gaze. “Why do we have to do all of that? It’s complicated.” He pointed out.

“It is complicated.” Ero-sennin huffed. “But I’ll show you why it has to be like that. Otherwise it just won’t work.” The old man strode over to a group of trees off the beaten path. “Watch closely. Up to the second step is like this.” Chakra swirled in the man’s hand and Naruto held his breath as he watched the old man shove his chakra infused hand against the trunk of a tree.

Bark was ripped off and Naruto was left gapping at the swirls imbedded on the trunk. It was not deep, it was more of a marking than anything else. The chakra in the old man’s hand was gone as
“Next is when you’ve mastered the third step.” Ero-sennin chuckled. Chakra swirled in his hand again and before Naruto could say anything the old man struck the tree again but this time bark and wood went flying as the man’s hand went through the tree itself because of the chakra in his hand. Smoke drifted from the huge hole that spread out from the trunk. “If you can keep this tornado in its form the power doesn’t dissipate. It will start to spin faster and its power will be highly concentrated.”

There was the why and instead of being stressed Naruto felt a spark of excitement deep inside him. His eyes went to the still smoking hole in the tree. His hand tingled, it was going to be hard but it was going to be fun too. And it was going to be worth it. He was another step closer to learning that super strong jutsu, another step closer to having it in his hand. It was going to be amazing.

XxX

Hard but worth it, Naruto was aware of the man next to him but his main focus was on the balloon in his hands. The one that just kept defeating him.

He would charge it and charge it but it always went horribly wrong. The spinning going too far and always the balloon bursting it all the worst ways. The horrible part was that instead of scolding or sighing, Ero-sennin just blew up another one and tossed it over. So damn annoying, good but aggravating.

“Don’t slack off! You have to concentrate 100% of your spin and power into it. Half assing it won’t work.” Ero-sennin said before he handed over yet another damn balloon.

Naruto knew the step was on a whole other scale but it did not stop the cold sweat that ran down his back at the man’s words. He knew he would prevail, no matter what it looked or felt like. He couldn’t afford to lose. Ero-sennin was teaching him the jutsu for a reason. The old man was convinced Naruto could master the jutsu for a reason and Naruto was not going to prove him wrong. He had to control everything perfectly in order to master the third step and that was going to take some time. It made the other steps look like a game.

“I told you didn’t I?” Ero-sennin said softly. “This is a rank A difficulty extremely high level ninjutsu.” The old man chuckled. “It’s not child’s play it’s a jutsu many can’t even dream of learning or even doing.” Naruto had nothing to say to that. “Tsunade might not linger long so we’ll pick up the pace to catch up. Not as if an old friend is going to pop by and say hello to stop her from going anywhere.”

“Does that old lady even have any friends?”

“Gamblers have friends in high and low places but those aren’t the type she’ll linger for.”

“So everything is back in Konoha for her?” Naruto grunted as he focused. Silence made him look away from the balloon. “Ero-sennin?”

“Something like that.” The man shrugged. “Little something like that but these are different times, not every friend you’ll have will be a shinobi. We travelled far when we were younger. Older people tend to wander more and see some old friends.”

“If they survived.” Naruto pointed out.

“That too.” Ero-sennin mused. “But she has no reason to linger for too long. It will be the next town, the next game.”
“She really your friend? When was the last time you saw her? You’ve been walking about too right?”

“We’ve known each other since we were kids! That sort of bond is hard to dissolve. We’ve seen each other at our worst. That sort of bond isn’t going to go away because of a little distance.” Ero-sennin laughed. “And for me, knowing she was alive was enough but it is different now, I need her for a favour. Something she won’t want to hear.”

“You and me both.” Naruto pointed out. “But if she was travelling this whole time she shouldn’t want to kill you on sight.” He eyed the man next to him suspiciously. “You guys were good friends right? Even with you being an Ero-sennin?” A heavy sigh answered him. “Hey! Answer the question!”

“Concentrate on the jutsu you brat.” Ero-sennin snorted before he ruffled Naruto’s hair and took the lead. Naruto was left three steps behind the balloon in his hands.

XxX

“She’s got a really short temper.” Ero-sennin stood with his hands on his hips as he stared down the steps into the city. “I hope nothing has set her off yet… but I don’t want to find her deep into her cups either… but if something sets her off…” Naruto watched the anticipation spread across the old man’s face. “She’ll be easier to find.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean.” Naruto grumbled as he stumbled to his feet and dusted himself off. Ero-sennin glanced at him before he tossed over yet another balloon.

“Well we are here.” Ero-sennin chuckled. “Good time too but that doesn’t mean that she still is, she could have had her fill. But we are here, now we track her down.”

“That side of town huh.” Naruto grumbled, concentrating really took a lot out of him. The balance was key and that was where he kept failing. Doing it on his own was hard but he knew he could get it done, the intervals between explosions were longer and longer but he was not exactly there yet. The image of the true jutsu in his mind and the damage it had caused.

“Just the dens not the bars. She will be fresh on people’s minds. She is not someone that you forget so quickly. Her reputation is pretty bad too.”

“This is a fairly big city.” Naruto pointed out. “How much gambling places you think there are?”

“Enough to keep her occupied for a while I hope.” The old man muttered. “We’ll start with the favourite games, check around to see how badly she was swindled and the closer we get to night we’ll check around for places she might have gone to sleep.”

“Wouldn’t she have stayed up to gamble more?” It made sense to Naruto considering that she was being portrayed as this helpless addict that was warped by the power of money and the shine of the dice.

“You keep saying it you know.” The old man chuckled. “She’s old Naruto, we all are. Have to get some rest in sometimes.” It sounded like the right answer but it felt like more was underneath it. Naruto was unable to probe because his control got away from him yet again and he was sent flying back a few steps from the balloon exploding.

XxX

“Oh!” Jiraiya looked back up when the owner of the gambling den’s tone sounded pleased and a
bit smug. “I know this nee-chan!” It never got old how time moved on and people still referred to Tsunade as nee-chan instead of oba-san of course… that might change with Naruto’s bratty mouth in the mix now. “She was saying she was going to get over her losses over ‘there’.” The man finished with a laugh. There was no point in asking whether he was sure. This was Tsunade after all and people tended to pay close attention to that legendary sucker.

“What’s that? Where’s over ‘there’? Jiraiya stressed. A lead was a lead and it was better than dragging Naruto to every gambling place they could find. There was no way they would find them all, not every place advertised what it was right out after all.

Even while he spoke to the owner his attention was on Naruto. In the background, he heard the occasional mutters and frustrated sounds coming from the boy which is why he also picked up the conversation.

“Listen up kid, first you add the face of two dice. If you get even that’s cho if you get odd that’s han.”

“I already know that!” Naruto snapped. “I’m busy with training buzz off! Why you trying to get money out a kid anyway?”

Before Jiraiya could pay what was happening behind him more attention the owner had gotten out his dice. “We can’t give you that information for free see? Let’s gamble for it if you win I’ll talk, if you lose you must pay up to a thousand.”

That was the way of the world. Jiraiya paused as he thought it over, he had the funds there would be no big loss and he did need the information. Of course, he was not as bad as Tsunade, he certainly had more luck than her so it would not hurt anyone.

“Alright, pick for cho or han.” The owner smiled.

Alright… hmm.” Jiraiya muttered as he thought over which to choose. It was not a game he played regularly. He was more of a cards person and that was from his youth. Easier to cheat and more fun too. Well his age was an even number so… “I’ll pick Cho!”

“If it’s Han I win.” The owner pointed out. Jiraiya nodded to show his agreement. “Alright let’s see what it is.” A huff from behind him made Jiraiya take his eyes from the cup and he met Naruto’s annoyed gaze. He was aware of the man finishing the shaking but Naruto’s irritated gaze held him in place. Then the balloon exploded.

From the corner of his eye Jiraiya saw the dice were two and five. Odd, making it han he had lost but then the balloon exploded. The two and five went to two and four, even making it cho.

“Seems like my win.” Jiraiya pointed out when the owner groaned. He glanced back to Naruto who was blowing up another balloon. Had the boy ruined the attempt on purpose? It was ridiculously good timing. Almost too good.

XxX

Slot machines were fun. Naruto listened to Ero-sennin with one ear while he looked around the place and listened to the bustle of activity around them. The people concentrating on their machine. Those muttering angrily and of course the rare cries of joy.

“Damn it she’s nowhere to be found.” Ero-sennin muttered as he glanced around. “She must have left already. Damn it where did she go?”
Leaning on one of the stools for the slot machine a glint of a coin caught his eye. There was nothing he could do as he waited on the old man. The balloons had been removed from his grasp the moment they entered the establishment.

It was just a bit of harmless fun, Naruto picked up the coin before he inserted it into the slot machine. He pulled the lever and watched as the numbers and letters swirled in a blur.

Just a bit of harmless fun. Naruto laughed as he focused on the numbers swirling before him. He could hear Ero-sennin talking to someone behind him. He shook his head and pulled the lever again.

XxX

As irritated as he was about not being able to locate Tsunade when he knew that she was close, Jiraiya spared a few moments to shake his head at Naruto as the boy cuddled his toad purse that was full to the point of bulging. He had only taken his eyes off the boy for a few seconds.

As many jokes that he might make he had never planned on actually corrupting the boy. Hopefully he wouldn’t mention it to anyone. Granted it was surprising that he had won all of that from one coin. Jiraiya’s careful interrogation had revealed that. After all he had seen Naruto hit the jackpot with his own eyes.

The brat was certainly proud of himself. He had pretty good luck. The boy had to be extremely talented at that sort of thing. Slots were hard for seasoned shinobi with good eyes, that a brat could so easily and so quickly make so much money. Maybe it was a good thing Naruto wanted to be a shinobi.

“Gama-chan’s so cute when he’s full.” Naruto gushed as he hugged the purse tightly to him. “You’re so much cuter when you’re crammed full of coins. Let’s keep you that way!” Jiraiya shook his head as he watched Naruto march happily along the path, it was cute.

But still, where was Tsunade? Where had she gotten to? She must not have gotten far. They were in a castle town so maybe it would be better for them to look for her from above.

“Let’s go this way Naruto.” Jiraiya pointed to the path that would lead them up to the castle.

“Roger!”

“Least someone is energetic.”

XxX

“Umm.” Naruto said slowly as he shielded his eyes with his hands. “There is supposed to be a castle there right? Where is it?” He was fairly certain there had been a castle mentioned by everyone that knew they were new comers to the city. Yet there was no castle.

The old man’s face showed that he was just as stunned as him. Ero-sennin glanced down at him, blinked a few times before his widened eyes returned to the road ahead of them. The road ahead and the collapsed castle.

XxX

They stood on the wall facing the collapsed castle. “Someone has to know something.” Jiraiya gritted as he eyed the ruin. Destruction of such magnitude screamed Tsunade but Tsunade had never been one to recklessly destroy historical buildings and artefacts before. When she fought
there was calculation and reason behind it. No little rookie could push her to that kind of destruction.

Which meant that it could be a coincidence and it could not be Tsunade as well. “What happened here.” Naruto said softly. “It feels like there was a big fight.” Both Jiraiya and Naruto’s heads turned to the same direction at the same time.

A man fleeing as fast as he could away from the castle. “Hey! You over there! What the hell happened here?” Jiraiya bellowed. The man barely slowed down his pace but his terrified expression caught Jiraiya.

“You guys should run away too! There’s a demon beast up there!” A beast?

“Demon beast?” Naruto blurted out.

“This demon beast you speak of… what exactly is it?” If it had human form it just could be Tsunade, but then there was the question of what set her off and whether it was wise to approach her right away Naruto in tow.

“A hu-uge snake! It toppled the building instantly!” Jiraiya felt his blood chill. Of course, it just had to be.

“How big was this snake beast?” Naruto demanded with a step towards the man. “Is it possible that-“

“Naruto.” Jiraiya waited until the boy looked at him. “You already know.” The anger in the boy’s eyes confirmed it for him. “It’s a summon and you’ve seen that snake before.” Maybe he should have worded it differently but they didn’t have time for that. “Let’s go.”

XxX

“Something did this.” Naruto panted when they landed in front of what had been a wall. “But I don’t think this was a snake.”

“Oh?”

“It looks like something smashed it alright.” Naruto frowned as he walked towards the shattered remains. “But it more looks like it crumbled because something hit it. A snake would have crushed it from above, if it had rammed it… it wouldn’t look like this unless the snake was a lot bigger and even then…” Naruto glanced around them. “There would have been a lot more damage.”

“We are just a little bit too late.” Ero-sennin muttered. “But you are right. This wasn’t a snake.”

“But that was huh.” Naruto said softly as they looked at the remains of the castle. “So, what did this?”

“It isn’t a work of a snake I can tell you that.” Ero-sennin muttered. He poked around the rubble and Naruto was left to watch him. “Two huh.”

“Two what?” Naruto asked before he watched the old man pick up a long needle. “Is that poisoned?”

“Correct.” Ero-sennin’s mouth twitched. “We were a little too late but we’re on her tail. We can’t leave her leave, we have to find her before then or before he finds her.”
“You mean the Baa-chan?” Naruto asked softly. “She is caught up in this?”

“I’m not entirely surprised that she is.” Ero-sennin muttered.

“She did that?” Naruto gestured to the wall. He looked over it again and swallowed. “But there is no other evidence of fighting.” He pointed out. The old man had found some needles but besides that there was nothing.

Ero-sennin was kneeling at a spot close to the opposite wall. “I have some ideas of what went down.”

“Is she in danger?” They couldn’t have that. They needed her, the village needed her.

“No, I think this was more of a discussion and a warning.” Ero-sennin poked a faintly discoloured patch of dirt on the ground. “But she will be on high alert she may even make a run for it. There’s no sense in messing around now. We have to find her.”

“Roger!”

“Let’s go Naruto.” Ero-sennin got back to his knees and dusted off his pants. “We’ve still got time until night falls.”

XxX

“Come on we’ve been at it all day.” Naruto groaned. “The sun is going down.”

“Exactly why we should keep looking.”

“You can always leave me here for a bit.” Naruto muttered, his hands itched to grab another balloon and practice.

“God what am I going to do with you.” Ero-sennin shook his head. “Twenty minutes and not a second more.” Naruto lit up happily. “Then we’ll gather information.”

“Right right right.” Naruto said happily before he scrambled for his bag and the balloons. “Twenty minutes.” He knew what they were doing was important but breaks were important too. Running around like chickens with their heads cut off had not done them any good. So maybe staying still for a while and focusing would tell them where to strike next.

One thing he had noticed about the old man was that he was really good at reading people and intentions. He might be an unapologetic pervert but he knew people, he understood people and he was fairly good at reading a scene. The old lady they were looking for was an old friend. He had tracked her down this far. He just needed to focus so he could find her whether he came to the conclusion subconsciously or not. Naruto had not met the woman but he knew she was close, maybe lying low which meant Ero-sennin needed to think about where she would lie low after an event like today.

What better time to focus than when Naruto was getting some training in? It worked for everyone and it helped them to calm down and avoid thinking about the other things. Like the fact that a huge snake had been spotted, like the fact that Orochimaru might be lurking somewhere and Naruto wanted to know.

When it came to the subject of Orochimaru, Naruto seemed to be always left with more questions than he had started with. That name still haunted him, the fact that some group was hunting him scared him. That Orochimaru wanted Sasuke for an unknown reason enraged him, now
Orochimaru might be after the old lady healer they were after. Always more questions than answers. The guy was too troublesome, too dangerous.

Another reason why he needed the jutsu. A chance was all you needed sometimes. Naruto breathed out slowly to calm himself before he settled the balloon in his hands. It almost felt like they were running out of time in more ways than one.

And wasn’t this supposed to be an annoying but fairly easy mission? Yet there he was about to be waist deep in a mess not of his own creation. Perks of being a Konoha Shinobi he guessed.

XxX

“Well that’s enough. Let’s eat dinner here.”

“Here?” Naruto demanded as he glared up at the sign. “This is a bar! What kind of adult are you? Don’t you have any shame?”

“Dumbass you know information can be gathered at these sorts of places.”

“How much of that will you be doing when you’re four sheets to the wind and halfway down a nee-chan’s chest?”

Ero-sennin paused in the middle of pushing up the flap in the entrance to the pub to look back at him. “You really don’t have much faith in adults do you.”

“In adult perverts with intentions.” Naruto hissed. “I’ve seen you in action Ero-sennin.”

“I’m not going to get drunk.” Ero-sennin grumbled as they made their way into the bar. His eyes moved around before they froze on a table. “Hey!”

It took some tiptoeing for Naruto to figure out who the old man was looking at he saw two women sitting together at the back of the bar. He frowned at the brown-haired woman sitting next to a black-haired woman. He narrowed his eyes at their faces.

“Tsunade!”

“Jiraiya?”

They could not be fucking serious. This was how they found her? How anticlimactic.

XxX

She really did look as young as the photo. Naruto stared at her face looking for the trick to it, a lie in it but could find none. Her cheeks were flushed, she had to be more than tipsy but her companion was fresh faced and sober looking. “Why are you in a place like this Jiraiya?” She had not even looked at Naruto yet. It was almost suspicious.

“Finally we’ve found you.” Ero-sennin grunted as he took a seat at the table. Naruto eyed him before he copied the old man, his gaze fixed on the woman on the other side of the table. She really didn’t look fifty years old, she did not look like a woman they would be looking for but then again, she did not look like an unapologetic gambler either. Yet there she sat.

Food came to the table so Naruto took one the fish for himself. He looked back and forth between the adults. Ero-sennin’s face was blank. The woman’s companion looked nervous, the woman they had come for her face was flushed but she looked contemplative.
Naruto had made it through half of the fish before she stopped drinking and swirled the liquid inside the cup instead with her gaze on the table. “Today… I met someone who brought back bad memories.”

“Orochimaru?” Ero-sennin’s hands rested on the table. “Did something happen?” A look was exchanged between the two women and Naruto shot the old man a glance of his own. They knew something had happened. Why ask?

“No.” Naruto’s gaze shot to her when she spoke. “Nothing much, just a little greeting.” Naruto bit his tongue before he reached forward to grab the nearest plate of snacks and drag it to himself. If he had to listen to this dancing around he might as well eat.

“Really.”

“You too, why did you come to see me?” The old lady in disguise leaned on the table her gaze fixed on Ero-sennin.

“To tell you the truth…” Ero-sennin’s glance went to him before it went back to the woman. “It’s quite a few things that brought me to you. The most important thing is that Konoha has issued a request for you to be the Godaime Hokage.”

All of them reacted. The women, Naruto noticed them freezing, their eyes opening in shock but he was too caught up in his own reaction. The empty plate fell to the floor when he got to his feet.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” He blurted out. “You didn’t say anything about that! I thought we were here to ask her for a favour not to be Hokage!” He glared at the woman who had slowly regained her composure. “What the hell, all of a sudden. Why do we need a new Hokage?”

The old man glanced at him. “The Sandaime…”

“Is still alive!” Naruto yelled. “He’s just…sick.”

“He’s old Naruto… he needs to retire. He had once before.”

“Then why can’t you do it.” Naruto snapped.

“The Sandaime… it was Orochimaru’s work. He told me.” The woman spoke up interrupting their conversation.

“He keeps popping up.” Naruto snarled. “Who is he really?”

“One of us.” Ero-sennin sighed. “He was one of the Sannin for Konoha.” Ero-sennin’s hand briefly tightened on his cup. “He abandoned us and the village a long time ago.”

“Jiraiya… who is this boy?” The woman’s gaze was properly on him.

“Oh.” Ero-sennin brightened up. “I should have led with that. “He’s Uzumaki Naruto.” Naruto watched the woman’s gaze widen as it rested on his face. No doubt about it, this woman that he was certain he never met knew who he was. “You never got the message about not needing to keep an eye out for him anymore?”

“Uzumaki Naruto.” Her eyes searched his face. “I never knew you had found him.”

“It wasn’t the old man that brought me back.” Naruto pointed out. “So, are you really the same age as him?”
“Let’s move on.” Ero-sennin coughed.

“But I wanna know.” Naruto frowned. “She doesn’t look older than that Nee-chan next to her. Or any older than most the mothers in the village but from what you say, she’s a Baa-chan isn’t she?”

“Quiet kid, Tsunade your answer? Do you accept?”

“But I’m still talking!”

“You’ve spoken enough for now.”

XxX

“Impossible.” She said softly after a long silence. Most of that silence Naruto had frowned while staring at her face and running over Ero-sennin’s surprise that Konoha wanted her to be Hokage. Naruto knew that it was not as if he could ask the Sandaime to hold the seat until he was ready. Who knew how long that would take. He would have to be older first. He was still just a kid and even asking the Sandaime to hold onto the seat, Ero-sennin had been right about one thing. The man was old. As long as Naruto had known him he was old, he was still strong, he was powerful but he needed to rest, it was time for him to rest. He had been so badly hurt against Orochimaru. Who knew who else Konoha would have to face before Naruto could become Hokage.

But this woman? She was supposed to be some super strong healer but she had a gambling problem! She sucked at gambling! That was the person the village wanted to take over? Maybe they were looking at ability to lead the village rather than personal failings? Maybe that was a good thing? If it was a thing it would come in handy when Naruto was deemed ready. But somehow there seemed to be more to it than that.

“I decline.” She said softly.

“Heh, I recall.” Ero-sennin said softly. “You said the same thing when I asked you out.”

“Is this the time for this?” Naruto demanded. His palms slapped the table. “What the fuck is this? I thought we were coming to ask her to heal the Sandaime! Then you pull out this Hokage request shit!” He glared across the table. “Wasn’t it just supposed to be one thing? To help us? But then you ask her to be Hokage? Then she declined?”

“Don’t worry so much, Tsunade here she is the only person that can be the Fifth Hokage.”

“What do you mean the only person?” Naruto demanded, his throat felt raw. “We had to leave the village to find the only person? Doesn’t that mean I’m more qualified? Hell, it feels more like we’ll have to drag her back to be Hokage! Let her look at Lee and the Sandaime and let her leave!”

“But Tsunade here is qualified.” That Ero-sennin could smile so easily and so happily made Naruto want to leap at him. “She was the one that brought us victories in battles. One of the key figures to our winning the Third War. Also no one has been able to acquire her techniques. I did tell you her healing was legendary.”

Naruto glanced back to the old woman and looked closer. She looked unsurprised by the things Ero-sennin was saying. The same for the woman next to her too and Naruto really wanted to get the story behind that, she sat close but her eyes kept going to the woman next to her and even around her. It reminded him not quite like Zabuza and Haku, more like Alya and Haku. Or even Zabuza and Kasumi.
“Also.” Ero-sennin chuckled. “Tsunade is the granddaughter of the first Hokage.” Naruto froze. “So you see she’s the most appropriate person for the position. If she becomes Hokage she would have to come back to the village. Then she can help the Sandaime and look at your friend for you. See how it works out?”

Well it did seem simple but… “She could also just visit and wake up the Sandaime and help out Lee and….” Naruto stuttered. “I don’t know Lee that well, I mean he’s cool and all because I’ve never seen anyone like him before. Him and Gai-sensei I guess.” Naruto muttered. “If she’s legendary I want her to help him.”

“Gai-sensei?” The other woman spoke up for the first time. “Do you mean Might Gai by any chance?”

“Oh! Shizune I was wondering if you would catch on.” Ero-sennin laughed. “Gai made quite the impression on Naruto, Lee-kun too. Of course, there is much Naruto is still learning about Konoha’s village life and customs. Excuse him from time to time.”

“But I’m still right about her not having to be Hokage to help us out.” Naruto pointed out.

Ero-sennin flashed him a grin. “This was a decision made by the top members of Konoha. They chose Tsunade for the candidacy. You have absolutely no say in the matter.” He was right but he didn’t have to say it in that way. Naruto glared at the old man before he looked away.

He was drawn back by the woman’s chuckles. “Jiraiya.” She drawled. “This kid seems worse than your previous apprentices. In terms of looks, intelligence and speech. He’s loud and bratty, quite the opposite of the Yondaime.”

Naruto really wanted to challenge her on her insults but the fondness in her tone stopped him. “You knew the Yondaime?”

“Soft spoken and cute too.” Her eyes held his gaze before she broke it to look at Ero-sennin. “So many differences it is quite amusing.”

“Well it is hard to compare anyone to the Yondaime.” Ero-sennin coughed. “Smart, reliable, handsome. He had a few… faults.” Ero-sennin and the old lady laughed but whatever the joke was it went over Naruto’s head. “But he became an incredible top-class ninja.”

“But even he died quickly too.” Her laughter had disappeared. “He gave up his life for the village.” Ero-sennin’s laugh faded as well. Naruto spared a glance towards Ero-sennin’s serious face before he watched the woman’s contemplative one. “Life is different from money, it can’t be risked that easily.” Her words had a slight slur. “Whoever puts it at risk is a fool.”

Naruto tasted blood in his mouth and it took effort to open his mouth enough to move his trapped tongue. He was hearing her words but they were getting fainter and fainter to him.

“My grandfather and the Nidaime too both focused too much on bringing peace to our homes more than everybody else. But as a result, they died in the middle of their dreams like the losers…” Her words, he could still hear them but it was competing with the sound of his heartbeat.

“You’ve changed Tsunade.” Ero-sennin sounded almost reproachful. “I don’t know what you’ve been thinking all this time, but you’ve just said all that’s on your mind.”

“Well I’m already in my fifties, age changes people Jiraiya. It’s the same for Sarutobi-sensei. He’s too old to be living his dreams like this. Being a Hokage is a shit job only a fool would do it.”
Deep inside Naruto, he was aware of a soft chuckle but nothing more because he was too caught up in watching a kunai fly towards the healer’s throat. A kunai that had come from his hand. She caught it, that spoke to her skill but Naruto was still halfway across the table before the old man managed to grab him.

“Let me go!”

“Don’t you realize we’re at a bar?”

“You think I give a fuck?” Naruto snapped his gaze of the woman who held the kunai between her fingers. “I let her ramble on and on. She’s acting like she has the monopoly on pain! Like other people haven’t watched people they love not make it to their dreams! Die half way! What did she do huh? Sit back, run, forget anything.” He was dragged back into his seat with Ero-sennin’s hand slapped over his mouth.

“Come on now.” Ero-sennin sighed. “We’ll be thrown out.”

Naruto wiggled away from the hand to snarl. “I’ll never forgive anyone who insults Hokages and the Yondaime. I don’t care who she is I’ll kick her ass!”

“Oh god.” Ero-sennin groaned.

“You’ve got some guts to be talking to me like that.” She hopped up on the seat to lean over to him.

“You think because you look like you do you’re special?” Naruto hissed. “Your appearance lies and it hides your ugliness. The type that lurks in your heart. You can come from Konoha a village you served and talk in such a way, no wonder you have to run, no wonder you have to hide your ugliness it goes straight to your soul. Otherwise how could someone so close to a Kage ignore everything they work for?”

“Tsunade-sama.” The attendant whispered with the pig in her arms.

“Let’s take this outside.” Tsunade growled. “Right now.”

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“I’m pointing out how ridiculous this is before it even begins.” Ero-sennin folded his arms.

“Tsunade what are you thinking, duelling outside bars? You aren’t that drunk.”

“Shut up.” She swayed as she chuckled. “I’m a part of the legendary Sannin I don’t need to go all out on a little brat no matter who he might be. A finger will do.”

“I never did get around to telling you where and how we found him did I Tsunade.” Ero-sennin sounded amused. “It’s nice to know you won’t be trying to kill him but you shouldn’t treat him like normal genin.”

“A finger is all I need Jiraiya.”

“Shut up.” Naruto placed his bag gently out the way while he let the rage simmer. “I came all this way for you. You have no idea how pissed I am. If the village hadn’t chosen you as a candidate I could have lived with gagging you until you healed our friends but after talk like that I won’t be able to live with myself if I didn’t try and sock you one.”

“There’s no stopping this now.” Ero-sennin grumbled from the side-lines. “Don’t look so miserable
Shizune. You know better than anyone what happens when types like those clash.”

“Pissing me off so much.” He felt hot all over. “You could have gone on your merry way and we wouldn’t have cared. Related to Hokages or not nobody gets to insult them and the path they walked on without walking and standing there themselves! I’m not the Yondaime.” His hand fell to the kunai pouch on his leg. “Not the Sandaime, the Nidaime or your grandfather.” But he would become Hokage someday. Walk in their shoes and go further than any of them had ever dreamed accomplish more than they ever had and that was why no one was going to spit on his path and his dream. “God damnit!” He lunged forward.

Throwing would be a mistake, he had no idea how she fought, rage kept his body hot but his eyes were open and clear, his mind catching everything. Her cheeks were still flushed from drinks but her body was alert. When he moved she moved too in a way he had seen from two different people already.

Or not exactly, it looked more like a group of people he had seen lately. Gai-sensei, Lee, Hinata, Neji. She was coming at him not with jutsu at least not so far. He had less than a second to make his decision. She was stronger than him, older than him but she did not know him and that was what would come in his favour.

She thought he was coming with an easy slash and she ducked accordingly that finger coming for his ribs like he guessed she would try. Pity that he had spent so much time with Hinata and training for Neji. But she was not exactly foolish either.

She caught his long feint and was quick to retaliate before he could dodge safely out the way. He had almost expected a kick because her leg was closer but all too quickly she sent that finger his way again. She was dangerously fast.

He had expected a finger poke but the finger flick was worse. The pain in his head would have sent him to his knees if he had not been braced for something, as it was he was frozen in place as his whole head throbbed along with his senses. At the back of his head he heard Kurenai-sensei, Hinata and Kakashi-sensei explaining how the Hyuuga technique worked on shutting down the body and felt like swearing.

Except there was no time because she had straightened up and flicked him in the forehead again and he lost consciousness while on his feet. Just for a bit, but it was enough for him to be dragged to someone he really did not want to talk to.

“She’s giving you quite the beating Naruto.” Claws stroked the bars of the cage. “I could help you with her.”

“What you can do is give me some chakra.” Naruto growled. “I’m not letting you out but I will take a boost.” She underestimated him, she underestimated what he was made of and he would not stand for that.

“Oh…” The fox laughed. “This is a first Naruto.”

“I really wanna beat her ass.” Naruto hissed. “I’ll use what I can.” It was not complete, he was nowhere near what Ero-sennin had showed him but it would be enough. He would power his way through.

“Hey kid.” While he had been out he had been knocked back a few feet but he had gotten to his feet while occupied. She stared at him from a distance away. “Tell me, why do you get so excited when you hear the word Hokage?”
“Unlike you.” Naruto said softly as he touched his headband to make sure it was still securely there. “I will succeed the name and duty of Hokage. I’ll go further than anyone else because not only did I make plenty of promises, but because Hokage’s my dream.” He watched her eyes widen and her face slacken. Stunned at his words? Alcohol kicking in? Whatever it was he had a chance. He made a fist and concentrated, pouring his chakra, his concentration and his rage inside. It had to be enough.

It felt the chakra form in his hands and it was the first time he had done this without the balloon. The first time he saw what he was creating. Beautiful but not enough.

“It is more than my dream, I’m tired of the pain I’m tired of being alone and I’m tired of being left behind.” He growled, he felt the chakra in his hand expand. “What I’ve seen can never be changed, what I learned told me I have to be Hokage, I have to keep walking forward and one day I’ll protect those behind me! One day when I’m Hokage those that run before me I’ll protect them too!”

Was it completed? Hell no but it was enough. She had taken a step back her eyes wide and fixed on his hands but that would not stop him he was already running flat out for her. No games, the most he could do was dodge twice but she was already off her game, that could be enough if he was fast enough.

Her finger would not save her this time. Even if she got him… he would get her shoulder. That would be enough. That was all he needed. He could taste the success. Her finger instead of coming for him went to the ground. He had a second to be confused before the ground split in two and his footing was gone.

No chance to divert, his stumble was just the beginning of the fall. He had to centre himself. The jutsu would be wasted, so close but not close enough. With regret, he slammed his hands into the ground to catch himself before he fell into the gaping hole.

Naruto groaned at the sight of the swirl embedded into the ground before he threw himself backward. He glared up at the night sky and cursed. “Shit.”

XxX

Well the winner was expected, Jiraiya was unable to prevent a frown when he surveyed the scene. He was glad it had not gone as messy as if could have. That Tsunade. That freakish strength of hers, he could recall being punched by her and being thrown a hundred meters away to the amusement to all those watching. Still, Naruto couldn’t finish it but by the look on the boy’s face while making it he had known that but Jiraiya had no doubt that the boy had gotten at least a step closer. That was good enough for the both of them.

“Are you okay?” Shizune was struggling to help Naruto to his feet while the boy coughed. Jiraiya had no doubts that most of the damage was on its way to healing. Still to be able to get to his feet right away after facing Tsunade, even though she was holding back.

“Jiraiya!” Tsunade’s angry voice made his attention snap back to her. “Who is teaching him the rasengan? Was it you?”

“I’m his master… in principle for now… it’s really a long story.” It had started as a way to have fun and keep himself occupied and amused then of course he had borrowed Naruto from Kakashi with all intentions of giving him back but Naruto had the summons… and he listened rather well and he had a good spark in him. But ultimately, he was going to give him back to Kakashi. He couldn’t deny Kakashi the delight of a full team after all. He might just borrow Naruto from time to time. A week here or there, a month here or there until the kid hit Chuunin or something. That
sounded nice.

“The only people who can use that jutsu are the Yondaime and you!” She glared, why was she so angry? “Teaching him something he cannot do and believing you are his master… it’s better if he doesn’t think this way.” As angry as she was, Jiraiya kept an eye on Naruto who had gotten to his feet and stood seething. He might have to stop the brat from launching himself at her again. “Much better he doesn’t think like that so brats won’t joke about foolish dreams like becoming Hokage.” Jiraiya just might have to step in there.

“Shut up!” At least he managed not to lunge at her but Jiraiya wondered if the boy noticed that his eyes had shifted just a bit. Not that noticeable but the pupils had changed. Just a little bit. “You idiot you idiot! Who are you to say I can’t do it? Give me three days! All I need is three days and I’ll master that technique just you watch!” As entertaining as watching Naruto’s face was, Tsunade’s was just a pleasant to watch. Partly amused, the rest was her reminiscing. He didn’t have to guess of what, he wasn’t that old after all.

“Those are some words brat.” She huffed. “A man’s word should never be taken back.” Oh Tsunade… Jiraiya so badly wanted to touch her shoulder but he knew not only would she shrug him off and punch him for his efforts, he knew Naruto had this one in the bag. He could see the spark in her now. Barely there but it existed he just had to leave the rest to Naruto.

“What? Huh?” Naruto’s tone was a cross between confused and disgusted. “What are you even saying? I won’t take my words back. That’s my way of shinobi.” His eyes were clear, pupils had shifted back too. Tsunade looked a bit smug with a smile growing by the second. This was working out better than fine. They just might get the princess as Hokage after all.

“Well then is that so.” She sounded not only sober but highly amused. I’ll give you one week.”

“What?” Naruto frowned. “I just said three days!”

“And I’m giving you a week because I know what I’m talking about. If you master the jutsu in the time limit I set I’ll acknowledge that you can become Hokage. I’ll give you this necklace.” Jiraiya’s breath caught in his throat. He stared at her but Tsunade never looked away from Naruto.

“Hold up.” Naruto’s gaze darted to the necklace and back to Tsunade’s face. “I don’t want that, just heal the old man and my friend that’s all I want I don’t need a necklace.”

“Tsunade-sama that’s your precious!” Shizune’s tongue had awakened to protest the madness unfolding before their eyes.

“Don’t worry nee-chan I don’t want any necklace from her. Just want her help and healing ability. That’s why I’m here.” Naruto frowned. “I’m already getting something incredible from the old man over there. Don’t need some old necklace you know.”

“Listen, I’ll do both brat. You’ll get the necklace and I’ll heal Sarutobi-sensei and your little friend.”

“I told you.” Naruto stressed slowly, his hands drifted to his hips. “All I want is your healing abilities not some necklace.”

“Wait just a moment Naruto.” Jiraiya cut in, as entertaining as it was getting he did have to help this along. Naruto did not understand the importance of Tsunade offering up the necklace but he did. “That is a unique and precious ore that belonged to the First Hokage. If you sold it you could buy three mountains but if you keep it, it would look mighty fine on you when you become
“Well alright then.” Naruto agreed. Jiraiya was not too sure if it was the temptation of wearing the stone as a Hokage that sold him or the promise of money. The brat hoarded like nobody’s business which was understandable.

“But if you lose.” Tsunade had a grin on her face before she dangled Naruto’s ridiculously fat purse. Jiraiya had wondered why she had went for it. “All your money will belong to me.” To think she was stealing from kids now. If he did not know she was playing with him he would be worried.

“Gama-chan!” Naruto looked actually distressed. “No!”

“Oh yeah, brat.” Tsunade tucked away the frog into her shirt. “What’s so important in Konoha? You’ve been going on all this time.”

If she expected an outburst then she had to be disappointed. Naruto’s face lit up for the first time since they had run into Tsunade.

“A chance.” Naruto flashed her a grin. “Start fresh, make new friends and a way to the better world we’ve been dreaming of. Just this time make that word a different way.” His eyes went distant for a few seconds. “I’ve been running for a while and I saw a lot of things, learned a lot of things and right now I’m seeing those things all over again but differently. My goals haven’t changed just the way I will achieve them and the people who will be with me.” Naruto’s head turned to the sky. “I’ll change a bit too on the way there.” He finished wistfully. “But Konoha has people who care about me, who looked for me and who believe in me. Not everyone does yet but that will come.”

“What a weird brat.” Tsunade said softly. Jiraiya smiled at her and Naruto. Much better than he had anticipated, least she was listening. Now she was on the brink of believing. Pity she was still underestimating him, he thought she would have known better by now by not all wisdom came with age.

XxX

“Tsunade-sama what are you doing?” The other woman let the pig drop from her arms before she stalked over to Tsunade. “That necklace… that necklace is… how can you bet…”

“It’s not like he can accomplish it anyway Shizune. It’s a sure bet. Let’s go Shizune!”

“But Tsunade-sama.” The pig nudged at the other woman’s feet.

“Just wait a moment.” Ero-sennin raised a hand. “Tsunade can we have a drink together? It’s been a while. Naruto, you can look for a hotel. I’ll find you later.”

“Why is it always up to me.” Naruto mumbled before he gave up and went to where he had stashed his bag. He dusted himself off ignoring the fact that only a good wash would begin to remove the damage taken. He had gotten more than a little dusty.

“Okay.” Shizune looked even more dejected by the order.


“I’m not drinking with them.” She said softly as she gathered the pig into her arms. “Anyway, Naruto-kun let me introduce myself. Shizune, I’m Tsunade-sama’s attendant.”
“What a job you have ahead of you.” Naruto muttered. “So you just follow her?” An idea occurred to him. “Does she teach you things?” Shizune’s face lit up in a smile. “That’s cool! So you are like her disciple or something? She’s your master? Nee-chan you’re lucky!”

“It doesn’t feel so sometimes but there is nowhere I’d rather be. You just caught us on a bad day.”

“Orochimaru would put anybody in a bad mood.” Naruto muttered. “And I only saw him up close once! I’m still feeling miserable about that!” That got him a smile. They walked along together the sound of their feet on the gravel on the road the only other sound. “She’s really in her fifties?”

“It’s a complicated jutsu.” Shizune said weakly. “But yes.”

“Hmm and she’ll really keep her part of the deal? I want her help out the old man Hokage really bad you know.”

“About that. I don’t want you to misunderstand. That necklace is… well you know Tsunade-sama wasn’t always so harsh. She wasn’t always so…”

“Cold?” Naruto supplied, it got him a nod in return.

“Exactly. She used to have a caring heart, she loved her village fiercely but she changed that day.”

“What happened?”

“Dreams, hope and love all were lost that day. Furthermore, about that necklace. To Tsunade-sama, that necklace is just as important to her as her own life. It’s not something that should be carelessly bet on.”

“Well tell her that.” Naruto frowned. “I didn’t want it in the first place. She’s the one that bet it!”

“Also, that necklace isn’t something you should have! It’s a cursed object! It doesn’t acknowledge anyone but Tsunade-sama. Anyone else that wears that necklace will die!”

“A cursed object? That necklace?” Naruto muttered to himself. He was aware of Shizune next to him but he was too busy mulling it over.

“Yes.” She said softly. “Also… do you mind if I ask you why you accompanied Jiraiya-sama?”

“Huh?” Naruto looked up in confusion. “He’s the one that dragged me along you know. Bribed me with a jutsu.”

“Last Tsunade-sama and I were aware you were…”

“Oh!” Naruto laughed. “You see, when I was younger I ran away from the village! They brought me back and I know they don’t trust me that much even though I was a kid when I ran.” Naruto kicked at a small rock in the road. “But honestly it doesn’t matter. I was a missing nin for years running with a group that got bigger and bigger. That showed me so many things.” His voice fell. “When I was brought back everyone with me got killed.”

“I’m… so sorry.”

“Me too I think about them a lot. They are never too far away from me and as long as I think of them I feel them for a little longer and it doesn’t hurt so bad and if I keep going, I can see the world we wanted to see.”

“That’s a crazy burden for someone so young.” She said softly. “But technically you weren’t a
missing nin. Everyone thought you had been taken.”

“Well in my heart I ran away that’s what mattered.” Naruto laughed. “I had always planned to come back you know. Just had some things I wanted to do first. Of course… Konoha came for me instead.”


“Better than outside at least.” Naruto shrugged. “And Shizune nee-chan?”

“Yes?” She stopped the pig in her arms. “What is it?”

XxX

“Not like you to be so harsh.” Jiraiya lightly scolded Tsunade. “He’s loud but a cute brat, isn’t he?” She bowed her head looking into her glass. “They are even the same age, almost the same words.”

“Stop it. He can’t do it.”

“You can think what you want to Tsunade. You made the bet. Now you will watch the results.” Jiraiya chuckled. “Something tells me you’ll be surprised. He’s like so many that we’ve known but yet something new at the same time. Doesn’t matter if we are ready for change or not. It’s already here.”

“Why do you trust in him so much? He’s been gone for years Jiraiya.”

“I know.” Jiraiya admitted. “But I never gave up hope for a day because he is their son. Not just his, he is their son and he’s proving it. But it isn’t the only way he’ll be defined now.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean. Where was he?”

“It’s like a story out of a novel.” Jiraiya chuckled. “I hope you are ready to pay up. The village has never seen a kid like that before. Our very own changeling.”

XxX

“About that necklace.” Naruto said slowly. “And the things you said about it being a cursed object it doesn’t matter to me you know.”

“Naruto-kun.” She frowned.

“No wait, listen.” Naruto pleaded. “Hear me out Nee-chan. The stuff I have now, the stuff I had when I came back to the village all of them are or could be considered cursed objects. I don’t doubt some pieces of souls are trapped inside them. For some of the things I want them to be cursed, haunted because they are all I have left of the people I cared about.”

“I-I.” She looked so confused he could not help but laugh.

“One more cursed, bloody object won’t harm me.” Naruto smiled. “I’ll prove it! I’ll win the bet with Tsunade baa-chan. I’ll take that necklace from her and I’ll wear it and when I’m Hokage I’ll give it back after I take a photo of it!”

“N-Naruto-kun.” She spluttered before she laughed. “What are you even saying.”

“I’m saying I’ll train hard.” Naruto promised. “I’m saying I’m not afraid of the pain of her past.
I’m not afraid of a cursed necklace. I’ll wear it right against my skin. I won’t die.” He promised. “I can’t die, not here and not yet. We can’t die yet, as long as I live I carry them with me not just their belongings but I carry them in me.” Shizune’s eyes softened in understanding and Naruto nodded. “I lost my friends but in me they will live on. I’ll remember them and that’s what keeps them alive. They aren’t dead yet. I am the troupe.” Naruto grinned. “I feel really sorry for that baa-chan because she thought she had a sure deal. When she gets back the necklace she better have learned her lesson.” He laughed, Shizune’s laughter joined him on the dark street.
Journey for the new Hokage: Rasengan complete

Sometimes he felt strange, like his body did not match what he was and he knew now that what he felt was normal, did not change the outside. Did not change what people saw and it did not frustrate him. He liked that, he liked knowing when he slipped by what most people saw was a kid going along his business.

If they saw the forehead protector then they saw a kid still. Just a more dangerous one. He was still young. He had time and he had to keep reminding himself of that. He had years ahead of him. Years and hopefully years. Did not mean he should slack off but it did mean he had to acknowledge that things he did by himself would take time.

Granted not everything he wanted to do could be alone. Sometimes you needed a little help. A little support. Even if it came with a willing ear, a comforting pat on the shoulder or the simple warmth of someone walking by your side.

He couldn’t help but wonder what his team was doing back in Konoha. Travelling was still fun. Village life was good and full of its own surprises but waking somewhere new, learning a place as quickly as possible before moving on was still one his favourite things to do.

It just felt a little weird doing it with just Ero-sennin. Not that the guy was all bad. Aside from the pervy things he was pretty okay and sometimes fun when he was up to it. It just was different. He had gotten used to his team, he missed them a bit. It had been just them for so long. How could he not think about them? Especially considering what he now had to do.

He was going to pour his all into learning the jutsu. He was not going to give up or back down and he would master it and drag that Baa-chan to Konoha. He had a deadline and he knew he could do it, he was just missing something.

He knew Ero-sennin would not give him any more hints. He knew asking the man for anything more would make whatever progress made taste sour but the fact still remained that he was missing something. So he would have to find out whatever it was and find the answer and way himself and what other way was there besides practice?

He would try and try and evaluate and try again he would pour everything he had into the one week he knew he could do it. He would master the jutsu drag the Baa-chan back to Konoha and be part of Team Seven again. He could hardly wait.

But he really had enjoyed getting to stretch his legs outside the village. The wandering around. The walking, the elusive target. Made him a little nostalgic. Naruto huffed softly before he shifted on the window sill to his room. Meditating as the sun rose had helped him rather nicely. He was not full of answers but he felt energized and ready, eager to try again, train harder.

Even if the Baa-chan was to pop up and make fun of him he would not be dissuaded. That was simply how things were. Simply how he felt. He had so many things to work on but completing the jutsu was the biggest. That and shortening the time he took to do each step. He really had a lot ahead of him.

Naruto shifted again and sighed at the feeling of his legs slowly waking up. He glanced behind him to the stretched-out form of the old man lightly snoring in his own corner of the room.

Naruto did have a deadline after all, he was not entirely certain about the old pervert though. Naruto
shook his head before he stretched and slipped back into the room. Breakfast and then training. He had a lot of work to get done. He wanted to get as much time in as possible and he wanted to give it his all so he certainly needed energy. He couldn’t wait to see the look on that old baa-chan’s face when he completed the jutsu. He couldn’t wait, just the thought of it gave him energy of its own.

XxX

It was a bit suspicious how there was no one around the area Naruto had decided to pick to train in. He had felt pulled to the area. It was a strange place to find in a castle town. A barren spot so close to the river but with no one around it was better for him. It was just what he needed to focus and concentrate and he did not have to worry about some child or some villager running into something they didn’t understand.

Naruto planned to get serious after all. He took a deep breath before he dropped the bundle. He had decided against bringing his bag along. Who knew what Ero-sennin would think if he woke up to find Naruto and his bag gone. For all that he was easy going there was no point in thinking he would not think the worst. After all, Konoha did not entirely trust him. Not that they were wrong for doing so.

Just that they should not get mad about the blank spaces around Naruto when they gave him so many blanks themselves but that was for later. Right now, it was easier to tag along. Still the things Naruto needed could not exactly fit in his pockets or even his jacket.

Which was why a bag would have been nice but he could not exactly have that with him now could he? So, the bundle had to do. He needed the food and drinks for when he had a break. He needed the timer clock he had gotten from the inn and he certainly needed that towel.

All in all. He was ready for a good long training session. He had to push himself to the limits. He had to go all out because not only did he have a deadline, he could feel the finish line just there was a glass wall separating him from it. And he had no idea how to go through or go around but he had his nose pressed to the glass, maybe he had to step back a bit and see where the glass ended. Figure out if it was an around, above or below situation to get to the finish line.

His jacket dropped to the ground, his shirt quickly following. He was going to get sweaty fast. There were nice targets all around and he doubted one day could destroy them all. He doubted a month could destroy them if he lingered, but he had one week.

Naruto took a deep breath to settle himself before he moved. He moved to the bundle and took out the timer. Not only did he have to get serious, he had to get smart too. He summoned a clone before he walked back to a reasonable spot. The clone met his gaze before Naruto steadied himself.

“Now!” He yelled and his clone hit the timer. Naruto’s focus was not on the clock but everything he had was focused on the steps of the jutsu.

XxX

“Three minutes.” Naruto seethed to himself as he stalked back and forth the bottle of water in his hand. “You know how much shit can happen in three minutes? And my hands are like useless right after that because surprise it didn’t work! It started to shrink! What the fuck even is that?” He met the gaze of his clone who raised an eyebrow at him and Naruto groaned. “I mean you are doing so much and you have to think about so much it’s so hard to focus!”

His clone reset the clock and Naruto rolled his eyes before he unscrewed the cap of the bottle to drink. Three minutes. It had done rather well, almost a replica of what had gone down between
himself and Tsunade baa-chan except he had held something in his hands for a bit longer.

Just the time it had taken to get there and he knew he had not given it his all. There was too much to focus on. He needed to find a way to separate better. This could not be allowed to hold him back it made no sense.

“Right.” He sighed when he finished the bottle. “Let’s try this again.” His hands tingled and he eyed them when he tossed the empty bottle onto his bundle. His hands were pink not the bright red they had been when the jutsu had failed. That was good, it showed him he was getting some part of it down. Ero-sennin’s advice was running on a loop in his brain. Did not make it any easier but repeating the attempts and trying to find where he was going wrong while feeling out for a way to go right. Well that was how he worked.

A cry of a bird startled him and he glanced up only to get hit in the eyes with the morning sun. It was not afternoon yet. Still morning but time tended to move quickly. Before he knew it, the deadline would arrive. Naruto wanted to be finished long before then no matter how hard he had to go.

XxX

“Weak.” Naruto hissed as he looked down at the spiral on the ground. It had looked good but it ended up not being anything. All it did was swirl some dirt and maybe indent the ground a little. He had to concentrate more on building up power.

His glance to his clone that sat by the small clock idly tapping it made him wince. Just when he had shaved down some the time. He had to get it done. It needed power. It had to do what he had seen the first time. It had to do what he had seen Ero-sennin do and it was nowhere near that.

He needed power. He heard a snort from inside him, it echoed and stroked his bones but he ignored it. That was not the power he needed. He needed to build up and make it powerful. It could not just spin out on impact. That was not what they were looking for. It had to be a ball of fury.

But it couldn’t hurt him either. Naruto muffled a groan before he knelt next to the swirl in the ground. it was still the first day even though day was turning to evening. He still had some time, but that did not mean take it easy if anything it meant push even harder than before.

XxX

It needed to be stronger. It had to break things. It needed to collide and destroy not be wiped out on the first touch. Wiping out at the beginning of the swirl was not good. The swirling was just the beginning but he could say there had been some progress.

Naruto lightly touched where the ground dipped. It no longer looked a tattoo on some landscape. It had some impact on it. Not enough but it was getting there. Just not quickly enough. It was too damn hard worrying about all these things at once in his head.

He muffled a groan before he glanced at his clone. His gaze went to the bundle and the remainder of water and food that he had. He had packed plenty and he was delighted it had lasted the day but he was hungry.

He would review while he ate, then it would be back to it. He needed to build up the power. There was no going around that. It needed more, he had to find a way to give more without neglecting everything else and wasn’t that a chore on its own.

XxX
“Fuck!” Naruto snarled. He had been so over the damn thing exploding in his hand and revisiting the experience was not a happy experience for him. He dipped his hand in the river water and swore at the mess of his hands that he could see. Admittedly after the first time he had failed he should have taken a break instead of powering right through.

But stopping right away had seemed like such foolishness he had shrugged it away. Had the clone reset the clock and powered on. Now look at his hands, they felt raw and they looked it too. Stubbornness.

All that power and he just could not maintain it and use it properly. That was the frustrating bit. He had locked down the other steps but when he added power to the mix everything went flat.

But the jutsu needed power! It needed that damn power so that it would make that impact! But it couldn’t do damage if everything fell apart. He had to focus on keeping it together but that was harder than it seemed. When he focused on keeping it together, the power lessened, when he focused on the power instead it started to come apart.

Then there was the keeping the wall between the power and the spinning in his hands. His hand was going to go numb but he had to keep going. There had to be a way to give equal focus without giving up any of the other important things. He couldn’t slacken. There had to be a way to divide everything without losing out or causing any delays.

And he had to work on that time too. Naruto sighed as he sat back. A small distance away his clone dozed waiting for Naruto to return and get ready for another round. Night was coming. Did not really matter because he was going to keep going at it.

XxX

The end of day one. Naruto stood panting his hands on his knees, sweat coating him as he glared at his surroundings. His hands ached form the chakra he had been manipulating but he was beyond caring. The progress made it had not been enough. It had not been anywhere near enough.

He knew his problems but was he anywhere near to a solution? No.

His clone dispelled with a sharp pop and Naruto grimaced before he straightened up. The moon was high, the wind had to be cold but his body was running so hot it barely registered. He had barely rested. Every time he tried the image of that Baa-chan’s face swam to the front of his mind. A taunt. An image he was unable to resist. He had to show her and he had to prove it. He also had to go back to the inn. Wash up, eat, sleep and get ready to do the same thing tomorrow as soon as he could.

With a sigh, he started to pack the remains of his snacks away. The bottles could be used again. He would toss the garbage away the moment he could. The clock would be coming back with him tomorrow. When the bundle was finished Naruto shrugged back on his shirt. He was running too hot to properly wear the jacket so he shrugged one arm into a sleeve and left it at that. It was time to go back to the inn. He had been left alone for the day but he knew if he was to try to stay out all night they would come looking for him. He didn’t need that. He did not want that.

He really did not want that. Naruto sighed before he settled the bundle in his hand. He set off to town at a slow pace. He had to take care of his hands when he got in, he had to eat something again. Lots of it too. He had used up tons of energy and even if he was tired he had to relax his
body before he went to sleep.

Relax his mind. It was the only way he would get progress. He had to calm himself so the picture would become even clearer and what better way to do that than meditation?

The streets were empty when he got back onto proper roads and it was not even that late. Lights were still bright. If he strained his ears he could still hear laughter from bars and restaurants. It was not that late but the streets were deserted. Could it be civilians’ wariness at what was occurring in their town? Self-preservation?

They had lost a castle to a monster after all and they had not been given closure. That might be it. They might not fully understand what was going on under their noses but they understood being safe. That would keep them inside.

Not that the behaviour was weird. There were those sorts of people who sensed change long before it happened. Way before the troupe arrived to pass through a town the streets would empty. They did not know what was coming but they knew something dangerous was among them.

Many would call that a shinobi trait but Naruto knew it was a person’s need for survival tuning them into the land. Just like the animals that sensed a storm before it hit. People attuned with their city, with their land sensed dangers before they fully formed. They were smart people.

His sandals crunched on the gravel as he made his way back to the inn. He would not say he was upset about the empty streets. Full streets, empty, half full. He was comfortable in them all. Full streets made it easier to vanish and the feeling of life surrounding you never got old.

Besides, he might walk among them but he was not like them at all. He was a shinobi that set him aside from the civilians. Then came being a Jinchuuriki. Another distinction and a burden of another type of loneliness that many would not understand. Then lastly, he used to walk with those bringing the chilling feeling of ‘something being wrong’ to many people’s stomachs. He could still recall the feeling of walking through quite streets in high mist knowing people were still awake in their houses.

Recall the backs he followed, feel the presence of those behind him as a town was reduced to a ghost town because of their passing through. It had saddened him the first time but soon enough it got normal. When they could not afford the time to go around a town they had simply gone through, saving time.

With dogs on their heels. They had been hunted but when they turned a town to a ghost town. Busy streets that should have been filled with morning people to a dead zone. Well it put things into perspective. No one saw them, they did not linger but they had been felt.

XxX

Honestly Naruto would love to know why the really good baths were outside towns and villages. Even nature had a better set up than half the things he had seen. Even nature did hot water better, but what was the sense in complaining, if he had wanted luxury he was in the wrong place and with the wrong people.

His hands looked a bit better but they still felt raw. He would have to wrap them up when he left the showers. A sneeze escaped him and his towel shifted. Naruto grumbled to himself before he dragged it back. Ero-sennin wasn’t in his room but his stuff was there which meant the perverted adult was out doing perverted things.
Honestly Naruto was a bit surprised he had waited this long. He had been out for hours with the young-looking Baa-chan in the first place. Naruto just knew when he woke the old man would stink of alcohol again and would be snoring with a cheeky look on his face. How such an old man could wear such a face was beyond him.

But he was writing those books so it had to be some deep seated perverted thing that was currently missing him. Besides Naruto had better things to do. Like finish that damn jutsu.

XxX

“Oof.” Escaped him when he flopped down on his belly. His hands were wrapped up and had balm applied. The cool minty feeling spread all the way up and felt nice. His head was sort of woozy along with his legs. He had fallen so deep during his meditation but he felt right. When he closed his eyes, he knew he would drift off to sleep.

It was the best feeling ever. He would be ready to go for the next day. His whole body was tingling, healing and his mind was calm. That was what he needed. To drift off into the calm.

XxX

Okay, he had to work on not getting frustrated. He had a deadline but getting frustrated was not helping him. His anger had booted him but frustration was not anger. He needed to focus and sometimes in really deep anger a strange calm could be found but Naruto doubted he could get into that mindscape right away and that he would enjoy doing that every time just to complete the jutsu.

He needed focus, he needed to multitask because doing all the hard things at once frustrated him which lead to mistakes.

He took a long deep breath and released it before he glared at the clearing. He needed to calm down, he needed to breath because otherwise he would not be getting anywhere. It was day two. He had shaved down time. He could get the ball to form but keeping it and keeping power in it was two things he seemed to be struggling with.

It was frustrating but he was not going to give up. even if he had to tell Ero-sennin he was going to camp out in the damp clearing until the deadline hit.

A yawn made him acknowledge his clone waiting for him to start again. Another pair of eyes were certainly useful. Another pair of hands too. Call him lazy but having the clone nip into town or deal with the food matters for him went a long way.

He was making use of the resources that he had after all. “Okay I’m ready.” Naruto grunted, his clone hit the button on the timer and they were starting again. Hoping this time would give them something a little better than before.

XxX

He just did not have the focus to keep the major power contained. He just did not have it. He was getting better at keeping the ball but he still sucked badly at having plenty of power in the ball. But he could not slack on it. The power was necessary.

Naruto grumbled and let his head fall on the inn’s table. The place was mostly dark most the patrons already retired. He had been glad to find the leftover rice along with the fish the inn keeper had left for him.

He was thankful but his hands needed a bit more rest before he could properly hold anything to eat.
Well… he could also just not use his hands and as funny as that would be for him he knew it would not go over well if he were caught by anyone else.

Gosh he was so tired. So hungry and his hands really hurt. It was just day two but he was not going to give up. He couldn’t he had promised himself that he would win and he would not back down and besides, they never said this sort of thing would be easy. This was the Yondaime’s jutsu. The jutsu he had created himself. It was not going to be something any run of the mill ninja could do. That he had gotten this far proved something. When he finished it, it would prove that he was right for embarking on the path he was on. The path he knew was right.

“Naruto-kun?” The soft voice startled him enough that his head came off the table. He blinked ahead of him only to see Shizune nee-chan peering at him from the entrance of the room. “Are you okay?”

“Tired.” Naruto admitted before he glanced to the full bowl of rice and plate next to him. “Hungry too, training was rough. I’ll get to that in a bit.”

“Oh.” Shizune cautiously entered the room and took a seat in front of him. “You were gone all day.”

“Yeah.” Naruto shrugged. “Got a deadline to meet. He followed her gaze to the food. “Inn keeper left that for me, told him I’d be out all day and coming back late.”

“That’s nice.” She smiled. They sat together in the dim room in silence before Naruto decided to risk using his hand. He tested it first. A few twitches and movements before he decided he could work with it. He cautiously moved his hands to his chopsticks. He took his time and swore in his head before he got them separated.

“So nee-chan.” He spoke as he slowly started to eat. His hands lightly throbbed but it was light enough that he could keep his face impassive. “What you do today?”

“I was with Tsunade-sama mostly after she woke up after being out all night-“ She broke off to cough. “Drinking nee-chan. Just say it, she and Ero-sennin were out all-night drinking.” That got him a sigh in response and Naruto shrugged. “He stank of alcohol this morning.”

“Where is she now?” Naruto asked curiously.

Shizune played with the collar of her robe. “She and Jiraiya-sama went out again tonight.”

“Drinking again.” Naruto shook his head. “I guess they really are old friends catching up since they need so many days together to get drunk. He’s going to come tottering in four sheets to the wind again, they are old don’t they have any shame?”

“Or you didn’t see it.” Shizune shrugged as she watched him eat. “Jiraiya-sama was not always this excessive.”

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“Or you didn’t see it.” Naruto muttered as he made headway into the bowl of rice. “I swear, it feels sometimes like he’s more my age than me. Same for that Baa-chan, is that a way to talk to or treat a kid?”
“Definitely not.” Shizune shook her head. “But they are so set in their ways.” She cleared her throat. “You’ll be training again tomorrow too?”

“Yup.” Naruto acknowledged. “Until I get this done.”

“Are your hands okay?” She asked softly. “You are holding them kind of…”

“It’ll heal.” Naruto dismissed. “By morning I’ll be fine as rain again. Don’t worry Nee-chan. I won’t be breaking my promise. That’s why I need to train so hard.” He crammed a fish into his mouth and chewed while Shizune searched his gaze.

XxX

Day three and he was back at it again. But this time there was more balance. There had been a few times his own clone had laughed at him but Naruto knew he must have made quite the sight charging the tree and getting smacked back from the force like that.

Nothing wrong with a few mistakes, nothing wrong with a bit of humour. Still, every time he went down he hopped back up ready to try again. He had the picture in his mind, a list of faults to stop and the will to carry it through.

Naruto knocked on the trunk of the tree and grinned. “You won’t defeat me so easily. Gonna take you out.” He glanced around at the other trees. “I’m taking all of you out, believe it!”

He had gotten an early start. He would improve he was so close he could just feel it in his sore hands. His gaze drifted to his clone waiting on his instructions and he smiled. He was ready to go again.

XxX

“Naruto-kun, let me see your hands.” Naruto was surprised at how quickly Shizune had appeared. He had barely left the inn’s showers and she was there. He guessed he took too long because she reached for his hands herself. The scowl that grew on her face after she saw his hands made him contemplate her. “I’ll take care of this.” She muttered. “Come with me.”

Naruto would have loved to see where he had been given a choice but he followed after he anyway. She kept a firm grip on his wrists until they reached her room.

“Sit.” She instructed, Naruto obeyed and sat on the inn’s floor as she bustled around grabbing supplies. “I know that has to hurt.”

“Yeah it does.” Naruto admitted. She paused to look at him and he rolled his eyes. “Of course it hurts. It all hurts but I can’t let it stop me. I gotta breathe through it and keep going.”

“How close are you?” She sighed before she knelt before him and started to clean his hands.

“Managed to gouge out a bit of a tree.” Naruto admitted. “I know what I’m lacking. I know it but I need some time to get used to it. I’m better than the first day I started.”

“This is going to take a toll on your body.” She warned. “You aren’t sleeping and eating enough.”

“I’ll work on the food starting tomorrow.” Naruto promised. “The sleep can wait Nee-chan I have a deadline. I rest what is necessary. Anything else is a luxury I don’t have right now.”

“You do know Tsunade-sama doesn’t believe you can do it right? You do know she doesn’t take
you that serious at all. You don’t have to push yourself. She’ll give you your money back.”

“It is more than her now.” Naruto admitted. “She’s a big part of it because she pissed me off so much but it is more than that. I was always going to push myself to learn this jutsu. That Ero-sennin isn’t stepping in to stop me tells me he thinks I can do it too. I’d love to know why he’s so certain about me but I think I’d rather learn this as quick as I can. I can’t sit back and wait when I can feel the end right in front of me. With every try I get closer. Baa-chan is a bonus but finishing this is the real prize nee-chan.”

Her hands glowed for a few seconds, a soft green light and his hands tingled in hers. “I’m worried about your body Naruto-kun. Pushed too far, people break.”

“I’ll try and do some breaks in between.” Naruto said softly. “Other than that, I can’t promise you more than that Shizune nee-chan. I can’t hold back considering where I am now.”

XxX

“Jiraiya why are we here.” Tsunade’s voice was sulky behind him and he could not exactly blame her. He had cut their drinking short. Of course, she could have stayed but as he had been the one paying… she had felt obligated to tag along.

“Just seeing what my cute little student has been doing.” Jiraiya mused as he ran his hand over the tree trunk. Just looking around told him the boy had been advancing by leaps and bounds. Swirl shaped gorges in the ground. Swirls carved into some nearby rocks… but the trees. Considering how the boy worked he just might be able to get that necklace from Tsunade… a bit sooner than they had thought.

“That’s not a proper rasengan.” Tsunade scolded from behind him. “You and I both know what damage from a rasengan looks like. That’s nothing like this. Nothing like here!”

“You’re right.” Jiraiya admitted. “But even with the Yondaime explaining parts of the technique to me it took me quite some time to master it. A few good weeks to be exact. Naruto’s learning in a couple of days. You can’t spit on that. It’s a powerful jutsu.” His fingers traced inside the hole in the tree. “He’s getting there Tsunade. That’s what matters”

“We’ll see.” She mumbled. “He’s running out of time.”

“I don’t think it is time he needs now.” Jiraiya muttered to himself under his breath. “I think it is inspiration.” He raised his voice. “I’m going back early for today.” His words earned him a loud squawk from Tsunade who he knew was not ready to turn in so early. She still followed him through. Mumbling every step of the way. It would have warmed his heart if he did not know something dark and heavy was on her mind. Something she did not want to share. He had his suspicions but nothing concrete. Nothing he could do but keep an eye on her. He had warned her after all and he was not joking. Konoha came first.

XxX

He had been trying to keeping his promise to Shizune with the breaks. He had known his idea of ordering lunch in town would not cut it. That was not what she had been talking about at all so he had made the effort to do a little more.

He had started an hour earlier because of this. No way he was going to miss out just because she wanted him to be more mindful. Was not going to happen. The sun was high in the sky and that was time he could be using.
But it was not as if he needed sunlight to train. He could do it in the dark of night too. It was his chakra he was working with not kunais and swords. And it was not as if darkness was a real problem for him like it might have been.

He had spent too many nights in darkness and mist for it to be any trouble. It was a familiar shield. It was home, especially the blanket of the mist.

But it did not change that he was walking around the busy streets looking for something else to do before he nipped back to training. Lunch had been filling but a snack would not hurt. Naruto weaved in and around the crowd as he examined stores and stalls, his senses were on high alert as he tried to pick something to do.

He could always grab a snack and return to the casino. The slots had been fun that one time when they had still been looking for the Baa-chan. Of course, he could always find a street game too but he might get carried away.

“Daddy! Look out!” The words barely registered before Naruto snatched the falling bag out of mid-air and shoved his shoulder under the falling man. He winced at the weight of the man while he balanced the heavy shopping bag.

“Oops!” The laugh came above him. Naruto watched brown hair and laughing black eyes come into view as the civilian righted himself. “Woah there. I tripped on the loose gravel here. Almost lost dinner.”

“And the ice!” Naruto’s eyes darted to the young boy that clung to the man’s pants. “Papa you almost dropped the ice!”

“I nearly did, didn’t I?” The man laughed sheepishly. “Sorry again.” One of his hands held a wrapped popsicle treat. “Sorry kiddo. Almost ruined your snack.”

“Least the food is okay.” Naruto interrupted, he lightly shoved the bag at the man and watched when he easily took it, slinging it over his shoulder.

“Thank goodness indeed. It isn’t even everything and that I’m grateful for. You’re really strong kid.” The man smiled as he unwrapped the popsicle. He shoved the wrapper into his pocket before he knelt next to his son. Naruto’s heart clenched when he watched the man separate the popsicle and hand one to his happy son. “Let’s be more careful and finish shopping for Mom okay?”

“Yeah!”

“And thank the nice shinobi for saving Daddy.” The man laughed with a quick glance at Naruto’s forehead.

“Thanks shinobi-san!” Naruto smiled at the boy but his feet were rooted in place long after the boy and his father left.

XxX

It was always nice to have somebody by you. To hold your hand, to look out for you. Naruto had that in Konoha in its own way. Iruka-sensei’s face when he saw him, the way the man hugged him tightly and was so happy to have him near. That was truth and Naruto loved it.

Did not change how much he missed being doted on by more than one person. He exhaled slowly as he lay on his back staring at the sky. Sharing a popsicle. Long before in Konoha he had no one to share anything with, no one that would have initiated or even wanted to share with him.
In the troupe, it had been different. He snorted to himself as thoughts of Sora surfaced. Not that they went that far away. They were just at the middle of his mind. Not forgotten just not focused on. Sora had been older, loud and angry but he had laughed just as much, been passionate about it.

Naruto had shared food with the others. Had Nina bite a cookie before she shoved the rest into his face. Had Haku break a piece of bread into two and offer him piece but there had been something about when he and Sora… when the rest of them-

Well it had been nice to have someone who got him give him a piece of something. He recalled the way Sora had done the same as the father. Broken a popsicle in two and offered Naruto a piece. It had been sweet.

They had helped each other, coached each other with supervision of course. To the point where they could have fought together without speaking. Almost as if they were the same person and it had been incredible. Combination fights were incredible to watch and even better to do. Not that they had done much of them.

Still, watching Haku and Zabuza team up or even Raiya and Kaya. The way she would spit fire on the sword in such a short amount of time. How Raiya would not even slow down, it had been beautiful. Like if they shared the same mind.

A little help now and again was nice. Some things you could do on the own but it was nice when you did not have to. Also, somethings you just couldn’t deal with on your own and not only was the little extra help great it felt good.

Naruto hated to admit it but he needed a little extra help with his focus. A little back up since he could not exactly split-

Naruto sat up so fast that under him the dust went flying. A grin spread across his face before he started to laugh. It echoed throughout the area and he did not stop it.

He had been right, the solution had been right under his nose, right in front of his face the entire time and was not that funny?

Xxx

“Is he close to the answer or not?” Tsunade’s voice did not surprise him. Jiraiya surveyed the scene. There were surprisingly very little changes. He could not put his finger on it exactly but something had changed though.

“Who knows.” He shrugged as his answer.

Xxx

Naruto was unable to say what possessed him to not try the trees but the river instead. It was a gut feeling. So, he followed his gut.

Now he was soaked head to toe and he could not stop laughing as he stood in his boxers as the river went back to how it was. At least on the surface. The river bed was an entirely different story. He fell to his knees and laughed. At himself, at the situation and of course how ridiculous it was.

Ridiculous and good. “Hey!” His clone pointed at the clock. “We still gotta get this time down!” It was the truth.

Naruto sighed heavily, it was not perfect but it had made a considerable impact. The power had
been added. With some work, he would be able to add all the power he could handle and then some. Oh, he just could not wait to show that Baa-chan.

XxX

He could not wait to show Ero-sennin. Naruto watched the water fall down around him as he grinned. He slowly sludged his way out the water before he collapsed by his clothes. He was as ready as he could be and if she did not like it well he still had two days left for practice. He would just take a quick nap.

Let himself heal and rest before he went to show them. His grin followed him to sleep.

XxX

“Forgive me Jiraiya.” He lurched against the wall and wanted to snap her neck. She sounded remorseful but her eyes were determined. He knew exactly what she was going to do and he had warned her!

“Tsunade.” He gritted. He could guess to when just not what. Was it to kill? He knew now why she had called him out so suddenly. He recalled Shizune’s shy and sometimes desperate behaviour.

“What have you done Tsunade!” He demanded as his grip weakened. He felt himself sliding down the wall but he kept his eyes opened as she sent him a regretful look. She had another thing coming if she thought he was going to be kept down for long. She knew him, she had tricked him but she did not know all his secrets. She did not know all his shame.

His legs sprawled out before him and Jiraiya bit his tongue until he tasted blood. He tilted his head so that the blood would gather and flow down. Tsunade definitely had another thing coming if she thought she had the upper hand. She did not know everything. Not interfere? He was about to be in the centre of it.

XxX

He had a bad bad feeling. There was no real change around him. No change in nature but he could feel dancing up the spine the feeling of danger. That something had changed and that feeling drove the feeling of wanting to train from him.

Naruto had no real choice. He tossed on his clothes, ignored the early morning light and made the dash back to the inn. He had stayed out because Ero-sennin told him he could when he asked. The old man had gotten Naruto wanted to be out as much as possible but now Naruto had the feeling he had missed something big.

That something was wrong and he could not put his finger on what it could be. He could be wrong. His mind was thinking something super big but if it had been super big the people would have reacted but there they were scattered on the streets calm.

There was nothing big going on as far as his eyes could see and that his ears could hear. No vanished building from what he could see when he leaped from rooftop to rooftop. No running or panicked civilians but something was rubbing him wrongly and he trusted his gut. If it turned out to be nothing fine, but he had learned the hard way that when something felt wrong, move immediately.
It was the biggest scene of confusion ever back at the inn. Ero-sennin was pissed! Not just that he was ill, slumped in a chair in their room. Shizune nee-chan was slumped on Naruto’s bed healing herself and Naruto knew before they even opened their mouths that not only was the Baa-chan gone but that she was responsible.

“What now?” Naruto demanded.

“We go after her.” Ero-sennin snapped. He did not look too good but he looked like he was doing better every second. “She messed up my chakra coils.”

“I told her. I told Tsunade-sama to reconsider. To not do it.” Shizune gritted with her arm against her stomach. “She’s headstrong.”

“I can’t believe she’s going to do it. Granted the motivation…” Ero-sennin trailed off. “If I had known that was what Orochimaru was offering I would have moved differently. But that she’ll do this. She knows she can’t trust him. She knows this won’t work out!”

“She doesn’t care.” Shizune bit out. “You of all people know what those two people mean to her. To see them…”

“As they were.” Ero-sennin snapped. “Not whatever Orochimaru will give her. She will ignore the cost? Fuck we just had to deal with this in Konoha. I don’t want to deal with this again.”

“What is it?” Naruto asked curiously.

“Tsunade-sama made a rash decision. Orochimaru offered her something… that was hard to refuse. I fear she has gone to accept. They set a time up the day we met you. They said a week to decide.”

“The timeline of the bet.” Naruto breathed. “But the time isn’t up yet!”

“They sent a message… they moved the time up.” Shizune got to her feet her face pale. “That is what set Tsunade-sama off.”

“You know where right nee-chan?”

“You are not coming Naruto-kun!” Shizune’s eyes widened. “You can’t come!”

“What are you saying?” Ero-sennin grumbled as he lurched to his feet. “We can’t leave him here. He just has to stay back while we deal with Orochimaru.” He hesitated before he eyed Naruto. “Unless you want to stay behind?”

Naruto clenched his hands into fists. “Try to keep me away.” He snarled. “I don’t mind facing him again.”

“Seeing.” Ero-sennin corrected. “You won’t be facing him in battle. No matter how far you got with the rasengan. You are still far away from him in not only strength but experience. He’s something you can barely imagine and you know that. I know you remember the last time he fought you. I use that word loosely because you know and I know that he was holding back. Toying with you.” Ero-sennin grunted as he stretched. “She got a head start on us but we can catch up.”

“That you are awake and moving is surprising enough.” Shizune shook her head. “But don’t forget that she poisoned you. We are far behind her as it is. We can’t stop her before she meets him but if
she is healing him it will take time and we can get there before she is done.”

“It will have to be good enough.” Naruto muttered. “Let’s go. Where are they?” Shizune’s eyes
narrowed at him before she glanced at the pig that followed her everywhere. Then she started to

speak.


XXX

They had heard the noise before they had even gotten close and the state of the place had been
enough to warn them but what really got Naruto when they hit on the scene was that Orochimaru
was not alone. And the bad feeling in his gut melted away when he landed next to Ero-sennin his
gaze going to the familiar man by Orochimaru’s side.

It had been nice to see the original meeting place demolished. It was more than enough for
Shizune who had looked near to tears at the blatant destruction. For Naruto, he had watched the
smile grow on Ero-sennin’s face along with relief. He guessed even for the old man it was nice to
know faith in friends had not been misplaced.

Now for Naruto… he had to address the elephants before him.

“Naruto-kun.”

“Why the fuck are you smiling.” Naruto gritted, he had to force himself not to look away. “Why do
you look happy to see me? When we are meeting like this? Kabuto-san!”

XXX

It looked like they had gotten there just in time. The old lady looked roughed up. She had been
going to her feet when they got there but that was not what had Naruto. No Kabuto and
Orochimaru held most the attention. Mostly Kabuto, he looked roughed up too in the same outfit
that Naruto had last saw him in but his hitai-ate was different.

No longer a leaf but a musical note? No longer with the calm smiles but instead stood accessing
and waiting now? He was upset but he felt so sad he wanted to scream.

“Oh, so you know who he is?” Ero-sennin asked softly. “Well that makes things more interesting.”

“Move!” Ero-sennin was knocked aside by the Baa-chan’s thrust as she charged Kabuto. Naruto
was unable to do anything but gape before she stumbled and blood went flying. Not a deep cut. Not
life threatening but Shizune’s reactions along with Ero-sennin’s made his blood heat.

“Reckless move Tsunade. Just think!” Ero-sennin had leaped forward and dragged the Baa-chan
out the way. Kabuto never moved. His eyes had darted to the woman charging him but returned to
Naruto. A little further back Orochimaru stood. He looked different from before, paler and he stood
with his weight shifted.

“Naruto-kun. You aren’t happy to see me? But I’m happy to see you.” Kabuto said softly.

“I’d be happy to see you too if you weren’t standing there with that on your head and with him!”
Naruto spat and he pointed to where Orochimaru stood. “If I hadn’t seen you try to kill the Baa-
chan!” Naruto glanced to where she sat frozen on the ground her eyes fixed on her blood covered
hands. Shizune was healing her but her eyes were frozen on her hands.

“My body’s finally starting to move properly.” Kabuto smiled. “Now Naruto-kun, I’m
Orochimaru-sama’s subordinate but you of all people should know how this story goes.”
“You’re a Sound ninja spy.” Naruto spat. “You had no business being in that exam with me just like how he had no business being in there either.”

“I was doing my job. My real job.” Kabuto’s voice was so soft and polite, it grated his skin. “I was in that exam gathering data. The data I gathered on you… on Sasuke-kun. Sasuke-kun’s a genius but you are a weird type of shinobi yourself. You are mad at me for seemingly betraying the village but my alliance was with Orochimaru-sama all along. Now what about you? Who are you loyal to?”

“The living.” Naruto hissed. “I can respect the dead and be loyal to the living and I am loyal to my dream!”

“You already know of Konoha’s issues. You of all people know of the true village Naruto-kun. I saw it in your face even before I did my research.”

“God.” Naruto swore. “Goddamnit.” He cursed. He blinked up at the sky taking his eyes off the man for a few moments. “This is so fucked up. You were so nice! Your smile reached your eyes, you were fucking concerned! Polite, nice. Damn it!”

“Being around all of you wasn’t exactly a hardship Naruto-kun. You should be used to deception, you can hold that against me can you? It is just how our world works.”

“So much like Haku.” Naruto breathed. “So nice and the way you spoke. The way you acted, the look in your eyes…”

“Naruto-kun!” Shizune snapped. “Don’t be taken in by this traitor!”

“Taken in?” Naruto frowned. “He’s right you know. I do know how this goes, I know a few things here and there and I know my weaknesses too.” He snarled. “You’re my favourite type of person. Least that was how it was then, nice, considerate. One of my biggest weaknesses. I know that about me. Sweet manners, pretty face and I’m all sweet inside.”

He ignored the gasps from behind him. He was too busy taking in all of Kabuto. He knew that about himself. He knew how he got. It was hard to control, you could not help what you liked but you can damn well educate yourself.

“People like you. You so badly make people want to make you happy. Make you smile.” Naruto swallowed because he could feel the soft arms on his shoulder. The voice in his ear, the cold look in Haku’s eyes melting away because of something he had done. “I know how it goes. I know how it goes for people like me. We don’t want to disappoint people like you and I know how it goes for people like you too.”

He had noticed so much but understanding had come later. All he knew was how certain situations made him felt. Now he knew better. No, he was able to at least put words to what he felt. Now he was able to describe what was wrong and put a finger on the shit that was really wrong and recognize the patterns playing out everywhere.

“Yeah.” Naruto admitted. “I’m a sucker for polite types but I know how you guys work. Most of the time…” His eyes drifted to behind Kabuto. “I want to tie myself to people like you but I find behind the polite types like you is something far more dangerous. People like him.” Orochimaru’s smile was wide but pained. “People like you Kabuto-san are dangerous and you become even more dangerous when people like him get you young.”

“You really are an interesting and observant little boy aren’t you Naruto-kun. I wanted to see what
you would be like up close but you didn’t show me half of what you are capable of did you? Hiding it deep inside, my affection isn’t fake. I do want to be nice to you. I’d love to see your development. I feel you could become a better spy than me.”

“This sort of thing is why I can’t relax.” Naruto shook his head. “Are those your words or his? Your views or his? You’ve already dedicated your life to him. Given your soul to him! Are you seriously trying to recruit me? I’m never getting into that sort of situation again!”

His words echoed, it made Kabuto smile and Orochimaru’s eyes glittered. With every second that passed Kabuto was revealed more and more. He really was like Haku, in that way that Naruto had absolutely hated with every fibre of his being. Doing what they did gave nothing. Just an early death, a death where they did not see themselves as people anymore just skills.

“I know how it works!” He yelled to Orochimaru. “I know how you operate. I know what people like you do. I’m not going with someone like you. My former status is none of your business. I might have a lot of questions but you don’t give answers, you cause more confusion and you turn people into personal tools.”

“Oh Naruto-kun.” The man purred, his eyes glittered with amusement. “You have never see anything like me.”

Naruto was about to open his mouth to protest before he considered it and nodded. “Zabuza was redeemable.” He admitted. “Too late and all but you… you are right. I’ve been plenty of places but I’ve never laid eyes on something as evil and manipulative as you and I’ve seen plenty of rich people.”

“You flatter me Naruto-kun.” Orochimaru hissed. “Pity you plan on staying a village brat after all.”

“I’d have to be a special brand of fool to run off with you after everything you’ve done. The Sandaime, Sasuke, Konoha. I want to be Hokage you freak! Only business I have with you is taking you down!”

“Every meeting you get more and more… delicious.” Orochimaru hissed. His eyes flashed and Naruto shuddered at the chill that went down his back. “Now I’m actually invested in your development and I find myself reluctant to let my former colleagues have you.”

XxX

“Even if you make such a scary face Naruto-kun you are still an out of place genin. Granted you are talented.” Kabuto said softly, the light in his eyes slowly faded. “Even if you were to rely on the monster inside you. You are nothing compared to the Sannin before my eyes. If you were to try something, as fascinating as you are. I’d kill you.”

Naruto believed him, about the last words at least. The look, in his eyes, the determination and warning. He had already seen it before. He knew the warning. He knew the caution to keep his head low. But the thing was, he was different and he was not going to turn back. He was not going to back down because of what someone thought he should do. The manipulation time was over!

“Wait!” Ero-sennin called but he was already gone. Kabuto’s right hand was covered in blood and he was barely able to use it. That was a small opening but it would be enough. Naruto would turn that opening into a door he could use.

First a distraction. He knew he needed it. Six clones appeared with the focus of his chakra.
Naruto’s gaze was on the right hand even as a plan developed in his mind. He was angry at being underestimated. He was angry at Orochimaru, he was angry at Kabuto and his words and he was angry that he had to face the almost exact situation again and he was angry that deep inside him a voice was whispering things he did not want to hear. Not the fox, but himself.

Four clones leapt forward to take his from the side while another littered the area with smoke bombs for cover. Naruto did not doubt that the clones would fail. They were a distraction after all. Kabuto was a man cornered. Naruto was not surprised when he heard the first and second clones yelp. He got an impression of blood in his eyes and a sharp stab to the gut before he shoved the impressions away to focus on what he was doing.

“Don’t underestimate me!” Naruto roared when the last clone distraction dispelled. Kabuto had turned to face him but the last clones jumped ahead. When Kabuto got rid of those the look of confusion on his face felt wonderful.

Still he was fast, instead of getting his chest, Naruto got the shoulder instead, but that was okay. It would do. He had used a bit of chakra to get it set up and it felt wonderful to see Kabuto’s eyes widen as he was thrown backwards. Right to the feet of that bastard Orochimaru. Naruto was thrown back too and he was aware of Shizune catching him.

His hearing came back just in time to hear Ero-sennin laugh while Shizune kept gasping behind him.

“Surprise.” Naruto laughed. “I think it needs a bit more power but I’ll work on that as we go but it is what it is. Rasengan!”

XxX

The responsible part of Jiraiya, the old soul, the soldier wanted to scold Naruto for showing his hand so soon and for using so much chakra right away along with charging the enemy as though he had no self-preservation and head when Jiraiya knew that he had both, but the fun-loving part of him. The teacher who delighted in his students and the progress of the next generation felt his heart grow so light that his head spun.

He had done it. Not only had he done it, he had made quite an impact on them all. Tsunade had not exactly seen it but she would. Shizune had spoken to her and she was pulling herself together. Jiraiya was proud of them both. He was especially proud of Naruto.

For not even blinking before rejecting the little spy. For talking back and for finishing a jutsu that was so hard to do. Jiraiya was proud.

He watched Shizune let up Naruto before his eyes shifted to the little spy that had managed to get up and held a few soldier pills in his fingers. Jiraiya slowly shook his head because he knew the kid had not been an easy push over but he couldn’t be normal. His constitution had to be hardy to get back up so quickly, medical nin or not. That and he was swallowing those soldier pills so easily and that was a red flag if he had seen one. Things just could not be easy. It always had to get complicated.

Their enemy might be two, Orochimaru and Kabuto but even with Orochimaru partially crippled and Kabuto injured they did not come up on top. Jiraiya’s chakra was still messed up. Tsunade had not recovered. The healthiest person had to be Naruto and Shizune and they were not Sannin in any form or fashion.

Jiraiya had been prepared to deal with Orochimaru for years and that was what he was going to do.
He had proved it at their last meeting and if he had come earlier Orochimaru would have never managed to slip away.

Naruto needed to catch himself a little bit. Shizune could at least keep Kabuto from helping Orochimaru while Jiraiya did his best. Honestly, if Tsunade had just shared her plans then none of this would have happened. They would not have been in the situation. They could have ambushed Orochimaru and had the advantage, but no sense crying about if onlys.

Only thing to do is play with the hand dealt and make sure that they won.

“You’re bleeding too much.” Orochimaru took his eyes off them to look at his accomplice. “They got you good.”

“Please take off the left bandage.” Kabuto answered with a pained look on his face. That he did not even respond to Orochimaru’s teasing. Orochimaru might actually have him valued higher than Jiraiya had thought. He was not exactly top tier important but he had to be close. He knew the difference between Orochimaru’s gloating and teasing and chose to ignore the latter.

“This is really going to get fun.” Orochimaru’s eyes had changed, his gaze not on Jiraiya but past him to Tsunade and Naruto.

“Orochimaru.” Naruto hissed. Jiraiya closed his eyes to give him a second to hope his body would fix itself in a few seconds. He had no such luck.

“Shizune, you handle the guy in the glasses.” Jiraiya instructed, she nodded and he continued. “I’ll take Orochimaru.” As he had always planned. “But before that, could Tsunade do something about my body?” He would like an advantage if it was possible.

“Jiraiya-sama.” Shizune sounded regretful. “The effect will probably last a few hours more.” Well you could not win everything. “I myself can do nothing about it.”

“Well I guess there is nothing we can do.” Jiraiya sighed. “We have to do it like this.” He and Orochimaru were both weakened but the Sannin had that other name for a reason. The fight just might be drawn out to ridiculous portions. “Tsunade, heal yourself with your jutsu.”

“What am I supposed to do!” Naruto spoke up. Jiraiya snorted because he had expected the injection a bit sooner. Naruto’s patience impressed him.

“Stay with Tsunade and her pig and protect them for now in case Kabuto or Orochimaru come for them.” He instructed. “No one is playing fair here.” He looked at the sullen look on Naruto’s face and sighed. “You can’t fight. They are on an entirely different level. The enemy is like me a Sannin. Plus, he gravely injured the Sandaime. It’s an eye for an eye only I can take him. Also, before you want to talk about Kabuto that guy is on the same level as Kakashi. How close are you to beating your sensei?” Naruto’s shoulder slumped down in acceptance and Jiraiya nodded.

“Exactly, you aren’t ready for a one on one for long periods with either of them yet. Rasengan or not. They would have to be softened up first.”

“Damn it!” Naruto hissed before his hands clenched. “Damn it!”

“But you are going to see something up close many have never seen so there is that kid.” Jiraiya chuckled before he turned to face Orochimaru again. “You’re the luckiest kid in your generation in Konoha. About to see a Sannin fight up close.”

XxX
God, it was so tense as they all waited their eyes on each other. Waiting on the other to make the first move to start the real fight. He could taste Orochimaru’s need for blood and he could see deep in his eyes that the man wanted to go on a rampage.

It was so quick almost a blur. It was impossible to watch both of them at the same time but Naruto tried it anyway. The moment that Ero-sennin bit his thumb Kabuto had jabbed his finger into Orochimaru’s now unbandaged arm.

When Ero-sennin swiped his thumb against his hand Kabuto was already moving his hands tracing along some ink on Orochimaru’s hand. The time that took cost him because when Ero-sennin slapped his hand to the ground to summon, Kabuto was a few steps behind.

Yet Ero-sennin’s efforts were wasted because instead of the Toad boss it was his small son instead. While Kabuto and Orochimaru were high up on their large snakes.

“What?” Ero-sennin gaped. “What the hell!”

“The poison is still affecting you Jiraiya-sama.” Shizune muttered.

“You’re stupidity hasn’t been cured Jiraiya!” Orochimaru called. Naruto cautiously bit his thumb. “Fine! I’ll attack first!”

“Or not.” Naruto muttered as he completed the summon. He let out a sigh of relief when the Toad Boss appeared. “That’s more like it.”

“What did I say about wasting chakra?” The Toad Boss’s son was deposited on his shoulder before the old man hopped on the larger Toad. “Thanks kid.”

“Sup.” The small toad whispered into his ear.

“Jiraiya every time I think there is no one less talented than you. You prove me wrong.” Orochimaru had gone from angry to amused. “Even your student has to hold you up and isn’t that a familiar scene? Always outclassed and surpassed. You look like you’ve been hurt by something else Jiraiya.”

“A sacrifice is required for the technique. Maybe Tsunade-sama was thinking ahead.” Kabuto slowly pushed up his glasses with two fingers. “Maybe she was thinking ahead. She most likely gave him a drug to reduce his power. To prepare him as a sacrifice.”

“Ch.” Ero-sennin muttered.

“Oh…” Orochimaru sounded amused. “But that is till just one. Even Jiraiya can’t be enough for two. He alone is one sacrifice. But as usually that guy is shamefully indecent, like a young child. Maybe that was who he was going to be.”

“Ch!” Ero-sennin gritted.

“But the little Naruto-kun. For the time being I’ll overlook his attitude.” Orochimaru’s eyes traced over the Toad. “He’s gotten even more troublesome especially with the seal removed. I almost regret not killing him outright.”

“Orochimaru-sama. Don’t you want to deal with the Nine-tails yourself?”
“I thought I didn’t have to.” Orochimaru grinned. “I’m not too sure if he has talent or plenty of trainings. I’m leaning on the latter. Outside of the village is a harsh place.”

“We going to talk all day Orochimaru?” Ero-sennin called out.

“Of course not.” Orochimaru laughed. “I was just letting your lives extend for a while longer. And finalizing what to do with the winnings. A Jinchuuriki would be so nice but is Naruto-kun worth the trouble? Jinchuurikis can be such… passionate creatures wouldn’t you agree? Feisty.” Golden eyes locked on him. “He isn’t to that level yet but he does have the rashness.”

“Don’t.” Ero-sennin’s voice was cold.

“That you think you can instruct me Jiraiya tells me that stupidity can never be cured!”

XxX

“I’ll take Jiraiya!” Orochimaru’s snake lunged forward towards Ero-sennin while Kabuto’s came towards their direction. “The rest are yours.”

They all moved quickly enough. Shizune had the old lady in her arms and had jumped away by the time the snake came down at them mouth opened wide. It was ridiculously huge. He heard a large impact somewhere beyond the debris but he was too busy getting the small toad and the pig a good distance away.

Tsunade baa-chan had been placed a further bit away but Naruto took her with him. A battlefield changed all the time. People moved around they did not stay stationary and his job was to keep an eye on her and to come in as back up for Shizune.

The sight of dark mud came into sight out the corner of his eye and he gaped at the large snake emerged half into it. It looked like a swamp. Smelt like it too but he had only taken his eyes off the other two for a few seconds and already something so high scaled had happened. The huge snake was completely trapped and slowly sinking. Not quick enough for Naruto’s liking but it was sinking. And Orochimaru stood on the head of the snake watching Ero-sennin. Naruto did not want to take his eyes off those two but Shizune’s pained grunt pulled his attention away.

Kabuto’s hand was glowing a light blue and he had Shizune on the retreat. Blood was at the corner at her mouth. They were both injured, both scuffed but every needle attack that she tried Kabuto effortless dodged no matter how far or close she was.

He was fast, he was very fast and the small smile on his mouth as he advanced and attacked made Naruto recall how Ero-sennin had classed Kabuto. He had put him on the same level as Kakashi-sensei and Kakashi-sensei was already strong as it was. He had talents and abilities that he hid from them but he had been on the team to bring Naruto back to the village. He had faced the strongest people Naruto had known in the troupe and lived. And he was the Sensei placed to deal with Naruto if he ever got out of control. Naruto did not doubt that Kakashi-sensei could put him in check. Shizune was accompanying Tsunade baa-chan but that did not mean she was on Kabuto’s level. A spy, a medical nin and Naruto was willing to bet a very good shinobi.

She staggered back which caused Naruto to draw his kunai. Kabuto was on the attack again but instead a poison cloud emerged from Shizune’s mouth. It was fast and it spread quickly forward and to the side. Naruto felt hope, he hoped that Kabuto got caught by some of it. Instead he watched in horror as hands emerged from the ground cased in blue light to grip Shizune’s ankles. She groaned in pain and Naruto did not have to know. He did not have to guess that she was out of the fight.
Instead while Kabuto started to pull himself out of the ground, Naruto gathered chakra and thought of situations and plans. When Kabuto glanced in his direction, Naruto moved in front of Tsunade baa-chan but one phase of his plan had already started.

“We’ve resorted to this now?” Ero-sennin demanded angrily. Naruto glanced across in time to see Ero-sennin wrapped up in a white spiky hair of some sort while Orochimaru’s neck had extended and seemed to be trying to bite the exposed flesh. “You called me immature before. Look at yourself!”

Naruto would have loved to pay attention but there was no time. Shizune had been tossed to the ground. She was still breathing but Kabuto’s eyes were not on her. They were on Naruto. They were on Naruto and the prize behind him. They wanted the baa-chan. She was still out of it but they would have to go through Naruto first.

XxX

“My talent of seeing through people is unsurpassed Jiraiya.” Jiraiya could taste blood in his mouth and his neck was sore. Orochimaru was such a rough guy. “In my eyes, Naruto-kun is just a simple boy. A little roughed up, tarnished but ultimately a common kid no matter what he might be.”

Jiraiya could agree on some of those things. “Some of that just may be true.” He got to his feet slowly. “I wouldn’t need a kid like Sasuke a boy raised as a natural prodigy from the outset is no fun.”

“So you are looking for someone like you? The nothing that becomes something? Naruto-kun hasn’t got much to offer me other than some amusing times and the ninetails. Sasuke-kun has a fascinating bloodline. A shinobi talent that enables the user to use and master every technique in the world. That is what Sasuke-kun’s heritage is. He now just has to encounter the techniques.”

The same old argument years down the line. It was actually sort of funny. “That is not what the talent of shinobi entails Orochimaru. You still don’t understand. You’ve never understood no matter what we tried to show you. You still don’t get what it takes for a shinobi to be called a ninja.”

“Our perspectives differ. They have always differed.” Orochimaru said softly the words blowing over to him over the short distance.

“I’ll teach you one thing. The most important ninja talent is not the number of techniques one acquires. The most important thing…” Jiraiya’s eyes turned back towards where the others were at Kabuto’s soft cry of alarm and he grinned. He saw Orochimaru turn to look as well and his grin grew wider. “The most important thing Orochimaru is the spirit to never give up!” Something that was being displayed gloriously by Naruto. Blood dripped down his face but he stood tall his furious gaze locked on the shocked man before him that had punched him.

XxX

“Did you think that I was going to run? That I was going to cower before you?” Naruto snarled. He felt the blood drip down his face but he was beyond caring. He was mad. He was pissed and most of it was directed to the man gaping down at him. “You aren’t going to hurt Baa-chan! I’ll put an end to you. I’ll put an end to this!”

“What a foolish little boy you are.” Kabuto’s tone was slightly shaken but he kept his hand where it was. “Anyone else would have moved. I wasn’t playing with you. You of all people Naruto should have sensed my intentions. Yet you stayed, you refused to move and I have to admit it’s a
little cute but you keep getting in my way.”

“And you are in mine.” Naruto growled. He watched Kabuto’s eyes dart down to his hand and grumbled to himself even when his arm came up in an arc and missed. He stumbled past Kabuto but he had already known Kabuto was too quick to be caught that way. Naruto was currently too slow to move quick enough to adjust as his enemy adjusted. Another thing to work on but that would come later. He had to deal with the man currently before him.

“Even after everything you are still moving, still standing. You know you can’t hit me like that with that broad sweeping motion of yours. You know the cards are stacked up against you.” Kabuto shifted his stance. “You know I will kill you if I have to, are you afraid of me?” Kabuto sounded amused. “Feel like running away? Has your self-preservation instincts kicked in yet?”

“Stop making fun of me.” Naruto hissed.

Kabuto snorted and straightened up his hand slipping to his pocket to pull out a photo. Naruto’s eyes widened as he saw himself in the photograph in the second test. Going against Orochimaru. He had not even known anyone else was around or even watching.

“This is a picture of you Naruto-kun from around the time of the test. Don’t get me wrong, you are interesting but nothing special. You have a few extra boosts in you but you should know better than most how ‘normal’ you really are.” Naruto felt his heart twist in his chest. “With your spirit, it would be fitting for you to be Hokage. Do you honestly think you could become something like that? If you want to grow up and become a champion it would be best if you fled now. You know about living to fight another day and picking and choosing your battles from your own past. Under these circumstances you should just quit you know? Oh dear…what is with those eyes? If you die here you’ll never attain your dream or anything else.”

“Shut up.” Naruto hissed. “What you’re saying… what you are saying! Do you even know how it feels to hear those words from you? Don’t you think I’ve done it before? And had no choice? I never want to turn my back on a friend again!” He could still see the bruised and bloody arms…nailed to the post. “You think I can become a Hokage if I ran now? I ran away before, I ran and I ran and I ran.” He glared at Kabuto. “Sleep didn’t come any easier.”

The guilt never faded. Turning his back, turning their backs on someone they cared about because they had gotten over their heads. He had never forgotten although he pretended he had. He never forgot about how the group had continually dwindled because people had been sacrificed to those that came. To those that followed behind hunting them like dogs.

“The kind of person I want to grow up to be is going to stand their ground and protect their friends. The kind of Hokage I want to be.” Naruto sighed slowly. “I’m not there yet but I’m still a kid. But the kind of Hokage I want to be grows from the past, doesn’t deny it. Accepts it, the good and the bad and the kind of Hokage I want to be wouldn’t walk away from facing you no matter what. Stop underestimating me already. I’ll get killed? No I won’t and if somehow I do at least I died doing something that meant something to me.”

“A kid like you that can speak like that. Speak so calmly about a dream like that. The decision is completely simple. You can’t run away.” Kabuto laughed.

“I’m not dead yet.” A smile came to his face. “This is my shinobi way.”

“Why.” The soft voice distracted Naruto for a moment as he and Kabuto circled each other. “Why are you…”
“Tsunade baa-chan.” Naruto could not let her distract him now. “Remember the conditions of that bet of yours. Now you’ll have to give me that bad luck necklace of yours.”

“Naruto stop it!”

His clone popped into view and while he concentrated on what he had to do Naruto lamented the plans he had thought up that had failed halfway through planning. But then again, he was against a tough opponent. He would not die here. Not here not in this place and not now. He had to go further.

Kabuto came at him in a charge his head low. “For that insolence, I’ll give you death!”

“If you die you’ll never accomplish your dreams or anything else!”

“Ch.” Escaped him. “I know that already.” He muttered under his breath as he calculated Kabuto’s dash towards him.

“That’s enough! Get out the way!” She screamed.

Finally, there he was. He gritted his teeth at the pain that went through his free hand but he grinned at the shocked look on Kabuto’s face when the man realized that he could not move. The clones he had created earlier had emerged from the ground and latched onto Kabuto’s legs and arms holding him down in one place for Naruto. Perfect for Naruto to finally properly hit. “I refuse to die until I’m Hokage, you guys have to stop underestimating me.” He teased as the chakra began to swirl in his hand. “You won’t be able to escape this one Kabuto-san.” With the strength of his clone then directed the rasengan into Kabuto’s stomach sending him flying back quite some ways. Sent Naruto flying too. The clones dispelled as the landscaped exploded.

“Impossible.” Tsunade breathed behind him.

XxX

A distance away Kabuto stumbled to his feet. He looked exhausted and he had survived. Naruto gritted his teeth even as he felt his body tense up. He had managed, he had gotten the hit in and he had locked Kabuto down but he had been too slow. He had no clue what the chakra infused hand slap to his insides had done but he was not exactly feeling so good.

The good part about that was that the same had to go for Kabuto. His lips were red, he was all bruised and his clothes had gotten wrecked. For an opponent that outclassed him, that was pretty good in Naruto’s book.

He slumped to his knees before he fell onto his back with a small sigh. He could taste blood in his mouth. His body was struggling and he could feel his strength escaping but deep inside was the overwhelming feeling of victory. He felt his head being lifted and cradled and he wanted to smile at the fact that Tsunade baa-chan had recovered enough to join in.

He was tired, he needed a moment to recharge, he also needed to heal. He could feel a pair of eyes watching him as he sank slowly into the darkness but he was not afraid, how could he be? There was no reason to be afraid. He would rise back up. He just needed to rest first.

XxX

“He took that attack and got back up?” Jiraiya demanded. “How is that possible?”

looked like his abdomen. Then he started to heal immediately. The thing is Jiraiya. Kabuto-kun I keep very close to me, his skills outshine Tsunade in her prime. He is the one that saved my life. He has an ability to activate all his cells. He then creates new cells to replace damaged ones. It is an ability I have spent a lot of time studying.” Orochimaru sounded so pleased with himself. “Naruto-kun’s move was a cute one but that doesn’t change the fact that Kabuto is the one standing.”

Orochimaru did have a point and things were looking terrible for Tsunade and the others but it was not as if he could slip past Orochimaru and lend a hand. As serious as the situation was he and Orochimaru were still playing fair. They had looked at the others but their focus and all their energy so far had been towards each other. If he were to try and do anything to help, Orochimaru would strike hard and fast.

It made him wish that his body had healed more. There was plenty he could do but with the current situation he did not have that many choices. Kabuto coughed suddenly and Jiraiya felt a grin spread across his face at the startled look on Kabuto’s before the man slipped to his knees to collapse face first into the dirt.

“Looks like your guy is no longer standing. I’m willing to bet he doesn’t have that much chakra left either Orochimaru. Certainly not to heal. He won’t be getting up anytime soon.” Jiraiya’s heart sped up when he saw Tsunade’s head lower to Naruto’s chest and come back up right away with an expression of hope. It had been so long. Instead of hoping to fix he had gotten used to the situation, accepted it but the look on Tsunade’s face carried him back years. Naruto was covered in blood but she was there, pumping his chest her face determined. It was better than he deserved. “Some of ours may be down but not everyone is out Orochimaru.”

XxX

It was so dark all around him. It felt cold but he was not afraid. There were thoughts that were not his own in his head. Asking what he was asking, why was it so dark? What was happening to his power and why was it getting so cold? Wasn’t there something he was supposed to do?

But there was something, small flecks of light. So small and bright they were like stars. At first, they were a few but then they were more and more and they carried with them a bit of warmth along with the light.

He remembered who he was, he remembered what he had to do. He could hear voices that were not his own but he was not going to listen to the one closest to him. He goal was the one farthest away.

XxX

Moving his limbs had been absolute agony. Opening his eyes had been so hard but he had managed even if he had only managed to crack open one. He hurt all over. Still his fingers were able to ghost over the cool crystal and the look aimed down at him made so much of his pain and annoyance worth it.

“I won, the bet.” He managed to croak out.” Her eyes were wide with shock and it made it so much sweeter. It was not the way he had planned to win but it was pretty good. His grin refused to fade and his eyes drifted shut. He was resting.

Not unconscious but he needed a few more moments. Right away he felt his hand taken into hers and a warm feeling coating his arm. Naruto felt himself healing. “It’s your dream to become Hokage.” She said softly, her voice trembled. “So, finally just one more time.” He was leaned
forward and Naruto felt something being placed around his neck. “Now I want you to wear this.” He heard a soft jingle as he felt a soothing warmth above his face, he was healing.

XxX

“Kabuto’s down but Naruto-kun doesn’t seem to be doing well.” How Orochimaru could sound so calm while he was outnumbered was an ability he had failed to share with the rest of them since genin days.

Jiraiya wiped away the mud from his face and flicked it away before he settled his hands on his hips. “Tsunade’s a medical specialist. He’s fine with her there. But I think it past time that we upped this fight. I plan to make sure that you won’t have the time to be looking away to check on them Orochimaru.”

“As always talking to you is meaningless. If that kid crosses paths with the that group he’ll become a real hassle. As he is now he is nothing but trouble, a fruit ready to be picked and if he is he’ll start something really troublesome.” Orochimaru’s eyes were still on the others.

“What the hell are you going on about?” Jiraiya had a few seconds of warning before Orochimaru’s weight shifted. Jiraiya yelled out but it was a waste of breath. Orochimaru had already taken off into Naruto’s direction and this time he was not playing around. His whole body thrummed with his intent. He planned to kill Naruto right then and there.

He was a few split seconds behind Orochimaru and catching up but the moment he had started the hand signals for a jutsu he felt something wet wrap around his middle. His swearing was lost to the wind when he felt himself launched towards the opposite direction.

“Stay out of the way.” Orochimaru snarled while the tip of a sword emerged from his mouth. Jiraiya hit the ground hard and swearing the entire way.

XxX

It happened so fast. Naruto was still recovering, slowly gathering himself back together. He was still aware but he was tired and weakened. He could barely open his eyes. Still he heard the sound and his half-opened eyes had seen flying debris and the blood spray. His entire body went cold right after.

“Tsunade.” Orochimaru’s voice was close and soft. “Tsunade I wasn’t trying to kill you!” The stress on the last word and the annoyance. “Don’t get in the way Tsunade.” A warning. “If that brat lives he will get in my way further on and I don’t just mean my plans for Konoha.”

“No.” Tsunade baa-chan’s voice was soft but determined. “I’m going to be looking out for and protecting this kid from now on. No matter what.”

“How are you going to do that when you shake at the sight of blood? Where does this folly come from Tsunade? Why of all the shinobi one of the legendary Sannin why are you risking your life for a genin brat that means nothing to you?”

“Obviously.” Tsunade baa-chan’s sandals scrapped the ground as she got to her feet. Naruto could not see much even as he fought to open his eyes wider. No matter how he struggled he could not see beyond her back. “To protect Konoha.”

“To protect Konoha? Protect?” Orochimaru demanded.

“You want to know why? This kid, he is the future of Konoha.”
Orochimaru released a slow hiss. “You gave him that? You think he is the future? You think there should be a future? What are you babbling about Tsunade. Hokage is worthless only a fool would want it would strive for it and sacrifice everything they had for such a title and burden.”

“From now on.” Tsunade baa-chan’s voice deepened with anger. “I too will bet my life!”

“I didn’t want to hurt you. I didn’t want to involve you. Of all of the people still around I never wanted to drag you into the hopeless battle because I knew you understood Tsunade.”

Orochimaru’s voice was darker. “But if you are going to throw away your life for a brat like him then I’ll be the one to kill you like the trash you obviously want to be!”

Naruto heard a sword slice through flesh and he raged at his body. He heard a body fall and it was enough for him to roll over. His eyes properly opened and even as his heart dipped at the woman’s fallen body he glared at the man approaching him.

“Now for Naruto-kun what a waste.” Orochimaru purred. The sword was in his mouth and as weird as it looked it was being aimed at him. Naruto refused to look away as his mind raced. He had just gathered enough energy to switch out with the closest anything when a shadow covered him and blood splattered him and the ground.

“Didn’t I tell you Orochimaru.” Tsunade baa-chan had gotten to her feet again and protected him. “I said I’d bet my life.”

“You want to die that badly?” Orochimaru demanded. “You worth-“ He took a step back.

“Impossible.”

“It’s a day for the impossible to become possible Orochimaru. Why am I doing this? It is because now I’m the Fifth Hokage of Konoha.”

“Tsunade-sama!” Shizune’s voice startled Naruto. He had managed to make his way to a sitting position when he saw her. Awake a little bruised but the panic on her face was real. “I’ll heal your wounds! Don’t open that seal!”

The old lady had a seal? It had to be a big deal. It made him curious. Still he watched as she made a seal anyway disregarding Shizune’s cry.

“Release!”

“Oh.” Orochimaru’s voice was back to being amused. “Seems like I’m not the only one playing around and developing new jutsus. Care to tell me what that is Tsunade?”

“This?” Her voice did not shake, it was determined, confident and even amused as she answered Orochimaru. “I’ve been gathering chakra to the seal in my forehead for quite some time. I used that chakra to stimulate production of various enzymes that accelerated my cell duplication rate for rapid reproduction. I can reconstruct any damaged parts and organs of my body. It is not simple healing it is regeneration. You like the sound of that don’t you Orochimaru? In other words, I can never die in battle.”

“Tsunade-sama!” Shizune’s cry was ultimately swallowed up in the smoke that appeared along with the huge summons. The Toad boss was back again. Naruto had not even noticed his departure. Now there was the Toad Boss, a Huge snake and a huge slug and all the summons were eyeing each other.

“Naruto!” Tsunade baa-chan was looking down at him from where she stood on the huge white slug. “I know we haven’t shown you much but from here you’ll see how the Sannin fight and how
the Sannin take care of things. From this point, you’ll have to stay back and rest.”

Naruto would have argued except that he could feel the difference. Even if he were up to full strength that invisible barrier would still be there, warning him of the beasts just a few steps away. The three of them were unlike anything he had ever seen, anything he had ever felt. No matter how they had been fighting up to now Naruto had the feeling that all of that was about to change and lucky him he was right in front of it all.
Darlings darlings darlings. This chapter took so long to get to. It took so many WORDS to get here my god we are finally at the end of this mini arc that really should have been stretched out over a series of chapters but I was like naaa (like an idiot) so I crammed everything into like 5 chapters because then it is like an anime arc right? (Purple is so dumb)

So this niiice LOOOONG finish to the arc(Not the fic lmao we're like 1/5? of the way? Or something depends how long it takes to end the next large section) At the end... I start doing something you'll see plenty of scattered through upcoming chapters so read carefully keep your eyes peeled and I'm not giving any spoilers so just wait okay?

ENJOY \O/

“Manda and Orochimaru. Tsunade and Katsuyu… long time no see strange time for a reunion isn’t it?” The toad boss removed his pipe and exhaled slowly the smoke drifting slowly into the sky.

“Don’t be cracking such stupid jokes when I call you for a tough job.” Ero-sennin leaned forward his gaze directed towards the huge snake. “There’s a time and place you know. Now is the time to deal with some old problems once and for all. We’re going to defeat Orochimaru right now.”

“Oi! Orochimaru.” The snake shifted. “What are you thinking summoning me in the lame excuse of a land to face creatures such as this. You want me to eat you?”

“Manda-sama.” When had Kabuto gotten to his feet? “We’ll provide sacrifices for you afterwards-“

“Shut up!” The snake shook its head slowly. “Who told you to speak? Keep your trap closed stupid brat. And Orochimaru, you better provide a hundred sacrifices after this.” Granted Naruto had not met that many summons but he was certain that they did not talk like that.

XxX

“You.” Manda snarled. “Want me make you into toad jerky?” Manda’s lower body shifted and coiled while he kept in the same area.

“You know I really want a snake skinned wallet. It would look mighty fine.” It was already a waste of time trying to corral him. He was the Toad boss for a reason. Jiraiya watched the sword slide slowly from the sheath before his gaze went back to the main cause of trouble. Orochimaru. Unsurprisingly Katsuyu had nothing to say but that was because she was waiting on Tsunade. Jiraiya was willing to be that Katsuyu had not been summoned for a very long time.

“Orochimaru you’ve adopted an evil that goes too far to be ignored or forgiven. We’re no longer comrades!” Jiraiya could see in his mind’s eye the atrocities he had come to face and witness all because of Orochimaru. It could not be allowed to stand.
“Comrades? Don’t make me laugh.” Orochimaru sneered. “And you honestly think it so easy.”

“Today is the last day that there will be three of the legendary ninjas.” Tsunade spoke up. “Prepare yourself Orochimaru.”

“Today is the last day I’ll have such a large snack you mean.” Manda sneered. The only response given to him was the slow exhale of smoke from the large pipe. Manda leaned back a bit from the smoke. The danger did not come from Jiraiya first. The first move was not made by him but by Katsuyu.

Zeshi Nensan-Thousand fanged acid. Jiraiya had seen the jutsu many times before but this was the first time that he witnessed it being turned on what had been an ally. Still seeing it being turned on Manda did not bother him. It simply had to be done. There was no playing around with that fact.

The only thing he regretted was that he had not been the one to act first but when he saw the acid hurtling towards Manda he started to think and plan out his own move. While he watched Orochimaru and Manda make theirs.

Manda was fast, fast and built solid. The acid had done some damage but not enough. Manda was simply too quick. That was the only disappointing thing. Orochimaru had reacted fast and Manda had wrapped up Katsuyu before they could even blink properly with Manda looming above threatening to bite.

But the three of them knew that would not exactly go well. They had been together for years, they learnt together, fought together and had nearly died together. they knew each other’s styles, they knew each other’s ways and up to the time they had parted they knew each other’s secrets. Most of them at least.

“Triple wrapping us like this won’t get you anywhere Orochimaru.” Tsunade pointed out.

“Katsuyu might escape but you won’t Tsunade.” Was his answer.

“Good thing nobody is taking a bite anytime soon.” Jiraiya pointed out as the large sword came to rest just under Manda’s chin. All of them were frozen. The slug wrapped up by the snake, the snake kept at a distance by the toad with a sword. Not exactly how the lock was supposed to do.

“Now what to do.” Orochimaru muttered.

“Somebody has to make a move, it might as well be me.” Tsunade pointed out before the large form of Katsuyu split into numerous smaller clones. It was always a shocking and slightly creepy thing to see. The clones sliding away from the bigger body like raindrops as the bigger body shrank until there was nothing left.

“Tsunade get away from there!” A warning given just in time. Orochimaru was back to playing games and Tsunade barely dodged the kunais. Jiraiya kept his eye on Orochimaru, kunais were not exactly Orochimaru’s weapons of choice even while limited. He might not have his hands but that did not make him any less deadly or cunning.

“The slug escaped.” Orochimaru said softly. “So it is time to chase the Toad.” They missed the first strike by a few inches. Jiraiya felt the wind past them when Manda’s tail retreated. Their leap backwards gave them room but Orochimaru had already moved forward.

“Bunta! Give me some oil!” It would not take him out but it would slow them down and if really lucky give a bit of damage. Jiraiya aimed his flames at the stream of oil coming from Bunta and watched it shoot across the distance to Manda. Combination jutsus always packed a punch.
The surprising thing was not that Manda allowed the fire to hit him and Orochimaru full on. No, the surprising thing was what he saw in the flames. He was a distance away and the flames interfered but it really did look as if Orochimaru was moulting. He had to be wrong. He had to be mistaken.

Gamabunta gripped Manda’s unburned tail and had just started to tug when Manda crashed through the earth behind them. Take your eyes off them a second and something crazy happens. Jiraiya watched the snake’s wide-open mouth above him as well as the extra-large sword swirling through the air directly behind the snake.

“Ah fuck.” Jiraiya groaned before Gamabunta abandoned the snake tail for them to leap a distance away from the impaled snakehead falling towards them.

“And keep that mouth shut!” Tsunade landed on the ground next to the trapped snake. Before she could move Orochimaru’s tongue had wrapped around her and dragged her back. Jiraiya watched the body go limp until she was in Orochimaru’s range then she swung her fist and he felt that impact. But Orochimaru was relentless. Even a punch from Tsunade was not going to stop him. Of all people, they knew that.

She wiggled her arms into the loop around her neck and strained for room even as she slugged Orochimaru. There was no room for Jiraiya to interfere as yet but he knew the time would come. He watched the tongue loosen and be quickly grabbed by Tsunade who hauled Orochimaru back in to slug him again.

“Let’s end this!” Her final punch was to the jaw and only then did she release him. Orochimaru soared a small distance away and crumpled. Jiraiya had barely hopped off of Gamabunta’s back before Orochimaru had stumbled to his feet once again.

“Tsunade.” He panted as he got to his feet his knees swaying just a bit. That punch to the jaw had to be responsible for that. “Even if you won’t help me, there is still one option left. One more way to get my arms back.” His face. Jiraiya shook his head as he got to see the bruised burned face and the hints of something underneath it. Skin pale and unbruised. “I will surely destroy Konoha. Till we meet again my friends.” His smile became a grin. “Tsunade, Jiraiya.”

Kabuto slapping his hand to the ground distracted him even as he watched the two of them slowly melt away into the earth. He had not even noticed Kabuto getting that close or gathering chakra. But another urgent matter was Orochimaru’s face. He had to have taken over another body.

“Farewell.” Kabuto smiled as he sank down. Jiraiya wanted to wipe the smile off.

“Tsunade, you think you’ve gained immortality somehow. This is immortality… this is the true me. I’m immortal!” His laugh faded away as he faded leaving Jiraiya with distaste in his mouth and his entire body thrumming with dissatisfaction. He had gotten away again. Once again Orochimaru had escaped them and they might have gotten more information but that did not change Orochimaru’s thirst for destruction. Orochimaru would still seek out Konoha to destroy it. Come up with elaborate plots.

That Jiraiya had been face to face with him and he escaped. It rankled. Every time Orochimaru slipped away he felt bitter.

XxX

Jiraiya prodded his side with a sigh. His chakra had still not recovered, he had broken a rib and a leg. Orochimaru had gotten away yet again but at least the kid was still living. There would be no
explaining that. There would be no getting around that either. Trouble was drawn to them, when they got back Jiraiya had to do something about the kid and situations like… the one they were in.

He could hear Tsunade panting a few feet away. She had most likely used up a lot of chakra even though she looked undamaged she really was not.

“Thanks.” Jiraiya managed to nod to Gamabunta before he released the summon. He staggered with the release and had to force himself to stay on his feet for a few seconds before he recovered. Whatever Tsunade had given him had done him pretty good.

XxX

The necklace looked good on the brat. Shizune was healing him as the boy sat against a large rock but Jiraiya was still able to see the blue necklace glinting in the sun. A smile tugged at his mouth before he let it turn into a full-blown grin. “You still suck at betting Tsunade.” He said softly. He was still upset a bit about the drugging issue but it was water under the bridge mostly. Especially while he looked at the things they had all managed to accomplish together.

Granted they had all gotten scuffed up some but that happened, didn’t it? He had also gotten his leg and a rib broken. Maybe more than one, he was familiar with the feeling of broken bones but it would heal all the same. Still, Tsunade was coming back to the village. Tsunade had regained the light in her eyes, he was grateful for that.

“I guess I don’t learn huh.” She smiled. She stared down at Naruto her eyes soft but far away. Then she stilled so suddenly that Jiraiya was frozen. “Now the after effects.” She said softly.

“What?” Jiraiya frowned before he was rendered speechless as she started to age before his eyes. Her skin dulled, so did her hair. Wrinkles formed and her body grew thin. Jiraiya was unable to speak.

“What’s going on?” Naruto had managed to shove Shizune aside so he could stare up at them. “Baa-chan?”

“Tsunade-sama.” Shizune was not surprised but she looked so sad.

“Tsunade.” Jiraiya swallowed as he watched her body tremble slightly. He knew he was old and he looked it. He was not ashamed of being old, he was proud of the journey he had undertaken and he was proud that it looked like it. Youth was for the next generation. But Tsunade she looked even older than him, than she technically should be. The jutsu she had used had serious consequences.

“If I rest a bit soon I’ll revert to my young self. I’m fine.” She croaked.

“That isn’t where I was going you know.” Naruto tried to stand before he swayed and had to sit back down. “Okay I’m not ready yet. So that’s a side effect?” His eyes roamed curiously over Tsunade. “Doesn’t seem that bad for me, when there are side effects for jutsu it usually means being really tired or limited in some way or coughing up blood or breaking bones or something. You just need to rest a bit and you look like a Baa-chan.” His eyes lit up. “Cool!”

“Rude little brat.” Jiraiya huffed while Tsunade’s lips turned up in a smile.

“Let’s rest up in the village until we’re ready to go. Then we’ll head back to Konoha.”

“Don’t start making plans to gamble or anything now.” Naruto warned.

“Tsunade.” Jiraiya cleared his throat. ‘I think-“
“Don’t call me that anymore.” She interrupted with a smile. “Call me the Godaime!”

Xxx

“It doesn’t fit you know.” Naruto waved his dried fish in Tsunade’s direction lazily. The boy’s chest was firmly wrapped up in bandages. “I mean when you think about it. Really consider it, it just doesn’t fit.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Tsunade snapped. They were sitting across from each other again, just as they had in the bar they had first met up.

“I mean you’re going to be the Godaime right?” Naruto frowned before he nibbled the tail of the fish. “I mean but when you compare her to the Sandaime she comes off as rough, selfish, loose with money, easily pissed off but at least she isn’t a massive perv so that’s an upgrade but the rest … are we certain she can handle it?”

“Tsunade-sama you want to order something?” Shizune loudly whispered.

“And she’s in her fifties but she walks around looking like a twenty something woman. There is something wrong about that you know?” Naruto snorted. “I mean, we have a really old man as our Hokage so it isn’t like we have a problem with old people. Sandaime’s like seriously old and none of us care but she’s there deceiving us right?”

“You are going to spend the whole time criticizing me to my face?” Tsunade’s fist came down hard on the table. “Let’s take this outside brat!”

“I don’t know what you think it is going to change. It is still going to be the truth!” Naruto snapped as he shoved to his feet. “You’re deceiving everybody! It isn’t cute!”

“Here we go again.” Jiraiya sighed to himself. The two of them made him question whether they could make it back home before the two came to serious blows or Tsunade strangled Naruto and left him somewhere. She really had a wicked temper. Sadly, it had not cooled after all these years. In fact, it seemed brighter.

Still that part of her was good to see because it made her come alive. She had always been a lively loving person. A woman who had loved life and who had loved to tease and laugh. All Jiraiya had wished for was her happiness, all these years wandering and not only was she coming home but she had found hope. It was such a nice thing to witness. He was happy for her. Even though he was going to judge her for wanting to fight with a kid continuously because of his smart mouth. She knew better. She had grown up watching Jiraiya grow up after all.

Xxx

“This again.” Shizune frowned. “I’m not too certain who to scold?”

“Naruto has a large mouth.” Jiraiya reassured her. “But Tsunade is the one issuing challenges and lowering herself to his level so the blame really does lie with her. I just laugh at the things that come out his mouth, if you really listen you realize how funny it is even if it is truthful.” Jiraiya frowned. “And sometimes annoying. You know he calls me by a ridiculous shameful name? Nothing I say gets him to stop.”

“It is really that bad.” Shizune frowned. “Well I’m torn between amused at her antics and annoyed because it still is bad.” She smiled and shook her head. “But she enjoyed playing with him.”

And Jiraiya could see why. “I know.” He admitted as Naruto and Tsunade faced each other just as
they had a few nights ago when the bet had been made. Just Tsunade was sober this time and both of them were less angry and Naruto did not have any hint of bloodlust this time. It was good enough for Jiraiya.

“In the end, it doesn’t matter.” Tsunade snorted as she faced down Naruto. “I’m Hokage no matter what you have to say and I don’t have to get serious with a brat like you.” A sly smile came to her lips. “One finger is all I need.” Familiar words from only a few nights ago just minus the part about the Hokage. Naruto was not going to take that well at all. Jiraiya knew the boy.

“How many time do I have to say stop underestimating me!” Tsunade had succeeded in getting Naruto riled up at least. The finger he jabbed in Tsunade shook with the boy’s rage. “We just went over this! I won the bet! I did what you were positive I couldn’t! And you know something? One day I’ll be Hokage too and I’ll be one unlike anything seen before me!”

Jiraiya watched Tsunade’s eyes soften along with the sly smile. Naruto might not be able to pick up the fondness that came over he face but he was able to and it made Jiraiya’s heart soften in his own chest. He had longed to see that look on her face again, she was healing.

“Is that so.” The sly smile came back strengthened. “Then prove it then brat. Come at me.”

It was like waving a red flag at an angry bull. Naruto had good self-control. Jiraiya had noted it early on. The boy limited himself and mostly kept to himself, kept his true feelings and thoughts wrapped up tight. Training or caution Jiraiya was still unable to decide but Naruto was still a kid, kids had weaknesses some more than others but one thing plenty of kids had in common was the need to prove themselves. Something even so-called elites suffered with.

The ones who always changed but the need to prove, to not be underestimated. Some considered it a matter that had to do with pride but Jiraiya had never been convinced it did have to do with one’s feelings but pride was just a part of it. He felt it had to do with a need, something that needed to be fulfilled.

Naruto wanted to be strong, self-sufficient. The kid thought a lot about himself. He examined himself and did everything he could do improve and push himself because he believed in himself. It was the other people part believing in him that got the boy tripped up at least Jiraiya was willing to bet that was how it was now. The boy was trying, he knew people had faith in him and his abilities and it boosted him up even more, pushed him on further. Yet he had so few people, Jiraiya wanted to see what the boy would look like with a whole village behind him motivating him to fight harder, get better and to improve.

As it was the boy had worked hard and he felt qualified. He had walked through hell and had come out alive and with heavy shoulders. To be dismissed and considered insignificant by people he saw as powerful and maybe threats. It had to burn the boy inside, he would need someone to hold him back and remind him to keep his cool. He had a mouth on him.

A wicked temper and a quick mind, an amusing combination that Jiraiya knew he had seen before. He watched Naruto zig zag towards Tsunade at a quick speed. A pattern different to anything the boy had displayed before and Jiraiya was hooked. The boy stepped forward and sometimes zigged back. Sometimes he went further left sometimes he jumped back right. It was quick and almost unpredictable.

Still, the way Tsunade flicked the boy’s headband off with one finger was a little too harsh even for her. The boy was momentarily stunned. Jiraiya saw his eyes glaze over at the impact. The dawning understanding of the situation came across Naruto’s face before his body relaxed, obviously awaiting Tsunade’s finger to knock him backwards. He would get up and try again,
something Jiraiya admired.

Still when Naruto’s eyes slid shut, Jiraiya had been expecting Tsunade to flick him away with that superhuman strength of hers. He had not been expecting what he witnessed. The smile that came across her face. The battle scowl down. She started to lean forward the moment Naruto’s face scrunched up in confusion as he waited.

The kiss took Jiraiya by surprise. It was a simple one, lips on Naruto’s forehead while she tilted his chin up and kept him in place. Naruto’s eyes flew open at the moment lips touched his forehead. Jiraiya witnessed shock come across the parts of Naruto’s face he could see before longing and embarrassment chased the shock away. The boy flushed lightly before his face erupted into a dark red colour. Tsunade pulled back to smile down at him. “Become a good man okay?” Jiraiya turned away to hide his laugh. It was going to be fine.

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He had really expected to be blasted away. He had miscalculated her reach and paid for it. When his hitai-ate went flying he had started to make plans for when he caught himself. The kiss had frozen him, sent his body into confusion.

It had been so long.

Nobody did that for him. Naruto liked affection, he liked hugs and kisses, he liked holding hands, hands ruffling his hair. He liked people’s eyes looking down at him in fondness. He had loved being touched, he had missed it.

Still her kiss had made nostalgia come over him for a moment there he had felt slimmer fingers and colder hands on his chin, different lips on his forehead before he was reminded where he was and who he was with.

He had missed that sort of affection it felt nice. It made him feel good, wanted, cared for. Still it had been totally unexpected from someone like the Baa-chan before him. She was going to be the Hokage so he had guessed she would have tried to be distant and proper or something. He had not expected affection, genuine affection. He had not expected it.

He felt his face heat over. He was weak to the simple things and he knew it. He wanted it so badly and he buried that want so deep because he did not want to expect it. He did not want to feel the loss. It was a simple kiss, they had gone from annoyance to acceptance, it felt nice, he wanted to hold onto it forever.

She finally pulled back to smile down at him and it looked real. She looked more than just happy, she glowed inside and out, it was in her eyes. “Become a good man okay?” She smiled. Naruto could hear other words behind her own even as he felt her faith in him. It was overwhelming and shocking.

Still he managed to grin back at her and give her a thumb up. “Roger!” She thought he could do it too. He was not going to let her down. A good man and a good Hokage, she believed he could become both and that put a fuzzy feeling in his stomach and made his cheeks burn as he grinned.

XxX

“You heal quickly but that doesn’t mean you should push yourself.” Shizune scolded as she checked under his bandages. “It might be easy to forget but you should still remind yourself about the injury even if there is nothing to see on the surface. Things take time to heal. Just because a
wound looks healed on the surface doesn’t mean that it is.”

Naruto wrinkled his nose at the strong alcoholic smell as she started to dab at his chest. “But if it doesn’t hurt anymore there is no reason to sit around Nee-chan.”

“Just because you can’t feel it doesn’t mean that nothing is wrong.” Her hand glowed green and Naruto felt his eyes dip when he felt the warmth across his chest. “Just because it doesn’t hurt doesn’t mean there is not a problem. Many injuries go undetected because we don’t feel them. You have to be aware of your body and check on it constantly. Many problems get bigger with time. Of course…” She trailed off. “It’s hard to get shinobi to come in for check-ups at all or even regularly but that is why the academy is supposed to teach good health practices.”

“Doesn’t work.” Naruto pointed out dryly. “I don’t think people know what they are supposed to be learning. Med nins are pretty much the heal all end all.”

“Certainly feels that way sometimes.” She sighed. “But that is why we’re so strict with shinobis. Shinobi like to escape too much. They think that their injuries are nothing. That simple breaks can be fixed in no time and they will be back in action in a flash.”

“Well.” Naruto coughed. “Nobody wants to sit around nee-chan.”

“Always rushing, always in a hurry.” She shook her head before she nudged him to hold his arms in the air. “When they should be resting and recovering while they can. A shinobi’s body is their trade. They have to treat it well. They should treat it well.” She frowned as she wrapped the fresh bandage around him. “They should be aiming to be in top shape whenever they can.”

“Well it does make sense.” Naruto smiled. “Sometimes it feels like you can’t sit still and let you have that rest. I mean since the Sandaime got injured it was just rush here and there and everywhere and tons of missions and we are just genins! Even my Sensei had missions apart from us and when one finished another began it was crazy!”

“To be expected after a war even a small unsuccessful one like that.” Shizune leaned back to check out her work with her head tilted to the side. “Tell me if it is too tight.” She leaned back forward and began to unwrap again. “After everyone heard about the attack people would be testing Konoha. Konoha has always been a powerful village. Stronger than many other and fairly large with a large military force even after the wars. The talent from clans give Konoha a high status as well as the class of the genins that are showed off year after year.” She paused to make some adjustments to the bandages stuffing damp cotton between the bandage and Naruto’s skin as she worked. “Many advancements to the shinobi world have come from Konoha more than any of the great shinobi villages.”

“I didn’t know that.” Naruto mumbled.

“Other villages have great shinobi tools. Kiri and Kumo for example. Their shinobi tools are known far and wide and feared just as much. Konoha always had clans and alliances to make others tremble.” Shizune sighed. “Of course, having one of our own cause the attack brings us down in many eyes. We will be tested with plenty of missions for quite some time even after Tsunade-sama is Hokage.”

“Really?” Naruto frowned. “I mean I guess they might want to see if she is reliable and any good but isn’t that pushing it a bit much?”

“Not to them.” Shizune pinned the bandage in place. “The lords, the people who request shinobis are all about status. They want the best and words always gets around. They want their jobs done
and they want it done well. Which is why we encourage word to spread, why shinobis get famous. Why the more famous shinobi a village gets the higher standing that village will have for jobs. We want the jobs but we need to be able to handle them and protect ourselves and run the village as well.” Shizune sighed heavily. “Plenty of work will have to be done but soon Konoha will adapt and it will be smoother running. This kind of environment can have an effect of the genins now starting out. We don’t want that for you guys.”

“Well we need to hurry back to Konoha then shouldn’t we?” Naruto pointed out. That got him a hearty laugh.

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“Well I have to admit.” Jiraiya said slowly. “I really had a different idea about how this whole thing would end up. We got to the right goal alright but the journey was a complete surprise.” He fought back his wince as he turned to look at Tsunade who had five empty bowls of food before her and was currently demolishing another.

“I don’t know what you had planned.” She said from around a mouthful of rice. “But you have to thank the kid you decided to bring with you.”

“It really could have ended badly couldn’t it?” Jiraiya laughed. “It had been so long but I always knew me alone was not enough to get you to come back.” He admitted. “Granted the brat is loud and cute but not exactly someone one would expect me to bring along either.”

“God.” Tsunade muttered before she swallowed. She waved his chopsticks in his direction and continued. “That kid is a little messed up isn’t he? I mean he has some great stuff going for him, he keeps on going the way he is he’ll make it you know? But I heard the things that came out his mouth Jiraiya and I know you did too in fact you’ve been with him longer. You have probably heard more.”

“Well it is hard prying out his more deeper thoughts.” Jiraiya admitted. “He lets his guard down sometimes and sometimes it gets torn down because of his rage. Honestly he says some really shocking things and I’m not too sure what you are referring to this time.”

“The things he told Orochimaru.” Her mouth twisted down as she paused her eating. “I don’t like Orochimaru being interested in him.”

“Orochimaru’s interest goes all the way back to his team.” Jiraiya sighed. “There is Sasuke who Orochimaru wants as his new container.” He shook his head in disgust. “He sneaked right into the village during the exam and marked the boy. Of all the Uchihas he had to go after that one family.”

“It’s been so long.” Tsunade muttered. “I’ll have to see the parents and the clan for it to really click. What do you think his plan is?”

“Well he has alerted us even if by accident to a threat to Naruto. Going to make protecting the boy a lot harder.” Jiraiya admitted. “Then of course we all flashily showed off in that battle. Showed off new jutsus.” Jiraiya shook his head. “Looks like I have to keep up.”

“As if you don’t have a few things in your sleeve itching to be shown off.” Tsunade muttered as she finished off the bowl. She placed it with a soft clink onto the table and picked up the platter filled with fried fish. “If you hadn’t been so injured you would have handled Orochimaru better. I’m willing to bet that if your chakra hadn’t been so messed up along with your body you would have done some showing off of your own.”
“Who knows eh?” Jiraiya shrugged. “Battle is done and he has disappeared again.” His lip twitched. “Orochimaru had quite a few surprises of his own.”

“I can’t help but wonder how many spies he still has left.” Tsunade muttered. “We’ll have to do a thorough clean of everyone even genins.”

“You are the one that’s going to be the Hokage.” Jiraiya pointed out. “We’ll just follow your lead.”

“It won’t be your job alone anymore Jiraiya.” The empty plate was laid back onto the table and a large cup was picked up. “We know each other best. Orochimaru might be a former Konoha shinobi but he is still a Sannin. It is our job to take him down.”

“If you order me to it will still be us taking him down.” Jiraiya pointed out as Tsunade loudly slurped whatever was in the cup. “How much you plan to eat anyway?”

“Shut up! I have lots of chakra to get back.” Tsunade snapped. “I’m still healing and then I’m healing you too! I’ll eat as much as it takes to get me back in peak condition.”

“You’ll eat us out the place.” Jiraiya sighed. “Ah… just so you know neither I nor Naruto are going to pay for your food bill.”

“Cheap.” Tsunade hissed as she set the cup down. “You have all that money stashed away too.”

“I do don’t I.” Jiraiya laughed. “You know that money was never really for me. Only time I make big withdrawals is for something special.” A bird landing on the windowsill caught his attention and he chuckled when it ruffled its blue and brown feathers. “And whenever I do that the money is never for me.”

“I’m not so old that I’ve forgotten that.” Tsunade said softly. “You earned that money, by questionable means and even more questionable writing.” She jabbed, Jiraiya rolled his eyes at her as that was the only response he could give her. “But the money is yours you just don’t use it.”

“I like travelling, I like to keep moving. I like the finer things in life every once and a while. I won’t lie.” Jiraiya shrugged. “But in the end, I’m but a simple man. The things I want, the things I truly want money can’t buy I can just experience them and watch them. And cheap sake goes down just as good as the most expensive one does it not?”

“It certainly does.” For a few moments, the room was silent. Jiraiya allowed his eyes to close as he rested himself it went on for a long while at least an hour before she spoke again. “Where did you really find the kid?”

“He was with a Kiri shinobi that had big plans.” Jiraiya paused. “Zabuza failed his coup and for some reason ended up in Konoha and robbing Konoha. Naruto tagged along.”

“Tagged?” Tsunade demanded.

“I haven’t gotten the complete and true story.” Jiraiya smiled. “I know what I was told, I know what I’ve put together and then I know the kid is secretive and he is hiding things. I’ve tested him, I’m going to keep testing him because one thing he proved to me since I met him is that he is destined for great things. He’s a hard worker, he doesn’t give up, he keeps trying and he keeps pushing and he does more than you think he can. It is better not to underestimate him. Kid’s good.”

“Well we can see that can’t we?” Tsunade pointed out as she shook her head. “Granted that is a strange way to make a rasengan but he’s still a kid isn’t he? And he got it done in such a short time.”
“One thing I’ve realized when teaching the kid is that he thinks outside the box.” Jiraiya laughed. “Whoever he was with really rubbed off on him but that’s fine, he’s going to become a shinobi that is going to take the world by storm. His mouth will shock you and his strength will, in time of course be something to marvel at.”

“His heart too.” Tsunade said softly. “It’s there.”

“He cares.” Jiraiya eyed her before he continued. “He sees things differently than most people, he understands how the world works better than most people his age. He cares but he understands sacrifices. He understands not everything is roses and what surprised me of all the things he revealed about himself by that mouth of his, I think the way that he is learning and understanding himself has to be the most amazing thing to witness.”

“What you mean is that you think he’ll be a pretty great shinobi.” Tsunade corrected. “We have to learn ourselves somewhere along the way Jiraiya. Otherwise we will never progress.”

“But the kid.” Jiraiya pointed out. “He’s got a harsh burden on him, a sad and painful past and an uncertain future but look at him stand, look at him walk. Look at his eyes, he is not faltering he is learning, he is living.” Jiraiya’s voice fell to a whisper. “He’s forgiving.”

“He’s really smart Jiraiya.” Tsunade’s voice was just as low and filled with warning.


XxX

It was early morning in Konoha, deep in training ground fourteen Kakashi had just completed his set of thumb push ups when a strong wind blew disturbing the leaves and ruffling his hair. It was still dark out but his eyes searched the moving branches that were disturbed, he was certain that he was alone.

It had been a while since his whole team had been together, he knew Naruto was safe with Jiraiya. Safe physically at least, Kakashi was under no delusions about the man’s habits and personality. Even Minato had been rather accepting of the fact that the famous ninja was a huge letch.

Of course, since it was Tsunade they were going after, just maybe he might control himself and it was Jiraiya-sama. He knew how to connect with kids and keep them occupied. No matter the type of kid, he had been able to get to their level.

Kakashi had been no trouble to Jiraiya after all, most of his generation even as they admired him they also felt connected to him. The way he spoke, the way he understood as well as the obvious pride he had in them that could be felt.

Jiraiya-sama’s legendary faith in the coming generation made him a hero for many. Kakashi knew Naruto was safe as he could be. Safer even than being in Kakashi’s care since Kakashi had to keep an eye on all his genins not just Naruto. He knew Naruto was safe but it still felt off to have him away from them.

Kakashi knew he still carried wounds from the years of silence and uncertainty. Another scar added to himself that was fresher than all the rest.

Of course, explaining to Sakura and Sasuke that Naruto had been pulled off for a mission of his own without them outside the village had been difficult. There was no proper safe way to drop the news that did not sound suspicious. Sasuke had eyed him suspiciously. He still did eye him suspiciously but it was not Kakashi’s fault that he could only drop morsels of information.
Hell, he was still confused over why Naruto. Naruto never met Tsunade the only thing those two had in common was leaving the village and Tsunade had at least been given permission. Kakashi had been uncertain to what Jiraiya’s plan had been. The way he had laughed over Naruto’s age and said it was the perfect reason to take him. Kakashi knew some of the Sannin history. Not all obviously even Minato-sensei had not known all of the workings and history of the trio.

Orochimaru had always been distant to anyone not Sannin and sometimes even them from what he had observed. Tsunade had always been busy or distracted, maybe passing by from time to time to poke fun at Minato and shake her head at Kakashi’s team, Jiraiya had been the only one really and truly interested.

Of course he had poked fun at them, had fun at their expense but he had watched them and supported them and Minato. Naruto was in good hands, he might even come back a little stronger maybe softer considering who Jiraiya was. Not that Jiraiya would spill the classified information and tell Naruto who he was. Who Jiraiya really was and how everyone was connected.

It was not like Kakashi wanted to keep the information to himself. He just had no choice and currently it would not do anyone any good. Especially Naruto. Kakashi’s hair ruffled again with another gust of strong wind and he closed his eyes and savoured it. He hoped they would be coming home soon, it was silly to be worried over Naruto’s safety but he was unable to help himself. Until Naruto was back he just would not be settled.

Xxx

Another early morning, a fairly quiet day in the village or at least that was how it looked to be. Sakura quietly swapped the dead flower in Lee’s bedside vase for a fresh one. She sneaked a look at the figure on the bed that slept quietly. His face was troubled even in sleep and she could not blame him.

Being a shinobi was so important to Lee and now he was confined to the hospital and physical therapy without knowledge whether he would be able to return to duty anytime soon or at all. She knew his injuries were serious and she knew that Lee saw the rest of them as pulling away from him.

She did not know Lee’s full despair but she knew a little. The feeling of people that you care for pulling away from you and a wide chasm separating you from them. She had felt that quite a few times in her own team and she was feeling it again.

Naruto was gone again. Kakashi-sensei said it was a mission, Iruka-sensei had backed up the claims but it just felt wrong. With the village how it was, the Sandaime still gravely injured and the village in chaos with a bunch of incoming and pending missions. With restoration of the village still going on… for Naruto to be pulled away for a solo mission sounded fishy.

He did not even get to tell them any real goodbye. He had just been gone. Whoever had taken Naruto was apparently somebody important to the village and that meant that the mission Naruto on had to be pretty important and maybe dangerous.

Sakura could not help her worry about Naruto being out of the village technically on his own. On a mission that had to be important to the village somehow. Which led her back to the main problem. Why Naruto? Even Kakashi-sensei and Iruka-sensei could not answer properly to the why. Iruka-sensei had just said Naruto had been requested.

It was strange. Naruto, no matter his past was still a genin like the rest of them. What could a high class, most likely an important Jounin want Naruto’s help with? What kind of mission was it?
Iruka-sensei had said it involved looking for someone… but who? And why did just Naruto have to go along? Kakashi-sensei himself had let slip Naruto had never met the person Naruto’s mission needed him to find.

It had been so long since she had seen him. Sakura smoothed Lee’s bedsheet as she sat by his side. With a sigh to herself she picked up the small basket of apples she had brought along. There was not much she could do for Naruto except wait for him to come back and hopefully explain. If he was allowed to do that.

Her first start at peeling the apple went too deep, she gritted her teeth before she forced herself to breathe slowly and easily. Her next attempt went smoother. There was not much she could do in the case of Naruto but in the case for herself and the remaining Team Seven she could try her best.

There were missions to be done still, help to be given and training to do. Everything did not stand still because of setbacks after all. There was still work to do and people around. She finished the first apple and gently placed it on the waiting plate on Lee’s table.

She stood taking another apple with her and leaned against the window and continued to peel. As bad as things had gotten, as strange as things were, there was still hope. A strong wind blew suddenly startling her as it blew into the room tugging at her hands and hair. She almost dropped the apple and only managed to drop the knife and apple on the plate in time.

She shielded her eyes with her hands as she peered outside warily. It was early morning there was no logical reason for such a wind. In a few moments it died off, almost as quickly it came. Sakura peered out the window to the dimly lit ground below. Nothing seemed amiss. She glanced back up her gaze resting on the faint light coming over the trees. She really wanted her team to be complete again, waiting was hard.

XxX

“Kakashi.” Sasuke wiped his face with a towel as he waited for his sensei to give him his full attention. “When is Naruto coming back?”

“Mah.” Kakashi’s mused, his gaze went to the sky almost as if he was thinking things over. Picking and choosing what to say. “Well it is going to take him some time to come back. I guess depending how far he had to go he might take a while.”

“A week has already gone.” Sasuke pointed out. Kakashi’s eyes darted over to him

“I know.” Kakashi replied. “But the mission he is on is very important. He’s safe, almost as safe as he was with us and he’s most likely working very hard.” Kakashi’s eye closed and his mask moved slightly. “He’ll be back before we know it Sasuke so we shouldn’t focus on it too much.”

“What is he doing?” Sasuke pressed. “Why did they pick him?”

“Well it is a mission for Konoha.” Kakashi answered slowly. “Naruto is supposed to help convince someone to come back and do some work for us. The chances of them coming are fairly high.” Kakashi admitted. “But the council agrees that, the person in question will require some extra pushing.”

“Naruto is that extra pushing?” Sasuke asked suspiciously.

“Well… some people think so.” Kakashi shrugged. “There are many things Naruto is able to do if he puts his mind to. Even stubborn people end up thinking things over. Some your peers have learned that. Neji for example.”
“He’s something totally different, he was looking to be rescued.” Sasuke rolled his eyes. “Is that person looking to be rescued too?”

Kakashi stayed silent for a few moments, he crossed his hands over his chest and turned to look back towards the village, towards the Hokage mountain. “Maybe… they need to be saved. Maybe Naruto can do that, save them make them whole again.” He muttered.

“Naruto?” Sasuke questioned. Kakashi looked back towards him again and coughed.

“Ah well, we can ask Naruto the particulars when he comes back. You know it isn’t like he was dragged along you know. He wanted to go, there is something in it for him too.”

“You mean the council bribed him?” Sasuke demanded, he shook his head. “How much money is he getting for this mission?”

“Well it isn’t exactly like that.” Kakashi coughed. “Listen, I’m sure Naruto will be back soon, he is used to travelling. I’m certain it won’t be longer than two more weeks.”

“Two more weeks?” Sasuke demanded in disbelief. “Where the hell are they going?” Kakashi’s shrug made him seethe. “Their destination is a secret too?”

“I think it is more like they learn where they are going as they go along.” Kakashi shrugged. “It’s a bit of a hunt Sasuke. Finding people who don’t want to be found is a pretty tough job.”

Sasuke slung the towel over his shoulder as he reconsidered Kakashi’s words. He wondered if Naruto’s going along was more because he knew the ways of people running who did not want to be found. After all he had been gone for a while and he had picked up things from his group, granted some those skills had to be rusty. The secrecy about the mission still left a bad taste in his mouth but there was not much he could do about that. Konoha had already decided not to tell, hopefully Naruto could. Or hopefully he showed something Sasuke could make sense of.

XxX

The village might sound like a well-oiled wheel but those who really understood how a shinobi village worked knew better. They knew the chaos that lay in plain sight and hidden deep under.

Hiruzen had led them twice given them peace and order, with him fallen the village had to be held together by those who still remembered. Those who knew and understood the meaning and history of the village, who understood the meaning of Konoha and why Konoha had to remain strong. Who had faced the battles of before and understood the lessons given.

Tsunade was a better candidate but not the one they had picked. It mattered not whether she gave in or not. Jiraiya would return with or without her and if she refused Jiraiya would ascend because he could understand. He felt love for the village and he understood what was needed.

Tsunade was power, respect and symbolism but Jiraiya was power, respect and unity. Shinobi would fall into line immediately. His links to the Sandaime and to the Yondaime made him the best candidate in the eyes of not only them, the council but the lords as well. Any of the two remaining loyal Sannin would best serve the village.

They all had their doubts but if anyone could change the mind of a member of the headstrong Sannin it was a member of that same Sannin group. The council would take whichever head but they would still remain. The village had to be guided to the ideal future.

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“Time to go!” Naruto spluttered and shoved the rest of the bun into his mouth at the happy declaration from Tsunade baa-chan.

“At least wait until the kid manages to chew and swallow Tsunade.” Ero-sennin scolded. “You are the one that wanted to stock up on snacks and trinkets before we left.”

“Naruto-kun!” A sharp pat to his back, set Naruto to rights. He smiled up into the concerned face of Shizune who held the pig to her chest with one hand. “We’re not rushing off right away we are walking. No need to rush.”

“Let’s get back to Konoha already!”

“Tsunade-sama!”

“Fine words from someone who was so busy heading in the opposite direction of Konoha.” Ero-sennin muttered. “Oh, how things change in a matter of days.”

Naruto was unable to add anything due to the bun lodged in his mouth but he tugged his bag tighter to his back as he hurried after the adults walking the road, their longer legs already making distance. He was happy to go back too, back to Konoha, where she would help the Sandaime, Lee and Naruto would be back with his team again. The necklace bounced against his chest as he sped up and with his cheeks full of food a happy smile was on his face. Time to go back.

XxX

“Finally.” Naruto breathed as they paused by the gate. It was early morning, very early morning. The moon was still high in the sky but they had made it back. All five of them, the pig was definitely included.

“We could have stayed overnight at the small town.” Ero-sennin muttered.

“I still have some debt there.” Tsunade baa-chan snapped. “We were fine walking, nothing we haven’t done before.”

“Well we can rest now can’t we?” Shizune had wandered closer to the gate and pressed a hand against it. “Konoha hasn’t changed much.”

“ Barely looks like it has been attacked.” Tsunade baa-chan muttered. “You did a better job fighting off Suna than I thought.”

“Outward damage was mostly repaired.” Ero-sennin pointed out as the guards at the gate noted them. “Damage still remains on the insides. It is going to take some time before Konoha looks the same and a while before it runs smoothly. Paperwork is stacking up.”

“I have to admit I’m surprised no one made a run for Hokage and instead insisted on me.” Tsunade baa-chan peered at the empty streets as they walked. “It has been a long time.”

“Well there were some suggestions. Mostly me.” Ero-sennin shrugged. “But that was never my path and when the council heard about it being possible to bring you back they abandoned all thoughts of me instead. Higher ups love the idea too.”

“Oh, so that is how it is.” Tsunade baa-chan looked behind her. “Wedged in on all sides huh?”

“I’d only take the Hat to avoid disaster Tsunade we weren’t quite there yet. The shadows are still yet.” Ero-sennin glanced towards the Hokage mountain. “I’m glad we don’t require me yet.”
“Of all people, your heart is in the right place, even if your mind is full of filth.” Tsunade baa-chan teased. Naruto glanced longingly in the direction of his apartment but he shoved the urge to go there down. The mission was not over yet. It was not just bring her to Konoha. It was to get her to heal the Sandaime and Lee too. Also, to become Hokage but that would not happen right away, the council would be the ones to do all that. Naruto just had to make sure she met with them. When she did the other stuff, then his job would be done. Mission complete.

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“When I look from here, it really looks like the village has changed since I’ve been gone.” Tsunade leaned against the railing of the Hokage’s office. “Starting from now my responsibilities will be that of the Godaime.”

“I’m amazed you were able to persuade her.” An old man in glasses muttered to Ero-sennin.

“A handsome devil like myself only needs charm to bring down the mightiest of beasts.” Ero-sennin gloated with a laugh. Naruto rolled his eyes at him at the ridiculous boast. The old man had gotten poisoned and had almost died from it. That was not success or charm in Naruto’s eyes.

“Well then I guess it is about time to gather the local lords.” The old woman who had accompanied the other man said. Her eyes were shrewd her hair tidy and prim, and her tone blunt. “Aoba, Genma.” Naruto startled at her words, he was surprised to see the two men step forward. One he had definitely seen during the fight in the stands. The one she called Aoba, he had been spotted talking to Kakashi-sensei and Shisui as well. Genma, well he was pretty much everywhere Team Seven was in the village when they lingered too long. He had been the referee back then too, that Naruto had not even sensed him was spooky. “Announce this to the village.” She finished, Naruto blinked as the two men nodded and verbally agreed.

“Wait just a minute!” Naruto raised his hand to interrupt what was happening before his eyes. “Tsunade baa-chan has some things to take care of first before she does all this!” He pointed out. “I didn’t tag along with Ero-sennin just for the sights you know.”

“Sarutobi-sensei and your friend right?” Tsunade baa-chan played with the ends of her hair. “I sort of forgot about that. Let’s take a quick look shall we? It’s morning now they shouldn’t mind me taking a peek.”

“Even if you can’t finish them all at once at least start before the circus begins.” Naruto scowled. “You will barely have anytime afterwards.”

“How right you are.” Tsunade baa-chan chuckled. “Lead the way then.”

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The only sound was their shoes on the steps down from the roof with Naruto leading the way. He was eager to get the old woman to do what she had been brought to Konoha to do. Or at least what he had left Konoha assuming she had been brought back to do. The rest had been a surprise but he was mostly over it now, he wanted her to get to work and he wanted to save his words for nagging if she decided to linger.

He had just gotten to the bottom of the steps that led from the steps and had paused by the entrance leading to the Hokage offices and rooms when he heard the sound of steps coming up and a startled sound. Then he heard his name. “Is that you Naruto?”

Shikamaru sounded surprised but not as surprised as Naruto to see him. By Shikamaru’s side
his father stood his hands in his pocket his eyes on his son with a half amused half curious look. That was until he glanced over to Naruto and then beyond him. Then his eyes widened in shock before it carefully melted away. That was a high-class shinobi for you.

“What are you doing here?” Shikamaru pressed on.

Naruto squinted at the focused look on Shikamaru’s face. He knew he had earned maybe a look of confusion but that intense focus? He had not done anything lately for Shikamaru to be so focused on him like that. “I was going to ask you the same thing.” Naruto pointed out. “Only thing around here in the ninja registration and I don’t think you’re going there.”

“You’re right, sort of.” An irritated look passed over Shikamaru’s face. “I’m here to take care of some annoying business.”

“But that doesn’t really clear it up you know.” Naruto pointed out. “To you every business is annoying isn’t it?”

“Er-“ The stutter from Shikamaru’s father made Naruto look away from Shikamaru’s gaze to look at the man in a half bow. “How are you, Jiraiya-sama, Tsunade-sama.”

“You mean they really are special? Even Ero-sennin?” Naruto hissed quietly. Shizune barely muffled a snort in time.

“Hm?” Tsunade baa-chan stepped past him. “Aren’t you from the Nara clan? Are you taking care of your deer? They make good medicine.” She launched right into a conversation with Shikamaru’s father replying with extreme politeness that made Naruto’s jaw drop.

“Oi Naruto.” Shikamaru hissed as he stepped closer. “Who is that nee-chan with the self-important attitude?”

“She’s the new Hokage.” Naruto whispered back. Shikamaru’s eyes had barely started to widen from the shock before he continued on. “And although she looks young she’s really fifty!”

“How- “Shikamaru cut himself off to glance behind him.

“We’ll be seeing you later!” Tsunade baa-chan had apparently finished the conversation. “I have plenty of things I want to make and have in reserve so I’ll be looking for help from your clan!”

“Shikamaru! We’ll have to catch up again soon.” Naruto laughed.

“Wait Naruto.” The grab to his wrist startled him even though he had watched it happen. “Why are you with them?”

“Long story.” Naruto laughed. He laughed again at the look of confused frustration on Shikamaru’s face. “We’ll have to catch up about that. We’re going to the hospital now. Tsunade baa-chan has to do something there!” He did not wait for Shikamaru to reply, he easily slipped out of the other boy’s grip, nodded to Shikamaru’s Dad before he dashed to where the group had walked forward to.

“Another of your little friends?” Tsunade baa-chan chuckled.

“Yeah.” Naruto answered. “He’s really smart, it is cool. Can be sort of lazy too but that’s fun too.”

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“Tsunade-sama!” Gai-sensei’s relief could be felt from where he stood. Naruto hung back as the man did his best to hustle her down the hallway. He wanted to follow but decided it best to at least wait a few moments before he continued to join them.

Gai-sensei had been so sad, so obviously devastated but he was filled with nervous hope. She was the best and it seemed everyone knew it. Naruto could only hope that the best was enough.

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“I don’t know any of those medical terms baa-chan.” Naruto said softly from the doorway. Lee glanced up his face pale, Gai-sensei’s face was full of devastation and anger. Tsunade baa-chan looked sad but firm. “So I want you to lay out for me what has to be done for Lee and what you can do, then I want you tell me what you would like to do and what you wish you can do.” Her gaze locked with his. “Then we are going to figure out how to get you what you might need and whether Lee wants to take the risk or not.”

“Naruto-kun.” Lee swallowed and looked away.

“Fine then kid.” Tsunade baa-chan crossed her hands under her chest. “Right now, the chances are fifty-fifty. Too even. He could die, there is a higher chance of him dying than I would like.”

“Understandable.” Naruto nodded. He ignored the squeak that came from Gai-sensei. “Is it because of the damage or because of how his body works?”

“A bit of both.” Tsunade baa-chan sighed. “If I could mimic in my body and in his something that I’ve seen recently I know he’ll have a better chance. Might make the chance fifty-five to fifty. Then I would operate. Even at fifty-one I would operate. But giving up being a shinobi is the safer bet than risking it on the table.”

“Which is why when everything is prepared it becomes Lee’s decision.” Naruto pointed out. “We won’t take it away from him but we won’t give up early either. I went to find you because you’re the best. You don’t get that way by not taking risks baa-chan.”

“You don’t live this long without learning which are the foolish risks.” She shot back.

“You don’t get to live someone’s life for them. You don’t make decisions others have to live with when you could let them make a choice.” He narrowed his eyes at her. “What exactly do you need?”

She paused. “Some time to look over some things maybe. Some cases, maybe some subjects. A few tests.” Her voice had fallen into a low mutter. “The pulled files of a few genin. The medical files and of course maybe some restricted notes confiscated by some… persons of interest.”

“What can we give you?” Naruto questioned. “Lee can donate blood and do any training you think will be necessary.”

“I think some time would do me the best good.” Tsunade baa-chan muttered. “And once he follows his nurse’s instructions and doesn’t push it. He should be fine. This is no guarantee you know.”

“Lee?” Naruto’s eyes left Tsunade baa-chan’s to find the gaze already on him. “It’s going to be your call, now and later. Right now, it is fifty-fifty. We can try to see if we can change any of that but if we can’t you have to decide what you are going to do. Higher percentage or not you’ll be putting your life on the line either way. Any of the ways will be preparing to sacrifice something bushy brows.”
“We are prepared to give up our lives already, I still have things I want to do.” Lee gritted. “There are still things I want to prove! Places I want to go! Shinobi to me is not what I do but who I am and my way of shinobi can only be shown. My youth, whether it ends here or not I want to continue to see it through!”

“Lee!” Gai-sensei’s throat sounded hoarse.

“There you have it Baa-chan looks like we have some planning ahead huh.” Naruto smiled as he shoved the door open fully. “But bushy brows isn’t your only patient you know? Time to go, you’ll be coming back another time.”

“Naruto.” Gai-sensei had tears in his eyes. “Thank you.”

“I’m not the medical nin.” Naruto pointed out. “I was just the person they picked to look for her.”

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“There you are Ero-sennin.” The moment Naruto slid back the door he was relieved to see the white hair in the window. “I thought a pretty nurse had distracted you or something.”

“Will you ever let me have a bit of dignity?” Ero-sennin sighed. His head tilted towards the large machines and huge bed. The old man Sandaime looked so small on it with the various machines he was hooked up on. The mask that helped him breathe, the tubes in his hands. Naruto had never seen him so frail before.

He had always been in the robes for Naruto. An imposing figure that radiated warmth from time to time. The frail man on the bed was someone Naruto knew but found hard to recognize.

Hands on his shoulders reminded him that he was blocking the door so he quickly stepped in and aside as Tsunade baa-chan swept in. Her gaze went directly to the bed and her hand raised halfway to her chest as a regretful look spread over her face. By the time she had started to walk towards the bed the look had carefully melted away.

“He’s worse off than I thought he would be.” She said softly. She picked up the notes hanging on the end of the bed but barely ruffled through them before she moved to his side instead. “You’ve gotten into quite the predicament sensei. Never thought I’d see you like this.”

“It’s an improvement.” Ero-sennin muttered. “He was far worse before.”

“I see.” Her hands brushed the top of the Sandaime’s head. “He seems even older than before.”

“Baa-chan.” Naruto said slowly. He watched Shizune go to the other side of the bed. “Can you do anything?”

“This may take some time.”

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Tsunade baa-chan was a strong healer, the force of her chakra filled the room and even beyond it. It moved things and she took that energy and focused it. With help of course. Shizune’s eyes were closed tightly as she concentrated on the seal that hovered above the Sandaime’s chest. A diamond seal with a cat eye in the middle filled with inscriptions.

Naruto had been unable to do anything but stand there and watch the women work. He had no doubts that they were being as careful as they could be directing the healing energy, time ticked on
and the cat eye opened wider and wider, growing wider and darker.

Naruto’s mouth was dry as he waited, soon Tsunade’s and Shizune’s hands joined together and the seal dispersed. Their hands lingered together bathed in green light pressed above the old man’s chess before the light faded and their hands fell away.

Shizune took a step back and Ero-sennin’s arm came around her to steady her. Naruto stepped forward when Tsunade baa-chan removed the Sandaime’s mask and slowly pulled a tube from his mouth. He forced his dry lips to move. “Tsunade baa-chan? Is the old man going to be okay?”

She had barely gotten to put the apparatus aside and look at him before a shifting on the bed froze them all. Naruto’s breath caught in his throat when the Sandaime’s eyes slowly opened. It was just a slit before they closed again, then they opened wider the next time. Naruto felt his heart leap when the old man’s eyes focused on the woman next to him. “Tsunade?” It was a voice hoarse from disuse but still was the distinguishable voice of the Sandaime.

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“Sarutobi-sensei.” Her voice was low as she looked down at the confused man looking up at her. “It’s been a long time.”

“How…” The Sandaime’s voice was hoarse. “Are you really here?”

“Do you think you are dead?” Tsunade baa-chan’s voice was highly amused. “I’m here, you are alive Sensei and Konoha is fine. Mostly fine.”

“I never thought you would return to the village.” The Sandaime croaked. “What made you… what encouraged you to return?”

“Don’t you think I would come to give you a little healing?” She teased. “There isn’t anyone like me anywhere in this world.”

“I thought the healing you would have focused on would have been yourself Tsunade.” Wires shifted as he tried to move his hand. “It’s good to see you. A welcomed surprise even though it is rather hard to believe. The village? Have you been informed?”

“Yes, she has.” Ero-sennin spoke up. “I brought her back with plenty of help Sensei. She’s been brought up to date and you would be surprised about the healing she has gone through.”

“Tsunade has always exceeded expectations.” The Sandaime coughed. “Who has been taking care of construction? The state of the village? Words from other villages? Has the Kazekage sent word?”

“The Yondaime Kazekage was killed by Orochimaru.” Tsunade baa-chan said softly. “They are currently leaderless.”

“I feared it might have been so.” The Sandaime sighed. “Orochimaru?”

“Gravely injured.” Ero-sennin answered. “He won’t be using his arms anytime soon for jutsu. He may never use them again but he does have skilled helpers.”

“Foolish boy.” The Sandaime sighed. “Tsunade, the village and I have missed you.”

“I know, I’ve missed the village too.” Tsunade baa-chan sighed. “Sensei, I have some unexpected news as well. “I’ll be the Godaime.”
“Hokage?” The Sandaime’s hoarse voice croaked. “You? Tsunade?” His voice faded away and silence reigned in the room. “It is surprisingly fitting.” He whispered. “You are one of the best fitted and your heart knows the will. Or at least I hope it still does even after all this time.”

“Humph. Not sad about her stealing your seat while you were asleep old man?” Ero-sennin prodded.

“No, I returned after the death of the Yondaime. I had always planned to step down when faced with a worthy successor. Sadly, I thought I would have had to wait until certain generations grew up. Or hoped in times of necessity the right people would have stepped forward, this outcome I’m proud of.”

“Well it may not have happened if it hadn’t been for a certain loud mouth ninja.” Tsunade baa-chan looked back at him and motioned him forward. “Imagine my surprise when Jiraiya popped up with this brat right beside him. I can barely remember the last time someone was rude to me like that. Even Jiraiya treats me with kid gloves most of the time the helpless perv.”

“Naruto-kun.” The amazement in the Hokage’s voice made Naruto shift uncomfortably. He watched the man look him up and down as a smile spread across his face. “You brought Tsunade back to the village? Well done.” Naruto’s throat clenched up. “You have made me and the village very proud, Tsunade is exactly what the village will need during these times.” A smile came to the old man’s face. “You should be proud of everything that you have managed to accomplish these last few weeks Naruto.”

“You certainly should be proud Sensei.” Ero-sennin laughed. “This kid played a vital part in the original fight. He and his team did better than anyone expected them to be able to do. Talk to Kakashi and find out.”

“Well isn’t he supposed to be a genius?” Tsunade pointed out. “You can only expect good things from a team under Kakashi.”

“That man has good army skills, good small group skills? It depends of the group Tsuna.” Ero-sennin scolded. “Brat is still vulnerable and reckless.”

“Regardless.” The Sandaime interrupted with a croak. “I’m proud of you Naruto-kun and your hard work. Thank you.”

There was a warm fuzzy feeling in his gut fighting to escape. What else could he say? How could he even get his mouth to move? His face felt hot as he nodded and met the Sandaime’s eyes. “I did what I had to.” He muttered. “I didn’t know that baa-chan was going to be the Hokage when I took the mission but I did want to get her to help you and Lee.”

“And even that is more than fine.” The Sandaime smiled. “Thank you Naruto-kun.”

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It was about time for him to leave, the atmosphere among the adults had gotten serious. As much as he wanted to learn and snoop he did have a shred of decency and sympathy left. And who knew? Maybe they wanted to catch up on some old times and compare near death experiences.

It was good to see the Sandaime awake, it was good to see him smile. It had been so long since Naruto had seen him. In his head, he guessed he had already gotten used to the thought of the man being gone he had just been preparing himself deep inside. He was glad he did not have to say goodbye just yet. He was glad the man had survived.
“Konohamaru?”

“You can’t just bring somebody to be Hokage!” He yelled, his eyes were wide his scarf rumpled. “Jii-chan isn’t dead! You can’t… he isn’t… you can’t just get another Hokage.”

Naruto had not exactly forgotten about Konohamaru but the boy had been holding up fairly well in his opinion. Then again, the surprise news of Tsunade baa-chan would throw anyone off. Naruto could not blame him for the outburst.

Naruto glanced behind Konohamaru where two Chuunins stood. He shook his head when the two men tried to reach for Konohamaru and stepped forward himself. He gently ruffled Konohamaru’s hair and waited until the boy stopped sniffling to look at him.

“You’re right about some of those things.” Naruto admitted softly. “The Sandaime Hokage isn’t dead and I guess you can’t just bring in anybody to be Hokage either.”

“Naruto nii-chan.” Konohamaru sniffled.

“Tsunade baa-chan isn’t just anybody though.” Naruto sighed. “She’s an incredible medical nin and she is going to be the new Hokage but she also helped the Sandaime recover. He isn’t dead and he should be just fine.”

“Jii-chan?” Naruto eased to the side so that Konohamaru could see the Sandaime that had managed to sit up. “Jii-chan!”

“I think the old man Sandaime is the best person to explain things.” Naruto admitted. “But he’s still alive the old man. No one is going to forget him. We’ve got a lot to be grateful for when it comes to him. The village loves him and because we do we want the old man to get some proper rest. Retirement isn’t such a bad thing you know.”

“Konohamaru.” The Sandaime sounded amused. “Come here.” The words had barely left his mouth before Konohamaru had slipped past Naruto and flung himself mostly on the bed. The old man had to be weak but he still managed to get his arms enough to hug the boy crying on him. Konohamaru’s tears were that of relief and joy.

It was strange that the scene was right in front of him but it felt almost miles away at the same time but he was happy for them. He had a tight feeling in his chest. Instead of speaking and disturbing them, Naruto slipped out the door and closed it gently behind him.

XxX

“It’s the ends of time when you can get a Nara willing and early.” Genma snorted as he opened the door to find Shikaku already waiting.

“We have things to do, the quicker we get it done the quicker I can do something better.”

“Sounds more like he was kicked out and has to hurry back home very soon.” Asuma chuckled.

“Maa you know he was, can’t wait to take care of business.” Kakashi pointed out as he took a seat. Genma eyed the ceiling Kakashi had dropped down from and shook his head.
“Kakashi-san you, not only are you early but you have talk for Shikaku-san?” Aoba shook his head.

“All of you like to run your mouths that certainly haven’t changed.” The door opened to reveal two members of the council and more Jounins. “It is past time for this meeting to begin.”

“You’ll tell Gai what he missed?” Asuma whispered to Kakashi.

“Obviously.” Kakashi snorted. “He won’t miss much we already know why we are here.”

“Or you think you do.” Shisui folded his arms before he nodded at Genma. “We’ve all delivered our reports. We have all gone over with a fine comb and made our own special remarks.”

“This is about what I think it is about?” Kurenai frowned.

“Konoha took a blow during the Chuunin exams.” Koharu Uatatane announced. “We had many losses, the exams were ruined but even in the destruction something useful was discovered.”

“Most of the genins could be considered not fully ready for the responsibility before them.” Homura Mitokado picked up. “However, there are those that played a big part to assisting Konoha and in those that played a big part, there are the genins that showed what it truly means to be a shinobi and a Chuunin.”

“All that made it to the final stage stood out in their own way even if they lost. In many cases the loss itself was pretty amazing.” Genma mused. “Some showed the power that they controlled along with a good mind, passion and determination. I would have to say that I saw resolve and dedication shown after the exam in the battle.”

“I would also say so.” Aoba replied.

“The genins did exceptionally well, all that could fight that is.” Itachi said softly.

“Yes they all did well.” Homura nodded. “But the ones that were distinctly exceptional, we can all agree, can’t we?”

“Five names were put forward.” Koharu announced. “We the council went over them and the reports, we read over the Hokage observations and wishes. This set of business is of great importance to Konoha.”

“The first, Nara Shikamaru.” Homura observed the room before he spoke. “The second –“

XxX

“I’m surprised you rooted so hard for them.” Kakashi pointed out. Genma shrugged in response. “Shikamaru was a given but I didn’t know your admiration for my little monsters went that far Genma-kun.”

“She’s already a Chuunin.” Genma pointed out. “She just needs the jacket to prove it, she already thinks like a squad leader. Raidou and Shisui have been keeping an eye on her and the team. They agree with me.”

“Not that I don’t agree, Sakura has potential and she showed tremendous growth. Physically and mentally.”

“The good thing the mess of the Chuunin exam gave them, that growth, that development and it
opened their eyes.” Raidou said softly. “In time and training she’ll become a fine Chuunin then
Jounin.”

“Already seeing her future?” Kakashi laughed. “She’s a strong ninja, she’ll only become stronger
with her team and because of her team. She found what she needs to protect.”

“She just needs to learn the various ways she can.” Genma laughed. “Training is one way, she’s a
smart girl. Give her access to resources and she will find her way.”

Kakashi eyed the shinobi in the room. “Just how closely have you guys been watching my team?
And I do mean the ones that you aren’t supposed to be paying attention to.”

“Sasuke is family.” Shisui shrugged. “Just in case you missed stuff you know? I mean I’m already
watching little Uzumaki.”

“You know it is supposed to be Jounin in charge not Jounins and the village in charge.” Kakashi
pointed out. “We may have one exception to the rule…” He eyed Shisui. “And there may be some
needed observation for one, from a distance… but not to the extent that I’ve been hearing and
observing.” Shisui glanced at Itachi in an exaggerated manner. “Shisui I already know Itachi or his
team isn’t the one playing Santa.”

“Now now Kakashi.” Asuma chuckled. “You can’t blame them for getting a little attached, after
such a long chase I guess it is hard to say goodbye.” Not exactly what Kakashi wanted to hear. He
himself found it hard to accept that the look was over, it was hard to accept that the taste of failure
no longer had to be in his mouth and throat.

“It should be done slowly, soon the time will come where there is only acceptance.” Itachi crossed
his arms as his gaze lingered on Genma. “We can’t rush them we can only subtly guide them. They
must find the way on their own in their own time. It is the generation before us wish for us and the
wish we carry for future generations. Even though it very rarely works well.”

“Yet.” Asuma and Shisui interrupted. Shisui laughed and continued. “Already it is better than
before, it must only get better.”

“And it will start from here.” Asuma nodded. “I think it is time to let Shikamaru and Sakura know
the news.”

XxX

“Is that you Shikamaru?” Sakura frowned as she rounded the corner. Shikamaru stood his hands in
his pockets with a bored expression on his face.

“Sakura now?” Shikamaru sighed when he spotted her. “When will this day be over.” He took his
hands out of his pockets and looked her over. “Why are you here?”

“Funny…” She murmured. “I was going to ask you the same question.” She glanced past him to
the closed door. “But I guess you were summoned here too?”

“Yeah.” Shikamaru glanced at the door. “They are going to tell me when I can enter. Or I guess
when both of us can enter. Obviously, it isn’t a mission, we wouldn’t be in this part of the building
if it were.”

“My parents wouldn’t have been notified if it were a mission.” Sakura agreed, she played with the
ends of her hair before she sighed and reached into her pocket for a ruffle. She absentmindedly put
her hair into a bun and felt her body relax. She felt so tense about the entire thing.
“My Dad dragged me along.” Shikamaru muttered. “It’s been a long morning.”

“It certainly has.” She agreed, yet another day without word. “I was supposed to train around this time but I’ll have to put it off.”

“You can train with your team anytime.” Shikamaru frowned. “What’s so special about today?”

“Oh…” Sakura laughed. “I wasn’t training with Sasuke-kun or Kakashi-sensei. I was training with Tenten. You’ve seen her right?”

“I remember her.” Shikamaru nodded. “I didn’t know you two were friends like that.”

“You could say we made a connection.” Sakura smiled. “We’ve come to understand that we have a lot in common and she’s pretty cool. Also, I think she needs a break from time to time from her team. Usually they are quite the hot heads.” She said softly.

“Lee.” Shikamaru said softly.

“Yeah.” Sakura admitted. “The energy in her team has shifted. I don’t blame her, I even sort of understand it. Because my team feels a tiny bit out of whack right now with Naruto gone.”

“Wait.” Shikamaru shifted his eyes alert. “Haven’t you-“

“Haruno Sakura, Nara Shikamaru you may enter.” Sakura turned to the door that the voice had come from. It was still closed.

“Guess it is time huh.” She sighed as she stepped past Shikamaru. “You ready?” She asked, on receiving his tight nod she slowly opened the door and froze for a moment at the crowd of shinobi waiting inside. She stepped inside to allow Shikamaru to enter, they stood before the Jounins in the room and remained silent. Shikamaru’s father was there, Kakashi-sensei was there, Asuma-san, Itachi-san, Shisui-san, Genma-san and many other and they were all looking at them. She was unsure on what to do.

“Come in and close the door.” Shikamaru’s father said. “We have something to discuss with you and something to give you.”

XxX

Kakashi-sensei’s pat on the head let Sakura know that not only was it real but that it was really happening. She felt her eyes itch when they brought out the Chuunin jackets, she also felt her heart swoop. It was such an amazing unexpected moment.

She had pretty much thought like everyone else that the Chuunin exam had been scrapped because of the battle that happened. She had never thought that people would have still been picked. She had been making plans for the next Chuunin exams. Missions where Naruto and Sasuke ragged on each other lightly as they talked about the next one. Ino’s hopes for how she wanted to shine in the next one. Sakura herself had been training and making plans for the next one. She had never once thought that she had already made it.

Shikamaru had been surprised too, he had looked from his father to his sensei and back again before a heavy sigh had escaped him. But Sakura had seen his sweat of nervousness when he had thanked the room of Jounins.

Kakashi-sensei had told her she had done a good job before he handed over the jacket. He had
sounded proud, delighted and the pat on the head had been warm. She was so conflicted. She was
delighted to be a Chuunin, she felt a step stronger just by putting on the jacket but for her she could
not help but think that she wanted her team next to her.

Sasuke was not a Chuunin, neither was Naruto. They had said her demonstration during the exams
and the battle was what proved to them that she was Chuunin material but what about her team?
Naruto had dominated his battle, Sasuke had done well in the exams then pursued the enemy.
Naruto had lent assistance and from what she had heard, helped take down Gaara.

What had she done, that they had not? She guessed Kakashi-sensei would be willing to break it
down for her further later but when she moved her shoulders to get accustomed to the weight of the
jacket she felt stronger, deep down inside her she felt pride and accomplishment.

She just might gloat a tiny bit when she saw the other two. Just a bit, a small bit. Make them treat
her when Naruto got back. Things did go better team wise with Naruto around. He brought the fun,
the closeness without any problems. She could not help but wonder how they would react to seeing
her in her jacket. Sasuke had been set on being Chuunin, Naruto seemed intrigued with the whole
thing but she had gone first. Just how would they react?

XxX

It fit rather nice on her. Sakura pushed back the strands of hair that had fallen as she looked down
the mostly empty street. It had happened so fast and her sensei had just disappeared right after, she
had decided that maybe seeing Lee for lunch was a good idea since Tenten would have been busy.

Her feet stopped before her eyes fully registered what she saw. Orange, a bright eye-catching
colour. That was not all of it, she saw blond hair and a familiar figure leaving the hospital. She had
not been prepared, instead she stood her feet rooted as she watched Naruto, her voice was frozen,
she found herself unable to speak. Her hand wanted to reach out but she was only able to keep it
balled up and clutched to her chest.

It had been only a few weeks but it felt longer. She wanted to call out but a feeling nagged at her, a
feeling of uncertainty because she could feel it from where she stood. Naruto’s aura had changed
yet again, the air about him had shifted once more.

The last time she had noticed, rage had consumed him. He looked peaceful, he looked happy but
was it still the Naruto she knew? Was it really and truly Naruto before her eyes? How could she be
sure? She wanted to talk to him, it had only been a few weeks but it felt like more, but her feet
could not move.

But she ended up not having to, blue eyes found her, swept over her before they widened in delight.
“Sakura-chan!” Naruto called, he waved and started to run. Right towards her. His pack slipped off
his shoulders, she stood where she was when he slung his bag to the wayside and ran towards her.
“Sakura-chan!”

“Naruto.” She managed before she was swept up into a tight hug. “Naruto! You’re back.” She
managed to get out while wrapped in a tight hug. She knew she was taller than him, by a little bit
but his grip on her had her feet off the ground and looking down at his head as his head rested in
her middle. “You’re back!”

“What’s with the jacket!” Naruto laughed as he let her back on the ground, his hands gripped her to
hold her a distance apart as his gaze swept over her. “No way, you’re a Chuunin now?” He sounded
delighted. “That’s so cool! Baa-chan and Ero-sennin didn’t tell me or anything! I didn’t even know
if they were still going to pick Chuunins because of how everything ended but the council gotta do
what it can for Konoha huh?” His eyes slid shut and his grin widened. “Sakura-chan, you look
good!”

Her arms were around his neck before she realized her body could move again. He felt so warm. Her jacket pressed against him and it felt bulky. The jacket would take time getting used to it but she needed a hug.

Naruto’s arms wrapped around her waist as he chuckled. “Sakura-chan was the first one to make Chuunin, that’s so cool! Guess you’ll be taking care of me and Sasuke until we catch up right?”

“Thank you.” She managed. “Thank you, I’m so glad you’re back.”

“What are you saying Sakura-chan.” The arms around her waist momentarily tightened. “You guys are here, aren’t you? And I gotta work hard and become Hokage. Speaking of working hard, shouldn’t we treat you to a good dinner?” Naruto pulled back to smile. One hand left her waist to tug at the messy bun on her head. “All of us! Kakashi-sensei included!” His eyes slid to the side. “Well I don’t know if we are going to have time before Baa-chan gets her things ready…” Naruto groaned. “We’ll figure it out!” an apologetic look slid over his face. “Sorry to have to dash though Sakura-chan. I haven’t seen Iruka-sensei yet. Catch you later!” He had just broken away and had jogged to where he had tossed his bag before he turned back to her. “Wait is that what Shikamaru was there for too? Ahh Kakashi-sensei totally called it, that’s not fair.” Naruto groaned as he scooped up his bag. “I think he cheated.” He muttered before he sprinted off.

Sakura felt like a whirlwind had swept past her, but that was just Naruto wasn’t it? A smile slid across her face before she turned around. Naruto was back, she was a Chuunin. She might as well tell the last member of her team the good news.

XxX

Sasuke saw her long before she spotted him. Being in contact with his team the way he had been after the attack on Konoha had sensitized him to them. He picked up their mannerisms from afar no matter how altered it was.

Sakura’s walk was a little different, her entire posture was different but so was her look. Sasuke had been surprised at the smile that came across his face when he saw the green jacket on Sakura. It suited her, he felt a bit of envy but it was mostly covered by pride. It also felt inevitable.

He and Naruto might have gone after a pretty hard hitter, risking life and limbs, a detail Shisui had repeated often with a look on his face that bothered him but Sakura had worked hard too. The way she worked during, as a decoy, a relentless smart decoy. The way she acted afterwards on their missions. Sakura had improved herself and she would keep going. There was a reason that so many Jounins looked at her and smiled, there was a reason why the likes of Iruka and Ebisu nodded when they saw her. Sasuke could not begrudge her the moment. She had earned it.

“What has that smile on your face?” Shisui asked as he exited the police station. He and Itachi had arrived to the meeting with Sasuke’s father late. Not that his Dad had waited. “Oh.” Shisui chuckled. “That’s what caught your eye?”

“It suits her.” Sasuke answered before he started down the steps. “See you Shisui.”

“Sasuke-kun!” She had finally reached him, it was good to see the simple happiness in her eyes. Worry lurked deeper down but she was getting good at hiding it, just as he had gotten good at pretending everything was fine.
“This looks good.” He tapped the shoulder of the jacket. “It suits you.” She did not blush but her smile all the same felt good. It still felt like something was missing, Naruto would have been delighted to see Sakura, she would have felt how he felt. Maybe even more. The boy really needed to get back to Konoha, how long was the mission going to drag on?

“It does look good doesn’t it?” She beamed. “But Sasuke-kun! Guess who I just saw?” He knew the answer before the words left her mouth and he felt his body relax even as his mind sparked in curiosity.

XxX

“I actually forgot about classes.” Naruto laughed to himself as he left the registration building. “I was so excited to see him I forgot about that.” He frowned. “That means Konohamaru must have been skipping.” He shook his head. “But it is a special occasion so Iruka-sensei might let it slide.” His words came to a stop when he saw the two people waiting for him. One he had seen already but it still felt great to see the change in her. The other… well Naruto was happy to see him too. Eager to talk to him too. “Sasuke.”

“Finally you’re back.” Sasuke snorted. “You’ve been keeping us back you know.”

“Sasuke-kun.” Sakura scolded. “Naruto can’t help that he had a mission.”

“Yeah!” Naruto picked up with a laugh. “I mean I was kinda bribed too but what I had to do was really important even though I didn’t know all of that.” He came to a stop before the two of them and smiled at Sakura’s jacket. “This looks good on her doesn’t it Sasuke?”

“It fits.” Sasuke huffed. “It really clicked for me when I saw it. She’s more organized than Kakashi most of the time anyway.”

“Geez give Kakashi-sensei a break.” Sakura rolled her eyes. “He does his own missions and ours too! And we haven’t gotten into that much trouble yet.”

“I can think of a few incidents.” Sasuke muttered. “But taking it slow is a bit too nice, I want to get out there again. We won’t be in that much trouble with a Chuunin on our team.”

“Team Seven won’t be losing to other teams, we got a cool Chuunin on ours. One who actually wants to work hard.” Naruto laughed. “I can’t wait to see Shikamaru in his.”

“Naruto.” His eyes darted over to meet Sasuke’s. “We’re next.”

“Obviously.” Naruto gave Sakura a second warning before he bent down to lift her up from her thighs. The laugh she released echoed around them. “We can’t let Sakura-chan down now can we? Now where we going to celebrate.”

“It can’t be something thrown together.” Sasuke said when Naruto lowered Sakura back to the ground. She lightly ruffled his hair as punishment and Naruto snorted at the gesture. “Let’s plan something for a day off. All of us, not just dinner but a proper event. You don’t make Chuunin every day. It’s to acknowledge her hard work.”

“We’re proud of her.” Naruto agreed. He couldn’t help but smile a little. Sasuke choosing more than a mission or food or time to clean up felt good. They had been feeling more and more like a team lately. Even this part too felt good. It was good to be back, he had maybe gotten cocky and let the new jutsu go to his head. Sakura in the jacket hammered something home for him, he might have a fancy new necklace and jutsu. He might have picked up some people along the way but he was still a long way from becoming the shinobi he needed to be.
“Naruto-kun!” The sound of his name made him turn. Strangely enough he spotted the pig first and Shizune second.

“Shizune nee-chan.” She slowed down her pace when she reached him. “What’s wrong?”

“Sorry, Tsunade-sama and Jiraiya-sama wants you to accompany them.” Her face twisted in apology. “So sorry Naruto-kun.”

And he had thought he had finally gotten away with trailing after them too. “Guess I’ll have to see you guys later.”

“What’s going on?” Sasuke asked as he looked Shizune over. Sakura’s gaze was on the pig, he couldn’t really blame her, the clothes on it took some getting used to.

“I’ll have to explain later.” Naruto grimaced. “We’ll talk later!”

Word had spread fast through the village. Fast among the Jounins at least. It made Kakashi slightly eager though he had stuck to his routine. After seeing Sakura off he still had things to do, as regrettable as it was he had to do it, no ditching. Although the look on Shikaku’s face when he had spread the word made him feel nostalgic Kakashi still had things to do.

“Well isn’t it the little genius.” A soft voice said behind him. “You know, I’m not exactly surprised to see you here.” Kakashi did not turn around, instead he kept his eye on the memorial stone.

“I didn’t think this would be the place you would come to right away.” He felt the warmth of her by his side and finally allowed himself to look. “It’s been a long time Tsunade-sama.” She had not changed a bit, at least not physically. Or maybe he had to correct that. Her face looked the same, just as young as it had been with a new addition to her forehead. She was just as beautiful as before. His gaze lingered on the purple on her forehead before it moved over the rest of her, she hadn’t really changed, however something about her was off, something was missing.

“The brat’s all grown up now.” She smiled. “How does it feel?”

Lonely sometimes, although recently it had gotten better. “Taking it easy is fun.” He answered, he got a snort from her in response. “I’m sort of surprised to see you here. Even though I know they went for you.”

“Jiraiya never could leave people alone.” She sighed. “He always liked interfering in other’s people’s business. Other people, other countries, other villages. He’s such a busy body.” She gave a deep sigh. “He never wanted to be Hokage, he never wanted that sort of greatness, it is a shame because he would have made a pretty decent Hokage, he always cared about those under him and their future but he tied himself to destiny and tried to be humble, he always wanted to be a teacher.”

“He’s a fine one.” Kakashi agreed. “He’s taught the best and brought out the best, he’s a strong man.”

“And now he’s teaching again, or something.” Her eyes danced in amusement. “Your first team and Jiraiya already has his fingers poking in. He didn’t do that with Minato you know, he liked making fun of Minato too much to do that and we were so busy back then.”

“Well, Naruto is a special case.” Kakashi shrugged. “Of all people, Jiraiya-sama has the biggest right to teach him everything he needs to know.”
“I think both of you have that right.” She snorted. “I got to admit, the kid seems adjusted enough, despite all the things that he doesn’t know.”

“The heavier burden a child bares the harder it is to smile.” Kakashi shrugged. “You could say I have experience with that. Some things you should wait to learn. So that you understand what you are hearing, so you can weigh it and forgive.”

“Who does he have to forgive? Minato? Jiraiya?” Her voice softened. “Or you? Shouldn’t you worry about forgiving yourself first?”

“It’s a hard thing to do.” Kakashi shrugged. “Forgiveness doesn’t come easy. The past will always remain, reminding you of mistakes. Reminding you of your foolish past self.” His gaze went back to the stone.

“Reminding you of better times.” She corrected. “Of past dreams, of possible futures and of hope.” She chuckled lighty. “You’re still as gloomy as ever.”

“You’ve changed.” Kakashi looked back to her. “It’s been a long time but I can say now you’ve changed.”

“I found something.” She winked at him. “And you better get used to the change, I’ve got a promise to see through.” Her gaze went to the stone. “I’m a gambler you know, I can’t resist a good bet and I made one that I have to see through.”

“What is it?”

Her grin grew wider. “Wait and see Kakashi. Just wait and see, I suppose you’ve heard the news? Keep your eyes open. You’re a genius aren’t you? You should be able to put it together quickly.” Kakashi watched her turn and walk away from him curiously. When she got to the tree she stopped. “A new wind is blowing Kakashi.” She turned to smile at him. “It's changing all of us.”

XxX

There was a new wind indeed, something Konoha desperately needed. Something that had been missing and it was not alone, that wind was bringing change, it was bringing hope. It was bringing colour and it had only taken Uzumaki Naruto to do it.

Kakashi finally knew what had been missing when he had spotted Naruto entering his apartment. It had only been a second but it had been enough for him. The glint of blue around Naruto’s neck. He would never doubt Jiraiya again. The man knew people and he knew what he was doing. Taking Naruto along, mostly bribing him had turned out to be the smartest idea ever. It had gotten Tsunade involved in the village again, involved in the progress of the village. Made her come alive again. She was still the woman that had suffered many horrific losses but she carried a lighter weight on her shoulders as well as a new dream.

How could he be surprised? The village had changed many years ago. With the first tragedy, the Yondaime’s death, then a few years later tragedy again with Naruto going missing. Now he was back, things were still happening but things were turning for the better.

Tsunade as Hokage? Tsunade healing? It could only get better from this point. With Jiraiya in the village more often things had already taken a turn for the better. With a Sannin in the village full time and the Sandaime going back into retirement. It was already good.

Tsunade would have all the support she needed, she already had made quite the impression on
those who did not know her.

There really was a new wind coming. Kakashi was all for change, once the past mistakes would not repeat he was all for it. Still it felt good to see Naruto back in the village, it made his chest relax. It stopped the noise in his head and soothed the fear.

That feeling would most likely never go away. He could ignore it, he could pretend it was all fine. He could bury it in the back of his mind all he wanted but it was still there like everything else. He had to learn from it and do everything he could to not repeat it. Easier said than done.

Besides, no matter how he felt, how Jiraiya most likely felt they could not ignore the other rules and the other laws. To those not in the know their true feelings looked suspicious. To those who did not know, they did not have the right to want to cling so tightly.

But he had watched from the shadows for so long. Kakashi wanted to take the chance, the council and the Sandaime had given him them as a team. Kakashi knew they worked good together, with guidance, with faith they could become something incredible. He wanted to help them there without the warnings hanging around his neck.

He wanted to get even closer to his team but that would take time. Kakashi knew better than anyone that time was something people rarely had.

XxX

“Kakashi-sensei!” Naruto had just escaped Tsunade baa-chan, Ero-sennin and Shizune again. He had to see them again first thing in the morning, something he was resigned to. Just not looking forward to, who could blame him? He had gotten what he wanted and what he had promised to do, getting baa-chan as Hokage had never been in his plans.

“Naruto.” Kakashi-sensei’s relief made him smile at the man waiting for him at the end of the street. “Welcome back.”

“It’s good to be back.” He blurted out. “Did you talk to Gai-sensei?”

“Gai?” His sensei’s eye narrowed at him before he glanced over his shoulder. “I didn’t get to have a long conversation with him…” He looked back to Naruto cautiously. “Why?”

“Baa-chan.” Naruto cut himself off with a wave of his hand. “I mean Tsunade the woman we went to find, before I left… I went because I wanted her to help Lee, not just the Sandaime.”

“Lee…” Kakashi-sensei swallowed. “So he…”

“It’s a wait and see situation.” Naruto admitted. “He could die in the surgery but we’re going to help out to raise the odds. She’s really amazing.” He couldn’t help his smile. “She’s helping him.”

“It looks like you had quite the adventure.” Kakashi-sensei strolled closer his eye on Naruto’s throat.

“Miss me?” Naruto asked.

“Every day.” His sensei admitted. “I like the necklace.” His gloved hand hesitated before he tapped it lightly. “It suits you.”

“Really?”
“More than you know.” Kakashi-sensei’s eye closed in a smile. “It looks like it belongs on you.” His eye reopened and locked on him. “I’d love to know how you managed to get it someday.”

“Nothing special, baa-chan has quite the temper.” Naruto admitted as he rubbed the back of his head with one hand. “We didn’t get off to the best start you know. We were both mad at each other and then we got into a fight and I really really wanted to land a good one on her.” Naruto chuckled. “Then she bet me that I couldn’t do something and started railing on Ero-sennin and that made me even more mad you know? Then she bet the necklace and I didn’t want it at first but Ero-sennin convinced me.” He smiled as his voice lowered. “I was even more convinced after Shizune nee-chan talked to me about it. It fits me, even gave me an idea on what to do.”

“You mean you aren’t done?” Kakashi-sensei questioned softly.

“Of course not. I’ve barely begun.” Naruto touched the necklace with his fingers. “This is the beginning. I’ve gotten stronger, I’ve learned some things.” He admitted softly. “And I’m back now.” He glanced back up at the man in front of him. “I’ve got plenty of work to do.” Then he remembered. “Um… I kinda have something for you. Gave Sasuke and Sakura-chan their stuff already although I have to get her something for becoming a Chuunin now.” He laughed to himself. “I’ll have to think of something.”

“I’ll stop by later.” Kakashi-sensei glanced down the road that led to the academy. “You’re going to Iruka-sensei to invite him out to eat right?”

“Right!” Naruto admitted. “We’re going for ramen before he has to go grade papers and sort out other reports. I have to shout him since I’m back too. Got dragged about by Baa-chan and Ero-sennin all day long.” He muttered.

“Go then, Iruka-sensei missed you as well.” Kakashi-sensei’s gloved hand ruffled his hair before it dropped. “I’m eager to see what you got for me.”

XxX

“Welcome back Naruto.” Iruka-sensei was already waiting for him and the look on the man’s face made Naruto want to run to him to be hugged. Not that being on the road had been that hard. The training had been hard, dealing with Tsunade baa-chan and having to face Orochimaru and Kabuto had been hard but hard in their own way.

Not hard to make him want to break down, just tiring but maybe that was what Iruka-sensei offered. Comfort and warmth and certainly comfort and a person to rest of and maybe ramble to was what Naruto needed.

After he heavily edited it of course. Iruka-sensei still was not prepared for his fully uncensored mouth. Sure, things slipped from time to time but not any of the stuff that the man would lose his shit over. He already stressed too much about the sessions that Naruto really wanted to stop.

“I’m back!” He grinned. “Did you hear about Tsunade baa-chan?”

“We all did.” Iruka-sensei smiled. “We’ll talk about it over ramen. I’m paying for exactly three bowls and one of those bowls are mine. So if you’re looking for a ridiculous feast you’ll have to pull your own pocket.”

“Come on.” Naruto laughed. “Iruka-sensei I’m not that bad.”

“My wallet said otherwise.” Iruka-sensei’s arm wrapped around his shoulder. “Now come on, I’ve been hearing things and your name all day. I want to hear it from the source. I’m sure you have a
“But she made me mad!” Most of the ramen slipped out of his mouth at his words. “She shouldn’t have said those things about the Hokages. Just because Ero-sennin wanted to let it slide didn’t mean that I had to right Iruka-sensei?”

“You certainly are off to a rough start if you’re going to be defending the Hokages from everyone.” Iruka-sensei chuckled. “Even from those who knew them.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Naruto grumbled. “I’m going to be better than all of them.”

“I agree with you. You’ve come a long way.” Iruka-sensei lightly tapped his bowl with a smile. “I remember how you wanted to be a shinobi, wanted to become stronger and better. You’ve come a long way. It shows.”

“I am stronger.” Naruto whispered. “I’ve learnt a lot and I’m going to keep learning.” He had to smile at that. “I learned a bit from Ero-sennin during the trip even though he’s a shameless adult.”

“Jiraiya-sama isn’t that bad Naruto-kun.” Iruka-sensei wiped his face with his napkin. “But you got to fight alongside him. I’m relieved you’re okay but it was an amazing experience wasn’t it?”

“All three of them. The Sannin.” Naruto admitted. “They are…” out of his league. “Amazing, it’s so huge they are so powerful. They made a mess of like everything. I thought it was cool what we did but they matched each other. If they were at full strength I bet I wouldn’t have been able to be near them.”

“The Sannins are amazing even though the only ones left for Konoha are Tsunade-sama and Jiraiya-sama.” Iruka-sensei leaned on his elbow to smile at him. “I think they have taken quite a liking to you. Especially Tsunade-sama.”

“I can’t believe a baa-chan so hopeless with gambling is going to be the next Hokage. Sandaime and the council are blind and dumb.” Naruto shook his head. “She doesn’t even hide that she’s so rude and loves money and drinking. That’s gonna be the Hokage for real?” He burst out laughing. “She’s like a kid sometimes.”

“They are fond of you.” Iruka-sensei laughed softly. “They are all looking out for you now.”

“Dragging me around you mean.” Naruto grumbled. “I don’t think it is necessary for me to have to tag along again. The ceremony is something else. Why is it the whole day?”

“The kids will love the chance for the day off and the village gets to participate.” Iruka-sensei laughed.

“Did you talk to Konohamaru?” Naruto questioned.

“He’s better.” Iruka-sensei smiled at him. “He’s grateful that his grandfather will still be around. He isn’t sold on Tsunade-sama just yet.”

“Give him some time. It is all he needs. She’s already won over most the people by turning up.” Naruto grumbled. “But by helping the Sandaime and Lee… she’s gonna look really good in their eyes. Helping the Sandaime I guess. Not many people are going to care about Lee.”

“But you did.”
“How could I not?” Naruto muttered into his soup. “After what I saw, how could I not care? How could I not help? Lee’s something amazing. He shouldn’t end here, no matter what happens he has a lot to offer, he’s someone I want by my side. In the village I dream of.”

XxX

“Yo.” Kakashi-sensei had actually managed to knock and wait. Naruto was a little impressed.

“It’s funny how impressed I get when you do something polite.” Naruto sniffed as he left the door open.

“I’m here to collect a gift.” Kakashi-sensei closed the door behind himself. “You have to be polite when someone went out their way to get something for you. You want to get the present after all you know?”

“Um hmm.” Naruto murmured. He leaned against his table to watch the man scan his apartment. “You’re laying it on sorta thick Sensei.”

“Well, maybe I can’t help it.” Kakashi-sensei said softly. “I really did miss you after all.”

“Missed having me under your eye you mean.” Naruto rolled his eyes at the man. He got an eye grin in return. “You’re going to get it anyway you know. When I saw it… I thought that it suited you in a way.” It had seemed fun before and even funny but now it seemed serious.

He placed the festival mask on the table and stepped away. His eyes watched his sensei as the man stood frozen watching it. Seconds passed, minutes passed and before he could think to move to say anything the man crossed the room to scoop up the mask.

“I love it.” Kakashi-sensei’s voice was hushed. “This must have cost some money Naruto.”

“Not exactly.” He admitted with a soft laugh. “And when I saw it, it kinda fit you know?”

“I’ll have to think of an occasion to wear it.” Kakashi-sensei turned it over studying the mask. “As you know, I’ve hung up most of my masks.”

“One you wear day to day.” Naruto pointed out. “But I like it. I like masks.”

“You like festivals too huh.” Kakashi-sensei mused as he carefully tucked the mask away. “You’ve been doing so much, sharing so much. Sensei is going to have to come up with a way to reward you.”

“The teasing, usually cheapskate sensei?” Naruto snorted. “Besides isn’t being mysterious pretty much all you have going for you? You go about reading that nasty book in public and getting all giggly over it. That mask is helping you.”

“Is it?” Kakashi-sensei shook his head. “I think we’re getting off track and aren’t you the one curious about what lay under that?”

“I can multitask. I can wait too.” Naruto laughed.

“So…” Kakashi-sensei said slowly. “How was the trip? Really?”

“Tsunade baa-chan and I got off to a rough start but we get each other now. Before she was hard and cold, locked away but I think I see what Shizune nee-chan sees in her. Not that I’m going to be like everybody else. She’s going to hand that Hat over to me soon enough.”
“I have no doubt about that.” Kakashi-sensei chuckled. “I trust Jiraiya-sama behaved himself?”

“He got himself poisoned by Baa-chan.” Naruto recalled. “Nearly died for it too according to Shizune nee-chan. Baa-chan said she needed to go lethal in order to keep him down for a while but I think she miscalculated or something.”

“Jiraiya-sama is rather sturdy. Anything else.”

“Having to readjust your views on the world. Of people and bad guys it isn’t easy you know Kakashi-sensei.” Naruto muttered. “I know what is bad but now I know what is worse and how it is worse even while it is similar to something else. I know that sometimes you have to let people go.” He closed his eyes tightly. “Some people don’t have your best interests at heart at all.”

“That’s a funny thing to say.”

“Well I also learned that nice people are the scariest. The ones that make your heart melt, address you so politely. Restrained but strong, looks like there is no saving them after a certain point.” Naruto jolted at the gloved hand that lightly tapped his shoulder. “You know, I’m fine. I knew this. I’m just admitting it now. Acknowledging it now. I’m kind of mad at myself for pretending it wasn’t true. That I didn’t have a suspicion how it would all end.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too.” Naruto breathed. “I can dream however I want, it won’t change the truth. You really can’t force people’s devotion and affections.” He shook his head quickly. “I’m okay with that. I have different things now and I’m understanding better. I’m not angry and that’s a good thing.” He crossed his arms and frowned. “I wonder if those talks I have to do all the time is what is making me feel better.”

“Or it could be you’re getting accustomed to having a home. Having somewhere to return to where people are waiting on you.” Kakashi-sensei volunteered. “Honestly I think it might just be that.”

Where people waited for him, that was not bad at all. “And the number of people keep growing don’t they.” Naruto said softly. He glanced up at his teach and smiled. “First it was Iruka-sensei and the Sandaime. Then Team Seven and all the ANBU guards. Now it’s the ramen shop, Shikamaru’s team, Baa-chan, Konohamaru and friends… Kiba’s team.” He closed his eyes and grinned. “It feels nice you know.”

“Having friends and support is always a nice feeling.” They laughed together in the apartment and the sound echoed to the outside but neither of them were bothered.

XxX

Naruto’s day started long before anyone else’s or at least that was how it felt for him. He had the day off like everybody else but that was in name only. For Baa-chan’s inauguration he had things to do. His hands hesitated over his clothes.

He was not being made Hokage, he might be dragged through the streets as Baa-chan was officially installed in the Hokage mansion but it was not about him, he was just the guy who had been on the mission.

With his decision made he picked up his normal pants and his jacket. It was still dark outside but that was going to change soon. People would wake for the sight of Tsunade baa-chan walking through the streets.
To think Naruto had thought the Chuunin exam parade had been a spectacle. This one was about to be insane.

Hokage was an important position after all and you did not get one often. The next time they had that parade, he wanted it to be him.

Xxx

It was brighter at the gate, Ero-sennin was already there and Naruto was early. Naruto spared a moment to look out the gates to the open road before he looked back to the village.

“You’re early.” Ero-sennin chuckled. “You’re eager?”

“For this to be over with.” Naruto huffed as he crossed his hands over his chest. “Where’s Baa-chan. Don’t tell me she’s going to be late now.”

“She’ll be here.” Ero-sennin smiled. “The congratulatory walk, you know it is not only to have the people familiarize themselves with you but to let you know what you’re working for. A reminder to the Hokage if you will what they have to protect. Not the buildings but the people, their hopes and their livelihoods.”

“I knew that much.” Naruto sighed. “Well I had guessed that but the path is going through some good areas, if it was really about that we should go everywhere.”

“That would take all day wouldn’t it?” Ero-sennin laughed. He tugged at his hair and shook his head. “That would make this whole thing stretch out for days, no this way you walk and the people come to see. They watch, their eyes are on you a weight you can never allow yourself to forget.”

“Shouldn’t you be telling that to Baa-chan?”

“Tsunade has seen many Hokages.” The smile slipped from Ero-sennin. “There are those that would have made magnificent Hokages as well but she knows about the rituals of a Hokage more than many people still alive.”

“Then she should get ready to pass down that knowledge.” Naruto pointed out. “That sounds pretty useful, even necessary.”

“Somehow I feel even that will come in time.” Ero-sennin’s gaze turned to the sky. “She’s the practical decision but it will feel more real when the hat is on her head.”

“Not when we are walking through the streets?” Naruto frowned.

“You’re Hokage to the village when the people accept you. You’re Hokage for real when the hat is on your shoulders and you start the paperwork.” Ero-sennin chuckled.

Xxx

“Finally.” Naruto muttered when Shizune hurried into view Tsunade baa-chan a few steps behind. “Time is precious baa-chan.”

“We’re still early.” She rolled her eyes at him before she smiled up at the gates. “We still have time.”

It was still early but… “Where are the council members?” He had thought that they were going to be tagging along with them during the walk. He had zoned out a bit during the talks but he
remembered that the council members had to present her and everything.

“There was a change of plans.” She pouted for a few seconds. “I don’t need those old codgers with me every step of the way. I can’t shake them off from now on. Jiraiya’s enough.”

“Is she really ready for this?” Naruto loudly whispered to Shizune. He got a loud sigh in response and shrugged himself. “Well let’s start the zig zag path already right?”

“Not exactly.” Ero-sennin chuckled. “We’re going to need to wait a bit more.”

“What the hell are we-“ Naruto cut himself off and groaned. “At this rate, it will be night by the time she gets to the building.”

“We’re aiming for afternoon.” Was Tsunade baa-chan’s quick reply. “You have the day off; don’t tell me you have something to do.”

“Does the phrase ‘spend time with my team’ ring any bells with you?” Naruto hissed. “I’m about to see a Hokage being ordained, why do I have to be in the thing step by step when it isn’t mine yet?” His eyes drifted to the guard hut. “Why do I have to be on parade too when it isn’t my time yet?” His voice had fallen a bit too soft for his liking so he opted to glare at the ground. “Treating me like a guard and I’m not being paid.”

“You have the best seat in the house to watch a historic event.” Tsunade baa-chan patted her chest. “The phrase you should be looking for is thank you.”

“Money.” Naruto said dryly. “I’d rather have money baa-chan.”

“Greedy brat. It’s frightening how money consumes the young brain.” She fake shuddered.

“Oi who are you to talk?” Naruto hissed before a soft pop caught his attention. The orange smoke drifting above the gate quickly faded away. “Is that it?”

“Let’s go.” Ero-sennin smiled. “Shizune you’re not coming right?”

“What?” Naruto demanded. “Shizune nee-chan gets away?”

“Sorry Naruto-kun.” Her relief was in her eyes. “There are still things to be taken care of before Tsunade-sama can put on the robes.”

“You have got to be kidding me.” He complained when Shizune quickly disappeared. “Isn’t it more useful to have Shizune nee-chan that’s been with Tsunade baa-chan this whole time than me who she just met behind her during the walk?”

“Well it would be nice but she’s going to be there at the end anyway.” Tsunade baa-chan’s eyes dipped to his neck. “And having you along is more than useful.”

“I’m not even being paid.” Naruto groaned. He lightly touched the necklace before he gave another sigh, then he stepped forward to start the long morning.

XxX

The cheering was the strangest thing to him. Not that he had not walked through a cheering crowd before or a thankful crowd before but he had not expected that energy from Konoha directed anywhere near him. Granted it was for Baa-chan but Naruto was still a few steps behind looking at her back and the cheering went on even after she had passed.
It was uncanny. The cheers and crowd had started off small with them able to hear the things others shouted in the beginning. The older people nearly fainting at the sight of her, wishing her well. Thanking everyone for her safe return. That had melted away as the crowd got bigger with shinobi joining in.

Shinobi with small smiles but loud claps. Younger shinobi clambering as close as they could like civilian kids cheering as they swept by. People calling for Ero-sennin as well as Tsunade baa-chan. It was weird for him to watch them a few steps ahead of him side by side waving.

The village had a strange energy to it. The people had a strange energy to them as well. They were happy, they were relieved he guessed they had accepted. Tsunade baa-chan represented a lot to everyone. Something a little different to everyone.

To those who knew of her, she was an important figure from the past. A descendant of the Hokages and a student of the Third. She had served Konoha during its time of need and now she was back to serve again in their time of need. Because Konoha did need help to get properly on its feet and not be hobbled over doing the best it could with missing limbs and parts.

She was a legend to others. The miracle healer, beautiful, strong and smart and inspiration for many shinobi out there. Maybe an inspiration to many female shinobi. She most likely was, Ero-sennin had said many shinobi wanted to be like her. Naruto could be on board with that once they left out a few traits like the pettiness and the hopeless gambling.

She was a bit of everything to them. That was why he had brought her back after all. He had gone for a healer and brought back a totally different cure than the one he had expected and it was going to work. Naruto watched her back as he followed behind. Tsunade baa-chan was a little of everything for people but what she currently was for him was Hokage she was also the many other things but the thing that mattered was that she was going to be Hokage and he could feel that it was the right choice.

XxX

“Right.” Naruto breathed as they got closer to the administrative building. “This is my stop Baa-chan.” He had not expected Ero-sennin and Tsunade baa-chan to stop and turn to face him. “What?”

“So you’re finished here?” Tsunade baa-chan ignored the cheers and instead focused on him. “You don’t want to come to the top with me?”

“It isn’t my time, I wanna be with my team.” That got a chuckle from Ero-sennin. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing really.” Ero-sennin coughed. He eyed Tsunade baa-chan. “I have no doubts she’ll make the journey on her own.”

It seemed to be a surprise to baa-chan because she turned to Ero-sennin and placed her hands on her hips. “You’re not coming?”

“I wanted to see it from down below.” Ero-sennin shrugged. “Do you want me up there? Being in the deep of celebrations isn’t my thing.”

“Not exactly how I remember it.” She muttered. “But this is a bit superficial for you isn’t it? You would rather be with them, among them. But you brought me to do this, at least stay by me when I do this.”
“You only have to ask… goodness age doesn’t change your demanding nature.” Ero-sennin turned towards the building. “I’ll be seeing you around Naruto.”

“Not too soon I hope.” Naruto rolled his eyes. “I don’t want to be dragged off on another journey with you for a while. I gotta get back to doing normal genin things and normal genin missions. I’m not tagging along with you for no reason.”

“We’ll see. We’ll see.” Ero-sennin chuckled. “Tell Kakashi I’ll be seeing him around too.” Before Naruto could find a useful retort the two had already made progress ahead. Naruto snorted to himself as he watched them disappear towards the administration building. He mostly ignored the crowd around him and instead focused above. He just knew people were up there, that they were watching the procession. He just could not see them. Still, he had done what he was supposed to, now he wanted to watch the rest of the inauguration with his team from down below, like everybody else.

With a glance around him, Naruto started to follow the rest of the crowd on the streets. First, he had to find his team.

XxX

“I think he saw you.” Tenzo murmured, Shisui rolled his eyes before he carefully moved his left leg that had fallen asleep. “He looked right up at us.”

“He sensed something.” Shisui corrected. “He didn’t see us.” Although it had felt like he had, Naruto had looked right up at them as if he knew they were there. As if he could see them. “I don’t envy Kakashi at all.”


“Come on.” Shisui laughed. “It’s not that bad anymore.” He watched the crowd as they went closer to the tower. “Well I’m sort of glad I don’t have to assume my civilian duty just as yet.”

“I don’t envy the team that is in charge of the fireworks.” Tenzo muttered. “Is that much needed?”

“It’s Tsunade-sama.” Shisui repeated what he had been hearing since the woman had come back to the village. “That’s most likely not even enough to celebrate.”

XxX

“Had fun?” Naruto felt a grin spread across his face when he spotted his team on a balcony carefully balanced looking down at him.

“You could say that.” He laughed, before he could decide whether to come up they jumped down one by one. First Sakura, she carefully manoeuvred herself before she made it. Sasuke walked down showing off and Kakashi-sensei shrugged before he leapt down.

“You looked good out there Naruto!” Sakura raised her hand so they could high five. Naruto obliged and they laughed when their hands met. “Tsunade-sama looks so pretty.”

“She can be pretty can’t she.” Naruto muttered.

“So was it fun or not?” Sasuke had shoved his hands into his pockets. “You lost steam rather quickly. You weren’t waving as much as they were.”

“Well it’s about her not me.” Naruto shrugged. “I’m just the guy that delivered a message.”
“You’re more than that.” Kakashi-sensei commented. “Besides the march is just the beginning so people can see her up close as just Tsunade-sama one last time. Let people see her. From now on even after she retires she’ll be the Godaime.” Kakashi-sensei’s eye closed into a happy crease. “No one can take that away from her.”

“Well she’ll be Baa-chan to me because that’s who I met. She’ll be the Baa-chan that became Hokage.” Naruto glanced towards the building. “Until I’m Hokage of course.”

“Well she has a good amount of time ahead of her, doesn’t she?” Kakashi-sensei chuckled. “Let’s get closer to the action shall we?”

XxX

The whole atmosphere had changed, people had gotten even more tense. Naruto had no idea how that was possible. People were on the tips of their toes their necks craning towards the top of the tower waiting for Tsunade baa-chan to come out.

Now that the walk was over people were eager for the declaration. They were eager for her to come out. Naruto was too, he had no idea what was taking her so long. What was going on up there that was preventing her from coming to the people in the robes.

He had already asked Shizune nee-chan. She had told him all that needed to happen was Tsunade baa-chan put on the robes and hat then be presented to the village. He had known the robes were taking some time to complete.

Something about a certain clan that did the robes and only them. Naruto had nothing against them but if that was all their clan was good for then they should be speedy about it. Time was of the essence. The robes were simple in the first place. It was not as if it had to be tailored to fit Tsunade baa-chan exactly. He sighed and shook his head as the crowd of people grew thicker.

“What is it?” Sakura prodded. “Something wrong?”

“She’s taking too long.” Naruto groaned. “Everything is ready she should be out by now. She doesn’t even have to touch up on makeup or anything. Nobody is going to see anything under that hat. Nobody ever sees the Sandaime.”

“But Tsunade-sama most likely has other things to do before she could be presented.” Sakura’s eyes lit up in excitement. “Maybe she has to do a swear? A blood oath? A secret Hokage ritual? Only the Council and the Previous Hokage is allowed up there during the ceremony you know.”

“Really.” Naruto frowned. If that was true then why had Baa-chan expected him to tag along right at her heels? Was he missing something? Was there some Jinchuuriki etiquette that he had not known about? If there had been they had nobody but themselves to blame. Nobody told him anything, especially about being a Jinchuuriki. He had figured out everything by himself.

“It’s normal to have family.” Kakashi-sensei corrected as he shifted his stance under the tree they were closest to. “It is not out of place to have a Hokage’s family present at the inauguration. Some close friends, close bonds like a former sensei, former team.”

“Ah.” Naruto mumbled. “Wait does that mean Ero-sennin was up there for the Yondaime’s inauguration?” Kakashi-sensei tilted his head at him so Naruto rolled his eyes in response. “You know what I mean, who was up there for the Yondaime’s inauguration?”

“Well…” Kakashi-sensei mused. “It had been a sort of rushed affair. The Sandaime had stepped down and placed the Yondaime’s name as a candidate. It was accepted well. The village had been
surprised, like now we had not expected a new Hokage. The instalment of the Fourth signalled a turning point and changed… like Tsunade-sama, the Yondaime’s rise came after a battle, a war.”


“Well.” Naruto stalled. He had seen Orochimaru again, seen Kabuto again, learned a new jutsu and seen parts of himself he had been happy not knowing they existed for a while longer. His temper had gotten away from him a few times, he had pushed his body hard, he still had a long way to go in terms of everything and he had witnessed a historic fight, also he had lost a bit more of his childish understanding. “A lot of things happened.” He answered. “We had to hunt down Tsunade baa-chan and that wasn’t easy at all. I just wanted to bring her back to help the Sandaime and Lee. Ero-sennin had a whole different agenda.”

“That’s all that happened?” Sasuke’s tone made Naruto pay attention.

“Well…” He drawled. “I learned a super cool new jutsu but don’t expect me to show it so easily.”

“Who taught you it.” Sasuke frowned. “You learned it while you were gone?”

“Yeah.” Naruto grinned. “Ero-sennin taught me my new jutsu while we were looking for baa-chan.”

“That’s all that happened?” Sasuke pressed.

“We ran into some trouble before we brought Baa-chan back.” Naruto’s gaze drifted back to the tower. “Nothing all of us couldn’t handle.” Even though they had needed some downtime to recover.

“And that’s it?” Sasuke pressed. “Why did that old man need you to tag along?”

“Because…” He wanted to keep an eye on Naruto, he wanted to see what he was made of. Because the old man had secrets and they involved Naruto. “He’s old and bored I guess.” Naruto shrugged. “Hard to take him seriously sometimes when he’s drooling over nee-chans and Tsunade baa-chan.” Before he managed to look away his gaze caught Kakashi-sensei’s one and the man winked at him.

XxX

“I want…” Sakura paused to finish her drink and crumple the cup in her hand. “I want a cool new jutsu too you know.”

“It’s not something you pick up at the store.” Sasuke mumbled, Sakura ignored him to flutter her eyelashes at Kakashi-sensei.

“Well I need new cool jutsus, it isn’t fair that Sasuke-kun got that really cool one for the tournament and Naruto and I had the same old things.”

“Some of those techniques you used were very high-class Sakura.” Kakashi-sensei chuckled. “Especially the way they were utilized. That goes for all of you.”

“But it isn’t like Sasuke-kun’s! It isn’t something unique and passed on like I bet yours is.” Her gaze went to Naruto. “Bet Naruto’s new jutsu is something cool that people have never seen before or for a while. Something not many people would expect to see anyone especially a genin with.”

“Heh.” Naruto chuckled, she had a point.
“Mah.” Kakashi-sensei sighed heavily. “Well Sakura is right in that it wouldn’t be fair to neglect her training and her studies but in the case of Sasuke…” He trailed off. “Hmm I suspected Sasuke had the right nature for my jutsus. You two on the other hand.”

“What’s that supposed to mean.” Naruto frowned. “You mean Sasuke’s better or that he’s more like you?”

“Sasuke learns differently.” Kakashi-sensei’s eye was trained on Sasuke. “Even for him the training was hard and even now he has a long way to go. The jutsu doesn’t stop there. Where one person sees a wall, another sees a path or a simple line for them to step over. I can only teach what I know.” Kakashi-sensei closed his eye to chuckle. “But I’m known as the copy ninja far and wide. There has to be a really strong, really cool jutsu somewhere in my memory for Sakura to have all for her own.” His eye swept over them. “Because I’m willing to bet that these jutsus won’t be switched among yourselves so easily.” His eye closed again. “Although sensei would love to see that.”

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“And you know Ero-sennin could have made it less obvious about what he was doing you know.” Naruto moved piece of his hair behind his ear before he continued. “You would think Tsunade baa-chan would have said something they are the same age but she was too busy drooling over the slots can you honestly believe that? She was drinking and playing and loosing badly. I played three times and lost once it isn’t that hard.”

“You know.” Sakura had her hand pressed to her mouth to cover her laughter. “Shouldn’t you talk about them nicer? It’s Tsunade-sama and Jiraiya-sama.”

“Ero-sennin and Tsunade baa-chan, if I don’t call them how they really are I’ll forget! Even Shikamaru fell for it and thought she was a normal nee-chan because of how she looks. She’s old just as old as Ero-sennin no matter what she does. I’m not going to go and forget who she really is.” Naruto snorted. “Besides, if you knew how I met Ero-sennin you would call him that too!”

Kakashi had to turn to hide his smile and chuckle at Naruto’s words. It was something amusing to hear him speak the way he did about such figures. Sometimes he was ridiculously polite with names and titles and sometimes he was down to earth, frank and casual to the point of being blunt with it.

For Tsunade and Jiraiya, Naruto had to be a breath of fresh air. Naruto had heard the name Sannin and not cared he treated them like any other adult in his life and did not let them get away for their faults. He poked fun at them, teased them and generally acted as though they were all on the same level. That had to be refreshing in its own way.

He had been a tiny bit jealous about one Sannin taking an interest in Naruto even when that Sannin had all the right and even more rights than Kakashi. Tsunade on the other hand, her interest shone brightly on Naruto’s chest in the form of a necklace. He couldn’t help but wonder how and when Naruto would explain that piece of jewellery to others.

It suited him that necklace. It really did. Honestly, the way Naruto poked fun at two key figures of Konoha was nothing short of amusing and amazing. It just showed what type of person Naruto really was, his admiration went towards more humble sorts.

Jiraiya had no doubt taught him something complicated enough to keep him occupied. Kakashi was curious but he could wait. He had his suspicions about the jutsu taught after all. Of course, he was warier about what would happen next.
Naruto did have to be trained, something that had been brought up regularly when he had been retrieved and had been brought up with frequency after the attack on Konoha. Kakashi was equipped to help subdue Naruto at certain levels, he guessed he could help in the beginning of the training but other than his observations of Konoha’s last Jinchuuriki he had nothing really to offer.

His seal work was fine but not impressive not like Minato-sensei’s not like Jiraiya-sama and certainly not like the village’s last Uzumaki. Naruto needed to be taught the questions were when and how. Naruto would know something was up immediately. The boy sniffed traps and misdirection from yards away.

He was already suspicious and wary about what the village was keeping secret from him. Granted it was up to Tsunade-sama now on how to proceed with the plan. She could abolish the law and let people speak to Naruto about everything or she could order the boy to find his own way.

Honestly as much as Kakashi ached to speak the truth. Spill everything he knew and saw, as much as he wanted to do that he could not help but sit back and marvel at genetics.

Naruto was his own person but it was in the way he spoke, in the way he walked and in the way he looked. It took a while for Kakashi but he saw in Naruto’s image people overlapped in him. It might only get clearer the older Naruto got.

Of course, that familiar manner of his might be just why Jiraiya-sama wanted to keep an eye on Naruto so badly. He not only knew Naruto’s true history but he knew the path towards Naruto’s legacy. He knew the places to go that Naruto would have to inherit, he knew what signs to look for that would be familiar. What patterns to expect.

Kakashi did not expect a clone. It would be impossible, it was not just genetics that shaped a person, it was experience and Naruto had already had the wildest most dangerous experience for his childhood from what Kakashi knew. Then there were the parts that he did not know that he could only hope would be revealed in time.

Naruto was different, amusing with it. Hilarious with it with the things that fell out his mouth most of the time but the most amazing thing in Naruto would have to be his heart and dedication. He had set out with nothing but hope and a picture for the sake of the Sandaime and Lee. He had kept his team on his mind, brought them things. He respected personal boundaries and lines. Such respect, if you looked at Naruto from afar it might not make sense but Kakashi knew how many facets could fit into a single person. He was like that too.

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“What’s so funny?” Kakashi looked up from where he had been watching Sakura and Naruto dart off to a nearby food stall to meet Sasuke’s gaze.

“What’s so funny?” He pretended to think. “Naruto, I guess.” He bit back a snort at the judging look that appeared on Sasuke’s face. “Not like that.” He looked back to where Naruto and Sakura had gone his eye easily finding them. “In a different way, the way he talks the way he treats people. Tsunade-sama and Jiraiya-sama are important figures here in the village and beyond and he treats them no differently than anybody else. That is what is funny.”

“I don’t get what you mean, Naruto’s Naruto.” Sasuke’s eyes went to where Sakura and Naruto had gone. “He’s strange but he is what he is. You want him to change?”

“You’re mistaken, I like Naruto just how he is. The parts of himself that he shares.” Kakashi was unable to help his smile. “He’s the least normal kid around and yet he makes everyone around him
feel normal. Like they are just like everybody else no matter what they have done. No matter what they say, no matter how they feel.” He caught the way Sasuke tensed and pretended not to see it for the boy’s sake. “So it is funny to me, that part of him that can treat everyone the same regardless of status will come in handy when he’s older.”

“It’s just another part of him to get used to.” Sasuke shrugged.

“Well yes but it is refreshing, we have all these rules, all these people and Naruto looks past what they have done, who they are and treat them like people. Looks past their status and puts them all on the same level. You find it refreshing too don’t you? You’re not Uchiha Sasuke. You’re Sasuke to him.” He ignored the way Sasuke looked away and continued. “Even though he had nothing he doesn’t judge you for what you have. He accepts you as you are. Tsunade-sama and Jiraiya-sama must find that refreshing in someone so young.”

“How do you find it Kakashi?” Kakashi was unsurprised to hear the bite in Sasuke’s tone. Instead he allowed himself to reflect on how he really felt about it. Naruto did have his moments of respect and awe. He did give people their due but he did not overdo it. Instead he found his own way to show respect, and fondness.

“I find it funny.” Kakashi answered. “And I like it.” The way Naruto casually spoke about pillars of Konoha’s history, treating them as annoying old people was amusing. The way he met them head on was refreshing. How could he not be amused? How could he not enjoy it? Naruto brought an entire new outlook with him, every time he opened his mouth it was something new or startling and of course, that casual dismissal was something he had heard before. Granted not to that extent. Times changed of course but Naruto was doing many proud. Even if he did not notice it. Even if he did not notice it, there were many near to Naruto cheering him and his different ways on. “It suits him.”

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Baa-chan really was doing the most by keeping them waiting. Naruto wrinkled his nose when he took a bite from the pastry and it decided to flake on him. He frowned at the small pieces dropping even as he relaxed with his team.

“You can just catch them.” Kakashi-sensei said, his hand hovered under his catching the falling flakes.

“I prefer to send my mental disappointment in the direction of the falling ones.” Naruto bit into the sweetened pastry again and groaned at the outside parts that broke off. “Now I get why it was so cheap.”

Kakashi-sensei’s hand moved, holding the cupped fallen flakes and offered them. At Naruto’s laugh the man sprinkled the flakes on the pastry top. “Well isn’t that better?”

“You do know that’s going to just flake again when I bite right?” Naruto pointed out with another bite.

“Then I’ll just have to catch it again won’t I?” Kakashi-sensei chuckled.

“Sounds like a lot of work.”

“Is it work if you enjoy it?” Kakashi-sensei glanced towards the tower. “Least it is something to do, cuts down the anticipation.”

“The annoyance you mean.” A huge piece fell off only to be caught by his teacher. “Thanks I
“I see.” Kakashi-sensei’s eye was still on him. “But you know, when you smile, some of us feel the same way. Like we are part of something. That we’re welcomed.”

“No.” Naruto disagreed just as softly. “It feels like I have to do something to see them, some people I have to get that right to see a smile, a proper one. Every time I get one, it makes me feel…” It was hard to explain. The warmth that unlocked deep in his gut, the feeling that spilled over until he smiled too. That warm feeling that made him feel real, care for. “Part of something, part of them.” It really was hard to explain.

“I see.” Kakashi-sensei’s eye was still on him. “But you know, when you smile, some of us feel the same way. Like we are part of something. That we’re welcomed.”

“Really now.” Naruto finished off his pastry.

“Well, why don’t you ask Sakura?” Kakashi-sensei glanced to where Sakura stood her eyes on the tower her hands clasped eagerly together.

“Not Sasuke?” Naruto teased.

“Well Sasuke’s more confused than touched.” Kakashi-sensei mused. “Give him some more time… or maybe not.”

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It really was a historic moment. Naruto craned his head up as activity finally started high up on the tower. He saw Ero-sennin first his shock of white hair at the edge before the Sandaime peered over with a wave to the crowd. The cheers of relief at the sight of him even though he was in simple brown robes made Naruto smile.

He was happy to see the old man walking around. He was not a medical professional but he did think it was too soon. But there really was no bossing around old people when they were stubborn. The cheers gradually died down as the two on the tower looked back, obviously and hopefully towards Tsunade baa-chan. It was more than time.

“This is a historic moment you know.” Kakashi-sensei whispered from next to him. “You look so
impatient.”

“I just want her to come out and say the words already.” Naruto hissed back. “Because I know she’s the Hokage but even I felt weird just now seeing the Sandaime like that.”

Kakashi-sensei’s hand lightly gripped his shoulder in a squeeze. “You’re not the only one and this is the second time I’m seeing it.” Naruto blinked at the casual truth that he should have remembered and nodded slowly. Of course, the Sandaime had stepped down for the Yondaime, now again he was stepping down. Kakashi-sensei was seeing an event repeat itself. Hopefully it would go better for them all.

“So you’re having a bit of déjá vu huh.” Naruto said softly. That got him a confused look so he continued. “You’re watching this… but you’ve seen it before. So you think you should be a little younger? And that the Yondaime should appear?”

“Something like that, I’m happy for Tsunade-sama but it doesn’t erase the past. For many here as happy as we are to have her, we can’t help but reminisce.” Kakashi-sensei sighed. “But we are older, we can see it in our heroes faces, so we accept and move on. We welcome the future and we accept our losses.”

“That’s a long way around to say you miss the Yondaime but you’re happy Baa-chan’s gonna be the Hokage now.” Naruto shook his head at his sensei. “You could have just said that you know.”

“True.” Kakashi-sensei’s hand dropped from his shoulder. “But I think it wouldn’t have had the same impact. Don’t you?”

“How am I supposed to know?” Naruto mumbled. “I’m the kid here.” That got him a disbelieving look. “Don’t believe me?”

“You aren’t like any other kid around here Naruto. That’s what makes you special. Your take on things is different and your heart just might be bigger than anyone else’s.”

“How on earth did you get that idea.” Naruto grumbled. He felt the soft touch on the necklace and sighed. “It was a bet.”

“But you came to understand her right?” Kakashi-sensei said softly. “And you even brought her around to your way of thinking. Not many people could do that.”

“I also fought her… I mean I lost.” He admitted. “Took her by surprise and that whole thing could have been avoided if she hadn’t gotten on my nerves but… well I’m mostly over it. I get why Shizune nee-chan tries so hard and keeps with her. She really cares for her, like family. Ero-sennin worries about her too even though you know, she nearly killed him with whatever she drugged him with. I wonder how she managed to do that, Ero-sennin’s guard is always up even when he’s drunk.”

It was far easier to ignore him than to wait for an opportunity. He gave Naruto time to himself, backed off when really needed to but was always aware. Granted with some work Naruto could in theory sneak an unsupervised hour or two but not more than that. The man had an uncanny ability to lock onto him.

He asked Naruto where he went and what he was doing but there was always that sense that the old man knew exactly where he had been and how far away. It really creeped him out. Sometimes there was this air that the man had that he was aware of everything in a certain limit. Naruto was not positive about it considering how happy go lucky the man behaved most of the time but after
Naruto had watched him face off with Orochimaru… He had his suspicions.

“They say age brings a new outlook on things, experience too.” Kakashi-sensei ruffled his hair. “Jiraiya-sama is an old shinobi. He’s a little stuck in his ways but he has taken a liking to you.”

“Stuck in the ways of a perv.” Naruto grumbled. “And he’s proud of it! Not even joking around with it he’s proud of being a lech… how does the village put up with it? He’s so damn old.”

“Some things you just get used to and that may be the most visual part of Jiraiya-sama’s image but many people know where he true heart lies.” Kakashi-sensei’s eye was focused on the white hair that was visible on the tower. “It’s easy to forget the other parts of him when you’ve seen what he has contributed, what he will continue to contribute. He laughs but deep inside he is wary.” Kakashi-sensei looked down at him. “He at the heart of him is a shinobi although his laughter is free, it is not easy to forget that.”

“You really do know that old perv don’t you.” Naruto considered his teacher before his gaze drifted back up to the tower. “He’s cool, he says some awesome things and he knows some really cool things but he’s still a pervert to me.” Naruto laughed. “Sensei you can see him how you want but he’ll be Ero-sennin to me right until I’m Hokage and even after that.”

“Is that so.” Kakashi-sensei sounded like he had stifled a laugh. “That’s okay then.”

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Kakashi was listening but the words flowed over him, he heard the council introduce her but his gaze was fixed on her bowed head. Down below he could barely see her but it was enough. He doubted anyone there was actually listening, their hearts were connected as they waited for their Hokage to be given to them.

He could tell she was smiling as she waited, he could not see her that well with the hat and all but he knew. It would be so like the Tsunade that she was now. She was smiling, he could tell. Granted he had some reservations, he had been a shinobi for too long but with Jiraiya-sensei and the Sandaime by her side he knew she would make progress.

It already felt real. They were ready, they had waited almost too long for this. They needed their Hokage. Kakashi heard a soft sound from Naruto and barely resisted the urge to tug the boy closer. Naruto was tense by his side, excited.

The walk through the streets had wound the boy up. Since he had gone for her, Naruto more than anyone else was ready for the presentation. Another step towards stability. Of course, everyone was not going to sit down and give Konoha a break. They would want to test them and their new Hokage but that would come later. They still had time.

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He had been right, it certainly felt real having her up there. By the time the council members had stood back and Tsunade baa-chan had stepped forward his heart rate had increased. He had faint and it made no sense.

“Konoha.” Her voice carried to them and beyond. “My name is Senju Tsunade and I’m your Godaiim Hokage!” Naruto’s breath caught when she swept the hat off her head, the grin on her face, he really understood why Ero-sennin had insisted on her. The cheers that rose up around him were almost deafening but he was unable to take his eyes off the tower.

Ero-sennin and the Sandaime hung back but they had huge smiles on their faces. Tsunade baa-chan
looked proud as she looked down at them. Already it felt different, she was their Hokage.

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“Fireworks are later right.” Naruto glanced around at the people leaving. “I can’t wait to see them.”

“There’s going to be a parade in the afternoon too.” Sakura looked delighted. “I can’t wait for all of it. I think the river might be the best place to see the fireworks.”

“Anywhere is a good place. You can even see them at home. They’ll be in the sky soon enough.” Sasuke rolled his eyes. “It isn’t like Konoha has buildings that are going to block the view.”

“What do you have against having a good time and seeing pretty fireworks?” Sakura complained. “Sasuke-kun it’s where you are and who you are with that makes it fun.”

“I don’t know.” Naruto admitted. “Seeing it with people is pretty cool, pretty nice but there is something amazing about being alone, feeling alone and then watching them come up. Sometimes you are a distance away from people and hearing them but being alone can help you appreciate it more.”

“I-I don’t think I get what you mean.” Sakura said slowly. “You would rather watch the fireworks alone?”

“I’m not saying that.” Naruto laughed. “I’m saying that either way is amazing, being with people is fun and amazing but being alone has its own allure too. I’d love to watch Tsunade baa-chan’s fireworks with you Sakura-chan with everyone.” He eyed Sasuke. “Once certain people don’t have anything better to do, like go home… comb their hair and look in the mirror.”

“Making such a big fuss about fireworks.” Sasuke grumbled. “I never said I was going to go home. I wouldn’t mind staying out either. Not as if it would be a good idea to train with everyone in this type of mood.”

“Flowers in the sky.” Naruto smiled. “How could I not love them? They light up the sky, big beautiful colours that fade away in time. Just like flowers in everyday life. Also I’d like to see them with all of you. It isn’t our first time seeing fireworks as team seven. Why is it so weird now?”

“Maybe because it isn’t us passing by but this is ours. This is Konoha’s fireworks not somebody else’s fireworks.” Sakura mused. “Oh well, that just means it will be better.”

“You mean more expensive.” Kakashi-sensei chuckled. “This is not a small festival, this is a historic event.”

“Already she’s throwing money around.” Naruto groaned. “Will we survive?”

“Well this is a requirement.” Kakashi-sensei considered. “Considering the other expenses this is nothing. At least there is no week-long feast to worry about.”

“Week long feast?” Naruto frowned. “When was that? Who was it for? What was it for?”

“Darker times.” Kakashi-sensei casually glanced towards the tower. “As interesting as that was I prefer these simpler celebrations.”

“A day off, a parade, fireworks and dancing until morning… just how wild was Konoha before?” Naruto asked.
“A little on the savage side I guess… it all depended on the occasion.”

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“Someone seems pretty relaxed.” Sakura teased. “Is it all catching up to you? The exciting weeks away?” That got a bark of laughter from Naruto prompting Sakura to frown and push against him slightly which pushed him against Sasuke. Sasuke was not for any of that so he pushed Naruto back against her. “Hey! Sasuke-kun don’t shove him against me so roughly!”

“You started it keep in mind your strength and that other people are on this bench.” He folded his arms and looked away only to come face to face with Kakashi’s book. He rolled his eyes and looked up instead.

“Before this gets out of hand.” Naruto chuckled. “Sakura-chan Sasuke is right, you’ve gotten some serious muscles there. But on the other hand, I’m not so relaxed because I’m sleepy. I’m relaxed because I feel good that I’m back here, the Sandaime is fine, Lee is going to be as okay as Baa-chan can make him. We have a new Hokage and she might be just what we needed even though we didn’t know it.” Naruto released a happy sigh. “And I’m finally back being team seven again. I missed you guys… I feel… as safe as I can be when I’m with you.”

“Naruto.” Sakura said softly. Sasuke would have said something but he found himself blinking up at the afternoon sky instead. Naruto had never said anything close to that to them before. Not that he had expected him to after everything they had learned. He knew they were Naruto’s friends. To an extent but that tone of relief and trust, it had not been that strong before.

“I mean…” Naruto trailed off. “It feels really good it being us you know? Especially after everything we’ve been through. Before the exams we had been through a lot but after it? Helping out the village together? The way we are? The way we are becoming? It feels good. It feels really good.” He sighed. “There’s plenty in this village but you guys are the best part of it for me, I can forget everything when it is just us. I’m Naruto from Team Seven with you guys. The other stuff comes after and that’s nice.”

“That’s how it should be.” Sasuke found himself saying. He became aware of the other two looking at him but he kept his eyes upwards and carried on. “Team first and everything else is baggage.” He understood that. “What we know, who we are it is what we bring to the table to help each other. It doesn’t make us.”

“Exactly.” Naruto grinned. “Just what I meant Sasuke.” His eyes were dancing when Sasuke finally looked at him.

“How the hell do you get this stupid thing open.” Sakura mumbled before a ripping sound was followed by her gasp of dismay. “Oh no all over the jacket. Least I can just pick them off.”

There was still some time to go before night fell. The village was slowly coming alive with noise. Cheering, music. The smells of food, just like so many celebrations they as team seven had witness and passed through.

Sasuke smelt something buttery and had decided to ask Naruto to accompany him to get it when he caught sight of Naruto’s face. His eyes were shining but his face was flushed. A flush that Sasuke had gotten used to seeing no matter how infrequent it happened. He had not seen it for a while. He rolled his eyes and looked around to see what had gotten Naruto’s attention this time. If it was any of his clan Naruto was not going to hear the end of it.

Still there was no one that could have taken Naruto’s interest. Kakashi pressed his book to his nose
and eyed him before Sasuke dismissed him his eyes searching around them. Further down the street was team eight and Kurenai-sensei but she was too far away to have waved or winked at Naruto. She was at the end of the street.

Kakashi shifted on the bench next to him making Sasuke have to move himself so he glared at the man who was eyeing him and Naruto curiously. Sasuke huffed as his eyes continued to search. There was nothing, just civilians and no one near enough that could have prompted Naruto’s reaction. Especially not a reaction like that, Naruto’s face had been stunned.

It was so damn annoying, sometimes Naruto could be a real mystery. Sasuke rolled his eyes because Naruto’s entire face was red now and he saw no real reason for it. It might just be hormones or something really stupid and stupid Kakashi was still eyeing them his book pressed to his nose as if he found them fascinating or something. Sasuke was tired of it. Sakura still had her uneaten takoyaki so he reached past the confusing Naruto snagged one and ignored her complaint. Sometimes his team could be a real pain.
Naruto and Kiba

Chapter Notes

So in regards of the last chapter and the surprise only 2 people got it? If you got it but didn't tell me congrats to you! This chapter tells you what you missed anyway so feel relieved.

Buttt I was laughing all week darlings so thanks for that. There will be more moments like that. Things that are said or things that happened but due to the person's point of view they might just miss it. I find it gives a different feel for events and characters.

So enjoy this chapter which has been long in coming for a while cuz originally it was going to be sooner but what can you do? But this chapter kicks off another arc \o/ length still unknown cuz I'm writing it but I'm thinking 15 chapters will be the finished length. See you darlings next week!

Well another day in Konoha and for him that meant that his day started earlier than it had to. Naruto stifled his yawn as he got up from the floor to stretch. His routines took time so that meant he had to get up earlier. That also meant that he had less time to mess around and dream in the morning but that was not exactly a waste.

He snagged his shirt from hanging over the kitchen chair and pulled it on quickly as he accessed his kitchen. It was still fairly early and the place was clean enough and by the time that the washer finished all the cycles he should be back. After all his outside training was going to be hurried and consisting of only one thing.

He had made it two steps to the door before he had to stop and turn back to his fridge. With a sigh, he went and pulled the leftover mini bites from it and popped it into his mouth. Granted there usually were never any leftovers when he ate but Sakura’s dinner celebration had gone on pretty late and they all had to go home.

Sakura had been pretty happy about what they managed to pull together. Iruka-sensei had sent his camera along with him and all of them had taken pictures all night to Sakura’s delight. They had even gotten a few smiles from Sasuke.

Kakashi-sensei had even pulled more than his weight for the celebration. It made Naruto look forward to when he had something like that to celebrate. There had been food and messing around. Jokes and laughter the time had just flew on by. There was nothing more fun that being with his team.

Still he had been surprised there had been any food left back but they had all left with a little something. Naruto swallowed and winced at the cold chill remaining. He should have warmed them up but he was lacking on time. He reached in the fridge for some water and sighed at himself before he finally finished and made it to the door. He would be back in a bit after all, he had washing to finish and he wanted to use the partially dark village training grounds for some brushing up when no one would see him. He had some things he wanted to keep to himself after all.
It was still doing damage and Naruto knew he was not mistaken in thinking that he had managed to shave a few seconds off the whole thing. He grinned at the broken tree even as he winced at the obvious evidence left behind. Someone was going to notice that.

But it would have been a much bigger give away if he had hit the ground or rocks. There were plenty of broken trees in the training grounds. People would just know he had done something. Hopefully people would not guess what. He needed some tricks up his sleeve after all.

Rasengan was his ace in the hole but Naruto did like the idea of a full house. He liked that idea far better but he had wasted enough time. Practice was finished, time to go back home.

Naruto had to admit that he was relieved not only to get his plants back from Iruka-sensei but to find them well and thriving. He carefully moved the pots around after he watered them. He had already done the necessary weeding and treatments, maybe he spoiled them just a bit but it was fun, relaxing too. They looked so beautiful in return and he got to look at them every day once he was home.

His hand sagged a bit as he recalled the inauguration ceremony and afterwards. His face heated up and how could it not? Of all the things he had expected that day, been prepared for… He knew he had a weakness and he was mostly prepared for most of everything especially contact but the smilers he had encountered so far had met a challenger.

It wasn’t fair. How could he do it so easily and have it be real? He really was weak to that sort of thing. God no wonder he covered up, that smile had to illegal. Then he had acted like nothing was wrong. He had just covered it up with the bare minimum while Naruto felt like his face was on fire and his brain played that smile over and over slowly. Kakashi-sensei did not play fair, but he wouldn’t be so much fun to talk to if he did.

Not as if Naruto played fair very often. Not as if he had been raised on fair. Still his chest had felt tight at a simple smile. Maybe it was a good thing the other two had not caught on, he got enough heat for how weak he was around certain people around them. This he could keep to himself.

“Well we’re not friends like that though.” Sakura panted as she sat down. Tenten looked at her curiously and she elaborated. “I mean we are all in the same year but beyond being in the same room for the Chuunin exams? We don’t hang with the other teams like that. I mean I know Ino and we do talk every now again and Naruto talks to… well everyone I guess and Sasuke-kun doesn’t know conversation unless you tie him to it but all of us together?”

“Sounds like a mess.” Tenten grunted before she resumed her kicks at the target. “You’re going still though right?”

“Well Kiba called the meeting.” Sakura snorted. “And I know it will look bad if two of team seven don’t go. Naruto and I will both be needed to drag Sasuke along. He can’t be bothered with the other teams outside you know…”

“Actual missions?” Tenten volunteered.

“Exactly.” Sakura sighed before she fished in her bag for her water bottle. “I mean I don’t know why he wanted to call the meeting but he wants all nine of us to attend and since Naruto was out
for a few weeks that was hard to work in. Since all of us has downtime now I guess he sees his
chance or whatever.” Tenten shot her a look and she sighed. “I don’t know Kiba like that but I
really don’t think it is anything too stupid even if he is the one that called it. If somebody like
Shikamaru or maybe Shino had called the meeting I’d be more worried.” And less likely to be out
of sight of her team.

“Well maybe he wants to congratulate the teams.” Tenten paused her kick her leg outstretched.
“But his team didn’t get a Chuunin right?”

“I think it was pretty close for Shino.” Sakura admitted. “Maybe if he hadn’t done like Sasuke-kun
and taken off on his own he would have made Chuunin. Those two can be a bit self-sufficient
sometimes.”

“Neji’s like that too.” Tenten grunted as she resumed. “It gets old fast.”

“Sasuke-kun’s learning.” Sakura muttered. “Slowly. I think especially since he got out the hospital,
we work together even better now.”

“Least that is something.” Tenten switched to the other leg. “So, when’s the meeting?”

XxX

“I thought this was going to be someplace private not the park.” Naruto hissed as he sat on the
railing.

“As private as it is going to get, nobody comes this high.” Kiba placed his hands on his hips as he
glanced around at the teams, to Naruto it looked strange not to see Akamaru on his head or in his
pocket.

“I had some training I wanted to do.” Ino crossed her arms. “I don’t want to waste the free time I
have, who knows when things are going to get crazy again.”

“Well Tsunade-sama is in charge so the genins are getting a break.” Shikamaru rocked his head
back to brush the lamppost. “Of course, everyone else is dealing with the slack so your time will
come soon.”

“Exactly.” Sakura frowned. “Hurry up with it Kiba.”

“Stop rushing me!” Kiba barked before he let out a sigh. “I wanted to do this right away but things
kept happening then that one.” Naruto blinked when Kiba furiously pointed at him. “Went
missing.”

“It was a mission.” Naruto muttered dryly. “You would have taken the mission too.”

“Whatever.” Kiba grunted. He glanced back at his team before he straightened his back. “Look this
is the first time all of us have been together since you know the exams and a lot has happened, for
all of us and we never got to think about what happened during the tournament and what it meant
to all of us. We protected Konoha.” Naruto nodded, from the corner of his eyes he saw the others
doing the same. “We participated in the battle, we’re not kids anymore.” Well… least they weren’t,
Naruto had already been exposed to battle and war.

“So this is a check-up?” Shikamaru asked slowly.

“Sort of, I heard of what happened with others but I only know what I saw for myself and what I
did.” Kiba glanced at where Naruto stood. “Naruto, we never got to really talk after everything but
we’re still cool and thank you.”

Naruto was lost at the second part. “I’m not going to hate you over a fight like that.” Naruto grumbled. “What’s the thanks for?”

“You don’t know?” Ino’s curious glance left him confused before she glanced back at Team Eight, Hinata was half hidden next to Shino. “Asuma-sensei said you helped out a lot.” Naruto could feel Sasuke’s gaze burning his neck but he kept his own eyes on Ino and shrugged. “I mean you cheered on Hinata, fought Neji and beat him…”

“He had it coming.” Naruto interrupted. “He really pissed me off.” Of course the few times Naruto had glimpsed him since the guy had seemed different but he was not going to stroll up to him and start a conversation. Looks could be deceiving.

“Well you fought him in Hinata’s place.” Ino continued.

“You really helped us out, I couldn’t be there for Hinata.” Kiba glanced back at his team mate. “I’m really glad you had her back for us.”

Naruto was unable to help his laugh. “It wasn’t just for Hinata, a lot of the fights we got into that day wasn’t just for Hinata. I fought Neji for Lee too.” He frowned and recalled his feelings for that day of chaos. “I beat Gaara for Lee as well but I beat both of them mainly because they pissed me off. Neji pissed me off a lot.” Gaara had stirred deeper emotions, fear, pity and anger. That was a pot better unstirred.

“Well you got kinda crazy there Naruto.” Kiba laughed. “The crowd, everyone was going crazy especially the Hyuugas!”

“Kiba-kun!” The tiny tug to his sleeve by Hinata did nothing to deter Kiba.

“It was insane everyone had this energy when the two of you were fighting and I didn’t even know you and Hinata talked like that. You were really mad about the whole thing!”

Hinata? Well… Hinatas of the world were rare. The real ones at least. She represented assistance to him and the way Neji had spat on such an obvious helping hand and solution had really gotten on his nerves. “Hinata’s nice to me you know.” Naruto frowned. “Is there anyone who doesn’t like Hinata?” He heard Sasuke slowly sigh behind him and frowned at him. “You don’t like Hinata?”

“I don’t have any problem with Hinata.” Sasuke rolled his eyes at him. “How did that soar over your head?”

Naruto released a sigh of his own before he slid off the railing. He watched the trees below before he answered. “Nothing is soaring over my head that’s important you know.” He glanced at the others watching him. “Anyway, what you wanted to talk about besides the whole we made it out alive and different thing Kiba?”

“You’re weird you know that?” Kiba grumbled, a smile spread across Naruto’s face. “Really weird!” Kiba snapped. “Anyway I was wondering if people liked you and admired you for a while you know… like that. What would you do?”

“Well…” Naruto frowned he ignored Sasuke’s huff. “It’s me so I can’t accept them.”

“What do you mean it’s you!” Kiba demanded. “You’re not a celebrity because you’re chummy with the new Hokage you know.”
“That doesn’t have anything to do with it.” Naruto frowned. “I mean, that sounds kinda one sided doesn’t it? I mean liking someone. Love its powerful you know? It can power you up it can devastate you. It can make you go some faraway places. It can make you travel through hell, it can keep you blind… it can open your eyes.” He closed his own eyes as the noise and voices in his head rose. He could hear conflicting words, smell different scents.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well.” Naruto coughed. “Thing is well if someone was to come up to be right now from the village and tell me they liked me.” Naruto shrugged. “I don’t like them so I can’t do anything except say sorry.”

“How do you know you don’t like them?” Kiba demanded. “You don’t know who it is!”

“Anyone in the village that could do that would be genins or Chuunins around our age,” Naruto snorted. “I don’t like anyone from there… I can’t. I mean I’m already thinking about something, someone else.” He lowered his gaze. “They are kinda unreachable.”

“So shouldn’t you give people a chance?” Kiba frowned.

“Kiba.” Naruto groaned. “You can’t force love. If it was that easy why doesn’t that person just like somebody else? We’re not kids anymore, you implied that earlier. We’re ready for the real world and real truth right?” He glared around at those gathered. “Sometimes people like people they can’t have, who love someone else, something else and that’s perfectly fine. It’s normal, you can’t force love.”

Just having to speak about it made his skin itch and his teeth hurt. He was seeing them and his surroundings but he could faintly hear Haku’s voice, smell Haku and feel his hand in his or his lips on his forehead. He could faintly see him in his mind’s eye.

“Shouldn’t you want the one you like to be happy?” He frowned. “Even if it is not with you? I mean it is painful not to be liked back.” He admitted. “To look and see what you want so close that you could reach out and touch it.” He whispered. “But knowing it is not only far beyond your reach but that with action on your part you could ruin that person’s happiness.”

“Naruto.” Sakura said softly. He allowed her soft touch to his wrist before he continued.

“Look you can love someone with everything you have, offer your soul, your dreams and dedicate your life to them.” Naruto stressed. “That doesn’t mean they are going to like you back or love you back or that any relationship you have will be equal.” He shuddered, he could see Haku’s contented face and Zabuza’s calculating pleased one. Just because time had changed things did not make it right. “Someone liking you shouldn’t change your own direction and dreams you know.”

“No one is saying that you have to do all that.” Kiba spat. His tone rose before he continued on, Naruto zoned him out as he thought over the best way to make Kiba understand. It was a little harsh but Kiba had told him that time about those from near his clan. “What are you doing?”

*That* had been to march up to Kiba and quickly give him a peck on the lips. It got snorts of laughter from Sasuke and Sakura, shock from the others and disbelief and horror from Kiba. “You’ll give me a chance Kiba?”

“No! What the hell is wrong with you!” Kiba backpaddled before he crashed to the ground before his team mates.

“You understand it a bit better? You’re not going to throw away that cat girl from the village and
be with me.” Naruto laughed. “It’s a good thing I remember you’ve already had your first kiss.”

“That’s assault!” Kiba screeched.

“Yes, it was wrong.” Naruto admitted as Kiba furiously wiped his lips. “Come on I wasn’t even trying, your nee-chan’s given you deeper kisses I’ve seen her.”

“Shut up!” Kiba barked. “Just shut up right now.”

“But you get it right?” Naruto pressed. “I’m going to do what I want to do, if along my way I find someone that I like…” He couldn’t really see it as yet. “And we align that is fine. If I like someone who doesn’t like me back then…” He sighed heavily. “I’ve been there before and now that I’m a bit older… I get it a bit better. I mean first loves are painful… mostly because they seem so perfect and you want them to be perfect. You get over that fairly quickly when you take them off the pedestal. When you love them with the flaws…” Naruto watched a swallowtail do a loop over their heads. “Then it is a lot harder to let them go.” He gave a casual shrug before he stepped through the group to the steps. The swallowtail did another loop and soared to the centre of the village. “I gotta go.”

XxX

“Well that was a total waste of time.” Sasuke snorted, Sakura watched him as he eyed the direction Naruto had disappeared to. “I think the only ones who learned something was the six of you.” Sakura could not even find it in her to try to reel him in. Instead she sighed as she watched him go.

“Sasuke-kun does have a point.” She admitted with a shrug. “Of course, it was nice it being all of us but maybe next time we could talk about things we could all do or something. We might have to work together as proper groups in the future. I’d advise you to think carefully how you plan on treating Naruto, I think by now you’ve noticed that he thinks a little differently.” Sakura eyed the sky as she picked up her bag. “Well I’ve got some training to do since I cut my work out with Tenten short to come here so I’ll be going.” Ino sent her a startled glance. “…also try to leave those kinds of topics alone. Who he likes or doesn’t is none of your business if he doesn’t want you to know.” Sakura casually waved goodbye before she took off for the training grounds. Haku was still Naruto’s important person, that shouldn’t have to change, there was no limit to the amount of people someone could care about. She shook her head as she hit the first line of trees. Hopefully Tenten was still waiting.
Man this chapter gave me grief when I was writing it a few months ago. Took me a few months to finish omg I wanted to scrap it sooo much lol but here it is... something I wanted to do for a while shoved into one huge chapter. Bigger than I thought it would be (Always is darlings)

I have Kon this weekend so idk how that's going to play for you darlings and updates. I'm hoping I'll be finished writing and editing by the weekend but you know how these things go. Might end up being a Monday update next week if I'm too weary trying to pull things together.

Movie was fun and grief to do at the same time but I enjoyed how it turned out... even though the chapter is huge as hell. Guess it works out in the end if I'm late with the next one. Enjoy darlings see you soon!

“We have to actually go to her office?” Sasuke frowned Kakashi shrugged and he rolled his eyes. “I thought we accept this kind of mission the normal way.”

“Nothing about baa-chan is normal.” Naruto mumbled under his breath. “No hints at all?” He shifted his gaze going to the water flowing under the bridge. “Well it can’t be anything tiny.”

“We’ll find out what it is when Sakura gets here.” Kakashi shifted his book a bit higher. “Well you guys didn’t have that much warning.”

“We were supposed to have today off.” Sasuke pointed out, not that he was complaining a chance to be out of the house was taken eagerly. With some luck, they could be out the village for a while.

“I wanted to talk to the cloth merchant.” Naruto muttered as he remained half leaning over the railing. “He’s only here until midday.”

“If there is any time you can go find him.” Kakashi’s book lowered a tiny bit. “Or you can send a clone to conduct your business. What did you buy from him this time?”

“I’m supposed to make an order.” Naruto rolled over to glare at Kakashi. “I want to make a new fan and some other things.”

“Can’t you just buy it?” Sasuke asked slowly as eyed Naruto. “The entire thing, can’t you just buy what you need?” That got him a snort from both Kakashi and Naruto.

“If you have the time and the knowledge you make your own things. Customization is not only fun for people but… it can be a little necessary.” Sasuke was certain that Naruto’s eyes had gone slightly brighter at the end of his sentence.

“If you have the time and the knowledge you make your own things. Customization is not only fun for people but… it can be a little necessary.” Sasuke was certain that Naruto’s eyes had gone slightly brighter at the end of his sentence.

“Also, sometimes the finished product can cost way more than you are able to buy.” Kakashi supplied.

“Yeah and the things I want aren’t exactly sitting on a shelf somewhere in Konoha.” Naruto
laughed. “Maybe they are sitting somewhere on a shelf in Suna and maybe I’d have an easier chance of buying them.”

“Sorry!” Sakura gasped as she leapt down from a nearby tree to the end of the bridge. “I had to change after my spar.”

“All’s forgiven.” Kakashi’s book closed with a soft snap. “Let’s see the Hokage.” Sasuke almost protested because he wanted to continue the conversation but he sighed and gave it up. Another opportunity would come, hopefully soon.

XxX

“Finally, I sent for you a long time ago why are you only now getting here?” Tsunade baa-chan complained before the door had even closed behind them. “Kakashi don’t tell me you are teaching these kids bad habits.”

“It was unavoidable Tsunade-sama.” Kakashi-sensei laughed. “Sorry about the wait.”

“We came as fast as we could baa-chan you didn’t give us much time in the first place.” Naruto frowned. “We had today off you know.”

“I was aware.” She said dryly, she nudged a huge stack of papers to the side of the desk. Shizune bustled forward to take them away. “That’s why I called you, you’re not doing anything anyway.”

“Eh…” Naruto hissed. “Aren’t there laws for things like this? We’re entitled to a break now and again Baa-chan.”

“You’re Genins, all missions are breaks.” She dismissed. “Besides this mission is of importance to me an old friend reached out to me for a favour.”

“He’s paying?” Naruto asked suspiciously. “If he’s your friend you aren’t carting us off for cheap labour while your debts get wiped clean right?”

“What a horrid brat you are.” She sniffed. “All my outstanding debts were cleared.” Naruto snorted in disbelief and sought out Shizune on the other side of the room arranging the paperwork. She winked and nodded at him so he sighed instead. “Can’t you take my word for it?” Tsunade baa-chan complained.

“Nope.” Naruto yawned. “No way baa-chan, Ero-sennin said you’re addicted.”

“That Jiraiya, if he isn’t being a letch he’s slandering.” She grumbled. “Enough about that, your mission is going to be taking you out the village.”

“Again.” Naruto murmured. “So soon?” He caught Sakura’s dissatisfied look and quickly tacked on. “I mean me… not you guys.”

“Further out than what you’re thinking.” Tsunade Baa-chan picked up a few sheets of paper. “You’ll be eventually getting cold on this mission. You are going far north but don’t worry. Kakashi’s familiar with the area. Unless he’s forgotten the important parts.”

“I am?” Kakashi-sensei sounded surprised.

“The client is a friend of mine.” Tsunade baa-chan admitted. “But team seven gets the mission because Kakashi is already familiar with the terrain and some of the people involved. It has to do with a previous mission Kakashi did on his own way back.” Tsunade baa-chan stifled a chuckle.
“When you were a shorty.”

“We’re going to the land of snow?” Kakashi-sensei asked curiously.

“Escort mission for a movie.” Tsunade baa-chan said cheerfully. “Of course, if it turns out to be more than it seems and ends up to be a big mess…” She held up a mission sheet that had a huge C in the corner followed by a question mark. “Well honestly your team seems to be doing pretty well on the unexpected chaos front. If it turns out to be more than it seems I’m certain you’ll take care of it with no problem considering your record.”

“If it goes to pieces do we get paid more?” Naruto demanded.

“What movie is it?” Sakura asked at the same time. They glanced at each other and Naruto let out a laugh.

“Her first.” He allowed. “But don’t think I’ll let you slip away baa-chan.”

“Are you familiar with the Princess Fuun franchise?” Tsunade baa-chan asked with a smile. “They are making another one.”

“I didn’t get to see the last one!” Sakura sounded delighted.

“Sounds like you’ll be enjoying whatever the mission tosses your way.” Tsunade baa-chan mused as she scribbled on the mission sheet. “You’ll be compensated for any trouble based on your reports.”

“You better send in that report on time Kakashi.” Sasuke glared at their sensei.

XxX

“So, while my team uses their rest of the day to prepare to leave.” Kakashi shifted into a more comfortable stance. “You going to tell me more about this Tsunade-sama? The only work that I really had in the Land of snow ended in a half-completed mission.”

“It can’t be helped that we got the mission plea too late.” Tsunade frowned. “And before you ask, that region is just as shady as it became years ago. Doesn’t matter, you have a movie to protect during the shooting.”

“And any other things to do?” Kakashi asked softly. “Do I have any other motives? Anything that trumps the original mission?”

“The actress she’s very important.” A scroll came flying at him. He easily caught it he made it halfway through reading before his eye met Tsunade’s gaze. “I know what you’re thinking but that is the way it is Kakashi.”

“I feel my team will end up learning something along the way.” Kakashi sighed. “What a thing to suddenly drop on us Tsunade-sama but aren’t I more suited to completing this alone?”

“Well no.” Tsunade chuckled. “You see… I’m taking some things from Jiraiya’s book and letting the kids prove themselves.”

“The kids or Naruto?” Kakashi frowned. “Is this you wanting to see him in action?”

“Please I haven’t even gotten up to date on that kid and since you are being so suspicious about my motives, you’ll be pleased to know Asuma’s team is on a hard mission too, getting the kids ready
to be our eyes and ears. Thankless work but they do need a change every now and again. Kurenai’s
team also have some work doing. I’m soon going to let them experience a real challenge.” She
smiled brightly. “I don’t give people more than they can handle Kakashi.”

“More than what you think they can handle.” He muttered. “Fine fine, hopefully this won’t turn
into too big of a mess. Of course, it will be a lot harder to dig graves in snow.”

“Yes yes I already read the report about the fishing villages.” Tsunade waved him away. “I’ll send
some scrolls with you for just in case. But that only applies to just in case someone was interesting.
As in something to really study.”

“Yes ma’am.” Kakashi shook his head. “I’ll be going to pack now.”

“This is a good friend of mine Kakashi, make sure to treat him well.”

“Yes ma’am.”

XxX

“I thought you had today off.” Came from behind him, Sasuke shrugged as he continued to pack
his bag. “Is it an emergency?”

“Wouldn’t you know about any emergencies in the village before me Itachi?” He shrugged as he
carefully accessed the thickness of the pants he had selected. “It’s a special mission from the
Hokage.”

“Special mission?” Itachi closed the bedroom door. “Is it a big one?”

“Sounds like it may be a long one.” Sasuke rifled through his shirts to pick the thickest one. He
shoved the rejected ones over to a pile and started on his supplies. “An escort for something that is
going to take some time. We have a long way to go.”

“I see.” Itachi said softly. “Well it is to be expected after all.”

“I’m a shinobi, missions are my job.” Sasuke responded as he sorted through his weapons and
backups. “It doesn’t matter when they come.”

XxX

“Money.” Tenten said reassuringly as she shoved Sakura’s small purse of savings for extravagance.
“You never know what you’re going to see on the road and it sounds like you are going far.”

“Well yeah but I don’t think there will be many souvenirs where we are going.” Sakura shook her
head as she packed. “I might end up splurging for a coat or something just as useful.”

“All the reason to take it.” Tenten shook the purse enticingly. Sakura was unable to help her
laughter before she gave in and shoved the purse to the bottom of the bag. “There you go, now
you’re set to enjoy this mission.”

“Well maybe I could buy a prop or two.” Sakura admitted. “I mean if they are willing to sell it at
the end you know?”

“That’s more like it!” Tenten laughed. “Look here.” She dropped a small nunchuck into the bag.
“We only just started but you can practice on the road who knows? It might come in handy.”

“Considering the missions we usually get into when we step foot out the village?” Sakura groaned.
“I might end up saving someone’s life by clunking something on the head with it. Or using it as a grip.”

“Look at you thinking ahead.” Tenten nudged her so hard she almost fell off her bed. “Big Chuunin you.”

“Oh, come on don’t start.” Sakura laughed. “Not this again.”

XxX

“Maybe I can come up with some kind of elaborate watering system.” Naruto grumbled as leaned over Iruka-sensei who was furiously correcting papers. “This can’t be convenient, can it?”

“It’s just a few plants Naruto.” Iruka-sensei’s pen stilled as the man looked up at him. “I certainly don’t mind watering them while you are gone but the water system does sound interesting.”

“Well it would be nice.” Naruto admitted. “But I like watering them, but if I’m going to be gone like this I’m going to need more than this Iruka-sensei what if you are too busy? Or away on a mission too?”

“Well I guess we could tell Konohamaru it is a mission.” Iruka-sensei shrugged. “That would keep him out of trouble for fifteen minutes twice a day.” A smile came across the man’s face. “It’s a wonderful idea actually.”

“Don’t lie to the kid and tell him it’s a mission.” Naruto tried to growl but his laughter escaped instead.

“I’ll try to restrain myself.” Iruka-sensei’s free hand came up and ruffled his hair lightly. “Now off with you, time will be gone before you know it and I know you have packing to finish doing.”

“And errands to run.” Naruto laughed sheepishly. “Bye Iruka-sensei!”

XxX

Missions going wrong was an absolute certainty but along the road there was bound to be plenty of opportunities. The paper crinkled in his bag as he placed his cloak and pants in so Naruto growled before he rearranged his bag.

Another mission outside Konoha’s gates, it was going to be fun. The whole mission sounded like fun. His shurikens and needles dropped easily inside the bag. Of course, fun always had trouble a step or two behind. It was going to be a blast for someone he just had to make sure it was him.

The fan had to stay behind, he was disappointed about that but he knew he was not strong enough to use the fan in cold weather, what a pity.

His tray of experiments easily slid in next. He had a vague idea of what some of the mixtures did but there was only so much that he remembered or knew. That was why he had to get test subjects and who else but people getting in the way of the mission? The tray did not take up much room in his bag. The tray had once been a metal box of chocolates but it was what it was now.

XxX

“God he’s waiting for us this feels so weird.” Sakura whispered.

“If that isn’t a bad omen I don’t know what is.” Sasuke glanced behind them. “The sky is too
“I can hear you.” Kakashi-sensei closed his book and tucked it away. “Always so mean to your
sensei where’s the cute team I led that admired me?”

“Did that happen.” Sakura bit her lip and stared at the overhead trees. “I can’t recall.”

“What’s admirable is how you manage to be so cheap but still respected. That will come in handy
when I refuse to do reports and file my taxes.” Sasuke tugged at his pack straps. “Let’s go.”

“Naruto? You ready?” Kakashi-sensei’s eye swept over him to his bag before it darted back to his
face.

“Let’s go!” Naruto grinned. “I’m looking forward to this.”

XxX

“So, what’s your favourite movie in the series?” Sakura asked the moment Sasuke had pulled
ahead to walk by their sensei’s side. “I like the second one but the first one still makes me tear up.”

“You’ve seen them all?” Naruto mused. “I’m not too sure that I’ve seen all of them because I was
always moving you know? But the first one that I saw… well I’ve only seen four of them.”

“Four!” Sasuke’s head turned back at Sakura’s exclamation. “You haven’t seen them all then.”

“I had a feeling.” Naruto groaned. “I really liked them too, when I managed to see them.”

“Yeah… how did you manage to see them?” Sakura asked curiously.

“Well sneaked into one the first time with Haku.” Naruto remembered. “We had a slow day and
some of us watched one when Zabuza wasn’t looking the few other times. The last time I watched
one well Zabuza was too happy to get us away from him for a bit.” And what a time that had been,
they had nearly gotten thrown out being as loud and rambunctious as they had been but even
Zabuza understood people needed some good memories before they said goodbye. Even if it was
supposed to be for a while.

And he really had not wanted them making a bunch of noise while he had been creeping about
making plans. He had been really annoying like that but Naruto had enjoyed himself. The dark
room, the movie, the cheers. The taste of the popcorn they had splurged for. It had been worth it.

“That’s a pretty big smile there.” Sakura teased. “What has you like that huh?”

“I liked the movies.” Naruto admitted.

XxX

“You never even saw one?” Kakashi glanced back in time to see Naruto and Sakura close in on
Sasuke. “Really Sasuke? But they show in Konoha right? Sakura-chan’s seen them.”

“I never had time for such things.” Sasuke eyed his two team members and quickened his step. To
Kakashi’s amusement Naruto and Sakura did the same.

“But the signs are everywhere! You mean you weren’t even curious to go see once?” Sakura
demanded.
“I had other things to do. Better things.” Sasuke’s tone was dry.

“So many families were in the first one.” Sakura frowned at Sasuke. “My mom took me to the first one and Ino and I went to the second one. I went to the others with my mom or my Dad but you didn’t go to any?”

“Does it really matter?”

“We’re going to be watching them of course it matters.” Naruto scolded. “We gotta know what we’re seeing and understand what they will be looking for. Gotta help out too.”

“I can’t wait to see them in person.” Sakura sighed. “Of course, I never got to see the last one when it was in Konoha things were way too busy.”

“There’s a last one?” Naruto paused. “You mean the one when they got tricked in the mountains by the old witch and nearly got drowned right?”

“No no there’s one after that!” Sakura laughed. “It was advertising but somehow I just couldn’t get to it while it was showing in Konoha.”

“Really.” Naruto breathed softly. “I wanna see that.”

“You just might get the chance.” Kakashi shook his head at his team. “It’s still showing in some places.”

XxX

“You’re paying? Willingly.” Naruto glanced at the clear sky. “This mission is going to go to hell, we’re not going to make it out alive are we.”

“Rude.” Kakashi-sensei sighed. “It’s a treat, you three can watch the movie while I meet up with the client, after such a long walk I thought this would make you happy.”

“So suspicious.” Sakura eyed him. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Paying for all of us?” Sasuke glanced at the clear sky. “A storm must be coming.”

“All of you are rude.” Kakashi-sensei shook his head. “You can always come with me.”

“I’ll pass I want to see this.” Sakura refused. “Thank you for the generous donation sensei.”

“This isn’t a freaky test or something right?” Naruto whispered, he got a rolled eye in response. “What? it’s a legitimate concern you know.”

“I just thought it would be fun, something to do. You do want to watch it right?” Kakashi-sensei’s eye moved to the road. “It’s just something to do that also will help with the mission.”

“That’s what gets you to part with your money?” Naruto hissed. “Not the growling loud stomachs of your cute kohais but the mission? I think you’re worse than any cheapskate I’ve ever met and I’ve met a lot you know.”

“Mah I’m not as bad as you want to make out.”

“Education is the only reason you’re treating us and it seems so reluctant I bet this theatre is the cheapest in town.” Naruto taunted.
“But I do treat you.” Kakashi-sensei considered. “I bought you lunch, we’ve treated Sakura.”

“We as in a joint effort.” Naruto pointed out. “But I’ll give you that point… so you’ll only part with money when you have ulterior motives.” Naruto shook his head sadly. “That’s even worse.”

Kakashi’s suspicious funding aside the movie was okay, it was his first time seeing the series and it became obvious in the first ten minutes that you needed some previous knowledge to really get what was going on but that was okay, Sasuke was enjoying himself watching his teammates reactions.

No matter how much he saw how free they could be with their emotions it always startled him how they so easily and happily let loose. How easily Naruto could compliment people’s appearances admit that he found something attractive. Admit how he liked things and people when most those things would make others look at him strangely.

Sakura had already come to the scene being open with her emotions. It had been tiring having the campaign aimed at him but it was refreshing and fun to see how open she could be about her appreciation and liking for other things.

It made Team seven real for him those little things. In the dark theatre with his team next to him he felt closer to them when he heard their gasps, their groans. Sakura’s attempt at stifling her squeals when actors came on screen. Naruto’s fascination with the princess was realized two minutes after she came on screen.

Sasuke heard how Naruto whispered her name. Bit off groans of dismay, sad sighs and whispered words of encouragement throughout the movie. If he had been really interested in the movie it would have been annoying how active and noisy his teammates were but he found it hard to be annoyed over it. They were enjoying themselves.

Of course, the plot had multiple holes. That he could see anyway not that he was going to tell either of them that they were enjoying themselves far too much. On Kakashi’s money too but the fact still remained that there were ridiculously huge plot holes in the movie along with mind numbing cringe worthy material.

How this movie managed to pass any tests confused him. How easily every accepted the existence of rainbow chakra. Sasuke was still confused about what rainbow chakra was supposed to do. Talks with Naruto told him everyone’s chakra just might feel different but having multiple colours? At the same time? Who could even do that. Civilians were crazy.

Also as great as it looked he highly doubted the enemy could use the puppet jutsu like that, to that extent and that no one even noticed until it was too late. Sasuke could pick at the plot and the movie all day if he could, but he would not.

It was fairly okay when not taken too seriously. Something appealing to the eye but certainly not the mind the fight scenes were not even worthy of a scoff but the afternoon was not a waste. Naruto and Sakura made it bearable.

“Who knew that it was going to make a dent in the ceiling? They should check those things.” Sakura muttered as they emerged into the afternoon sun. “Oh no is that the sun?” She shielded her eyes with one hand. “But we didn’t get thrown out so we have that going for us. Wonder if
“Kakashi-sensei is back yet.”

“That was such a sad ending.” Naruto groaned as he shielded his own eyes. “It was good but it leaves you with so many questions. It isn’t fair.”

“Well we do know the two of you enjoyed it.” Sasuke flicked a popcorn kernel from his shirt. “Some people were loud and couldn’t keep still.”

“The story was moving.” Naruto turned his head at the sound of slight alarm a bit away. “How could you not get caught up in it?”

“I think the actors were moving.” Sasuke’s eyes dipped from him to Sakura who had taken to dusting off herself. “If the actors didn’t have such pretty faces you wouldn’t have been so taken.”

“Mao isn’t pretty.” Sakura declared with a final slap to her dress. “And he’s a pretty good villain it is amazing how he gets his lines and evil out, you end up getting so angry at him. He’s pretty good.”

“Yeah his face is too clear to be a villain in real life.” Naruto dismissed. “Too many laugh lines, good job on trying to hide them but I bet that old man is a laughing grandpa in real life.”

“But he does Mao really well.” Sakura groaned, “Best villain of the series.” Sasuke’s head turned to where Naruto had heard the sound of alarm, it was a bit louder and coming closer.

“Some people haven’t seen it all.” Naruto said slowly as he heard the sounds of alarm rising along with the sound of hooves.

“It’s coming closer.” Sasuke bent slightly his eyes all the wall to the left of them, it was wooden and low enough for children to hop over with some effort it would take people to get over swiftly and by the sound of the hooves it would take talent to soar over in a timely manner without stopping.

Still they had no time to debate because by the time they had stood together the first horse had soared over. Naruto got an eyeful of beautiful bright colours on a horse before his eyes registered those in all black and forgettable clothes coming right afterwards. He had made the seal before the second horse had landed.

XxX

He knew he had a weakness, he liked pretty things. Pretty people, soft items it was not as if that liking had been stomped out of him. He had been indulged and encouraged to like and long after pretty things. Delicate looking things that could house strength and intelligence.

Just because it looked nice never meant that it was not strong. A lesson he learned early. Naruto found that to fight best you had to fight for something you had to have an image of what you wanted to protect and what you wanted to aim for.

Of course, there was nothing wrong with having a few idealistic fantasies about things once in a while. Dedicating your service to a princess or a prince. Serving them with everything… it was just supposed to be a dream in the world of shinobi one could not expect that to be facts. One could not expect that to happen or for those people to live very long.

But when the opportunity to do not only the right thing but to play the role he thought about sometimes dropped into his lap Naruto could never refuse. Which is why his heart had reacted before anything else.
Besides, he held sympathy for runners. Princess Fuun was right before his eyes and she looked like she wanted to run, how could he stand by?

XxX

“You don’t have to be so damn bitchy to the kids.” Naruto growled when he finally tracked her down again. “I know you aren’t a real princess but to those kids back there you represent something. Couldn’t you have forced a smile for at least a few seconds? Your job doesn’t end with the movie you know. There’s something called promotion.”

“Who are you to tell me about my life?” Naruto had cornered her in an alley. “You are the one who came to me and started babbling about an autograph. You’re the one that stuck his nose in where it doesn’t belong.”

“Well you have me there.” Naruto shrugged. “You were running away and I could have let them capture you, I could have turned a blind eye but I didn’t that doesn’t mean you owe me anything. You didn’t ask me but I’m entitled to an opinion. I get to think what I like because my actions brought me closer to you and I have to say nee-chan I really don’t like your face.” He admitted.

“You’re hard and you’re cold not pretty at all you have to be a real good liar a really good actor to do what you do and be like you are. Your true face is ugly.”

“You think a silly boy like you gets to tell me what to do?”

“Why were you running?” Naruto narrowed his eyes. “Who are you running from? Because they will catch up with you even after my team has dealt with them. There may be another section of them you’re looking to run but you don’t have the skill or heart to do it. Were you going to ride on out on the horse in those pretty clothes?” He shook his head slowly. “You don’t have the heart or skill to do it properly but you feel the urge to run nee-chan. Who are you running from?”

XxX

Maybe leaving them to their own company had been a bad idea although Kakashi had left them to watch a movie and wait on him to return. He was not that surprised at the situation he had come back to. Team seven tended to get into its fair share of scrapes.

However, the one he would have put down to be the ring leader was nowhere to be found and that concerned him a little bit. There was no telling just what Naruto would have gotten himself into, still it was cute to see his little bloodthirsty team doing more for their reputation than his words could ever do.

“What are you doing?” He let his voice carry to the group below. Sasuke had finished tying up the client and a few of the bodyguards and Sakura had tied her group of unconscious men a little too tightly. It was really funny but their client was waking up and of course Naruto was nowhere to be found. That was a little worrisome but only a little.

“Wasting time.” Sasuke dusted off his hands before he peered up at Kakashi. “And now you decide to turn up.”

His team really could be cuter than words. Telling Sasuke that just might not be a good idea however so it was better for him to ignore the cuteness of the blunder and just go ahead and do what needed to be done. They had made the job easier for themselves after all, he doubted they were thinking about their reputation. It would be perfect if the third was around but one could not have everything.
They had done a rather good job of tying up their quarrys, although it was almost too easy for Kakashi to quickly untie the men gathered. He offered a helping hand to the man in a brown coat. “I’m sorry.” Kakashi chuckled, he gave a short half bow to the man. “This person is the client to the mission.” He got to enjoy the startled look on Sakura’s face and the surprise in Sasuke’s eyes.

XxX

“This time our mission is to protect the actress that plays Princess Fuun, Fukikaze Yukie from herself if necessary.” Kakashi folded his arms as his students settled themselves among the actors. “At least one of you is on the mission already.”

“Don’t act like we can tell Naruto what to do.” Sasuke folded his arms as he rocked back into his chair. “And there wasn’t that much time for action just reaction.”

“And you’re willing to admit that Sasuke?” Kakashi watched Sasuke twitch just the slightest. “Ah well it is Naruto. I’m willing to bet he’ll catch on rather quickly so finding him is only a matter of time.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sakura frowned. “And what do you mean by protect?”

“Ah well that’s not exactly true, we’re more of escorts.” Kakashi admitted with a chuckled. “That’s why I said protect her even from herself if necessary. She must be escorted no matter her feelings on the matter.”

“Eh this is the first time that The Unlucky Princess will be filmed overseas.” The nearby script writer offered up. He tapped his rolled-up book against his shoulder with a groan. “But Fukikaze Yukie plays the most critical role.”

Their client gave a small bow. “I’m so sorry.” He murmured.

“As one would expect from Konoha shinobi.” The director removed his pipe from his mouth with a smile. “The bodyguards that were hired as stuntmen and even our master guards were completely beaten.”

“What beautiful cliffs.” Sakura breathed, her eyes were on the photographs on the boards nearby. The set had her in slight excitement. Her body mission ready but her eyes dancing in glee.

“You’re Kin-chan!” The honorific got Sasuke to eye Sakura for a few moments before his eyes
returned to the director. “The actor that played Britt!”

“This time the last scene of the movie is going to be filmed there.” Another actor volunteered. Sakura’s eyes lit up further when she saw him.

“And you’re Hideo-san! The actor that played Shishimaru!” Sakura’s hands clapped together.

“We sure are going far since we’re going to Snow Country.” Sasuke interrupted, his face showed how tired he was with the entire thing. “Is this normal for a film?”

“That was the manager’s idea.” The script writer pointed to the client with his book. “Sandaiyuu-san’s recommendation is what gave us the idea of how to plan the next movie.” Sandaiyuu gave a slight bow at the mention of his name. “It is said that in spring the glaciers glow in the seven colours.”

“But that is nothing more than a myth.” Kakashi explained to his team when he noticed the interest spark in both their eyes. “In the real Snow Country, there is no such thing as spring.”

“No spring.” Sasuke said softly. “Then why the rumour?”

“Then it’s always snowing?” Sakura frowned.

“Exactly.” Kakashi nodded.

“Kakashi-san was it?” The director smiled. “I heard you’ve been to Snow Country before.”

“It was a long time ago.” Not the best of scenery, not the best mission not good at all even to think back on.

“And it is said that Snow Country is a poor nation.” Another actor joined the discussion this time coming up behind Kakashi’s team to lay a hand on their chairs. At his voice Sakura’s face turned bright red and she sat up straight before she whirled around.

“You can never talk about Naruto again.” Sasuke muttered while Sakura’s voice went a pitch higher.

“It’s the henchman Michi-sama!” Kakashi was impressed with her control.

“Worse than Naruto.” Sasuke huffed.

“Didn’t their economy collapse because the previous feudal lord got too involved with his mechanical puppets?” The man asked before he sent a wink in Sakura’s direction. “And that’s how they went bankrupt or something like that.”

“I hope they have a heater at least.” Hideo joked. “I’ve got delicate skin. I don’t like to go to cold places.”

“So you want to run away like Yukie?” Kin questioned as he toyed with his cup.

“Hey give me a break.” The script writer begged. “Don’t say things like that.”

“Is Yukie-san always like that?” Sakura asked slowly. “Running away all the time?”

The actors exchanged glances. “Ah yeah.” Kin nodded. “Well the running is new but… Yukie-chan has always been like well that. She doesn’t know the meaning of the words ambition or motivation. She’s really helpless that Yukie-chan.”
“But she doesn’t slack off when it comes to work.” The director pointed out. “I don’t care about an actor’s personal life. As long as she gives a great performance when the camera is on I’m not going to complain. She was born to be an actress.”

“Thinking about it.” Kin muttered. “She started running away when she heard we were going to Snow Country.”

“Kakashi-sensei.” Sakura asked softly. “Naruto’s with her…?”

“Her face isn’t that pretty.” Sasuke dismissed as he got to his feet. “We should start to look for them.”

XxX

“She ripped up my autograph book, she tried to spray me in the face, she’s rude and mean.” Naruto grumbled as he sat on a hard roof watching a dim establishment. “She’s got as much self-preservation as a flea and is really mean even to people trying to help her.” He grumbled. “And she’s in there!” He yelped. “Drinking like a fish! I just got rid of one drunken louse why is my mission having to deal with nee-chans and baa-chans who like cups more than anything else.” He groaned.

“Even though you didn’t know why you stuck fairly close to her, your instincts are impeccable.” Kakashi-sensei took a seat next to him. “She might be in her cups but it isn’t all that bad, didn’t you enjoy the movie?”

Considering how often Kakashi-sensei popped into conversations and Naruto’s life, him appearing and taking a casual seat did not startle him all that much. Some instincts were hard to suppress and ignore and Naruto had gotten mostly used to looking up and seeing the man outside his window, waiting for him at the end of a street. In a tree waiting for Naruto to finish train, at Naruto’s window a basket full of healthy food packed to the brim.

Naruto was used to the man popping up and engaging conversation as if he had been there all along. Mostly because the air behind him was calm almost soothing.

“She ripped up your autograph book?” Kakashi-sensei asked curiously. “Well actors can be a funny lot.”

“I’m pissed about that.” Naruto frowned. “She won’t give anyone her autograph the drunken nee-chan.” He sighed slowly. “I’m pissed that I still want the stupid thing.”

Kakashi-sensei tilted his head his eye watching Naruto closely. “You do?”

“Yeah.” Naruto admitted. “Stupid huh?”

“No.” Kakashi-sensei said softly. “Not at all but at least you will have some time to coax it out of her.”

“She’s a serious runner.” Naruto pointed out. “She’s been trying to ditch me and I was trying to help her, protect her…” He trailed off. “The guys that Sakura and Sasuke would have dealt with…”

“Oh them…” Kakashi-sensei hummed. “Simple misunderstanding but it is fine for us.”

“How are we going to get her to do anything?” Naruto grumbled. “I’m going in soon before she tries to slip out through the sewers or something.”
“Well we can work out something.” Kakashi-sensei hummed. “We soon have to leave on the ship.”

“That nee-chan doesn’t want to go anywhere near that ship.” Naruto grumbled as he lightly toyed with his weapons pouch. He had a few soldier pills that induced sleeping. He had never thought they could come in handy like that. He also had some powder that had finally finished drying in time to come along. The nee-chan would not even notice him slipping it into the sake. Might even improve the taste. Or he could just blow it in her face and save himself the grief.

It was not that he was not sympathetic to her fear. That he was not highly aware that she was running from something. That something loomed over her, he knew that he could see it but he could not even get a direction on where her fear came from.

She wanted to run, he could sympathize with that but that face of hers was well known. People around her and behind her had already seen too much. She could never disappear properly, she could never run properly in the first place. And he still wanted that stupid autograph… this mission was going to be quite the pain.

Naruto got to his feet and dusted his pants off as he eyed the establishment. He would have to keep his eye on her at all times from the moment they got her on that ship and keep an eye on anything else around her too. Just in case someone came to nip at her heels.

He had just taken a step forward when a hand grasped his wrist. His sensei had not turned to look at him but kept his eye fixed on the dingy bar below. His hand on Naruto’s wrist was not imposing just a way to keep Naruto still. “You’ll have things in common.” Kakashi-sensei warned.

“Yeah but she’s alone.” Naruto pointed out. “She’s all alone because that’s what she wants, I’m never alone. It’s either you guys…” he used his free hand to tap his hitai-ate. “Or it is these guys.” His hand moved to over his heart. “I’ve always got people with me.”

The hand slowly dropped from his wrist so Naruto used that opportunity to leap from the roof and head for the bar.

XxX

That white coat made her stand out like nobody’s business even in the dim bar. The nee-chan’s attention kept going from her drink to some accessory in her hand before it focused solely on the drink. Naruto was not impressed.

“Quit joking around.” She tucked away her accessory, a pendant now that Naruto had gotten closer. It easily was hidden in the palm of her hand. “Who would want to go to Snow Country?” Her voice sounded sloshed, even Tsunade baa-chan had held onto some pretence.

There barely was anyone in the bar but Naruto was not certain whether that was because of how shabby the place was on the outside or because of the hour. The place was so empty he was able to hear the sound of a man at the end of the bar room drop his coins before he got to his feet.

The nee-chan had resumed her drinking. Naruto was grateful she had not resorted to drinking from the bottle but he guessed it was more a manners and dignity thing. People tended to keep those up in society no matter who. It was when they were alone that things like that dropped away. It was not as if she was savouring the sake anyway. She was drowning whatever pain she carried.

The patron leaving looked more than a little shady so Naruto made his way forward. Talking would go right through the ears of such a nee-chan but everyone had a job to do. Especially him.

“I finally found you princess Fuun.” He teased, pretending he had not been sitting on the roof of a
neighbouring establishment since she had gotten there and contemplated the actual worth of the
mission.

“I told you already I’m not princess Fuun.” She took the pendant and tied it around her neck
without even hooking it from the front.

“I understand that!” Naruto sat on the stool next to her and lightly pounded the bar with his fist.
“Because the real Princess Fuun wouldn’t go about breaking a boy’s pure heart! She wouldn’t go
about hurting kids’ feelings either! You’re a great actress but I’m not in the mood to forgive you
for the stunts you’ve pulled!”

“Actress?” she lowered her cup.

“Don’t tell me you’re so far in your cups you’ve forgotten what you are.” Naruto growled.

“Great?” She chuckled. “Actress? Great? Me?” she leaned towards him a grin on her face. She
started to laugh her entire body shaking with it. “How stupid.” She sighed as she poured herself
another cup. “Being an actress is the worst job ever. It’s a job for the worst people. You have to
follow other people’s scripts, act, and live in a world packed with lies.”

She was talking about being an actress, being on stage and film but Naruto felt some his irritation
fade away because those words and the picture it painted felt so heart clenching familiar. Follow
someone’s script… live in a world packed with lies. He gave into a moment of weakness and
turned his head away for a split moment and closed his eyes tightly and tried to relax his hands.
Soon enough by the time the nee-chan had started to speak again he had regained his calm.

“Truly stupid.” She laughed.

“Nee-chan, you’re drunk aren’t you.” Naruto said softly.

Maybe the question struck a nerve because she swung to face him angrily. “You’re annoying! Just
hurry up and disappear!”

The door to the bar crashed open. “Yukie-sama!” A man called out. “The ship to Snow Country is
departing soon! We have to hurry.” He was unfamiliar to Naruto but obviously well known to the
nee-chan. Naruto eyed his clothes and noted the fabrics. He did look like a quiet man but
appearances were always deceiving. Naruto got distracted by Sakura charging in after the man.
Following quieter and certainly slower was Sasuke and Kakashi-sensei. The whole team was now
together, which made the man now by the nee-chan’s side most likely their client.

“It’s okay if it goes along, I’m not going to board.” She said before she sipped at her cup.

“Eh what?” Sakura gasped before she took a step forward.

“What are you saying?” The man raged with a small thump to the bar’s countertop.

“It’ll be alright.” The nee-chan swayed. “It happens all the time.” She was fully facing Sakura and
the other man. Naruto’s lightly traced the pouch that his powders were. He could stop all the
talking in one move and then cart the nee-chan onto the boat. “Something goes wrong the main
character gets replaced, the director gets replaced…”

“Be quiet!” Such a forceful voice from someone who had looked so pleading and begging only a
few moments before. The nee-chan stopped her swaying. “The part of princess Fuun can only be
played by you!” His determination lay in his voice in his eyes and when it came to facts Naruto had
to agree. In real life, the nee-chan sucked but the part she played on screen, it could not be anyone
else. It had to be her. “And if you won’t come to Snow Country.” The man had lowered his voice but it was a wasted attempt after all their loud voices a few moments ago. The bar was empty mostly anyway. “You’re not going to be able to work in this business ever again.”

“It’s alright, it doesn’t matter.” She said softly. Naruto gritted his teeth because he could feel in her words that it really did not matter.

“Yukie-sama.” The man took a step back his face falling into despair as if he had excepted his words and warnings to somehow reach the nee-chan. Naruto eased his packet of powder into his hand and had only made a small tear into it when he caught his sensei’s eye. The man slowly shook his head so Naruto held back.

“I guess it can’t be helped.” Kakashi-sensei stepped forward joining the conversation and shoving his hitai-ate from covering his eye. She turned around at the sound of his voice only to be caught in the gaze of the sharingan. Her eyes went wide before they went unfocused, she slumped of her stool into Kakashi-sensei’s arms.

“That’s one way to do it.” Sasuke looked for the barman. “She’s already paid for this right?”

“We can only hope so.” Sakura looked glum. “It’s going to be a long mission.”

“My apologies.” The man said softly. “Yukie-sama… she is…”

“Going to be a problem.” Sasuke nudged the sake cup further across the counter. “Is she going to act even when she wants to run?”

“She can actually be professional.” The man said softly.

“Let’s hope so or the filming for this movie is going to be longer than anticipated.” Sakura watched the unconscious woman before she turned to the bartender. “We’ll be going now sorry for the disturbance.”

XxX

“How much longer is she going to sleep?” Sakura asked her gaze on their sensei. “It’s good that we are a good distance from the mainland but they do have to start filming soon.”

“She would have been awake by now if I had sent her to sleep.” Naruto felt obliged to point out. “Six hours the most and it would be more than enough time for the ship to get away from swimming distance.”

“I’m not too sure.” Sasuke shifted in his seat. “She seems determined. Is there even a far enough distance? She might end up drowning.”

“I was going to say don’t be ridiculous.” Sakura groaned. “But we’ve all met her. That possibility is all too real.”

“Where did the old guy go?” Naruto asked curiously.

“Yukie-sama should be waking very soon.” Kakashi-sensei answered. “He’s gone to see if she has woken yet.”

“Her room has so many windows she’ll be awake whether she wants to or not.” Sasuke turned to Sakura. “You didn’t close the blinds.”
“Sakura-chan didn’t close the curtains around the bed either.” Naruto pointed out.

“Well I wanted to see her the moment we opened the door!” She defended herself. “What if she vanished? Better we know right away that she isn’t in her bed or her room.”

“Where is she going to go? A lifeboat?” Sasuke snorted. “We would know immediately.”

“She won’t shake off the effects so easily.” Kakashi-sensei hummed. “She’s a normal person.”

“So only someone extra ordinary is going to shake off whatever you did to her?” Naruto asked curiously. “Hey is she going to be able to act?” He teased.

“If she had a sharingan of her own there would have been cause for worry.” Sasuke flicked a balled-up piece of paper off the table.

“So, you would shake it off huh Sasuke.” Naruto sighed with slight envy. “So cool, sensei was so fast with it. Hey hey, next time she tries to run you can do it. I’ll keep the surprise powder for extreme situations. Like if she’s running somewhere in the middle of the night. I’ll just pop up and…” Naruto mimed blowing powder into someone’s face. “Then back to bed nee-chan goes. Hey think Sandaiyuu ossan will give us a tip for every time we cut her off before she runs?”

“What do you want us to do, lay a suggestion under a genjutsu?” Sasuke snorted. “It would have to be Kakashi.”

“I’m sure you can do it if you really try Sasuke.” Naruto waved away as he poked at the teapot, movie people were strange sorts. They had berries in the pot while the tea simmered. “Since you used your Sharingan on that tom cat he hasn’t run away since.”

He heard Sakura snort and looked up in time to see Sasuke glaring at the ceiling and Sakura sniggering into the shoulder of her jacket. “It’s nothing.” she continued sniggering when he eyed her.

“What did I say?” Naruto frowned. “Did I say something wrong?”

XxX

“I can’t believe you’re still impressed.” Sasuke shook his head at how transfixed Sakura and Naruto were. Kakashi had his head in his book… of course he did. Sasuke on the other hand could see the stars and hearts in Naruto’s and Sakura’s eyes as the crew bustled around making sets and attending to makeup. The deck was a busy place.

“They are so fast at it.” Sakura sighed. “And we’re right in the middle of it!”

“She’s so delicate looking.” Naruto sighed. Sasuke rolled his eyes before he turned his attention to the water. They had already checked over the boat and everyone on it before they had left. It had not stopped Kakashi or himself from doing so a few times since leaving the docks. Being paranoid never hurt anybody.

“You’re so obvious.” Sasuke snorted.

“She’s really pretty and delicate looking.” Naruto said as he sat cross footed on the deck. “But I really don’t like that nee-chan. She’s good at what she does but I really don’t like her.”

“You just like her face, why am at not surprised.” Sakura shook her head.
“I like Princess Fuun’s face.” Naruto corrected. “That nee-chan will have to work for it.”

“What are you saying Naruto?” Kakashi lowered the book slightly. “Whatever happens we have to protect her. This is an important mission.” The book went back up to his face.

“Yes yes.” Naruto sighed heavily. “But I think you mean protect her from herself and I’ll do it! I don’t have to like it.” He shook his head. “I can do it and hold onto my dislike can’t I?”

“Once it doesn’t affect the mission I don’t see why not.” Sakura shrugged. “Honestly speaking I see her being the one to make this mission hard.”

“I don’t think it will be that hard to protect a single actress.” Sasuke pointed out as he leaned on the railing. “However, keeping her from running off is another story… with a similar ending.”

“That’s not true Sasuke.” Kakashi’s book lowered again. “Famous people always get targeted. And we don’t know who the enemies are so don’t let your guard down.”

“Currently all we have to worry about is the crew.” Sasuke pointed out as those on the set finished making the scene. A scene of destruction judging by all the fake debris.

“You never know who really belongs.” Naruto volunteered as the camera lights were arranged.

“They might not be the physical danger but information goes a long way.” Sakura eyed the crew running around. “You never know who says what and to who.”

“Light okay mic okay!”

“Camera okay!”

“Put in your best effort!” Came from the director. Sasuke spared a glance around. “Start it from the test!”

“Alright! Scene 23, cut 6 take 1, action!”

Sasuke could see that she was a great actress, the change in expression. Her eyes, the way she moved. She really did look lost to despair. He had no reason to look in Naruto’s or even Sakura’s direction. Their soft gasps had told him that they had already gotten caught up in the scene before them. Kakashi’s book had slightly lowered as well.

“What great drama.” Sakura sighed.

“That totally different to how she acts in real life.” Naruto muttered but his eyes were fixed on the scene.

“That’s Yukie-sama.” Sandaiyuu’s voice was full of admiration and pride. “As soon as the camera starts rolling there is no one who can act like her!”

“Oh…” Naruto murmured. “Cool.”

“Okay stop.” Yukie suddenly said her hand up and her voice no longer in Princess Fuun’s tone.

“What is it?” The assistant director groaned.

“Sandaiyuu I need the drops.” She waved in their direction. “The eye drops.”

“Oh yes yes. I have them right here.” The old man hurried over. Sakura’s and Naruto’s faces
sank into extreme distaste.

“The franchise I’ve been following for so long.” Sakura shook her head. “They can’t be serious.”

“I could have gone the rest of my life without this truth.” Naruto grumbled.

“Good enough?” Sandaiyuu asked Yukie.

“It’s going to overflow! Get the cameras rolling!”

“Oh no no no no.” Naruto groaned. He turned away when the scene resumed, Kakashi chuckled.

XxX

“What’s this meeting about?” It was the crack of dawn way before the crew or any of the actors would be awake yet all of them were crammed into a little study room adjacent from their client’s bedroom.

“I think Kakashi-sensei is about to tell us about some unknown information about Yukie-san.” Sakura said softly as she rocked her chair back. “The closer we get to land the more watchful you’ve become sensei.”

The book had certainly been disappearing faster and faster the more the days crawled by. A slight malfunction the day before on deck and the book had been an orange blur. Naruto had been meaning to get their sensei give them a good reason for that but there had been no chance.

“I’m about to tell you about another facet of the mission.” Kakashi-sensei agreed. “You know how sometimes only the leader of a team carries all the information.

“The closer we get to the land of Snow you get warier does this have to do about the last time you were here? The Hokage said you were familiar with the area. You had a mission here?”

“And the information about Yukie-san has to do with just that. Some years ago, I had a retrieval mission in the land of Snow. It was not a perfect mission.” Kakashi-sensei admitted. “Many things went wrong but our client her name is not Yukie. Koyuki Kazahana is her real name the former princess of Snow Country.”

“Former princess? So she’s living undercover?” Sakura demanded.

“What did you retrieve her from?” Naruto asked slowly, their sensei’s eye met his before they went to the door.

“The current leader of that country tried to have her killed. It was a coup.”

“I see.” Naruto said softly. “Snow Country is home and she doesn’t want to return there.”

“What are you thinking?” Sasuke questioned.

“We just may have to protect her from her very own country if the truth is found out.” Kakashi-sensei said quietly.

“Does she recognize you?” Naruto asked curiously. “When she first saw you… it didn’t seem so.”

“I doubt she remembers much about the rescue.” Kakashi-sensei said softly. “But since we are returning there we may face some strong opponents.”
“But it is her country, isn’t it?” Naruto asked softly the question was more for himself than for his team. “I keep hearing that Snow Country is in a bad state. But it is her country, wasn’t she its princess? With a heart like hers… was it always like that? Under it all was that always her true face?”

“She watched a coup Naruto.” Sakura said softly.

“And turned into this?” Naruto frowned. “There should be a fire burning in her but there is nothing. Not even ashes… her heart is cold… just like snow.”

“It isn’t our business we just have to protect her. We shouldn’t be poking our noses into another country’s affairs.” Sasuke lightly tapped his cup. “We aren’t going there to set the country to rights or usurp the authority. That would be an act of war, something we are gravely unprepared for. We’re here to keep her alive so the movie can be done.”

“I know that!” Naruto seethed. “I’m going to do what has to be done but it feels half assed.”

“There is a limit to what we ourselves can do.” Kakashi-sensei warned when Naruto got to his feet.

“I know that.” Naruto threw an insulted glance in the man’s direction. “I know there are things that groups of people together can’t do but that doesn’t mean that it is going to happen every time for everyone. You’ve gotta catch a break sometime. I wouldn’t leave a gaping hole in the structure of a country but I’m not going to act like letting things sit is the right move either. Both are bad.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“Babysit the lush of course.” Naruto snapped back at his sensei. “Do the job we are supposed to do and keep her alive on and off the set. I don’t have to like her, I’m just liking the work and Kakashi-sensei don’t think we don’t know there is more to this story about this nee-chan. A lost princess turned actor I already know there is more to the story Baa-chan should have warned us.”

“Because she’s a princess?” Sasuke asked.

“Because she’s a loose end.” Naruto corrected before he left the room.

Well no wonder she was so good at making Princess Fuun come alive. There were some actor out there that breathed life through the role but small things really made it, experience, knowledge and what did you know. The nee-chan had both.

No wonder she was so good, no wonder she made the Princess so alive. No wonder it had seemed like a princess out of their dreams had come onto the screen. Of course some things were more than her past life. The crying and sadness might be acted and fake but the way Princess Fuun brought the need for loyalty. If she had been real Naruto would have been tempted to go on one knee.

Bow his head too, very few people inspired that in him. Of course that was for now. When he made it to Hokage he doubted he would find people that would inspire him to do that. He would be surrounded to equals but maybe when he was old… about to pass on the hat to Konohamaru or some other person he might see a kid worthy. A kid that showed that his eyes saw the dream beyond what Naruto could see. Would he kneel then? Of course he would.

He could only hope that he got to see that day that he a Hokage knelt to the next generation.
Who she was changed nothing really, it was what she did. He himself was a weapon did not stop the hate and disgust from the village, did not stop the love and the fear from the others.

“Naruto-kun will not be used as a bomb!”

Memories always lurked in his head. They were all he had left of them and their voices grew louder and sometimes softer. He missed them, sometimes he missed the run. But that did not change the situation. Hell, if Zabuza had been some lost prince of Kiri he would have never waited so long and come up with the second plan. Before that final year they would have stormed Kiri and drowned the place in-

But everyone was not like that. Fear, despair all sorts of things affected you in the run. She did not want to go home. Naruto could sympathize with that, he had feared returning at first but as time went on he had been eager to one day return people at his side. The thoughts of a kid.

He sort of still was one.

She had been a real princess? Didn’t change the fact that her true face was twisted. The true story was there somewhere and the closer they got to the land of Snow the more they would learn. The moment they got to land they would have to watch her. She might bolt.

She was a loose end even if she herself had thrown the past away. Of course if people did come for her Naruto would have to find out exactly why, especially if they tried to get her by herself. There was something in the whole mission that did not make sense but since when did any of them do?

Xxx

Well they had felt the upcoming chill in the air but it was still another thing to wake and find an entire block of ice blocking the path of the ship. A huge imposing piece of ice. Not something you could simply sail around, it would take careful manoeuvres. Just so that the underbelly of the ship did not scrape anything dangerous.

Still the way the crew absolutely lost it over the unexpected land mass of ice in their path was hilariously amusing. The cries of ‘We’re in trouble!’ had echoed all over the ship in a matter of seconds. Calculations on how much they would be delayed by how the ice would interfere with shooting it had been loud and fast paced while Naruto had listened.

Then the old director had instead eyed the ice blocking their path like a man who had seen opportunity and silenced the entire boat with his laughter alone. The director guy had greatly grown on Naruto. He had known before the director had gotten into his chair that the shooting for the movie would go on slab of ice or no.

“What an imposing ice mountain.” Sakura tilted her head back to take it all in. “It’s so big to think it broke off of something.”

“Looks fairly solid.” Sasuke’s eyes were on the ice closest to them and the water. “Must go pretty deep.”

“Something tells me we will be here for quite some time.” Kakashi-sensei lowered his book and chuckled. “Director looks stunned.”

“It’s one thing to think about a country filled of ice and snow and another thing to see it eh?” Naruto laughed softly. “The way any colour stands out on the landscape, the sea looks really
amazing right now.”

“The road is blocked!” The assistant director lamented. “When we woke up it was like this what do we do?”

“We can do it here.” The director whispered.

“Pardon?” The assistant director frowned.

“We can do it here!” The Director repeated loudly. “This… this here it is perfect! We can do it here!”

“Eh?”

“You fools! Can’t you see this is the ideal location? How can we not afford to film in such a place?” The director had gotten passionate his scarf flaring with every gesture he made. “This is what you call when the god of movies arrives. When the muse blesses you like this you can’t not obey! Everyone prepare to land!”

“He’s really into it, isn’t he?” Kakashi-sensei chuckled as cries of shock and dismay rose around the crew.

“It’s kinda funny don’t you think?” Naruto laughed.

“XxX

“They really aren’t used to it huh.” Naruto whispered as he watched the actors huddle around a portable heater. “They keep shivering and sneezing hope it doesn’t get in the way of filming.”

“Not everyone is you with a child’s temperature.” Sasuke pushed past him rudely in his cloak, scarf and gloves. “I can’t believe that’s all you’re going to wear.”

“Got used to cold a long time ago.” Naruto frowned. “I like snow you know but I like being warm too and I can’t help that his feels okay to me. I’d be just as cold as everybody else if I went rolling about in the snow. Or the water, that has to be freezing.”

“Yes yes.” Sakura cut off before it turned into a proper argument. “Having everyone huddled around heaters actually works for us because we can keep an eye on them like we do on the ship.”

“But keeping an eye on our surroundings is something totally different.” Naruto pointed out. “This may be a huge slab of ice but that doesn’t mean there aren’t any dangers.”

“Kakashi-sensei has already tested the area for natural occurring disasters. It looks good so far the places they picked.” Sakura frowned at the hastily written schedule. “Nothing Is going to move without help even with the lights and fires burning.”

“That ‘help’ is exactly why we should be on edge.” Naruto said softly.

“Do you sense something?” Sasuke asked softly.

“My neck itches.” Naruto looked around their landscape. “Just because it looks safe... Icelands are dangerous.”

“Have you ever...” Sakura trailed off. “Never mind.”

“A few.” Naruto picked up what she had wanted to ask. “You would be surprised what ice can
hide. It makes sand look tame in comparison.”

Xxx

“We’ll be filming so standby!” The assistant director’s voice easily carried around the area. Sasuke watched blankly as the makeup artists finished their touch-ups and cameras were moved in last minute adjustments.

It had not taken long to get the scenes set up and the director had run back and forth people on his heels as he picked the perfect spot.

Kakashi had tagged along as he tested the ice for dangers. The last thing they all needed was a landslide. Setting the film back and maybe hurting the actors. Of course they had kept their eyes on the crew too because this place was the perfect place for a sabotage. Their client could easily and naturally be disposed of if someone was cunning enough.

“Okay scene 36, cut 22, action!”

‘Mao’ started to cackle where he stood on his higher stand of ice while the cameras focused on him. Sasuke stifled a yawn. “So you’ve come all the way here! Princess Fuun!”

“You’re Mao!”

Sasuke’s eyes drifting beyond the scene lingering on the ice and the crew scattered around. After a few days watching the same thing every day it got boring fast. The amount of times they would do a scene over and over again not satisfied with the take. It gave him a new appreciation for what they did. They did days and hours of work and what the audience got was the best cut down to an hour and some. Sasuke was grateful. From what he had seen so far plenty needed to be cut out the final product. There were some lines and scenes he could not believe the actors had the courage to spout out, ridiculous by any standards.

The scene was a simple back and forth one, dialogue exchanged between the actors with the special effects to be added later. A simple confrontation between the heroes and the villain. Boring.

Except that the explosion that occurred behind the villain should not have happened. Sasuke sent a lingering regret towards the assumed C-rank of the mission and accepted the change in status his body moving even as smoke billowed into the air behind the actors.

“What’s the meaning of this?” The actor that played ‘Mao stuttered when Sasuke shoved him backwards. His attention was divided between the smoke and his sensei whose gaze was fixed beyond that.

“What are you doing?” The director bellowed.

“Secure the ship!” Sakura’s voice rose even as she and Naruto darted forward. Naruto was already armed his eyes darting around the snow on the icy landscape.

“I knew something was wrong.” He muttered when he reached Kakashi’s side. “You found them?”

“Yes.” Kakashi said to Naruto. “Stay back!” He instructed the crew.

Sasuke found his gaze being pulled to a white sheet that appeared in the middle of the smoke. The sheet slowly fell and the man in the silver suit that appeared looked to be shinobi. “Welcome to snow country.” He smiled, he did not look bothered in the least.
“Ah fuck.” Naruto hissed before he darted forward knocking several crew members back by several feet. A woman had appeared on one of the peaks but it was not her Naruto was looking at.

“You are…” Kakashi seemed to recognize the talker at least. It was not looking good.

“I personally welcome you, princess Koyuki.” The female shinobi purred. “Did you bring the hexagon crystal?” Things were snapping into place about the mission.

“I knew Hatake Kakashi would sense me if I got any closer.” A mound of snow moved revealing a heavy-set man in silver armour similar to the other two. “I hadn’t expected a brat to find me though, who are you?” Naruto swore again as Sasuke took in how they had been mostly trapped on three sides, there was still distance but they were dealing with unknowns.

And Naruto had been right, loose end though it was more what the princess had rather than who she was. They wanted something that she had, meaning if it was on her person and could not be easily destroyed they could go for maximum damage. Kill them all and search the bodies later. Their enemies could do that but they lacked information. If the princess had it, where was it? Things to worry about later.

XxX

“Sasuke, Naruto, Sakura.” Kakashi-sensei spared once glance behind him to them. “You have to protect Yukie-san.”

“Obviously.” Naruto glanced at his sensei’s feet and saw how by slight positioning he had put himself closer to face the heavier man and the first man that had been revealed. There was not that much choice there. Their sensei was going to go against two opponents and they had Yukie nee-chan to worry about and the boat.

If he had been the one attacking he would destroy the boat. Stop the target from fleeing by normal means. Run them down afterwards. Destroy the transportation and Naruto just knew who would go for the boat or Yukie nee-chan first.

The woman was positioned perfectly that she could distract them by going for the boat and hit Yukie nee-chan at the same time. Double feint until she got a target. That was unless they did something to her first. Naruto could feel his body warming up as he took in the scene… but a wild card had to stay that until it looked like the end had come. They had just started… which meant eyes front and ears open.

No covering anything, they needed to see with their eyes what the enemy were capable of and they had to throw them off guard. Protect, stay in a certain perimeter. Honestly, it had gotten hard for no reason at all, C-rank his ass baa-chan was getting an earful when they got back.

If she lost her perch, would she go forward or back… well in her eyes they were just some kids so… Naruto slipped his hand under his coat to grab an exploding tag and with one hand tied it to his kunai while he reached for another weapon. If she underestimated them it would go really well.

XxX

The enemies themselves had not made any major moves beyond revealing themselves but when it came to their team they had already made moves. Kakashi-sensei had made them reveal themselves but before they could prepare for the attack Naruto had made his move.

Sakura had not even had any proper warning it had been so fast her eye barely caught Naruto’s hand move. Considering Naruto had sensed the last man she thought that would have been his
target but he had aimed for the woman that had ‘welcomed’ their client.

The peak had exploded in a shower of ice and smoke and the woman had not retreated. Sakura had flung herself in front of Yukie-san but that had been unnecessary because Naruto had met the woman in mid-air the sound of blade hitting metal causing her to wince.

Whatever it was that armour was made of it would be difficult to break. And their three enemies were covered head to toe in the stuff. Their exposed faces would be hard to aim for.

“Oh little boy.” The woman bounced back fast and touched where Naruto’s short sword had hit. “You’re a cute one aren’t you?”

“Will I be cuter if I ask where you got the armour and if I can have one?” Naruto tucked his sword away even as he positioned himself to be mostly covering the way to the ship.

“I do need to get the princess so as fun as I feel this will be…” She trailed off. “I suppose you won’t just let us have her even if you’re brats.”

A plume of fire made her jump several feet back. Sakura heard the crew returning to the boat and she gritted her teeth because it felt like they were moving too slow. Sasuke shifted instead of getting closer to Naruto and the woman his gaze was on the heavier man Naruto had sensed. It was going to get ugly fast.

The man their sensei had discovered first… he felt strong, they all had to do their part. The vest on her did more than give her extra warmth, it was giving her a boost. It was nothing like before, they were together.

XxX

“It’s been a while Kakashi, you’re not going to run away this time?” His tone was not something to get angry about but his words certainly were. Kakashi stamped down that jet of anger that flamed up. He had not wanted to run away that time, that mission so long ago that had turned into the clusterfuck that it had finished as. Not his best work.

But it had been a job in the end, nothing personal but with these people threatening his job and team it would get mighty personal fast. They had been strong then and Kakashi had been outnumbered, age improved many and his team lacked experience. Even Naruto.

“Rouga Nadare.” How could a name taste like ash and couldn’t time be good just once to him and have some these people die? Were they still matched? Only one way really to find out but he could not afford to get careless.

XxX

One part of Sasuke’s brain was noting just how the armour worked to break objects thrown at high speeds to pieces. The other part of his brain was lamenting the loss of the fan shuriken than he had thrown because he had just bought that and already it was wasted, broken to pieces, unsalvageable. The problem was with the armour.

They knew they were vulnerable and did not give an opening. The guy was big but his tool helped him move quickly, still there was no real getting him off the thing it seemed perfectly built to handle ice and Iceland conditions. They needed more time than they had to actually examine and come up with an idea on how to handle them.

The muffled explosion behind him let him know just how Naruto was faring even before he heard
Sakura’s low swearing as she eased their client and the other actors to the boat. Slow eventual retreat was their only real option. The enemy had all the good cards, location was already handed over to them.

XxX

Naruto had known she would easily find the two shadow clones, he had known she would come at Yukie nee-chan by any means necessary so he had laid the last trap but he still felt annoyed and disappointed at how easily she discarded him when he went for her throat with the wire.

He had gotten it around her neck but the moment he had planted his foot in the middle of her back she had sent him flying. The poison mini bomb had not done anything to that annoying armour either. If Naruto had a poison strong enough to melt metal, corrode it no matter how slowly they would be getting somewhere… but no sense bitching about what he did not have that was a problem for another time. That armour had to get smashed somehow. She was really good with ice too she just might have been the one to put the block in their path if she had enough power to back up the abilities.

Wind, manipulation of ice. She really was a good match up for him even though she had them on the defensive. The ice walls she kept making trying to run him further from the boat and Sakura was annoying. The armour already protected her why duck behind the wall too?

Oh… “Sasuke!” Teamwork was good.

XxX

“Handle him.” Was Sasuke’s only instruction before he and Naruto switched. His fire jutsu melted the first ice wall easily and while he was not able to get to the woman properly he was able to drive her back, buying time that was what was needed.

He had no idea what was going on behind him but he did hear the sound of Sakura hitting someone hard before he heard Naruto’s whoop of joy. Further away Kakashi and his opponent were moving almost too fast to be seen while moving and distracted but they were destroying the area they occupied too.

XxX

“Naruto!” He had managed to drive the guy away from Yukie nee-chan and Sakura with Sakura’s help but he had to eat the punch in return to drive the man far away from the boat. Sadly ending it seemingly in his sensei’s line of sight.

That punch to his gut was unbelievable. He had gotten to his feet right away but that armoured covered arm was something else and Naruto was really pissed too. He kept a running count on his inventory and his chakra and swore because he needed to keep an eye on his surroundings and his opponent.

The water dragon jutsu driving his opponent back almost startled him but his sensei at his back did not. Naruto just started to talk. “There is something really weird about that armour they are wearing and I don’t mean what it looks like sensei.”

“That’s Snow Country’s armour designed especially for ninja.” Kakashi-sensei replied as he kept shifting around searching for their opponents. “Chakra armour.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Naruto groaned. “What the hell is chakra armour?”
“They are more powerful than before.” Kakashi-sensei’s tone was grim but disgusted.

“Don’t tell me that armour not only keeps them safe but it gives them a boost.” Naruto said slowly. “A warning about this would have been nice sensei.” He shook his head slowly. “How the hell are we supposed to stop that thing from working?” No sense lamenting about how unfair it was, that could be for later. They had to focus on stopping the thing.

“You remembered?” Kakashi-sensei’s opponent had reappeared on the slope above them. He looked smugly down at them. “This armour increases my chakra and strengthens my techniques.”

“That explains more about this set up.” Naruto grumbled, he leaned his head until it touched his sensei’s cloak. “How long ago was it that you fought these guys? The way he’s talking you would think it was centuries ago. How exactly are you going to forget an armour like that?”

“It is hard to forget an armour that creates a wall of chakra around the body and nullifies chakra and sends it back to the wearer.” Kakashi-sensei looked over his shoulder to Naruto. “It’s really annoying.”

“Just hearing about it makes my head hurt.” Naruto groans. “If nullifies chakra? Seriously?” Ninjutsu and genjutsu were worthless, in fact it might power up the bastards? And the metal was so damn hard. Naruto was unable to stop his mouth from opening. “Gai-sensei would just love these bastards, wouldn’t he?”

“Gai and Lee-kun would enjoy these more than we ever could.” Kakashi-sensei admitted. “But we are not that shabby ourselves, a friend of mine likes to remind me that nothing is undefeatable. No jutsu, no person, no armour. It just takes the right tools and the right mind.”

“When we get back home I hope you treat them to some barbeque for that good advice.” Naruto chuckled softly. “But all I can think about now is smashing that ugly armour to bits. But it is just going to suck up all the chakra huh.”

XxX

He and Kakashi-sensei had gotten separated quickly and Naruto had arrived just in time to help Sakura when it came to the big man. That armour needed to go. There had been no time to tell Sakura what he had learned so he had settled for not using jutsus and instead grappled with the man.

That wall of chakra, that explained why as he pushed the man back step by step he could feel something wrapping around him… calling things he had no intention of letting up. Things were getting serious behind him too.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” The man snarled down at him.

“Naruto! Grab everyone and run!” Kakashi-sensei’s instruction was enough for Naruto to push the man back make a summon and right after slap a tag between him and his opponent.

“See ya.” Naruto grunted before the tag exploded.

XxX

“I clipped the wing a bit but I can’t believe that armour can fly.” Sasuke gaze was still on the sky.

“That super armour can go to hell that big guy was full of too many surprises.” Sakura shook her head. “That needs to get neutralized, if only we had a way to study it.”
“We don’t have the time to study.” Naruto pointed out. “They don’t give us the time to breathe properly.” He glanced up at their sensei whose gaze was on the porthole. “Of course, your guy was only too happy to run his mouth Kakashi-sensei and he got really pissed at the end, he doesn’t like you copying jutsus?” Naruto had overheard that much before the ice slab had been destroyed. “Doesn’t he know you’re the copy ninja? It is what you do. I’d be disappointed if someone was the copy ninja and I never got to see the signature work.”

That got him a chuckle from his sensei. “Not everyone thinks like you Naruto.” He said softly.

XxX

“We were about to die and they filmed that?” Naruto hissed. “Just making sure I’m getting this right.”

“Naruto…” Sakura sighed.

“No no no no.” He refused. “We were doing our jobs and they decided to film it? They can’t put that in the movie.”

“Don’t worry I already told them that but that director is pushy.” She wrinkled her nose in disgust. “He was all gleeful about the effects Kakashi-sensei and Sasuke-kun were doing. Apparently, they were flashy and that is what he wanted to capture.”

“If he doesn’t watch himself he won’t have a movie if he focuses on Sasuke like that.” Naruto grumbled. “But they were flashy? What the hell! I’m so sorry me headbutting and slashing isn’t impressive enough but Ice wales and fire bursts are.”

“Naruto.” Sakura giggled, she raised her hand to her face in an attempt to stop her laughter. She failed. “You were flashy too, at the beginning I didn’t even catch it all I couldn’t even focus on what you were thinking that was cool too.”

“In the beginning? You mean when I was fighting that nee-chan?” That had been a tie with the tie coming close to failure, Naruto did not get it.

“All of us did good, we worked together and the enemy caught us off guard but they didn’t win and they thought they would have.” Sakura leaned back against the wall and stared out the porthole. “Sometimes that has to be enough. We have no casualties and no real injuries, we gathered information and our chakra levels are high, we know what they want.”

“Which is making the job ten times harder Sakura-chan.” Naruto slid down the wall by her side and allowed his head to rest on her shoulder. “That armour sucks.”

“We’ll find a way around it.” Her hand softly patted his head. “Of all people, you know this isn’t the place to give up.”

“It seems like a pretty good place to bitch though.” That got him a laugh, he laughed along until a huge yawn stopped him.

“How’s your head? You headbutted that big guy pretty hard.”

“I’m okay, barely stunned me.” The truth was that he had started to heal from the moment of impact so there was nothing to hurt. He had no idea why that had happened. That was not usual at all.

“Barely into this mission and there is chaos, will the time come where we have an actual C-rank?”
Sakura teased softly.

“Think about it.” Naruto laughed. “As dangerous and annoying as it is, it is fun too. C-ranks would bore us to tears. Even with us giving it our all we are too far gone to be satisfied with D-ranks now. We would do them but we’re looking forward. There are way too mysteries, too many problems out there. Too much to see for us. We all want to get stronger. We’re aiming to get stronger Sakura-chan and we want to be pitted against what is out there. C-ranks would be stifling us. We aren’t exactly a team that wins by the seat of our pants either.”

“That’s for certain.” She said softly. “Not much has changed on the surface but things do feel different. I don’t feel like backing down.”

“Remember who we are guarding.” Naruto answered. “A real princess, Sasuke and me will get away with doing some stupid shit but you’re the Chuunin Sakura-chan. You have longer reports to write, you are a representative just like how Kakashi-sensei is a representative.” He knew what she was thinking about.

“The reason why it took so long to get her back to the ship… when you, Sasuke-kun and Kakashi-sensei were setting off explosions… it was almost like she was somewhere else. I know she can be mean and sullen. I know she can be rude but when all the fighting started…”

“She couldn’t hear you.” Naruto finished.

“She wouldn’t move, she wouldn’t listen. She kept saying she won’t go back and even when they got their hands on her it was as if she wasn’t there.” She sighed heavily. “We don’t know the whole story but the closer we get…”

“You want to let her run?” Naruto asked softly.

“No.” Her voice was firm. “We can’t do that, just turning a blind eye to the situation would be just as bad and after seeing her like that. She would be dead in a few days.”

“You’re not wrong.” Naruto admitted. “We have to be extra careful now and keep her far away from those people. We can’t give her the opportunity. The past and her fears have hold of her, whatever it is that they want she’ll give it without a moment’s hesitation. It doesn’t matter if they threaten her life or not.”

“What a mission huh?” Sakura sighed.

“Yeah but the good thing is that Mao said I get to have the glove when they are done.” Naruto boasted.

“What?” Sakura demanded, Naruto’s head was dislodged from her shoulder when she sat up properly. “No way! The glove? He’s giving that to you?”

“Signed and everything.” Naruto gloated.

“When did he promise that.” She groaned. “All I got were the autographs and that is good too but I want some special limited-edition somethings.”

“Aren’t you on good terms with the assistant director and the screenwriter?” Naruto laughed. “Ask for some copies of the script!”

“Some photos with the crew on the last day of shooting too.” Sakura mused. “That would certainly be wild if we can afford that.”
“Not as if we can carry bulky stuff back.” Naruto stretched as he settled against the wall. “Take some pictures in the costumes.”

“That would be nice too.” She paused before she laughed. “Somebody has been thinking about this.”

“Well how often are we going to be on a set during filming?” Naruto demanded. “We gotta make the most of it and make some memories too Sakura-chan.”

XxX

“You really copied a thousand jutsus?” Sasuke asked as they watched the crew bustle about on the deck. Kakashi was next to him no book in sight but his eye on everything and everyone else.

“Well I’ve copied a lot of things.” Kakashi sounded slightly awkward. “I’ve had this eye for a long time.” He touched where it was covered gently. “I was entrusted with it and in order to protect the things that were important I had to get stronger.” His hand lowered slowly. “I already had good memory and I already could quickly learn jutsus but with this I was able to perfect them faster and speed was of importance.”

“You knew that guy’s jutsus, were you copying all of them as well?” Sasuke pressed. “Some of the things the two of you did there was fairly impressive.”

“It is not what you learn but how you apply it. Everyone has their limits. Limits to strength, limits to chakra, limits to creativity, to imagination.” Kakashi fell quiet. “The sharingan is a gift that comes with a double-edged sword. There are many shinobi that have no need for the eye but just as many out there are grateful it exists. Somethings can be easily preserved with just one application.”

“But you’re the copy ninja.” Sasuke pressed on. “Over a thousand jutsus or not Kakashi?”

“During the war, it was over a thousand.” Kakashi shrugged. “I’m curious by nature and I refuse to be defeated. Some things I just had to know and one thing I prided myself on even back then was application.” His eye went to the water. “You and someone can do the exact same thing, use the exact same amount of power and yet one of you wins because of how he used his brain. That is just how it works. There can be two armies with the exact same talent and manpower but it is how they are used that determines the war and how little people you lose. I don’t want to lose friends anymore.” Kakashi’s eye focused on him. “So I copied in order to turn an enemy’s blade onto their selves. The sharingan frightens many people. Many people are thrown off by having their jutsu being copied so easily.”

“Mind games.” Sasuke felt himself smile before he shook his head. “That’s why you’ve copied so many.”

“And you never know when a jutsu will become useful, it is not just the strong ones, it is the creative ones, the useful ones.”

“Is that your way of saying I need to up the amount of jutsus I know?” Sasuke snorted. “You just finished giving me one and that itself isn’t perfect.”

“About that…” Kakashi shook his head and chuckled. “I told you I have faith in you Sasuke. There is no doubt in my mind that when the time comes you’ll shock us all. I have faith that when it comes to that you’ll find a way to make it work for you in ways I could never dream of. Your sensei can only go so far you know? It is your generation that will pick it up and the time will come when it is you watching someone take your work and create art.”
Kakashi’s eye seemed sort of distant. “Just what are you thinking about?” Sasuke wondered softly. “We haven’t really done anything beyond Sakura becoming Chuunin. We haven’t made any art from anything yet.”

Kakashi’s eye focused on him again and Sasuke swore the man was laughing at him. “Is that so? Hmm.”

XxX

“What are you up to?” The quiet voice startled him a bit. Naruto was getting better at concealing his presence. That or Kakashi had been more conflicted than he had thought. Lost in old memories.

“I wonder.” Kakashi mused as he carefully slid his hands into his pockets. Naruto was quick to follow him down the corridor.

“What were you doing in the nee-chan’s room just now?” Naruto’s tone was half teasing and half suspicious. “A genjutsu would make it easier on all of us but wouldn’t do her very good when we go back home.”

“I was doing nothing of the sort.” Instead of taking the turn that would lead to the stairs to the deck Kakashi went the other way his intentions the belly of the ship. “She’s still recovering from the confrontation.”

“And you’re holding onto information again aren’t you.” Naruto slipped past him to stand on the first step to the belly of the ship. His hands went to his hips and the way he looked up at Kakashi, fearless with a hint of irritation. “It’s bad enough we have to deal with those guys. Now you’re setting your own plans in motion?”

“Backup plans.” Kakashi relaxed his body and leaned forward his hands sliding from his pockets to grasp the railings for the stairs. “After such an ordeal and after seeing who and what we are going to be dealing with we have to be prepared.”

“This is not a C-rank mission.” Naruto grumbled.

“Oops.” Kakashi teased playfully. That got him an irritated sigh from Naruto that he was unable to resist. “It’s not going to be a complete disaster. We don’t know why they want what they want we just can’t let them have her.”

“Sensei.” Naruto said softly. “I don’t like the feeling of this, I feel like I’m about to walk into a fight but I can’t see the fighters.”

The boy should trust his instincts. “What do you want to do Naruto?” Kakashi asked.

Naruto’s eyes slid shut for a moment, the two of them stood there in silence as Naruto thought over his answer. “I want to keep my main players, all of them and I want to be ready.”

“How can I help?”

“Some information would be nice.” Naruto grumbled. “What were you doing in there?”

More than ten years had passed since then. Since that night and that mission. Tsunade-sama had certainly known what she had been doing. Tsunade-sama, she had wanted Naruto and Kakashi on this mission. She could say what she liked but this was her way of testing Naruto out. Kakashi had to give him the opportunity.
He had no idea what exactly she was looking for. Whatever had happened to drag the Sannin to Naruto, the boy was keeping quiet about it or he had not noticed himself.

Objectively the mission was a clusterfuck. What could Naruto do? What could they do besides delay and try to dismantle? Kakashi knew the princess’s heart he knew her mind and he could hear her sobs as if they were in the past years ago and not the present day. How could he ignore? How could he forget? How could he let her become a liability to the mission?

“I was making certain.” Kakashi said softly. “That she won’t put a country in danger by acting too carelessly.”

“That tells me something but it also doesn’t.” A smile made Naruto’s eyes glow. “That’s shinobi for you I guess. But with her sleeping the filming is pushed back more huh.”

“They are doing the scenes that don’t include her.” Kakashi said dryly. “I think they are even adding some in.”

“Cheers to imagination or something I guess.” Naruto took a deep breath before he rocked back on his heels. “I can tell that’s all I’m going to get out of you so I’m going to start some backup plans of my own.”

“Sounds intriguing.” And dangerous.

“Well you aren’t invited.” Naruto dismissed him with a lazy wave of his hand. “Let’s see whose backup plans are more useful in the end.”

“We have no idea how this will all go.” Kakashi was amused. “Small things can affect in big ways a plan won’t cover it all.”

“Which is why you have more than one plan.” Naruto grinned up at him. “You’re right about the nee-chan, she is trouble and she will be on and off the boat. Especially now that she has seen up-close who is chasing her.”

“If I were a betting man I’d put a wager on whose plans will get used but I like to keep an eye on my finances.” Kakashi’s hand left the railing to ruffle Naruto’s hair. “Still, be sure to tell me if a plan of yours gets used.”

“I won’t have to.” Naruto sniggered. “You’ll know Sensei. Never doubt that you will know.”

XxX

“We’ve docked at port.” Sandaiyuu-san informed him, Kakashi got up from where he had been keeping vigil over the actress. His team had been keeping watch in turns. He had taken his after Naruto’s. Taken a sigh of relief to find the woman the same way she was supposed to be and no doodles or the like.

Naruto’s sense of humour could go places. One would think that would be the last place he would encourage it but when it came down to it, Naruto honestly liked that sort of thing. Causing chaos and laughter. The chance to tease, to taunt in ways he could not before.

And that kind of thing was marginally less dangerous than the things that he could easily do. It was just sad how easily people could forget that but Kakashi did not. He could not forget, he never would. That haunting emptiness and fear still lingered. Further away from the mind but it existed, a reminder that he had failed again.
A reminder that innocent eyes were filled with pain and understanding beyond their years. In the current world children suffered too much no matter the station. Naruto should have been surrounded by love and happiness never knowing gut wrenching fear or hunger. Koyuki should have been raised to be a Queen in her country.

But things never went as hoped. Still when it was the children that suffered everything went wrong for all. But Kakashi had seen war orphans, he had seen children changed by tragedy. He was one that had been shaped by tragedy but Naruto was another matter entirely he was determined to walk both roads, no wonder Jiraiya-sensei was drawn to him.

The anger, the pain, the loneliness. Naruto was shaping it and embracing it to become stronger. In his journey to become Hokage. Naruto had a dream, it had kept him going all those years and it would keep him going.

Before she saw her world burn down around her and her loved ones dead, had Koyuki had a dream? She was a civilian she was not used to the harsh realities but she had faced plenty. She had watched the world crack before her eyes. She saw how fast everything could change in a matter of minutes. She had fallen to despair and it was understandable.

Everyone needed someone, something during the times of need. Everyone needed a reminder that they could and should go forward. Sometimes it was a dream, sometimes a person, sometimes it was a promise, a commitment and that was enough to see you through to another day and another fight. Kakashi’s hand touched where the sharingan was covered. Sometimes a promise was enough to give strength. Even someone like Kakashi had something to cling to during all his pain and failures.

XxX

“We’ve made it.” Naruto murmured to himself as he read through the travel and filming plans. “We’ve made it to port huh.” The princess was still sleeping. Still tucked away in bed and recovering. All those extra scenes had been pushed forward since they could not exactly wake the lead actress up.

There was no doubt they would be facing another attack soon. It was inevitable. It was only a matter of time. It would not be right away. Their guard would be too high. No, it would be when things looked to be complicated. There would be several traps waiting.

Dealing with that would be hard enough on their own but that nee-chan was going to make a run for it. She was actually where she did not want to be now. Snow Country and Naruto could just feel that just being at the dock would be enough to push her to mindlessly flee when she thought she could get away with it. Flee with no direction, just run for the hell of it because the pain was too much.

It would happen and Naruto was going to have to be the one to find her. The only thing he had to do was make sure not to burn anything when he got near her. After his preparations, she would not be getting too far but what concerned him really was keeping her calm enough.

The first time they had talked about running she hadn’t listened. Naruto had no problem talking again and again but this mission was about to get complicated. They were walking into something big and he could feel it on his skin. It was a simple fact. He hoped he was ready enough to face what was coming.

XxX
“Sandaiyuu-san.” Kakashi said softly when he finally managed to catch the man alone. “You knew about this didn’t you.” Even though the mission had come with a certain sense of openness, giving information that made it look like an open book it was no real surprise that certain things had simply been hidden. Kakashi had known who she was from the start. “You knew how she would react to coming back to Snow country.”

“This is the only way I could have brought the princess back to this country.” Sandaiyuu-san rested his hands on his knees as he looked at the ground. “There wasn’t much of a choice I had to bring the princess back home.” Sandaiyuu rested his hands on the table to look at Kakashi. “The last time I was with her she was very young. I’m not surprised she doesn’t recognize my face.”

Something Kakashi was familiar with. “Especially if you remained in the background.” Kakashi had hidden among the other ANBU, behind crowds and masks at a distance always but he had been there, except in the way he should have been.

“I used to serve at the side of this country’s previous King Kazahana Sousetsu-sama.” Sandaiyuu said softly. “The Snow Country was a small but peaceful country. Sousetsu-sama loved the princess very much and they lived a very peaceful life. But ten years ago.”

That mission, Kakashi had been summoned too late. Unable to help, unable to fight and the only option had been to flee. He had done what he could but it had not been enough. That had burned but he had done what he could.

“Sousetsu-sama’s younger brother Dotou, hired some ninja, revolted, and took over the country. He burnt the castle the beautiful Kazahana castle to the ground and we thought we had lost the princess.” Sandaiyuu looked at Kakashi then. “I’m glad we were wrong.”

“Cover your face! The enemy will find us!” Kakashi recalled his own words and the sound of the dogs running pulling the sled away from the crumbling castle. “Konoha had been contacted back then.” Kakashi admitted. “We were too late.”

“I found the princess later on stage.” Sandaiyuu admitted softly. “She didn’t recognize me. I was overjoyed she was alive. Later on, I pieced together the whole story. I always knew from the moment that I found her that we would have to bring her back to Snow Country. Especially as the country got progressively worse. But I was so happy that she had managed to survived at how she had managed to survive.”

Considering the events of that night. That she had actually made it to adulthood. Managed a life even though her heart had grown cold a blessing itself although it was causing trouble now. Kakashi knew what Sandaiyuu wanted. It was the hope of survivors of an overthrown country.

“After I saw her again I somehow managed to become Fujikaze Yukie’s manager. And I waited until I had the chance to lead her back to Snow Country.”

“Right into danger.” Kakashi was obliged to point out. “It would have been easier if you had cleansed the nest of the snakes first.”

“I know this now.” Sandaiyuu shook his head. “But the princess needs to return to the country and reclaim it for herself.” Sandaiyuu’s hands clenched into fists. “She needs to overthrow Dotou and become the new Queen.”

Part of Kakashi wondered if the Hokage had known every part of the plan before throwing them on the mission. They were already there but some backup would be nice. However, getting the current king overthrown was a tall order.
Sasuke wrinkled his nose when he opened the cabin door. “What’s that?” Naruto was up to something, things from his bag scattered around him as he sat on the floor tinkering with small bottles.

“Getting ready,” Naruto muttered his eyes never moving from the things in his hands. “How’s the princess doing? Still knocked out?”

“Groggy but awake now.” Sasuke watched Naruto bite his lip as he tilted a small bottle over a small ball. “Seriously what are you up to?”

“I told you.” Naruto sniffed the ball before he tucked away the bottle casually recorking it. “I’m getting ready. Have you seen Sandaiyuu-ossan?”

“He was talking with Kakashi earlier and talking to some people at the port.” Naruto reached for a small bottle of leaves and Sasuke was unable to stop watching. “I see you’ve finally suited up.”

“My neck was cold.” Naruto defended. He bit a leaf and nodded. “Besides this is the real thing now. Time to thicken up the clothes. I don’t want to freeze to death.”

“With your child’s temperature? You’ll be fine.” Sasuke snorted.

“Just jealous that I’m warm like all the time.” Naruto laughed. “Your skin is pale and you always feel cool. No need to be jealous, there will come a time that I’ll be sweating and you’ll be looking unbothered.”

He could go about saying he didn’t trust the crew that was why he was so suspicious but the fact remained that he had learned early to be suspicious of a client’s motives. If they had done that in the last job the troupe would have still been alive.

Trusting the people who hired you. Especially when the job was so fishy was just asking for trouble. Naruto had more than enough trouble to deal with. This whole mission was going to end up a mess he could feel it.

The more they learned, the more they saw and the more they felt. Being close to them, watching the old man and the nee-chan. He knew when to follow his gut and this was the time. There plenty of different people. Different kinds of devotion, different kinds of followers.

Time had told Naruto that sometimes for their own good people needed a firm hand and firm words. He took a deep breath before he started to scout. They needed a better understanding of their surroundings. He really needed a good understanding, a map too. Public, private and the animal’s knowledge.

A man full of faith, even after the princess’s harsh words he would not be giving up. She had given up long ago but Sandaiyuu could not give up. Even though he had been close to her for so many years he did not see what Kakashi had recognized.

She had given into the circumstances, the ghosts of the past controlled her. She had turned her back on it all. Given up herself. Given up her people, her past. Everything in order to survive. She had not waited, the fire in her had grown cold.
They were looking for someone to lead them into battle and save them but their princess was not that person. She was not the warrior taking charge filled with ideas who had been waiting for the chance to turn wrongs to right. She was the girl that had been torn away from her place.

How could Kakashi not feel for Sandaiyuu? It had never been this easy and it could never be this easy. She simply was not ready to be Queen, she did not have the heart or the passion. The compassion was missing, her heart was as cold as the country.

XxX

“How long is it going to take us to travel through here?” Kakashi looked up at the tall mountain.
“Still it is better than going over it.”

“At the other side of this large cave is where our comrades are gathered.” Sandaiyuu looked proud.
“After we finish filming here we’ll make a formal visit. Everyone is eager to see the princess.”

“A rebel village huh.” Naruto swung his legs where he sat on top of the snow vehicle. “Nice.”

“Feeling nostalgic?” Kakashi called up to him when Sandaiyuu was called over by the director.

“You could say that.” Naruto laughed. “I mean I have seen a few of those types of places. Villages and towns where they plot to overthrow something or someone. Never this big of course. I mean Koyuki nee-chan is more like a political hostage than anything.”

“Interesting thing to say.” Kakashi said softly it earned him a soft snort.

“Come on.” Naruto shook his head. “Her eyes are dead but their country sucks so much they’ll ignore that. I mean to them anything gotta be better than the previous guy huh?”

“Sometimes that is the wrong thing to think.”

“You know that and I know that but when people are hungry and cold. When they have everything falling to pieces and no way to improve or fight they’ll rally around a devil or demon.” Naruto’s gaze drifted to the face of the tunnel. “Two things can happen in a country full of despair. Either they crumble silently or the country tears itself to pieces from the inside out.”

“Sometimes the latter can be a good thing.”

“Yeah but for it to work you need a special kind of leader. Nee-chan ain’t it. She doesn’t care, this country is hell for her.”

XxX

“I know we are going in a straight line but this tunnel is amazing. Look at the other tunnels. It has to go through and down the mountain.” Sakura’s nose was pressed flush to the glass. “It’s a network of caves!”

“This used to be a railroad long ago this tunnel.” Sandaiyuu smiled. “But this network does lead all over and down the mountain. Not all the tunnels are safe however. Many are closed off due to natural occurrences or lead to dangerous places on the mountain.”

“I can’t see the exit.” Naruto pressed his nose to the glass like Sakura. “This really was a railroad tunnel?”

“Long ago, right now it is covered by ice but honestly the tracks are deep underneath it.” Kakashi-
sensei looked unbothered by Sandaiyuus’s words but Naruto was unable to stop the curiosity and excitement that went through him.

“Guess we’ll soon be there the cave looks brighter.” Sakura slipped from her seat to grab her cloak that was in a heap with the other cloaks next to Sasuke. “Filming again.”

“We’re filming right outside the exit right?” Naruto glanced at Sandaiyuus for confirmation before he whistled. “Oh boy.”

“Changing the director’s mind is difficult.” At least the man looked apologetic.

“He really doesn’t grasp the situation does he.” Naruto shook his head.

XxX

It was hard work to make unexplored places keep looking that way but it was worth the effort. Naruto returned to the crew and his team feeling satisfied and a little smug. Not safe because it would be foolish with them being on enemy territory but he felt a bit more secure and prepared.

Of course he returned to a group filled with chaos and unrest. The moment he trudged his way back the activity let Naruto know that something was wrong and way before any of the crew opened their mouths he knew what it was.

“Big problem director! Yukie-san ran away again!” Of course she did. Of course she ran away again Naruto was not even that surprised. She just made the job harder on them and she put herself at risk. It was as if she was trying to die.

Of course she would try to flee but she kept doing it wrong. Scrambling away no plan or direction. No supplies just what she had and Naruto could admire that a tiny bit. He could hardly make fun of that. He took Haku’s hand that night and left the village with nothing but the clothes on his back but he had run with someone for something.

She was just running. She had to know, she was an adult and she couldn’t be that stupid, she had to know that she was not going to get anywhere. She had to know that the way she was running was leading to one place and it was not freedom.

XxX

“We’ll split up from here to search for her. If you find her contact the rest of us by radio.” Kakashi waited until he saw his entire team nod before he picked a direction. He knew she would run but to think she picked this time. It was dangerous.

Just for a second he watched the direction Naruto took. He watched Naruto kneel in the snow before he stood and took off at a fast pace. Kakashi knew any of them could find her but with his own abilities and experience and with Naruto he had it narrowed down to himself or Naruto finding her and he was leaning towards himself tracking her down.

XxX

“What an annoying predictable nee-chan.” Naruto glared down the mountain as he counted to settle his thoughts. Running for the sake of running, letting the fear consume. It was not that he did not understand. He understood and that was why he was angry but anyone would think he did not understand.

Not everyone ran towards what they fear. There was a thing called strategic retreat. Sometimes it
was better to flee, sometimes you had to run but you had to stop eventually, for food, for rest and to remove the threat hovering over you.

You could not live the rest of your life running from place to place the threat lurking. You had to remove some of them. Eventually all of them. Running from one shadow encouraged more to form it was just how it worked.

Running off into the wilderness like a headless chicken. But Naruto had known it was going to happen. That’s why he had prepared himself.

XxX

Utterly graceless, she had been so desperate to run. He had watched her, had already cut her off long before she knew it. She had not even seen him but he had watched her, running from her own personal demons. She had tripped and fell to lie sprawled in the snow. Her eyes held more emotions but she was still cold inside.

When her eyes closed Naruto knew what she was accepting. What she thought was going to happen. But even then, peace did not settle across her face. She kept fighting and running yet she had no goal.

“Geez, how many times are you going to run away before you are satisfied?” Naruto asked her when he stopped a short distance away. “Everyone is waiting.”

He watched her pull herself up to her elbows but he waited where he was for her to sit up properly and acknowledge him in some way. Her leg shifted and pain flitted across her face quickly before it faded away her emotions locked away and her eyes dead fully once more.

XxX

Hopefully her hurt ankle wouldn’t get in the way of filming. Bad enough that he had to walk far slower than he thought he would have been because of her weight. But he was still a kid after all, he couldn’t be expected to haul an adult for such long distances. He had his limits.

For now.

“Why is it always you who finds me?” Her voice was soft in his ear while her arms were looped around his neck. He was half prepared for her to try and strangle him. Except she knew and he knew that she could not flee far enough before he recovered.

He sighed at her question. Why him? So many answers. They were the same, sort of. He got it…kind of. He used to run too but he had been better at it. He knew what she would do and he could track her down because of who he was. “Because it is my mission.” Were the words that left his mouth. “Even if you don’t like it I’ll chase you wherever you go.” Because the life of running really wasn’t for her. “It’s easy to find you when you smell different to everyone else.”

Someone trying to run would abandon such things. It wasn’t even her natural scent that he kept smelling, it was something that she liked, maybe a perfume or cream.

“You want me to go back. I’ll just act in front of the camera. I’m not going to do anything else.”

“Then tell them that not me.” Naruto grumbled. “It’s them that thinks you’re going to do all these different things. It is you that has to convince them you don’t care about them, the country and who you used to be.” He paused to heft her further up his back before he continued to walk. “But I guess even if you were to do what they want you would be the same. Your heart isn’t into any of it.
You’ll just be a puppet. That might not be any better than the current situation."

“There’s no winning here.” She said softly before Naruto could respond he felt a shiver run down
down his back. Then he heard a whistle of a train. Finally, he could feel the ice underneath him cracking
melting. His grip on the princess tightened before he started to run. He couldn’t fight without
the others, in this place. The enemy was about to make a move but he could not afford to have her
in sight.

XxX

His back was cold but he was hot all over, the run had exhausted him and how could blame him?
Having to outrun the train. Having to outrun it and having Koyuki nee-chan on his back all the
time convinced they were going to die.

His legs burned, he was still gasping but everything had only just begun. The train had shot past
them a few seconds after clearing the tunnel. Nothing to be happy about the enemy was here for
her. The enemy was playing on their territory with their own rules.

It was only going to get harder from this point forward. He had to guard her, he had to fight too.

“It’s been a while Koyuki.” A voice was coming from the train and next to him she started to
tremble.

“Kazahana Dotou.” She whispered.

“So, it has been ten years?” Naruto spotted two men on the top of the train. One had the speaker
and was talking. The other had been the talkative shinobi that had been Kakashi-sensei’s opponent.
Not that Naruto had thought the main bad guy would have come alone.

That would have been nice. It would have solved plenty of problems. It would have been great if
the guy had been that sort of stupid but he wouldn’t have been in his position if he had been that
sort of stupid and careless.

“Ten years.” Dotou continued. “Now let me see your face.” His voice made Naruto’s skin crawl.
Distorted by the speaker it set off all the wrong kind of feelings. He stood in front of her blocking
the man’s view.

The train looked solid, heavy, difficult to destroy but to get to them and to stop them from running
away he would have to attack and trap the train. Limit their transportation. Just in case. He had
several cards to play but he was going to work his way up. That armour they wore was a pain in the
ass.

Before he could make a move, Naruto heard the sound of large quantities of snow moving. He had
just grabbed Koyuki nee-chan’s arm and begun swearing at their streak of bad luck before he saw
the logs and the crowd coming over the top of the mountain.

The group were carrying swords, spears and the armour they wore could be a samurai’s one if
samurais let their get so old. Just from a glance Naruto knew who they were. The survivors, the
ones who served the previous king. The rebellion.

And from a glance he knew how much shit everyone had gotten themselves in. He saw the old
man among them, his manager clothes abandoned for the old armour and his heart twisted in his
chest. He felt pity for them, they stood tall and straight and secure but they couldn’t see. They
couldn’t but he could.
A sight he had seen before, passed before, heard of before. They had the numbers but they did not have the understanding. That a shinobi like him at a glance could see but they couldn’t… even the nee-chan seemed to understand but that just might be fear.

Dotou had not just come for the princess. He came to stamp the rebellion out at the same time. To crush hope, he was giving them the advantage. His was giving the illusion of an advantage and that just pissed Naruto off. He knew what Dotou would do he could feel it.

He was not even that surprised about the old man Sandaiyuu. It was always the devoted ones but the ones like Sandaiyuu… devotion could only take a follower so far and those who could not think of a future could not lead others there. The past was past.

XxX

“Everyone! Our princess is watching!”

“That idiot!” Naruto hissed at Sandaiyuu’s words. “That idiot!”

“Victory will be ours!” He continued and all Naruto could think of was how the snow would be easy to bury them in all. They didn’t grasp the situation at all.

“Sandaiyuu.” Koyuki nee-chan and her voice was so dazed but amazed. Even when she of all people knew better.

“Kazahana Dotou, do you know how long we’ve waited for this day?” Well the answer was day one of his reign but as impressive that it was that they had let their rage and displeasure simmer so long it did not change the fact that all of them gathered together was in some serious trouble. The train had Naruto really worried. “I Asabansan Sandaiyuu a representative of the fiftieth brigade. Now, we will avenge the deaths of Kazahana Sousetsu-sama from a decade ago. And we will take it out on you.”

Naruto was uncertain to his ability of keeping all those fighters alive. He still had to protect Koyuki nee-chan. He had a mission, he had a job to do and he felt as though he was being tugged in so many directions. He wanted to save the rebels from themselves, from the inevitable truth and pain.

There was only so much that he could currently do and that burned. If he were strong enough… if he knew enough to save all of them he would. Deep inside him there was a chuckle that he ignored. He had to work with his current limitations. He did not have to like it but he would work with it.

Dotou did not even look bothered by the ragtag army and that said more than enough. “They are still people like that around?” He said softly enough that it only carried to them down below and not to the crowd above pumped up and ready to fight. There was another exchange between the man that had been Kakashi-sensei’s opponent and the man Dotou but it was too low for it to carry to them. At least until he spoke up in amusement. “They need to experience something that is absolutely hopeless.”

Naruto had no idea why everything went cold around him at those words. Why everything went quiet. Why the first thing he thought of was that day that the troupe fell and the next thing he thought of was the fear that had consumed him the times they had been cornered. It pulsed through his veins the certainty of the coming end. He saw impossible choices, forced goodbyes and even as he shuddered he started to move denial throbbing through him.

He knew something stupid was going to be done even as part of him decided on those that were necessary his heart shattered at those who would not be saved. He knew Koyuki nee-chan was
frozen on her knees in the snow watching what was about to happen. Naruto knew he would be unable to save everyone. He decided to try anyway.

XxX

They were running to their deaths not even flinching at the reveal of the machines. The chambers had barely slid open before Naruto sent the explosion tag hurling through the air. The air was filled with the sound of kunais and arrows flying through the air at fast speeds and volume. Blood covered the snow but the explosion had been enough.

The explosion was followed by another right by the train. A large warning crack of ice from above made Naruto force a smile. The train was forced to move along on the recently revealed tracks. Dotou stood on top of the carriage glaring back at them. Naruto was glad when the tracks were destroyed behind them.

“Sandaiyu.” Koyuki nee-chan whispered. The man in question swayed before the giant hole Naruto’s tag had created. He was filled with kunais. Then he swayed fell in and disappeared in a pop.

XxX

“Always your type.” Naruto shook his head at the injured man. He tried to speak so Naruto shoved a pill into the open mouth. “At least now you see what you’re up against. If you had hired some shinobi to creep around and take Dotou out that would have never happened. You guys were too used to peace.” He snorted as he continued mixing his mixtures. “You guys were foolish and now you’re mostly gone. You don’t fight guys like that head on and you don’t throw women like Koyuki nee-chan before them like a flag. It gets everybody killed.”

The man tried to speak again so Naruto shoved the bowl of melted snow into his mouth next before he worked on the man’s bandages.

“I knew something was going to happen.” He shook his head. “Yet I was only able to spare you. Try and lie low.” He bit off with a snort. “Well, you won’t be going anywhere for the next few days. Best way to hide an injured man? Have him be dead.”

XxX

“This is so cruel.” Sakura said softly Naruto stood next to her faintly swaying but considering what he had to face, retrieving Koyuki-san, protecting her and then facing the enemy and that thing. He needed a break.

“Don’t open your mouth.” Naruto turned behind them to see where Koyuki-san stood. “Do not open your fucking mouth! I can feel the venom in you. Go sit down somewhere before that ankle gets worse.”

“It doesn’t change facts.”

“They fought and died for something they believed in, a country they loved.” Naruto gritted his teeth. “We get that you don’t have any other purpose or caring beyond breathing and sake nee-chan.” His eyes searched the area and settled on the dead and dying men. “You don’t understand anything so you don’t get to say anything.” His eyes were cold when they stared at her. “Desperation and love got them here but you won’t take that from them. Nothing is more disgusting than tearing into people over a sacrifice and death they choose. Especially when you would never do the same.”
“You okay?” Sasuke listened into the conversation between Sakura and Naruto.

“Adults are heavy.” Naruto muttered. “And annoying very annoying.”

“Why did you have to listen to that?” Sasuke asked.

“Easy. I was curious.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to know what they were talking about.”

“Like hell! Our mission isn’t done because you say so!” Naruto snapped. “I’ve told you over and over again no matter how many times you try to run we’ll bring you back! You have nowhere to go! Finish the movie at least and get some sense and figure out a better plan on how to run! Stomping off into the wilderness is only going to get you a broken neck and-“ Kakashi and Naruto

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realized it at the same time.

Kakashi swore because Naruto and Koyuki were too far away from the rest of the group. By the time the blimp had gotten closer Naruto had already shoved Koyuki several feet back but it was not enough.

“Oh shit!” Kakashi swore when the exploding kunais started to rain from the air. He was forced to retreat along with Sakura, Sasuke and the rest of the crew and felt his palms sweat when he saw Koyuki and then Naruto being dragged through the air into the blimp. The absolute last thing they needed right now.

He doubted they could even bring the blimp down by any other means except excessive force and explosions from the inside. Still seeing the blimp slowly drift away from them all made his heart race in panic because this should not be happening. They thought they had been prepared. He had thought he had been prepared but he had been wrong. they had all been desperately wrong.

“Naruto.” He gritted out trying and failing to keep his cool. “Damn it, Naruto!”

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One of these days his most favourite jutsu was going to be his most predictable one. Granted not many people seemed aware of the shadow clone jutsu and all it’s better effects. Holding seriously injured ones together for maximum effect then dispelling them took work.

Still that they thought they had managed to kill him so easily just pissed him off. It was annoying that they thought they had gotten rid of him so easily and so early. Naruto was glad they had not just stabbed him and thrown him off to whatever fate but had watched the body fall to the treelines.

Fat lot of good that did them when he was carefully camouflaged next to the engine underneath. With every breath he took he calmed himself and plotted how to get everyone on the ship. If only they had not managed to get Koyuki nee-chan as well. Otherwise Naruto would have planted bombs everywhere and the moment they reached a high point set them off and take his chances. Then pick off the survivors one by one. The blimp was sturdy but everyone on it would hold some serious injuries. The insides of the blimp would rip and tear during the crash. Items would be airborne and people would be impaled, armour or no armour. If the armour wearers did manage to avoid being impaled or thrown somewhere dangerous the impact if it did not kill them outright would at least damage them enough for Naruto to sneak up and finish the job.

But sadly the princess was on board. He couldn’t take the risk. If he could sneak back onboard and take her off then it could be risked. Naruto bit his lip as he ran through possibilities. He could always see if there were parachutes around and take them all. Get a shadow clone and if Koyuki nee-chan was locked away by herself break her out then start sabotaging the ship. She would go down with his clone and he himself would make sure the deed was done.

It was complicated because there were so many dangerous on the ship. Dotou, his pet shinobi by his side that were way strong with the armour and then the final danger came from the person he was supposed to rescue. Who knew if she would keep her mouth shut.

If he could take them all out in the blimp that would be great but he needed another plan too. In case it all failed. He needed to know more, about what they wanted from her just in case. He needed to know about their base and any other back up strengths they just might have. Naruto released a pent-up breath and wished his team was there. He could make copies of himself but some other people on board with this new mission would have been nice.
The infiltration had to be quiet, sure and merciless. It was not easy to get back onboard with no one the wiser. It was not easy to creep around, his presence suppressed it was not easy but he did it anyway. He kept his ears and eyes open and he noted patrols and explored limited spots.

It was too soon to even think about going deep into the belly of the blimp. Keeping to the outskirts was the smartest thing to do. Listen and watch, observe and note. And the moment he felt those huge power shifts moving he moved as well, out their line of interest before they could focus on him before they could suspect that he was even there.

It was hard work, it was thankless work but he had to do it anyway as he waited for his chance. One of the guards had to go missing for his plan to work. Any of his plans to work. He needed to find guards with loose lips and he certainly had to find and remove a guard he could easily imitate.

He had most of the outer guards walking patterns memorized. He had picked up a few code words but nothing about the princess and that irritated him. He knew she had to be around, she was around but he needed to know where and who she was with.

It would have been perfect if he could find her in a storage closet or something. An actual enclosure with a few guards tucked away somewhere would be great as a second but the worst thing would be to find her right in the middle of it all. A front seat to entitlement and madness because people drunk on power always wanted their victims to see up close the power wielded.

They had been all too trusting about disposing of Naruto but they thought they were dealing with an actual kid. A shinobi but still a kid. In their eyes, the group from Konoha were no match for them in any way that mattered. They chose the fight spots, they held an advantage with the armour. Even Kakashi-sensei had to step a few steps back.

So why not underestimate him, underestimate the entire team. They were confident and they had all right to be in their mind. They had stolen the country. They made Konoha retreat a few times. That was enough to prove everything in their minds.

The armour was a threat. Naruto knew that to have a fair chance the armour quite simply had to go. But their confidence? Their overwhelming belief in their abilities and themselves? When they only had opponents such as Sandaiyuu and other remnants from the previous country. It was amusing that they thought for a moment that it was enough.

If those had been the people of Snow Country. If that was all they had fought for the last ten years. Mere skirmishes. No real fights, that meant they would have gotten weak. Naruto would be giving them the fighting worth their while.

He could not help but wonder how they would do against his own wild card. That armour was a huge pain but it did not change facts. Shinobi needed to sharpen and improve their skills. The same old, same old made them weak and when it came to the powerful and the unexpected it would get back for everyone.

They certainly were not on Orochimaru’s level but it would be difficult to keep their numbers down. If it had been just one he might have managed but as it was he had to stay careful and apply the sabotage that he could when he could and was not that tasteless?

“Everything is going to be okay.” Sakura said softly as they worked as quickly as they could.
Before they moved they had to take care of everyone else. They had to finish recover the bodies and make sure that the director and the rest of the crew were okay enough to leave behind.

“You believe that?” Sasuke worked quickly next to her his hands removing kunais and covering faces.

“Naruto’s on there.” Sakura said softly. “That’s one less worry. Koyuki-san will be safe once he is around. They will survive until we get to them.”

“How are we going to keep back these idiots.” Sasuke jerked a thumb in the direction of the higher executive staff of the filming crew who were making plans in whispers.

“Only so much they can do without most of the vehicles.” Sakura pointed out. “They’ll be grounded for a bit. I think we’ll drop them off in the village over the hill then go and track Naruto.”

“If that woman wasn’t on board we would have seen that blimp fall from the sky.” Sasuke said softly.

Sakura had to agree. “Naruto can be reckless.” She admitted. “It’ll work in everyone’s favour. There is so much we don’t know but the blimp will return to that guy’s hideout or his palace. Then it is only a matter of time for rescue. Naruto’s strong.” She finished softly. “No matter what he’ll hold up.”

“I hope you’re right.” Sasuke said softly. “Still I didn’t expect them to grab him too.”

“If they want to get into his head they have a hard time ahead of them.” Sakura shook her head slowly. “The same for Koyuki-san. Something like keeping a hostage won’t slow her down. Having someone around as a way to enforce good behaviour won’t work on her but it doesn’t change the fact that she doesn’t want to fight.”

“She’ll give them whatever it is that they want if they give her half the chance.” Sasuke snorted. “But we’ll have them both rescued by then.”

XxX

“She’s sleep.” Naruto whispered to the guard he had taken down silently. He was going to chuck the guy outside at the first opportunity but that did not really matter at that point. He had found that yes, the ship did have some holding cells and no, Koyuki nee-chan was not in them nor had she been in them.

She was not in the bedrooms either and although Naruto wanted to crash the blimp into the ice he had to admit that the décor on most of the blimp was pretty nice and high class. Very comfortable but it was owned by a dick who surrounded himself with fancy things like those while his citizens suffered. Not Naruto’s favourite type of person.

It was the type he would kill given the chance. The type of person he wanted to string out and make them count their own broken bones but he could not get lost in thoughts like that. He had to infiltrate, he had to find the princess and see what he could do about getting them both off the blimp and crashing the blimp with all the rotten bastards in one place together.

No sense crying over spilled milk though.

XxX

It was a really nice blimp. A very very nice blimp. Extremely nice and Naruto was pissed off that it
had to be in the clutches of such an evil ass. Getting close to the main part was dangerous but it was where Koyuki nee-chan was and god did that suck.

They were not on high alert, they were not on guard at all, beyond those on guard they were relaxed and that was good. There was no one easier to defeat than those who believed themselves undefeatable. It was just common sense, it was always those drunk on their own power and their own abilities, those who never acknowledged the outside threat.

It all worked out for somebody in the end and Naruto would just love it if it worked out for him because he was already in trouble. Sneaking around, switching around and hightailing it out with a huge sabotage as a goodbye was the only good plan in the situation.

He was not here to die, he was here to complete the mission, hopefully share some sense and go back to Konoha. He was not collateral damage and he was not going to be either but rushing about was not the answer so it was back to the basics.

Creeping around slowly, evaluating the surroundings while praying lady luck was in his favour. He needed to avoid those three other shinobi. Everyone else was easy pickings. Maybe Dotou too but for all Naruto knew the guy could be holding his own.

“You’ve grown so beautiful Koyuki.” The bastard’s voice echoed in the vent and it took Naruto a few moments to find the direction it came from before slowly creeping along the vent to the voice. What a creep. “Do you have the Hex crystal?”

Naruto knew she had something they wanted. He had been leaning towards information but an item worked as well. Hex crystal… there was that pendant she had always playing with. She never took it off, that had to be it.

“Yes…” That idiot. Naruto spared a moment to shake his head in disgust. It was good to be honest but she did not have an ounce of self-preservation or even understanding for her current situation. She could have at least tried to bargain… but her eyes were dead so he was not really that surprised.

“Good, that is the sole link to the Kazahana clan.” Naruto paused to gag at the bastard’s tone. The way he talked about clan. As if he had the right after he slaughtered his and had been trying to kill the last part of it. Disgusting. “And it is the key to opening the secret treasure.”

Naruto lay low in the vents as his mind raced. Treasure, greedy people just could not have enough it seemed. Always wanting more but those who sought treasure and craved it were different to those who sought excess.

Or at least that was how he justified it. Those obsessed with money and power never truly valued it. They never saw what they had and used it correctly. Those who sought happiness, love, affection. Greedy for more always they could go astray too and end up losing it all but those with the power just went overboard and abandoned their own selves in order to become higher than anyone else. That was just disgusting.

“Key to the… secret treasure?” Koyuki nee-chan sounded uncertain. Most likely the first time she had heard about it. If not many people knew about it including the princess what could it be? A family heirloom? A secret to be passed down to generations? It could not have been money but Naruto had the feeling that the idiot thought it was something like that.

“When I took over this land from your father.” Naruto rolled his eyes and fought the urge to gag again. He made it sound so peaceful, so simply as if he didn’t kill his brother. Kill his brother and
try to kill his niece. “Kazahana clan had no more resources. Sosetsu must have hid his riches elsewhere.”

Or maybe they did not exist. Naruto fought back a groan but it was so hard. The amount of times he had heard that same story when he happened to overhear a job the group had taken. If it had been the other way around then yes, if Dotou had been overthrown by his brother and there was a rumoured treasure lurking somewhere most likely it was money, riches actual treasure.

But the man that had been Koyuki’s father, the man that those who died back on the mountain worshipped. That guy sounded sentimental, a guy for the people. A good guy leading a peaceful quiet life for his people. Wanting no trouble and causing none. People could surprise you of course but chances are the treasure would end up some old scroll, some precious old cloth. Something really old that maybe could be traded away for some quick money but nothing to change a country. Because when it came down to it the really good people traded treasure for the future of their people.

“I searched and finally found it!” Dotou’s voice was smug, Naruto sighed softly. “It is hidden in the Rainbow Glacier. And I found the opening which is opened by a key, that key is the Hex crystal. Once I get hold of the secret Kazahana treasure our nation can attain immense military might.”

Naruto tensed then, hearing Dotou’s goal changed things. The guy was still an ass that needed to die as soon as he could arrange it but the direction he was going was terrifying to imagine. The world was all about balance especially the shinobi one. Konoha was part of the five great countries and what made them great was their shinobi and their military might. Just like the other great countries. What kept smaller countries in check was that the bigger countries at any point could unleash what could seem like the end of their world at any time.

That fear, the rage that caused despair and hatred. He touched his stomach softly. There were not that many things that would stand up to a Jinchuuriki or at least a trained one. Naruto knew he still had limitations, that those more skilled than him could take him out but that was now.

Everyone having great military might just cause problems especially when they had leaders behind them ready to go to war for any reason. That was what Dotou wanted, war. As if the last one had not been bad enough. Everyone had been affected shinobi or not. The changes made so more could fight, the destruction and despair that lingered for years. Those that dedicated themselves to war that were thrown away afterwards. It was a fragile balance as it was and someone like Dotou would only make it worse.

“We could surpass the five great nations!” Naruto doubted he knew what he was facing but it still did not sound good.

XxX

Naruto really hated to have to interrupt the conversation below but he had been granted the perfect window of opportunity. Until he had not been. The three strong annoyances and slipped off and he knew that was his only chance.

But of course the big guy had to double back, because paranoia. Well it had been amusing to see how shocked they were at seeing him alive and well and they had him on the ground in that hard rope again.

“This kid he has some strong chakra.” The big guy had his boot on his ribs and when he got the opportunity Naruto was going to make the bastard pay for that.
“Really?” Naruto did not like that intrigued tone in Dotou’s voice. He did not like it at all. “Shall we try that contraption on him?” Naruto was not here to be experimented on either. “We have a nice test subject.” He was going to hurt them so bad especially Dotou.

It looked like a gear. That talkative bastard held it in his hands then took it apart, electricity surging through it and Naruto knew it would be painful. He could tell by their grins alone. Still it looked like a big but heavy gear, what was it supposed to do and what did his chakra have to do with it?

The way the man slammed it into his gut Naruto knew it was coming from the smirk on his face but he refused to give the slimy bastard the satisfaction of a grunt or groan. Instead he glared up at him until his gaze was forced to his stomach because something felt wrong.

His mind went back to the forest and that moment when anger and frustration melded together with fear and pain because Orochimaru had done something. This was not a seal though. It was over his clothes above his stomach close to his seal but it was not a seal. Still the things that had emerged from the gear that were wiggling held him frozen because he could not even begin to figure what they were for and what they were going to do.

Then the little wriggling bastards dug deep into his jacket going right through all the way to the skin and before he could ignore the hurt electricity crackled and a whine was forced from him. He burned all over and where the wires dug deep he was frying. He was going to kill them especially Dotou.

“It’s a device to restrain chakra.” The bastard sounded so aloof. “It absorbs all the chakra absorbed in his body and places a powerful barrier around it. Which cannot be broken or destroyed.” His power was waning but he was not afraid just very angry. He had heard what the bastard said but those kinds of absolutes from people like that did not scare him.

He was going to find a way out of this. He would break this he would be the first to break it, smash it to pieces. It would not hold him, it might have held others but he was not like anybody else. Even if it could hold a normal person with large amounts of chakra Naruto doubted this thing had been tested on a Kyuubi before. It was better to pretend for the bit and get more information.

“Now you are no longer a ninja just a mere kid.” The talkative bastard sneered. Naruto kept his head low so he did not end up showing what he was feeling on his face. He had never been a mere kid and he would never be a mere kid. He was glad for that.

“Now, you will hand over the Hex crystal.” Dotou was way too eager. Naruto pretended to faint even as he seethed inside at Koyuki nee-chan handing over the crystal. “Oh… hmm?” His contemplation had Naruto angling his head a bit to see ahead of him. “This is…” The way Dotou grabbed his niece by her coat his face twisted by rage made Naruto bite his lip because he could do nothing. “Don’t fool with me! This is a fake!” Koyuki nee-chan’s face was filled with surprise and panic.

“That can’t be!” She twisted in the man’s grip. “That’s my… it has to be…” She froze. Naruto froze too his mind going over the past few days and his lips lifted into a small smile. At least he had his answer for what Kakashi-sensei had been doing in the room. Both of them had been preparing for the worst but Kakashi-sensei had gone a step further along, prepared against the final stage. It was so cool. “Hatake Kakashi.” She whispered.

“I see now, I wouldn’t put it past that man to switch it out with a fake.” The talkative bastard seemed delighted. “We can bring him or let him come to us.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Dotou threw Koyuki aside and ignored her cry of pain. “He’s sure to
appear before us soon. We will wait until then.” He sounded so sure that he held the upper hand. The moment they took their eyes off of him Naruto was going to raise hell, if he had to get a knife and dig the wires out of him in order to bring everything down around their ears.

XxX

Deep underground an ice prison where skeletons remained in most of them speaking to the neglect and carelessness of those who ran the place. Not all those who had apparently died down in the prison were civilians because Naruto knew a hitai-ate when he saw it.

He had seen plenty of those when he had been hauled down to his cell, he had no intention on being the next skeleton wearing a hitai-ate. They could have died from starvation, from the cold, from beatings from being exposed to Dotou’s tyranny whatever it was Naruto was not going to join them. He had been working the chains since they had strung him up.

The handcuffs were slightly troublesome because of the angle he was in. the amount of chakra he needed to break the chains activated the stupid thing on him which shocked him pretty hard. Sadly for the idiots that strung him up Naruto had spent years with people who thought it was fun to string him up and teach him how to escape the most ridiculous situations as quickly as possible.

Back then there had been no real danger but in the cases of them wanting to put on a show. Or if something had gotten their hands on him and he could not take them down or distract them enough to get away. Naruto had been taught how to escape trickier things than the old fashion handcuffs. It was just he had to save his energy as he went along because the moment he got out the cage he was raising hell.

To think they had him dangling. It was almost like they wanted him to escape, or they had never met missing nins before. Or slippery shinobi. The idiots had not even patted him down to remove weapons. Granted the obvious ones were of no help to anyone the way they were and they would not find the hidden ones unless they took more than a few minutes but they could have tried, their sloppiness delighted and annoyed him.

If he were less practiced, less knowledgeable and less trained getting out this situation would have been a real pain in the ass. To have to bend in order to take the file that was in his boot with his legs chained the way they were. It was not impossible just hard, it caused a small burn in his gut when he let his feet back down but the file was between his teeth.

“Shinobi find ways to fight even without their chakra. Dumbasses.” Naruto snorted softly. “It is what real shinobi do.” He barely got to enjoy his glee before the sound of footsteps had him hiding the file in his mouth as he slumped in his chains pretending to be asleep.

When a gate slammed closed and the footsteps left he cautiously opened his eyes a crack to see that the cell across from him had been filled, he was not all that surprised to see who filled it. She sat on the ground hugging her knees her gaze on the blank wall.

Then she turned to look at him. “Serves you right.”

Naruto almost spit the file out in the rage that threatened to consume him, instead he tilted his head back as he calmed his breathing and his blood. “You too.” He managed to say between gritted teeth. “You had this coming since the very beginning. It was the only way you were going to end up when you go running off without a plan, support or even destination.”

“I know.” She said softly, Naruto was unsure to whether to believe her or not so he tilted his head as much as he could below his hands preparing to spit the file into his fist.
Besides the sound of his shifting chains and his soft grunts as he shifted around to get the position that would help him the most there were no words between them. At least until Naruto had managed to grip the file in his fist. The triumph that swept through him, the knowledge that it was going just fine had him tilt his head down to eye the woman in the cell across the walkway.

“You said…” Her head lifted at his words. “That there is no spring? What’s that mean?” It had been something that appeared to bother her back then when they had argued. To Naruto it was the Country of Snow. That was what he expected to find.

“You can see it in the spring.” She said softly. “My father always used to say that. ‘Spring is sure to come’ but this country has no spring. My father died and I escaped from this country and I stopped believing. And ran and ran and lied. And even lied to myself.” It was like a damn breaking, the words flowed from her even with her tone soft her eyes downcast. “And continued to pretend. Being an actress was the only thing I could become.”

So sad, so hopeless. He understood, it was so sad but she had also been so foolish it was not easy to forget that. But how could he not hear the lingering regret and longing in her tone? That was what he had been looking for in the first place. She was still lying to herself, it was there in her tone when she spoke of her father. No matter what she said or she thought she still believed.

His hands strained as he worked the chains, small grunts escaped him as he switched on angle and shuffled the file from one hand to the other. Just one break and it would be good. One would be enough and he was going to get there.

“Doing that won’t change anything.” Her voice almost did not carry over to him but he kept working kept straining because he knew better. When the file made a groove he wanted to cheer.

“I guess it would be so easy if I gave up.” He said softly. “It would have been so easy if every time I faced something hard, painful or impossible I gave in.” He chuckled harshly. “Or lowered my head but it would depend on when. No one cared about me so I left with someone who did. I figured, what the hell I’m only going to suffer more here and I wanted someone who looked at me. But I always dreamed of coming back, proving I was someone, worth something.” He continued to saw away at the chain almost absentmindedly. “It was so rough, there was nowhere in the world for me, no one in the world for me just cold eyes wherever I looked. Wherever I went.”

The file slipped in his sweat slick hands so he broke off to juggle the file before he was able to get a good enough grip again. He gave a sigh of relief before he went back to the chain cautiously.

“I could have given up and given in instead of leaving. I could have just accepted what I was told, done what I was told in order to stay by his side. Ignored the feelings in my chest, I could have listened to that sharp tooth bastard from the very start, would have made things easier I guess.” Naruto snorted. “But… if I had given up, given in I would not have what I have now. I wouldn’t know the things that I know now. I wouldn’t change those experiences not for anything in the whole world. If I had given up, given in I wouldn’t have met them I can feel that. I found people, I found friends, family and no matter what they can’t be taken from me and as long as I keep going as long as I keep trying I’ll always have something I’ll always get more.”

The chains slacked just a bit and he grinned and kept at it harder energy thrumming through him at the chains that rattled and at the groove that had gotten deeper.

“But because I didn’t give up I have these things. I have the friends I found and I keep going and I don’t give up.” He panted. “And good things happen! If I had given up back then I would have never learned, never understood never been able to laugh freely to experience happiness and love. If you give up your dreams stop there and you’ll never get them! The path to a dream isn’t easy.”
He admitted. “But… there aren’t steps to the clouds are there?”

It had been cut enough, He strained and ignored the shocks through his body. He pulled and ignored her alarmed cries to stop, instead he focused and pulled and pulled a smile breaking free when the chains snapped and he fell to the ground.

“That old man Sandaiyu, your father.” Naruto whispered as he pulled himself to his feet. “They weren’t wrong and I’ll prove it to you.”

XxX

One would have been enough, except that they had Naruto. All the bombs that he had would not be enough. Kakashi swallowed as he carefully set the minimum amount needed to provide the distraction to get inside.

He had faith in Naruto he knew of all people Naruto could take care of himself. He had evidence that Naruto no matter the situation could take care of himself. It was just that Kakashi had just finally gotten him back from missing nins and Jiraiya-sensei and someone was snatching him away again faster than a blink of the eye.

It made his blood boil, it made his throat run dry and it made him not want to hold back but that was okay. They were not here to hold back. They were here to finish a job and retrieve a very important team member. The first explosion rocked the entire plateau. Kakashi tilted his head as he waited for the second. There was no such thing as overdo in a retrieval mission.

XxX

There were plenty of guards running around the place but they had very little strength they had numbers on them not any real power and that worked to their advantage. They kept them confused as they worked their way to the lower levels.

Kakashi-sensei had gone his own way but not before informing them to keep in contact by the radio. Unspoken was the message to contact on seeing Naruto. Sakura was relieved to be at the base but wary at everything they found.

She knew getting out would be the real fight on their hands because the enemy contrary to how it looked was actually luring them in. With such a huge base, it was hard to keep people from creeping in the cracks but it would be easy to keep people trapped inside if everything remained on high alert and calm.

Which was why they had the flashy entrance in, why they did everything they could to shake up and confuse guards even while they made their way down to the lower levels. They made a ruckus going down and for Sakura she hoped they met Naruto half way up.

XxX

Sometimes when you saw something wrong you should just keep going, curiosity was not always good. Especially when everything seemed to be going wrong, they were supposed to be backups but they got side-tracked by his figure on the ground.

Instead of reporting it, or ignoring it they decided to fix the problem themselves, admirable but foolish. His capture had been laughable especially the imprisonment in the cell, they had not even taken his kunais away from him. It had been easy work to slit their throats when they rolled him over. He had been so fast they had just slumped down without a sound.
Wherever they had been planning on going to backup was a moot point now. Granted Naruto had just taken advantage of the situation when he realized the place had to be under siege. The entire place had shaken with the first two explosions. He did not need to be a genius to know what that meant, the faint yelling and increased activity of the guards had only cemented it for him. It was wonderful. His team had arrived, they were somewhere looking for him.

Still, Naruto was thankful to them for removing the seal from the door. Getting shocked was not fun and he did not want to get used to such a feeling either. He stole the keys from the loose grip of one of the dead guards and made sure there was no blood on him before he tossed the key in the air and met Koyuki nee-chan’s amazed gaze. “I told you don’t underestimate shinobi.” He smiled.

He waited for a second hoping he had not scared her off or that she had not retreated into herself again but instead she smiled and he watched light come to her eyes.

XxX

Her hand held his tightly as they made their escape. Many things could go wrong Naruto knew things would go wrong simply because that was how things went. There would be no smooth clean exit. There would be obstacles along their path, people in their way because that was what happened and because neither he nor Koyuki nee-chan had that sort of luck that would allow for a smooth simple escape.

If he were alone there would be no need to use the elevator. He would have run up the ice to levels above and made his own way out but because he had her by his side he had to make use of the elevator. Of course he would have never been captured if he had been on his own so there was that to think about.

The ride was quick and filled with tension she squeezed his hand all the way up and when the doors reopened even as Naruto glanced both ways to make sure the coast was clear her grip tightened. Naruto chose the way left to go leading her into a run onto the walkway their footsteps echoing when a line appeared and a guard zoomed into sight.

There was no time to really react, before the guard could land Naruto had released the hand in his and went for his kunai. He feinted with punches that were easily deflected. Even as the guard did not try shouting or anything more dangerous than deflection, which was strange in itself because Naruto could feel how much stronger than him the guard was. He switched his kunai from hand to hand as he looked for a good enough opening.

He found it soon enough although it seemed to be a given opening, his kick to the guard’s gut was solid but only sent him stumbling back a few steps. Naruto flew forward aiming for the throat only to find his hand caught in a solid grip and words spilling from the guard. “Wait wait a minute Naruto!”

That voice, Naruto watched stunned as the man threw off the guard’s outfit to reveal his sensei. “Kakashi-sensei.” He let his hand drop.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.” His secondary weapon pouch came flying at his face. Naruto secured it to himself without a second thought. “I see the princess is well also, I’m glad.”

“Yes.” Koyuki nee-chan too a step forward but her tone had chilled considerably, Naruto did not have to guess why. “You switched the hexagonal crystal for a fake one didn’t you?”

“I’m sorry.” Kakashi-sensei said softly as he approached. He reached into his jacket with ease. “I knew those guys were after it.” He placed it into her open palm gently.
“Just for this.” Koyuki nee-chan closed her hand around the crystal, Naruto could follow where her thoughts were going. Just for that so many deaths and injuries.

Before Naruto could urge everyone to think about their surroundings and that they had to escape a muffled boom from ahead of them caught all their attention before Sakura and Sasuke sprang into sight sprinting from around the corner. “We can’t hold that area any longer!” Sakura gasped.

“Sakura-chan! Sasuke!” All of them together made things less complicated.

“Down there.” Koyuki nee-chan took the lead with Kakashi-sensei at her side and the rest of them at their heels. Explosions came from all over rocking the entire structure and the walkway under their feet.

“Maybe you guys were a little over excited?” Naruto questioned his sensei. “This place is going to go down.”

“They had you, the both of you.” Kakashi-sensei didn’t turn to look down at him but Naruto felt his heart warm a slight bit.

“Let’s go!” Naruto’s eyes went from Kakashi-sensei’s back to Koyuki nee-chan’s. He eyed her for a few seconds as they ran before his eyes slid back to his sensei only to find that the man’s eye was on him as well. They shared a moment of unease and silence before they continued running.

Naruto felt delighted that the man felt the unease that he felt. There was no way to voice his suspicions no way to give words to the unease.

XxX

“Everyone seems to have forgotten that I’m an actress!” Kakashi kept his swearing to himself as he watched Dotou close his hand around the crystal.

“You seem to be in a slump then nee-chan because you haven’t been lying with your eyes for a while.” Naruto stepped forward to be met by Kakashi’s hand in an effort to keep the boy away from the shinobi protecting the throne. “Don’t do it nee-chan.” Naruto ignored his hand and spoke in a near growl. “Don’t do it.” She trembled then, a quick shudder quickly stopped.

“Everything was an act.” She said softly, Kakashi watched in shock as a knife slid into her hands from her sleeve and she stabbed Dotou in the gut.

“Nee-chan.” Naruto’s distress would have confused him if Kakashi had not already known her effort was useless and why. Still his hope in her had been mostly restored.

Dotou grabbed her by the throat keeping her away but her grip remained on the sword. “I knew about this Naruto.” She gritted her hands strong on the hilt of the sword. “When I returned here was when I would die. When I should die. That’s why at least I’m taking this bastard with me.”

“Stop it, stop it princess! Nee-chan! Stop it!” Naruto’s hands gripped his arm to push him away so he could step forward but Kakashi kept his arm to the boy’s chest.

“Naruto it was thanks to you.” Kakashi swore at the tear that slid down her cheek. “That I found the strength to do this. Until the very end I kept running away.”

“What you’re doing right now is still running away!” Naruto’s voice echoed around the throne room. “Death is still running! You can’t die!”
She was no longer hearing Naruto’s voice. “Father.” Her whisper was gentle and soft. “Sandaiyuu.” Kakashi watched both figures fall off the platform. Dotou’s back to the ground and she almost on top of him driving the sword deeper. As if that would do much.

The sound of their bodies hitting the ground made Kakashi lower his hand a bit a proved mistake as Naruto used his hand as a spring to leap over it. Kakashi’s grab at the boy’s collar proved worthless his only relief was that the enemy shinobi let Naruto pass them to the princess’s still form.

“Wait Naruto!” He tried to warn when he saw Dotou move when Naruto’s hand brushed the woman’s arm. His warning was unneeded because before the punch could land the kunai glinted and blood flew before Naruto flipped backward out of range.

“I’m not going to die from this toy like Katana.” Dotou chuckled as he wiped away the small knife wound on his cheek. He slowly undid his sash, Kakashi shook his head as the chakra armour was revealed. He knew it had to be there but it still disgusted him to see it. “This is the new advanced model of chakra armour.”

“Only the best for yourself eh?” Kakashi asked before he gestured at the waiting shinobi. “All the kinks worked out I hope, would hate for something bad to happen to you while your guards have the knock offs.”

Koyuki broke into a bout of coughing her face twisted in pain. Dotou reached for her easily picking her up with one hand with no noticeable strain.

“Don’t touch her with your dirty hands!” Naruto was ready once again to spring forward.

“Naruto! Don’t!” Her cry as she struggled in the man’s grip only made Naruto’s face grow more determined.

“It is pointless. Your chakra is completely sealed!” Kakashi’s eye fell with Naruto’s hand to the object on his stomach that he had not gotten around to asking about.

“What did you say?” Kakashi asked softly.

“His chakra is completely sealed!” Dotou’s eyes gleamed. “Now Koyuki.” He ignored the way she punched and kicked at him. “Let’s go to the place beyond the rainbow.”

“Damn it!” Naruto was quick and a rope wrapped around the princess’s hand. “As if I’m going to let you take her out of here you filthy bastard!” He was launched into the air along with Dotou.

“Damn it!” Kakashi swore when the three disappeared into the crumbling ceiling and Naruto disappeared from sight. “Damn it!”

The six of them remained in the room and as the ceiling for the throne room came down they were all forced to scatter. Kakashi’s calm came back to him in anticipation for the coming fights even as he seethed on the inside for Naruto who had gone after one of the most dangerous men without a blink of an eye.

Sakura’s report on the fight in the forest of death came to his mind again and he had no choice but to sigh. He honestly should not have been surprised.

XxX

Those wings made the idiot look like a fucking bat. Naruto was hanging on desperately but he was allowed to judge the shitty design. He was tempted to poke a few holes into the wings. Sasuke had
managed to damage the woman’s one and he had no doubts that when the bastard noticed him he would cut Naruto lose.

At least he would have enough self-preservation to glide down with or without Koyuki nee-chan but judging by the guy’s goals and gloating he would hang onto her at any costs. He would do anything to keep Naruto from getting her to safety.

The bastard noticed him like Naruto knew he would but before he could cut Naruto loose, he used two kunais to tear a hole into the ugly wings. The man’s look of shock was worth it. “We’re both going down huh.” Naruto laughed before Dotou yanked the rope from Naruto’s grip.

XxX

There was no easy way to cushion a fall from that high but there were ways to slow down. Naruto had dropped into a forest full of tall trees and snow. From tree to tree he slowed his way his kunais dragging along the trunks in an effort to slow his fall.

He had still hit the ground pretty hard but he had not broken anything and that was what really counted. “You couldn’t have gotten far.” He groaned as he dusted off himself. “Even if you hate it I’ll follow you wherever you go. Damn it!” the thing from his stomach had to come off soon. He was not indifferent to pain but usually his body would have started on the healing by now and made some progress.

The sound of something chugging along confused him until the sight of the film director along with the assistant and the screen writer on a snow machine chugged into view. No self-preservation at all, Naruto gaped at them until the director gave him a large grin. “Get on!”

“You guys will do anything for this movie won’t you.” Naruto laughed before he clambered on. “Thanks for the lift but stay back when the fighting starts.”

XxX

“They got further ahead on those damaged wings than I thought.” Naruto grumbled as he stared at the sky.

“What’s that.” The assistant director whispered as he drove towards the bright lights.

“Whatever it is that Dotou wanted.” Naruto gritted out as he tried and failed to pull off the device on his stomach. If he had not been going to fight he would have cut the wires out and taken his chances but in his condition, he would be too weak from blood loss, he would simply have to fight the only way he could without chakra. Not impossible, just not easy.

“What is that crazy bastard going to do.” The director grumbled under his breath.

“He thinks he is going to find some treasure.” Naruto shrugged.

XxX

Kakashi had already lured his opponent away and Sakura had deduced the way to take out the other annoying two would be to team up. The flying woman already had honed in on them so she was going to be the first target. Holding her off so Sakura could study her enough to make a plan to take her out was hard enough without the woman sending ice spears up at them.

Stopping her from luring them where she obviously had a trap waiting for them was frustrating and annoying. Racing through the forest with her swooping from above being able to do nothing was
aggravating to not only him. Sasuke had seen the clench in Sakura’s jaw as they evaded and she watched.

“How much longer Sakura?” He demanded after a thorn bush of ice sprang to life almost between them the intent to separate them. They did not let it work, quickly joining back together side by side.

“Just a bit more.” She gasped before they were forced to duck behind separate trees. Her eyes danced around the clearing before a look of understanding crossed her face. “That’s it! I get it now! After five seconds, turn twenty degrees left and run thirty meters ahead!” Sasuke had started to count the moment her words ended when the five seconds ended his feet moved. “That’s where the tree branch is!”

“Alright.”

“Whatever you do it will be useless!” The last moron had found them but Sasuke was too occupied with his cords and ropes. Besides he knew Sakura had it handled. This would take out the woman and then they would take out the man.

There was the ring metal clashing against armour behind him. Sakura moving onto the next stage of the plan. Sasuke heard the laughter of the man as the armour rendered the kunais useless but the point had never been for the kunais to pierce the armour. It had always been about what they carried. Sasuke suppressed a smile as he waited for his turn.

XxX

The slow dawning realization that one had fallen into an elaborate trap. Sakura was coming to love that expression on their enemies. The man looked slowly at his arms only to realize that the little bags the kunais had carried had carried lots of those little paper seals.

“I call this the Sakura Fubiki no jutsu!” Sakura teasingly showed the explosion kunai in her hand. “As if.” She chuckled. The kunai landed a few feet from the man and the tag ignited he gave a small whimper, took a step back but it was already too late.

The explosion took out a generous area fuelled by the other tags in it. The explosion caused a large gust of wind and she smiled when she heard the rip not too far away, the cause… those wings being torn by ninja wire.

XxX

She had lost the annoying wings, Sasuke was thankful. Even though that was only the beginning keeping her grounded was important. It was very nice to keep her from being able to soar away. “We snow shinobi aren’t that weak!” She taunted.

“Maybe.” Sasuke said in her ear. Her gasp was almost worth all the stress she had caused them since her appearance. “Shishi rendan!” A good impact with the ground would stun her enough for them to deal with that armour without any interference.

He had not expected that when the two idiots collided that they would electrify themselves. The red light that surrounded them was confusing and bright but their cries of pain and the smoke told Sasuke their work was being done for them.

“What happened?” He asked Sakura when they shielded themselves from the flying snow and other debris.
“I’m not sure.” She said slowly. “But maybe…” She took a step forward towards the unmoving bodies. “We deactivated the armour… no they deactivated it… we need to take a look before we go.” She gave a glance to where the green light in the sky had gotten brighter. “Naruto has something like these things on him.”

XxX

Kakashi had watched Sakura and Sasuke lead the other two shinobi away and he himself had led away the one that was far more dangerous than the other two and the one that was fully focused on him than anything else. “Do you have any chance of winning?” The man asked. “After all you ran away the last time.”

“It can’t be helped, I’ll show you something original.” The man was like a dog with a bone, just worse. Maybe a raccoon dog, digging at the same sore spot over and over again. It was easy to gloat when not only might was on your side but you had nothing to watch over. “Raikiri!”

Kakashi wanted the confrontation over with as soon as possible. He had seen the unnatural green glow in the sky and he knew that was where Dotou and very likely Naruto were. Dotou was strong, not overly so but Naruto had a dangerous handicap currently. Kakashi could not afford to linger.

“Hyouton Rouga Nadare no Jutsu!” His tone was smug he had thought he had already won. Kakashi ignored the snow dogs snarling and running down the mountain easily hopping over them to his true target. One dog made of snow got between him and Nadare but was easily obliterated by the raikiri. Nadare’s look of shock was almost amusing. “What?” He thought he dodged but his heart had not been what Kakashi had been aiming for. His shoulder smoked. “That was close.”

They had no time to rest because they had to move away from the snow rushing down on them Nadare tried to escape as he fell. Tried to regain his footing away from the torrent of snow falling on them. Kakashi was pleased at the man’s horrified face when he gripped his front tightly. “Even if ninjutsu and genjutsu don’t work on you a ninja still has taijutsu!” Something that Kakashi had been training to the most extreme because of Gai for years. “You’ve depended too much on that armour!”

When Kakashi got to his feet and looked back at Nadare the sight of the cracking armour and small charges of light pleased him. The man was unconscious and would not be moving under his own will anytime soon.

“You remained exactly the same all these years, one win does not guarantee you to win again. Conditions and people change. It is just the way it is.” Kakashi turned to where the light had gotten brighter before he spent another glance at the fallen man. He shook his head before he took off.

XxX

Even from a distance Naruto could hear Dotou roaring, over the roars of emitting steam he could hear the man raging the closer he got to the bright lights. “Where is it! Where is the treasure?” It was a pity that Naruto had never met the former king but he understood him far better than his own brother had.

Under the noise of the steam and Dotou’s roaring was a soft rush of water, the closer they got to where Dotou was the warmer it got. Naruto walked ahead of him snow melt and droplets turn to small rivers.

“A generator!” Dotou roared. “Is that what you call Kazahana’s treasure?” Dotou really and truly was an idiot. Granted Naruto had not expected it to be a generator either. Special flowers that
bloomed in the snow to make it look like spring. That had been his guess, proved he still thought like a kid.

XxX

Naruto had warned the film crew to stay back, he had no idea whether they would listen or not but he had high hopes that some sort of self-preservation would kick in at this late time and let them know that they were way out of their league and poking their noses into the coming fight would get them killed. He was thankful for the ride but even more he was anxious to end the entire fight.

With the steam working like a mist and Dotou so distracted, Naruto had hoped that the man would not have noticed Naruto coming up on him. He had wanted to reassure Koyuki nee-chan but the chance to get a few blows in undetected was the better option.

Unfortunately, the man kept whirling around angry at everything especially at his dead brother and that armour had to work as some sort of sensor because when Naruto was just out of striking range the man noticed him.

After everything that he had come to see, everything he had heard and witnessed. Naruto had not just come to fight Dotou he had come to kill him. Having to watch the efforts of the rebellion, having to see Koyuki nee-chan having to see the entire country suffer he knew it would not end with a simple arrest. Dotou, Dotou’s ambitions, his hopes, his dreams all of it had to end right there with no one to remember or carry them forward.

Naruto had wondered originally whether the man was just all muscle and no jutsu but when he saw Dotou form seals he muffled his curses to himself and instead prepared to counter whatever in hell the man was doing. He had been hoping since Dotou relied so heavily on the ninjas it meant he was defenceless but since Dotou had a chakra armour of his own a tiny suspicion had laid at the back of his mind, a simple heavy armour would have been good enough but Dotou had said it was the newest chakra armour. Naruto wanted to smash it into bits. “Hyoton, kokuryuu Boufuusetsu!” It was like a black cloud extending towards him expanding with every yard it covered.

It hit the snow before him because he dodged back in time but the impact still tossed him farther than he would have liked. Naruto had no choice but to go with the explosion, flipping and jumping backwards giving ground that he would have rather not have given. He landed on his hands and knees before he got to his feet to eye the rabid man.

Underneath him, around him after the sound of impact was the sound of slowly cracking ice but Naruto doubted Dotou heard it. He doubted Koyuki nee-chan heard it either but he heard it. He heard it and carefully watched his steps and kept his ears tuned to the ground under him. All around them it was getting warmer, faint mist in the air and with every second the ice became weaker.

“What’s wrong Dotou?” Naruto taunted. “You missed, it didn’t affect me at all.” It could have thrown Naruto into the air if he had not dodged at the right moment and then moved in a way that best protected his body. Sometimes you had to go with the force even if you lost ground.

“Wait Naruto! You have to stop it!” Koyuki nee-chan’s voice was frantic. “This time you’ll really die!”

“Believe in me princess.” Naruto answered her without taking his eyes off Dotou. “Watch me and believe in me. If you believe in me I will definitely not lose! Not to shit like him. Not after what he’s done to you, the people of this country.” Naruto bit back most of his swearing through strength.
To come to snow country, and see something that he loved so much. An element he adored so much being tainted by these people who thought themselves above it all. That he would be tormented and chased by ice. That this man before him thought that Naruto could be underestimated like that. His stomach felt hot, his entire body boiled with the rage he kept inside himself, then he heard a crack come from his stomach. It was so loud, so surprising that Naruto glanced down only to see a small crack in the device that kept his chakra captive.

“Don’t tell me.” Dotou’s voice had a small about of worry in it. “Don’t tell me his chakra is leaking out. No way, that is impossible.” Dotou’s face twisted into fury before the man started to run towards Naruto. First it was a few short steps but in no time, he had gone into full stride like a raging bull aimed at Naruto.

It was sort of startling how blind to rage Dotou had gotten just because the device had cracked, it was almost as if he had lost his senses as he charged at Naruto. No jutsu just his body and while most people would have charged him back in return. Met him in the middle, Naruto was only too aware how much taller and bigger Dotou was along with the fact that he always had a dirty trick up his sleeve, so while he charged at Naruto his hand held high aiming to strike down. Naruto prepared to dodge to the first blow by stepping back.

“Die just die!” Dotou screamed as the first punch went wild. Naruto watched the second fist and ducked back forward angling his body so that he took the punch right on the device. The punch hurt him too but even as he lost some breath he jumped back to recover.

He felt the thing crack again and even as he beat a small retreat, dodging the fists and the destruction Naruto slowly gathered chakra testing his limits as he kept an eye on his footing. The clone popped into existence after Dotou sent ice shattering around them Naruto met the man’s gaze as he concentrated before in the debris of ice and the light mist he disappeared.

Dotou roared looking for him, he shouted insults, he screamed and threatened but Naruto needed those few seconds of concentration and he needed to buy time. His clone popped into existence with a few kunais thrown to distract the man and draw blood while Naruto ran up on him from behind and above.

“The time to end this is now! Rasengan!” The hit was glorious, Dotou had turned in time to take the full thing on the central panel on the armour. It glowed before it cracked. Naruto had a moment to watch it turn purple before the glow expanded the colour blended with the ransengan. The ice shattered below them. Around them everything turned white but Naruto had the pleasure of watching the blood flow from Dotou’s lips. He was finished even if he had not known it. Ice water embraced him, embraced them both.

Naruto had used plenty of chakra and even as he sank he was aware that the device still was not broken. But he had won, he just needed to take a quick rest.

Xxx

As fast as they had come they had gotten there for the finale. “Naruto you idiot.” Sasuke hissed, he had no idea what Naruto had done to trigger the armour to malfunction but… Dotou was gone, Naruto was nowhere to be seen. The ice was melting, the princess was having hysterics. “Fuck it, Naruto!”

Xxx

“Oi brat.” Someone was speaking to him, it was annoying. He just needed some time, he was healing, he could feel himself healing. It was taking sometime but that was okay. He wasn’t in any
real rush. He had gotten what he was supposed to do done. Even though there was something surrounding him, squeezing and crushing him he felt no fear. "Brat, you’re pushing it." The voice growled. Naruto knew that growl.

His eyes opened to see the Kyuubi’s eyes close to the cage glaring at him but the surroundings were vastly different. The water level was much higher than it usually was. It usually went to his shoes and a little above. Naruto was neck deep in water. "What the hell." He said slowly.

“You’re seriously going to let us drown?” The Kyuubi snarled.

“Drown?” Naruto asked softly. It was then he remembered, the fight, the carefully constructed rasengan with a tiny bit more power than usual. The armour that had been destroyed and the ice cracking beneath them. Koyuki nee-chan had been on a different part of the ice so she was safe. At least she should be. He had to go and check.

“Worry about yourself!” A nose tried to stick out the cage. “Stop taking chances like this.”

“I get it.” Naruto looked back at the cage. “I don’t want to die either but with that thing on me there was only so much I could do. I’m glad you didn’t mess around like you could have. You going to lend me a hand?”

“Stop making careless mistakes.” Was the growl back. Throughout his body Naruto felt warmth and an overwhelming amount of chakra. He felt the device finally shatter. There was a huff from the cage and nothing else. Naruto shrugged in return even as he struggled to wake back up. He had to get up to the surface before he really did drown.

XxX

As fast as he had come, as fast as his chakra and his legs had carried him when Kakashi had gotten to the source of the bright light he knew he had come too late. Even as his eyes took in the surroundings, the melted ice. The shattered ice, the flowing water and slowly revealed greenery his eyes was focused on the people not on the scene.

He heard Sasuke’s loud angry cry and his eyes went to the water in the middle of the ice mirror ring where the huge crack lay and the dark water under. He knew without asking, he knew without looking at the princess what had happened. She was fine, she was safe, Dotou was missing and everywhere was the evidence that something had gone down.

Kakashi’s legs moved before he knew it. He threw aside shinobi tools and his vest as he raced to the ice and the water lake in the middle. The sight of Sasuke reaching it first slowed him just a small bit. He watched Sasuke disappear under the water but Kakashi continued his rush to the ice before he dove in and under.

It was not a job for him to sit down and wait for others to do. Naruto was his responsibility. Sasuke was his responsibility and this was not something they should be doing alone. It was not something they could and should handle by themselves. In the dark of the water he was aware of a red light and in the light he saw Sasuke snag Naruto. Kakashi prepared himself to be able to take them both. They had both fought hard, the water was far more treacherous than it looked. It was best to be there just in case.

XxX

The red light that guided him, that was a mystery that Sasuke would have to uncover later. He wrapped his arms under Naruto’s shoulders and tilted them enough at an angle as he pulled them
Naruto was heavier than he looked, or maybe it was the water. Sasuke had never rescued someone from drowning before like this. It was once thing to get a dog or small child from the surface. Retrieving someone who had sunk under, and it looked as though Naruto was going to sink for a moment there, sink and never come back up and that made no sense.

There was just darkness underneath and although Naruto’s eyes had fluttered open at his approach they had closed just as suddenly. Kakashi’s shadow appeared above him before the man came into view. Sasuke expected Kakashi to try to take Naruto away from him but instead his sensei wrapped his arms around Naruto’s waist and helped Sasuke drag him towards the surface. Maybe it was the jacket and the clothes that made Naruto so heavy. Whatever it was, it did not matter anymore when they broke the surface and Sasuke breathed in fresh air.

XxX

“I got it.” Kakashi reassured Sasuke when they broke the surface. He pulled Naruto to him as Sasuke took deep breaths. “Let’s get out of here, I’ll bring him out.” It surprised him a tiny bit that Sasuke did not protest, did not eye him suspiciously or snort but instead made his way for land instead but then again, the water was cold. It stole one’s breath there was no energy for arguing.

Naruto’s head rested limply against Kakashi’s shoulder which spurred him to make for land hastily. They had barely managed to pull themselves out of the cold water before he had unzipped Naruto’s jacket to check him over. His fingers lingered over the device that had caused him worry. He noted the cracked glass and hollow device. Naruto had taken care of the problem himself but had Kakashi really expected any less? He had come to defend and back up but Naruto had ways of taking care of himself even when it looked as though he was over his head. Kakashi was still relieved that the chakra sealing was not a problem.

Naruto seemed to be breathing okay but before Kakashi could continue looking him over Sakura had knelt by his side and taken over. “Unconscious.” She said softly after she checked his airways and taken his pulse. “I’m not surprised, we heard that explosion when we were coming here. I wonder what he did I didn’t see any tags.”

Analytical Sakura. Kakashi was forced to hide a small smile as he careful ran a hand through Naruto’s hair. He was okay, he was going to be okay and Kakashi’s team had out done themselves.

“Is he okay?” Koyuki-san was the next to fall to her knees. Her hands gently reached to touch Naruto’s chest. Her fingers moved with Naruto’s breathing and the look of relief that swept over her face made Kakashi relax. “He’s going to be fine?”

“Going to take a lot more than that to take out someone like Naruto.” Sasuke had started to wring out his wet clothes. “Can’t get rid of pure hearted idiots so easily you know.”

XxX

“It’s cracking.” Naruto said softly when he opened his eyes. He had kept his eyes closed listening to the murmurs around him but that had gotten boring quick and he had wanted to see the results of his efforts with his own eyes. The first thing his eyes had seen clearly were the huge ice pillars. They had been glowing all that time but now they had cracked, they were crumbling.

“It’s shattering?” Sakura asked softly. “Wait no, there is something.” They were all rendered silent when all around them turned to grass and spring. It could not be real but it felt real, it looked real.
The snow was gone and grass spread as far as the eye could see. “Amazing.”

“Believe in the future and one day spring will come.” Naruto frowned at the unfamiliar voice that seemed to come from all around them.

“Where?” He questioned as he looked around them. Koyuki nee-chan looked as though she had seen a ghost her gaze fixed on the pillars.

“Koyuki what would you like to do when spring comes?” A girl was projected in the middle of the mirrors. A glance at the nee-chan told Naruto he was not imagining the resemblance.

“I’ll become a princess.” The projection said seriously.

“Hm, what kind of princess?” That had to be the former king, his voice was kind and soft.

“Hm a strong kind one. A princess who believes in justice!” Koyuki nee-chan gave a soft sob at those words from the projection.

“That’s going to be very hard work.” The former king sounded amused.

“I did say that before.” Koyuki nee-chan was entirely focused on the projection.

“But if you don’t give up and keep on believing in your dreams one day before you’ll become one.” Naruto stifled a gasp when a man appeared with the little girl in the projection. It had to be the former king. Koyuki nee-chan’s father and his face was not only kind but full of love and hope. Naruto watched as a necklace was fastened around the little girl’s neck. The same necklace that so much pain had ended up following. “Can’t you see? That a beautiful princess is standing here?” It was almost as if the former king was looking across time to see them as they were. It was humbling.

“But I’m not decided yet.” The young girl looked up at her father with a smile. “There’s one more thing I want to become.”

Surprise crossed the former king’s face. “What’s that?”

“An actress!” the former king started to laugh at that. Naruto heard Koyuki nee-chan laughing too but then he felt gloved fingers under his chin turning him in her direction. He went with the soft push in confusion before he watched the tears slide down her face as she watched the projection.

The gloved fingers left his chin so he turned back to meet his sensei’s gaze. “You did that.” Kakashi-sensei said softly. “She’s started to live again thanks to you.”

“She did that.” Naruto corrected. “I just helped remind her that it was all worth it. She had to do the discovering on her own.”

“If you say so.” Kakashi-sensei did not look as if he agreed one bit.

“I want to rest.” Naruto groaned. His hand drifted across the remains of the device. “Gotta get the rest of this junk off of me too.”

“You can take a nap first.” Kakashi-sensei reassured, Naruto took him at his word and let his eyes slide shut.

“This is one happy ending huh. Like a movie.” He whispered, if anyone answered him he did not know because he had already slipped under.
“There’s a rainbow.” Sakura turned away from it to sigh at Naruto. “He’s still unconscious though I think he’ll be sad he missed it.”

“He needs to rest.” Sasuke corrected. He eyed the sky and shook his head. “It’s ridiculous. Like a fairy tale.”

“This generator is amazing, a land of snow turning into a land of spring and it has to do with that crystal doesn’t it.” Sakura mused, she absentmindedly ran her hand over Naruto’s arm as she thought. “Our report is going to look interesting.”

“And long.” Sasuke added on.

“And long.” She sighed. “So long.”

“Least we’re bringing back the armour.”

“That’s only the really good thing about it.” Sakura groaned.

“**XxX**

“You did not think to tell us that Sandaiyuu-san was still alive?” Sakura scolded him as they watched the inauguration. “It terrified us all when he limped into the capitol.”

“Sorry about that.” Naruto muttered sheepishly. “I got him out of harm’s way pretty quick but then I ended up sleeping for a few days so he was by himself huh. Least he’s alive.” Sasuke poked him in the side. “What? he would have been dead if I hadn’t done something at least now he gets to help Koyuki nee-chan with her duties.”

“A warning would have been nice.” Sasuke rolled his eyes. “You were peacefully sleeping as we wrapped up the mission and you were sitting on a vital piece of info.”

“Well it isn’t as if he turned up after the memorial service for himself.” Naruto felt obliged to point out. “Now they know, no real harm done and he could have died from his injures too. They were no guarantees and everything had happened fast remember? I barely had time to secure a place. I just knew something stupid was going to happen but I didn’t know I would have had to tuck him away somewhere until all the danger was through.”

“The crew was so relieved to see him alive.” Kakashi-sensei leaned over the railing to join the conversation. “It all worked out in the end.”

“**XxX**

“Something nice?” Kakashi asked Naruto softly, the boy seemed transfixed as the ceremony went on.

“The snow is falling so pretty, covering up the grass again.” Naruto smiled. “And everywhere you look you see people smiling, you see people happy and isn’t that amazing? The country seems so warm even with the snow falling. Nee-chan, you can barely see her from here but she looks really happy too. It’s going to be a really warm country.”

Naruto was right, it was really going to be a warm country. Everyone had come together after the death of Dotou. Come together in happiness and tears, in relief and gratitude and worked hard. They had marvelled at the miracle of spring in their country and smiled at every turn. No wonder
Naruto was so drawn to it and them. They had been a kind and peaceful country before, they were returning to that.

“Still as happy as you are I detect…” Kakashi trailed off to muse. “A little sadness.”

“Mission is done.” Naruto said softly. “Movie’s finished and we did more than what we were asked for. Not that I’m complaining but Koyuki nee-chan. She’ll be retiring. The movies are over now.” He sighed heavily and ignored the soft snow that continued to fall around and on them. “I really enjoyed those movies.”

“She’s a queen now.” Kakashi said softly. “She will have more responsibilities. Her old life…”

“I know.” Naruto admitted. “But it looks like the movie is going to be okay. I watched them editing for a bit.”

“We can treasure this movie. It might be her last.” Kakashi admitted. “But we’ll be closer to this one because we were right here the entire time for the last time.”

“It sucks.” Naruto drew his legs up from where they dangled over the roof. “She’s really good… but this is where she belongs. She isn’t that good at running. It doesn’t make her happy.”

“She’s happy now.” Kakashi watched as the new queen greeted the people. “She’s content now.”

XxX

“It’s out and proud.” Naruto pointed to the pendant. “That necklace and look at her eyes.” He laughed. “We did good here.”

“We?” Sakura turned to hide her laugh. “Uh huh sure.”

XxX

“After all the device was incomplete.” It was nice to get to talk to her even though she was a queen and not an actress or lost princess anymore.

“So it is going to be winter again soon huh.” Sakura sighed. “Pity, I had a feeling through.”

“No, not at all we will use that device and study it and if we refine it then someday the land of snow will be called the spring country.”

“But you know it’s going to be a waste. You’re so popular and you’re going to quit acting.” Sakura smiled. “I’ve been a fan of yours for so many years, it is weird to have to say goodbye now.”

“Who said I’m going to stop acting?” Koyuki nee-chan crossed her arms and frowned. “As the monarch and the actress of snow country I’m going to show that I can do both.” Her eyes were lively and her smile so bright even through his shock Naruto was unable to help responding to it. “It’s stupid to give it up isn’t it? My dreams.” In her hand was a small script book. “Now see ya!”

“That’s!” Kakashi-sensei spluttered behind them. He seemed to have recognized the script and although Naruto was curious himself he knew he could wait. Before the Queen had gotten too far away children ran up to her full of smiles and laughter. Naruto smiled himself when he saw the queen smile and laugh and sign pieces of paper for them.

It hit him like a brick then. “Ah! No no!” He groaned. “I should have gotten her autograph when I had the chance!”
“If you’re talking about her autograph I have it right here.” Sasuke’s easy handing over of an envelope quietened Naruto even while he eyed him suspiciously. Naruto was aware of two heads over his shoulders watching him but he ignored that in order to see the contents of the envelope. It was chock full.

A photo slid out and a blush covered his cheeks, it got brighter and brighter when he realized that the contents were all photos. Sighed photos from Koyuki nee-chan herself. “I wish she had taken better pictures of me.” He groaned. He was fast asleep in the photos. It had to have been after the fight when he had been unconscious and slept for a few days. Koyuki nee-chan smiled at the camera in some photos. Kissed him in others, Sandaiyu the old man was in some too, the film crew too and Koyuki nee-chan had signed every single one. The crew had put messages in the envelope too.

Naruto touched his left cheek as he stared at the last photo and felt the phantom kiss. He shook his head even as he ignored Sakura’s and Kakashi-sensei’s amusement. His sensei had been failing to hold back his low chuckles since the first photo had slid out.

“It’s really cute Naruto.” Sakura nudged him. “You definitely made some memories didn’t you.” Koyuki nee-chan was barely visible because of the crowd that surrounded her but Naruto smiled in her direction anyway.
Gifts are meant to be given

Chapter Notes

Things got a little crazy for me, I went to Kon then afterwards I went back to work and I've had so many things to do I couldn't keep up my quota which makes me really really glad that I left on such a huge chapter.

D-rank missions did not leave you rolling in money neither did C-ranks when you had supplies to stock up on but for Sakura there was just enough money for her to indulge buy. It had come to her what she had wanted to buy when they had been in the Land of Snow.

Watching all the footage of them doing actual shinobi work being cut had been funny but it had bothered her a bit too. She had watched them do their work from another perspective and the feeling that had been strongest in her chest had been the need to keep those images longer, keep that physical evidence close and never lose it.

Which is why she decided to buy a little cheap camera. There was the official team seven photo but everyone had team photos. It was a rite of passage, one that she would never change because it was nice and a reminder but she felt as if her team was a little different.

No, she knew her team was different. She wanted to document their smiles, their achievements anyway that she could. The little moments that she saw. She wanted to preserve forever to remind them and herself of what she saw. Which is why she wanted the camera, nothing too fancy just a little something.

Along with her team seven photo from when the team was formed there was the photo from the celebratory dinner for when she became a Chuunin. She treasured both photos and they sat on her bedside table. Such a difference between the two. The recent one much warmer but the first one, she found it funny how things changed. It seemed so long ago that team seven was formed but honestly it was not that long ago.

But she really wanted that camera, she would share the pictures of course. Keep some treasured for herself and some of the things she would take pictures of would not even be her team. The world outside the village was huge and beautiful documenting it, sharing it would be a pleasure.

Sakura jingled the coins in her purse before she made her purchase. It was a cheap little camera but it gave the picture right away, easy to store the pictures in books and frames. Supplies would be cheap, maintenance would be easy and best of all it would be able to take a hit. It was going into shinobi territory after all. She would not be able to baby it that well or most likely at all and was not that a shame? Still she could not wait to get started.

XXX

A shinobi noticed changes so Kakashi noticed right away that Sakura had something new. At first, he was not going to ask. Sometimes it was best to accept things and move on but his curiosity just grew and grew the more he noticed it. Sakura did not talk about it or anything so every time the camera came into his line of sight Kakashi stared and burned a little with curiosity.
She had it all the time and he knew that it had to be a new purchase but he just was unable to understand why she had bought it. Why it had become her new accessory or tool. If she had been taking pictures of the world around them as they travelled Kakashi would have been able to leave it.

Yet even when he shared with his team little sights and things that he had discovered and found interesting the camera remained in her bag even while Sakura’s eyes searched their surroundings constantly. It was good that she was so alert. But Kakashi really needed to know what the camera was for.

Her eyes as she watched their team was content and amused, mostly amused and determined but even then the camera remained in the bag. Kakashi was forced to break his silence when both of them were on watch after a simple mission a long walk away from Konoha. The morning would take them back to Konoha but the night provided them the rest they needed.

“You pick up an interest in photography?” Kakashi asked her as the fire dimmed and the heartbeats of Sasuke and Naruto settled into a calm rhythm.

“Huh?” Sakura seemed startled before she caught on. She laughed even as she retrieved the camera from her bag. She played with it in her hands her gaze contemplative before a card came flying in his direction. “Something like that, I found things I wanted to save.”

The card was a photograph, Kakashi found himself looking at Naruto laughing on the training grounds while Sasuke stood in the corner of the photo rolling his eyes a small smile on his face. The camera had caught him midroll, the photograph had preserved the moment so perfectly Kakashi could almost hear Naruto’s laughter and Sasuke’s groan. He concentrated on the two boys sleeping in the tent and hummed. “Not a bad idea.” Kakashi admitted softly. “Are they just for you or will the rest of the team have some?”

Photographs were nice. They were memories preserved. If Kakashi could go back in time he would take so many pictures of so many people and so many moments but of course if he were able to go back in time he would be too busy righting wrongs to be able to take those pictures. So many people to save, to apologise to. To talk to, to reassure. If he could ever go back he would do more than preserve he would change.

“You can have that one Sensei.” Sakura smiled as she tucked away her camera into her bag again. “I make copies when I have the time. I’m just concentrating at capturing some precious moments.” She stared into the dying fire. “Seeing them happy, you can’t take that for granted, them happy, them safe. Us happy, us safe but one day we’re going to look back and see how much we’ve grown and we’ll be proud of that. I look back and I’m proud of me now.” She smiled.

XxX

She had caught the early morning training bug from Naruto. Training when the wind was chilly and the light was dim. When the village was still quiet from the night. Training during that time was peaceful. It was just her and the wind rushing through the trees.

When she ran into Naruto coming back from training she had been confused. Even knowing his past, having Naruto explain he was used to sleeping days or mornings and having to make the switch back had been hard. Even knowing that, she had not understood how much you could get done in early morning training.

How ready for the day you got from it, how the chilly wind kept you from burning up. How even if you were tired in the beginning the air and the work got you ready for the day. And you did not get
tired throughout the day. Taking breaks were important but one thing she had noticed from her team was that hands were never idle.

Her sensei was probably the worst example with his dirty book but Sasuke played with ninja wires and kunais or he read. Naruto always had something doing when he took a break, recently it was the fan that he held during breaks. Moving it in his hand and obviously planning something.

Group training was still hard, Kakashi-sensei was merciless and somehow always knew how to push them to the right limits. It was something they had not yet managed to grasp for themselves. Well maybe just her and maybe Sasuke.

Naruto seemed to do well on his own after all. She knew his training was leading to something, some sort of goal. Strength building, stamina building. It was not for nothing, he had to have some idea in his head after all.

Sakura slowly slid down to the ground her back against the target post. Her off days were filled with training and when she could get away with it, studying and different types of training. The more time she spent with Tenten the stronger her determination grew.

She still visited Lee in the hospital. They all visited Lee and Sakura had to say that since Tsunade-sama had come the air around Lee had changed. The hope in his eyes was intoxicating. Tenten left the hospital these days with a smile on her face because they were all thinking the same thing. Lee would be back, it would only be a matter of time and it made it easier to keep going forward.

Honestly, she wanted to know more. She wanted to fight harder. Sasuke and Naruto were proud of her in their own ways. They made it visible in the little things... but that was mostly Sasuke. Naruto did it loudly and brightly with his eyes shining but she could never forget what the jacket meant. Responsibility, strength, things that she had to keep earning and keep getting better at. Hence the training.

She sighed again and the wind joined her shaking the leaves. It was a few moments after the wind had shaken the leaves that she became aware that she was not alone. When she looked up she saw a mask in the trees above her. ANBU.

She doubted the ANBU member had just come. She knew it was more likely that they had been there for quite some time maybe even watching her train, they had just decided to let her know they were there. “Can I help you?” She called out as she got to her feet.

The ANBU faced her for a few moments their armour almost imposing before there was a blur almost too fast for the eye and gloves fell at her feet. She looked at the thick gloves for a few moments frowning before she looked up again, she had half expected to find the ANBU gone. “Those will come in handy.” The ANBU said before they disappeared.

XxX

“This is the third time you’re going for supplies since you bought this isn’t it?” Tenten held the camera in her hands as she laughed at Sakura. “How many things are you taking pictures of? Unless you’re a secret pervert and taking pictures of people in the bath and selling them.” She teased.

“As if.” Sakura snorted. “You can only take so many pictures right away. You need the right paper, it can only hold so much and sometimes... well I need copies, don’t I?” She started to browse the shelves. “Before I bought it there were some moments that I wanted to capture but now that I have it I want to take more. I don’t take it for granted you know?”
A bright flash startled Sakura and she turned fully to face Tenten only to see her lowering the camera and removing the snapshot. “I know what you mean.” She smiled as she held the picture to her face. “Some things you want to keep seeing for a long time. I’m keeping this one.”

“You know you can get your own camera.”

“But you already have yours!”

XxX

The nights were a bit colder than expected. It did not bother Kakashi but it did mean that plans had to be made. Team seven was not unaccustomed to a tent. They had used tents in several occasions although sleeping bags were more the norm but there was a chill in the air now and Kakashi knew that changes had to be made to how they carried out their missions and how they set up the tents.

The pond was not the best place to set up a tent but it was safer than any other place. Only one of them would need to keep watch and since Kakashi had let his team carry out the mission on their own while he napped. The best one suited to guarding was simply him.

He did not mind, he had met Naruto’s disapproving gaze when he had woken back up but the mission had been so simple Kakashi had known they were fine. He had been on high alert even while asleep so it honestly had not mattered that much.

With Tsunade-sama at the helm things were calming down but with her at the helm and the administration shifting that meant different kinds of business for different kinds of shinobi. As he had told Naruto once before, Kakashi was a special type of Jounin. It was one of the reasons why Naruto and Sasuke were under his care. Why Team seven had been carefully crafted.

It still amazed him how good at picking the Sandaime had been. On paper it looked good, it made sense but when their personalities were added in team seven could be terrifying if they went the way they looked to be going. Kakashi foresaw some bumps in the road not just because of Naruto. Naruto would play a part of course but Sakura and Sasuke had their own bumps ahead of them.

They were all still so young after all. They had changed a bit, grown a bit older, a bit wiser and a bit closer. That delighted Kakashi, he watched and saw how team seven drew together. The way Sakura looked at Sasuke and Naruto. The careful way her eyes followed them, the way she pushed herself for herself and for them. The worry in her eyes.

The way Naruto and Sasuke looked at Sakura, the pride, the amusement and of course the worry and shame. Kakashi could not get that scene at the hospital out of his mind no matter how much he tried. The moment that Sasuke and Naruto felt what Sakura felt and blamed themselves. Made a promise to themselves and to her. All in that moment when emotions had been fresh and bared.

Her feelings for the both of them had not only shaken them up it had unlocked something in the both of them. Sakura and Sasuke who had never known war. Naruto who knew war. They had realized not only how serious the fighting was but how much they meant to each other. More than acquaintances. More than just friends, a solid team had been born then. They were not perfect, they had growing to do, things to work out but if they could keep on the path they could become something powerful. Something of the likes that the world had never seen before. Kakashi could not wait to see it.

Kakashi was here too of course, there to watch over them. Help them, advise them and guide them for when those bumps of the road came. He was there to make sure the mistakes of the past were not repeated. That they were not left with regrets. That pride and textbook rules did not ruin
everything. That they did not repeat his mistakes and the mistakes of those before him. That they did not become a hollow team.

There was plenty at risk of course. Naruto’s past, Naruto’s nature. There honestly was no good way to introduce Sakura and Sasuke to Konoha’s darker self. To Konoha’s secrets. In the end, they may not have a choice but to reveal everything but Naruto’s peers were not foolish. They would piece together the pieces and one day in the future… Naruto’s dream…

Kakashi shook his head to bring his focus back before he returned to setting up the tent. He had finished with the layers and the padding. No one should be catching a cold. Granted he doubted Naruto would catch cold from something like this ground chilly or not but at least they would be comfortable.

The watch would be entertaining in itself if only for the fact that there was only one tent and none of his team had volunteered towards keeping guard with him. He heard soft splashes from the pond but before he could focus in on the noise and his team he returned to setting up the tent properly. In time they would know and do it fine enough but for the time being he was better.

XxX

Kakashi-sensei had not even given them a choice, just shooed them away and started on setting up the tent for them. It almost felt like a reward but Naruto suspected deep inside their sensei was the guilt for sleeping the entire time and letting them handle themselves without keeping an eye on them.

Kakashi-sensei had not exactly been in deep sleep but Naruto was used to the man being there. Watching or at least talking but considering how their sensei was and how busy he could be sometimes he could have been taking some of Naruto’s advice.

It had been bad enough before Tsunade baa-chan had taken the hat but things were still a bit strained even though the paperwork was going through smoothly. Iruka-sensei had spoken about different ways of running administrations and shifts which ended up affecting everybody but since he and most of the others were genins they were only going to see from afar the strain.

Sakura had meetings and people calling on her when she was not with them. She had responsibilities and things to memorize and Naruto knew that just like how Ero-sennin had plucked him away from the village for the mission to bring back Tsunade baa-chan. The day would come where Sakura was borrowed for a mission without them because they needed her, needed a shinobi of her skills plain and simple.

Naruto knew that day was coming. It simply was how it worked. Chuunins had other jobs they did not stick about like genins. Genins needed a Jounin’s strong eye on them. Chuunins pretty soon were encouraged to go on their own. They had squads to lead, missions to tackle themselves and interests to pursue for the best of the village.

He and Sasuke were going to be right behind her of course, getting stronger and learning what they had to. Learning the village, learning ways to help the village. He did not want to think about parting no matter how temporary. He liked what they had and he wanted it to be the most valuable thing for all of them. He wanted to tell Sasuke and Sakura how they made him feel. What he thought about them, how much he valued them as friends and how glad he was that they were the ones backing him up.

They may have questions about him, have questions for him. They may not know him fully but what they did know they liked. For them, he would keep trying.
A glint from the water stopped him from swinging his feet where he sat on a large pond a little way in the pond. More like a lake but Sakura had insisted that it was a pond so Naruto had left it. He ignored Sasuke’s curious look before he rolled his pants up and waded into the water.

Sometimes Naruto compared himself to magpies. Pretty, shiny it got his attention. He bent and plunged his hand into the water to search for what he knew he had saw. It took some time some rummaging. His fingers running over the bottom of the pond as he searched. Finally, his hand scooped up just the thing he was looking for. He laughed in triumph and ignored the curious looks from Sasuke and Sakura. They would see soon.

They had been tired and bored waiting for their sensei to finish setting up the tent. The change in the air did not bother Naruto. He had thought about risking sleeping without a shirt but the knowledge they were away from Konoha and Konoha’s protection kept him from relaxing to that extent.

On missions sleep was not a proper sleep and never should be unless medicated and sometimes even then it should be an uneasy rest, the person waiting for a sign of trouble. Outside the gates they were vulnerable so letting their guards down was simply dangerous and stupid.

XxX

When Naruto had started digging about in the water Sasuke had not thought anything about it really. They had just been watching the surface of the water in the first place as they waited for Kakashi to finish with the tent so they could sleep. Sasuke felt weary to his bones. All he wanted to do was fall onto his sleeping bag and rest until morning.

It had been a simple mission but it had been an exhausting one. Sometimes it was not just the mission itself that drained them. Sometimes it was the clients, conditions and demands that ran them ragged. It was the straight forward missions that ended up being the most exhausting.

For team seven they had stopped looking at the class definition for missions. They noted them but they doubted them, they always found something lurking. Something wrong. Someone needing help that they could provide. Something that they could do more and it was their job but it was exhausting too. There was a clear line drawn between civilians and shinobi. No matter how they tried and looked civilians not only did not understand, they feared.

To them they were children, murderers most likely beasts hired to do their work. Their lives were not peaceful either but their reality was different. Sasuke did not envy them but it took a certain amount of energy and will to have to handle them during difficult missions. It was great when they provided clear information to them and kept out the way. The mission was why they were there but there was more to it too.

The mission had to be completed to Konoha’s standards so that not only could Konoha get a boost but so that their names would carry far and wide bringing more business to Konoha. It was exhausting work. Sasuke stifled a yawn and swayed on the rock he sat on before he became aware of Naruto’s back straightening.

He had assumed Naruto had heard something he had not, Kakashi finishing the tent. A bird close by, people close by. He had not expected Naruto to shove his wet hand so close to Sasuke’s face as he stared into Sasuke’s eyes as though he was trying to solve a mystery in the fading light.

“What’s this about?” He frowned as Naruto narrowed his eyes at his hand before he switched back to Sasuke’s face, comparing and searching but for what was what Sasuke wanted to know.
Naruto’s face cleared before he shifted his hand so Sasuke could see the black rock in his hand. “I was right, I knew it was the exact colour of your eyes.” Naruto laughed softly. “It was just there and I thought that looks just like Sasuke’s eye colour but then I took it out the water and it looked different you know so I had to compare it.” Naruto withdrew another rock from his pocket and placed it close to Sasuke’s cheek before he nodded. “I was right, it does fit. It is the right colour. It isn’t just black, it is that silky black that wraps you up and pulls you in.”

“That sounds spooky.” Sakura hooked her chin over Naruto’s shoulder to look at the rocks. “Why two?”

“Because they are really pretty.” Naruto chuckled. “One’s for me to take back and the other is for Sasuke. I mean it matches his eyes exactly look.” The rock was raised again this time it hovered next to his cheek.

“Amazing.” Sakura breathed as she eyed the rock. “It’s so pretty, in the right light it looks like it is shining. Like it has some warmth.”

“I know I know right?” Naruto laughed. “I love Sasuke’s eyes. So pretty and they suit him so well. All his clan have that same colour but on Sasuke it’s really cute.”

“Really now.” Sakura mused before she borrowed the stone to play with in her hand. “This is very smooth I wonder if it is just a stone.”

“Sasuke’s eyes are like gems so wouldn’t it be cool if this was one?”

“But what about my eyes?” That got her a long perusal by Naruto before he laughed.

“When I find the stone that remind me of the right colour, the right shade and the stone shifts like you do I’ll bring that stone right away. Somehow I get the feeling seeing your eyes will calm me down.”

“Morbid.” Sakura sniffed. Then Kakashi called Naruto’s name so Naruto shoved the extra stone into Sasuke’s hand.

“Keep it, it really does resemble your eyes.” Naruto insisted before he scrambled away to where Kakashi was waiting.

Sasuke waited until he was certain that Naruto was busy before he released a long slow sigh and slid back until he was looking up at the stars. “The things that come out his mouth sometimes.” He told Sakura softly. “Does he have any decency? Is he totally oblivious?”

“I don’t think so.” Sakura laughed in response. “It’s just… Naruto you know?”

“It feels sometimes as if we’ll be using that as an explanation and excuse for years to come.” Sasuke snorted. “Everything he does or says something so…”

“Yeah.” She snorted. “I mean he was bad enough before the Chuunin exams with the things he said but then the things he said got worse during the exams.” She snorted. “He made it sound so normal and there we are wondering what cabbage patch he was grown from.”

“We’re trying.” Sasuke sighed. “But one minute he says things and does outrageous things and the next he’s… well.”

“One minute he’s just like us and then the next he’s years ahead and it feels as though we’re kids.” Sakura sighed. “He treats things so casually, he has very little to no boundaries on certain things.
Normal people…” She broke off to sigh heavily. “I don’t think he gets how it sounds, how it looks but it doesn’t bother me that much.”

“It makes me wonder how he sees us sometimes.” Sasuke admitted softly. “If we’re just kids unworthy of the ways he looks at others. If team is something off limits. Sometimes it actually feels like that. Then the idiot goes splashing in a pond in the evening to get a stone that he thinks matches your eye colour and not only decides to keep it, give you one and then acts as though the whole thing is normal.”

“He’s not normal.” Sakura laughed softly. “He’s ours but Naruto is not like the rest of us. We know this, how he sees the world. How he thinks. What he does, what he considers normal, we know that it is different to us. He’s done his best to fit back in. See the world from our point of view but the facts remain the same.”

“He can be honest to the fault about things people have difficulty speaking about.” Sasuke sighed. “He likes something he says so. He doesn’t dodge about it or hide it. He likes pretty things he says so, he loved Haku, we know this. Something in Konoha makes him very angry.”

“He’s in danger.” Sakura said softly. “He’s strong.”

Sasuke remembered a red light guiding him to Naruto. “There’s something about him that others want.”

“He’s weak to a pretty face.”

“He just might like ours.” Sasuke sighed at the sky. “What am I supposed to do with a rock.”

XxX

“So what does this remind you of?” Naruto’s energy had him bouncing on the toes of his feet as he held up the stone up for Kakashi’s perusal. Kakashi looked the stone over back and front with an amused air.

“It’s very pretty.” Kakashi mused and laughed to himself at the dry look Naruto shot back at him. “Well obviously that is not the answer, I guess the dark of night is not it either.”

“Of course those are not the answers.” Naruto snorted, he drew the stone to his chest and smiled. “It’s the colour you get when Sasuke’s all relaxed. It goes all hard looking when he’s on guard or irritated but when he relaxes a tiny bit this is the colour that starts to form.” Naruto brought his fist down and opened it the black colour stood out against his palm. “A lot of the Uchihas in the village has the same colour too.”

“Their eyes change with their emotions.” Kakashi stroked the stone softly. “But now that you mention it this is the shade of black that you see in the village, when they feel safe. You know, the sharingan was once thought of as the eye that revealed the heart.”

“But this wasn’t about the sharingan.” Naruto pointed out. “It is about Sasuke, something that reminds me of Sasuke and his clan. Something pretty and small.” He carefully tucked the rock away into his pants pocket. “I should start a collection. I’m already looking for something that will remind me of Sakura’s eyes.

“You just may have to shell out some money if you are going for accuracy.” Kakashi snorted. “What about me? Or do I share the stone with Sasuke?” He looked mostly surprised at Kakashi’s words and to his surprise a low flush started from his neck before it travelled upwards at an almost astonishing speed. Naruto muttered something but thanks to Kakashi’s gently nudging the boy
answered louder.

“Your eyes are different too, just because they are black doesn’t mean that they will be the same. It is about what could be captured, what will be captured by the stone. It symbolized something in its very own way.” Naruto blew out a huff of breath. “I can’t help what I like but I’d like more things that reminded me of all of you. Sakura takes pictures and I want to think of my team, of all of you from gentle reminders and inside jokes.” Naruto’s smile was a bit crooked when he was finished. Kakashi was unable to do anything except smile.

“Then search extra hard and tell me when you find something that reminds you of me right away.”

XxX

“So no one finds this weird in the least?” Sasuke muttered half under his breath. Their team could be a bit strange. He knew they were weird but this was the weirdest. Naruto could be excused, Sakura on the other hand. She knew something was wrong with the situation but she was still—

“Say something?” She had already claimed the furthest corner of the tent for herself. Naruto had already changed into a shirt and shorts which left Sasuke in the middle of the tent contemplating his options and their sanity. Their modesty.

“No.” He grumbled with a glance at the door of their tent. Their sensei did not seem to mind but Sasuke knew he could not be the only one that thought all of them sleeping so close together, right against each other was weird. But then again Sakura and Naruto already did it without thinking. Naruto was Naruto though.

“You’re so hot.” Sakura complained the moment Naruto sat next to her. “You’ll keep me hot all night.”

“So what am I supposed to do about that?” Naruto scooted a small distance away. “And it is cold out so isn’t this a bonus?”

“It isn’t that cold out.” Sakura grumbled before she turned on her side. “I guess I’ll go without a blanket. You’ll end up being one anyway.”

“It’s better for me to be in the middle because it is cold out.” Naruto lay flat his eyes on Sakura’s back. “You can always kick me over ya know.”

“Let’s just sleep.” Sasuke sighed. “We need to be up early.” Hopefully he would get some sleep.

XxX

Kakashi was reading his book and keeping guard as the night grew colder. Well he was mostly turning the pages as he listened to his team sleep. Naruto had fallen asleep almost immediately. It was not a deep sleep but it had been quick. He had listened to the sound of Naruto making himself comfortable in his sleep then Sakura’s amused snort.

Then Sakura had fallen asleep next her breathing had shifted to soft sighs. Not a deep sleep either but deep enough. Sasuke had been last as Kakashi had expected. Sleeping bags were one thing but this was something totally different. Sasuke had been uncomfortable before sleeping.

Jounin duty was a hard thing but it could be fun too. All those cute little genins in the grasp of puberty. They may be ninjas but they were still human and the body never failed to try and embarrass one in the time of uncertainty.
Sasuke showed the most development among the three physically. His tone of voice, his appetite, his scent and his body. He had become self-aware and while he was not the most tactile of the team. Team seven were not the most aloof around each other.

Naruto’s habit of touching, of hugging that had only grown the more he was around Sakura and Sasuke. The hugging was rarer but Kakashi could feel Naruto’s need to touch and be touched. The way Sakura grabbed at Sasuke and Naruto was different to how she did it when the team had first started. Comfort and need wrapped into one along with a silent plea that both boys listened to.

But back to Kakashi getting a front row seat to the blunders of growing up. Some things were just unavoidable and he had to admit that he was curious to how they would handle things like that. Sakura had endured her team bleeding and being sick around her. Naruto seemed oblivious to most others modesty but Sasuke… well time would tell.

XxX

It started with an intake of breath, a slow coming to awareness. Kakashi could not see into the tent but he almost wished he could as he could feel Sasuke’s dismay and horror from where he sat. He let his book dangle from his fingers as he heard Sasuke swear softly then tug away from what Kakashi guessed had turned into a puppy pile.

“Sasuke?” Naruto was awake, his voice soft and a little dazed. “What’s the matter?” Kakashi listened to the sound of sheets shifting.

“Go back to sleep.” Sasuke was tense and irritated.

“What?” Sakura made a soft mumble and the sound of sheets moving continued. “Where are you going?”

“Don’t worry about it-”

“It’s normal you know.” Naruto’s blunt words made the tent go silent. “Don’t be all awkward about it, these things happen.” Naruto yawned.

“Have you…” Sasuke started before he sighed. “Go back to sleep.”

“Don’t make such a big deal out of it.” Naruto sighed.

XxX

Kakashi had not asked what was wrong which was a small blessing onto itself for him. He had allowed Sasuke to stomp out of the tent and not asked what was wrong or where Sasuke was going. He had not gone far, just to the water’s edge.

He had relaxed pretty quickly but he felt no need to go back to sleep. He was not tired, his body felt rested enough and his mind was the most active thing currently. He knew it was normal, he was glad because it was normal but it did not change things.

“For gods sake.” A groan behind him startled him that he almost fell off the rock. Naruto nudged him aside and sat next to him with a huff. “Are you being serious right now?”

“I’m not like you.” Sasuke hissed at Naruto.

“You’re a lot like me.” Naruto corrected with a sigh. “And yeah, you aren’t like me but that?” He said with a soft wave of his hand. “It’s normal. It happens there is no control over it. It does what it
wants to do and you were sleeping anyway. So what if it went up? You were warm and somewhere you felt safe it is natural. Not as if you did anything really.” Naruto gave him a small glance. “It bothers you that much?”


“It could happen to anyone.” Naruto shrugged.

“You?”

“Well Sakura-chan hasn’t said anything.” Naruto stressed. “But no not to my knowledge.” He leaned back on the rock. “I mean she would have said something because that is how she is you know? But it will happen to me and it might be you or Sakura and it isn’t a big deal you know? I’m not going to do it to you guys on purpose and I hope you’ll understand that.”

“I do understand.” Sasuke found himself sighing. “You really don’t care do you.”

“I will if you will.” Naruto said softly. “But I’m not going to hold it against you… unless you were dreaming about something.” He teased. “Is that why you’re embarrassed? Then you woke up and found that it wasn’t who you thought but your teammate?” Sasuke felt justified in shoving Naruto off the rock into the wet grass.

XxX

“You’re weird you know that?” Sasuke said softly interrupting the silence that had fallen between them.

“Yeah.” Naruto smiled. “I know.”

“Your eyes are going to fall out your head one of these days.”

Naruto fought back a flush as his non too helpful mind rolled through the people he had to see daily and the different beauty all of them had and then the one that had knocked all of them out of the park which was not fair. “I hope not.”

“Kurenai really likes you.”

“She’s nice.” Naruto admitted. “Her eyes are so pretty and the way she talks to me.” He pressed a hand to his stomach as it he could hold the bubbly feeling inside. “I can’t help the way she makes me feel.”

“You mean all of them.” Sasuke said dryly. “Kurenai, my brother, my cousin, the girl at the ramen shop, some of the people we do missions for. Some of the people we do missions with.” He stressed. “You like all of them.”

“I can’t help it.” Naruto laughed.

“Do they remind you of Haku?” Sasuke asked softly. “Is it the same for you?”

“A little.” Naruto watched the pond and the still water. “I mean it isn’t the same but it reminds me of how Haku made me feel. Not all the way because I don’t know them.” He admitted. “I knew Haku, I know what I like.” He admitted. “But what I feel now is mostly soft… I never had that here before. Acceptance, caring I feel so happy and they make me feel warm inside. When Kurenai-sensei smiles at me I feel so warm. When I like someone, I feel warm inside I want…” He trailed off to think. “With Haku, everything I did everything I felt I wanted to keep feeling the way
he made me feel, happy, warm.” He cleared his throat. “Hot inside, wanted.” He paused to look
behind him back to where their camp was before he continued. “Sometimes you look at someone
and know not only do they see you but they understand you, like you, want you. And inside your
stomach feels so tight and hot and you feel free for a little bit when their eyes are on you.”

“That’s what you feel? When you like someone? Nothing else?”

He looked at Sasuke for a few minutes but Sasuke never returned the stare, he sighed and looked
back out to the water. He felt the memory of lips against his but there had been so much of that.
Only Haku’s had mattered, the soft press of lips of his that had confused him, that he had tried to
understand but the better feeling had been the soft feel of Haku’s hair against his face or even his
hand.

“Well, sometimes I wonder what it would be like to be closer to them.” Naruto admitted. “But right
now what I feel is enough.”

XxX

For the first time since Naruto had come back into their lives Sasuke felt old. He felt older than
Naruto and while before he would have welcomed it, he hated it. Naruto who made it feel so gentle
and good. So normal even while he accepted what he did and what he liked.

Sasuke could not do that. He wished he could, he wished he felt what Naruto felt. He wished he
could understand what it felt like to look at someone and feel that. To have his wants be as simple
and pure as that.

He could understand better why Kakashi looked at Naruto the way he did. Why Iruka-sensei had
the look in his eyes that he did. Of course he did not understand anything but he did share some of
their feelings. Naruto could be so old sometimes and then he could be so young.

It twisted Sasuke inside.

XxX

“What happened last night?” Sakura asked Naruto softly. Sasuke was ahead of them but he seemed
lost in his own thoughts. She had woken up alone which was of no surprise to her when it came to
Naruto. Naruto might snuggle in the middle of the night but he woke before the sun and moved as
though it were noon. Sasuke on the other hand… well it just was not him.

“Boy stuff.” Naruto shrugged.

“So the both of you got up?” She frowned.

“We needed to talk.” Naruto answered with his eyes on Sasuke. “I think it helped.”

“Oh.” She frowned.

XxX

Had they gotten closer or had they gotten a bit further away? Just by looking Kakashi was unable
to tell. Sasuke seemed lost in his thoughts but he did not shy away from Naruto’s touch or Sakur’s.
Yet he seemed different after the night’s mishap.

Naruto had gone after Sasuke as Kakashi had suspected he would have, the two had come back
together. Naruto calm and bright eyed and Sasuke contemplative. The look in Sasuke’s eyes had
changed and he still watched Naruto with the same frequency but Kakashi for the life of him could not figure if the curiosity was a good or bad thing.

XxX

It did not mean anything, Sasuke knew that but he was unable to stop himself from placing the small rock next to the two photos on his dresser. The things that came out of Naruto’s mouth, he knew that Naruto did not get how they sounded, how they could mean to others.

Naruto liked and he liked just a little too much. After everything he had gone through, everything he had experienced such things meant nothing. Sasuke knew that. Just because he liked Sasuke’s eyes, because he thought about Sasuke did not mean Sasuke was actually important.

Naruto liked too much. It meant nothing. Yet Sasuke was unable to throw the rock away.

XxX

“Mother?” Itachi gently prompted his mother who had been staring into space her hand full of clothes. “Is something the matter?”

“There is a…” His mother shook her head. “In Sasuke’s room when I was cleaning. There is some rock on a foam on his nightstand. It wasn’t there before and it seems kind of important.” She trailed off.

“Maybe he got it from somewhere.” Itachi suggested.

“Sasuke isn’t the collector type.” She frowned. “He made me put away so many of his awards and I had to get the frames for those photos but…” She shook her head. “It must be nothing.”

“Is it a valuable stone?” His father paused as he put on his flak jacket. “It may have been a reward for a mission.”

“But he’s still a genin what kind of mission would get him a valuable stone?” His mother shook her head. “I’d ask him but you know how Sasuke is these days.” Sadness flickered across her face. “He’s so quiet.”
Chapter Notes

It's been a while. I've been busy (and tired) trying to get into a rhythm for writing. I have most of the current arc written up because I know what happen in terms of the big stuff, it is the smaller stuff that takes time. (for example I have to pick what missions or fillers for things to happen or if to make a mission of my own) Foreshadowing is a lot of work. It is worth it but it does take time. I'm glad when you guys are patient so thanks darlings.

Of course just working on one project/work alone slowly drives me insane so self indulgent one-shots for the win! It does help because I like to test out some scenes in other stuff especially when I have trouble. Still I hope you guys enjoy this chapter because I had tons of fun writing it when I finally got to write it (editing is no fun but reading it over did make me laugh) see you darlings!

“I’ve got the perfect team for this problem.” Tsunade bit her pen before she rolled back up the scroll. “A combination team would be just perfect. I’ve been meaning to do more of those anyway. Shizune! Contact the leaders of Team Seven and Team Ten. I want them in my office now.”

“Right!” Shizune scribbled on her clipboard. “I’ll contact them right away Tsunade-sama and they’ll speak with you right after your meeting with the stealth team.”

“That’s today?” Tsunade reached across her desk with a frown. “That’s now?” Well she had needed them but time moved so quickly when she had so much work to do. “I thought I had another tea session with Sarutobi-sensei now.”

“That’s tomorrow.” Shizune said dryly. “The Sandaime was here two days ago to discuss the deconstruction of the chemical facility.”

“Yes yes I remember now.” Tsunade rifled through the right file. “That was two days ago? Feels longer somehow. Okay send the stealth team in I’m sure they are lurking around outside somewhere. I’ll have them briefed by the time Kakashi and Asuma gets here. Hopefully they don’t dawdle, those kids.” She sniffed. “Arrogant brats.”

Xxx

“This is interesting.” Kakashi said dryly as he read the summons. “Just what is the Hokage thinking? I mean we’ll find out eventually.” He sighed to himself. He looked around his apartment before he watered his plant. “I wish she would give us a hint of what she is thinking.”

She was a good choice for Hokage, she knew what she was doing and where to steer the village but that did not mean that Kakashi was unaware of where her faults lay. It did not change the knowledge that she was up to something. Kakashi would love to know what it was.

She carefully picked missions, she pulled Jounins in for questioning and Kakashi had seen enough mission shifts to know that the Hokage was up to something, he just wished he knew what it was and who it concerned.
After the disaster of the Chuunin exam of course things had to change. Security had to change. Things had to be beefed up. Konoha had a reputation to uphold and Kakashi knew and respected that but he knew that Hokage’s eyes were seeing something he could not.

There were plenty of dangers waiting for the right opening. The people after the Kyuubi. Most of the other countries, alliance or no. Orochimaru, the list could go on and on. Konoha had to be prepared and they had to be ready.

She had returned for a reason, she was interested in Naruto for a reason. Jiraiya-sensei was interested in Naruto for several reasons and Kakashi knew he only saw half of them. Curiosity was a dangerous thing. He really wanted to know but he could not just ask. Hopefully he would be able to see the reasons behind all the changes.

XxX

“Tsunade-sama.” Asuma sounded amused, Kakashi wished he could share the amusement. “Thank you for the opportunity to test our teams.”

“You sweet talking brat.” The Hokage shifted a stack of papers to shake her head at them. “Don’t act like this is a vacation both of you have writing and reporting to do on top of your Jounin duties. Both of you have Chuunins under you now.”

“They are new Chuunins.” Kakashi pointed out. “I don’t doubt their abilities or their judgement but this looks to be a rather long mission.”

“It would be long if you did it one team at a time.” She mused, her gaze went to the open window. “I have no doubt that you’ll be back in Konoha before three months are up. I doubt you’ll even need a full month and the two of you know why.”

“The talent of our teams? Our Chuunins?” Kakashi questioned. “Or because we have a new weapon?”

“What do you think?” she turned her chair to face them and leaned her elbows on her desk. “After all, you’re going to be reporting everything back. You’re in charge but don’t forget to give your team the opportunity to stretch their wings. We need improvement, we need advancement.”

“Fresh blood.” Asuma said softly.

Her lips turned up in a smile. “Quick as always.”

XxX

“A team up?” Naruto gasped from where he hung upside down. A shift in his chakra and quick reflexes had him jumping down to the ground. “Are you serious? For one mission?”

“Kakashi-sensei just said so.” Sakura tossed him his jacket. “Sounds like it is going to be fun.”

“Dangerous you mean.” Sasuke corrected. “You know how it is when we step out of the village.”

“Yes but it is Asuma-sensei too.” Sakura looked hopeful. “Maybe this time we won’t shift a country’s entire political structure.”

“That wasn’t my fault!” Naruto snapped. “And you guys helped with that too ya know and it isn’t like baa-chan was mad.”
“It almost feels like she wanted that to happen.” Sasuke mused. “Where are we going this time?”

“A little town.” Sakura paused before she looked at her bag. “This is going to go bad isn’t it.”

“Maybe it won’t not all our C-ranks go bad.” Naruto tried to cheer her up before he handed Sasuke back his ninja wire. “We might just get a little dirty.”

“But it sounds like we’re going to be gone a long time.” Sakura eyed him. “Will your plants be okay?”

“Iruka-sensei has my key. It’ll be fine Sakura-chan and we’ll be with other people this time. That would be nice.” Naruto sighed. “We keep missing them when we’re in Konoha.”

“It’ll be nice to be on a mission with Ino.” Sakura smiled. “We only get to train now and again when we’re free and that isn’t very often. I more run into her than get to see her.”

“Lucky us.” Sasuke grunted as he finished stretching.

XxX

“Just stop.” Shikamaru begged. “If I have to hear again about Sakura and Sasuke I’m going to go mad.” He slumped against the rail for the bridge. “This is so annoying. This is going to be so troublesome. Why do they need four genins, two Chuunins and two Jounins for?”

“Can’t you see this for the opportunity it is?” Ino frowned. “Eventually you’ll be working with teams that aren’t us. This will teach you a bit. Let you get used to how others work.”

“That isn’t what you’re thinking at all.” Shikamaru scowled. “You’re thinking about being close to Sasuke and Sakura.”

“We don’t fight over Sasuke-kun.” Ino glared at him. “We get along much better now.”

“Only because Sakura isn’t mooning after him.” Chouji laughed. “She’s too busy riding herd on her team to be thinking like that.”

“What makes you say that?” Shikamaru motioned for Chouji to share his bag of chips.

“It’s what Naruto said.” Chouji handed over the bag without a fuss. “Since the whole exams she’s been totally serious and I’ve seen the way she talks to Sasuke now. We all have, team seven has changed.”

“More like Sakura has changed.” Ino said softly.

“No Sasuke’s changed too.” Shikamaru contemplated. “Naruto changed long before team seven formed. Not like anybody is going to admit it though.” The mission was a chance to observe Naruto more from a closer place. There was just something about him Shikamaru could not put his finger on. Even now that he was a Chuunin, Naruto remained the mystery he was when they were kids.

“What are you thinking Shikamaru?” Ino’s eyes watched him carefully.

“That this whole mission is going to be a headache.” He admitted. “And that we’ll have to work harder than we’ll actually want to. It is troublesome but we can’t lose to them. We’re just as good as team seven.”

XxX
Another long mission. Naruto packed with care grateful for the things he had managed to stock up on. They had gone over the mission scroll and he did not think he needed half the things but considering his luck with missions better safe than sorry. The real difference in his packing came with the extra money he pocketed. Not for fun, it was for business.

His plants looked great, between Iruka-sensei and Konohamaru it was almost as if Naruto was the one taking care of them. Everything else in his place that needed to be taken care of already was. The clothes had been washed, dried and put away. He had cleaned, it was good enough to leave behind.

XxX

Shikamaru was not overthinking it, there really was a weird energy about team seven. It was almost as if during the time he had not seen them they had gotten older. It was in the way Sakura waited patiently at the gate her arms folded her eyes on the outside.

It was in the way Sasuke stood not too far from her his eyes closed but his entire body tense, waiting for the right moment to act. To do something. Shikamaru was not imaging it at all. It was in the way no smile was on Naruto’s face and his eyes were on the Hokage mountain.

They were supposed to wait on their senseis to join them so they could leave but when Shikamaru saw what waited for them he did not want to go. He knew he had to but the air around them was so strong, it was almost like a barrier that they should not cross.

Yet it seemed he was the only one who felt it because Ino happily shouted for Sakura. Chouji ambled along behind her and Shikamaru watched the shift in their behaviour. They all turned to look at Ino in their own ways.

Sakura’s whole body turned, her arms dropped and a smile came to her face. Sasuke’s eyes opened, he looked at them, past them before his eyes closed again. Naruto’s head tilted in their direction before his eyes followed and his eyes looked them over casually before a small smile came to his face. They seemed relaxed but Shikamaru did not buy it at all.

XxX

“I always wanted to stamp out corruption.” Sakura joked. “Still the town is so big.”

“I’m sure we’ll get the job done quick enough, not many people have the power to squeeze a town of that size.” Kakashi and Asuma exchanged wry glances. “We have faith in you.”

“Don’t think you’re going to be sitting reading and smoking.” Sasuke turned back to eye them. “I’m not wasting my time in a border town.”

“Don’t worry Sasuke.” Asuma laughed. “We don’t want to linger in a border town either but it is a mission request from high up.”

“Baa-chan has to be pissed.” Naruto laughed. “But the place sounds sort of interesting, mission aside.”

“So you haven’t been?” Sakura frowned. “I thought this would be a place you would have gone through.”

“I’m fairly certain I haven’t gone through there.” Kakashi watched Naruto reassure Sakura. “I’ll be seeing it for the first time with you guys. Wish it was better circumstances. But when it comes down to it most the towns are the same. They rely on not only traffic but themselves to keep afloat.
Nothing like small towns.”

“I can’t help but wonder who is squeezing them.” Sakura murmured. “It can’t be a local gang.”

“That’s why we are going to find out.” Kakashi interrupted. “Any ideas on how you want to do this?” He directed to Sakura and Shikamaru.

“Let’s get there first.” Shikamaru groaned.

“Yeah, I have some ideas but let’s get there first and scout around.” Sakura shook her head. “We can’t make the right moves on so little knowledge.” Kakashi saw Asuma smile and was glad that his own smile was hidden. Testing their team was not going to be boring at all.

XxX

“It’s hot now but it is going to be cold later.” Sakura let her jacket slide to the ground. “Ten more minutes then we start going again.”

“Wait what?” Shikamaru gaped at her. “We just sat down.”

“We can cover a few more miles and stop in three hours.” Sakura shrugged. “I’d like to go longer but I know we can’t.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Sasuke eyed them. “Why so early?”

“Be considerate.” She hissed.

XxX

“Night is here.” Shikamaru crossed his arms. “We taking a rest now?”

“I guess so.” Sakura settled her pack down. “How are we doing for shifts?”

“Two each, we switch every two hours. Four shift changes.” Sasuke glanced at the night sky. “That should be enough.”

“Sounds about right.” Naruto stretched. “Who wants to go first?”

XxX

“They are so serious.” Ino said softly, it surprised Shikamaru. “I’ve never seen Sakura like this before. I knew she was Chuunin. I saw her during the exams, I’ve been training with her sometimes but this Sakura is so different. It’s like facing her in the exams again. Like she turned into something different without me noticing.”

“I know.” Shikamaru said softly. “No wonder they get the reviews they get. They’ve been pushing themselves all this time.”

“Yeah.” Ino said softly. “We’ve got to keep up.”

“We shouldn’t kill ourselves to do it, we’re two different teams. We have our strengths and our weaknesses. We shouldn’t try to be like them. We should be trying to be the strongest we can be that suits us and our styles. If they are going to be overpowered stamina machines.” Shikamaru said softly. “Then we’ll be powerful ones too in our own way. We aren’t them but we aren’t lesser.”

XxX
There was no opportunity to talk to Naruto because Sasuke and Sakura were always a step away. Their senseis trailed behind them and it was the perfect opportunity to be one big group but Sakura or Sasuke were always there.

There was no chance to get closer and when he watched Naruto for too long he always got watched in return. Naruto had an uncanny ability to know when someone was staring because he always caught Shikamaru at the right moment, when Shikamaru could not deny that he was staring and he stared back. And then Sakura, Sasuke or both picked it up and stared back and it was freaky.

Shikamaru could tell that they knew something was off about Naruto. He knew that they knew he had questions. But they prevented him from getting close even when they themselves were curious. It was frustrating and Shikamaru knew whatever was off about Naruto that Asuma knew.

XxX

“You’re not coming in?” Naruto asked curiously. Sasuke shook his head before he sat on the nearby rocks.

“You can splash about for the two of us.” He waved away.

“Suit yourself.” Naruto submerged himself in the cold water and came up gasping. “That’s a way to wake up.”

“How close are we to the town?”

“About another day or so right?” Naruto mused before he ducked his head underwater again. He came up and shook his head vigorously. “At this pace, we’ll get there about morning.”

“If we were doing this ourselves we would be there already.” Sasuke grumbled.

“Yeah but would we be able to handle what we find?” Naruto pointed out. “We have to research, we have to find our targets and we have to eliminate them. The bad guys aren’t out there in the open and they are strong enough to control an entire town from the shadows. We don’t know what we’ll find.”

Sasuke turned away. “We would still pull it off.”

“With how much damage?” Naruto laughed softly. “And with us pushing ourselves how far? It could turn out to being nothing more than a few bandits that need to be tied up and thrown away. It could be a hidden revolution. It could be anything and the more help the better, I can make hundreds of clones but I still like the idea of a team back up.”

“Hn.”

“Besides, this mission is more about Sakura-chan and Shikamaru than anything else.” Naruto sighed before he came out the water. “They might be getting some new missions soon, or we’ll get some more mission freedom. Sakura-chan is our Chuunin after all.”

“They can also lend her to other teams and give us to Shikamaru once in a while.” Sasuke eyed him with a small smile. “Would you mind that?”

“Why would I?” Naruto picked up his shirt. “Shikamaru’s smart. Really smart.”

XxX
“We’re here can you smell that?” Naruto laughed. “That’s a border town for you.” Kakashi-sensei snorted behind them.

“You’re Kiba now?” Sakura shook her head. “I can’t smell anything yet.”

“After what was in that bottle I’d be surprised if you could smell and taste anything.” Sasuke knelt down on his tree branch. “The air is different, something sweet is not too far away.”

“The marketplace is close to the outside.” Naruto stared in the direction of the border town. “The poorer one at least, they’ll have the cheap things, the fast spoiling things and the wild things that will smell and disturb others. It is what lures people in. The good things are inside, the unbruised fruits and vegetables. The fresh meat and everything else.”

“Really now.” Sakura turned to the opposite direction. “Well we’re here but I think we should take a quick look around first. Figure what we’re dealing with. We’ll need a place to meet back and we’ll have to split up and choose areas. That okay with you Shikamaru?”

“A quick pass through sounds good enough.” Shikamaru stood on a nearby branch his arms folded as he frowned at the direction of the town. “Should we divide it straight down or into grids?”

“The grids can come later. First comes the pass through then we’ll meet up to discuss what we saw and think then we’ll make the next move. You can take the closest areas in you want, we’ll move further up.”

“We still need to figure a place to meet.” Shikamaru paused before he scratched his head. “Okay you and I will be on the outside and everyone works their way in. We’ll go straight through the town and meet on the opposite side in the middle.”

“Works for me.” Sakura looked around. “Okay I’ll go further up who is coming my way?”

“I’m coming.” Sasuke answered.

“I’ll stay here.” Chouji’s eyes went to Shikamaru before they flicked away.

“I’ll go with Sakura.” Ino looked carefully between the group.

“Yeah I wanted to stick to these parts anyway.” Naruto admitted. “So, we’re decided now?”

“Looks so.” Shikamaru looked around then at them before he nodded. “Scatter!”

XxX

“They are doing so well.” Asuma lit his cigarette with a smile.

“I can’t believe you sent a shadow clone along.” Kakashi lowered his book and shook his head. “You have no shame but they are doing well.”

“You’re one to talk.” Asuma grinned at him. “You sent a shadow clone too.”

“Well I didn’t want to interrupt.” Kakashi tapped his book against his nose. “They are doing well on their own and I never planned on getting in their way. Also, who would keep you company?” He lowered the book. “And who says that I’m not the shadow clone?”

Asuma gave him a long look before he returned to smoking. “Because I know you, you want to give them a chance and you want to make it fair.”
“So we should get moving then shouldn’t we?” Kakashi tucked away the book. “To the meeting point? Our clones will make it in a decent time.”

“We’ll be first?”

“Who knows.” Kakashi admitted. “Ask me that question a year ago I would have said yes, would have said it might have been close. Now I just don’t know.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Asuma blew out a long stream of smoke.

“Who knows.” Kakashi said softly.

XxX

“Well what have we learned?” Sakura sat in the middle of the place they had made camp. “Thanks Ino for getting the town map. It’ll make crossing off places easier if we know exactly what we’re looking at it.” She glanced behind her to the town. “It’s too bright and too busy right now. We’ll stand out.”

“So we’re on a break?” Shikamaru watched Naruto’s face light up. “Sakura-chan I have something to do I’ll be back later.”

“What are you up to?” It was too late because Naruto’s jacket went flying in her direction. Sakura caught it with a roll of her eyes. “Some warning hello…” Shikamaru’s eyes went to Naruto’s mesh shirt and the necklace that he had never seen or noticed before. Not that he had seen Naruto minus the jacket very often but somehow that necklace did not seem to be his in a weird way. Asuma and Kakashi-sensei had inhaled sharply when Naruto’s jacket came flying off but none of the two men said anything when he sent them a sharp look.

“Gonna do a different kind of scouting.” Naruto had dived headfirst into his bag. “It’ll be okay Sakura-chan.” He came up with a small bag of coins that he shoved into his pocket. Shikamaru swallowed when the hitai-ate was the next to drop. Naruto surveyed himself with a frown before he shrugged. “It’ll have to do. I’ll pick up something later.”

“Is this like the looking around you did on that mission long ago?” Sasuke asked where he sat looking over Sakura’s shoulder. “Are you bringing things back?”

“Huh? Oh no I’m just looking around but I was looking around then too huh.” He muttered. “Well I won’t be looking for trouble. Just I saw something useful.”

“Be back before night. Even you have to rest.” Sakura frowned. “We’ll be ready to make the first infiltration then.”

“Right!” Naruto grinned before he flickered and disappeared.

“So about conforming what the client claimed.” Sakura tucked the jacket over her lap. “How did that go Shikamaru?”

Xxx

As horrible as Naruto’s experiences were he knew he was not the only one. He might be one of the few Jinchuurikis out there but there were plenty of invisible kids shunned by adults and children alike by no fault of their own.

Even in the village there were kids like that. Kids that were not talked to, not played with because
of their parents and what they did and Naruto had watched those kids band together create their own world and he had been envious.

He wished he had been accepted back then but considering what he had seen from place to place it had ended up better for him to take Haku’s hand. He had understood more. He had accepted more and he had still been angry at the foolish adults.

Still there was no escaping that those who knew the feel of a town, of a city almost better than the most alert and gossip would be simply the children of those who worked in brothels. People worked hard not to see them, they were almost ghosts unless you knew what to look for, and Naruto he knew what to look for.

Those kinds of kids were always looking for something to do, money to earn a way to look out for themselves, to help themselves. They grew up fast, they grew up hard and they were the type of people Naruto understood best.

He had gotten a glimpse in his first quick pass over. He had smelt the strong perfumes and he had known what his eyes had seen. He just needed to see again.

Then his ears picked up the sound of drums, of music and he grinned. He changed direction easily, jumping and touching a wall to change his direction before he sprinted off.

XxX

“You reek.” Sakura frowned. “It’s like strong perfume.” She leaned close to him. “And something else? Something sweet.” She shook her head and tossed him his jacket. “At least you’re back okay and on time. How did it go?”

“Better than expected.” Kakashi watched as Naruto shrugged back into his jacket and slipped back on his hitai-ate. “It’s night now so we’ll be going right?”

“You’ll be taking a bath first.” Sakura gently pushed him in the chest. “Where were you.”


XxX

“Someone’s enjoying themselves.” Shikamaru almost slipped from his perch at Sasuke’s amused tone. “I think I have an idea to where he went.”

“Or he could have picked it up from before, even Naruto would have trouble learning how to play in such a short amount of time.” Sakura’s gaze followed the buildings ahead. “I can smell the oils and perfumes from here.”

“We won’t be here for much longer.” Sasuke shifted slowly. “But we’ll be able to cross off at least four people tonight.”

XxX

“We’re hustling today.” Naruto was informed when he caught up with the kids. He was the oldest and was not that a feeling. A heavy cloth was draped over his head and he peeked out from under it to wink at the brats. The eldest of the group, Shoko smiled back at him.

“Then let’s get to it shall we? Any dancing going to go on today?” He asked as Shoko rearranged the cloth on him. He fit right in with them and he was just as invisible.
“Mama said to be careful.” Shuji was one of the youngest and he held his little sister’s hand in his, his green eyes were big as they watched Naruto. “It’s busy on and off the streets today.”

“We’ll find ways to occupy ourselves.” Naruto mused. “First work then how about I teach you guys a thing or two?”

“Really?” Shoko asked. “Thanks nii-chan!”

XxX

“It’s nice isn’t it. Almost like a vacation.” Asuma tossed the apple up into the air and caught it easily. “The day we are left to ourselves and the others work hard in the night. Perfect, Tsunade-sama should have come up with it earlier.”

“Have you and Shikamaru-kun exchanged bodies?” Kakashi asked as he moved so an old woman could get to the stall. “We’re still working keeping an eye on them.”

“They are making their way through this faster than I thought they would.” Asuma paid and bit into the apple. “They’ve managed to cross off a lot.”

“They don’t waste their days.” Kakashi felt a change in the atmosphere and tilted his head against the pole for the stall for a better look.

“I think Naruto-kun has made some friends.” Asuma laughed in amusement. “Almost hard to pick them out.”

It was not hard for Kakashi to find them. Children running even children that sounded and smelled like that caused attention even if it were disgusted and disapproving looks. The heart-breaking thing was how at home Naruto was. He was dressed like them, clothes he had to have picked up because he had left in only his pants and the mesh shirt.

Not all of the children Naruto was with dressed the same but they felt the same. Some of the girls, the older ones had what Kakashi knew were discarded cloth stitched together to make dresses, hoods, pants and other clothes. The boys had either old rags or were wrapped up. It was mostly the older ones and Kakashi knew why.

The children ran among the stalls avoiding people with ease. They had sticky fingers and Kakashi had to shake his head in amusement at not just Naruto helping but the coins that sailed to the stalls as the children finished their work.

“He knows what he is doing.” Kakashi returned to his book and ignored Asuma’s hard stare.

XxX

He missed it, he really missed feeling that sort of fun and that sort of free. Although the current circumstances made him want to slit a few throats afterwards, Naruto knew what his place was. All he could do was teach them skills to defend themselves better and to educate themselves more.

But he could share other things too. Things to make them smile, ways to get past the adults that scorned, shunned and shamed them. So what if he had to get leered at by a few creeps? Better than the younger kids. Better that for once they got a break. They were almost the same after all and Naruto could cheat with some clones.

It made the kids laugh when he showed them different beats on the makeshift drums. It made them delighted when they found other ways to bring life to the dances and hustle. It made it easier, it
made it more fun and they needed it.

It was a give and take, they help him and he certainly would help them back. There were things he
could not do anymore. Things he carried with him but they did not have to end with him. His fan
slid into his hand easily. Naruto ignored the gaping travellers and instead focused on the beat
around him created by the kids. He focused on that and he could feel Kasumi’s body behind him,
guiding him like how she had tried to long before.

Except it was different now, his body was different now and not only did he know what to do he
knew how to make it look. His feet followed the steps he had seen over and over, in battle, in play
he knew the steps. The low steps and the tip toe. The movement of the fan, he kept it to the beat
and he could feel her right there as if she were by his side and that made it worth it for him. The
sound of coins pouring into a cup made it worth for the kids too.

XxX

“Ah!” Ino sat down suddenly. “I got it! The sweet smell.” She explained to Shikamaru. “It’s a
child’s smell. That smell that children have that clings to you after you hold them? That’s what
Naruto comes back smelling like besides the perfume.”

“Kids?” Shikamaru frowned as Chouji sorted through the letters they had stolen. “What the hell is
he doing? Babysitting?”

“When I went to the market with Asuma-sensei we saw Naruto with some kids.” Chouji handed
over another letter of interest. “That must be why he smells like a kid.”

“Who are those kids?” Just because team seven seemed so lax and accepting of whatever Naruto
was doing did not mean that he should be. Sharing information would be what would get them
through the mission with the least amount of trouble.

“I don’t know.” Chouji shrugged.

“Maybe they are somebody’s illegitimate kids?” Ino whispered before she grabbed the discarded
letters. “It could be something like that.”

Ino had a point but Shikamaru just knew they did not know the half of it. He sighed and started to
read over the letter before him. When evening fell he and Sakura would consult again before they
went searching again. Another night of narrowing down the town and but no real knowledge, they
needed to find someone or something soon. So far, they had only gone after the obvious culprits
because that was what they could see.

XxX

“Thanks for looking out for them.” Naruto watched as the big sister, Namji sewed up clothes
quickly and efficiently. “I keep fearing they’ll run into trouble in town. Go places they aren’t
supposed to go.” She could not be any more than three years older than him but already she was
dressed in makeup and veils. Naruto did not let any of that distract him.

Instead the moment the hood was fixed he took her hands in his. “Where are they not supposed to
go?” He asked softly. “And why?”

XxX

“You washed up?” Sasuke asked when Naruto returned. Naruto blinked a him for a few moments
before he touched his bare chest almost self consciousness
“Yeah.” He shrugged and Sasuke watched the blankness in Naruto disappear. “Had something to do and got a little messy. What did you guys do today?”

“Realize that helping the town is going to be harder than we thought. Everything is a mess, barely any organization and it starts from a good part back.” Sasuke frowned. “Even tracking mail is difficult. When it is out it is out. Anyone can send anything. Even tracking people is hard because so many run away and so many end up-“ He eyed Naruto before he continued. “In that part of town.”

“I noticed.” Naruto nodded. “What about past maps? If everything is messed up to the mail what about day to day things? Something that they say doesn’t exist and when you look officially it doesn’t exist but ask a local, check for yourself and it does?”

“How far back you think we should go?” Sasuke’s mind had already started going through the books and papers he had checked all day. “Ten years? Twenty?”

“Let’s look at the founding, if those papers are left, time to see if some little baa-chan that is around knows something.”

XxX

“You know you didn’t need to do that.” Namji glanced to where Naruto was sprawled on her cushion in the receiving room. For the first time since he had started hanging with them he wore his jacket. “But thank you anyway.”

“Least I can do, you know. I scratch your back and you…”

“Do you a favour.” She said softly. “You’ve done so much already this is all you need?”

“You have no idea how important it is but we’re going to get to that later.” Naruto got up from the cushion and lazily retrieved a kunai. He placed it in her hand, he had to close her hands around it and he had to ignore the way her gold eyes watched him with curiosity. “Now how would you hide this?” he stopped her before she could slip it up her sleeve. “In a place you could get it easily, quickly with the least amount of suspicion.”

Her hand went slowly upwards to her veil and the long brown hair hidden under it. Naruto smiled and nodded before he started to teach her the best way to hide it.

XxX

“Guys like that are awful.” Naruto carefully sorted out the morning’s loot. “But I hope your Mama feels better, this medicine and these flowers should cheer her up.” He told Shuji. “But you’re being an awesome big brother.”

Just seeing the way Shuji took care of his sister, put her first. Protected her and stood in front of her. That little boy was ready to do all sorts of things to keep his little sister safe. It may not look it but the town was a simple hell not just for everyone else but especially for the kids.

Those that would prey on those weaker than them. There was not going to be much left of them when Naruto found them. “So, the aunty down the street can’t pay protection money huh.”

“No.” Shoko sighed. “My mom thinks she’ll have to work with her soon or worse but I don’t know what worse is. She might have to go somewhere far away.”

Naruto nodded even as he kept the conversation going carefully steering it until it reached a safe
and happy topic. There was more work to be done but honestly, he did not care about how much work he would have put in when the mission came to a close. He knew what he could live with. Ignoring these kids was not an option, he could not afford to.

“It looks like rain!” A happy voice exclaimed. Naruto looked over and had to smile.

“Yeah it does doesn’t it. At least until you turn it on the side…” He laughed.

XxX

“So who does it better? Me or your Mama?” Naruto asked only to get the kids laughing in return. He laughed a little himself because while he had some experience there was no way he had their level of experience.

You could learn a lot by just watching, the kids were proof. They knew enough to copy and they knew enough to teach. Did not make it any easier to swallow but Naruto knew he was not the only one worried about their wellbeing. He was concerned about their hearts too, they had each other to rely on since he doubted that they would have much to fall back on.

Opinions tended to rule people and their actions, the kids needed to know how to avoid that scorn. They were already ignored, invisible but that would not be forever and their mothers wanted more for them. Naruto wanted to give them that chance.

“With practice, you’ll be a stunner.” Shuji’s mother was a tall woman that was soft all over with a husky voice and a kind face. Naruto gratefully accepted the water she gave him.

“I’ll still be shades paler than the rest of you.” Naruto smiled.

XxX

“You have to be at least a little bit curious.” Asuma propped his leg up higher on the branch as they sat in the empty camp. “He’s gone every morning, he comes back late. Of all people Kakashi you have to be dying inside of curiosity. You never were able to leave things alone.”

“Am I curious?” Kakashi sat back against the trunk of his tree. “Of course I am, he’s a member of my team and as easy as this mission appears to be I’m aware how things can go bad in a matter of seconds. My team so far has the highest number of mislabelled C-ranks and D-ranks.” Kakashi shook his head slowly. “But there is only so far that we can interfere without making the wrong steps.”

“So you trust him out there alone unsupervised?” Asuma lit up and breathed out a puff of smoke. “He still has watchers on him.”

“I trust him with his team.” Kakashi shook his head at Asuma. “I trust in his goals and I know we don’t know everything but we aren’t giving anything either. We have to take it a step at a time. All of us. Do I know what he is doing? No.” Kakashi admitted. “But I know he’ll be back and I know that this time he’ll make it back no matter what. He doesn’t need to be in my sight all the time.”

“He just needs to be in smelling distance?” Asuma mused before he shifted. “You would be able to track him if he went too far, even before he went too far.”

“I’m fairly confident in my abilities but I’m not going to go around spreading mistrust.” Kakashi turned to face the town. “If not now when will we give him freedom? Enough was cleared up in my mind for me. Naruto has enough people looking for him, the danger comes from beyond him and it is directed towards him.”
“Any ideas?” Asuma blew out another long stream of smoke.

“Jiraiya-sama has been looking but when organizations are shrouded in mystery there is only so much that can be gleaned when they haven’t made a move and we don’t have proper names.”

“They’ll make a move soon enough.” Asuma shook his head. “With Tsunade-sama and Jiraiya-sama working on it we’ll have the information we need to know in no time.” His fingers relaxed on his knee. “She seems to have her own plans for the likes of Sakura and Shikamaru.”

“Right now it is just Sakura and Shikamaru.” Kakashi pointed out. “She left the final choice to the Jounins to be decided after all. The Jounins and the Jounin council, we gave the final stamp of approval she is just making sure that she will be using them correctly.”

“An evaluation so soon though?” Asuma paused. “She’s been away from the village for a long time but it was not that long. She knows what and who she is working with.”

“I wouldn’t say that Tsunade-sama is not playing a game.” Kakashi admitted. “But we won’t know what kind and with who I do know that the likes of our teams and those under us, she has their best interests at heart.” His thoughts drifted to Naruto and the way the Hokage smiled at him, the way Naruto looked and smiled back. “She’s really invested in them.” Asuma was not blind either. Kakashi still could not get used to the sight of that around Naruto’s neck.

“As Shikamaru would say, it is going to be troublesome in the end huh.” Asuma sighed. “I had planned on suggesting that he take some time out the village, learn a bit. Like I did, that’s not a good idea now.”

XxX

“You know you owe me an explanation eventually right?” Sakura said as she stood behind him. “Sooner or later you’ll have to fess up Naruto.”

“I know Sakura-chan.” Naruto smiled as tested the blade. “I’ll explain really soon but the stuff I gave you is good right? Doesn’t it buy me some time?”

“What are we going to do with you. Fine, but you better explain everything soon and I do mean from beginning to end I don’t care how embarrassing it ends up. If you had to run naked through the streets and had to duck into a house of poor reputation you better tell me.”

“If something like that happened how would I keep you from hearing about it in the first place?” Naruto frowned. “And that’s rather detailed don’t you think Sakura-chan? Like really specific? Am I missing something?”

“Weren’t you going somewhere?” Sakura said pointedly.

XxX

“So don’t you have work to be doing?” Namji asked as they led the kids to the river.

“Yeah but this is okay, it is nice to take a break now and again.” Naruto admitted, he laughed at the squeals from the kids when they saw his surprise. He had made a small dam to cut some of the water off. It made a play area for the kids. It was the first time he had done it. Before everyone else had done it and what a fun time it had been when they had time to spare for that.

“They love it.” She smiled as around them the kids shrieked and ran for the water. The younger ones were quickly managed by the older ones, directed carefully to the water and carefully held so
that they would not get too far or too deep. Naruto had carefully cut off the water so there was not
that much in terms of deep water anyway.

“Everyone needs some good times now and again.” He sat at the water’s edge and smiled when
she sat next to him, it was a little graceful her knees tucked under her. “This feels so real.” He said
softly.

“Just for a bit they can forget, for a little bit they can pretend that they are like everybody else and
that is what matters.” She knew exactly what he was talking about. “They need things like this,
especially away from people, a break from them.”

“Exactly why I did it.” He removed his shirt and tossed it to the ground, his pants were quick to
follow. He grinned at her. “They can’t have all the fun now can they?”

XxX

The grass was so nice and warm under him. Naruto sighed contently as he stared up at the sky and
felt the sun drying him off. He had not even known how tense he was until he had spent time
goofing off. These kids, they were a little like him. They did not know the darkness he did but they
knew the truth that he did. As young as they were they felt the taint. As young as they were they
knew the darkness their own little town held.

But the few hours they had horsed around, raised their voices, splashed and had fun. No one could
belittle them for that. No one could take that away from them, for a few hours, away from the eyes
of a harsh world they had felt free, normal and that was what counted sometimes.

Through no fault of their own they suffered. They suffered for imagined sins, a parent’s sins and
these kids knew the world was not fair but they did not take what they were given lying down.
They had things they wanted to protect, people they wanted to make happy and if it had not been
for some people in his life that part would be where they parted from Naruto.

Lucky for him, lucky for them all Naruto had his own special people that he cared for. His own
special people he looked up to, worried about and wanted to make proud. It was strange but for
him this mission that was filled with so much smoke, would be so calming. Even though he had
lots of work ahead of him.

“What are you going to do now?” Shoko shook her head to shake away most of the excessive
water. “You said you had to think on it.”

“Well…” Naruto trailed off as more and more of the kids left the water. “I know what I want to do
and I know what I would rather do but it isn’t just me that has to make the decision. I do have a
team.” He gently tweaked her nose. “But we’ve been watching and thinking for a while now so I
think I can make a good enough compromise.”

“Mama wants to thank you.” Shoko wiggled away from him and sat on the grass. “For everything
you’ve been doing. She said work is easier.”

“Work is about to get a lot easier. Your Mama is smart.” Naruto admitted. “And that’s good that is
really good.”

XxX

“This is fantastic work.” Shikamaru was left gaping at Naruto and Sakura as Naruto laid out his
information and plans. “I knew you were up to something. I was thinking about how we were
going to stabilize the town after taking out the shadows but this works wonderfully. There is an
upper and a lower in this town and we can’t mess with the balance too much.”

“The town will take care of itself.” Naruto dismissed as he drew his finger along the map. “But the nee-chans know how the area works and how to manage themselves. Without those idiots breathing down their necks and demanding payment that keeps rising at every turn. They’ll be able to keep their side rising and maybe even flourish. The town could even grow a bit once the bandits and snakes get removed.”

“They had a really good operation huh.” Sakura mumbled before she narrowed her eyes at the map. “It looks good at first glance. The town seems okay at the first few glances but the more you look the darker it goes. It sucks and they were really smart to keep to people that wouldn’t identify them or defy them. They really are scum.”

“An old abandoned mining shaft is not the most original bases.” Sasuke looked up from where he had been going through his shuriken. “But considering how old it is and how long ago it failed, it is the best place to hide from people who aren’t locals.”

“They went to so much trouble to hide, they can’t be that strong I know there are a few reported shinobi among them but so far from all the reports I can’t see anything that strong or even intimidating. Not even a hint of a bloodline limit.” Sakura glanced at Sasuke. “At least nothing too special but you never know. Just because I’m not seeing anything elemental doesn’t mean it can’t be something else. Hell, I’d kill just to get a feel from which village they defected from if they defected at all.” Her eyes trailed over to Naruto.

“Obviously not Konoha.” Naruto said dryly. “We’ve checked the book backwards and forwards, looked at all the missing nins higher than a B and I have to say if they had any special jutsus they wouldn’t have come from Konoha and they would not have been missing for so long.” He stressed. “Suna had tons of defectors and we are close enough to their border for it to be possible.” He wrinkled his nose as he thought. “But even for them it is kind of pathetic, it would have to be an unknown clan that turned into a village or something. Not any of the great countries simply because they would not have been able to settle here for so long. Not so close to other countries.”

There was just something crazy about team seven and Shikamaru had no idea how to handle it and he had no idea what he was to do about it. Ignoring it was his first impulse because it seemed too troublesome but the more he looked the more frustrated and curious he got. It just was not fair, to him, his team and anyone else who got lost as hell after listening to team seven after three minutes.

A few months ago they had all been at the academy together. They had all just been a bunch of kids. What the hell had happened to them? He watched Naruto as Sakura flicked him in the middle of his forehead for a sassy remark and had to hold his tongue because since his reappearance. Something about Naruto had not sat right, he was strong, stronger than Shikamaru had originally thought.

He was smart, there was something about how he thought and reacted that did not make sense. There were too many secrets surrounding him. When he thought about the Naruto that disappeared and he looked at the one before him. The only thing similar about them was that big smile and the looks. Everything else that he could remember was gone.

XxX

“It’s up to you guys how we move.” Naruto knew he was ready to follow Sakura’s lead but he guessed Sasuke had something to prove because of how well behaved he was being. It could be the presence of team ten. Even Naruto had cut down on most their talks and normal things.
Granted he what knew of team ten Asuma-sensei would understand them the most. That did not
mean they wanted to expose everything. They were still rivals after all and in the next exam
everyone would be coming after everyone else hard. He had to be prepared to meet them head on.
The preparation was all now.

“You tell us where and how hard.” Sasuke’s eyes went from Shikamaru to Sakura. “It’s time to end
this.”

“My plan is to cut them off here and here.” Shikamaru traced over the spots on the proper map.
“We’ll wait just before the protection collection starts. We want to take care of the dangerous ones,
the really dangerous ones but we should let the town themselves give up the harmless ones. Most
of these have bounties.” He winced. “Small ones but it will help the town on getting to where it
should be.”

“Sakura?” Sasuke asked.

“The force you deem necessary.” She bit her lip as she went over their notes. “I don’t think it will
become too big of a fight but don’t get injured trying to get a higher bounty because some of them
have the clause of more money when alive. That isn’t what we are here for.”

“I’m impressed at how quickly and easily you came up with paths.” Naruto sniggered. “But it is
the lazy and unmotivated that find the shortcuts.”

“Once it doesn’t get us in trouble.” Ino’s glance towards Sakura was hesitant. “How are we going
in? premade teams or…”

“Where we think the fighting will be the strongest we’ll send in Naruto or Sasuke. Or both.”
Sakura rolled up her notes with a frown. “We need to infiltrate and quietly too.”

“My team will start.” Shikamaru reassured. “Don’t worry about that part, we’ll open up and creep
in. you will contain the area and clean up.” Naruto’s mouth twitched in a half smile. The funny
thing was that he had no doubt that team seven could have completed the entire thing beginning to
end themselves. That did not mean they did not appreciate the help though.

“Sounds like a plan.” Sakura nodded. They glanced behind them to where their respective senseis
waited. Kakashi-sensei sat in full gear just silently watching them. Asuma-sensei had a smile on
his face while he watched them. Naruto had no idea what to make of it. “Sensei, will you be
accompanying us?”

“We’ll be right beside you the entire time.” Kakashi-sensei said softly. His eye closed briefly
before it opened, mirth dancing in the depths. “We’re looking forward to the operation.”

“So reassuring.” Naruto muttered under his breath. “Right beside us as well as a step behind I bet.”

XxX

Do the job but go easy, Sakura had no idea how delighted Naruto was at the chance to not go in
with the intention of bringing death yet how disappointed he was at the fact that he would not be
bringing death to those who really deserved it.

He had listened to the kids. He had eyes too, roughing them up was in the cards for them. He
would kill them if they forced him to it but as he stood in the mine shaft he just knew that there
was no one around to actually force him to that point.

They had work to do, for the sake of the town, for the mission and for those kids the place had to
get cleaned up. They could not afford to let even one escape. They had to be taken down quickly. Those kids, they were a little like him, like then.

Except… a rule had existed among them that the kids had not been forced to acknowledge. Naruto was actually sort of happy about that. Their world was hard enough already, they did not need that sort of fact hanging over them, they did not need that sort of dedication just yet. They did have tools now, they would be able to fend for themselves better now.

That would have to be enough as they grew. It was the least Naruto could do for them and considering what he had been asking them in return. He had to do his best.

The mine shaft was dark with a light breeze coming from the tunnels ahead. The ground held the traces of others footsteps. Naruto could feel all around him. The darkness did not hinder him, instead it guided his steps forward, around rocks and long ago abandoned materials.

He kept his feet steady, his breathing soft as he advanced, he was hunting and it did not take long before he was rewarded.

Xxx

It turned out better than he thought it would have. No scratch that, considering the feeling that had settled in his gut since they had left Konoha, this was better than the best-case scenario he had come up with. He had been braced for so many things but he had not been prepared for team seven.

In comparison his team was not shabby, they were not lacking in skill for certain but Shikamaru had become aware that there was just something about team seven that was a little different to the rest of them. It was more than being Chuunin ready, in them they carried a deep intensity along with lots of secrets.

It was a hint of something that the rest of them simply did not have, not the other Konoha nine, not the team of Gai-sensei’s who were older and knew more of outside the village, no Shikamaru knew that whatever team seven held it was different to anything normal teams held.

If anything, sometimes they reminded him of some of the people that visited his father at night. Those that came in cloaks and spoke in low words and whispers. Of course Shikamaru knew it was more than that to it and even then, he knew that as weird as team seven was they were not exactly like those in the cloaks either.

They were just weird, they saw things he did not see. He was trying to see. He wanted to see because the less he saw the more danger he would put his team in. His own head tended to be full of information, thinking, considering and discarding ideas.

He had thought, he would have sworn that he had caught up to them a little bit or at least in understanding the most confusing ones in team seven but again he was right back where he started just a little more confused.

God the way they talked threw him off, the way they acted. Naruto had blown them off for days to do his own thing but his team acted as though it was nothing special. Naruto and Sasuke fell in behind Sakura as though they had been doing it all their lives not for a few months.

After making them feel as though they were light years ahead of them all, how could they sit so easily among the bandits tied up to hell and back and wait so patiently for orders? They had changed the town’s future and they looked so at ease even as they spoke as though the job was not finished.
Shikamaru knew the job was not finished, of course he did but he had not expected to be on a job like this one. So full of mysteries and confusion. So full of contradictions and the knowledge that something was right in front of him he just could not see.

Naruto looked so amused, it was almost funny. The way he stood among bandits that were trussed up so neatly. The way he laughed with his team. The way he looked at the relieved townspeople as their senseis reassured them that the worst was over, yet the longing and almost regretful look on Naruto’s face did not belong there and Shikamaru did not understand why it was there in the first place.

XxX

“Now I get why you smelt so strongly of perfumes every day.” Chouji kept looking around the establishment. “It makes sense now I think about it I’m going to reek when we leave.”

“Sure.” Ino could not seem to make a decision on where to look.

“Everything smells so strong but it is kind of dark in here.”

“Don’t worry too much about what in here looks like.” Asuma-sensei coughed. “We’ll just get the thanks and leave. Quickly.”

“Good job.” Sakura slid into the booth. “I can’t believe they are going to close down for a few days but it seems they can afford it now. Guess they have some repairs to make. Shifts to make.”

“It all works out.” Naruto caught sight of Shoko and Namji and made his excuses. “I’ll catch up later.”

XxX

“You’re strange boy.” Namji said softly. “But we do keep our promises.”

“I hope your Mamas manage to keep the place and the town running.” Naruto shoved his hands into his pockets. “Keep looking out for each other, keep learning and… well it is just a one-time thing. Don’t worry about it.”

“I won’t.” But he could see that she was curious. “Konoha shinobi are strange.”

“Yeah.” Naruto laughed. “Or maybe it is just me I just don’t know.”

XxX

“You’ve got some ink on your hands.” Sakura handed a cloth to Naruto and watched as he carefully wiped away until his hands were clean. “Did you need more time to say goodbye? You guys seemed to be having a moment.” Even as she teased she was surprised at the slight confusion that flickered across Naruto’s face before he shook his head and a laugh broke out of him. “Oh? But she was really pretty. Just your type, lots of them were, the nee-chans. The mothers, I mean we all know your target range.” Sasuke snorted from in front of them at that.

“It wasn’t like that Sakura-chan.” He spluttered. “I mean we just got along, all of us because…” he looked lonely for a second. “Well we understand how it is to live… and not be wanted. To be blamed.” He looked up at the sky and sighed. “So many kids like that, in every town, every village. Some have it worse than some but you never have to look too hard to find the outcasts. But ones like them they have each other so they are lucky.” A smile came to his lips. “Nobody does trade better than brothel kids. Long before they understand proper value they trade. First it is knowledge. Asking a passing nee-chan or nii-chan to teach them something, tell them something.
Then they want to get things for their information. Street kids do it too but brothel kids? They do it best.”

“Sounds like you liked them.” She paused to think it over. “Did you give them something?”

“Taught them a few things.” Naruto shrugged. “They taught me a few things too, give and take Sakura-chan.”

“You liked them.” She said softly, Naruto’s eyes darted to her and there was something there that she could not correctly identify.

“Yeah, considering the situation? I really liked those kids. They’ll go far. Not only do they get it, they aren’t planning to stick around and be invisible forever. Everyone better watch out.” Sakura would have pried more but she was only too aware of not only Team ten’s eyes but the eye of her own sensei. She remained quiet not only because of ears listening but because she knew it was possible to pry too hard and too soon.
Combination of spirit

Chapter Notes

Still tired but I'm working hard. I'm behind on editing future chapter but I am working on wrapping up this arc in a way that I can be satisfied about. Really looking forward to the end of the simple missions arc... This is kind of the interlude before the story continues. I get so tired looking at canon sometimes. I like to avoid it as most as possible. But ayy It looks like this arc will finish at chapter 66 or 67... or 70 If I'm honest. Since I don't get to write that much I've been just trying to outline the little things as much as possible as I get ready for Nano. It usually is a good idea to submit this for Nano cuz at least I get get 50K or so put in and that is like a chapter or two... sigh. Big chapters are a pain.

See you in a while darlings.

It was hard to breathe, he was tense all over and he knew that he should not be that he would make others wary but he could not help himself. He was burning from the inside out, from heat and from the need inside him, the anticipation and wasn’t that a bitch?

He had to be patient. He was supposed to be patient but for some reason with every step closer he just burned inside with more questions. He had been doing so well too. It was not fair. He had to get control of himself, there was too much to lose and he could not go back.

He had to remind himself of that, he simply could not go back. There was nothing to go back to, there was only forward and the things he decided to carry forward with him. A loud groan escaped him before he turned the tap from hot to cold. He barely shuddered when he dumped a cup full of cold water over his head.

The baths were empty for once. Even at this sort of late time old men were at the baths and they had it up to steaming, still Naruto was glad to have it to himself for once. Sometimes he needed time to himself without others around, without his team.

He enjoyed being around them, talking to them, hanging with them but when he had such feelings, when he was so tense inside that he felt as though he would stop breathing he needed the space.

He grabbed his hair in one hand and his groan echoed in the room. Waiting was hard, staying calm was hard he was so full of energy and anticipation but would baa-chan assign his team to missions that would let him get rid of the stress? Would Kakashi-sensei actually push him in training sessions and let him work or beat out some of the worry and anticipation?

No on all counts and he could not even blame them. Team seven could not get every gone to hell mission the others needed it too and not every mission was one that required all out dirty fighting. Plenty of missions that required focus.

And Naruto knew, he knew better than anyone that a clear mind was needed so you did not miss things, so people did not get the jump on you, so you did not fuck it up but in the state that he was in that sort of thing, those sorts of thoughts were hard because he could not help it.
He let his hand slide from his hair as he sat alone in the bath area. He really could not help it and he was not blaming anyone it was just the way it was. His mind kept jumping ahead, he kept pulling out personal items and looking at them. He could not help his eyes following the people who he knew held the answers he sought.

He wanted to move but he couldn’t. He wanted to do something but he should not. Most definitely should not. It would be amusing if it was not so pathetic too. So many eyes on him, so many secrets around him.

He turned on the tap again, this time a warm feeling instead of scalding or cold. He would do what he had to do because he had to. This burning need would pass, he was not the first to suffer in such a way and he certainly would not be the last.

His eyes slid shut when he used the cup to pour water over his chest. He needed to think and he needed to focus, draw all the energy away from him and he knew how to do it best, he had to get focused, he had to get calm before it interfered not just in his progress but his training.

XxX

Mornings in Konoha tended to be quiet. They tended to come slow, the temperature warming so slow that it was almost unnoticed. The wildlife that were not nocturnal waking up. The wildlife that were nocturnal retreating for the day, it was a slow shift and the overlap of night and morning happened so slow and then it was gone.

It was usually under these conditions that he liked to get his harder training out of the way. The sneaking, the target practice when light was barely there. It was during that time that he liked best to recall the lessons he had learned and that he put them into practice hard before he slowly settled into training that others would not blink at.

His mornings started differently now, they had to. As disappointed as he was to have to shove the harder training to the back burner, the harder fights against his clones, the almost punishing retraining as he fought to remember what he saw and he fought against it trying to defeat it. The little tricks that he knew would come in handy, the slow study of everything he could recall seeing, all of it had to go on the back burner because he had no other choice.

He had to focus more, he spent long minutes just breathing slowly not even trying to do anything, just to settle his body and his heart. He knew the why he just could not allow it to throw him off, he still had to do training but unless he skipped sleeping altogether there was no way he was going to get the necessary amount of focus done along with the training he wanted to do.

He knew why he pushed his body, he knew why he had to but he was not going to be of any use to anyone if he was on a hair-trigger and drawing suspicion to himself.

It sucked but it had to be done, he had to keep quiet. A smile tugged at his lips as he sat cross-legged on his roof at the thought. He had left his shirt behind so he could feel the chill of the air better. For that reason, he had come out in his boxers and the roof was doing cruel things to his ass and legs but he had to endure it, it was better than rocks anyway.

Still, having to sit still and keep quiet reminded him of how he would be dropped on Ryu to be kept an eye on when mostly everyone else was occupied. Alya always lingered but she was Haku’s messenger and not always as focused on him as Naruto would have liked. Ryu on the other hand he understood and welcomed the chance to share his ideas.

Meditation had been his way of escape, of relaxation and it had taken a while for it to sink in but
there had been plenty of times when Ryu’s bigger body had blocked the scorching sun or blistering wind from Naruto as they sat together just feeling the world around them. Ryu had drawn comfort from knowing how small he was compared to the world around them. Naruto did not get that, it was not exactly terrifying but it was not comforting either.

For him, it felt good to feel the world around them because he felt alive. He felt as though he existed and mattered, every breath he took had a purpose, every sound he heard, everything he did meant he was part of something, that he was alive. A big part of it. A feeling he could drown in because when it came to actual nature, the world around them he was not alone there was something no matter how big or small and that helped to focus him. That helped to settle him even if it took him hours.

Every single breath had a purpose and while there may seem like a need to hurry there really was not.

Xxx

There was no imagining it, something was bothering Naruto. His eyes were different, he was a little tenser in ways that he had not been even leading up to the Chuunin exam disaster and afterwards. Something was bothering him but Sasuke did not know what it was and he did not know how to start talking about it especially with Naruto throwing up signals that he did not want to talk about it.

He was quieter, Sasuke could feel the tension in him but he said nothing. He instead retreated into himself whenever he could and there was nothing to do about it. When before he would wait patiently for his turn when it was time for sparring, his gaze on Sasuke or Sakura, he took that time to sit with his back to the nearest, tree or rock and rested, his mind elsewhere.

He still did plenty of the weird stuff he did but he was quicker to pull to a halt, close his eyes and just drift away. Sasuke did not understand it, when before he would stumble across Naruto in the mornings in a training ground covered with sweat and the area looking demolished he was more likely to find a mostly calm area with Naruto in the middle.

Something had happened, something was bothering him and none of them knew what it was. Kakashi sent enough looks in Naruto’s direction for Sasuke to know that he was not imagining it. Sakura bit her lip so many times after starting to speak that Sasuke knew he was not alone but Naruto always sat down and closed his eyes so they closed their mouths again, they let it pass.

He was not certain to whether it had to do with something in Naruto’s murky past or not. Whether they had tripped over a landmine or he had gotten caught by ghosts or not they did not know and he was not telling them. They still worked fine but the energy that Naruto gave off that worked in their team had them all feeling slightly off balanced.

With every time Naruto gave a deep sigh and sat down and closed his eyes the need to know drove Sasuke almost insane. So many times he almost opened his mouth but not only did he not know what to say there was no easy way to pry. No text book guide for that kind of situation because there was nothing around Konoha like Naruto.

His mind was somewhere else it was so obvious but where exactly was beyond him. Was it in the past, the people Naruto had loved and the memory of him by their side? Was it something Konoha related? Something mission related? After the team up with team ten Naruto had grown tense and almost irritated. Impatient and there was no reason for that.

They had not lingered on the way there or back. Some of team ten had complained about their pace
back to Konoha but honestly, they had made good time back home and while the mission itself had felt like it was dragging on, considering what was at stake and the entire shift in dynamic it was necessary. No one had gotten injured either which was for the best.

It had been a simple enough mission even with the number of enemies they had faced. They had managed it perfectly regardless of Naruto developing his own network of information while there. It was not as if Naruto had gotten attached to the kids there or even the women.

He had been polite but distant, every inch of him a traveller passing through and although Sasuke had watched him talking and laughing never once had it felt as though Naruto wanted to remain. It had been simple, Naruto wanted to know more and Naruto had wanted to help. After helping he had been glad to go.

Sasuke could be wrong of course but he doubted that Naruto was mooning after anyone. If anything he might have gotten caught up in memories while interacting but that did not change the tension surrounding Naruto currently.

XxX

Well something was wrong but she was not going to get it pried out of him any time soon. Sakura kept her mouth closed and instead reached into her bag for her camera. They had all fallen into silence after Naruto had drifted off.

Not as if Sasuke was one to start and keep conversations going anyway. She and Naruto were the ones that started things and kept them going with Sasuke joining in from time to time or their sensei picking up the thread and running it if different directions until they got tired.

It was fun to tease and be teased by Kakashi-sensei. To make fun of the man being tardy, to loudly lament over his worth as an adult even as they admired his back and his strength. Because she knows that she does and that Naruto does and that you might have to fight Sasuke to admit it and even then, he might not say it verbally but they did admire their sensei.

The man had his moments, there had been back at the stands. Moments during missions when he took charge and just being behind him made everything not only safer but better. She herself was striving for that air their sensei had around him when he took charge of the team. When he stood before them between whatever threatened and them.

Of course he was preoccupied with giving her space to do Chuunin things as he called it and leading the team. He spoke often about her finding her own way and the opportunities he gave her with each mission she was grateful for. Every moment, every advice, every strategy he took to heart because this was the perfect time for her to stumble and for her to learn.

Still with whatever that had Naruto in the mood he was in silence was the norm. He all too quickly fell quiet and closed his eyes to focus inwards. Whether he was thinking of the past or searching for answers within himself Sakura did not know. It did not change that she was curious. It did not change that she watched him, they all did. Sasuke’s questions were in his eyes.

Her sensei was no easier to read but she knew he was waiting. He was less lax the more Naruto kept quiet. The dirty book hung limp from his hand and his eye watched Naruto and their surroundings and Naruto acted as though what he did was normal.

It was not as if the sight of Naruto sitting cross legged as he focused inwards was new. Sakura had seen him on many away missions. She had stumbled across him in training grounds, she knew he did it but it had never looked as though he needed it before.
She watched his breathing slow and his entire body calm to become still besides the light breaths. She had no idea what was going on. She did not know the purpose either but what she did know was that there was a purpose behind it and something was bothering Naruto and no one would get an answer until he was ready.

It was frustrating to think about but when he was still he made quite a picture and that was why she had bought the camera for. She bit her lip as she focused before she took the shot. He looked so calm and at peace, it was nice to get pictures of that too.

Xxx

The village had shifted and the change was a welcomed one. Jiraiya sat on the roof and simply looked out to Konoha. He could feel the activity in the tower, in the village but he felt no real need to move. Where he was, it was enough to simply feel the life around him.

Watching and observing was a huge part of being a shinobi as well as being a sage but not many people enjoyed it as much as they should. For him when he had been young he had been trying so hard to be active, to not be left behind but now that he was old and ready to see the next generation do what he could not, what they could not he could actually enjoy the sights around him.

Konoha would always be the village of his dreams, the place that was home and held his heart but that did not mean he was unaware to the faults, no the faults just made his love for it stronger and true. He shifted a slight bit to get comfortable, even through the years and through the various changes, the rise and fall of buildings, Konoha somehow managed to look the same, still managed to be home.

“How long are you going to lurk around?” Tsunade’s voice carried to him from below and with a chuckle Jiraiya stood before he made his way down and through the window. Tsunade stood before her desk a large stack of intimidating papers on it and a frown on her face.

“I wasn’t intruding.” Jiraiya pointed out lazily. He noticed the lack of Shizune, time had been moving faster than he thought. “I guess you have time for me now?”

“Don’t act like I don’t want to see you.” She shook her head before she yanked a drawer open at her desk. Jiraiya shook his head when he saw the sake bottle and the cups but he helped her move the stack of papers to their various locations so that they could attend to the bottle without guilt.

“That’s better.” She sighed after the first cup. “Shizune keeps such a close watch it drives me mad.”

“Can you blame her?” Jiraiya swirled the sake in his cup. “That girl is a lot happier now.” Her eyes met his and he smiled. “So? Came to a decision yet? Figured things out yet?”

“After so short of a time?” Tsunade rolled her eyes. “Don’t be silly.”

“You’ve sent him out so much, you talk to him. You’re watching him. He’s still alive.” Jiraiya said softly. “So?”

“I haven’t come to a decision yet.” She lied. “But what about you? What have you found?”

“Lots of dark spots, lots of holes.” Jiraiya grumbled. “Not much we can do about that Tsunade.”

“There are some people I’d love to kick in the teeth.” She bit her thumb and tapped her cup against the desk. “The number of files I’ve gone through, the kids I’ve seen. I’m scared to trust half of the people that have been active for years because who knows where their loyalty really belongs? But I’m not going to do something cliché either. Sensei and the council had so many half done plans
I’m tempted to toss everyone in front of T&I and hope for the best but spies do come in handy too.”

“You think we have anymore plants? It would be just like him to leave a few more things behind.” Jiraiya watched Tsunade shake her head. “Are you sure?”

“As sure as I can be, I mean I know he’s waiting on something. He’s pulled out plenty of people. Removed lots of others in ways that I would love to know but we can’t focus on that now that he has gone to ground and we don’t know what his future moves will be beyond Sasuke again.”

“He may change his mind about Naruto too but Sasuke is the priority.”

“We’ll have to take the opportunity that he’s given us. He’s gone to ground we can’t waste time looking for him.” She shook her head. “We have way too many troubles to think about. Missions, treaties, genins, progress, the clans and of course…” A smile tugged at her lips. “Our very own Uzumaki Naruto.”

“Well he’s not going to cause trouble anytime soon.” Jiraiya pointed out.

“Really? You think so?” Her empty cup was gently placed on the desk before she got to her feet. She stood at the window and stayed silent for a long while. “That boy is truly amusing, I could read about him all day, what people think, what people have observed and never really know who he is and what he thinks. But at least Sensei put him on a pretty good team, nothing but success from that one. I’ve had them run a few missions and errands for me, that boy brings chaos wherever he goes.”

“Don’t pretend that you don’t like that.” Jiraiya snorted. It earned him a shrug and he stifled a laugh. “Come on Tsunade, you like the kid, admit it.”

“Are you going again soon?” She turned to face him her eyes curious. “Or are you staying for longer than a day and some.”

“I’ve got some things to do.” He admitted. “I’ll be around for a while, spend some time talking to sensei and going through some things. Going to think through which leads I want to follow next and there are some pieces of information I’m waiting on.”

“Not going to steal Kakashi’s student away from him again?” She teased.

Jiraiya sighed heavily. “It’s borrowing, I’m giving him back not keeping him forever, just borrowing him now and again when I’m feeling lonely.”

“Sometimes when I read over his files, when I watch him, I wonder if Sensei made the right decision.” She said softly. “In not telling him. It is the first time that I’ve known of that they’ve hidden from an entire generation just who and what someone so important is.”

“I think about that too.” Jiraiya rolled his tense shoulders. “But what good would it have done in the state the village was then? Even now some things needed to be kept quiet, some things a child doesn’t need to know in my opinion. We wait for a reason but the Yondaime did not have the chance to wait. This we know and the one that paid for it, that is still paying for it is Naruto. Did sensei do the right thing in keeping it a secret? I’d like to say yes but then I watch Kakashi’s team.” He admitted. “And I ask myself if they would be so calm, so accepting if they knew everything, if with Naruto’s past with Naruto’s truth if they would be able to welcome him as one of them.”

“He’d have a bigger head if he had been raised on the truth.” Tsunade sighed. “But when I think of it mixing with his past… I don’t even know if it would have turned out like that if he had known.”
“We’ll never know now.” Jiraiya pointed out. “All we can do now is move from this point on, one day he’ll be ready. Or one day he’ll find out but if he had known, if he back then had something else to hold on to maybe he wouldn’t have left.” Jiraiya admitted. “Not much we can do about that now. Not much we can really do about any of that.”

“I know.” She said softly. “It is where we go from here that will matter but the boy needs something.”

“He’s already got that covered, he has his team. He has his past and he has his dream he’ll keep adding and hoarding, he’ll keep putting things together. if it is that kid…”

“Don’t jinx it.” She said softly.

XxX

Naruto smothered a laugh as he waited for Iruka-sensei to notice him. It had been Iruka-sensei’s idea but the man was late by no fault of his own according to what Naruto saw. He was smothered in the paperwork and Naruto had no idea how he managed to balance that, the classes and keep an eye and ear out for Naruto.

Before he could announce himself, Iruka-sensei’s head came up from the piles of scrolls and a smile spread across his face. He was so happy at just seeing Naruto. His heart squeezed tightly in his chest because this was what he wanted. What he needed in everything to help him forward. This was what he wanted.

People that got happy at seeing him, people that were happy that he was around, people who needed him and wanted him around he would never take that for granted, he never could take it for granted. It felt so good, it made his stomach flutter and his heart clench tightly. He could not give that up.

“Sorry about this Naruto.” Iruka-sensei stamped the bottom of the scroll he held in his hand and rolled it up. “I’m running late and it is totally my fault.” He admitted with a laugh. “I’m the one that picked the date and time but I’m holding us up aren’t I?”

“Well it doesn’t matter, mission is done for today anyway.” Naruto slipped into the room and sat on an empty desk. He ignored the Chuunin traffic around him and instead focused on Iruka-sensei. “Nothing much to do and it isn’t like I thought you guys would have it easy now. Sakura-chan’s busy when she isn’t with us too and Kakashi-sensei is busy when we don’t have missions. Stuff have gotten done because of baa-chan but the village still has to be run and there was lots of backup because the Sandaime Hokage was sick right?”

“It’s not baa-chan.” Iruka-sensei tapped his knee with a scroll. “It’s Tsunade-sama and you’re right. The backups are what has us still working at this pace. It isn’t as bad as before because we have an ease at the top but we’re still busy going through missions and doing what she wants us to do the way she wants us to do it. Different Hokage means different rules and regulations sometimes. A lesson to remember for when it is your turn.”

“But she’s a baa-chan though.” Naruto swung his legs lazily. “And of course I’m going to remember. It is why I’m watching you now so that everybody else won’t be drowning in scrolls and paperwork.”

“Paperwork is necessary.” Iruka-sensei stamped two scrolls in quick succession before he continued on. “It only gets messy when people do it wrong and that’s another something you should pay attention to.”
“Eh.” Naruto grumbled. “I’ve seen how Sakura-chan has to fill out hers and Kakashi-sensei’s are always hurried. Whose example do I even try to follow?”

“For the sake of my sanity I hope it is Sakura’s.” Iruka-sensei said dryly. “Too many Jounins drop in the sloppiest reports. I’d like them to have to file these for a change. It is like they don’t know what these reports are even for.” He muttered as he stamped another scroll. He pushed his hand into his hair when he started yet another and shook his head at the sloppy writing that Naruto could see from where he sat. “I swear, it is like they don’t even try. Thank goodness these are the last five.”

XxX

“It’s a good day for this sort of thing.” Naruto watched as Iruka-sensei stretched almost lazily as they headed to the civilian part of town. “It’s not too late too.”

“Well we don’t have to get it now.” Naruto pointed out. “But this is fun, we should have brought Konohamaru along.”

“Somehow I don’t think he would have enjoyed it nearly as much.” Iruka-sensei stroked his cheek with a finger his gaze towards the sky. “And we barely get to hang out with it just being the two of us these days, not that I mind anyone joining us for food or in the baths but I like to spend time alone with you too you know? So we can talk.” Iruka-sensei seemed embarrassed. “Some us time.”

Naruto knew just what he meant. “You’re not being selfish.” He reassured. “I get it, sometime I like to have you to myself too. I feel like I’m talking off your ears sometimes but…”

“You’re never talking off my ears.” Iruka-sensei patted him on the head softly. “I enjoy everything you have to say, I enjoy seeing you. Watching your progress, hearing about your progress, the things you feel the places you go.” Iruka-sensei’s smile developed into a wide grin. “I’m so proud of you.”

Naruto knew that, he loved that. He knew Iruka-sensei was proud of him and he had known that long before the exams but it was another thing to see that every time the man saw him. When Naruto played with his hitai-ate Iruka-sensei got this look on his face as if his heart was bursting with pride. Naruto was a shinobi and he was not Hokage yet but he knew Iruka-sensei truly believed with all his heart that Naruto would get there, that it was just a matter of time. There were no words for how incredible that made him feel.

“I know you are.” Naruto said with a laugh. “So are you going to cover the costs for this or…”

“Haha.” Iruka-sensei said dryly. “I feed you as a treat, I might buy you some cheap seeds or a pot but don’t think for a moment I’m covering everything.”

“It was worth a try.” Naruto shrugged as they stopped outside the store. “Gotta work on my delivery.”

“What is that man encouraging you guys in.” Iruka-sensei groaned as he took the first step into the store. “Oh, Ino you’re on duty.”

“Hi Iruka-sensei?” Ino leaned on the counter a smile on her face. “Good to see you are you here for some flowers? A bouquet?” Her eyes darted to Naruto. “Oh, hey Naruto what are you here to get? Flowers?”

“Some seeds and some pots but we’ll look around first.” Iruka-sensei looked around. “Kurenai-san got the seeds from in here right?”
“I had picked them out personally, poppies are her favourite.” Ino came from around the counter and wiped her hands on her apron. “That’s what you want?”

“Yeah we are looking for fully grown or seeds, no cut flowers.” Naruto said as his gaze went over the various plants and bushes. “Don’t you have any plants in recovery?” Like the ugly, gloomy plant he had given his sensei that no longer looked so ugly or gloomy.

“There is a lavender that came in a while back but it isn’t in the best shape.” Ino went to the corner and knelt by a small pot. “Needs some work but if you think you can handle it you can have it.”

“Nice how much?” Lavender was not a bad choice, nursing it into something magnificent would be fun too, it could sit in the kitchen window when fully recovered.

“Eh…” Ino considered the plant in her hands. “130 ryo and I’ll throw in some plant food. It is in really terrible shape.”

“That’s fine with me.” Naruto pulled his wallet out. “I need some bigger pots too.”

“The poppy seeds too, at least two types.” Iruka-sensei joined in. “Some starter pots for them too.”

XxX

“Sasuke-kun!” It was not his name but Kakashi looked back all the same. He saw Ino waving enthusiastically in their direction and while Sasuke most likely would have continued walking, Sasuke was accompanying him so when Kakashi stopped, Sasuke had to stop.

“Hello Ino.” He said when she hurried part of the way out of the store.

“Kakashi-sensei!” She sent a glance towards Sasuke but beyond stopping and shoving his hands into his pockets Sasuke had not done anything. “You know you just missed them Sasuke-kun. Iruka-sensei and Naruto were just here.”

“Naruto?” That got Sasuke’s attention. “What were they doing?”

“This is far away from their usual haunts.” Kakashi said dryly. “The bath house and the ramen shop aren’t around here.”

“Naruto was buying some plants and Iruka-sensei was getting some seeds. Those two are close huh? They looked like they were heading back to Naruto’s place so if you were looking for them…” She trailed off.

“We weren’t but thanks Ino.” Kakashi generously thanked her. “We just might pop in on them later.” That got him a smile and a goodbye. He waited until Ino had returned to the store to continue walking. “You’re so cold to anyone outside the team Sasuke.”

“You’re one to talk.” Sasuke scoffed.

XxX

Sakura spluttered at the water splashed into her face unexpectedly. “Hey!”

“Finally you’re back with us.” Tenten shook her head at her. “Where were you? Since we got here you’ve been drifting off and I know it isn’t anything mission related. You get a totally different look on your face.”

“It’s just nothing really.” Sakura groaned, she wiped her face before she settled herself deeper in
the bath. “Just sometimes curiosity sucks you know? I mean here we are working so hard and when I don’t have work with my team and training I’m yanked and being interrogated by people I don’t know.”

“Being accessed.” Tenten corrected as she sat in the deepest part of the bath. “That’s a good thing! You don’t want to get stuck with the paperwork do you? You already complain about how many different reports you have to write.”

“Kakashi-sensei had it so easy until Tsunade-sama came along.” Sakura sighed wistfully. “Just one sheet of paper but those days are gone now. Now everything has its own report can you believe that?”

“Well it is Tsunade-sama.” Tenten’s eyes danced with admiration. “She has a plan I’m sure of it and isn’t that how the hospitals are run anyway? Makes sense she would bring some order into the administration building.”

“I know you’re a fan.” Sakura laughed. “But wait until it is your turn and you’re borrowing books from the library and nagging people so you know exactly what has to go into your report. It is so crazy but that isn’t what is bothering me.” She sank deep into the water until her chin was covered. “But all I can do is wait it out so…”

“Sounds terrible.” Tenten said softly. “Want to go for meat after this? I’ll treat I got a coupon from a mission a while back.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Sakura breathed.

XxX

“It’s a nice day.” Itachi told Shisui softly. “Quiet.”

“Hn.” Was Shisui’s response as he knelt in the tree.

“I’ve got one unresponsive person at home Shisui.” Maybe it was harsher than it need to be but he had spent the week being ignored and rejected. Shisui’s expression changed then, an apologetic look.

“Sorry about that.” Shisui straightened and tugged at the ANBU masked tied around his neck. “I just can’t help but feel that there is something wrong. That we’re missing something and with Tsunade-sama coming down on everyone’s head like a ton of bricks I like to be at least a little bit prepared.”

“That is understandable.” Itachi leaned against the trunk his eyes on the boy far ahead. “He’s rather close to T&I. I understand wanting a high perch but this is rather high.”

“They know he’s there and they were nervous at first but they seemed to have gotten over it.” Shisui frowned. “I want to get closer but we can’t. What’s he even doing up here? Even for a member of Kakashi’s team he’s weird.” Itachi snorted at that. “We’re weird too, we’re all weird but Itachi the kid is seriously weird.”

“I know.” Itachi’s eyes searched the area ahead and the hill Naruto was on. Down below was a serious drop and the river. “He is strange and it is not just to his experiences, he is well adjusted.”

“I swore he would have nightmares.” Shisui said softly. “I swore he would cry at night you know? But after the debriefing it was as if he just clammed up and that isn’t normal. I keep thinking about the way he devastated that forest Itachi and how he looked in that bed, how both of them looked in
that bed. That made it more real.”

“I understand.” And he did, it was hard not to smother not just his brother but all the genins. Hard to pass them and keep going knowing the threats that faced them, Sasuke was his brother and Itachi’s allegiance was of course to his village but that changed nothing about how he felt as a shinobi. Too many acquaintances and too many people suffered during the attack. Just because some were ready to shoulder the burden did not mean that everyone wanted them to shoulder that burden.

He especially did not want his brother hurt, he did not want his family hurt but there was duty. There was a need but Itachi never forgot what they were protecting, what they were fighting for. He knew that he fell weakened in some areas but that was just the true fate of their clan.

“What is he going to do?” Shisui snorted before he sat in the tree properly. “You know you just can’t figure that brat out after all. He smiles big and he acts like every other kid sometimes then you stumble across him training sometimes and you know that kid has seen some shit. That kid’s version of normal is so fucked up I don’t know a clan that could compare.”

“They did a number on him in more ways than one.” Itachi’s fingers sank into the tree bark. “A few more years under them and he would have been a problem for Konoha.”

“A few more years and he just might have won.” Shisui snorted. “I’ve seen that kid do some fighting routines that make you look sane, some of the things he does are so advanced, no shinobi should know and especially not a genin.” He stressed. “I don’t blame the council for being worried, I don’t know if they had foreseen it but the longer I look at the kid I keep hoping that he really is on our side. I don’t know how he can do it.” He finished softly.

Itachi knew just where Shisui’s thoughts had gone. “Forgiven us? Forgiven Konoha?”

“It just seemed so easy in the end and trust me I hate myself for even thinking that but the kid loved those guys.” Shisui paused to roll his eyes. “Obviously not all from the things I’ve heard but from what I’ve heard he loved them and some of them doted on him. Taught him crazy things, talked to him. Things he would have never gotten from Konoha because not only could we not break the law there was no way ANBU could approach him. No excuse that could be given to why most of us were hanging around a shunned kid.”

“It ended up working strangely in the end.” Itachi said softly. “Because although most of us would be tempted to break the law in some way or the other. Be tempted to at least bend the rules, most of us would not have done a thing. Chosen to wait it out and who knows how that would have turned out. Someone that can see beyond their own pain to others, that can sympathize with two opposite sides. It’s painful but somehow I see this being the best-case scenario.”

“You really think he would have turned out anything other than good?” Shisui demanded. “For years he clung to a dream when it would have been easier to let it go, let it all go and bend to what they wanted.”

“I can only work with the facts we know.” Itachi watched Naruto as the boy stared down to the water below. “Painful to contemplate, we all know that these children deserve better but we can’t help the cards dealt to us it is what happens next that defines us all.”

“Kid’s got a pretty decent deck now.” Shisui watched Naruto right along with him. “He’s said goodbye to them, he’s involving himself in the village but I haven’t gotten this far for nothing. I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop there has to be something.”
“He is insightful for his age.” He might blush quickly at the hint of fondness and gentleness but his eyes watched and accessed, some wild animals could never lose that feral attitude, that wildness in their eyes and he feared Naruto was the same. The last few days it had looked as though the boy was fighting the feelings he held. Forcing himself to remain still, forcing his body to calm way beyond what many would advise.

“He’s something for his age alright. Gotta say I admire how team seven’s shaping up. Genma’s right you know, that whole team is a bunch of monsters waiting to be unleashed. First it was Naruto but after that second exam? After the battle?” Shisui said softly. “I don’t know if I’ve ever seen a team focused like this. Maybe this is why Jiraiya-sama can’t keep from interfering. Maybe it is why Tsunade-sama has us doing so much work and she keeps asking so many questions. I never doubted they had potential but… have you seen them in action?”

“I’ve seen them sparring.” A gentle admission, he had seen them from a distance with Kakashi’s knowledge. He had watched the smile on Naruto’s face as he sparred with his team. He had listened to the laughter that came from the team when something worked out just right. He had lived for the smug look on his little brother’s face along with the look of success.

“Vicious little things they are, Haruno is quick as a whip but somethings you can’t beat and instincts is one of them and Naruto? I’ve seen enough to know he’s trying to supress his but that group they hammered some stuff into him and when the right situation comes he’s going to act in a way that won’t be able to be explained normally.”

“It’s already happening, with every mission. With every moment that he is around others he will reveal himself. it is better they learn of his time lost first, before they have to face the reality of that.”

“Because it is terrifying?” Shisui laughed.

“Because they’ll remember.” Itachi said softly. “They’ll look back with fresh eyes and they will see everything differently. The Sandaime had been trying to aim for something but there is a danger with so many unknowledgeable. They’ll look back at those that kept them in the dark, they’ll remember looks and whispers. They’ll remember Naruto.”

“Well it isn’t as if some people won’t deserve it.” Shisui said softly. “But that kids has plenty of work ahead of him, I’d love to know the actual plan. I don’t think he’s noticed that he’s gained quite a few fans.”

“He feels responsible for the likes of the Sandaime’s grandson.” Itachi could not help but shake his head. “Everyone is a potential friend until proven otherwise. He won’t keep score, he’ll do what he thinks is the right thing because he likes them.”

“That works out for us.” Shisui said softly. “But what is he doing up there? Is he going to fly next?”

XxX

He had spent a long time looking down at the water below before he had gotten down to business. High points were good, they were calming and there was something about looking out to Konoha and seeing green. It was a relaxing sight.

For him that needed a centre that was just what he needed. To look down and out as his thoughts swirled around him. The more days that passed the better he was coming back to himself, but still nothing beat Ryu’s ideas. Meditation helped bring calm to him and that calm lingered, it was easy
to reach for when his temper flared.

The more he did it the easier it was to cool down when he wanted to. No wonder Ryu had been so easy going no matter the problem or horror. Granted he had seen and experienced plenty of scary stuff but he had always been centred. Even when they had been caught unawares, even when shady people that had come into the group for a short time betrayed him Ryu had kept his cool.

That was nice. Naruto wished he could keep his cool with all the surprises and unpleasant things around him. It was hard not to think about the shady shadow organization looking for him and it was even harder to ignore the threat that was Orochimaru.

As if would even want to forget for a single moment that he was being hunted. There was no relaxing only a delay. Still he needed to keep his calm and his cool. He reopened his eyes to be greeted by the brilliance of light and village. The sky itself looked brighter than before. His eyes remained on the horizon as he allowed his mind to continue to drift.

“Want to fly Naruto?”

Why would he ever want to forget? There was just so much. So much to remember and when he thought back it was on high speed because how could he process it all? He could not forget any of it.

Still one thing was for certain, he was still him. No matter where he went or what he saw at the core of him he was Uzumaki Naruto. The guy who believes that there is a better future, the guy who would change the future with his own hand if he had to. The guy who had seen amazing things and the guy who was going to go on to do amazing things in his own right. He had to start slow but the day was coming that he would take the village and the world by storm.

He stood up with a smile on his face. He had not come up the mountain heavily armed. Mostly because he knew exactly what the building that he had passed on his way up was. He did not want to alarm anyone. There was no need for him to come loaded up and armed to the teeth either, he had come up for two things after all.

The view to meditate, and to test himself on the way back down. It was why he had brought the cloak with him, it was not because of the dark clouds that loomed so far away. No, he had memories in his head and he had longing in his heart, curiosity in his soul and he had always wanted to catch up no matter the cost.

Some would call it stupid but for him he saw nothing but progress and freedom. A chance to be a bit closer than anything else.

He kept his hands on the necessary tools before he pitched himself off the mountain.

XxX

“Oh fuck!” Shisui had gotten up when Naruto had gotten up, prepared for Naruto to leave to go somewhere he did not expect that. At the most he had expected the kid to dart off, maybe start some new crazy training after the meditation.

Throwing himself off the fucking cliff had not been in the estimated moves at all and while his heart was in his throat and his mind raced, Shisui could feel at least four different people strangling him for letting it happen.

He had been halfway through a shushin when Naruto dug a kunai into the rock, if it had not been for Itachi he would have missed it, still Shisui was forced to watch as the young body slowed itself
bit by bit. It was a dangerous move even with him dragging down the mountain like that. Just when he had started to relax the kid opened his arms and soared to the river below and Shisui started cursing all over again.

XxX

Flying was off the charts for him for a while longer but it had been fun. Nothing like what he remembered, in fact it too reminded him of that mission not too long ago where he had fallen a good amount of feet. No for him, he would have to think more.

Naruto tossed his wet clothes aside and remained in his boxers and mesh shirt. He would have tossed the shirt aside except he felt as though he needed some sort of restriction against his skin. Some sort of pressure so that he did not get carried away.

He had not carried weapons up the mountain but that was fine because he had left his bag waiting on him in his spot.

He had settled his mind, reawaken his body and enough time had passed, he had to get back into training now that he was fresh with ideas and understanding on how he wanted to do the things he wanted to do, how he wanted to bring them to life. His head was just flowing with ideas and half formed ideas and he just wanted to let it flow and see where it carried him.

XxX

“Tell me.” Shisui whispered weakly. “Tell me in all your years and reckless behaviour swear to me right now that you’ve never done anything close as reckless as that!” His hand weakly pointed to the mountain Naruto had dived over.

Itachi was unable to give Shisui the answer he wanted so badly so instead he sat by the other man’s side and gently rubbed his back. “It was a ravine in my defence.” He said softly, that got him a tortured groan from Shisui. “Naruto-kun did well considering the height and lack of proper tools, he was prepared for it all.”

“Please stop talking.” Shisui whimpered. “Please don’t say another word, I need to process this.”

XxX

Instead of just shadowing why not go a step further? He had already seen teamups close up, he had ideas on how it worked how it could work better and how it could work for him. The fan slid open easily and Naruto grounded his feet as he relaxed his grip just enough that his hands would be able to move with enough ease.

He had been thinking about it for quite some time, the battle styles he knew, the things he had watched and the things he wanted to carry forward with him to the future. Never once had he thought of leaving techniques behind. The other things like stupid opinions and helpless decisions, those could be thrown right behind him.

But he did not want to deny his roots, he never wanted others to forget who he was and where he came from. He believed that people died where they were forgotten, that successors could move beyond blood and teachers, he believed it took heart and love to carry things forward into the future.

Things that existed that no one knew a thing of were truly dead which was why the troupe was supposed to live with him, a group that would live on through his actions, through his fighting and his dreams. It was what he needed to do.
They would live on in him and the best way was to continuing their techniques but there was more to it than that. He was literally the only one that could do what he wanted to do. He had seen the partnerships up close, he knew how they worked around each other, everyone had their strengths and weaknesses but what he could do, what he could easily do was combine the techniques into something entirely new.

Kasumi had been a storm on her own, a whirlwind of blades but she had still fought back to back with Ryu. They had been a team together and the two of them surrounded only meant good things for them. Ryu fought with his fists, his knowledge of fighting when it came to hand to hand had been to a level Naruto had envied at even back then and that was before Ryu started with his clan’s techniques.

Kasumi’s fan had been precious to her and she did do some of her best work with it but Naruto had never failed to notice how easily the two of them flowed together. Back then it had been one of the most graceful things he had ever gotten to see and he was still awed to this day. He not only wanted to do the two of them justice he wanted to surpass them both.

It might sound a little cocky, it might take some work but he honestly felt as though he could do it. He needed to do that because he would never see them fight again but by learning their way, by improving it and making it better they would never leave his heart. Their past would live on and the things they had struggled to learn and pass on would live for a little longer.

Kasumi had been light on her feet, a dancer something almost out of this world. An angel but one covered in blood that brought death, her fan and the carnage she brought with it had been art. Ryu on the other hand he had been quick and solid, he had moved in ways that Naruto saw in other shinobi. The older ones, quick, calculated and sure.

Combining the two things into one body was not going to be easy. They had worked good together, worked around each other and had blended together but they had been two separate bodies when it came down to it and Naruto was aware of the fact.

He shifted his footing even as he breathed light and easy, the fan was a calming weight in his hand but his mind was a struggle. He had to move one way and direct the fan another while keeping an eye on his target, all while he plotted out a path. Considering the jutsu he had not too long ago mastered he was not exactly worried but the entire thing was still complex in its own right.

He moved a certain way with a certain movement to accommodate the fan. He moved like her in order to fight like her, it was almost as though she were at his side or even guiding his steps. The same for Ryu. It was almost like he was at his back or guiding him when Naruto fought like him.

But that was not the plan this time, he still wanted them there by his side with each step but they had to be together, he had to bring them together and that took work. Style could come later, targeting could come later, he had to get it to work.

He brought the fan to cover his face as he centred and breathed in deep, then he lowered it enough that his eyes were revealed. He could feel Kasumi behind him as he waited for the moment to strike. The fan lowered again, he made a small rotation with it in his left hand even as his right hand moved to thrust, then the fan came up even as his right hand retreated, a slice as his body sank low. It would take some time, it would take some tweaking but although it felt clumsy he felt as though they were right there by him and that made the effort more than worth it for him.

Xxx

“I’m not ever going to get this kid.” Shisui admitted when the relief for his watch finally arrived.
“No matter how many heart attacks he gives me, no matter how many normal and weird stuff he
does. No matter how long I watch him, I’m never ever going to get this kid.” The ANBU mask
showed no sympathy but he could feel it pouring off of weasel anyway and honestly that was what
counted.

“We’re here to observe not to have opinions and not to understand.” Boar was the same as always.
The understanding and the getting, that privilege goes to the Hokage and his commanding officer.
We’re here to watch and protect from the shadows.”

“And I’ll tell you now that the shadows might not be close enough to protect the kid from himself.”
Shisui said tiredly. “I thought it was going to be a quiet day, it had looked to be a simple easy
mostly quiet watch but of course when the really chaotic gone to shit days come it always starts
deathly quiet doesn’t it?” He grumbled.

XxX

Well it was not a complete disaster and it had not been a waste of time either but it certainly needed
work. It would take time and reassessment to get anywhere close that he wanted to be, for him to
consider using it in an actual fight with things on the line. There was a long way to go before it
could be considered one of his cards to deal for battle.

Naruto ducked his head in the river for a brief moment to cool his head and came up spluttering
before he shook the excess droplets away. It was not a bad beginning. It was not where he wanted
to be with it but these sorts of things took time.

Still, he had time to continue other things, he still had the energy and he certainly had the
motivation and ideas. The combining had only been a small part of it, he still had strength training
to do and since he was a good distance from others it would be the perfect time to work on his
speed and his dodging. He was still pretty fast but nowhere near where he wanted to be. He had
ideas and strategies and too many times he had been frustrated with himself on missions.

He needed to dodge better and he needed to dodge more, he needed to read body language better
and faster, these were all things he had to work on if he wanted to perfect even some of the things
he wanted to do and honestly, there was no time like the present to get started. He was in the mood,
he had the tools and the time. Naruto grinned at the fuzzy reflection of himself in the stream before
he pushed himself to his feet, he was ready to go again.

XxX

So many things he could do on the days that he had off, so many things he did actually do on his
day off but one thing he had decided to do after too many surprises from fights and the shinobi he
might one day have to fight next to had led Naruto to try and play catch up.

Granted the first time he had come had not been about catching up at all, he had just wanted to
be close to Iruka-sensei a bit but the man had been teaching not handing out scrolls so there was
only one thing he could do if he wanted to be close and that was stick around.

Iruka-sensei’s voice had floated through the open window and it was not as if Naruto had anything
better to do. His chores had been finished, everyone one else had other things to do and searching
for others had been too much of a headache, there was an itch at the back of his neck that told him
it was too soon to go exploring so he had sat under the window and closed his eyes to listen to
Iruka-sensei’s lecture. Nothing he had not already known but that did not change the fact that he
had enjoyed listening, he had felt close to the man just by being there.
Of course Iruka-sensei most likely did not know that Naruto was just outside listening to lessons of history and shinobi rules. Naruto was there to observe not participate. Iruka-sensei had a job to do after all and Naruto was highly aware of that.

He was quite fine listening to the lessons as the kids inside struggled through rules and jutsus, as they asked questions and tried to give Iruka-sensei hell. He was unable to suppress sniggers whenever Konohamaru tried to raise hell in the classes. He did a pretty good job but Iruka-sensei was best suited for reeling in class clowns.

It was nice, it was fun and even though the stuff Naruto really wanted to learn were barely spoken about it was still useful. He could always laze around and listen but it paid off to keep his hands busy as he relaxed. The shirt had to be mended anyway so it was no real trouble to start on the seams and fix it as the lesson dragged on.

Some of the topics were ridiculously boring or really diluted in order to spare kids but Naruto enjoyed listening anyway. He had promised himself to learn more about the clans around him and it was not as if Kakashi-sensei was unaware of it. The man whenever he noticed Naruto falling behind or just simply lacking information was happy to rattle off on the topic or clan at hand.

Sometimes he and Sasuke fell into small back and forth discussions about Sasuke’s own clan and while Naruto was surprised and grateful for them being so open about the Sharingan Naruto knew he lacked information on the clans that filled Konoha even as he saw the members day to day.

He knew that Kakashi-sensei was not giving him everything and it only made sense. Kakashi-sensei had happily filled him in on the Hyuugas to an extent and while Naruto liked having the basic information on the clans that everyone else seemed to know he knew it was not nearly enough. Of course it was not, how could it be?

There were clans with gifts he knew that and many of the clans were distantly related if you went back enough. Some of them with gifts that had mutated in their own way with either the stories embellished with the times or lost forever until it took actual medical work to reveal the relation.

Konoha had so many clans and they were all important and so visible. He wanted to learn as much as he could how could he not? He was searching for himself as well, clan showed family and family was where you were from and where you ended up.

Kiba’s clan were easy to spot, easy to find and Kiba might be an important kid in terms of clan but he was still the guy Naruto liked to spend time with. Kiba’s sister did work for their clan as a veterinarian and honestly that was so cool, Kiba’s clan were so close to their summons and their nature itself was wild, in time Kiba would be like them and surpass them.

Shino held secrets beyond what one could see, he did not talk much but he listened and he kept things inside. In fact although Naruto would never say that Shino’s clan were withdrawn they were secretive. He had seen Shino’s father plenty of times and the man was soft spoken but firm. His true thoughts a real mystery but Shino was enough like him for Naruto to know Shino admired his Dad. The time would come for Naruto to know more about not only the clan but Shino too. He would never dismiss Shino because he was quiet.

Shino had easily made it to the finals and he had fought for Konoha too. Quiet reassurance. No doubt that Shino would be able to go really hard if the need ever came for it.

There was all of team ten that was wrapped up in tradition and secrets that Naruto had no idea where he was supposed begin. It was not just three clans either it was four because Konohamaru had told him the Sarutobis had some duty to the clan…
Team ten was a team made of teamwork because the three clans were tied together for life and as weird as it sounded it made sense when it came down to protection. Those three would always have each other’s backs and while Ino, Chouji and Shikamaru had a burden waiting for them Naruto had no doubt that with the three of them supporting each other they would not only get somewhere, they would succeed.

Team ten needed each other, Ten eight supported and matched each other. No matter where one looked there was clan patiently waiting not only to be acknowledged but to guide Konoha.

Everyone knew most of the story of Konoha’s formation but when Naruto tried to look at the clans closer he felt awed. All those different clans had come together and tried to do something, different abilities, strengths, beliefs, ideals and they had carved out Konoha. Most likely Naruto did not know the whole story, he doubted any of them knew the true story but it was still kind of cool.

Of course the village, the great villages everything had an explanation to it and he was in there too and somewhere was Uzumaki. He had no doubt he would find it and open all the other questions he had about himself.

Xxx

Well Naruto did not exactly have a problem with hanging out with his team when they had time off but the note seemed suspicious. It was Sasuke’s handwriting though, he knew that but that did not change the simple fact that the suggestion for meeting and hanging out had not only come from Sasuke it had been planned by him, all Naruto had to do was attend and it was not as if he had any problem with going.

An evening out with team seven minus Kakashi-sensei seemed like fun. They already had their own little things they did together without their sensei because the man was either busy or ended up being ridiculously late.

Still it was the tone of the note that confused him, it made him hesitate with the note in his hand fresh out the shower as he thought about it. The necklace around his neck which had gotten chilled in the shower warmed up against his skin as he read the note over and over again.

Well it was not as if he had much in the first place, it he was reading too much into it, it was not as if he had that many choices anyway. He had inquired only once about the clothes he had been brought back in. He obviously was not going to see those again and his shinobi clothes were just easier to get, they were cheaper, his size was always there and no one could ever mistake it for theirs.

He could modify the clothes later and he always did. So many things to do to his clothes so that he could carry more, conceal more and be a walking surprise. Still he could tone down a bit, he was off duty.

Xxx

Sasuke was late, it made him frustrated because he had planned this, had went out of his way to do the whole thing and he ended up being late. Not ridiculously late but it did not make him feel better to see Naruto by the lamppost his hands in his pockets as he waited.

Even Sakura was waiting, she sat on the bench by the path her hands folded. When Sasuke got closer he saw her stifle a yawn. Naruto looked up at him then and the smile that spread across his face at seeing Sasuke really made it hard to do this properly.
“Sorry for being late.” He muttered when he reached them. “Ran into some unexpected things.” Mostly people gawking but that would have to be put behind him. Naruto’s eyes lit up anyway and Sasuke was reminded of the rock he had at home and the reason he was doing what he was doing.

“So where are we going first?” Naruto glanced between him and Sakura. “Food is an obvious thing but since we’re in the park does that mean we’re doing something park related?” He tugged at his simple shirt. “I mean I guessed we weren’t going to train but your note sounded like this was kind of casual but…”

He broke off at the flowers Sasuke shoved into his chest. Sasuke fought the embarrassment threatening to overwhelm him and instead started to speak. “No one got around to ever thanking you, for going and getting us the new Hokage. So congratulations, it is late but…” his gaze slipped to the small bouquet of daisies, he had gotten help on picking flowers but it had been so hard to choose anything but those flowers. “For helping everyone.” Sasuke finished.

A snort came from Sakura before another bouquet was shoved at Naruto. “Yeah…” She said slowly, Sasuke met her amused gaze before she turned to Naruto. “You’ve been working so hard and in all the madness and celebration no one thanked you for what you did. I’ve heard it was difficult to get Tsunade-sama back to the village so this is us thankful and grateful to you Naruto.” The back of her neck was a light pink while she finished.

She could make fun of him all she wanted but to say things so bluntly. To state it so badly in the open. To say it so loudly was embarrassing and Naruto might be able to easily say such things but Sasuke had to struggle enough as it was and he had not even gone to the lengths Naruto could go easily.

“You guys.” Naruto gently took both bouquets; his eyes were darker and misty. “You guys…” His smile was slow but it lit up his entire face. Sakura gave an answering smile and Sasuke was unable to help following. It was embarrassing as hell, Naruto was confusing as hell but that happy smile, that delight and surprise made it worth it. Besides now they were even. “I’m going to dry these and put them somewhere.” Naruto’s eyes dropped to the flowers in his hands. “Can we go to my place really quick? To drop them off before we do whatever you guys want to do?” It certainly was worth the embarrassment.

XxX

“Catch your breath, Shizune is going to kill you when she finds you.” Jiraiya chuckled. “Going to be you alone because I’m not going to be caught.”

“You’ll do something perverted and be found quickly enough so we’ll be both suffer.” Tsunade laughed, she nudged him away gently and sprawled over the railing. “The sky is nice, the air is cool.”

“We drank a little too much.” Jiraiya admitted. “Bar hopping at our age, we have no shame.”

“I remember the last time we drank so much, twenty bars and then the morning came, we drank and got kicked out by every single one.” She slumped forward before she pushed her hair back with a shaky hand. “Remind me to check your liver sometime.”

“Check yours first.” Jiraiya said dryly. “You’ve been abusing it far more than me.” He trailed off when he noticed she was no longer listening to him. “What caught your attention now? We’re too old to be racing around in the middle of the night Tsunade.”

“I was just looking at your little egg.” She teased. “That’s him over there isn’t it?” Jiraiya followed
the direction of her finger to spot Kakashi’s little team in the middle of the path below. Naruto seemed to be getting flowers from his team members and the look on his face brought a loud laugh from Jiraiya that he was thankful did not carry far.

“Looks like even the kids are up to something.” He mused as he rested against the same railing Tsunade was sprawled against. “I have to say I wonder if Kakashi knows just what his little team gets up to. I’ve heard of some romance on teams but this has to be the first love triangle I’ve seen.”

“Is it like that?” They watched Naruto gather the flowers up in one hand before he rubbed his head. “I hadn’t thought he reached that point yet.”

“Well I haven’t been around the entire team.” Jiraiya pointed out. “But no, I don’t think it is like that at all.” Naruto hugged his team and his laughter was loud enough to reach them. “They might be kids but they’ve got a firm understanding of themselves. They want to value and be valued.”

“The kid is more than valuable.” She said softly. “This is cute.”

“I told you.” Jiraiya pointed out. “I told you he is a cute kid. I knew you wouldn’t be able to resist. He might be a loud brat sometimes, he might make your heart hurt other times but you can’t help smiling along sometimes can you?” He watched Tsunade’s expression, she had started to sober up. “Now what?”

“Nothing I can put my finger on, or well nothing I’m willing to talk about at this time. But he’s doing fine Jiraiya, he’s doing just fine.” Her lips curled into a smile. “Far better than I expected.”

“You’ve got reports and reports on the kid, can’t you just admit that you like looking at him? That looking at this…” Jiraiya shook his head. “He can be really friendly huh.”

“To the people he likes it seems, of course that is a trait all his own. Or maybe not, I recall her doing some enthusiastic hugging from time to time.”

“I never got any hugging, the most I got was getting to touch the belly.” Jiraiya sighed. “But the Yondaime got hugging and he gave it too, I think what Naruto does would embarrass them just a tiny bit. But isn’t that cute, giving him flowers.”

“I wonder what the occasion is it looks sort of private.” Tsunade mused. “They haven’t done anything officially for Naruto to be receiving a reward although he should get flowers for being the most frequent patient. The boy doesn’t know limits.”

“He knows them.” Jiraiya corrected. “He is just pushing them.” He watched the kids down below as he slowly sobered up. “This is nice, when you see things like this. It makes getting old worth it.”

“You sound like someone’s grandfather.” She said softly as she studied the team down below.

Xxx

Iruka had enjoyed another full day and had gotten dragged into something troublesome at the end of it. He enjoyed work, he enjoyed teaching at the academy, he enjoyed bringing order to the various reports and he believed his insights on the genins he knew helped with assigning the various missions.

He liked his work and while many other teachers despaired of class clowns, Iruka himself was reminded of himself and could only smother his laughter. Class clowns were so cute with their pranks and interruptions, look a little further, search a little harder, be willing to listen. Be willing to understand and those class clowns always crumbled a little. He had after all and look at him
now.

Of course he enjoyed being a Chuunin as well, many aimed for Jounin and enjoyed it but considering that Iruka had many bones to pick with the Jounins around Konoha he would prefer not to join their ranks. He enjoyed his work as it was, many aimed higher but he was satisfied with what he had and he enjoyed the ways he could serve the village.

He did not mind getting dragged into recreational fun by the Jounins that he did know but he had papers to grade, he had his own things to do and while they wanted to raise hell Iruka wanted to go home and sleep.

He just might be a little bit tipsy. He came to stop under a streetlight as the cool air did its work on his senses. He had went because he did not have to pay and they always poured a few drinks into him. He had not had any pressing engagements so he had gone because why not? But he had sensed the trouble coming as his friends got more and more carried away so he had dismissed himself.

He shook his head at how quiet he had gotten but these things did happen, it was nice that things were calming down enough that he could be dragged along without guilt and lingering thoughts to stacks of paperwork… no it had been the filing that had occupied his thoughts.

It was sitting there on the cart just waiting for him in the morning and no matter how many mixes or shots he took the thought would not leave his mind. It loomed even though Iruka knew a break was good once in a while. Although most of his breaks tended to end up being with Konohamaru or-

He had to be seriously tipsy to not even notice or hear them they had not even been hiding, sprawled out on the grass the three of them. Even Sasuke looked content, there had to be a story behind the flowers gathered to one side but Iruka was just transfixed at the sight of Naruto so happy and between his two team members.

Content, hanging out with his team. In the village safe and getting the chance to be like every other kid just how Iruka had hoped for. A chance to grow, get stronger get his dream and have everyone acknowledge him for the sweet kid he was.

He was tipsy so he could get away with the little tear that escaped his eye at the sight of team seven lying on the grass pointing out stars and laughing. This made it worth it, the fear still lingered, that horror of losing someone you cared for and of course Naruto would never be like the other kids in the village but that was okay, they met him where he was and accepted him anyway and soon enough everyone would.

Iruka cleared his throat before he continued along the path. Somethings were better off being left alone and a team bonding moment was not for outsiders or those passing-by.

XxX

Something had happened when he had been away, Kakashi knew it just by how his team stood together as they waited for him. It was in Sakura’s posture, Sasuke’s relaxed stance and in Naruto’s eyes. He would like to think that the difference had been because all of them had gotten up to some sort of teenage mischief but if they had done that he would have known.

He would have known, gotten called to face at least three people one of them being the Hokage and then Kakashi would have had to go and write up reports and plead for his team’s careers so they had not gone about playing pranks but his team had gotten up to something.
If the prank had been on him well it had not been one in his house because it was the exact same way he left it. No new smells, no strange ones and certainly nothing moved.

Still that did not mean that nothing had happened, he would just have to unravel the mystery and he had plenty of time to do that.

XxX

“This is for the thing you were talking about.” Iruka-sensei rummaged about on his desk before he pulled out a rather worn book. “The process is fairly simple and you still have time. You really want to do this?”

“When am I going to get something like this again?” Naruto chuckled as he flipped through the book, plenty of pictures being the guide as a step by step guide. “This is perfect.” He breathed. “I honestly had been thinking about running an iron over them or something but this is good.”

“You might want to think about… hmm maybe check the bookstore? That old one by furniture repairs.” Iruka-sensei mused as he read through a scroll only to snort and toss it onto a cart. “Hmm let me see there should be books that cover the same topic in different ways too. You still have time but options are nice.”

“I gotta pick up a book to store them in too.” Naruto agreed. “I guess I’ll swing by after my next mission. No time now.”

“Your session is today isn’t it?” Iruka-sensei glanced at the calendar. “You want something to snack on before you go? Konohamaru’s class made some hard candy the other day.”

“I’ll pass… but thanks.” Naruto said slowly. “I’ll be mostly drinking if I do anything when I’m there. All that talking makes me thirsty.”

XxX

“So we’re not going for ramen now?” Kakashi lowered his book as he eyed his team as they walked in front of him. “Are you feeling okay right now?” After such an annoying mission, he would have sworn his team would have gone straight for food in order to wind down.

If they had been a little older he would have sworn they would have headed to the nearest bar in order to drown out the mission entirely. The mission had been taxing on their collective patience after all. Even Kakashi himself had been ready to finish and come back home.

“What?” Naruto looked so offended Kakashi brought the book back up to muffle his laugh. “Of course not. I just gotta do something first, there is a book I want to buy if it is in stock. Iruka-sensei told me about it and hopefully it is there because those things are going to die soon.” He shot an amused glance at Sasuke who only sighed in return.

Kakashi had not figured out exactly what had happened with his little team when he had not been around but it did involve the flowers on Naruto’s kitchen table in some way. There were two separate vases so that meant two people and from there he was able to figure out the who.

Not the why or the how. Kakashi was so curious, he really wanted to know but no matter how he hinted Naruto’s eyes would dance at him before Naruto pretended not to know what Kakashi was hinting at. It was sort of cute but he really wanted to know.

They ducked into the old shop together and the small bell that rung at their entrance only rang out of politeness for the owner. Kakashi resisted temptation and instead wandered with his little team
to the DIY section as Naruto rifled through various help books.

He kept an eye on them as they talked in hushed voices and rifled through books. It was amusing, it was relaxing and it just seemed to fit. When Naruto found the book he wanted, a book on preservation Kakashi had a moment of understanding that he covered up by watching another stack of books instead.

“Shouldn’t you get something to put them in? Like a photo album or something.” Sakura said as she looked around.

“I was planning on a special notebook.” Naruto’s eyes swept the various stacks. “Don’t worry I have it covered, I want to try a little of everything too. Guess we’ll need a small container according to this book.”

XxX

“So you decided to do both methods after all.” Kakashi-sensei’s voice was of no surprise to Naruto. Somehow Naruto had managed to miss the man’s regular basket drops at his place so he was long overdue for the man to catch him at home and press the basket on him.

“Yeah.” He agreed as he grinned at the two glass containers that held two different flowers. Forever frozen in time and forever a reminder. “I wanted to keep them, I didn’t want to throw them away so I had planned on pressing them and tucking them into a book or something. Then I got talking to Iruka-sensei.” He admitted with a laugh. “The idea of keeping at least one flower how it was for well… a long time… I liked that.” He whispered before he touched the one that held Sakura’s flower.

A sunflower and he had enjoyed picking the one flower out of the many that her bouquet had been crammed with. Sasuke had given him all of one type so he had picked the best of them all and pressed the rest and tucked them into a notebook.

“I’m not surprised.” Kakashi-sensei admitted as he rested the basket of vegetables on the table. “But they look very nice. You work quickly.” He tilted his head as he eyed the two preserved flowers that rested against the spice set on the table. “Done so well in such a short amount of time.”

“The instructions were easy to follow.” Naruto reassured even as he knew that was not what his sensei was referring to. “And it was a case of trial and error. I tried on other things before I used those and it came out well even though I did it right away.” He beamed at the flowers. “They look nice you know? Giving the place a different kind of feel.”

“You’ve been giving your place a different kind of feel bit by bit.” Kakashi-sensei slowly turned around his eye taking in everything. “If it is not gifts from well-meaning friends and acquaintances, you’re bringing something home.”

“A plant.” Naruto interrupted. “I bring plants home and not all of them stay inside you know.”

“Forgive me.” He knew that his sensei was amused just by the hitch in his breath. “You’re bringing home plants that catch your interest or you’re working on some sort of project. I have to say Naruto, no one could ever mistake this place for anything but lived in.” His sensei stressed. “This place is undoubtfully yours and you feel it from the moment you walk in the door. Things like this…” he waved towards the preserved flowers. “It just adds to it a tiny bit more. I hope you took a picture of the flowers before you preserved them.”
“Sakura-chan did.” Naruto grinned.

“That’s nice.” His sensei chuckled. You should put the picture in the book that holds the flowers.”

“That isn’t a bad idea…” Naruto mused. “I’ll have to ask Sakura-chan but I bet she had planned to give me a picture when she made copies.”

XXX

Well it had taken some time, taken some missions and some indulgences but he felt calm again. Happy and ready and that was what mattered. Sakura and Sasuke had really surprised him with the flowers. He wished Sakura had been fast enough to get snaps of Sasuke’s face, to him that had been priceless and beautiful too.

He had not expected to be thanked for what he did. He did not think he should be either. He had set off to find Tsunade baa-chan but he had been bribed and almost dragged, only the benefit of having the Sandaime and Lee fixed had really gotten his feet to move. Otherwise they would not have gotten him out the village with Ero-sennin without more of a fuss being made.

It had been worth it, he could see that in the village and with Lee. Even though she was a drunk and a gambler she seemed to be a decent enough Hokage. Everyone held praises for her. She really did know what she was doing and although she had everyone swamped in paperwork, things seemed to be doing great for Konoha.

She really seemed to have settled in, if she was not barking orders and arranging for really troublesome missions she was doing research or having meetings.

The wind ruffled his hair as Naruto sat on the Hokage mountain to stare out at Konoha. It was a nice view. It was better to actually sit on the actual faces sometimes but he had caught a few ANBU looking and watching him so he had decided to sit at the very top of the mountain for the best view, it really was nice.

He was happy, he had friends, he had friends that appreciated him. Friends that wanted to make him feel wanted and he did feel wanted. He missed his old life but that did not mean he rejected the one he had. He had a place to call home, a base and he could fill it with things. He did not have to abandon anything and he could collect as many memories as he wanted. Many might not get the deal about the flowers but Naruto only wished he could have preserved the entire bouquets, held them suspended forever.

He was carrying the troupe with him but that did not mean he did not miss them that he would abandoned what he currently had. After all he knew they would not only be proud of what he had done, of what he was doing. He knew they would support him and his dream every step of the way. He watched the trees down below and he swore he felt for a moment slim hands sliding around his waist and a chin resting on his head.
Sheltered love

Chapter Notes

So I'm doing Nano in hopes I'll be able to shove more words into this fic before the end of the year. I want to hit as close to 500K as I can. That won't be uploaded though lol. But I just want that I have 500K down at the very least omg.

I hit the 10K mark yesterday so go me! Let's hope I can continue to be so productive when editing is holding me back... December for certain I'll be uploading weekly but idk if I'll have enough chapters to upload every week for this month. Lots of words yes, lots of chapters? No.

But in other news I'm glad to announce this current arc(simple missions in my notes) stops at 65 \o/ What that means is that we are soon going back to dip into canon. I've been getting some really good questions lately about the canon that I have confirmed is going to happen. Ahh I can't wait to take a vacation when you darlings see what I've done ^.^ I'm working really hard for this so for now enjoy the chapter, keep an eye out and read carefully. You might miss something.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Things are going fine.” Tsunade bit her pen as she read through the assembled request. “I’ve gone through this three times up down and sideways.” She paused to look at the reports on her desk.

“There is no other way around it, this is the best move, Shizune!”

“Tsunade-sama?” Shizune had been attending to something else entirely and she tended to ignore Tsunade unless she needed her or unless Tsunade’s hand started to creep towards the hidden bottle in the bottom drawer. “You’ve come to a decision then? Who do you want me to call?”

“I’ve decided to make a special team for this one.” Tsunade read over the report again. “I know who is best suited but I can’t help this feeling.” She stressed. “In my gut I know that sending a normal four-man cell would not be enough but to send two four-man cells would be pushing it.” She frowned. “It is time for a five-man cell just for this, the four-man cell would operate just as normal with the fifth member as a reserve.” She bit back her smile only barely.

“Tsunade-sama.” Shizune’s gaze was suspicious and it was well deserved, she most likely had a small inkling to what Tsunade’s intentions were but she had no real proof and in the end that was what really mattered when it came down to it. “Who do I call?”

“Well I’m certain you can guess.” Tsunade shook her request at Shizune. “Use your brain Shizune.”

“Naruto-kun.” Shizune closed her eyes briefly to hide the quick roll that Tsunade knew she did. “You’re pulling him from team seven then? For this one mission?”

“He’s suitably qualified.” Tsunade grinned as her eyes went over the request again. “He’s marvellous at bringing back results but he has to learn to play nice with other teams.” It was not the only reason but if the council wanted to pry that would be the answer she would give with no shame.
“And that has nothing at all to do with the fact that you want to test him out in the field. Poor Naruto-kun. He’s soon going to think that you’re bullying him Tsunade-sama.”

“Nonsense.” Tsunade grinned. “It’s his lazy sensei that’s going to think that. Naruto is going to be glad to do something new, besides it all works out in the end for team seven.” She rifled through the papers on the desk to find the other report. When she found it, she flashed in in Shizune’s direction so that she could see the stamp. “See? Everyone taken care of. This is just making sure that everyone is busy.”

XxX

Kurenai had not been a Jounin long but something she knew she would not get used to was the standby time for missions. Chuunins were busy like bees. There was something to be done or someone to be helping and while it was not missions all the time there were far more Chuunins than anything else in the village and Chuunins ran most of administration.

There had been so little down time, there was helping, training, assisting while they could. It simply was not easy for her or anyone else so having the time to herself to walk around the village, read, spend time with her plants was strange to her.

She enjoyed spending time with her team while she could. She invited them over, there were plenty of bonding events that she tried to do to encourage them to not only get used to each other but to open to each other and it seemed to work.

They grew in their own ways and like many teams they had grown close together and worked together not just spending time together with her urging but at theirs as well, training together when she was not free, helping each other with their own personal pursuits. It was a wonderful thing to see as their squad leader.

She had dreamed of such a team for so long and to see them put to use made her heart warm. It would take time to get them to the heights she knew that they could reach but she was willing to take her time to get them there. They all had their individual strengths and weaknesses but she had no doubt that they would work together in order to balance it out. It was already happening.

The Chuunin exams had taught them a lot about themselves, during the first to second and of course the finals and the tragedy that had occurred after. She was relieved that Kiba had bounced back so quickly. She was thankful for Hinata’s recovery although she had wanted to dispatch some justice herself during the fight and after and of course Shino was tamping down on the temper he had discovered that he had.

And of course her team, hunters in training had all found something to observe. She set her watering can down as she looked at her young poppies. She had nothing against Uzumaki Naruto no matter the past, in fact she felt indebted to him for what he had done for Hinata.

The boy was simply too kind. The way he smiled at her, the way he had eagerly trained with her and of course the rage that had ignited in his eyes at Neji after the fight. Teachers should be impartial but she had been grateful for the win, Asuma had known of course, he had known the moment she sat down to watch the fight that she was rooting for justice to be done.

Her team was precious to her she did not want them to be hurt, not Hinata, not Kiba and not Shino but a world of hurt was ahead of them all. It was simple nature. It was how the world of shinobi worked, those that were too kind got hurt the most, those with the kindest of hearts always carried sorrow within them. They were so young and she wanted to shield them as much as she could.
But she knew the closer to Naruto they got, the more they observed him they would be drawn into
the danger that was drawn to him. They were no Shikamaru but they would piece together the
pieces bit by bit. They were already fond of him, when the truth was revealed, when the dangers
came to their door she had no doubts that her team would fight.

She honestly felt sorry for Kakashi a bit, Kurenai had her own troubles but she did not have to
worry about S-class shinobi trying to steal away or destroy her team. There were targets on
Sasuke’s and Naruto’s backs and Kakashi was lucky no one had targeted Sakura yet but
considering that Shikamaru and Sakura were the only ones to make it out of the exam with
recommendations her time might come soon.

It was a little bit depressing to think about. There was danger lurking everywhere, hard to carry on
as if everything was normal which was what made days of rest so bothersome. They needed
something to distract them.

A sparrow fluttered to her windowsill, she eyed the brown feathers before her eyes fell to the red
ribbon tied around it’s leg. She bit her lip before she untied it. The moment that she did the bird
fluttered away leaving the ribbon in her hand. Kurenai sighed to herself, at least the stand by was
over. She was being summoned.

XxX

“Kurenai.” Tsunade looked up the moment that the woman walked into her office. “Good timing.”
She loved when one meeting ended and the other began just like that, especially when one had to
do with the other. “I have your next mission for you but it is a little different to the usual ones that
Team Eight undertakes.”

“I guessed so when I was called personally.” Kurenai smiled. “Is it long term?”

“Not really.” Tsunade considered it. “You’ll be back in two weeks the most, no I’m sending along
a little addition to your team.” She had to fight to keep the delight from her voice. “You’ll have
four members to keep an eye on, a little strange I know but when you go through this you’ll
understand why not only your team is needed but why I’m sending that particular extra along.”

XxX

“I can’t believe your dad made an official request for you to help out.” Naruto snorted as he held
the request paper to his nose. “It’s a D-rank! An actual D-rank! And you’re going to be doing it
alone too.”

“Well you got requested to a C-rank.” Sakura pointed out. “I have a C-rank too but I’ll be going
along with Kakashi-sensei.”

“We all have something to do.” Naruto sighed. “Well I don’t mind having to go with Kurenai-
sensei.”

“I bet.” Sasuke mumbled as he grabbed his request paper back.

“For gods sake.” Naruto groaned. “Please behave.” He glared at his two team members. “She’s
different.” He stressed. “She really cares for Hinata, Kiba and Shino too you know? I see her and them
around the village all the time.”

“I bet.” Sakura snickered. “But Sasuke has to stay in the village, he gets the break that we were
promised.” She sighed.
“I’ll be hard at work.” Sasuke waved the paper with a snort. “My Father has lots of work for me to do, most likely training and clan stuff too.”

“And he went through official channels to do it? Couldn’t he have asked you when you were free?” Naruto shook his head. “Your dad is weird but clans can be funny like that.”

“Chances of the two of us syncing up for a break are pretty slim.” Sasuke eyed the report. “I bet it is going to be important but he’ll have me do grunt work first”

“Will you be at the police station? Will you be wearing the uniform? I like their jacket.” Sakura patted her Chuunin vest happily. “Theirs just seems so much better whenever I see it.”

“I’ll be doing the grunt work so of course I won’t be wearing the uniform. Unless janitors have uniforms to spare.” Sasuke sighed. “I guess it would have been too much for the Hokage to let two members tag along.”

“You don’t like team up missions.” Sakura said dryly. “You barely spoke to anyone else on our last one. Without Naruto as a buffer it would get awkward fast. Also if she wanted you on that mission Tsunade-sama would have you there. She has to appease the clans too you know. You haven’t forgotten that your father is your clan head right?”

“I’d love to see anyone forget.” Sasuke muttered. “It’s going to be an annoying mission. I doubt he’ll give me over for a day. I bet I’ll be tied up with this.” He shook the paper. “Until you guys get back.”

“I think Naruto is going to get back first.” Sakura mused. “Right Naruto? My mission is going to take some time and we are further away from Konoha than yours.”

“Well you never know just how long these things are going to go Sakura-chan.” Naruto pointed out. “I don’t even know how team eight works. This is the first time we’re seeing them at work up close. Who knows how long it is going to take us?”

“A week and you’ll be back.” Sasuke glanced between them. “Don’t let them take longer than a week.”

“We still have to travel.” Naruto pointed out, Sakura nodded her agreement. “And I only now just heard about the team up I haven’t met up with them yet to hear the exact details, if we’re going to be given plenty of them. I know how far away the client is though.” He said softly. “I guess if we don’t waste time we’ll be… I guess a day our pace away?”

“A day?” Sakura frowned. “You sure?”

“Or maybe a day and a half our pace. Depends when we leave you know.” Naruto nodded. “And we still have to meet with the client and talk to them and go through all the posturing. That is going to take time then we start the mission so we could get there in a day and half and then the next day we would start the mission.” He wrinkled his nose. “If the client takes afternoon visitors.”

“Goodness I’m glad I’m missing that one, what a waste of valuable time.” Sakura sighed. “Meanwhile I’m dreading the reports Kakashi-sensei is going to try and foist on me when I’m not looking for the sake of experience.”

“Can’t you write up lazy officers?” Naruto demanded, team seven burst into laughter together.

XxX
“Separated again.” Kakashi sighed when Naruto landed on the balcony. “I need to complain to the Hokage, every time I turn around my cute little team is being split apart.”

“Doesn’t that say something about our talents that we are being demanded so frequently?” Naruto was being cheeky as he opened his apartment door. “At least you get to keep Sakura-chan with you.”

“Even part of my team is better than nothing.” Kakashi agreed as he followed Naruto inside. “Iruka is going to be keeping an eye on your plants for you?”

“And Konohamaru.” Naruto’s jacket went flying towards the bed. “Hey who keeps an eye on your plant when we’re gone? Gai-sensei?”

“Sometimes.” Kakashi agreed as he helped himself to Naruto’s cupboard. He easily found the cup ramen and the tea and hesitated only a moment before he removed both and filled up the kettle. “Sometimes Gai is out of the village too so I have some other friends keep an eye on my plant for me. Just ask a few to water it when they are passing by, it only takes a few seconds.”

“After they disarm the apartment.” Naruto corrected and Kakashi nodded to concede Naruto’s point. “So who are these friends? Asuma-sensei? No.” He said softly. “You would have said his name if it was him…” He trailed off before a grin spread across his face. “You can’t give names right? Which means…” Naruto leaned on his table with his eyes shining. “ANBU members.”

“Maybe.” Kakashi nudged the ramen across the table. “Just might be.”

“Certainly means that it is.” Naruto crowed. “Since they hang around so much I should get them to water them too but Iruka-sensei and Konohamaru knows just what to do just Konohamaru tends to be a little overenthusiastic. I’m going to have to teach him pruning soon for when I’m on longer missions.”

“Nice to see you planning ahead.” Kakashi chuckled as he removed the sugar from the cupboard and went into the fridge for the milk.

“Make yourself at home why don’t you.” Naruto grumbled from behind him.

“Well if you insist.” Kakashi drawled before he removed a plate of leftovers. It was carefully covered and did not look anything like takeaway so either Naruto had cooked which was highly likely or someone had gone around sharing food which was just as likely. Still, Naruto had told him to make himself at home and while ramen was good once in a while the cup ramen was simply not in Kakashi’s favour.

He would rather have the real deal any day. Naruto’s surprised squawk made him laugh again even as he grabbed two sets of utensils. There was nothing wrong with sharing, in fact it was an enjoyable act and made food taste even better.

XxX

“There is still plenty of work to be done.” Sasuke said as they ignored the activity of the shinobi a few feet away. “Konoha has calmed down slightly.” He rolled his eyes when Sakura frowned. “For genins and most Chuunins, you’re new of course you’re going to get the grunt work.”

“That isn’t nice at all.” She sighed before she nodded. “But considering how rushed it was when the Sandaime was ill… we went from mission to mission and it was nice to get the extra money, never mind we split it so all we did was speed up the collecting. But considering how it was back then this is better. We still have breaks.”
“We had breaks before.” Naruto reminded her. “And considering we were doing D-rank after D-rank it really doesn’t matter in the end, we can do a bunch of those in a day no problem. It was Kakashi-sensei who was feeling the strain, when he wasn’t with us keeping an eye on us he was doing missions too.”

“I almost forgot about that.” Sakura breathed softly. “Yeah Kakashi-sensei had it worse back then we were barely finished before he was gone and he was late more often than not and plenty of missions we had to do without him, which helped me get a start on figuring out how to write up reports.”

“So when you look at it the village has calmed slightly, it is busy and the structure is a little different to what we are used to.” Sasuke shrugged lightly. “But it is not that bad and it is well thought out, we don’t feel any strain and we all are making a good amount of savings.”

“Not much to spend it on because we’re so busy.” Sakura groaned. “Most my money goes towards food, I get back too late to eat with my parents anyway. It is easier for them not to cook for me but sometimes I’m too tired to cook for myself.” Sakura played with her bun before she sighed. “Buying the camera has to be the most indulgent thing I’ve done for myself. Everything ends up being saved. Even when there is time there is training, there is keeping up with friends and you know what? That’s okay.”

“Is it really?” Sasuke pressed with a frown. “Is that what you really think?”

“Yeah because as the missions get harder you can’t help but think things like that we aren’t kids anymore. Sometimes I feel like an old person because going to the hot springs is like heaven.” She sighed. “I eye my food intake like nobody’s business, most my things are basic with a little something to make me feel better but nothing like what I used to do.” She shook her head. “I can’t remember the last time I thought seriously about things like diet and extra hair care, bare minimum except for special occasions and those usually are the days I go to the hot springs with Tenten or Ino.”

“She’s right you know.” Naruto admitted. “Of course you’re going to think differently after everything that has happened. You have no choice, it feels good to do some of the things you like before but there is so much rush, so much strain the other things you thought were important gets pushed back further and further until you look back and wonder…”

“How it took up so much of your cares because when it comes down to it.” Sakura smiled. “There are so many other things to do. D-ranks after the cash has been split doesn’t bring in that much money but C-ranks and B-ranks? Of course we are not supposed to be taking those sorts of missions yet, or at least not you guys.” She said smugly. “As team seven we end up on some B-ranks, A-rank mission fairly frequently but the cash for those are better… there is something I’ve been thinking about for a while now but it is still too far away.”

“Well when you get closer be sure to tell us.” Naruto instructed. “Don’t leave us in the cold okay? But back to what Sasuke was saying, the village is a bit calmer, the atmosphere is better with Baa-chan as Hokage.”

“She has some strange ideas doesn’t she.” Sasuke mused. “I’ve never heard of teams being used the way we are being used until her. Usually it is the team you’re given until you hit Chuunin but we’re being joined together and pulled apart so quickly.”

“Tsunade-sama has to have a reason.” Sakura frowned. “And don’t forget they pulled Naruto from us too not too long ago when he left to bring back Tsunade-sama so it can’t be a new thing. They always pick who suits best for a mission. Usually they go by team but it seems they are choosing
for ability now which is what they do for Chuunins and Jounins. Creating new temporary teams for certain types of missions, genins or not.”

“I can’t help but be curious to what they would want you for.” Sasuke’s eyes lingered on him. “You have any idea?”

Just suspicions but nothing clear yet. Naruto shook his head. “I don’t even really know why Ero-sennin dragged me along to help him find Baa-chan. Guess there is something going on that they won’t tell even me about.”

“Well that isn’t nice.” Sakura muttered. “But this is the last time we’ll see each other for a while right? Kakashi-sensei and I will be leaving soon, Sasuke-kun starts tomorrow and Naruto’s leaving in the morning.” A smile spread across her face. “Make sure you’re on your best behaviour okay? You’re representing us, don’t go off giving team eight the wrong impression about us now.”

“Hey and what is that supposed to mean?” Naruto protested. “It’s just Kiba and the others.”

“And Kurenai-sensei.” Sasuke paused as a smile teased his mouth. “Sakura’s right, you have to be on your best behaviour, don’t go embarrassing us now. The village is a small place and we already stand out.”

“You have got to be kidding me.” Naruto folded his arms across his chest as he glared his two team members. “That’s not nice! And totally ridiculous what are you guys trying to say? Just how am I going to give a bad impression?”

XxX

“Going to ask me to be on my best behaviour too?” Naruto asked his sensei. His question seemed to have taken the man by surprise because the look shot in his direction was not of the norm.

“I know you’ll be on your best behaviour.” Kakashi-sensei stopped walking to lean against the fence by the walkway. “That wasn’t what I was thinking about.”

“Going to tell me?”

“Hm, not this time.” Kakashi-sensei said softly. “Just be careful and hurry back as soon as you are able. Team seven is not complete with only some of you.”

“Tell that to Baa-chan not me.”

XxX

Naruto took a deep before he stretched where he sat on his bed. He loosened himself up before he eyed the pile before him, it was time to pack. They were meeting in the morning but that did not mean he wanted to rush anything, if anything he might repack in the morning when he rechecked his bag.

It all depended on how he woke up and what mood he was in, besides it never hurt anyone to be extra prepared, the mission was enough that he had to tag along even if it was on Baa-chan’s orders. That was honestly something he had to consider as well when he made his plans.

Never mind what he had read and what he had been told. He had to prepare for himself, he had to make himself guess and most importantly he had to remain calm about the entire thing. Of course it was nice that he was going to be able to hang out with Kiba for a mission.
Working side by side instead of the last clash that had happened between them. He could not wait to see team eight in action up close. He did not know how they worked as a team, how they deferred, their strengths and weakness and maybe it was a little early but the Chuunin exams were going to come around again and while Naruto knew he had an edge many did not have it never hurt to be prepared.

Anything could happen by the time Chuunin exams rolled around again. They could have adapted to him, he doubted they would gain the hard edge he had, even while Konoha had many secrets he doubted that the people he would have to face from his own village would have that rough knowledge.

It was his chance to see them up close, observe and hear them before whatever plan the adults had in mind came to fruition. Besides, there were some people dear to him because of how human they had been while he had been gone.

There was so much to learn that he would not learn by simple books. Team eight was a team full of clans and they were some of the clans that Naruto wanted information on anyway. He had been given quite a few surprises during the exams and while it had kept his blood pumping he liked to limit the amount of nasty surprises.

He expected to be a little uncomfortable some of the times during the mission. There was no real way to prepare for it but it never failed to try to prepare. Team eight, the tracking team with the add along, Uzumaki Naruto the running expert.

Or runner in training because he had never been alone. While the lessons were printed in his brain that did not mean he was the best or even that most of the things he was supposed to know he still knew. Running was hard work and planning, there were different types of running and while Naruto clung to the belief that it took strength to run he acknowledged that sometimes the hardest and bravest thing one could do sometimes was stay.

He however was still fond of running. There was no way to explain it, he had seen the world through eyes that he missed. He missed it but he would miss the village life as well and there was no getting away from that.

Naruto flicked through the triple tray of altered potion bombs. The tray had been a simple treat tray until he had gotten his hands on it, some cleaning, some tinkering and he had gotten himself someplace to store his experiments and then take them into the field.

There was still plenty of work to be done and the briefing had told him that the mission could end up a fairly serious one. Certainly not the place one would experiment with weapons to see how effective they worked but Naruto was going to do it anyway. The heat of battle sometimes provided good insight.

The small tray slipped into a designated spot in his pack. It was barely visible but he knew that it was there and he knew how to reach it quickly so honestly, that was what really counted when it really came down to it.

His bag of needles went in no question, he might need them to incapacitate someone, he could use them as a distraction and of course he might have to scratch someone with one to cover his tracks. The needles were necessary. The small bottle of poison followed the bag of needles into his bag.

His hand lingered on the fan but he understood that leaving it behind would not help him improve, besides size wise it really helped in not taking up too much space. It was a fairly decent sized fan.
His normal mission tools quickly followed along with the padded sheet that had appeared in one of the vegetable baskets a morning that Naruto had missed his sensei but he knew that the miss had to have been by only a few minutes.

Kakashi-sensei had not said anything about the unexpected gift but Naruto was grateful for it all the same and it did come in handy. It was easily packed, it gave warmth and it was good to use no matter the terrain.

A few more things followed into the bag before Naruto deemed it fine to close and then go to sleep for the next day. There was plenty of work to be done. The mission, they would set out in the morning and while it looked fairly easy and straightforward Naruto doubted heavily they had been given all of the information gathered.

Kurenai-sensei would hold onto most of the information given and might choose to bring her team in on the plans and information and keep Naruto out. Of course it could go the other way around and considering just who he was and what the mission would most likely entail, Naruto could see the latter happening.

He would have to keep on his toes even as he tried to enjoy himself. He had a chance to get to know team eight, observe them as they went on the hunt and he got to stretch his legs outside of Konoha. He doubted it would go smooth and he doubted that the C-rank would remain C-rank for very long.

He knew that the C-rank was optional at best but he was not too angry at that. Naruto rested his pack next to one of the legs at the kitchen table. The preserved flowers that he had saved from two bouquets, one from Sasuke the other from Sakura caught his eye. He had put them on the table in order to remind himself of what he currently had and to keep the beauty and awe of that moment with him as long as he could bear.

He stretched again, a long stretch as he moved in different directions. He felt tired, it had been a long day filled with amusement, laughter and of course more questions. He could not wait for the day to come that he would be getting answers even when he did not want them.

It would get annoying and old fairly quickly but it would be nice to avoid the nonsense that usually surrounded people in scandals and earth breaking gossip.

Still he had so many questions and even as he thought about it he knew exactly where he had to start, the problem was finding information without drawing suspicion.

Naruto flung himself face first onto his cleared bed and sighed loudly, the sound muffled by his pillow. He would sleep before exhaustion caught up with him and in the morning, he would be off with another team and missing his with everything that he was capable of and everything that he had. The sooner he was gone, the harder he worked, the quicker he would be back.

Xxx

Kiba was used to early morning training, he was used to getting up early anyway. He could hear well and he already too easily heard everything that went on in the compound that his clan lived in, he heard the dogs, he could smell them. He could hear his mother and sister moving around well before dawn arrived properly so it made no sense to laze around in bed.

Morning was the time to care for the dogs under them. Feed them, walk them and everything else that came after. Just because Akamaru was small did not mean that he did not need care too. He was a small guy and he liked to eat loads, he liked to run too which was just perfect for a ninja dog.
It all worked out so mornings were good for people like him. For people of his clan.

What was the sense lazing around in bed when there was so much to do? Shino was sort of the same. He had his bugs to care for, some had different needs and such and Shino was always looking for new ones even if he did not end up taking them home with him. It was just how it was.

So with all of that behind him, morning missions where he had to leave when fog still hovered around were no real hardship to Kiba. He was up anyway, he had gotten up earlier in order to help out his sister and take make sure Akamaru’s needs were taken care of, all of them.

Had gotten his sister to give one more check over before they went just to be sure. They were going to be gone for a while and while he guessed that was not what she wanted to do first thing in the morning after she woke up it was not as if Kiba was asking for a selfish reason after all. It was Akamaru and it was for shinobi things. She of all people would understand.

Kurenai-sensei had let them know that this mission was going to a little different to their others ones but they were tracking someone down so it could not be that much different even with Naruto tagging along with them.

The whole Naruto tagging along thing confused him because he knew that missions were flying at everyone everywhere at that people were being put to work left and right but he did not think they needed help in that sort of way to form another team. Or to be precise, to have a tag along.

He would have thought it would have been like when his team met up with another genin team and they had similar missions so they worked together but their aims were different. That had been exhausting but Kiba knew that was because the other team sucked. No wonder all of them were still genins.

Having a five-man team, well there had to be a good reason for it so he was not going to be the one to kick up a fuss. It was not as if he minded it being Naruto anyway. Of all the people team eight could have been given they lucked out because Naruto was fairly okay. Well better than okay especially since how he had obliterated Neji at the finals.

Kiba had been expecting something back then, especially since he had lost to Naruto but what Naruto had done he had not expected that. Then right after he had heard that Naruto and his team had fought to help everyone else and taken on the scary Suna shinobi and won.

Sasuke and Naruto had ended up in the hospital afterwards but that had still been cool. Kiba had felt proud about that because while he had done his own part after the attack in the stands, he had not gotten to see Naruto actually fight since Neji and that was not fair.

He had stumbled across team seven on the training grounds and he did see Naruto around the village but not in the way he knew he could do. This mission would be a good chance to be able to hang with him. It would work out for everyone.

Hinata still had stars in her eyes, it amused him, Kurenai-sensei and anyone good enough to see them. Shino just mildly encouraged her and while that was fine too it was not what she needed, she needed a firm nudge and the mission was the place to do it.

Naruto’s words from before lingered in his mind along with the kiss and he made a face. He did not get that, not all of that but he did know that time moved on and so did people. Naruto had some weird things around him but he was still the cool guy from before. Just a little stronger and a bit weirder. Nothing was wrong with that at all.
Still he did not know how team seven operated in mornings or in any kind of situations. Kiba had not run into them during the forest and they did not have C-ranks that required Team eight and team seven to leave Konoha at the same time so while he was hoping that Naruto was going to be on time to the meeting he was prepared to wait.

It was fine, things happened and people got to the meeting time a bit late. Sometimes his mom called him back to do something or to talk about something the moment that Kiba got his foot through the compound gate. Sometimes Shino had weird things to do that involved bugs or lessons or bug clan things.

Sometimes Hinata’s dad was being a royal dick and Kiba was grateful that Naruto had seen fit to loudly call the Hyuuga clan on most of its shit and on their treatment of Hinata. Naruto honestly was a weird guy and Kiba felt he would never understand him but they could understand each other and liked the same things so it could work.

Still, things happened and people got delayed. It was nothing to really fuss over. Sometimes Kurenai-sensei got side-tracked or got summoned for something or the other and they started late. That was fine but as his mom said, that was why you tried to get places early.

Kiba knew his mom liked to ramble for a good ten or so minutes so he liked to give himself an extra fifteen minutes starting time just in case she caught him before he could get out the door. If he ended up early, Akamaru got a bit of spoiling. It all worked out for everyone.

All said and done he had not really expected to get there early and find mostly everyone there waiting. Kurenai-sensei seemed tense at the gate and Kiba had no idea why but could smell the sour scent on anxiety clinging to her. Hinata stood a little behind Shino her hood up as she watched Naruto. Shino was normal, one of these days Kiba was going to see if the guy had any other expression other than blank and angry.

And Naruto, he was packed and ready to go, his pack on his shoulder, his head tilted back as he leaned against one of the poles by the gate. He had a small smile on his face his eyes on the Hokage mountain but the closer Kiba got the more he noticed that Naruto’s eyes were a bit different to how he usually saw them not that he saw that much.

Still, Naruto’s eyes were either laughing and calm or serious like they had been when they had fought in the exams. The tension in Naruto’s eyes, the tension that clung to his scent had Kiba looking at him and wondering just who he was because the Naruto he saw, the one he came to see even after he had done all those amazing things. That did not fit in with the Naruto he knew of at all.

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Naruto was their back up, the one in the team that would hit the hardest the tank for just in case. Kiba let Kurenai-sensei’s words simmer in his brain as they walked. He was unable to find anything good to say so he was stuck shooting looks at Naruto’s back from time to time.

Heavy hitter? Their tank? Was the mission so serious? He could see Naruto being a tank, being their tank no problem but the way she had said it and the smile that had come across Naruto’s face made him suspect that they were being lied to and he was not down with that at all.

Besides Naruto’s bag was bigger than theirs by a good amount and it had to be heavy too but for some reason he did not act it and not only did he keep pace with them he outpaced them too. It made no sense and while he would have fallen into conversations with Naruto, given him a bit of teasing or ribbing like he tried to do when he and Naruto saw each other before one or both of them
had to run off, Kiba could not help staying silent and watching Naruto.

He had no idea what it was that he was trying to find by searching but he did it anyway. It was just suspicious all of it. The mission seemed pretty straight forward, travel to the client, track down the people the client wanted them to track down. Deliver the target, get told good job. Get briefed by Kurenai-sensei given some advice on their teamwork and come back home.

Just adding someone to the equation was going to change things and Naruto might be a genin like the rest of them but he did not give off that feel when he was right next to them. Even those useless idiots they had teamed up with had given a genin feel, a Konoha genin feel but Naruto just felt a bit dangerous.

Like something was coiled in him ready to be released at any time and it was not as if Kiba was blind to how strong Naruto had to be. He had taken out Neji to who Kiba would have forfeited to instantly even though he wanted to pound the guy’s face in. To that guy, Naruto had smashed his face in for Hinata, and Lee too.

He had gone after that creep Gaara and beat him and the vibes Kiba had gotten from that one was terrifying not to mention the shit he had seen the bastard do in the forest. That bastard had been evil and Kiba would have cancelled the match before he set foot in the arena with that evil bastard.

But there was some good around Naruto, he cared that was not faked at all. He cared, he laughed, smiled and made jokes. Kiba saw him around team seven and Sakura enough to know that. There were also those kids that tagged after him all the time and Naruto laughed with them with no problems.

Still Naruto had to be strong and a bit dangerous in order to match the shinobi he faced but still it did not fit right. Kurenai-sensei was strong, Asuma-sensei was strong, even Kakashi-sensei was strong but none of them gave off that feeling that Naruto was doing, not even Sasuke and that guy had issues clinging to him.

Naruto just emitted something cold, dangerous and Kiba could not keep his eyes away and he could not get his heart to relax. There was something going on right before his eyes and he did not like being kept in the dark. Chouji had said that something about Naruto was bothering Shikamaru and he had waved it away as the genius finally being stumped but now that he had Naruto in his sights he had to say that not only did Shikamaru have a point… he just might have missed quite a few things.

Because while Naruto was highly suspicious he had not missed the looks Kurenai-sensei kept giving Naruto as they walked along. As if she expected him to vanish between one glance at the next. As though it was a miracle he was listening and walking around fine right next to them.

Naruto on the other hand he had a wide grin on his face and the smiles he kept shooting Kurenai-sensei small amused smiles that seemed packed with meaning but Kiba had caught Naruto mooning after Kurenai-sensei a few times before so maybe he was stepping his game up.

At some point he had to gently break the news about Asuma-sensei to Naruto because just because Kurenai-sensei and Asuma-sensei acted as though the rest of them were blind they were taking care of young shinobis. And Kurenai-sensei was in charge of a tracking team so honestly she should feel ashamed, it was not that hard to figure out considering they saw so much of her in the first place.

XxX
The biggest blessing in Kiba’s opinion was that he had not ended up on team seven because honestly what kind of torture did they put themselves through? Naruto had seemed amazed every time they called for a small break.

He had wanted to keep going even after dark fell and while Kiba would have been down with that in normal circumstances he was ready to take a break and wait for morning to continue. Naruto just seemed prepared and eager to march on through the night to the next morning and that was again highly suspicious. The longer they spent with Naruto the more suspicious he got and the more he started to watch him and Kurenai-sensei more.

She avoided his glaring and Naruto behaved as though nothing was wrong when they sat up camp and made plans for watch. Kiba on the other hand he let Akamaru do what he had to before he let the pup sleep in his pocket like he loved to do.

XxX

Kiba was not someone that was going to judge a small village on their circumstances or their appearances but when they finally made it to their destination he found himself doing just that. It reeked of old school clan. It had the feeling that the Hyuuga clan did and he barely walked into the compound that often.

There was nothing weird about the smell of the place but from the village markers Kiba just knew that the place was built of rules more rules, bloodlines and stupid regulations. In less polite terms he could smell the bullshit of a council from the village markers alone.

Of course he did not want to have to be the one to say that so he just kept an eye on his team. Hinata looked like she had recognized the similarities. Maybe it felt or reminded her of home too, maybe that was why her guard went up a few minutes past the village marker.

Seeing a change of emotions in Shino was a lesson in difficulty but Kiba was fairly certain that the different bug crawling signals Shino subtly did meant that he too was on his guard. Naruto and Kurenai-sensei on the other hand, there had been no change in anything physically not even in their eyes.

They walked the same as usual but from the village marker alone Naruto’s entire gait had changed. It creeped him out. It seriously creeped him out and Kiba did not know what he was supposed to do about it because how could he ask Naruto about it? How did one bring that up in a conversation? He could always ask Naruto if he were okay but that was an easy question to dodge. Asking him what the hell was up with him was more his style and of course saying such a thing would be considered rude so of course doing that was out too.

All Kiba could do was soothe Akamaru who whimpered softly into his hair and keep his eyes on the surroundings as they got further into the heart of the village. He did not feel eyes on him, he did not scent anyone but that did not mean anyone was not there.

That had been a lesson in hunting Team eight had learned early on in the formation of the team. Kiba was not going to forget that anytime soon.

XxX

The buildings suited the location of the village in Kiba’s opinion. The large wooden structures blended well with the surroundings. He guessed it would be hard to pick the village out of the field of bamboos. Still not the best security, not the best of anything but considering they came from Konoha Kiba knew he was being bias.
Of course Konoha had really good security and the battle had still happened so he did have a point in a roundabout way. A full out frontal attack and the village was toast, of course considering that the people were calling Konoha for help in the first place told him that at least the leaders or maybe the council understood when pride and spirit was not enough and that they needed real help, real muscle.

But then again team eight was called, it had to be more than a tracking mission because Naruto was along too. He knew that the meeting with their client whoever he or she was that it was clear up most of the questions. Or it could clear up nothing and leave Kiba with even more questions if the client was one of those really stupid ones.

Which would make the job more annoying than it had to be. Maybe it was a good thing he did not make Chuunin yet because he had not managed to perfect the necessary temperament for dealing with stupid shitty adults. He would just make Hinata or Shino deal with all of that while he bit his tongue and prayed really hard for the patience. He doubted that would work either.

Honestly, after the battle he knew he had work to put in before he could become a Chuunin but when he thought about all the things he would have to deal with after becoming Chuunin he knew he was not really prepared for all the stuff Kurenai-sensei had to do.

He was sad about Shino not making it, mostly because the pride of team eight was on the line but what could he do? He had lost so he really did not get a chance to talk when all was considered and Shino already was upset about that as it was, he said he understood why he had not made it.

And since if Shino had made it they would have had to let Sasuke be one too… Kiba was not that eager for a Chuunin on his team if it meant team seven would have two at the same time. Or three since Naruto had been just as reckless and far more powerful fighting. But it was about smarts too and a readiness to take on responsibility.

Naruto had the fighting, he had the smarts too. Kiba could still remember how it felt to realize that Akamaru had been taken captive. To fight and fight and then realize he was far behind his opponent. To fall and know to the depths of his soul that he had lost. That everything that he had thought up to that moment about himself had been wrong.

He still thought about that, he would always carry that loss with him. That was not a bad thing. Still he really hoped that the client did not have too much pomp about them. That would cut into valuable time.

XxX

It would be so easy for her to forget the kind of boy that Naruto really was. He was well behaved and sociable, he was polite and helpful to a startling degree but she had read the reports and warnings. She had been right among the other panicked Chuunins when the boy had vanished and she had been right among the Jounins when word had been given of his return.

She had watched him talk to Hinata with not a care towards her name. She saw him treat all his peers exactly the same on first meeting with slight adjustments the more he got to know them. She saw all of that but she was still not prepared for how easily he hid his true self from everyone.

He found it funny, he honestly thought tagging along with them was funny. She knew exactly why Naruto was there, not just for Tsunade-sama to test no that came later, a lot later. She on the other hand knew the full truth. It would have been easier to give this mission to another team. Not a genin team but a Jounin Chuunin team.
All of them were being tested but it was Naruto most of all that the Hokage was testing and Kurenai honestly could not blame her. After everything the boy was rumoured to suffer, after having the weight of everything on his shoulders how far could he be trusted with Konoha? For Konoha?

The boy had skills, the boy had talent and he showed a willingness to use them for the good of a mission but from what Kurenai had read it had seemed more like those were situational things. Could Naruto hunt from the get go? From the very beginning could he take the role he most likely hated and feared so long? How would that affect him? What would he do?

So far he had been on guard but he was amused and she could feel it but she could not even blame him. The boy knew what was going on, she had read it in his eyes especially when she struggled to explain exactly why he was there. Yes he had more chakra than even her an alarming fact when she considered that he was still so young but facts were facts, he was a heavy hitter she had heard Shisui moaning about the forest for days during the clean-up of Konoha.

But while her team were good trackers Naruto was the boy that evaded not just Konoha but most likely the entire continent for years. With help of course but those lessons don’t just fade away, it was engraved on him, deep in his soul. Anything dark that tried to go to ground around the mission that her team would be able to identify, Naruto would not only root it out but he would hit hard and that was what was needed.

Her team lacked experience not just with tracking but life experience. There were many dangers around the shinobi world that they had not faced yet. There were rumours of things that she herself had not encountered yet the world was simply too big for her to experience everything.

But Naruto, he had travelled far and wide he had met people from all over. He had a life experience Kurenai would not wish on anyone. The boy all now was healing the scars on his heart that had to exist. She felt sympathy to him for that but the boy’s eyes held a slyness to them a playful look to them and Asuma had already told her to keep an eye out for that sort of thing.

She had no doubt that while Naruto was here for them that he had yet another agenda. He wanted to be Hokage, she wanted him to rise that high up one of these days but the boy had not cast off his former self, he carried it around him like a cloak, a second skin and then he wrapped himself up in the ways of a shinobi instead of it clashing it worked but it scared her simply because of what she did not know.

Did she approve of all the secrets wrapped up around Naruto? No she never had but she knew that children did not need to know everything about another child’s personal tragedy and business. The adults set a bad enough example, figuring it out on their own as the days went by was actually good for them although she hated having to lie.

Her team was not innocent but there were things they were not ready to do as yet. Even after all the things that happened in the forest of death. Maybe because of those things that happened that she knew they were not ready to delve into the darkness of tracking and the hunt.

XxX

Someone liked their cleaning job a little too much, his nose tickled ridiculously. Kiba fought the urge to sneeze as the attendants kept them company waiting on the young leader of the clan. He sniffed then wrinkled his nose in order to fight the sneeze.

They had to be cleaning at least every day three times a day for this level of clean and for his nose to be killing him that the way that it was, it simply was not fair. It hurt, it irked and he could barely
smell anything the floor, the walls, the ornaments just reeked of cleaning solutions and everything in the large room that could give shine was shining. Some of the things should not be gleaming like that either.

Kiba’s wooden floors never looked that shiny ever. Not after cleaning, not after the blasting that happened a few times a year, no amount of scrubbing would get his floor to shine like that. Someone really had to be enjoying their work and that was not fair to his eyes or his nose.

It was annoying and slightly intimidating having a place so clean. He could smell but the smells were limited. He could smell the attendants but in the room? Way too clean and he was searching for something, a dusty smell. Something to signal that someone had forgotten a spot. Someone had rushed, someone had forgotten something. It was irritating to be surrounded by so much clean.

Just for this place alone, Kiba wished that his nose was not so sensitive and Akamaru had it worse. Akamaru was in his pocket buried as close to Kiba as he was able to. It was as if the people had an issue with the smell of nature.

XxX

It was an honest to goodness palace, or at least the village equivalent and Kiba did not know how he felt about that. He had thought where they had waited was the place the client would come to them but he had been mistaken the attendants in their simple clothes had come to escort them to the second building that was more like a palace than anything else.

It still gave Kiba the creepy vibes that the Hyuuga compound gave him, very few clan compounds gave him that sort of feeling but then again not many clans were than closed off and damn secretive, the idiots even had a wall. Well the Uchihas were sort of closed off too but the place did not give him that feeling.

Just there had cats everywhere and Kiba was not too cool with that. He did not mind cats, they were all right but dogs were his thing, canines were his friend so he was not down with having cats watching him every step of the way to his destination.

How Sasuke did not walk around with his head full of fluff and his hand full of scratches Kiba did not know and he did not care that much about him to really care either. But even though Uchihas and Hyuugas were important, powerful and both closed off, Uchihas were not as restrictive and they did not give him the feeling the Hyuuga clan minus Hinata gave him.

And it really did relieve him to know that Naruto’s dislike towards the Hyuugas skipped Hinata and went straight to the source. The guy understood almost better than Kiba did. He wished that whatever that was making Naruto hold back from opening his eyes…

Well his eyes and mind seemed pretty opened. Kiba winced at the memory of the kiss even though it had been pretty chaste. A simple smooch really, like what his sister did to his cheek when her friends brought her home drunk. Not a real kiss but they were still a kind of kiss he would not expect that sort of thing from Naruto anyway.

He still wanted what was good for Hinata though and Naruto had talked about her during the fight… he had fought so hard for her hadn’t he? Why the hell did he just ignore the rest of progress? Kiba felt as though he could ask that question all day and get nowhere because Naruto was complicated.

He glared at the boy in question only to find him looking out the window to the bamboo path not too far away. The path had old cobbled stones and did not look as if it got used at all, Kiba had no
idea where it led to but he knew that path could be a security risk so they would have to keep an eye on it. Meaning already the mission was a pain in the ass. He scratched his head as he slowly sighed to keep his calm. Soon they would meet the client, the person with the money and they would get to work.

The smell was still around and it hurt his nose with how clean everything was. Someone better have allergies to justify the discomfort he was in.

XxX

This room was just as clean as the other had been, Kiba’s nose was honestly killing him and there had to be a way to say that without being rude. He had to find a nice way to keep it together but hint that honestly that his nose was on fire.

What was wrong with people, natural was nice too, why did it have to be cleaned so thoroughly and then to add insult to injury, the flowers everywhere and they were not exactly nice flowers just pungent ones. They were not even expensive flowers, they were the common ones you could find in the bush. Were they too poor to spring for some nice smelling roses or lillies?

Maybe not lillies but his nose really could not with any of that. Before Kiba could nudge Hinata and make faces at her, letting her know his pain the attendant came back to them. “Our Lady Trafal Chihaya-sama.” He said softly.

Kiba looked up in time to see the platform ahead of them just shift, there had been a door back there that was the only explanation for the click but the way the large chair rose from the ground? The silver fans? The other attendants?

Maybe the Hyuugas could learn a thing or two from these people because they certainly were not lacking style. Or cash. Still Kiba had to strain to see the client with all the large fans and attendants, the most he could see was the red gown and veil but it looked like a woman. Not as if he could smell them thanks to the overwhelming room.

“Greeting shinobi from Konoha.” Yup, a woman client. Kiba nodded to himself at her words. “You arrived earlier than we anticipated, you were the best choice after all.” Her soft voice could lull someone to sleep if she spoke softly long enough. Except that kind of quality usually was found with older women… if the client was older than Kurenai-sensei Kiba would douse himself in whatever cleaning agent it was that was currently giving him hell.

“I have to admit we tend to keep abreast of certain places and incidents.” Kurenai-sensei spoke up. “We were aware of your loss but we had never known that there was an heir.”

“My father.” The client sighed, the attendants shifted as the client sat up on her chair. “The loss of my siblings and my mother when I was young drove him to isolate me. He feared losing me as our people faced troubles. I was hidden away and on my father’s death I was released.” The veil shifted with her bowed head. “He was a sad man.”

“I heard bandits were the cause.”

“They were.” The client said softly. “They nearly destroyed the village, they killed my father, most the advisors and although they were driven off we knew they would come again. I have to protect my people, money does dead men no good.”

The soft gasp from next to Kiba startled him enough to turn to see who it was. He got startled himself when he watched Naruto sink into a kneel his eyes on the client and an almost worshipful
Look on his face.

Kiba did not know what to do, a glance to Kurenai-sensei showed the woman’s amusement. Hinata had a blush going, Shino was the same as usual and Naruto looked as though his heart was going to burst.

“And just who is this respectful little ninja?” The client sounded amused.


“Uzumaki.” She said softly. “Will you help me? My people? Will you give me strength?” Kiba could hear the smile in her voice. “You’ll be well rewarded if you lend me some assistance.” Somehow Kiba had the feeling that he had missed something.

“I’ll help you secure your home. We will help you get your peace back.” If Naruto had not been talking Kiba would have sworn the boy had stopped breathing. He had leaned forward so much, he looked captured as he stared at the client. Kiba knew she was a lady but they could barely see her.

“I’ll be depending on you little shinobis.” The client chuckled.

XxX

“I imagine being locked up for years because of a paranoid parent.” Kiba grumbled as he sniffed loudly to get his nose started properly. “That sucks.”

“I’m not even surprised.” Kurenai-sensei sighed as she spread out the map. “I met the former lord only once and even back then he was twitchy.”

“Twitchy enough to lock away his only child so people didn’t even know she existed?” Kiba frowned.

“That could have gone wrong, she’s lucky.” Shino interrupted. “She could have been kidnapped, she could have died and no one but her father would have known.”

“I guess she is lucky.” Kiba glanced around and frowned. “Where’s Naruto?”

“He went to scout the perimeter.” Kurenai-sensei looked up at him for only a moment before she consulted the map. “I guess the scent must be bothering you more than we thought. Hinata is also taking a look and Shino’s bugs have been on the lookout since we arrived.”

“There are many places of interest here.” Shino’s head turned towards the abandoned path they had seen earlier.

“I’m not surprised.” Kiba grumbled. “But I wonder what the bandits want with this place it is not that rich, unless they get their kicks from scaring people. There have not been that many incidents so far right?”

“Some things set on fire, some stealing, some shadows some people that have gone missing and others can’t pin down exactly when.” Kurenai-sensei shook her head. “It looks bad and we have suspects and even they look bad.”

“Well tracking is our speciality.” Kiba pointed out. “Whoever that is behind this they have to be close. They know too much.” The brief had been startling, there was no way that a stranger was doing this much chaos. No someone in the small village was a traitor and that sucked.
Kiba was not bewitched behind the client like Naruto was but he had listened enough to know that the Chihaya lady was fair and kind. A little distant and some things she said felt strange but considering she had been locked away her entire life by her crazy father it was understandable. Only seeing one person for her entire life not even being trained for the life she now had to lead.

Considering everything she was doing pretty damn good and her attendants were doting over her so Kiba really did not get why someone wanted to bring her down. Well people were stupid so yeah he got why people would want to bring her down. Maybe they thought they could do better maybe she was ruining some long ass stupid tradition.

Did not matter whatever they thought, they were bringing trouble and ruin to everyone else and that could not stand. He sneezed as he caught scent of the damn cleaning agents again and Akamaru followed suit. Kiba grumbled to himself before he shook his head furiously to settle himself. This mission would take time.

Yeah he wanted to get back to the village as soon as possible, a place that would not trouble his nose so much but he was aware of how things were and had no problem complying. He did want to hell, not as much as Naruto obviously wanted to but having this place destroyed because of silly grudges? Not on their watch.

Kiba found himself watching as Naruto pulled back on his jacket before he shook himself furiously. He had no idea why he had watched Naruto redressing, the place and the smells had to getting to him. Naruto had gone off again seemingly on Kurenai-sensei’s orders, Kiba was taking that with a pinch of salt.

Team eight on the other hand had started working through the lists and securing places. Kiba was set on discovering the secretive meeting place of the traitor because one thing he had learned was that there always was a secretive meeting place or lair or both.

The traitor had to be a councilman and they had to have help or a lace to leave notes for the bandits or to meet them. Finding them and the places was a bigger headache with the smells muted but Kiba knew they would narrow it down.

Shino’s bugs had already found some paths that were being used. Hinata had managed to lock down on people’s movements it was just Kiba holding up the show.

He was frustrated about that but Kurenai-sensei had begged him to work through the scent. Kiba hated the explantion he had been given about their cleaning habits. Clean away he had no problem with that, it was what they were cleaning with. Even god had to forgive them a scent change right? It made things harder than they had to be.

Naruto grunted as he sat down and Kiba’s eyes were drawn to him again. Naruto was seriously strange. The more that he was around him the harder it was to ignore, as if Kiba wanted to ignore such a strange person.

He blew out a frustrated breath and concentrated on everything around him including the burning smell in his nose. It took longer than it had to but he turned his head to the south because there was an isolated human path in that direction. He could only detect three scents and only one of those scents came back to the village.

Xxx
“What a slimeball.” Kiba grumbled as he crouched in the tree. “He’s been on the council for over thirty years and he decides to screw everyone over? Everyone loves him what a dick!” It had taken some time because people were paranoid but finally they had narrowed down and found the traitor.

Naruto glanced to him as he played with a kunai. “That’s how it goes sometimes.” His eyes went past Kiba to the village leader’s residence. Kiba rolled his eyes.

“Disappointed that we don’t see much of the client?” He teased. “I mean she’s a babe, from what we could see of her anyway.”

“We’ll see her when we’re done and it is time to leave. That will be enough for me” Naruto grinned.

XxX

Naruto was not team eight level of tracking because no other team could be team eight level of tracking but he was still fairly decent. Not that Kiba had paid that much attention in the academy before graduation.

But he could not exactly recall Naruto’s skill back then before graduation either. Iruka-sensei always had been nervous when the time came around for Naruto. He was always gone for the sparring classes but he had been there Kiba could remember that but when it came to remembering where he was during the classes for demonstration. Other than the actual indoor classes he could not remember Naruto being around or standing out.

Still Naruto was pretty good on tracking. Just not team eight because they had other skills and experience. Naruto had found them pretty okay but the way that Kurenai-sensei kept pulling aside and whispering made him feel like something was up. They had all found the target together but the way she kept looking at him and the way that Naruto kept looking back was suspicious.

XxX

“Where’s Naruto?” Kiba asked as he sat on the traitor idiot and three goons. Shino had tied them up rather nicely for them. “I thought he was supposed to be here to back us up?” He knew he was not imagining the flinch that Kurenai-sensei did.

“I imagine that Kurenai-sensei gave him another job.” Shino rifled through a document they had stolen from the traitor. “Am I correct?”

“You are.” Kurenai-sensei said warily. “He’s fine he’ll be back soon so Shino and Hinata can deliver the documents and help bring in these wise guys. Naruto will be back by then.” She bit her lip and looked behind her. Kiba watched her without saying anything.

XxX

“What the actual fuck happened to you?” Kiba demanded when Naruto dropped into their camp. “Back us up? You look like you should have had back up! What happened? Couldn’t you have waited on us?” He rushed over a few steps to Naruto before unease made him halt where he stood.

Naruto was covered in blood, the clothes he was in this was the first time Kiba was seeing them. The blue jump suit was soaked right through. Kiba had no idea where Naruto’s normal clothes were and where the sword strapped to his back had come from but Naruto was hurting his nose covered head to toe in blood and sweat it was even in his hair.

“Is any of that yours?” Kiba asked softly when he realized that Naruto’s clothes did not have a
single tear.

“No.” Naruto’s eyes looked a little distant. “I’ll go and clean up don’t worry just wanted to get a change of clothes first. Did you guys get the guy?”

“Yeah a total breeze maybe we should have come with you.” Kiba said closely. “Who did you go for?”

“The leader behind the traitor.” Naruto shrugged.

“Naruto’s job was similar to ours but not exactly.” Kurenai-sensei’s hand hovered above Naruto’s shoulder. “Did you get them?”

“Yeah.” Naruto pulled a blood covered ring from his pocket. “Job complete I guess.”

XxX

“Good job.” Kurenai said softly as she got away from her team. “How many were there in the end?” Naruto blinked up at her slowly.

“Lots.” The boy said softly. “Mission complete though. There was no time to come for you it happened really fast they had a hostage.”

“Hostage?” Kurenai queried.

“Back home safely.” Naruto replied.

“Good job then we are going to head back home as soon as we wrap thing up with the client.”

XxX

“Better than even I could have expected.” No attendants just the client. Kiba sighed at the distance between them and what had to be a looker of a lady. “I’ll have to request Konoha more often especially if you come with them little Uzumaki Naruto.” Kiba’s eyebrow rose at the playful way she said Naruto’s name. “Go far and go big Naruto-kun.”

“We are here too.” Kiba grumbled to Shino when the attention was turned to Kurenai-sensei. “Damn it all.”

XxX

“They have their own priest too huh?” Kiba asked as he walked backwards to get the guy in sight. “Seems kinda young don’t you think?” He asked Naruto as the priest walked properly into view, his short bobbed black hair melded almost too well with the night. The hand that he had in a sling would have been suspicious but most of the villagers had injuries. “Looks kinda fit too why is he wasting away in a priesthood?”

“Maybe his family gave him to the service?” Hinata whispered. “And he might hear us.”


“He’s watching us, I think he belongs to the client to give advice.” Naruto said softly a smile flickered to his face at the sharp-nosed monk guy watching them. “He doesn’t look that much older than us don’t you think?”

“You’re right.” Kiba narrowed his eyes at the guy. “What a waste I guess.”
“Hey you seem tired.” Kiba frowned at Naruto who had stumbled. “Don’t push yourself, if you were tired we could have stayed there until morning at least no need to rush back to Konoha we finished the job really quickly.”

“Yeah.” Naruto coughed. “Don’t worry about it, just felt a rush of fatigue or something. Delayed or something.” The corner of his mouth lifted into a grin. “I’ll be just fine Kiba don’t worry about it.” Yeah the mission with Naruto told Kiba one thing, he did not get the guy at all.

Chapter End Notes

I could have named this chapter the eternal suffering of Kiba and it would have fit...
poor darling
Flowers in your hair

Chapter Notes

I managed! A little late but considering Nano and all, glad I got the chapter up. Don't want to have to wait too long. I'm battling a monster chapter right now and I'm tempted to take a break after that goes up because whew! It's huge alright.

In other news 4 people figured out the hints from the previous chapter and I'm so happy and proud of them. No this chapter doesn't tell you what you missed. Where's the fun in that if I tell you right afterwards? That then was just to help you realize that yes I'm hiding things from you ^_^ so you have to read carefully. We have a long way forward and lots of stuff ahead. I hope this week I can finish up this annoying chapter because I love a head-start but... oh well.

Enjoy the chapter!!

“Not exactly what I thought I was going to be watching today.” Shisui snorted. “It’s cute they don’t look like shinobi at all. Are shinobi supposed to be this cute? Tenzo?”

“I have a mask and I have a code name.” Tenzo hissed from his tree. “Use them you stupid captain, I know that you can use them, don’t be senpai. Use the things.”

“Don’t be so touchy.” Shisui groaned. “And you never answered the question. When you woke up from the roots of whatever tree you carved out, did you think that you were going to be watching a Jinchuuriki teach a bunch of hopeless academy brats how to make flower crowns? I didn’t.”

“Of course I didn’t.” Tenzo sighed. “That’s the point, Naruto-kun never does what you expect him to do I honestly thought we were going to get uncomfortable when he picked up the Sandaime’s grandson.”

“Yeah that jutsu.” Shisui pretended to leer before he toyed with his mask. He dragged it off his face before he let it fall back with a soft sigh. “It’s not a bad jutsu for a couple of brats, good for the element of surprise. It works on plenty of people no matter how strong they are. Everyone has a pervy side… eh Tenzo?”

“Something bad is going to happen to you.” Tenzo said dryly. “It’s going to be really bad, really embarrassing and you’re going to want my help and I’ll leave you to suffer.”

“That doesn’t sound like someone carrying the will of fire in them.”

“You’re right so watch yourself around me Shisui-kun.”

“Hey code names!”

XxX

A bright day, a day that he had off. Naruto did not mind collecting the kids and taking them out to the fields as much as other people might think that he did. Spending time with Konohamaru and co was not a trouble and with a day like the one they were having, heading out to the fields on their
day off?

Absolutely no problem and since getting back from Konoha from the team up with Kiba and Kurenai-sensei’s team he was a lot calmer. It was easier to relax so spending some time goofing off with Konohamaru was a pleasure and he could teach him some new things now that the flowers had bloomed.

It was the perfect day for it. Naruto looked up from his latest creation to see the kids watching him all bugged eyed. He bit back a snort because this was most likely how he had looked not too long ago. He gently placed the white daisy crown on Moegi’s head and watched her blush. “I’ll guide you guys on how to make your own, big ones and strong ones. They won’t blow away while the wind blows.”

“I’ll make a big multicolour one for Ji-chan.” Konohamaru sounded delighted as he started to yank up the flowers around them.

“Woah woah woah there.” Naruto laughed as he quickly halted Konohamaru’s hands from yanking up more flowers the wrong way. “First do it slowly and you don’t yank it by the top yank it by the bottom. Eh, actually gently break the stem.” Naruto corrected as he pulled a long-stemmed daisy. “Now watch my fingers and try yourselves; take your time guys you’re now starting.”

XxX

“He’s a good teacher, isn’t he?” Tenten giggled from her perch. “What do you say Sakura?”

“He is good.” Kakashi responded to get squeals of shock from the two girls ahead of him. “Sakura can still answer if she wants to.”

“That’s… sensei.” Sakura gritted out. “Any reason to why you’re here on our day off?”

“Well maybe I was lonely?” Kakashi-sensei offered. “Why are you here?”

“I’m here…” Sakura trailed off before she raised her camera. “To take pictures of course.”

XxX

“And fold and twist and fold and twist.” Naruto chanted as around him the kids laughed and did the same. “Fold and twist fold and twist- you want to explain why you have a Bunshin helping you Konohamaru?”

“To make it go faster.”

“It’s not about speed that comes later.” Naruto chided. “It’s about enjoying the routine and then you get the crown as a reward.” He brandished his crown that had a yellow and white theme with four big red flowers dividing it. “It’s the finished product that matters.”


“So cool!” Naruto praised. “Put it on Moegi-chan! It looks good and sturdy.”

XxX

It was not rare for Itachi to be alone in the house. His father worked a lot and always had even when he was home his mind was elsewhere to the point that when his mother was not home technically their father was not either. It had not taken very long for them to get used to it, besides
when their father chose to communicate it was usually about outside matters and Itachi had no problem with that.

His mother on the other hand while she did tend to be around home more often than not she usually was with the clan and not inside the house most of the time. She went shopping, gossiping not that he would call it that anytime that she was in ear shot. Sometimes she was just gone and even Itachi would not dare look for where she had gone. He had not needed his father’s warning to know that sometimes his mother needed time to herself.

He had come across his mother once by the memorial stone and her back had not even looked familiar the entire air around her had felt distant and painful. In the house, she was their mother she was warm and understanding but sometimes she needed a break to reminisce about the past.

How could Itachi hold that against her when he did so much of that himself? He thought so wistfully of the past whenever he was home. Granted his relationship with his father had improved over the years so he did not think of their past struggles fondly but when it came to his little brother. How could he not think of the past?

The Sasuke of old and the Sasuke that he saw now. There barely was anything connecting them. The amount of people shoving themselves into Itachi’s affairs telling him that it was natural did nothing more than frustrate him.

The teasing members of his team that compared Itachi to a sulking father angry thinking that his child thinks he the old man unworthy of affection hurt worse than he let on. Because for Itachi everything had just changed out of the blue, one moment Sasuke had been the adoring little brother one step behind Itachi an open smile on his face. Then Itachi had turned around to find cold eyes and a boy reluctant to speak or trust him.

It came out of nowhere and he had no explanation. The more he looked the harder it was to understand, Sasuke may want nothing to do with him but Itachi’s feelings and love still remained. Sasuke represented so much for him, when the clan had been falling apart Sasuke had been Itachi’s ray of light and hope. Shisui’s light too but somehow along the way Sasuke had turned away from them all.

It was harder to face when he had the evidence that Sasuke had really done a one eighty on them. When he looked at photos from not that long ago. Sasuke did not know Itachi had them because Itachi knew that Sasuke would dispose of them if he could. If he had the evidence before his face that they had been close, that they had always been close.

Itachi gently traced Sasuke’s face in the photo in the album. He had put it together over the years and he was glad now that he did. Pictures of Sasuke as a baby, Sasuke and Shisui, Sasuke’s eyes big and watchful and Shisui’s happy indulgent grin. The three of them together in various activities. Sasuke in the bath with Itachi. Sasuke in the bath with Shisui making a mess and their mother in the background throwing up her hands.

Shisui and Itachi sparring gently and Sasuke cheering them on. Shisui and Sasuke being talked to by their father. Sasuke in the academy. Their entire family at clan meetings. Sasuke and Itachi doing clan duties. Sasuke’s happy smile and shining eyes.

Yet the moment they had hit the final stretch for the academy, when graduation had grown closer, Sasuke had turned cold eyes on him. He had stopped asking for help determined to do it on his own. He had trained more and harder his tongue had gotten harsh and dismissive.

But Itachi missed his little brother so much. It really was not enough the tiny bits of him that he
got. He hated having to sneak around to make sure that Sasuke was okay. Sasuke as a genin was killing him inside, that bastard Orochimaru that had gotten even more evil had cast his cold eyes on Sasuke. Sasuke that was still young, still vulnerable and easily influenced even when Itachi did not want to think about that.

Sasuke had been marked, Sasuke had been attacked. Itachi had nearly lost him and it killed him that he had to sneak around to get to hold his little brother to him. What had happened to them? Everything had been so straightforward and easy. Everything had been perfect for their family and their clan and then Sasuke for no reason that he could see had disappeared from right next to him.

Shisui said that Sasuke still cared but with every day and every cutting remark Itachi doubted that. He might care for their parents, Shisui although he would deny it to his grave, the clan but for Itachi only a fool would ignore the anger in Sasuke’s eyes that was there.

Itachi had no idea what he had done to earn the look of dissatisfaction and anger. He was a wall that Sasuke would have to climb over he knew that he was prepared for that. For Sasuke to try and surpass him in order not to be lost but this was not that.

He envied Kakashi. Kakashi who got to see his little brother relax, laugh, work hard and everything else that Itachi had once taken for granted. He wished he could go back to the old days but only for Sasuke. When he teased his little brother, and wished he had more time. When he fought to be the best big brother that he could be while protecting everything he held dear.

If he had known that Sasuke would turn away and reject him he would have taken more pictures. That was the honest truth because he was on the outside looking in when it came to Sasuke. He had no idea what his brother thought and what he wanted, how he truly felt. He was just as confused as any other person.

XxX

Sasuke sat on his bed and read over the note. Kakashi’s notes to him tended to be fairly brief. A time and location to meet along with what Kakashi wanted. Right to the point and just what he needed.

They had been given even more C-rank missions since Sakura had become Chuunin and that was just perfect with him. It was ridiculously fantastic because he needed to get stronger and he needed a distraction. When he was with his team he could forget everything else.

Everything bothering him faded to the background so it was better that his mind and heart was kept busy. Naruto was frustrating but it was better to get exasperated over him than to focus on the other worrisome things.

Especially since that the more he stressed and worried the tighter his heart twisted. It was easy to get angry, it was easy to get frustrated and it was okay to feel those sorts of things but the fear lurked waiting to consume him and that was not okay. Being a stranger in his own home was not how he dreamed things would go but the clan started it first.

The more he worked with the clan business the colder he felt. He still wanted to do his duty he still needed to but the whispers, they kept getting louder and it was so hard to ignore them. It was not fair it felt as though he was being consumed alive by the whispers.

The fear grew with every whisper. He could only take so much exposure before he had to leave, before he had to prove himself. Everything that he thought he was… everything that he had been before was being torn down. All he had left to hide behind was his status and his team.
Sakura was Chuunin, he was envious but not jealous he knew where he had failed and she had succeeded. His need to prove himself had blinded him. He had forgotten about the ones behind him and Sakura’s tears had reminded him of that. It had made him feel uncomfortable and the taste of regret had lingered in his throat.

He had just wanted to do the right thing, the necessary thing he had not wanted to make her worry, make her cry. He had not wanted to put the haunted look in Shisui’s eyes either. Shisui had looked so destroyed when he had found them. That had not been his intention at all but it had ended up that way.

XxX

“So how are we doing on time?” Sakura asked as she checked her watch. “We’re starting pretty late but that is to be expected huh. I mean when it comes down to it we were supposed to have today off before this last-minute request came in.”

“I wish people could get used to the new Hokage already, stop flooding us with ridiculous requests.” Sasuke growled. “But at least we’re out of the village again.”

“And not on a farm I hear.” Sakura said excitedly. “I wish Kakashi-sensei would let us go out the village on our own now that we have a Chuunin. I hear team ten might be doing that soon.”

“That’s because the teacher is like the student.” Naruto laughed. “Asuma-sensei wants a break I think. That or he really wants to push Shikamaru and this is the only way to do it. Besides our team is a little different we can’t split into three-man cells like that yet with Sakura at the helm.”

“So I hear.” Sakura grumbled. “I really want to lead my own team for real for once. Kakashi-sensei is always one step behind or some Jounin is always a step behind me.”

“This isn’t the time to show off your new wings Sakura.” Kakashi called from above. “The time will come but it isn’t now.” He dropped into the training ground without a sound or dust movement. “Seems we are all here so let’s start the briefing.”

“How far is it?” Sasuke asked right away. “Can we be back by tonight?”

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“Exactly how long do you think this mission is going to take?” Naruto demanded. “We’re the team that has the most misjudged missions remember? We’ve gotten strong but not strong enough that we can solve a mission in an hour and walk back home.”

“A sad truth.” Sakura sighed. “So sensei what is the mission this time? And how far away is it? We still have time to pack and do last minute shopping.”

“Are you going to bring those fancy shurikens again Sasuke?” Naruto whispered.

“I haven’t since the mission for the land of snow.” Sasuke rolled his eyes. “The ones I have will do and I’m not taking them to get smashed beyond fixing again.”

“Or we.” Kakashi-sensei stressed. “Are going a simple day’s walk away from here. Walk at our pace if we leave at dawn.” That got him a few shrugs from his team and he sighed. “We might get wet on this mission, a well is involved.”

“Those nuns had a well.” Sasuke said suspiciously. “They made it explode and tried to kill us.”

“Didn’t that old man that gave us that D-rank mission have a seal that was wonky that one time?” Sakura said slowly.
“We need to pack just in case.” Naruto said warily. “Just in case because… you know… based on experience this is going to hell.”

“We haven’t even left the village yet and it is fishy.” Sakura grumbled. “I’m going to lose some kunais tomorrow I can feel it.”

“Ninja wire is cheaper.” Sasuke already had a faraway look in his eyes.

“You and Naruto are better at that than me.” Sakura frowned. “Of course this could be a great chance for practice.” She mused. “But man, a well? Seriously? Those things never go good for this team.”

“Well I couldn’t tell the Hokage no.” Kakashi-sensei said weakly, that earned him a glare from his team. “We’re the only ones available right now.”

“I want double pay when it goes to hell.” Sakura glared at the Hokage tower. “I should go and tell the Hokage that.”

“I’ll be right with you.” Naruto laughed. “But I gotta stop and see Iruka-sensei first before I go.”

XxX

“Those brats aren’t even cute.” Tsunade huffed when her door closed behind the two kids. “And I picked that mission because it is so easy too you know.”

“You can’t blame Naruto-kun for thinking that you’re picking on his team Tsunade-sama.” Shizune carefully rested down the cup of tea. “He is being worked hard you can’t blame him for suspecting your motives.”

“Okay.” Tsunade allowed with a grumble. “But the girl too? I want the will of fire not the spark of rebellion.” She turned away with a smile. “But maybe it is cute just a little bit. They’ll see soon enough that this mission will be far easier than they could have imagined. I gave this to them instead of one of the other teams because they do need a break from time to time. Need to stop and smell the flowers or something.”

“Well Tsunade-sama you could have told them that instead of making them feel as though they are simple scapegoats.” Shizune sighed. “I feel so sorry for Kakashi-san.”

“That brat needs to smell the flowers too.” Tsunade huffed. “But actually, he just might be getting there.” She shifted some papers on her desk. “He seems to be getting there at least, of course he is still very far from good as yet.”

“Tsunade-sama?” Shizune questioned. “Is something the matter?”

“Nothing I can’t handle.” Tsunade focused on the documents ahead of her. “Team seven’s making considerable progress especially since they find their ways right into trouble. I wonder if they understand all that they are doing? Kakashi does that smart brat that he is… Naruto most likely does, the girl too but I can’t help but wonder if they understand just what they are doing for Konoha with these missions. The kindness of their hearts, the understanding of the hunted… they do need a break sometimes.”

XxX

“I’ve heard of taking advantage of myths and legends but this is the first time that we have to do the right thing for the myth and rumours.” Naruto whispered into Kakashi-sensei’s ear. “Can you
seriously believe this?"

“Well this mission just might turn out to what it seems.” Kakashi-sensei chuckled in response. “So are you regret over packing Naruto?”

“Never, the mission isn’t over until we’re back in Konoha.” Naruto pulled back after his words and his sensei straightened back up. “Besides protect a wishing well? You could have led with that sensei.”

“Mah I thought it was a typo.” Kakashi-sensei sighed. “At least we have a target and a location.”

“And a time limit.” Naruto mused. “I think I’ll like this mission but this well is really important to them huh.” He said softly. “Imagine that, must be nice to have something like this.”

“Back home we have the will of fire.” Kakashi-sensei beamed. “Feel free to take a lamp to the statue and keep it lit every night.”

“I’d say something but I’m not going to.” Naruto rolled his eyes. “Besides are faeries going to grant me a wish at the stone?”

“The will of fire might give you a power up but not from faeries.” Kakashi-sensei’s eye changed becoming a little distant. “But these people take the wish thing serious.”

“I can tell.” Naruto nodded. “It’s why we are here after all.”

“Exactly.”

XxX

“Want to go in?” Sakura joked as Naruto sat on the top of the well. “See how big it is?”

“I’ll pass.” He said dryly. “Want a go? I can get you down really fast, getting up will be some trouble though.”

“I’ll pass.” She snorted before she scanned the grounds. “I’m bored.”

“Me too, I can’t believe we’re protecting the faerie well from people trying to make their own wishes. I can’t believe that this is going to happen next year too.” Naruto groaned. “Do the wishes have to go through the priests?”

“Kakashi-sensei said you can wish anytime but that the faeries listen better around this sort of time. The wish will be granted any other time but there will be some sort of catch even if you use the special stone or coin. This period is the time for wishing without consequences.”

“There are always consequences Sakura-chan.” Naruto grumbled. “Even if you don’t see them there are always consequences. These people are a little silly.”

“You can’t fool me.” She laughed softly. “You think it is sort of cool don’t you.”

“In a fairy tale sort of way.” Naruto admitted. “A special stone, a special wish. Hey who collects the special stones after the ceremony? Or do they stay down there forever?”

“Want to go down and see?” Sakura grinned.

“I’ll pass.”
“Well this was easier than I thought it would be.” Naruto mumbled as the villagers took care of the vandals. “I mean it got complicated fast because the bad guys went for back up but it was fairly easy.”

“I got some good pictures too.” Sakura laughed, Kakashi remained a step behind his team his eye going from them to those they had apprehended and back. “I can’t wait to try that trick with the ninja wire again.”

“It’s not a rope you know.” Naruto said tiredly. “When you said you were going to practice I had not been expecting that, you might as well have used a chain instead of a wire.”

“Everyone is a critic.” Sakura sighed before she caught sight of the client. “Here we go now.”

“This bonus makes a pretty good souvenir.” Sakura mused as she rubbed the smooth white stone. “I’m glad that the money was never in question though.”

“I really thought for a few seconds there he was going to pay us with a rock.” Naruto squinted at his before he laughed. “Considering that this felt like a break than anything else I agree. This is a pretty neat bonus and I had planned on sneaking down the well anyway so this really just saves me time.”

“Don’t you have any shame?” Sakura sighed before she caught sight of Sasuke examining the rock. “You like the idea of the rock too don’t you Sasuke-kun?” For a moment, she swore she caught him off guard because of the lost look on his face before his hand clenched around the stone. “Sasuke-kun?”

“It’s just a cheap little rock.” He said softly before he turned away. “Nothing to get excited for.”

“Says the guy that didn’t turn it down.” Naruto muttered.

He should be home in his bed, most likely his family thought that he was home in his bed but Sasuke was not. He was in the clan compound still but that was not where he should be exactly either. Yet Sasuke found comfort lying on his back on the temple roof staring up at the stars.

He had the rock from the wishing well protection mission in his right hand. He had been unable to think of anything else since the mission had begun, all those talks about wishes and all those people fighting and wanting to kill for the chance at a wish.

Sasuke understood them far better than he wanted to admit. Everyone had wishes, hopes dreams and even though the thought of it being granted by some wishing well in the middle of the country was ridiculous one could not help but think about it.

People would wish for money, they would wish for food, the resurrection of a loved one. People had selfish desires and wishes reflected that. They had been given the stones and the wishing coins even though they had not stuck around to make any wishes. After such an annoying mission they certainly had not wanted to.

Many people had selfish wishes. Sasuke sighed and stretched on the hard roof his eyes on the sky above and the clouds that blocked some of the sky.
Wishes. He had wishes too, he had hopes too, dreams, regrets. When faced with the chance to get whatever they wanted people wished for selfish things, they opened their hearts to the truth.

If the wishing coins were really real. If he could have even a single wish granted what would he wish for? Strength? Powers? Success? That was what many shinobi would wish for wouldn’t they? Sasuke sat up his throat tight and stared at the stone in his hand before he withdrew the wishing coin from his pocket. He flipped it and caught it easily before he held both in one hand his grip so tight that it hurt.

“If I could have one wish.” He said softly as he rested his head. “I would want…” to be normal. A tear escaped his eye and he turned onto his side and squeezed the stone and coin tight enough to hurt.

XxX

Kakashi paused his approach when he caught sight of Naruto’s stance. Sometimes when he came across Naruto’s training he was able to approach but sometimes it was better to wait until he was addressed or noticed.

Sometimes Naruto was deep in thought or even deep in meditation and interrupting was not exactly the nicest thing that one could do especially when most of the time that Naruto was deep in thought he was working out solutions to problems.

That and he was rather nice to watch. It was not hard to admit that Kakashi liked watching Naruto train, he enjoyed watching Naruto even while Naruto was not doing anything worthwhile at all. He liked guessing and testing himself at how well he knew and understood Naruto.

He seemed to be doing fairly well on getting to know him. Naruto smiled, blushed easily and the other filter on his mouth seemed to have loosened considerably. But he really liked teasing Kakashi on things that Kakashi really wanted to know.

At some point, he understood that not knowing things could drive Kakashi’s anxiety sky high especially when left outside of an inside joke. It was actually fair when one considered that Naruto was left outside of many secrets. Secrets that would affect how he not only looked at the village but how he would train.

Naruto was still in danger and that weighed heavily on all of them. Naruto trained hard but with only a hint to the enemy and not their identity and not even a base made Kakashi nervous. It was easy to pretend that everything was going fine, that they were okay but Kakashi knew how quickly happiness could be snatched away.

He knew the moment that you felt that life was finally on track was the moment that you tended to lose everything important to you. His team, Naruto was just so precious to him. It was bad enough that he had to share, bad enough that Kakashi had to lend him to other teams when Naruto was not even a Chuunin. It was bad enough that sometimes Kakashi did not understand what Naruto was aiming for.

Everything had a purpose. Naruto’s dream of Hokage, he seemed to have a fairly good understanding of where he was going and what he needed to do to get there. Never mind that sometimes Kakashi had no understanding of Naruto’s true aims beyond Hokage.

Naruto’s refusal to let go of the past stirred admiration. Naruto’s determination to carry parts of his friends’ will forward and to apply it in his shinobi life… Kakashi would be lying if he were to say that he did not understand and that he did not approve.
Somehow Naruto’s training had changed yet again and Kakashi wanted to ask Naruto so badly if that meant that Naruto had managed to pass some sort of stage. Kakashi did not need Shisui’s reports to know that Naruto trained against ghosts and that sometimes he was frustrated at his own abilities and lags.

Team seven trained together often with Kakashi there to guide them to better forms or to point out where they were going wrong. Sakura, Sasuke and Naruto tended to train and spar with each other often getting a feel for themselves and their teamwork.

Kakashi was not going to point out to Sakura or even Sasuke how Naruto held himself back during those spars. After the Chuunin exams they had to have realized and after watching him fight others on missions they certainly knew by now how Naruto held himself back.

Naruto going all out was Naruto fighting to kill. The style that he was adopting slowly with Sakura and Sasuke was him learning how to do proper limits. It was understandable because from what Naruto had said and what he had gathered, the training that Zabuza’s group had given him leaned more towards ordering Naruto to use everything they had to bring them down. Being adults and being more experienced at everything Naruto was taught to use lethal force from early on.

Shinobi children used lethal force and they learned it too but they learned to subdue and apprehend. There was no need for a missing nin to learn such things something that Kakashi knew and something that Naruto obviously knew by the way he held back. Like with the fight with Kiba not too long before.

Still even Naruto needed to go all out sometimes which led to just Kakashi and Naruto going at each other one on one. They tended to spar together when Sakura and Sasuke were not around, it had not started on purpose it had just been more convenient and because they had been cautious about the whole thing because of all the secrets that had to be kept.

They still had to be cautious even when sparring because when Kakashi and Naruto were sparring and Sasuke and Sakura were not distracted there were plenty of clues to be picked up. Kakashi tried not to tease Naruto too much when they sparred because the boy truly gave his all. It was adorably cute right up to the moment that it was not.

Moments where Naruto would land on his hands and feet after Kakashi fended him away and he would look up with slit pupils for eyes that never failed to shoot Kakashi’s caution sky high. He did not think that Naruto even knew how often it happened or that he was doing it.

It was nice for Naruto that he got to push himself, try new things and wasn’t that amusing. So far Naruto was not a serious threat but as time went on Kakashi was not all to certain that is was because of his own skills and training or because Naruto was keeping things in reserve.

Kakashi still had not seen the cool new jutsu that Naruto had apparently learned and he was keeping his eye out for it. If Jiraiya-sensei had taught Naruto something cool and new it could honestly be anything so Kakashi was prepared to expect anything that could have been taught in that short amount of time.

Honestly, Naruto was just amusing but that was part of the reason that Kakashi enjoyed watching over him. Even when he was vicious and tearing the training ground to bits fighting ghosts or testing his limits in ways that would make most shinobi flinch he still soothed Kakashi’s spirit.

Kakashi shifted before he reached into his weapons pouch. Not for his book but for something else. That time he had joined Sakura and Tenten and spied on Naruto had kept him amused. Naruto teaching others, Naruto making flower crowns, he was honestly very good at it and the way he
interacted with other children was something that most likely delighted the Sandaime.

Still Kakashi knew that Naruto’s skill was something else Naruto had been taught during his time away and though others would hate to think of Zabuza’s team as ones who had gentle as well as bloodthirsty moments Kakashi knew one could not fight all the time.

His time in ANBU had showed him that sometimes you found light in the strangest places and comfort in the gentlest of things. You learned to value life in the smallest of ways and the things that made you laugh, that kept you going sometimes was the simple things.

Seeing a boy that had suffered so much, that contained rage deep inside him and a devastated lonely soul, smile and make flower crowns. How could Kakashi not fight to smile too?

He had already known how to make the flower crowns but it had been so long since he had last made an attempt. His hands easily separated the cut bunches as he watched Naruto toil in the training ground. With an amused snort Kakashi took up the first flower.

XxX

It had been a long time since team seven had formed and it really showed. In the beginning Naruto had cared but he had been on guard for his mouth and his body. He had given advice and kept his stories to himself along with his opinion but time had passed and though they all kept some things to their chests he could say that they were a lot closer than when they had originally started.

He felt closer to them before in ways that he had thought honestly that he would never feel again and that was a good thing. Holding Sakura’s hand, having her rest against him. Playing in her hair, falling asleep next to her relaxing as much as he was currently able to. That felt good and that showed that he was doing something right.

He knew about moving on but never had he had to move on with nothing to hold onto but words and dreams keeping him grounded. He had lost people before but there had always been Haku beside him to hold onto and as the group grew there had been the knowledge that some of them would be around as long as it took.

Having to start from scratch had worried him that he would be unable to care the way that he had before. But from the very start Iruka-sensei had claimed him with a smile and open arms. On learning most of the truth Sakura had changed and grew. She had become determined to stay by his side and accept all parts of him even the parts she did not understand.

Kakashi-sensei offered no judgement and there always was the sense that the path that they walked on was far more similar than either of them wanted to talk about. That and it was fun to keep secrets sometimes.

There was Sasuke who Naruto had assumed would have kept distant until they went their separate ways but had softened enough to reveal confusion, understanding and regret. All of them had come a long way and become closer as a result. Sasuke who had cautiously let them in a bit and who seemed to understand that some things just happened.

Well Sasuke had a long way to go and a lot on his plate. The understanding would come in time but for Naruto who had felt the lack of physical affection like a physical ache, having his team sleep around him, touch him, hug him, fall asleep with him. Well it made him feel like a dehydrated plant that received water after a long time.

When Sakura and Sasuke had gotten him those flowers… his heart had felt so tight. He had felt it
was going to overflow with emotion and that was how he had known for certain he was on the right track. He had not gotten caught up thinking about the past of Konoha. He had thought about his team and the future they would surely bring together. He also had been thinking that both of them had looked rather cute doing that for him too.

These days they worked together better and Naruto could not help but feel that sooner they would not need words. They understood things better, they caught onto intentions quicker and the trust was stronger than other. He and Sasuke were united in their decision not to worry Sakura to that extent again. Not to tear her in two as she fought for their village and worried for them.

Some part of him knew that Sakura was not going to put up with them trying to take the first leap for very long but that was the future and he was enjoying where he was right now.

XxX

“Someone is in a good mood.” Sasuke said as he took the seat next to Sakura. “Mission gone well?”

Sakura paused in the middle of sorting out her bag to snort. “Well yes and no thanks to the senior Chuunin that I was under, I missed you guys.” She finished softly. “But no that isn’t what has me in a good mood.” She shook her head. “I was just thinking about Naruto.”

“What about him?” Sasuke watched as Sakura separated damaged items and tools into one pile.

“Well I was thinking about the last few missions where we had to spend the night on the road and…” She sighed. “It’s just recently hit me that he’s really changed you know?” She smiled down at the table. “He’s really at ease with us right now.”

“Wasn’t the problem that he was too at ease as it was?” Sasuke questioned. “You know there is no one else like him.”

“I don’t mean like that although that was a concern too.” Sakura breathed out in a huff. “I was just remembering all the times he fell asleep against me and recently it changed. This time it felt as though he had fallen asleep with me, against me Haruno Sakura his friend and not some… not some female from the past.” She met his eyes and Sasuke could feel the seriousness in them. “You have to know what I mean.”

He did, he did understand because he had always felt that there was some sort of imbalance there when Naruto fell asleep against their shoulders or curled up against Sakura. Recently the way he had clung to them, slumped against them not only felt like trust it felt like- “He finally sees us even as he dreams.” Sasuke admitted.

“Exactly.” Sakura pressed a fist to her chest. “Do you know how that feels for me? He trusted me enough to sleep against me to keep him safe while he sleeps. Before it felt as though he was having someone else watch over him and he was so tense.”

“You like that.” Sasuke watched her and the flush that spread across her cheeks. “You’re so easily pleased.”

“We’re his team, we’re his friends.” Sakura grinned. “Don’t you feel the same way?” Sasuke could only smile.

XxX

“Kakashi-sensei has been guiding us so far on battle plans but we need to come up with things on
our own.” Naruto’s uninvited guests… his team sat at his table a very unusual turn of events.

“Well I don’t disagree.” Naruto eyed Sakura before he gave in and sat at his own table to eye the both of them. “So what do you want to do? Kaka-Sensei’s been telling us what to do since day one.”

“We don’t always do what he says. We think for ourselves.” Sakura folded her arms. “And we access and make our own judgements when the time is right and we make our own moves when we have to. All of us have done it. Not just you.”

Ouch. “So you want to make separate battle plans and formations?” Naruto frowned. “Without telling sensei?”

“He’ll figure it out soon enough.” Sasuke dismissed. “Besides it is not as though we don’t have someone who isn’t familiar with making battle plans.”

“Hey.” Naruto raised his arms in protest. “I didn’t make them I watched other people.”

“Several missions that we have been on you’ve done your own thing. I’m not mad.” Sakura waved away. “I’m just saying that sometimes as a team we would make better progress if we were on the same page and understood what moves the others were making. What people are thinking.”

“In the land of snow.” Sasuke said softly. “You had several plans laid out.”

“That had been a headache.” Naruto’s lips twitched as he fought a smile. “So you want to make contingency plans?”

“We have several with Kakashi.” Sasuke glanced at Sakura. “But considering the type of missions both Hokages have gotten us on… we need to start preparing for what to do when we face something a little bigger and more dangerous than a nest of bandits.”

“Why does this sound like preparation for another war.” Naruto asked cautiously, he saw the change on both their faces and groaned. “That’s what this is about isn’t it. This is about another war.”

“Our enemies are not going to fade away.” Sakura glanced quickly in Sasuke’s direction. “When we were in the land of snow and the land of waves both times we found unexpected fights.”

“And we won.” Naruto pointed out. “But I get it, winning now doesn’t mean you’ll win in the future. You want to start training for lethal attacks.” He took a deep breath. “That’s where I come in don’t I. You want to learn how to think like a missing nin.”

“Or at least fight like one.” Sasuke rolled his eyes. “Sometimes when I watch you and Kakashi fight side by side I can’t help but wonder if you have your own separate communication mics in.” Naruto held his gaze before Sasuke looked away.

“There’s nothing wrong with how you two fight you know.” Naruto pointed out. “Back after the finals you both did good. When we are on missions you both help and fight well it is just that I got pretty used to having to bring down people hard. That isn’t going to go away, the things the others taught me. The things that I know. It isn’t going to go away but you guys don’t have to be like that.” He pushed away his chair from the table and stood up his hands braced on the top of it. “If you want to train more and together that’s fine but don’t think there is something wrong with you guys. You are good too.” His necklace slid out of his shirt and he sighed and shoved it back in. “But I do think I get what you guys want so let’s go.”
“All of us have our talents and our abilities. Kakashi-sensei all this time has been using us the way that he sees best based on what he knows. Sakura-chan as our Chuunin you’ll be instructing Sasuke and I how to move.” Naruto paced around the training ground. “Which means you’ll have to know not only our moves but how to best use us against enemies you don’t know. You’re pretty tactical but I think you want to be even more so.”

“That’s right.” Sakura nodded. “There have been too many openings that I’ve noticed. We need to fight efficiently as a team.”

“Sasuke and I are your heavy hitters.” Naruto nodded. “We have more chakra than you do so you send us out knowing we won’t tire easily. There have been situations where we have needed to cut an enemy off. We’re good right now but you guys want to be like actual ghosts.” He bit off a smile. “And you want to get in someone’s head.”

“Exactly.”

“No matter what we do people will still see us as kids.” Naruto pointed out. “We could have a Jounin jacket and that would make them be a bit cautious but people look at us and see kids. We have to use that to our advantage even as we treat them like the threats that they are.”

“So how is this different to what we normally do?” Sasuke asked. “We’ve been taking it serious this entire time.”

“We just have to up our targets. At least before they can upgrade on us and we get into serious trouble.” Naruto grinned. “We are about to learn about our strengths and weaknesses the hard way.”

“And how are we going to do that?” Sakura frowned.

“We’re going to fight each other but this time it is going to be two on one. Fighting with someone, tracking someone. Running and having to fend off someone is the best way to understand what they think and what they are weak against and we’ll have to bring our full game to it.” Naruto grinned. “Every time we do this we’ll switch.”

XxX

“You didn’t use the jutsu sensei gave you.” Sakura panted as she lay flat on her back.

“Naruto didn’t use his new jutsu either.” Sasuke pointed out as he sat against the remains of a tree trunk his head between his knees.

“Aces in the hole.” Naruto yawned as he lay on the ground. “Next time Sakura-chan has to run.”

“Come off of it.” Sakura groaned.

“I’ve got more training to do.” Sasuke muttered.

“Yeah bet you never guessed how much you over compensated with your left side huh.” Naruto yawned. “You know we could have asked Kakashi-sensei to do this too.”

“I like doing it ourselves.” Sakura chuckled.

“Me too.” Sasuke said softly.
“I like you guys working it out yourselves too.” Kakashi chuckled as he drew back into the trees. A solid team was one that worked things out for themselves. And with team seven working solid even without him there, well that only spelled good things for themselves.

Of course, maybe he should start to pull Sakura aside more for some one on one practice. Asuma played Shogi with Shikamaru and Kakashi had planned on getting Sakura a jutsu that suited her strengths. Maybe he could help her with this too.

XxX

“What are you doing Tsunade.” Jiraiya folded his arms when Shizune left them alone. “Why remove those shinobi from their duties?”

“Because it was a waste of time.” Tsunade rolled her eyes at him before she shoved a stack of papers aside. “I have other things for those shinobi to do than waste their time stealthing around looking for a snake that has gone to ground.”

“What’s that supposed to mean.” Jiraiya frowned. “We need that intel.”

“Yes we do.” Tsunade agreed. “But we’re not going to get anything new. He’s gone to ground and keeping them on him when he’s not making in moves is a waste of time. Besides—” Her eyes lit up. “I have plans.”

“You’re moving the special stealth teams from watching Orochimaru for different plans? It can’t be about his previous organization because not even I have information on them yet.”

“Exactly.” Tsunade hummed. “You’re the best person for tracking down the mystery group and Orochimaru at this time. Right now, I have things I want done from the stealth team and I want them to do some training of their own. I need more shinobi inside of Konoha with their talent.”

Tsunade could sometimes be a mystery. “What are you up to?” Jiraiya shook his head.

“You’ll see eventually.” Tsunade sent him a sly grin. “It’ll work out for the best, they are the only team I’d trust right now to gather this sort of intel. Orochimaru not making any moves works out for us right now. In the brief peace we are given I’d like to start widening our talent.”

“You’ll inform me eventually what you’re up to won’t you?” Jiraiya sighed. “How long do you plan to keep the stealth team occupied with other matters?”

“Until I have a team that can replace them. They are shinobi that can get me intel on Orochimaru without Orochimaru sensing them for a certain distance. Perfect for what I need.”

XxX

“Tsunade-sama I have the reports from—“ Shizune stopped when she entered the empty office. Tsunade-sama had obviously left for other matters. Hopefully not to get drunk but she had been doing so well lately that Shizune doubted she would have done that.

The pile of papers were in the finished pile so she had been working hard. It brought at smile to her face to see the mostly empty desk. Shizune approached the desk to leave the reports for whenever Tsunade-sama returned and paused when she spotted the flower crown on the desk. White, blue and yellow flowers made a pattern and she had to admit that it looked well made. She doubted Tsunade-sama had seen it yet and it made her curious to who had made it.
Or maybe not, very few people would leave something like that in her office so she could narrow it down past the eccentric shinobi and narrow onto a special little genin. At least Naruto was not letting Tsunade-sama’s teasing get to him.
The third, the fourth, the fifth coming of the demon

Chapter Notes

I'm so excited about this chapter because I've been waiting to get to post this since I thought of it, since I named the chapter, since I wrote it and I've just been so eager and excited because this chapter is my fav so far and I love it. Hope you darlings enjoy it too!

“Three days off, Tsunade-sama is being generous.” Kakashi withdrew his book as he lounged in the Jounin station. “I should enjoy it while it lasts.”

“You mean until she changes her mind.” Kurenai sighed. “Even under the Sandaime I never saw this much movement. On call really does mean that.”

“Stop complaining she can hear you.” Genma leaned over the couch. “And Kakashi just because you get three days off doesn’t mean that your entire team gets those days off too.”

“Sasuke’s clan is Sasuke’s clan. I take no responsibility for their actions. I encourage their endeavours.” Kakashi mumbled as his eye slid down the open page.

“You know, I wasn’t talking about him or the girl.” Genma laughed. “I mean Naruto. To the Hokage, he is pretty much fair game isn’t he?” Kakashi’s eye shot up to lock on Genma who had moved in front of him. “She likes yanking him from your team as much as she uses your Chuunin.”

What was annoying was the fact that it was the truth. A very painful truth. Tsunade-sama with no shame at all enjoyed taking Naruto from team seven as though there were not dangers all around them and as if all the Jounins she handed him off to could handle those situations.

Kakashi would not insult the talents of the other Jounin senseis but Naruto had been given to him for a reason. Not every shinobi in the village could handle a boy like Naruto. Not many shinobi could handle a Jinchuuriki and although the seal that was used was strong that did not mean anyone could deal with it if it were to break.

For the Hokage to act as though Naruto was like any other shinobi and toss him wherever she chose… Kakashi knew she was up to something. It was in the way she tossed Naruto at missions, it was in the way she regarded him and Kakashi did not know if she was testing him, training him or some mixture of both.

Naruto obviously did not know either but he sent amused looks at the Hokage when she was not looking and sometimes they seemed to hold an amusing secret between them. A dare or something that electrified the air between them that Kakashi pretended that it did not drive him crazy.

Even Shizune kept her mouth closed about whatever it was and that told Kakashi a lot. Still, for a genin to be treated in such a matter. A genin jinchuuriki. It did not make sense to him so he had to wonder what was going on.

Actually, it seemed like no one could leave his team alone. Sasuke tried to avoid clan duties but got dragged into them anyway. Sakura had Chuunin duties, Chuunin training and when that was not
Then there were the ANBU guards that Kakashi knew, the ANBU members that could not keep their eyes off his team and especially Naruto. The watches for Naruto were dying down instead sticking to simple guards but that did not change anything.

Shisui and Itachi were expected to be interested in Sasuke and to want to keep an eye on him. Everyone else that was watching Sakura with some sort of anticipation got on his nerves, he could not even have his team to himself.

Orochimaru had gone to ground to the irritation of Jiraiya-sensei but only a fool would think that he was finished with Sasuke. The question was where he would pop up and how.

With all these things going on, with Jounin senseis that were not match for the actual Sannin themselves, tossing Naruto around really did not make any sense. Kakashi could only hope that their three days was for the entire team to stay in the village under his eye.

XxX

“Oh and Asuma.” The Hokage called when Asuma turned away. “You’re taking Naruto with you.” Her eyes dared him to say anything about it.

“Is that wise?” He shoved his hands into his pockets and grinned. Of course he was wary of her, respectful too but he knew she had a nice side.

“Hm, you mean Kakashi?” The Hokage grinned wider. “He’ll get over it, he needs to sleep anyway but if the mission tags on too long I’ll send him and the little Uchiha on some sort of little mission to keep him quiet.” Asuma shook his head at her response and he wondered how he was going to break the news to his team after the last mission they had gone on with team seven.

“Any advice?” He asked when he got to the door. “Kakashi and the rest of the team won’t be there as a buffer.”

“Let him have a little breathing space, he’ll know what to do. Don’t try too hard, give him his head a little and let me know how it goes.” Her eyes shone with glee and Asuma could do nothing but sigh.

“He’s not going to run off is he?” Asuma doubted it but you never knew.

“Oh he’s here to stay but that isn’t what I’m getting at.” She smiled down at her desk full of papers.

XxX

“You okay Ino?” Shikamaru asked with his hand hovering over the doorknob. “You seem a little quiet.”

Ino looked up at him before she set a photo aside. “I’m okay I was just thinking a bit. Are you here to do some training? Or are you saying goodbye before you’re off again?”

“I wish it was that easy but Asuma wants to meet up.” Shikamaru barely stifled his groan. “We have a mission and Chouji is already on his way over there so we should head to the briefing.”

“Okay.” Ino reached for her weapons bag and Shikamaru was tempted to say something because a thoughtful or subdued Ino was not good for anyone. It was confusing as hell too but… from what
he could see of the photo maybe it was best to keep his troublesome mouth shut. Reminiscing
about the past never hurt anyone anyway.

Xxx

He had gotten a little carried away with meditating but Naruto was in a good mood so he let that
slide. Besides when he had been deep down he had felt the nagging feeling of something else.
Ignoring it had not been an option but he had been unable to grasp it either so he had been forced to
let it go.

Which honestly was way more annoying than most people would think. It honestly sucked but it
had not ruined the peaceful mood he had fallen into. He had gotten up earlier than he usually did in
order to train because sleep had just escaped him.

He had been thinking foolish thoughts and he been forced out of sleeping for a length of time. He
had felt rested so he had given up going back to sleep. He liked being awake in the night hours
anyway. Outside looked the best when it was a little chilly out with the darkness and mist as a
curtain.

There had been plenty of missions tossed around but it felt as though things were finally slowing
down. They went out just as often but the way they were sent out and the way that missions were
reassigned felt different.

There were more C-ranks for team seven but the feel of them were different. Tsunade baa-chan
was obviously up to something but considering that she was new to the job Naruto was willing to
let it slide. That and because of the shake-up in all the administration.

Patience paid off after all. Keeping his eyes open and waiting paid off in the end. While others
might have relaxed and forgotten, Naruto had never allowed himself to forget exactly what his
goals were.

Tsunade baa-chan was better than most of the closed mouth shinobi in the village but she was still
like them. If Naruto had learned anything from his months in the village it was that there were
plenty of people holding hostage what he wanted to know.

It was sort of hilarious that no one knew just what he would do to find out what he needed to know.
Konoha just kept giving him the best excuses to go where he wanted to go and the best phrases to
pursue.

When one heard that they were the only Uzumaki. When they heard about the last Uzumaki they
would obviously think that meant that they were alone in the village but didn’t that mean that the
others were dead and buried?

People could be buried under false names but there had to be enough for Naruto to find information
in the graveyards. Missions went to some weird places so Naruto had managed to cross off a lot of
different things right under the nose of his team and the village. He was so amused at the situation
that he really was not that angry.

A bird cried overhead and he was drawn out of his thoughts. He stretched up high before he stood
up his feet on his cold roof. Another day, more missions and more training. He had things to make
too, Konoha was a busy place.

Xxx

Shikamaru had heard from Chouji who had heard from Kiba that the Hokage had sent Naruto to
tag along with team eight on a mission. He had also heard that whatever had gone down with
Naruto tagging along had unnerved Kiba in a big way.

Apparently, it was now Team ten’s turn to have Naruto tag along. They had only teamed up with
team seven, to have a tag along raised his apprehension but while he had been confused and
curious during the team up before he had to admit he looked forward to having the rest of team
seven missing.

He wanted a clear view of the Naruto that perplexed him. Thinking about it was troublesome but it
was also worrisome. How could he be expected to ignore what was right before him? The longer
he looked at Naruto, the longer he listened to him things just did not add up.

What made it worse was that Asuma-sensei knew what bothered him. It was in the way the man
looked at him, it was in the way he regarded Naruto. It was in the way Jounins fell silent when
Naruto walked among them, there was a huge mystery surrounding Naruto and while part of him
worried about what he might learn there was a bigger need to shine a light on Naruto and learn
everything he could about him.

The things he did, the things that fell out of him simply were not normal the mystery that Naruto
was wrapped up in, Shikamaru knew he could solve it. He just needed more time.

XxX

The Sannin had an unhealthy fascination with his team and especially with Naruto. Kakashi gave
into his irritation as he crumbled the note in his fist. Part of him wanted to confront the Hokage but
he knew that she would enjoy that too much.

He knew that she expected that of him, that she wanted him to protest. He knew what she was
hinting at and he hated it. He did not want to be exposed in this manner and he did not want to play
along with her games.

He guessed she had embraced the Sandaime’s jinchuuriki plans with open arms since she kept
giving Naruto away to different teams. Never mind that Shikamaru was close enough to uncovering
at least part of Naruto’s past.

Having them discover on their own the pain Konoha put Naruto through, the pain Naruto suffered
outside the village. There was no way that the genins of Naruto’s generation. The children that he
knew, there was no way that they would not paint adults and Konoha in a dark light the moment
Naruto’s true history was revealed.

Kakashi was uncertain to whether that would be a bad thing.

XxX

“Again huh.” Naruto mused to his empty apartment. “Asuma-sensei is alright so I think I’ll be
okay. At least I think he’ll be just like Shikamaru and do the least until he has to. That isn’t a bad
thing.” Not just weapons were making it into his bag but Naruto had a reason for that.

He glanced around his apartment that he had hastily cleaned when he had received his mission
instructions. After the hunt with team eight he had given into the fact that Tsunade baa-chan was
just going to toss him wherever she wanted.

He wished he had time to tell his sensei goodbye but as it was he barely had time to brief Iruka-
sensei. They were leaving right away.
“Long time no see Naruto.” Chouji already had a bag of crisps in his hand and open as he waited at the gate. Naruto flashed Chouji a happy grin as he looked for the other members of the team.

“Same thing Chouji, it has been around a few weeks huh.” Naruto mused. “Shikamaru is going to be late? Your sensei too?”

“Asuma-sensei and Shikamaru have business with the Hokage and Ino had to go back home for something.” Chouji shrugged before he ate a handful of crisps. “Usually Asuma-sensei isn’t late.”

“Already he sounds like a decent adult.” Naruto sighed enviously. “This is going to be a long mission huh.”

“Asuma-sensei says we aren’t supposed to call them that but we are hunting E-ranked missing nins.” Chouji shrugged. “They aren’t that much of a worry supposedly.”

“Until they get the drop on you.” Naruto warned. “But team ten has some good capturing jutsus and techniques I don’t get why I have to tag along.”

“Me neither.” Chouji admitted. “But I guess we need someone like Asuma-sensei along too. Like how you and Sasuke can bring down powerful people hard and quickly. Just in case in most likely why you’re here.”

“You know.” Naruto sighed. “Nobody tags along with team seven on our missions and it would be really nice if we had back up once in a while.”

“Maybe someone will team up with you guys soon.” Chouji said around a mouthful of crisps. “Like Shikamaru because he is a Chuunin or those guys from team Gai-sensei but you have Kakashi-sensei so I don’t really see a team being split apart for you.” Chouji admitted. “Most of us are clan based teams it is easier to break apart your team than to break apart ours because we rely on teamwork.”

“That’s a really good point.” Naruto mused. “But it still isn’t fair.”

“Team eight could maybe continue on without a person but not us.” Chouji chuckled. “And your team really is easier to split up and still have working… also your missions are too bothersome for us. We would rather not. Well Ino wouldn’t mind but the rest of us would.”

“Brutally honest.” Naruto said dryly. “Thanks Chouji but you do know you’ll have one of our crazy missions soon enough right? There is no logical reason why only we should get the nasty surprises. And we go all sorts of places!”

“I’ll pass.”

XxX

“He’s going to be with Shikamaru?” Sakura frowned at Sasuke. “Okay but why is he being yanked off our team? Again? Even I don’t get pulled as often as he does when you think about it.”

“Kakashi isn’t in a good mood.” Sasuke shrugged as Sakura packed up her tools. “I don’t think he likes it either.”

“Well we know that something is going on there but getting it out of Sensei will be like pulling teeth. If we were still on the state of emergency I might have let it slide but there is no need to pull
Naruto onto missions unless he has something unique to offer.” Sasuke watched Sakura’s eyes glaze over.

“Sakura?”

“Do you think it has something to do with that insane amount of chakra that he has?” She said softly. “It is useful for certain missions maybe it is something unusual. I mean… he has more chakra than the both of us right?”

“More than Kakashi too.” Sasuke offered, Sakura shot him a contemplative glance before she resumed packing up her tools.

XxX

“They should have sent a tracking team.” Shikamaru complained. “Why didn’t they send Kurenai-sensei?”

“Ask the Hokage Shikamaru.” Asuma-sensei looked close to giving into the urge to ruffling his hair so Shikamaru allowed the space between them to lengthen in order to prevent that.

“For her to throw a chair at me.” He snorted.

“She only throws furniture at Jounins.” Asuma-sensei snorted. “She’ll throw a pen at you.”

“That sounds far deadlier.” Shikamaru grumbled, his gaze moved to the three ahead of them. He was glad for the opportunity to get to observe Naruto away from the rest of team seven but Asuma-sensei kept getting in his way and Naruto himself would turn eyes on him at the most dangerous times.

Asuma-sensei had no shame and stared at him while he watched Naruto. He knew why Shikamaru was watching him and the smile on his face when Shikamaru got frustrated because Naruto gave nothing away was not funny, it just made Shikamaru more frustrated.

“Good things come to those who wait.” Asuma said lazily. Shikamaru rolled his eyes. “You could make it a little less obvious Shikamaru.”

“You could tell me what’s going on.” Shikamaru bristled. He watched as Naruto’s head turned to eye the road that led away from the one they were taking, as if he was thinking about where it led.

“This is so troublesome.”

“Then why don’t you ignore it?” Asuma-sensei laughed.

“If I had the chance to ignore something so obviously troublesome don’t you think I would? Obviously I can’t leave this alone, my mind can’t leave this alone.” Shikamaru’s eyes narrowed on Naruto’s back. “If someone would just tell me I wouldn’t have to feel like this.” He blew out a frustrated sigh. “But no one is going to tell me anything. I can tell that this is something I’ll have to figure out on my own.”

“There’s more to that boy than what you see.” Asuma-sensei’s hands drifted to his pocket before he forced them away. “Don’t rush things.”

“You guys don’t make it easy.” Shikamaru huffed. “He’s a mystery wrapped up in contradictions. My Dad tells me one thing, I see another, he acts another, the rest of the village…” He trailed off and sighed. “I have my suspicions but then he smiles like an idiot and I’m back to square one.”
“There’s a saying about bright smiles Shikamaru.”

“There’s a saying about smoke and fire too but you keep blowing smoke in my face.” Shikamaru grumbled.

“Well I can do more of that if you want…”

“Don’t be annoying.”

XxX

“Aren’t we all equal?” Ino asked as she frowned at the map. “Why is the area split into grids like this?”

“One it is so I can come to back you up at any time.” Asuma-sensei put out his cigarette on the grass to rolled eyes from the team. “Second it is because you aren’t equal, you all have your strengths and weakness and it is a fairly big area to cover. I assigned you accordingly.”

“Naruto and Shikamaru get the toughest areas to search huh.” Ino sighed. “I’m not surprised.”

“Shikamaru can think his way out of anything,” Chouji shrugged as he leaned over Ino. “Naruto can fight his way out of anything, we saw that at the exams.”

“Heh well not everything.” Naruto admitted, Ino watched him awkwardly rub the back of his neck. “I mean I’m still improving, plenty of things I suck at. If I could fight my way out of anything I wouldn’t be here.” She swore for a second Naruto’s eyes flicked to Asuma-sensei.

XxX

“Well good luck!” Asuma-sensei looked way too cheerful in Chouji’s opinion but he was used to it by now. He watched as Naruto eyed the surroundings before he turned in the direction that he would have to search.

“Keep in touch okay! Let us know right away if you run into trouble.” Shikamaru sounded worried but Chouji had known that something was bothering Shikamaru since they had gotten the mission. Naruto seemed pretty okay to Chouji but if Shikamaru was concerned then that meant that Chouji had to worry too.

“See you guys.” Ino looked determined. “I’ll bring in all of them.”

“There’s actually no need for that just call us over.” Shikamaru looked slightly alarmed at Ino’s determination. “What’s gotten into you lately? Have you been hanging out with Sakura too much? Or that other girl? There’s no need to compete we are all a team.” Ino’s clenched jaw told them how much she was listening.

“We’ll be fine.” Chouji reassured. “We’re in the grid with the lease amount of trouble anyway.” If they got any action at all Chouji would be surprised. Most likely they would end up being back up but he had no real problem with that anyway.

“Take care of yourselves guys.” Naruto flashed them all a grin. “Don’t worry about me.” He finished before he took off at a run. Chouji was left watching his back. It was strange but he was not worried about Naruto’s safety at all, he was concerned that something bigger than what they were hunting might come in a wrong place wrong time situation but somehow, he could tell that Naruto could take care of himself.
He was so at ease during these sorts of missions. He was so happy when travelling and then there was that he could fight and he could plan. His planning was nowhere near the level of Shikamaru’s but for a few missing nins Chouji had no doubt Naruto could take care of himself.

XxX

There was nothing around really, no activity above but down below? Naruto had managed to locate a few trails but nothing serious. He had really gotten one of the good grids. Of course it was funny how Asuma-sensei and Shikamaru ran the team. Naruto had to give the both of them credit because Shikamaru was always consulted.

Naruto could understand why, Shikamaru was lazy but he was scary smart. The things he saw and Naruto bet half the things Shikamaru understood he did not talk about, most likely because he could not be bothered. Shikamaru had always been that way, from as far as Naruto could remember. He knew the answers but was too bored to write them. He had a good strategy but saw no sense in doing it. Could have been fit if he tried but did not want to play. He really had not changed, the faded boy from Naruto’s memories had just gotten older.

Team ten was not bad, they were not team seven but they were still pretty okay. Still he had managed to luck out with the mission and Asuma-sensei’s laziness. It was kind of funny how obvious Shikamaru was. Maybe if Naruto was not who he was he would not have noticed but even after the months of trying to be a normal Konoha shinobi… he was still who he was.

Besides, Sasuke stared just as much as Shikamaru did and almost in the same way. Sakura did too but there was a different feeling to it. A stare filled with worry. Kakashi-sensei was the only one that did not stare at him like that.

He did watch Naruto and that in itself caused problems but he was willing to come and sit right next to Naruto too and leave him alone and unfortunately for Naruto’s heart Kakashi-sensei liked to smile at him for no reason. There was no reason behind it, the man never shared what he found funny but he would flash that grin at Naruto when they were alone sometimes. The last time he had been so shaky and uncertain around a person’s smiles was…

Honestly Kakashi-sensei should really keep covered up.

XxX

There was nothing like lazing around, Shikamaru was onto something. There really was nothing like staring up at the sky while you laid on your back, absolutely nothing like it. Especially on a clear day, the clouds drifted slowly by and there was the feeling that everything was just fine. It was a nice illusion to sleep under.

The breeze ruffled his hair as he watched the clouds, he had work to do but honestly Naruto was at peace, there was no sound other than the sound of nature and his own breathing. Ryu would have loved it. Noise was okay but a chance to rest and feel a part of nature was always good. Nature never let you feel alone.

Time drifted on slow and unbothered until Naruto became aware of the sound of footsteps approaching. There was no sense of danger and he did not feel unease as the soft footsteps came towards him, unhurried and easy.

He reopened his eyes when he felt a shadow fall over his face. He knew that it would not be Asuma-sensei, Shikamaru, Ino or Chouji. Still a smile came to his face when he caught sight of the black hair and sharp nose above him.
“You don’t look like a dignified shinobi from Konoha.” Sora smiled.

“Hi Sora.” Naruto smiled.

XxX

His hair was a bit longer than the time that they had said goodbye but he still had that knowing smile on his face. The one that had gotten him into trouble the first time they met. He pulled Naruto easily to his feet before Naruto was pulled into a tight hug. They rocked together back and forth a few seconds with Naruto’s nose pressed into Sora’s monk robes. “I missed you brat.” Sora whispered.

“Me too.” Naruto’s arms tightened around Sora as he breathed Sora in. “It’s been so hard.” Sora allowed him to pull back a bit and Naruto allowed himself a small laugh. “Looks like the ossan was right.”

“Hm?” Sora questioned, his brown eyes lingered on Naruto’s hitai-ate before they eyed Naruto’s clothes. “What Ossan?”

“Yours.” Naruto sighed before he dropped back down to sit on the grass. Sora followed him and laid back with a sigh before he removed his arm from the sling he usually carried it in. “Chiriku ossan.” Naruto laughed softly. “He said to give you something when I ran into you. He might be onto something there.”

“He asked you to pass something on?” Sora’s voice had gone high for a few seconds and wistful. “What was it?”

“A talisman.” Naruto reached for his bag before he dragged it towards him. He rummaged around in it until he drew out the talisman Chiriku ossan had left for Sora. “He seemed to think that you would run into me way before him and it turns out he was right.” Naruto handed over the heavy talisman and watched Sora examine it. “Even though you’re supposed to be somewhere else.”

“Island life is boring.” Sora chuckled. “I can’t stay still in a place like that after all the work is done. I’m not made to sit on my ass all day and help govern.” He tucked the talisman into the front of his robes. “Besides I had to make sure that Morgana was doing okay by herself.”

“That isn’t the name she’s using now.” Naruto pointed out. “She went back to her old name.”

“That’s her dead name, to us she’s Morgana. Our Morgana she isn’t their little paper doll.” Sora seethed. “But enough about that.” His voice softened. “Did he say anything else? Where did you even see him?”

“He was in Konoha.” Naruto snorted. “He is friends with a Jounin in my village but he said that the temple was cleaned and stuff, that he did some house cleaning.” Naruto watched Sora make tight fists at his words. “He said that it is okay to come home, that he was worried for you.”

“He’s the only good thing about that place but I can’t go back.” Sora’s tone was regretful. “In that place of hell, he was the only angel around even though he wasn’t the best angel either but he was the only human worthy of respect around there but I can’t go back.”

“I told him that.” Naruto grumbled. “He seemed to think that I could convince you or that would convince you but I knew better.”

“He doesn’t understand, but that’s okay!” Sora barked out a laugh. “It’s fine that he doesn’t understand, people like him shouldn’t have to understand. There’s so much evil around. He should
never have to understand things like that. He tried hard enough.”

“You should see him.” Naruto said hesitantly. “If you’re going to be around fire country like this, you might as well go and see him.”

“I know that I should.” Sora admitted. “But who says that I’m around here for him? Or even you?” He teased. “I have a job to do and I’m out here to do it.”

“So why are you so close to fire country huh?” Naruto asked playfully.

“Well I needed to get a closer look at the future Kage of Konoha for one. He’s always locked up and I was worried about that.” Sora mused. “And because there are some bandits that I’ve been tracking. They are the nasty sort. I can’t let them roam around.”

“From Kusa?”

“Kiri.” Sora glanced towards the tree line. “You hunting some bandits too?”

“Yeah but mine are more annoying than dangerous. Where are they?” Naruto glanced to where Ino’s and Chouji’s search grids were.

“Not in that direction.” Sora shook his head. “But they are travelling slow and plenty arrogant. We’ll know when they get close enough. They are those sorts of disgusting animals.”

XxX

“Bet you haven’t told the entire story yet.” Sora stared at the sky while he held Naruto’s hand in his. “Want to talk about it? About what happened.”

He had told his story in many ways but never the full thing, maybe that was Haku’s influence. Naruto sighed before he squeezed Sora’s hand. “It happened a few weeks after we left you guys at that beach. We went north afterwards. Zabuza didn’t want to lay low as yet. Wanted to lead those chasing us on a chase.”

“That’s Zabuza for you, always ready for a fight.” Sora snorted.

“There was this client they took on while everyone was resting up. We had gone for a week straight barely any stops. Barely any sleeping.” Naruto bit back his growl. “He drugged us, Haku had never liked the guy, he had not wanted to stop or even work for him but you know how it goes.”

“Zabuza’s word is final.” Sora breathed softly.

“Yeah.” Naruto admitted. “After you guys left there was so much running but so much work too, everyone was on my case. If Alya wasn’t in my hair then Haku was. We were losing people hard too and part of me was frustrated that we just had not carried on across the sea.”

“Haku had his reasons.” Sora squeezed his hand gently. “You know he did and tensions were high with such a big group. We followed no problem but you bet that we were asking questions too. We had to leave, I didn’t want to.” He finished sadly.

“I didn’t want to say goodbye.” Naruto admitted. “But now I’m glad that you left when you did.”

“Haku didn’t give us a choice and I wanted to help out. Guess it is all over now.” Sora’s free hand reached towards the sky. “We’re all that’s left.”
“It was over so quick. That bastard sold us out.” Naruto watched the clouds. “Konoha came for
me.”

“You never thought they would did you?”

“They never did before, all the dogs that came after us, none of them were from Konoha. No one
ever looked for me. I always thought I would have to go back to them, either my tails between my
legs or with everyone by my side.”

“But they did come.” Sora said softly.

“Haku.” Naruto shook his head. “Sometimes I think that if they had known what they were there
for. If they had just handed me over-“

“You know better than that.” Sora shook his head. “You knew Haku almost better than all of us.”

“I guess I did.” Naruto admitted. “Thought I knew Zabuza but instead of running… he chose to die
right there with everyone else and Haku.”

“That’s the real surprise.” Sora sat up. “Never saw that bastard doing anything for anyone but
himself. what about Haku?”

“Died for Zabuza.”

“You knew that would happen eventually. I told you before we left. We told you. You knew
Naruto, the kind of person Haku was better than anyone. Just because you were the youngest
doesn’t mean you were blind.”

“I wished he valued himself more. The endgame.” Naruto gritted his teeth. “It was always Zabuza
and I knew it would get him killed eventually, it was only a matter of time. That was why I wanted
to get stronger, why I fought so hard to be useful so at least Haku wouldn’t throw me away.”

“Two of you would have clashed, you know how Haku was about people who tried to save him.
He was stubborn. It would have come down to two things. Either he let you go or you fight
Zabuza.” Sora sighed. “Least that was what I saw, the rest of us were never as important as Haku
and you.”

“I wanted to save him.”

“He would have never let you. It was already too late.”

“I know.” Naruto admitted. “I know that now, I look back and know that Haku feared that too. It
was why he tried to bring me closer even when he should have pushed me away. He cared for me
too but Zabuza was always first, Zabuza’s dream. I couldn’t replace it but Zabuza cared for Haku
too just he did it too late. Haku never got to know that Zabuza had changed.”

“Konoha huh.” Sora sighed. “I guess they made their own assumptions about us huh.”

“The group wasn’t close to anything normal.” Naruto rolled his eyes. “And why talk about things
unrelated?”

“Haku and Alya taught you well.” Sora laughed. “So they brought you home huh. They treating
you good? I’ve been trying to get eyes on you but it is hard when you don’t leave the village.”

“Some parts of them are annoying.” Naruto grumbled. “There is so much they won’t tell me but
there are some good people in the village. It pisses me off that everyone wants to keep secrets from me but… nothing new when you think about it. I’ll figure it out on my own.”

“Lots of things you see clearly when you’re on your own.” Sora laughed. “So? How is it?”

“Being a shinobi for real?” Naruto laughed. “You know, much hasn’t changed except I live in the village and I kinda have friends and I have a place to come back to. People that say welcome back and things like that. I’m sorta part of the village.”

“You were never the type to be a loner.” Sora laughed. “But be careful, we won’t hesitate to come after Konoha if they mess with you.”

“Please don’t.” Naruto said dryly. “I think I worry a lot of them.”

“Because?”

“I’m doing what they want.” Naruto admitted. “I’m a genin and I’m working my way up.”

“What on earth did they think was going to happen?” Sora frowned. “They know how the group worked didn’t they? Hell before Raiya nee-san joined she took out Kaya’s friends didn’t she? Couldn’t slide a piece of paper between those two after some time. I mean can’t afford to hold onto grudges unless somebody is really bad but Haku took care of that in the end.”

“I can’t shake the feeling that if it hadn’t been Konoha that it would have been-” Naruto cut himself off. “I dreamed about taking that sword you know, leading the group somewhere safe. Where we wouldn’t have to run.”

“Yeah you would have had to kill Zabuza to achieve that dream.” Sora laughed. “Where’s the sword now? Konoha send it back to Kiri?”

“It’s in Konoha, when I get older. When I’m ready.” Naruto declared with a grin. “It’s going to be mine. Zabuza left it for me.”

“Even that sounds about right.” Sora snorted. “I really missed you Naruto.”

XxX

“It just feels weird to know that they are gone.” Sora said quietly as he handed Naruto a wrapped bean bun. “This has been such a big part of our lives you know? Everyone believed in them and for them to be gone. To know that it is up to us now… feels kinda lonely.”

“I know.” Naruto took a huge bite and ignored Sora’s laugh before he brushed away the stray crumbs around his mouth. “The world felt so big and lonely for a bit but I made some friends. They don’t know everything though.”

“Of course they wouldn’t how would they even begin to understand everything that we- wait.” Sora frowned. “Don’t they know about your other self?”

“Don’t call it that.” Naruto frowned. “That fox is not me.”

“You two reside in the same place, it is you. Your other self that shares a body. Two bodies one heart.” Sora shook his finger at him. “I’ve seen it look through your eyes enough to know that denying it only causes pain in the end.”

“It hurts people.” Naruto grumbled. “I’ve started asking it for help now but at the back of my head
is the knowledge that it wants to hurt people no matter who.”

“Hatred is a part of living beings, anger, irrational or not has to be accepted. You can’t tuck away
the negative things to the back of your heart you have to face them, confront them because that’s
the only way to find happiness. Accepting anger and disgust does not mean forgiveness or letting
them go it just means acknowledging your true self.” Sora sighed heavily. “It isn’t easy but living a
dream isn’t good for anyone.”

“It frightens people.”

“It scares you.” Sora corrected. “I’ve never had to face that part of you but like everyone else I’ve
seen your eyes turn red like a demon’s would. I’ve seen you grow fangs and you know what? I’m
still here for you and I don’t care. It doesn’t define you and you’re more than that.”

“You sound like Ryu.” Naruto groaned.

“I’m glad.” Sora laughed. “It means that you know I’m right.”

“But I don’t wanna.” Naruto groaned.

“Now you sound like Kasumi when Ryu’s told her something she doesn’t want to hear.” Sora
laughed before he rolled onto his side to tickle Naruto. Naruto squirmed and laughed as Sora
sought out all his weak spots. “That tells me I’m on the right track, now listen to your elder brat.
Heed me!”

XxX

“It looks just like it used to.” Sora mused as he turned Kasumi’s fan over and over in his hand.
“Good work! She would have been proud, I’ve been trying to replicate the arm bands that Ryu had
but I suck. Need more practice.”

“I might be able to make them.” Naruto thought it over. “I helped him fix them a few times so I
might be able to make them from scratch but that would take some time and then how would I get
them to you? You going back to the island anytime soon?”

“I want to keep an eye on Morgana as much as I can.” Sora handed back the fan. “I don’t like her
being by herself with none of us around. Least I can pretend to be giving her council or whatever.
Some of the others want to move into her compound just in case. Island life isn’t for everyone.”

“I can’t expect to run into you all the time.” Naruto laughed.

“Well I’m trying to keep an eye on you but Fire Country is dangerous.” Sora chuckled. “We don’t
need the wrong people getting the wrong ideas but we thought up something before. I’ll get you to
run into me again. We have to be careful so no one figures out what’s going on. Last thing we need
is them taking a closer look.”

“So I’m taking care of the dirty work?” Naruto grumbled.

“You are a ninja, aren’t you?” Sora laughed. “Doing that is kinda in the job description. It hasn’t
really changed up. You’re doing the same thing that you always used to do just you get to breathe a
little easier.”

XxX

“You really are easy to spot in that loud ass orange get up. What even is with that.” Sora
complained as they started down the hill. “It’s easy for us to see you but you won’t be able to make direct contact so it will be you to us until we can establish something safer.”

“Are you trying to get found out?” Naruto questioned dryly. “I’ll leave hints when I can but don’t move out of character, keep the eyes on me if you must and if I can get away with it I’ll send a shadow clone but it is way too risky.”

“Don’t expect us to stay quiet if we sense anything shady.” Sora frowned. “You know we have our ears to the ground. We can’t afford to lose you to some village’s stupidity we’ll swoop you up and away across the sea if we have to.”

“Just let me handle it for now it is bigger than me.” Naruto stopped walking his eyes ahead of him, Sora had stopped too. “It has its problems but right now it is home. I have work to do there.”

“Haku was right about one thing.” Sora said softly as the air chilled slowly. “You will turn the world on its head but in the right way.” He took two steps forward ahead of Naruto.

“It’s not like that anymore.” Naruto hissed as his hand slid into his pocket for the fan. It slowly slid and fanned out as a ragtag group emerged from the trees ahead. Sora was one step ahead of him his hand spread out to stop Naruto from moving forward. “These your bandits?”

“Can’t you smell the blood?” Sora asked softly.

Xxx

“What’s this? A couple of kids?” A man came from behind the group and brandished an old sword at them. Rusty with misuse, no sheath in sight and his Kiri garb had Naruto reaching for something other than the fan just in case. “Out of the way you don’t want to mess with us.”

Mist started to form from behind the men, not thick but light enough that for others unease would brew. A pity for the men facing them that they found the kids that would never blink an eye at the mist.

He and Sora exchanged a glance at each other, words unspoken before Sora’s body relaxed. “You’ve come a long way.” He said softly. “But I’ve already have your name picked out. All of you are going to die here.”

“A kid threatening me?” The man’s stringy brown hair wobbled as he fought to the front his group and brandished the sword at them. “You threaten me? Hunt me? Do you know who I am? What I’ve done?”

“I’ve seen too much of your work.” Sora sneered. “It’s why I am here.”

The air changed, the area became sharper with the scent of pending death. Naruto was barely able to hold back his laugh at such weak thirst for blood. “Hopefully that isn’t supposed to faze us.” Naruto whispered.

“I wonder what they would think about my brand of justice?” Sora’s bloodlust filled the clearing and beyond. Birds leapt into the air, leaves shook all while Sora stood quietly. Sora called it justice, the rage he turned onto bandits and anyone he deemed worthy of unforgivable destruction. He always carried that rage inside.

Sora brought out feelings in Naruto too, not just feelings and regrets of the past but the sense of self that had lived and walked as Uzumaki Naruto for four years under people with no home and very few morals.
He could feel ice in his veins again, in his throat and the fan in his hand felt as light as a feather as his eyes locked onto everything at once, categorised it, dismissed the irrelevant and continued on.

“You’re just small fry with big mouths.” Naruto smiled, he could feel all of them dying under his hand, by his will and he shared that with them. Watched the big talker sweat a bit by the force that he shared.

“Y-you brats! You think you’re something big? You aren’t even hunter nins! And you, blondie you’re from Konoha?” Naruto remembered the hitai-ate at the talker’s words and sighed before he reached up to let the band slide off. It bounced on the ground at his feet

“Don’t worry about that.” Naruto smiled.

“Don’t you know who I am? What I’ve done? I’ve trained under Kiri’s most elite! To replace one of the swordsmen! You could never defeat me. Not untried brats like you. You’ve heard of Momochi Zabuza?” Naruto’s entire heart jerked at the name. “They say he was a true demon and then there was Mangetsu Hozuki who mastered the seven swords that they said was the second coming of the demon.” The talker took a stance that had very few openings. “And then there is me. They say after Mangetsu-san that I’m the third coming of the demon!”

“Oh.” Sora’s bloodlust had thinned a bit. “Question were you ever trained by Zabuza personally?”

“Not directly.” Came the snapped reply.

“Hm.” Naruto considered as he stepped forward to be directly by Sora’s side. “That’s interesting. I didn’t know there was a second.”

“Me neither, bet you Haku knew.” Sora grumbled. “But you know you’re not worthy of that title. It sounds really cool.”

“But the coming of the demon?” Naruto spread out his fan. “We can do that too because unlike you, he trained us but it is easier to show it that to talk about it. We aren’t Kiri nins but we can open the gates to hell and shove you right in.”

XxX

It was not just Zabuza’s voice in his head as he reacted it was Kasumi’s too. Both he and Sora leapt forward but not directly at the bandits before them, no they aimed to cut them off, with Naruto going left and Sora going right.

Sora’s curved blade slid out easily from the loose cloth he had at his back as he mowed down his own scared opponents. For Naruto, he dodged a scared swing, spun on his left foot before he launched up high enough that he cut slit the man’s throat as he fell.

Before he had even landed properly he was off again, lessons and the feeling of ghost hands guiding him. Naruto could fight like Zabuza, the man did not have an exact style but the terror he brought along with the pure force. That was Zabuza.

Naruto had to make up for the force he lacked so Kasumi’s fan, Kasumi’s steps were what he used as he dodged in between enemies. Zabuza’s precise and final movements were what he used to end them. They did not need the poison that coated the fan. They were gone long before and in cases where there were two to take out one time, Naruto had his kunai for that. The perfect unexpected surprise.

His landing was smooth but he flipped forward and forward in order to avoid the wild crazy
swings. His wave of the fan was graceful but the needles that flew out to slam into the stunned man’s face and throat were unexpected. To the bandit of course. Blood oozed from the precise holes and the sword dropped from his grasp. Poisoned needles.

XxX

It had not taken that long to take care of them, he and Sora might have been younger than them. They might have been long removed from the original troupe but some things you never forgot. Some things you never let go, besides they were only gone if you let them go.

Sora had left the leader alive, for reasons only he could know so Naruto watched the leader shake and curl in on himself, covered in the blood of his men. “Do you know why you’re about to die?” Sora asked softly.

“Fuck you, fucking brats. You’re Konoha aren’t you, both of you. I thought they were better than us but they are doing the same as us. You aren’t any different.”

“You’re a complete idiot.” Sora shook his head. “And in no way do you even come close to Zabuza. You call that coming of the demon? Kid and I were barely warmed up and we have a long way to go.” His blade lifted the bandit’s head. “The fear you feel now is nowhere close to all the people you inflicted it on. Go to hell nameless and worthless.”

Naruto watched the arc of blood and the head that fell before he relaxed his body. “I wasn’t like Zabuza at all just now.” He sighed. “I’m trying, I’m working hard but there is so much of everyone in me. Right now, I’m too graceful to be a demon.”

“You are what you are.” Sora ripped a piece of cloth from the closest bandit. “And that looked like Zabuza to me, the way you came in low down? You had the fan behind you for a few seconds like he had the sword. And honestly.” He shook his head before he carefully tucked away the sword. “Too beautiful to be a demon? Don’t tell me you’re still too young for these sorts of things. Kasumi wasn’t the only graceful beautiful death bringer. She was the angel of death but Zabuza? Haku was not watching him work for tips you know.”

“I know that.” Naruto rolled his eyes. “I wanted to be like him for a bit there. It’s what he wanted.”

“You’re doing your own thing instead.” Sora shrugged. “Honestly Naruto? That seems more like you to me. If Kasumi and Zabuza could have combined the way you did things would have gone so much easier for everyone. Don’t think I didn’t notice that you used Ryu’s stance too. You had different teachers and it shows you take what they gave you and make it better. You know you hold the kunai different ways each time? Raiya’s method and Kaya’s.”

“But I wanted to be a demon.” Naruto sighed. “Like what he used to be.”

“Demons were angels once.” Sora mused. “So you got some white in your wings, so some of your skin is pale and smooth instead of red and scaly. Doesn’t that make you unique?” He eyed the bodies. “We have to bury these idiots, can’t let them stay out here and rot for people to run over them.”

XxX

“I can’t believe that I ended up helping you with your mission but you don’t want to help me with mine.” Naruto jostled Sora good-naturedly. That got him a laugh in response.

“You’re being paid and you said it isn’t that hard anyway.” Sora dismissed as they came to the road. “Besides I gotta get out of here before your Jounin guard comes looking, we weren’t exactly
discreet.” Sora handed over Naruto’s hitai-ate. “You sure you’re good going back?”

“This is something I have to do and I’ve wanted this for a long time.” Naruto smiled at the disappointment on Sora’s face.

“Don’t let so much time pass before we see each other again. I’ll work on something. Morgana will work on something, we really do miss you but she misses you more.” Sora wrapped him up in a tight hug, Naruto’s arms wrapped around him in response. They stayed together, Naruto on his tiptoes as they squeezed each other.

“I’ll miss you Sora, not a day goes by that I don’t miss everything.” Naruto whispered into his shoulder.

“Same here but don’t forget to live for the future too alright? Regrets are for sake and cold nights.” Sora released him slowly from the tight hug. Naruto smiled up at Sora as Sora smiled down at him then Sora leaned forward just enough for Naruto to guess what was coming so his eyes slid shut. The lips to his forehead sent warmth and longing through him. “Be careful Naruto.” Sora whispered.

“You too.” Naruto whispered back.

XxX

The whole outing was hilarious if only for getting to Shikamaru frustrated over his plans being ruined. Still something had scared the sad idiots out of the net so carefully prepared and into Chouji and Ino instead of Naruto, Shikamaru or even Asuma himself.

Speaking of Naruto, Asuma had no idea what the kid was up to but he did not seem that bothered about not being able to do anything. Hell, the way that the kid acted sometimes Asuma would have sworn that the kid lived to fight. It was something the Sandaime feared even now. That his days of being hunted would have planted a seed inside of him.

“I took a page from Shikamaru’s book and watched the clouds.” Naruto laughed while Ino groaned. Asuma had no idea what frightened the idiots they had been sent to catch so badly that they had ended up fleeing where they certainly should not have gone but at least Ino and Chouji had gotten some experience in there.

Still, it felt as though Naruto had gotten into some sort of trouble, it was in the way he walked. Would he run off the group in order to give work to Chouji and Ino? Asuma could not say that the kid would, still the Hokage would enjoy his report if anything. Besides if the kid had used the time to goof off and make a reed flute then no harm off no one’s back. Asuma had done some dozing off while he waited too. Only thing bothering him was that the area had no reeds to make a reed flute in the first place. Unless Naruto had brought them along? Asuma had no idea how the things were made in the first place.
Well I'm back, been busy to do much editing or writing for this fic so there is that. I had soo much planned but time got away from me and in the end I kinda needed that break. I try to aim for weekend updates so just try to keep that in mind for this upcoming year.

I wanna at least finish 2 arcs this year omg. That includes this one right here. Hoping I can pull that off but chapters... be a little big so breathe a bit okay darlings?

I'm always excited to see if you catch onto the little things and while eventually things will be revealed. From this point on... well if you don't take note then this slope is going to be a bit tricky. Development is fun and so is this huge ass story. Hope you are ready

I'm back darlings, I missed y'all too Xoxo

There were many people who thought that Kakashi’s reading choices were quite frankly horrible and that was before Kakashi had gotten his hands on the Icha Icha. He remembered Minato-sensei’s sad eyes before he plucked a book away from Kakashi. Kushina’s vengeful burning of books before she gave him money and instructions to buy anything better.

His reading choices were to be frank not the best but good information did lurk in the books. The ones that were not the Icha Icha series at least. The good information just lurked under harsh realities and the darkness of the world and soul.

It had not been the best reading for a twelve-year-old and honestly most of his books still were too dark for his team but there were some books that were more boring information than horrifying doctrines and thoughts. Kakashi had already memorized the books but for his newly minted Chuunin with a lot on her mind, he had the right book for her.

There was no telling what new horrors they were going to run into and while Kakashi was there to guide them he simply could not be there any minute. Sakura had gotten one taste of war and what she had seen she had not liked. It had changed her.

But Kakashi had seen worse wars, had planned in the midst of them, moved around them and while he preferred peace he knew how to handle wars. It was time for Sakura to learn how to win them using what she had at hand.

It was not just scuffles that shinobi had to fight in. Sometimes it was actual wars. It was easier when they went in to kidnap a person or assassinate a person but the truth that many accepted while they hated it was that shinobi were the tools to those that held them. Not everyone accepted that, many wanted to overturn that and while Naruto was one of the shinobi rising up to protest to that, Sakura was quickly proving to be another.

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“He could have said hi.” Sakura grumbled as she shifted through the rest of her items. Tenten had run off early but she had remained to enjoy the soaking of the hot baths. She was quickly becoming like an old lady with her love for the baths but she had so many hard missions it was nice to pamper herself.

She flipped through the book that her sensei had left behind. No one else could have left it. She had not received any more gifts from the masked shinobi and she did not expect to. The gloves were enough, she could not wait to show her team how great she was with them.

Still the book seemed rather blunt. Kakashi-sensei needed no calling card because he was always so sneaky around them. It really got on her nerves sometimes when it did it to get a rise out of them. Still, the book did look interesting. Naruto could only tell them so much, he had experience but not that much that he could teach them things to look out for.

They worked fine now but they needed to improve she needed to improve. They looked to her and the last thing she wanted to do was see their bodies still and cold on the ground because of something she said.

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“Well saying hi would have just made it awkward, wouldn’t it?” Kakashi chuckled as he stood with his back to the window. Playing with his team was still a high point of entertainment for him. Naruto accepted his gifts and nagging good-naturedly. Still the times Naruto had gotten frustrated with Kakashi’s games had been a source of amusement and keeping the game going had just been another part of their developing friendship.

Well that cat was long out of the bag now. Not that he regretted it, the more Naruto shared with him the more Kakashi wanted to share back. He had grown fond of Naruto’s gleeful eyes. Seeing Naruto relaxed and happy, seeing him looking how he should look warmed Kakashi’s heart and made the games fun.

Sasuke might tear up the little papers and set them on fire but he had a soft spot for Pakkun and most of Kakashi’s hounds, that could not be denied. Also the look on his face when he realized all his traps had been carefully disarmed made Kakashi chuckle.

Sasuke liked to act as though his needs and desires were far beyond simple teenager things but he betrayed himself in the end always. Slipping around him was the best game there was.

Sakura wavered between Sasuke’s attitude and Naruto’s but in the end, she loved a good game. She was scarily good at finding him given enough time. Almost part bloodhound herself, Kakashi had no idea where that came from and he was too nervous to ask.

Still, his little team kept things from getting boring. He would mourn the day they got too old for him to pull wool over their eyes and toy around with them. Messing with the team was most of the fun about being Jounin and being a captain.

He doubted he could have as much fun with team seven that he had done with the ANBU under him that he had liked. A Naruto, Sakura and Sasuke combination spelled trouble if he were to go that far.

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“Aren’t you going to call for her?” Neji asked as he held the basket. Tenten looked up at him in surprise that he had spoken before she looked across the market to find Sakura. She wasn’t in
mission clothes, no jacket to be found and she had said something about quick downtime.

She wasn’t alone though, Tenten was too far away to hear Sakura but she was laughing with someone just out of sight. Tenten did not have long to wait before Sakura pulled Naruto into view and plucked bags from his hands before she led him further into the market.

“I’ll see her soon enough.” Tenten shrugged as she continued to examine the herbs. “She needs time with her team too.” She sent Neji a sly look. “Did you want to go over? Or is it that…” Had Neji sensed not just Sakura but Naruto too?

Neji had mellowed out after the battle and his loss. He did not exactly open his mouth and spill all his secrets but he was better than before. He and Lee had some sort of heart to heart in the hospital and Tenten was willing to bet that it was about Naruto in some way.

She had run into Naruto plenty of times in Lee’s room but he never lingered when she turned up. Neji on the other hand she just knew that Naruto had not said a word towards him. From what Sakura said Naruto had been fairly busy. There really was no time for the two of them to talk.

Naruto had been understandably upset with Neji the last time they had met. Granted Naruto’s emotions had seemed sort of naïve even to her but afterwards he seemed to have let it go. After the match anyway, and Naruto had bigger fish to fry by the end of the entire thing.

Neji on the other hand, he had not exactly gotten to talk to Naruto. All he had done was talk with his clan and them and barely to them. He was not exactly the talking type. He was the watching type. She contemplated Neji all amusement gone. Naruto had caught plenty of people’s interest but Neji’s too?

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“Baa-chan.” Naruto grinned when she and Lee looked up at him. “How is it going?” He came in the room and slid the door closed. Tsunade baa-chan was on a chair by Lee’s bedside.

“I want to wait a little longer but we’ve gone over 51%.” Tsunade baa-chan flipped through her charts. “I still don’t like the odds and thankfully neither does Lee-kun here.” She smiled at Lee. “We’ve been getting a lot of information and help so you will recover and be a shinobi again. It is just a matter of time.”

“She’s telling the truth right?” Naruto whispered to Shizune.

“Tsunade-sama has been working on this in her spare time.” Shizune whispered back.

“Why can’t you just trust me.” Tsunade baa-chan growled. “Rude brat.”

“You drink too much.” Naruto said dryly. “You dodge, you delegate-”

“Delegation is my job.” She huffed. “You try it if you think you’re so good.”

“I plan to.” Naruto grinned. “In a few years so watch yourself baa-chan. I’m coming from that hat when I’ve become a man.”

“Hm.” She turned away to smile. Lee glanced at them in confusion so Naruto ended up giving him a smile and a shrug.

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Konoha was guided by the previous generation and handed over to the next one when they were deemed worthy. When they understood the past and the dream that the founders envisioned. Only then could the next generation take charge, when they were ready to lead Konoha to the future dreamed of by thousands of people gone before.

The will of fire can be interpreted in different ways but the most popular and frustrating version would have to be the one taken by the Sandaime and carried down to the Yondaime and now the Godaime. With every day Konoha was being led into a light that had not been in the plans.

As if that was not annoying enough, support for these frivolous and weak dreams kept coming. Still, the shadows had not forgotten and they were patient. Their time would come, while they waited they would keep a watch on the Jinchuuriki. Only the Hokage thought the boy could be trusted and left alone.

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Back to Konoha it was for him then. Jiraiya gave in to the impulse and threw a nearby stone. He watched it soar away into the distance but it did nothing for his irritation and low burning anger. He had been away from Konoha for some time now. Not exactly that long considering most of the time he usually spent away but this time frustrated him.

Nothing, he managed to dig up nothing and that made his blood boil because he should have managed to sniff out something. He hated that Tsunade had been right about them wasting their time but he had to try something.

He had thought that at least him would have been able to find a trail. At least he would have found something that they could use but even though he was one of the best hunters and infiltrators that the village had he could not even find a direction.

As much as he hated to admit it, as much as he knew that Orochimaru had to be up to something. That Orochimaru had to be planning something. Jiraiya had to admit that the slippery bastard had gone to ground and had gone to ground frustratingly hard.

It made him angry that there was nothing that he himself could not do mostly because he needed to do something. Leaving Orochimaru out there doing god knew what was not a preferable option. He had been right in their grasp last time the more time they gave him the further away he would slip and that was something that Jiraiya was not for.

But there was nothing he could do and he could admit that. Even though it was unwillingly, so he would go back to Tsunade, report the things he had found. Lend her his ear, see how she was doing. See if there was anything non Orochimaru related she wanted taken care of. Maybe check on the brat and Kakashi a little bit and of course keep his eyes open.

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“You’ve been around more often.” Itachi looked up from his silent card game with Shisui to see his father regarding them over his newspaper. “Doesn’t the Hokage have work for you to do?”

“Itachi’s lost most of his team.” Shisui volunteered before Itachi could shut him up. “Most of the ANBU have been moved and replaced. Think of it as downtime Uncle, we’ll be back and busy as ever when Hokage-sama is done doing whatever she is doing.”

“Some clan leaders seem to think she has some large plan.” Itachi’s father brought the newspaper back up slowly. “Don’t slack and shame the clan.”
“We still work you know.” Shisui laughed. “Just it is more village based and watch missions.”

“I feel it will end soon.” Itachi offered softly. “As it is I don’t mind being transferred to Shisui’s team for the time being.”

“I love having you as my second in command.” Shisui flicked his ponytail teasingly. “Brings back good times, old times.”

“I recall exhausting times.” Itachi casually shifted three cards from the deck to his hand without being noticed. “It’ll work out for the village in the end.”

“If you’re that bored I have work you can do.” His father’s paper rattled. “It’ll be good for the force and the clan.”

“We should do more training.” Shisui cleared his throat. “What do you think Itachi? Use this time to really get some training done and run some drills.”

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“You look tired.” Kakashi cheerfully informed the ANBU members he had spotted. “Hokage-sama has you working extra hard?”

“I haven’t seen weasel in days.” Tenzo folded his arms before he sighed and sat down on the bench in the locker room. “Everyone in ANBU has to pick up the slack and every time she summons someone I feel terrified.”

“It’s that bad eh.” Kakashi tapped his nose with his book as he contemplated the situation. “I guess I’m glad I have my team to look over and only that.”

“I’m so bloody tired.” Sparrow’s voice came from the ceiling. “It just isn’t fair. The watch was the best vacation I ever had, who said I wanted scout duty?”

“That’s exactly why you have scout duty.” Tenzo muttered. “Sorry Senpai but the way the Hokage is currently moving we just don’t have the time to poke our noses where they don’t belong.”

“I’m not complaining.” Kakashi murmured. “But this does make me a bit curious.”

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“Come in.” She ordered after the knock. She looked up when the Nara clan leader entered and closed the door behind him. For a moment the memory of him as a child sighing tiredly behind his father’s leg came to her mind and she had to fight back a chuckle at the image. Instead she waved him forward and pushed most of the papers on her desk aside. “Good to see you.”

“You called Hokage-sama.” He stood loosely at attention before her. “This is about the matter we discussed earlier?”

“I’ve been putting some measures into place.” She picked up a heavy book and flipped through it the faces and names familiar to her because she had read it several times. “When I took office, I did a sweep and recently I’ve been having some retraining done.” For her own purposes. “Now after some thinking I know we didn’t catch everyone in the double check but I want a closer eye on our Chuunins and our Genins.” She leaned on her desk to focus her gaze on Shikaku. “I doubt our Jounins are possible leaks but we have had suspicious Chuunins and Genins.”

It was nice to see he got it on the first try. He nodded gravely. “You already have a list of
suspicious ones that have managed to pass the first sweep?”

“I’m not too certain they carry the interests of other countries…” She trailed off. “But they still are a concern. I want the spies either gone or labelled I want to control what our enemies learn and I want to know who wants their ear to the ground when it concerns us. We’ve had enough interference.”

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Sasuke had been running a quick errand the morning before a mission with his team when he heard someone pause by the stall next to him. “Say aren’t you…” The person trailed off. “Team seven but… ah! Uchiha Sasuke-kun right? Same team as Naruto-kun.” Sasuke looked up into curious black eyes, the guy was almost too close.

“Yes.” He turned back to the stall. His bluntness tended to discourage others.

“Naruto-kun did such a good job didn’t he? The dark horse of the tournament I really enjoyed that.” The guy continued. “Sasuke-kun you did rather well too.” A small medicine bottle was shoved under his nose. “This is better than what you’re trying to get there.” The guy’s gloved hands held the bottle out expectantly. “Take it! Team seven’s done so much for the entire village and everyone’s reputation. It’s only fair.”

Why was he being confused like this. Sasuke’s mind flipped through the people that had been around during the Chuunin exams and fought the urge to roll his eyes. Of course, that was why he felt familiar. Being hassled was actually Naruto’s fault. Hadn’t the idiot come to this idiot’s defence? Sasuke was willing to bet that the guy was looking, hoping to see Naruto or something. “Thanks.” He said dryly. He was only the stand in, the guy didn’t really care about him or team seven. It was Naruto that had his interest.

When it was time to move onto another stall Sasuke realized he had somehow managed to tune out the guy leaving. Good riddance for him. Sasuke couldn’t remember his name and he really could not be bothered though but he would make sure to tell Naruto that a fan had bothered him. It would make him blush.

Come to think of it, Naruto had been showing off a bit for that same guy hadn’t he? Maybe this was a good opportunity to tease.

When the team finally met up it was on the tip of his tongue to say something, tease Naruto but he caught sight of Shisui in conversation with Kakashi and goodwill dried up. Then it simply did not matter anymore.

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“We’re team eight and we’re just as good as anyone else.” Kiba panted as he pushed himself back up to his feet. They had been training since early morning. He could hear Shino behind him panting. Hinata’s legs kept shaking but she kept shoving herself forward.

Kurenai-sensei’s eyes were so proud as she looked at them. It had been Shino’s idea for a full-on sparring session with her. They had not managed to wear her down yet or the traps but they had to be doing something.

But they had to keep going. That feeling that Naruto gave him, like he was millions of miles away made him so angry because it was true. Something was off about him and to add insult to injury whatever it was that made Naruto so different was making Sakura and Sasuke different too. It was
not just one weird person on team seven. All of team seven was trying to cast some dark shadow on them all.

Kiba was not here for that.

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It all started with the Chuunin exam. They were in a better place now; she and Sakura were the friends they had started as but that exam had been the real change. It was then that Sakura had changed it was then that she had seen not only Sasuke-kun but all of team seven start to leap forward.

It wasn’t fair. She did not want to be left behind, she was just as good as all of them and what was Naruto’s damage anyway? Sakura wore her hair up and let Naruto take it down. They hugged and held hands and sometimes it felt as though team seven were caging Sakura in.

When Ino finally got to have Sakura to herself there was always something happening or something new. It had been fine until after the tournament. Ino could have dealt with the changes because Sakura had not pulled that much further ahead. Team seven were heroes but they were too.

But now it was totally different, she felt leagues away and Sakura kept getting further away now that she was a Chuunin. If not with her team she was training with Tenten. If not doing that then she was doing some Chuunin training and that was more than even Shikamaru did.

She did not even know what Sakura’s dream was anymore. What was going to make her eternally happy? Happier than anyone in the village, happier than anyone that they knew? Before it was love now Ino had no idea because even the colour of Sakura’s eyes had changed.

It was bad enough her friend was changing so rapidly but Ino would not be cast aside and she certainly would not lose to team seven either. Her clan was depending on her to become someone worthy of leading them. She simply could not lose and she could not be left behind.

She could not be left swaying in the breeze either, neither would she sit in the shadows. Team seven would not overshadow her or her team.

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Team seven were setting a standard and that was annoying. Shikamaru was not jealous of the way others looked at Sakura. They were two different people and if he had to be honest, Sakura had a deeper knowledge of darkness than he currently had.

He had worked with her one on one a few times and the things that came out her mouth shocked him a little bit. Left him shaken up because they had all been in school together a year ago right? There was a knowledge of the shinobi world and then there was being knee deep in a way that only Jounins were.

Sakura’s understanding of death and sacrifices, Shikamaru could follow her thought processes but he was disconnected from it in a way that she obviously was not.

Sasuke had whatever it was too it was in his eyes. The way no one got behind him except for his team. It was in his walk and how he held himself. Shikamaru did not really like Sasuke. Guy caused too much trouble by just being attractive but whatever that Sakura had, Sasuke had it too and whatever it was that they had Naruto had the most of it.

Sometimes a chill ran up his spine when Naruto walked by or when Naruto focused intensely.
There was no explanation for that. There was no reason for that and it was starting to piss him off. Sometimes Naruto did not feel normal, like human. Sometimes it felt as if he did not have human limits but it was starting to feel that way for all of team seven. That just told him that he had to step up himself.

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They were the ones with the extra year of experience but team seven had swept them out the way. Tenten was glad for it. They had let everything go to their heads. She was so happy for Sakura and so proud of her but she worried too.

Neji and Lee were bad enough but add Sasuke and Naruto too it and how couldn’t she worry? From the things she heard, from what she had seen it had to be stressing Sakura even though she did not say anything.

She did not have to say anything, it was in the set of her shoulders when she looked at her team photo. It was the way she watched their backs. The way she smiled over their pictures and the pictures she took of her team as though she would never see them again.

She was still afraid. That was perfectly okay because Tenten was afraid too. She had thought they were going to lose Lee for good. Gai-sensei had been shaken to an extent she had never seen before. Neji had gotten a bit of the chip off his shoulder but it had terrified her to see him not moving on the ground.

A team put you through so much. You had to watch their backs, they watched yours too but when you had determined hot heads, when you had guys with a mission your heart was going to get twisted. They were going to make you cry and there was no sense in hiding that.

At least Sakura’s team felt guilty and acknowledged what they did. Neji still had a way to go. She doubted the idiot would ever come around but that was fine with her too. Neji could be an idiot in his own right sometimes.

Just now he was more determined than ever, Tenten doubted Naruto knew what he had unleashed. Neji’s eyes kept following the kid around. The whole clan couldn’t take their eyes off him. Neji kept training and training. Lee’s own training was going fine too. Surgery day was coming. Soon they were going to be Team Gai again and soon enough they were going to be shoulder to shoulder with team seven. Or at least with some time they would be.

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“All of this is paperwork.” Shizune allowed herself a small sigh at the sheer magnitude that had made it upstairs. when the Hokage came back from her meeting she would not be pleased. The only thing that made her feel relieved about it all was that thanks to the new system anything that made it to the desk was actually Hokage relevant.

The thing that sucked was that so many things were necessary and relevant. That did not even touch on the Hokage’s side projects and fun ‘hobbies’ honestly how she had time and energy to poke fun at anything confused Shizune to no end.

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Team seven had been on plenty of missions. The reports were extensive and Tsunade liked that. There were little notes on the mission reports and although the overview was a nice one she preferred the details. She chuckled to herself alone in the office as she drank from her cup. She
kept getting engrossed in the mission reports.

She had enjoyed all of the new team’s reports. While there was plenty of confusion about her actions she knew what she was doing. She knew what she was looking for. Even while her sensei sent her confused looks across their tea, Tsunade would keep smiling. Even while the council blubbered and frowned she kept on smiling.

While the shadows threatened to stretch forward she would grab the nearest torch while she waited. When that started she would not be smiling. Least not on the outside. Work was being done and while there were so many unanswered questions there was more fun ahead to be had.

She was not bullying team seven even though Kakashi shot her injured looks every time she summoned him or his team. No matter the blunt annoying accusations from the brat, she really was not bullying them. She knew what she was doing. In time they would also learn.

A cry from a hawk made her put down the cup even as she replaced the files and reports in an orderly manner. By the time the dusk coloured hawk came in she was adequately prepared. She had been waiting on the response from Suna. The hawk allowed her to untie the message and sat at the end of her desk to wait for her reply.

She took her time to read through the response as with her free hand she opened her desk to provide the bird with food. She would provide the bird with water before its trip back to Suna.

The response made her smile and the knowledge that she was the first one with the information instantly put her in a good mood. Things were looking up for Konoha and not only that soon Jiraiya would be able to stop mopping around and harassing her special ANBU.

Everything took time, some things you just couldn’t rush. Soon the joint mission would begin and Suna would prove themselves. The combined probe would start from Konoha for obvious reasons and make their way to the suspicious new country staying low key and using some of the new force she had created.

It was all going nicely, exactly how she had planned it in the beginning. Everyone was going to be nicely busy. Which all worked in their favour because the busier people were the easier it was to accomplish the things she wanted to.

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Sakura was not going to say anything about the way the teams were being sent out but she certainly was not going to ignore just how often they ran into other teams that were not theirs. She would like to think that the missions were being assigned in a way that a fan pattern could be formed. She would like to think that maybe the Hokage assessed them based on skill and speed to make sure that backup was never too far away.

That maybe it could be quickly done and then they would be back home in order to do another mission. Maybe a few months ago she would have believed that. Maybe a new year she would have done that but not now. They saw other teams way too often and it made her uneasy.

Team seven rarely used assistance. Honestly, they didn’t really need it not with the way that their sensei and Naruto was. Not with the way that Sasuke and Naruto pushed themselves to the limit at the hint of something they could not handle.

Not needed because there was something that came over them when it looked as though they were over the head. Maybe it was like that from the beginning and she never noticed, she did
acknowledge the roar at the back of her mind these days at the hint of something dangerous threatening her team.

She knew when retreating was good but they rarely did it. They rarely had to, sometimes… she never wanted to think about where her thoughts wandered because it got dark but sometimes it felt as though her boys were something dark swooping down onto prey. Once they came back to her she was fine but she always searched their eyes after.

It was one thing for Naruto to get caught up in the mission or the hunt. She just did not see why Sasuke wanted to lose himself in it too because it had to be on purpose.

Which made her wonder who else saw that about Sasuke but it was not as if she could talk to just anyone about her concerns. They were team seven, strange and tossed together. A team made of people that not many understood. Their secrets were their secrets.

Besides, her Sensei was like them and worse. Far stronger than he wanted to let on but she knew the truth. Sasuke and Naruto too. No matter how strong and badass they acted, their sensei had them all beat. They were different to the other teams so it made sense to have them help others.

But she could not fight the feeling that their Hokage had something else planned. She could not be alone. There was just something about how the missions were handed out maybe it was because she was a Chuunin now. Maybe she was reading too much into it. Maybe things were always like this but she just saw more now.

She doubted that though. There was something about the way the Hokage smiled at them all, something about the ways she watched them. Something about the missions and the requirements. Something that told her the woman had a plan and that she was carrying out. Call her impatient but after everything the last thing Sakura wanted was to wait until everything was carried through.

She just knew that she was not imagining things. With every mission they took the chances of running into another team either there or on the way back grew higher and higher. Sometimes they just passed another team. Sometimes they were in the same place with different goals. Like now.

She knew she should enjoy the chance they got to hang with team eight but she could not stop her mind from running. She should be watching the festival, enjoying it after such a mission but her mind kept going back to their Hokage. She had a feeling that there was an answer nearby, she just could not see it.

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“There’s no reason to rush back yet.” Kurenai smiled. “Besides, they are enjoying the festival.” Kakashi let his book tilt down a bit as he contemplated the crowd and their young teams. The amount of people actually made the back of his neck itch.

There might be no need to rush back yet but that did not mean to relax. He had no real reason to be on guard but he was anyway. It was not as if his team had not attended festivals before. He had a habit of trying to let his team see the bigger world outside the village.

Also, it was a way to connect with Naruto who had already seen much of the world already but they had never been right in the middle of it all like this. Usually they were a little distant. Watching from a rooftop, a side street or sometimes from a tree a good distance away.

To be among the people like this showed that Kurenai was more in touch with things than he was. Also that she had not developed that touch of paranoia that came with a Jounin. Kakashi had
thought that after her missions with Naruto that she had grown wary but maybe the wariness had fallen away. Seeing him in action a few times must not have been enough.

Besides the paint the villagers carried, the laughter, the drink and alcohol that he could see and smell. There was nothing wrong with watching from the outside but having them participate? Maybe he was a little old fashioned, a little over protected or maybe something was up, you never knew. Maybe that was why his eye kept tracking back to his team and their antics.

“After such a long mission we need to take a break because otherwise Hokage-sama won’t let us have it eh?” He said softly as he watched team eight attempt to get closer to his team.

“This might be the only downtime we’ll have for a while. On call means take a breather.” Kurenai admitted with a snort. “Still, it doesn’t bother me as much as I thought it would.”

“We’re here to work.” Kakashi shrugged as he tried to return to his book. “Shinobi need to be kept busy. Idle hands never turn out well.”

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Team seven was as weird as ever but Kiba was not going to let that get him down. After such a mission they needed the breaks and the cheers and celebration was just the thing to help them relax. Just that honestly he wished that he could lend a hand to at least one of his team members.

Naruto had to be the most blind person he had ever met. Kiba had been trying his best but while Naruto was a brick wall sometimes it felt as though Hinata was not even trying. Hell, Naruto was fond of her, he liked to talking to her and Kiba had managed to get out of her that they had trained a few times.

Hell Kiba had caught Naruto watching her while she practiced by herself a time or two. Why was he still fighting so hard? Part of him wondered if Hinata had let what Naruto and Sakura had said on that day get to her.

Cool down time was the perfect time to get closer, to talk and make plans to hang out. Become better friends but team seven, there was this wall around them that just kept getting fucking higher and Kiba hated it.

Even when Naruto was not squished between his team members he was doing things that Hinata was too shy to do. Dancing among the villagers, getting covered with paint, playing on a reed pipe that Kiba wanted to know where he had gotten it from.

He had been surprised at how quickly and easily Naruto had ditched his shirt but when the paint had started to fly he had understood that. But the villagers were really wild the way they celebrated, hugging everybody they could, singing and dancing.

Kiba got that they were happy but it was still wild. He wished that Naruto would stick a little closer to them and their teams instead of doing wild stuff right back. Like dancing along, like dancing with the villagers no matter who they were.

He shook his head at the woman that swung Naruto around in the air as different coloured paint flew everywhere and sighed. Well it was not as if Naruto did not drop enough hints as it was, he guessed he really did not care and Kiba would have to do the same… except… it just wasn’t fair.

XxX

Naruto was carefree and in his element. Sakura wished she had her camera nearby but she was
good enough with watching the spectacles, she and their team was good enough watching the relieved townspeople. It must have been so hard for so long and now in time for the celebrations they get a reprieve. As Naruto would say, that precious happy ending had been granted.

She could get used to things ending like this. She could but she knew better, not every mission ended in festivals and laughter but that just meant they had to enjoy the times that they did and how could she not?

Naruto had been enjoying himself enough for all of them, team seven and team eight. She had shaken her head at the adults that had welcomed Naruto among them and embraced him into their numbers. Somehow when he wanted to, Naruto could fit in so well.

She had shaken her head when the dancing had gotten frenzied, there were moments she simply could not track Naruto or his partners for a few seconds but only too soon he was danced back into sight as the celebrations raged on.

Some long-haired villager had swooped into sight and danced away with Naruto to Sasuke amusement. Sakura had not gotten a good look at the man’s face just his long hair because he kept his head low to look down at Naruto. It was actually kind of cute even though she could barely see what was going on.

It was blackmail and teasing material after all. The man looked sort of cute from what she could see with that lavender hair and all. He danced quite a bit with Naruto too, all over the square and they moved among the people so much that Sakura stopped looking because her head kept weaving back and forth to keep them in sight. Besides, it was harmless.

Or so she had thought when Naruto finally returned to them, flushed, covered in paint. His eyes were dancing and he had fresh lipstick on his face and lips. She and Sasuke exchanged a glance before they tugged their teammate to them. There was no sense in thinking too hard about it.

It simply was the way Naruto was, after all those things Naruto had told them and all the things she had put together she was willing to bet that to the adults it was just a bit of fun for them. Even though deep inside of her she felt a smidgeon of concern. She knew Sasuke did too.

Still she wiped away at the green lipstick on his face and ignored his wide grin as she shook her head at his antics. Poor team eight, they had to be just the bit scandalized by Naruto. It took no time to wipe the green smudges on his face with a napkin. Sasuke pointed Naruto to the direction of the nearest well and got a hefty laugh in return.

Her fingers brushed the napkin as she balled it up and her fingers stilled when her finger touched the lipstick. Her finger tingled in the slightest bit. It felt cool as well almost like a minty feeling.

She balled the napkin the rest of the way up as her eyes went back to the villagers and the celebrations. She frowned as minutes ticked on and her eyes were unable to locate Naruto’s last dancing partner.
Set a caged bird free

Chapter Notes

So 2 week chapters for the time being mostly because I'm busy and the chapters take time and work. (Kinda big/long hard to write etc) Trying to keep on top of things as well as write other things too so yeah another reason. I'll try not to let my progress for this to fall behind. Enjoy the chapter!

“What on earth.” Sakura sighed the moment she got out of the office. “Again?” She ran her hands to the top of her bun and lightly tugged it. “Not that I have a problem with it…” Well actually she sort of did have a problem with it but who could argue with the Hokage. “Why do we have to team up with them for something like that?”

It was something team seven could handle themselves. Even with the rest of team ten’s skill she was certain she or her sensei could plan around it. There really was no need for such a big team. Unless their Hokage feared the mission going sour and something big happening.

It made her wonder if she should pack for a battle or a war. Would not surprise her in the slightest if it turned out that way but it would be the first time the Hokage was so blatant about her concerns. And the first time she gave them back up.

Unless the battle would be even bigger than expected. Just not knowing irked her to tug at her hair again. She agreed with Naruto about the Hokage. Sometimes she tested you.

But Sakura never felt that she was leading them astray.

Still, she had not expected to be spending so much time with other teams. Not that she had a problem with them. Ino was there, but Shikamaru on the other hand. Not that she had a problem with him it was just the way he watched them now. All of them… especially Naruto.

She was not hiding Naruto or anything and she could not expect to wrap him up in a bubble or keep everything a secret with the way Naruto behaved sometimes and the way he talked most of the time. It just felt like Naruto was a team seven thing and Shikamaru was not team seven.

He might be Naruto’s friend or something but what else was he. He wasn’t team seven he had not seen the things they had and the last thing she wanted was people judging Naruto or feeling sorry for him. Because Naruto didn’t want people feeling sorry for him.

In the beginning he had been grieving and he had still changed over his entire life and acted as though everything was fine. He was not sorry about his past, he was proud of it and while it worried her sometimes she was proud of it too. Naruto was Naruto no matter what, even if he scared them sometimes and even when she kept feeling like there was more to Naruto than what she knew.

She took a shaky breath as she recalled the way her sensei and Naruto looked at each other sometimes. How Naruto looked at the Jounins in the village sometimes before his shoulders relaxed. She was not an idiot, she knew there was more to it, Sasuke knew it too it was why they stuck so close to him but there was no pressure.
He would tell them in time. Whatever it was, if he had taken this long, they could honestly wait a bit longer because they had not even suspected the first bit to his past. Whatever it was that made eyes follow Naruto around the way they did, they could wait. Naruto trusted them more now. He cared for them more now, he relied on them now, he believed in them more now. Their bonds were solidifying.

So it was understandable that she did not want any intruders sniffing around her team like that unravelling things that were better off unshared until the time came. Shikamaru was a genius, she doubted he would be able to leave Naruto alone no matter how lazy he professed to be. Besides her team was all hers, she did not need someone finding things out before them. It was a matter of pride. A little bit. That and well… team seven had changed all of them had. They were not exactly that different to the other teams but they had a different flavour to them now.

Team seven was battle hardened and there was no escaping that. They all had their wounds, her, Naruto, their sensei for certain and while she did not understand it fully, Sasuke too. They were coming into their own and she could feel how different they were already to those they had gone to school with.

She couldn’t help but wonder what had pushed their rapid change, if it was just the war. If it was normal for all shinobi or if it was their proximity to Naruto that had hastened the change in Sasuke and her. Because when she looked back to all those months ago it felt like years.

XxX

Team up with team seven again, the entire group and Shikamaru had no problem with it. He was actually eager to be with a competent group again. He had been tossed everywhere the Hokage could think to toss him and it was actually irritating how many people shared his title but were actually idiots.

His Dad thought he was letting the title go to his head but honestly Shikamaru had not known how good he had it until he saw the other side of the Chuunins. How those idiots got to be Chuunins was beyond him. No motivation no anything. They were strong but so what? It wasn’t just about strength or all of team seven would be Chuunins.

Still, Shikamaru had a better liking for those in his generation, or at least those in his generation that had gone through the Chuunin exam with him… that were from Konoha. You had to be specific about these things.

Although Team seven could give one a headache when it came to operations if Shikamaru had a choice about picking a team to team up with then it would have to be team seven hands down.

If it turned to shit you knew for certain that you were getting out alive. The way team seven acted they made it look as though there was no other choice but to get home safely the mission completed. Nothing wrong with that, they were just so thorough that it looked exhausting.

Still, when he looked at his options there could be worse and Shikamaru was tired of worse. He was tired of having to do everything for everyone when it wasn’t his job but he did not want to die or get his friends killed or in trouble so he picked up the slack. It was nice to be able to be on equal terms or as much as equal as he could get with team seven.

Also, Naruto was going to be around. Naruto had been shared around the teams pretty frequently during the mission rush and while Shikamaru did not know why. Naruto had been useful, there was just the question of why.
When it came to Naruto there were lots of questions unanswered and for Shikamaru while he had been focused on rooting them out he found himself a bit warier. Not because of anything Naruto had said or done. Not because of the people he caught watching Naruto or the aura that cloaked Naruto sometimes.

It was just Shikamaru’s good old self-preservation telling him to slow down a bit. Something at the back of his brain that stopped him every time Naruto caught him staring and smiled back. Every time he eavesdropped on something Naruto said that confused him and blew his mind at the same time.

The feeling at the back of his neck that told him in no uncertain terms that just maybe he was unqualified for this and just maybe he was not ready. He was not giving up, he would have sleepless nights if he did but he was trying his best to slow down and take in all the picture. There was so much he was missing, so many people involved.

There was a story that concerned Naruto that he could not get from running ahead. Taking his time was his forte but he had to admit to himself that the only way to discover would be to proceed as though nothing was wrong.

Even though that was the hardest thing to do. That was even before hearing half the things that Naruto could and would talk about. How Sakura and Sasuke managed Shikamaru would love to know because he just knew that they did not know either.

XxX

A chance to escape was not only welcomed, it was the best thing that could happen to Sasuke he was just delighted over the chance to be somewhere else for a turn. The mission was another team up but he did not care as long as it got him away from his clan for a bit.

He had been watching the approaching dates with annoyance and silently begging for a way out, then along came the Hokage with this mission. It was a blessing in disguise and maybe he could have concealed his relief from his family a little better but they were not the ones that had to go through what he did.

He would be rather on the road with his team, doing missions with them. Seeing the world by their side, it was easier to pretend that everything was fine when they had a mission to do. His mind was never better when he had a mission to do or he was training away from home.

That was when the thoughts crept in, that was when he could feel himself sinking, that was where he felt as though he was an imposter or someone that did not really exist. It was not all their faults but he just couldn’t be happy with them. Doing what they did, listening to them. It was harder than it should have to be.

Seeing Itachi made everything worse because he could still remember the past and he could remember how it all changed. He could still feel the moment that they had stopped being family. It was not fair but it was what it was.

He did not want to be with them, he did not want to walk beside them. He did not want their expectations, he did not want their rules. He did not know what he wanted barring his need for something normal, something expected. God sometimes they made it so hard for him and they just did not understand.

Itachi was in the light always and the light just got brighter the more Sasuke chased. No, that light was burning and he could feel the darkness. He wanted the light for himself but it just would not
take hold of him. They didn’t get it, all they did was dunk him in the black waters.

He had so much to overcome. Why him? Why did he have to overcome this too? It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t right but he would continue to fight on, another year, another day. His team made it easier.

Naruto and Sakura, Kakashi too. They made it easy to breathe and when he looked at them he had a place where he belonged if only for a while. There were moments he felt out of his body and moments he was glad for the dark of the night because he could close his eyes and pretend that everything was as it should be.

Being the second son of a clan leader was rougher than it looked. Being a son that felt the way he did, that thought the way he did. He already felt shame. It was his burden to shoulder.

Think of the clan, don’t bring shame on the clan, why did he have so fight so hard for it? He just wanted to be normal. He just wanted to be like everybody else. How did Naruto do it so easy? Lose everything he loved, accept that his love would never blossom. How the hell did he keep smiling and laughing and-

It just didn’t make sense but Sasuke was glad for Naruto.

XxX

“Hey Sasuke.” Shisui called out, he had not expected to get an answer back or anything but he was relieved when Sasuke stopped walking away. “Can you wait for a second?” God the way that Sasuke turned back to look at him. It would sadden any heart, no wonder Itachi was so down so often. Where was the kid that was always laughing? Was this really teenage rebellion?

“Shisui.” Sasuke’s eyes were carefully blank, no sign of the relief that had bloomed when Sasuke’s upcoming mission had been revealed. Sasuke was good, almost too good.

“Yeah kid.” Shisui sighed when he drew level with Sasuke. Kid still had to tilt his head up a little and wasn’t that good? But for how much longer would that be true? The kids were growing up, it was just how things were. Shisui shook his head to dismiss those thoughts. “Look I know you have a mission and everything but your mom and your brother really were looking forward to this, obviously they can’t cross the Hokage but… would you consider maybe… making it up to them when you come back? Your mom has been working really hard on this whole thing. This might not be your thing but we’re all clan you know?”

If it had not been for Sasuke’s eyes Shisui would have sworn that Sasuke had not heard a single word. So what if he had not been playing fair. Sasuke would avoid and lash out at Itachi but he had always been close to his mother. Both boys were and she had been working hard on the whole event. It was mean but considering the alternative was letting Sasuke slip silently away Shisui really didn’t have a choice.

“Will you at least think about it while you’re away?” Shisui asked softly. It took work to make sure his body did not relax at the agreement in Sasuke’s face. It was a step in the right direction but no real victory. He was aware of that. Did not change that he wished it were a victory.

XxX

“It sounds like a straight forward mission.” Naruto told the man that was eating his cereal without a care in the world. “But we have to be going for another reason Sensei. You can’t fool me, team ten can do this on their own. They go all sneaky sneaky and with whatever plan Shikamaru manages to pull out his head and they will be in the clear so why us?”
“You think there is another mission in there?” Kakashi-sensei eyed him before he returned his gaze to the bowl. “Why is this the generic brand?”

“Don’t dodge the question.” Naruto said dryly as he fanned his chest with the mission sheet. “Besides do I look like a rich man to you? And in the end it tastes similar enough. It’s just cereal.”

“Doesn’t taste similar at all.” His sensei grumbled as he finished the bowl. Naruto watched him finish and get to his feet to carry the bowl to the sink. “You really think the Hokage has plans under everything?”

“I know this mission isn’t what it seems and I know that she isn’t afraid to use team seven and use me in the ways that benefits her best without too much fuss. It isn’t as if I haven’t been shuffled off to other teams for a while.” Naruto tilted his head at the sound of a spoon being cleaned a little too vigorously at his words. “Sensei?”

“You could be right.” Kakashi-sensei shrugged at the sink. “But there is only one way to find out. Are you packed and ready?”

“I’m packed and ready for blood.” Naruto said dryly. “Blood and scorching heat but at least the mission will start slow enough. We have to move to accommodate team ten.”

“They’ll catch up.” Kakashi-sensei dried the sink and turned to face him. “We can’t baby them forever.”

“Baby them? That’s acting as if we’re normal as if they are behind and lazy.” Naruto laughed. “Team seven isn’t normal and that’s what makes us so damn amazing.”

XxX

“Finally leaving now that’s what I’m talking about.” Sakura stretched the moment Konoha disappeared from behind them. “Is this what it feels like for you Naruto?” Shikamaru was as glued to the quiet conversation as he could be with the amount of space that team seven had put between team ten and themselves.

“It feels like a breath of fresh air.” Naruto sighed. “The grass feels greener, I feel lighter sometimes but the best part is why I look around and see you guys.” Sasuke sighed heavily and Naruto turned back to walk backwards. “What’s up with you? Is it something I said?”


XxX

“It would be nice if for once we could have some detailed information on the countries surrounding us. Even though the country of…” Sasuke trailed off to roll his eyes. “The country of This is small but they have history.”

“They can make trouble too.” Naruto pointed out, Kakashi’s eye slid from his book to his team that had gotten lost in themselves. “They are small but they have some money and some clout. They might seem a bit whimsical but they aren’t pushovers. They took in plenty of Samurais after the Third War.”

“You seem to know a lot about it.” Sakura mused. “Have you been here before?” Her eyes sought out the border line. “It looks pretty small but it seems pretty alright.”
“Hmm.” Naruto hummed. Kakashi watched the way blue eyes lit up in amusement before Naruto turned away. “I wonder what the real mission is.” He chuckled. “I can’t help but feel like everything is at rest, too calm.”

“Really? You’re going to dodge the questions?” Sasuke snorted. “It’s going to go to shit. The mission always goes to shit and I just went and restocked.”

“Sasuke-kun’s right.” Sakura frowned. “I just restocked and we’re going to lose half of our weapons if we aren’t careful. It sucks that we won’t be reimbursed.”

“You guys are talking like a bunch of old men.” Shikamaru scowled before he turned away. “Worry worry worry, last thing I’d expect from you guys.” Naruto smiled at his words, Kakashi could only lift his book a bit higher to his face.

“So about knowing about this place?” Sasuke pressed. “You’ve been here before?”

“Something like that.” Naruto shrugged. “It’s a bit complicated.”

“When isn’t it?” Sasuke grumbled.

XxX

“Maybe that song isn’t about our client.” Ino frowned when the kids ran away from them giggling from the sweets Naruto had given them.

“No, it is about him.” Naruto disagreed, Sakura watched him straighten up and zip back up his jacket. “Brought in the dark of the night, too caged up to take flight, might doesn’t mean you are right… it has to do with him.” Naruto loosened up his shoulders with a shrug. “I’ve already been here and I did a mission here, I know about it because we put him here.” A smile came to his face. “Kinda ironic that we are springing him out now.”

XxX

“Can they recognize you?” Sakura’s question was hard and fast, just what Sasuke wanted to know after Naruto’s cheeky revelation. It was one thing to know in an absentminded way that Naruto worked all over, that he had been dragged all over by his previous family.

It was another thing to be where he had been and to correct a wrong. Not that cases like these had rights or wrongs. Hostages were needed in politics. The Land of This was small. They needed whatever they could in order to get ahead. That they had employed Naruto’s previous family, that Naruto had been so close yet so far that entire time.

His eyes slid to Kakashi to see how the man was taking the news. The more Naruto relaxed and talked, the more Kakashi watched and the more he absorbed everything with a startling intensity. There was more to Naruto than what met the eye. Sasuke knew that, there were just too many weird things, too many mysteries and then there was the way people watched him. Some half afraid, some expectant and some carefully blank with the air that they were waiting on something to be revealed. Sasuke had no idea what but the mysteries kept climbing. Not that it bothered Naruto. He just smiled before he got you off guard and soon enough everything slipping to the back of one’s thoughts, till the next time.

“He had a sack over his head and we weren’t allowed near him.” Naruto waved away. “He was with us but there was no doubt of what he was. It was a job that I couldn’t do much so I kept my distance, I doubt he even heard my voice. It was a pretty quick mission the lands border each other
“So it was easy? No trouble?” Sakura pressed.


XxX

Kakashi knew what Asuma was thinking even before the other man exhaled a shaky breath. It was one thing to suspect, it was another thing to know how close Naruto had been. To know the missions that he had been on. Naruto talked sure but it was never enough information.

Someone had been teaching the kid well because most of the time Kakashi doubted Naruto knew how easily he was deflecting them. How easily he talked but somehow said nothing, it was frustrating.

But at least Kakashi was his sensei and not his counsellor. The poor person had to be suffering because Naruto did give up information but somehow it was never enough and not something to work with for proper research. He needed the help, they all needed the help but it always felt that the more they uncovered there was just something else lurking out of reach. Poking at sore wounds was not nice but it just might end up being necessary.

Still, the group had been pulling serious political moves. Kakashi had started off thinking that as troublesome as Zabuza had been towards the end, his dream had been just a pipe dream. There had been no way that he could win, even with a Jinchuuriki making serious headway.

At least that had been until he had started to hear about the group in detail, about Haku and Zabuza the ringleaders with Haku being the brains of the operations. The advisor, chief advisor. It was bone chilling to think about, because Kakashi suspected a lot about the group. Their movements, their reasoning and he watched Naruto too. Zabuza had seemed so certain.

They had all died and they had fought so hard on realizing Naruto had been Konoha’s aim. Naruto was safely in their grasp, with Konoha and he was willing but sometimes it felt as though something had been missed. Zabuza claimed Konoha would not find the mindless weapon that many would want. So far it seemed to be true but of all things Kakashi thought that the group would want that, would need that trump card.

But he listened, he listened and watched and he couldn’t help but wonder what the group’s true intentions regarding Naruto had been. Haku… with every word and action from Naruto his true character was slowly revealed.

Not that Kakashi had been disillusioned in the first place. He could still see the boy, still hear his voice when he warned the group what Konoha was there for with his rage filled voice. He had been the first to figure it out. Naruto cared for him still. Sometimes Kakashi worried about Haku’s reach from the grave. Even though he had lied, even when Kakashi’s suspicions were slowly revealed to be true. Even while he thanked everything that they had gotten to Naruto in time…

There was just a feeling sometimes. Whenever Naruto was too loose with words, when he was reckless. There was this cautious feeling inside him and the beginning of a bubble deep in his gut that he could not explain or describe.

XxX

Asuma knew something, that meant Kakashi would too. Sometimes Naruto made no sense, sometimes he said things and Shikamaru’s mind jumped to conclusions that could not be right. Of
course he had to be wrong but sometimes the way Naruto thought made him think all kinds of crazy things.

Team seven was just impossible, they were just too much stress, especially Naruto. Naruto was the main cause of it all.

XxX

“The eating contest is known about far and wide.” Shikamaru said as their respective teams gathered around him. “It’s the best way in because security slacks a bit. It is our way in and it gets us the tools we need without being too suspicious.”

“So cool.” Naruto hummed, his hand was braced against the nearest tree trunk. “Everyone knows about the Daimyo’s eating contest every year. The prizes are amazing but the guy is really eccentric. I can’t help but wonder how many people sign up for the chance at free food and for the chance to eat the really outstanding dishes in this country.”

“Wait.” Sakura paused as she glanced at Naruto. “Did you ever get the chance to—“ Naruto was shaking his head before she could finish.

“I didn’t get to attend the contest last time.” Shikamaru watched the wistful look on Naruto’s face. “And everything had smelt so good, you could have smelt it from right outside the main halls. I’m glad I get to participate this time.”

“As camouflage.” Shikamaru felt hurried to add that on. “Chouji needs cover. Not all of us can go in but we do need eyes on the ground.”

“Umhm.” Sakura lightly poked Naruto in the arm. “We can’t get carried away now, we’re backup for team ten you know.”

“I know you know.” Naruto lightly poked her back with a laugh. “That doesn’t change the fact that we’ll be there, we’ll be inside and we get to help thin out the numbers while we get a good meal.”

“Thin out the numbers?” Ino interrupted. “Chouji will do fine there isn’t a need.” She looked hesitantly at Sakura. “Is there?”

The person who answered her was not Sakura however, Chouji cleared his throat noisily before he spoke up. “Eating contests are serious businesses, there is an art to it. Many people who are going to compete have all kinds of techniques to beat the clock, I’m good but I never let myself think I’m the best.”

“Exactly.” Shikamaru nodded. “So while the contest can’t be too boring we can’t have too many strong contenders in it.”

“It just sounds like you’re playing along.” Ino frowned. “And Chouji I hope you don’t get carried away and try winning the thing, you act like there isn’t anyone better but I doubt that anyone can out do you, even if there are a bunch of adults competing.”

“That’s kinda like a compliment isn’t it?” Shikamaru mumbled to himself before he rolled up his maps. That was the best he could get from team seven and his team when it came down to it wasn’t it? But his mind was furiously working on a timeline and the information he was given and he just could not figure out the glaringly obvious problem that his team seemed to be ignoring.

When the hell had Naruto had time to come to this land before? On a mission? With who? In fact scratch that when had he done it because no matter how he looked at it. It just didn’t make sense,
there was a mystery right there and the more he tried to solve it the more mysterious it got because
the theories he ended up drawing up were simply ridiculous.

And he was left right back where he started wondering who the hell Naruto had become and what
the hell was wrong with him. The more he heard the more he worried, the secret of where he had
been, he had a feeling that team seven knew, it was in the things Sakura asked but there was
something private there that he itched to know because Naruto was different to them. All of team
seven was different to them but god did Naruto take it to another level. He could hope that this
mission would uncover some stuff for them but frankly he was not going to hold his breath. All he
could hope for was crumbs of information. Little pieces to a puzzle so large the bigger picture
seemed beyond his comprehension. It was fucking troublesome.

XxX

“It’s about time we get the lay of the land.” Kakashi closed his book with a soft snap, his team
looked up from their various conversations their hands moved to a state of readiness. Sasuke
carefully returned his kunai cleaning kit to his bag, Sakura’s gloves slipped out and Naruto’s fan
vanished so quickly Kakashi would have thought the boy having it was an illusion.

“Time to go in already?” Sakura asked slowly. “Team ten does have the main mission handled,
we’re taking the heat off of them.”

“Sort of.” Kakashi chuckled. “You are going to be providing feedback and assistance, you see,
Team ten won’t be able to get too close to the Daimyo, neither can you actually but you will be
getting the lay of the land and getting the information back to them in order for them to carry out
their plans smoothly.”

“No matter how you put it, it sounds like a lot of work.” Sasuke scoffed. “How exactly are we
going to get the lay of the land, the security can’t have lapsed that much. If anything, only
the public areas would have lesser security. The other areas will have heightened security just
because of the drop of security for the contest.”

“Exactly.” Kakashi admitted. “Our other… errand is going to be a tiny bit difficult because of that
but the other part will be fun. Seeing the security breaches and points, seeing the people that will
be the most troublesome in the end. Marking down opponents. You can say that in getting the lay
of the land, we will be avoiding some trouble later down.”

“So you say.” Sakura tugged on the tips of her gloves before she stretched. “It’s going to hell, I can
feel it. This place feels too weird. It’s going to hell just like every other innocent looking mission
with too much history behind it.”

“Sakura-chan.” Naruto stressed. “We can’t afford to get caught up in a political struggle with these
countries so let’s hope for the best.”

“What’s that going to do in the end?” Sasuke asked dryly. “We’re still going to be running around
like a chicken with it’s head cut off at the first sign of a double agent.”

“The kid’s going home Sasuke-kun.” Sakura frowned. “I think he would want to go back to his
country after this time. I’m more worried about him doubling back and trying to…” She waved her
hand frantically. “A well taken care of hostage is still a hostage in the end. He’s still a kid he might
be angry at this whole thing. It is his life.”

“We’ll have to wait and see.” Naruto nodded. “No sense debating about it now when we don’t
know much about any of them. Guess we gotta take a good look around.” He finished in a smile.
“See what this food is all about, gather some information and arrange for some little accidents, a little fatigue. A few dozen drop outs. That sort of thing.”

“You’re crazy if you think I’m going to be front and centre eating all of that. There is eating what is necessary, there is indulging and then there is this contest.” Sasuke shook his head. “I’m out, I’m not doing that.”

“You’ll be with me then.” Kakashi said cheerfully. “Glad to have you on board Sasuke-kun.”

“I’m in, there are so many famous shops that are contributing to the meals, this is the cheapest way to sample them all.” Sakura grinned. “I’m no Chouji but I’m certain I can hold my own to a certain point. Naruto on the other hand, he’ll eat anything in order to get to that special ramen… won’t you?” She teased.

“Sakura-chan sees right through me.” Naruto pretended to sigh. “But the two of us should be enough to have fun and to scope out the competition. We’ll get the troublesome ones out the way no problem. Just rely on us.”

“There isn’t exactly a choice.” Sasuke folded his arm and snorted. “Best go out there and represent the best you can the both of you. You better make it to the second last round at least.”

“Eh?” Sakura looked worried. “Isn’t that too much Sasuke-kun? You know how many courses there are?”

“Let’s not get carried away now.” Naruto put up his hands in a placating manner. “Three courses and we should be on our way out to let Chouji handle the rest, right Sakura-chan?”

“Exactly, don’t go giving us high goals when you won’t be the one working to achieve them Sasuke-kun.” Sakura scolded.

“Mah.” Kakashi interrupted. “But Sensei thinks you guys should be able to make it to the last round at least.”

“No!” Naruto and Sakura yelped before they aimed insulted looks in his direction, Kakashi could only laugh at that.

XxX

“I wish I could go with them.” Ino said softly, she had not expected any of them to hear her but Shikamaru’s shoulders slumped just a bit as they and Asuma-sensei watched Chouji, Naruto and Sakura make their way to the large crowd waiting to enter.

“It does seem like a lot of fun, their end.” Shikamaru admitted softly. “That doesn’t change the fact that this is a serious matter.” He turned around to face her and she knew she was not imagining that his smile was a bit stressed. “Isn’t this what you wanted from us anyway? To take things a bit more seriously? Try a little harder?”

“I don’t want to be like them.” She knew what Shikamaru was thinking. “We don’t need to be like them, operate like them. I just want to be with them from time to time. They make things easier, fun and we have fun too but team seven feels so alive sometimes.”

Just watching the way Sakura was with her team, the closeness they all had. The way they relaxed against each other, huddled in a group. They were a team in their own world and it looked like so much fun, she could not help her eyes from following.
Team seven was different to the other teams, they did not have the same restraints and responsibilities. Well maybe Sasuke-kun had those but he never seemed to be caught up in those sorts of things the way the rest of them did. Being the firstborn to the leader of a clan, having gifts, it was not easy and she never wanted it to be.

Still she could look at Sakura and wish she was just a bit closer. Even when it was for a mission as silly as this one. She had not ditched most of the things Sakura had done, she was active but she doubted she was as active as Sakura who trained whenever she could, she could afford to eat in the contest, a few missions and everything would be right again.

Not that Ino thought Sakura thought about that sort of thing anymore. If anything, she poured over books and advice magazines about stamina and strength building, muscle gain. Her head was always on success, improvement and team. Ino was not exactly slacking but maybe Sakura was pulling ahead a little bit.

She was so happy to be around her team, talking to them and although Naruto was more than a little odd, Sasuke-kun too… but they did seem to fit together and be a solid team. Something the village would be proud of. She could not exactly begrudge Sakura that, she was allowed to feel a bit lonely though.

XxX

“He really looks as though he doesn’t want to be here. He’ll be grateful I think.” Sakura whispered as the Daimyo made his speech and their client looked sullenly at everything and everyone but especially the daimyo.

Naruto nodded even as his eyes moved along the guards and the walls. “He won’t fight once Shikamaru gives him the official letter. He’ll be glad to see the back of this place. He looks as though he is being treated right and while the daughter seems enthusiastic I get the feeling the little lord would run the Daimyo through with that spear that guard is holding.”

“The sad thing is…” Sakura shook her head. “I think you’re right. The more I watch them up there the more I wish we had not left my jacket and extra weapons behind.”

“Well I’m armed.” Naruto gloated.

“Well the first part is about appraisal and removing the serious competition.” Sakura’s shoulder’s relaxed. “But we’re going to have to be on our toes.”

“I thought we were since we got here.” Naruto teased. “Let’s at least enjoy the free food Sakura-chan.”

XxX

“All these famous places are providing the food.” Naruto groaned as he tried to switch his glances from the advertising banners and the Daimyo above. “These people are really famous even out of the country I can’t wait to have a few bites. There is Ama-ama An, their bean jam cakes are supposed to be the best in Ko no Kuni.” He groaned.

“Sound like you can’t want to have a bite.” Sakura snickered. “I think they are going to be the first course so eat your fill because I don’t think we can afford to but anything that is supposed to be the best in this country.”

“Damn right I’m going to eat my fill.” Naruto grinned. “Let me at it! But Gito Gito Tei’s ramen is going to be so good I can tell. I want it, I want it I want it Sakura-can! It isn’t fair.”
“Just make sure you don’t end up puking before you make it too far in.” Sakura warned. “I wish we could get to taste Neta Neta Sushi but I’m guessing that is the last course and we certainly don’t want to be in there for that.”

“Expensive as hell it has to be amazing, I sorta envy Chouji a bit. A little bit.” Naruto admitted. “But everything else leading up to it is going to be amazing I can’t wait! Kemu Kemu-en’s Yakiniku is the best so I have to last to that at least. It isn’t my favourite thing to eat but it is pretty damn good.”

“You usually find Yakiniku everywhere don’t you.” Sakura mused. “I love the taste of it too, I’m going to enjoy that more than the ramen. That’s your staple food Naruto not mine.”

“But Sakura-chan it is such a good staple food.” Naruto teased. “It’s a good thing we had all that hot tea before we came to this, to get far you need a stable empty stomach you know.”

“We’re not supposed to be taking this seriously you know.” Sakura fake scolded. “Kakashi-sensei just wants something to laugh at and we just want to take advantage of the free food, we can take others out from afar just as well.”

“Well I know that.” Naruto grinned. “But Sakura-chan, you gotta admit, this is more fun isn’t it?”

“According to who exactly?” She teased. “But we are team seven after all, this is our normal and our fun too. Free food until we’re full!”

“Kakashi-sensei’s cheapness is rubbing off on us.” Naruto snorted before it became a full-blown laugh. “We’re just like him now. Soon we will be late to everything and making our juniors pay for things and do the paperwork.”

“Well I think I’m the Chuunin.” Sakura mused. “Naruto-kun, be a dear and write up the report later?”

“As if!” Naruto laughed. “We haven’t fallen that far yet Sakura-chan.”

XxX

“If they make themselves sick I’m taking pictures.” Sasuke muttered half under his breath. “Look at their faces, how much do they plan on eating?”

“It isn’t too late for you to join you know.” Kakashi pointed out. It got him a sullen look from Sasuke that was well deserved before the boy turned to observe his team members who looked delighted at the plates awaiting them. “You can eat a fair amount too.”

“I’m not a glutten.” Sasuke huffed. “I didn’t think Sakura was either.”

“Well Sakura…” Kakashi trailed off. “She’s not a glutten but she likes what she likes and I think all thoughts about maintaining girlish figures and dieting has long gone out the window, it is about strength muscle and stamina now.” He watched Sasuke carefully. “Of course everyone needs a cheat day, those root snacks are sort of boring.”

“Disgusting.” Sasuke corrected. “They are disgusting.”

“Disgusting then.” Kakashi shrugged. “But do you begrudge them this? A little fun on a mission that I know you can handle.”

“They are going to make themselves sick.” Sasuke snorted. “Even Naruto can’t handle this level.”
“You may have a point there.” Kakashi admitted. “But it is sort of cute isn’t it? Them, this entire thing. A reward of sorts before the mission. Who knows when they will be able to have this sort of thing again?”

“Especially when we have a cheap sensei like you around.” Sasuke pointed out with a small smile. “Expensive dinners like those are out of reach until we become Jounins ourselves.”

“Sensei’s pockets are not deep enough to feed all of you extravagantly.” Kakashi felt obliged to point out. “Besides, isn’t that Jounin pay check far away?”

“No, it is us so no. We’ll be there soon enough.” Sasuke said softly, Kakashi was glad for the mask that hid his grin.

XxX

“Well I won’t have to eat for a year.” Sakura groaned. “I wanted to hold out to the final round but I think it is about time to bow out.”

“Next round you can bow out.” Naruto’s eyes were amused where they went from her to his bowl of ramen. “I’m out after this round so once you get through this and onto the next stage I’ll be backing up Sasuke and Kakashi-sensei.”

“I guess it is best if I’m the one to keep an eye on Chouji.” Sakura’s eyes went across the table to the other boy. “If I didn’t know better I would swear he’s forgotten exactly why we’re here, look at him go.”

“Well I don’t think you’re wrong.” Naruto chuckled. “I think he’s aiming for first place. It certainly makes things interesting.” A loud groan came from further down the table before a man slumped to the side holding his stomach. “Makes it easier for us doesn’t it?”

“Certainly does.” Sakura mused as she watched a woman throw back up the ramen noisily onto the ground. “What a shame, a waste of food.”

“Not our problem now is it?” A heavy slum and the table rattled from the force that the man fell onto it a distance away. “Weeding is so much fun.”

XxX

“When exactly is team ten going to make a move?” Naruto asked as he paused mid-stretch. “We’re running out of time aren’t we?”

“When Chouji gets second place is when we will make our move.” Sasuke knew Shikamaru was disappointed that Naruto had not flinched at his sudden appearance. “After the ceremony we grab the lord and make a run for it.”

“That isn’t going to go as well as you think it will.” Sakura wrinkled her nose when she got into the small chamber. “The guards are everywhere. Switching out Naruto for the young lord is going to be difficult as it is. I mean it is a perfect plan in theory but you know what they say about perfect plans.”

“Someone is always around to fuck it up with their abnormal ways.” Sasuke shook his head. “Lucky for you we’ve already figured out whose movements are going to cause all of us the most trouble.”

“Tatewaki, he’ll be the one giving Naruto the most trouble.” Shikamaru looked stubborn. “By the
time we move there will be enough of an opening to get the young lord out of their clutches.”

“If you say so.” Sasuke shrugged. “But if you think that guy is a match for Naruto maybe you should go over your plans.”

“Well in terms of Naruto giving off the wrong signs, it is not as if Naruto is a young lord. It is fake it until we clear the place.” Sakura’s warning look in his direction made Sasuke pretend not to see it. “Sometimes it is the weirdest of things that can throw a person off guard. We need to buy at least a day. As it is we should be moving from first contact.”

“The moment the young lord is alone I’ll make my move.” Shikamaru’s eyes went to Naruto. “I trust that you’re ready even though you were gorging a few moments ago.”

“I know when to stop Shikamaru.” Naruto was visibly amused. “I won’t go until I puke, it is a waste of food and it defeats the purpose.” Besides I’ve been watching him on and off since we got here, I think I can muster up some resentment when I’m disguised as him. He doesn’t hide the face that he really does not want to be here. There are some nice feelings but everyone gets a bite of that anger he has inside him. It won’t be a breeze but I do know what I’m working with.”

“That’s the best we are going to get huh.” Sakura sighed. “After the presentation of prizes, we make our moves. Naruto, we’ll be watching you but for the time being get ready with the rest of team ten.”

“As you say Sakura-chan.” Naruto loudly cracked his knuckles as his eyes grew darker from anticipation. “Let’s do this.”

XxX

“He forgot.” Ino growled as her fingers dug into Shikamaru’s shoulders. “I’m going to strangle that idiot the next time I get close to him. He completely forgot what he was supposed to do and got caught up in winning the stupid competition! Why this mission of all missions? Is he trying to embarrass team ten on purpose? Sakura’s with us!”

“We stopped him before he could ruin everything.” Shikamaru winced. “And don’t you mean that Sakura and Sasuke are here? Don’t you want to show off to them?”

“Sasuke-kun’s focus is his team.” Ino muttered dryly. “I wasn’t trying to out do team seven or anything but looking like a competent team would have been nice.”

“The mission isn’t over yet.” Shikamaru had no idea why he was encouraging her and her madness. “We still have time to make team seven and Sakura do a double take. Don’t forget we secured the basket ourselves and we are the ones that are going to take the young lord to safety right under everyone’s noses. Isn’t that amazing enough? We work the ways that works for us and not only will it go well but we will be able to handle whatever that comes.”

“Once we don’t run away needlessly I’m good.” Ino looked stubborn. “I can’t be-“ She cleared her throat. “I just want us to pull our weight too. They make us look bad and lazy. We aren’t like that anymore, I mean we don’t have a death wish but we are stronger and braver than before. Smarter too.”

They still had some ways to go before they could hold a candle to team seven but Shikamaru kept that part to himself. Just because it was true did not mean he should say it after all.

XxX
“Maybe it would have been nice to let Chouji win and one of us take the second spot.” Sakura mused as she hung from a rafter to watch the closing ceremony. “Seems like a waste you know.”

“And who was going to make it to the final round again?” Naruto chuckled from where he hid in the shadow of a post. “My stomach has an end there is no way I could have finished that sushi as quickly as the rest of those people and certainly not without wanting to puke up something.”

“But it tasted nice.” Sakura groaned. “And maybe I could have gotten two eaten? I guess Sasuke-kun or Kakashi-sensei could have let me win by sabotaging the other contenders.”

“Isn’t what we are doing bad enough?” Naruto laughed from his shadow. “Besides it works out, the Daimyo gets a good show, we got to scout around. We get free food too, so far so good right Sakura-chan?”

“Don’t jinx us.” She said dryly. “The really hard part starts from now, are you ready?”

“You guys are here.” Naruto’s voice softened. “Being right next to the most dangerous guy would be nerve wracking but I do have a few ideas on how to deal with him.”

“Will they work?” She questioned dryly. “We have to buy team ten time and we have to get started on our parts of the mission too. You aren’t just doing this you know.”

“Oh I’m well aware.” Naruto said softly. “That’s why it is better this way. Only one stolen prize.”

XxX

The young lord, Shu he had to be scared Shikamaru knew that he had to be but the way he pulled himself together so quickly after seeing him appear and give him the sealed scroll. He would never admit it to anyone but the dignity that the boy still carried with him gave him a better understanding of a Chuunin.

The boy was the one being rescued but still there was this feel to him a rightness to him that made kneeling and waiting not a chore. The boy might be a hostage but he was a young lord that would become great. All the lessons that must have been poured into him from birth. They were still there and they had moulded the boy before him.

Was he angry at his situation? Yes he was but he knew who he was and he still cared. Would he be a strong lord protecting and guiding them to the future only time would tell. Shikamaru was hoping that he would. He was hoping that this would work out not only for the young lord but for Konoha as well. If this boy became big, he had to look at Konoha with favouring eyes. He just had to.

“How will you get me from this place?” Shu-sama’s eyes were a bit misty as he rolled up the scroll but Shikamaru pretended not to see.

“We will have you replaced until you are far enough from here Shu-sama.” Shikamaru kept his head bowed at a respectable length. “We have ways of making it seem as though you never left but time is of the essence. We must move quickly. I apologize for the nature of your escape but security is high.”

“Once I’m from this place I care not for the means.” He hesitated and looked towards the door. “Will Chiyo… will she be well? I won’t be able to bid her farewell.”

“No you won’t Shu-sama.”

“So be it.” The young lord straightened his shoulders. “We will go at once.”
“Chiyo-sama will be well taken care of.” Ino and Sakura appeared along with Chouji and the basket. “Shu-sama you need only worry about your own escape for now.” Sakura eyed the basket before she swung it open. “You must be on your way.”

XxX

“He speaks really formally doesn’t he? A real little lord.” Naruto chuckled as he eyed his transformation in the mirror. “Guess it is about time for our mission to start.”

“Don’t get cocky.” Sasuke warned. “You have to be him for a few days at least.”

“I get that.” Naruto tilted his head and watched the face looking back at him. “Tatewaki will know something is up no matter what we do.”

“That’s why you’re the one in his line of sights.” Kakashi-sensei stepped right next to the mirror. “We have a job to do so while you don’t draw too much of his attention to you it would be best if you keep his attention from wandering to where we don’t need it.”

“Sounds hard.” Naruto’s lips turned up in a brief smile before he tamped it down. “But this is not just for me is it? I shall do what is expected of me.”

“You’re trying to hard.” Sasuke said after a beat of silence. “I know you’re joking but that was just painful.”

“Just get going.” Naruto rolled his eyes. “I’ll go play nice.”

XxX

“My lord?” Tatewaki was right there hovering at his elbow. Naruto allowed his lip to curl for a brief moment before he settled for a neutral expression. Something that most people would miss but something that the guard would catch and he certainly did.

“Don’t touch me.” Naruto breathed as he strode down the corridor. “Can I not have a moment to myself or am I not to be trusted a few moments in my room?” He met the guard’s gaze before he huffed. “Are they finished?”

“The food is ready my lord.” Tatewaki walked a little further behind than he had been aiming for but the eyes burned into his back. It took effort for Naruto not to smile. Instead he walked at a decent pace his eyes dismissing all those in his path as he made his way to the dining table. He allowed a small glare at the Daimyo at the head of the table before he allowed his gaze to soften at the sight of the Daimyo’s young daughter. He had a role to play and never let it be said that he could not be good at it.

He took his seat with a small sigh and allowed his shoulders to slump at the food before him. Naruto knew that the food had been sampled and tasted. He also knew that it was terribly cold now, the young lord hated that and Naruto was not exactly looking forward to it either after being spoiled for so long but food was food.

“It’s the buns and ramen that you liked so much.” Chiyo-sama’s voice was soft as her gaze darted from her father to the food. “I requested it because I saw how badly you wanted to try it.”

What would Shu-sama say? How would he say it? Naruto allowed a smile to come to his face while he watched Chiyo. The smile faded and a wince surfaced when he eyed the obviously cold ramen. Well to Naruto nothing was wrong with it but to a lord that wanted hot good food once in a while? Yeah it just might taste slimy and nasty. “You’re so considerate.” Naruto smiled.
“This is going to sound dumb.” Sakura said as she watched the dinner. “But that is Naruto right? Not Shu-sama.”

“I’m impressed too.” Kakashi admitted as he spared a glance down to the dinner. “He’s playing the role far better than I thought possible, it is one thing to wear the face but he has everything down perfect. It is a little concerning.” Because where the hell had Naruto learned how to do it like that and who did he do it with? It chilled the back of his neck to think Naruto could play a game like that with them.

He did not think Naruto did that with them if only because he saw no point to it. Naruto played these people because he was working with them. This was a mission as cruel as it was even though sometimes he felt as though he was missing something all Naruto had left was memories and Konoha. The past and his future, his dream with them.

Just because he was good at deception, at playing along did not mean there was something wrong.

Except he had not gotten this far without listening to his gut.

XxX

“Did I scare you?” Naruto’s question made Sasuke look up even when he knew Naruto was not talking to him. Naruto was still in disguise sitting on the young lord’s bed and watching Kakashi. “Worried?”

“Just a little.” Kakashi sounded the same but he seemed tense. “For a moment I wondered who was talking there.”

“Shouldn’t you know by my eyes?”

“I’m not always seeing them now am I and what about the times they don’t change?”

“Well I guess you’ll be left wondering.” Naruto turned away with a smile and Sasuke huffed as he sorted through the documents they had borrowed.

Tatewaki was amusing, it was almost hard to keep a straight face. Shu-sama obviously sucked at combat and had no idea about the ways of the samurai. Naruto on the other hand, he knew more about sword work than most people. Not only that he knew enough about the ways of the samurai to identify the different divisions.

Just by watching Tatewaki teach Chiyo-sama he was able to learn more about the man keeping his team on edge. He could be taken out of course but then everything would get messy, besides it looked as though while Shu-sama was not fond of the old samurai, Chiyo-sama doted on him.

The happier they could keep the girl while keeping her oblivious the easier it would be on the rest of them. They did not want to upset her too much while it came down to it.

Still it was easy enough to have the wrong posture, to swing wildly and pretend to get frustrated, easy to let anger and resentment to rise to his face, easy to pretend to be thinking angry young lord dark things until Chiyo-sama tried interrupting. It was all too easy to slip into the role, it was the saying in the role part that he knew he had to be wary of.
Tatewaki’s eyes were on him and while they were not catching onto everything there was no doubt that the man’s mind continued spinning and accessing, his position was no joke. He might not get it now but certainly he could end up putting things together.

XxX

“You’re thinking about home.” Chiyo-sama’s words were a statement even as she closed the door behind her. Naruto had hurried into position the moment he realized she was on her way. “You can tell me these things Shu…” She blushed at the end of her sentence. “I know it is hard on you even though you’re trying so hard.” Her hand shook as she pulled a bun from behind her back. “I thought you wouldn’t mind this even if it isn’t as hot as it was when it was made.” Sadness flickered across her face. “Father says a necessary evil but…”

“I’m honoured that you thought of me.” Naruto searched her eyes before he let his body relax. “And it may be cold but better than the alternative, while I long for something else my mind is at ease knowing that we are safe, that you are safe.” He crossed the room to take the bun from her gently. “Thank you Chiyo this makes it all the better.”

XxX

“So he can flirt with people our age and he’s so distinguished with it too.” Sakura mused. “There is hope after all.”

“They are three years older than us, there is a difference.” Sasuke reminded her killing her glow from discovery. “This also means nothing.”

“Well I know it is for a mission and all but he does sound older doesn’t he Sasuke-kun? Sakura sighed. “And someone is a little… bitter aren’t they? Don’t worry our time is coming soon.”

“Don’t be silly.” Sasuke scoffed. “We’re something totally different.”

Well that was nice to hear sometimes, “Ah, guess you’re right.” Sakura smiled.

XxX

“How are you doing so far?” Kakashi asked when he returned from his meet up with Asuma.

“Good.” Naruto looked almost bored. “I think we can move forward from tomorrow with the operation. Chiyo-sama has relaxed around me while Tatewaki thinks I’m up to something but that something more along the lines of running the Daimyo through with a sword.”

“I’m certain that Shu-sama’s thoughts were along those lines so it certainly works out.” Kakashi pointed out. “I think we’re on the way to finishing our side of the mission very soon.”

“Yeah Sakura-chan told me that she started the removal in the lower levels of the castle.” Naruto sighed. “Wish I could help but everyone is focused on me. I don’t mind the pretty clothes, don’t mind the food either even if it is always cold but you know I do mind the company. Chiyo-sama is so worried, the Daimyo when he isn’t being an airhead is ready cold and cruel… I’ve spoken about Tatewaki and the guards are just that, guards.”

“You’re staying mostly under the radar though right?” Kakashi questioned worriedly. “We can handle it from here but I’d rather…”

“Me too.” Naruto agreed. “But you know sensei… I can’t shake this feeling about this place. Like it has a target on its back.”
“Which is why I don’t want to delay.” Kakashi sighed. “We don’t have a fancy box but we can carry Chiyo-sama away fairly quickly and get her to the border.”

“It’s just the bodyguard that is the problem.” Naruto groaned. “They don’t like Chiyo-sama and Shu-sama alone too much and who can blame them. We’re going to have to do something.”

“Once Tatewaki doesn’t catch on, this is hard enough without having his blood on our hands to complete the mission.”

“I honestly was thinking the same thing.” Naruto sighed. “Pity that he is so loyal to the place but those types are the best when it comes down to security and management.”

“Sounds like you know a thing or two.” Kakashi chuckled.

The eyes were not Naruto’s shade but they still danced like Naruto’s. “Who knows.”

XxX

“Shu-sama.” Tatewaki’s voice was insistent as Naruto walked quickly away, he allowed his pace to pick up as he left the courtyard to head back to his rooms. “Shu-sama!”

“I’m going to relieve myself.” Naruto said coldly as he hiked his robes higher.

“You’ve been to relieve yourself at least five times today, are you experiencing trouble?” Naruto was amused at the guard that matched his pace and looked down at him. “You’ve been recusing yourself more often lately.”

“I find myself not decent company.” Naruto allowed himself to glare at the bodyguard. “There are many things I can attend to in my room without inflicting my current mood on others.”

“Shu-sama.” Tatewaki’s face slumped for a brief moment before the mask settled in place. “I can escort you to Chiyo-sama’s room after she finishes her lessons.” Shu-sama would hesitate at such an offer considering his fondness for the girl so Naruto allowed himself to pause as he considered the benefits.

“I would appreciate that but until Chi- until she finishes her lessons I’ll be in my room. Alone.” Naruto finished as he lengthened his stride. It was a risky game being so close to the observant bodyguard. The man knew something was wrong of course and reacted as such, sadly he did not seem to expect two operations. He only knew of one… but the thing was that Naruto suspected instead of two current operations running that there were three. He just could not shake the feeling and he could not narrow down the target.

XxX

Being right sucked sometimes, Naruto had no clue why it was always them, always team seven in the big messes but he was getting tired of it. It was nice to know that they had not been imagining the feeling that something was off. It was great to know that they were not being paranoid but that there really was something wrong with the country that had nothing to do with them.

It was great to know but it still sucked to be them. They had objectives, they had things to do that most certainly did not involve whatever was going to go down. Naruto would have loved some more time in the palace, buying not only Shikamaru’s team more time but Sakura some more time too. Hell even buying himself some more time when it came down to it. It would have been nice getting Chiyo-sama to warm up to him and the future plan a bit more but when things went to hell you really did not have a choice.
Sasuke was shadowing him as he got ready to do what he had to do and Sakura and Kakashi-sensei were busying going beyond the looting they had come to do in the name of Konoha and the Hokage. Discretion was supposed to be the name of the game but when a place was going to get wiped out pretty soon it was a grab and go operation of everything that was valuable. Chiyo-sama was very valuable but she was part of their mission.

It was up to team seven to grab as many things they could get and preserve while they had the time. Naruto felt sweat roll down his back with every second wasted as the princess processed her situation as they sat in her room.

“You’ll take me to him?” She asked softly her hands clutching her robes. “That is not really a choice is it.”

“Not really.” Naruto admitted. “You willing would make things easier but we do have to go. I know you miss him. He’s important to you.”

“You’re cruel.” She bit her lip as she looked away. “The way you learned of my feelings, the way that you are manipulating me now. To leave my country, my father for what?”

“You want to die here?” Naruto asked bluntly. “You’ve been dissatisfied this entire time. Conflicted between your father and what they were doing to Shu-sama this entire time. Can you say knowing what you know that you want to stay here and take your chances? Hope that they want a captive to keep locked up and pretty until you step out of line or they get bored?” She flinched and he softened his tone. “You want to live how he lived this entire time?”

“I walk out that door with you, with all of you I’ll be a traitor to all I hold dear.” Her eyes glinted with unshed tears but her voice never wavered.

“You walk out that door.” Naruto countered softly. “You’ll live, you’ll be surviving and you and Shu-sama get to call the shots and make sure neither of you have to suffer what he has suffered for years. It won’t be easy but you’ll be alive. I’ve been here listening to you for a while. You understand the state of this country, the people and your father more than most. You want to go down fighting for what you don’t believe in or do you want to take the chance at rebuilding and prove yourself that your words to him aren’t lies? He hesitated for you.” Naruto admitted. “Freedom and his people are all he as but he hesitated leaving this place and being under the thumb of a man he hates more than anything. For you.” Her back straightened at his words. “It’s not really a choice but what you’ll do from now on is important.”

“Shu.” Her eyes slid closed and the deep breath she took visibly steadied her. Her clenched hands slowly released. “There are many things I would love to do.” The regret in her eyes made Naruto’s heart tighten in sympathy. “But there is nothing much I can do beyond leave and leave quickly, before I see things I’ll regret for the rest of my days.” Her lips curled up in a painful smile. “I always watch the swords training but it seems I’m a coward.”

“You love these people, no matter how they are.” Naruto shook his head to deny her words. “There is nothing cowardly about making sure that the way you say goodbye to them in person and your memory kept normal. You want to look back and see this not ash, ruins and blood, them at their worst. Nothing wrong with that. You want to look back with love, you want to see something whole, complete and grand. There is absolutely nothing wrong with that. If many could they would choose to see their beloved people and things at their best. The ghosts beautiful and complete.” He knew he had said the right thing by the way that she nodded her eyes bright but determined.

XxX
Her hand was in Naruto’s one as they started their fast grabbing and escape. Sasuke lingered close by as he watched them. As always, Naruto pulled through in the weirdest ways. Everyone was in danger now from whatever in hell was coming but somehow the princess was calm and trusting. The better for Konoha but Naruto had done it again.

It would be funny if instead of the young prince, the princess turned her affections onto Naruto. It would be funny but she did not seem like the sort. Even though they had bonded and she had forgiven Naruto for lying to her. Even after all of that, Sasuke knew the reason for her agreement was the prince that she cared for all this time.

Leaving family, friends everything in order to forge a new future. It was brave and it was selfish but that was the power of bonds or something. Still it had to be jarring for her to look at the face of someone she cared for and know that the person underneath was no one that she knew.

Still, Sasuke could watch the two of them and mentally urge them to move at least a little faster. The old guard was their biggest obstacle in the face of the upcoming threat and they all knew it.

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Not everything would go right, it was common sense but it just sucked that things had to come to head when the gate was just there and he had Chiyo-sama’s hand in his. The gate was just there! He could always just scoop her up and run because the place was done for anyway but he did not want the old man chasing them all the way to the rendezvous point.

He did not want to have to kill him either. Naruto scowled as he considered his options, a sign from him and Sasuke could at least put him unconscious but for a prideful old man meeting death and not knowing it. It felt wrong even if it was merciful.

“You are not Shu-sama are you.” The sword was slowly withdrawn and while Chiyo-sama gasped behind him, Naruto remained calm outwardly. Inside of his head he swore bitterly and cursed the observant old man who just could not do what he was supposed to. “When was the switch made?”

“A while ago.” He kept Chiyo-sama behind him as he faced the old man. “His people wanted him back.”

“And Chiyo-sama.” The man’s eyes never left his.

“They want her too. Better with them than here, you’ve heard the perimeter alarms haven’t you old man.” Naruto glanced behind him to the castle. “She’s safer gone than here. I am not too sure but I think the reason Shu-sama needed to be retrieved was because former orders couldn’t be taken back.” He had seen it before at least once. While this country had disrespected the other by having Shu-sama taken and then keeping him. Shu-sama had still been necessary. Not to everyone he was willing to bet. “This country will be gone soon.” Naruto admitted. “But that isn’t on me.”

“This country…” Tatewaki lowered his sword slightly. “The lord, Chiyo-sama.”

“You guys knew the risks.” Naruto pointed out. “Better to save something in the end.” He hesitated at the hand that squeezed his. “I don’t know how Shu-sama would feel but I think Chiyo-sama would like it if you came along with her. I don’t know, maybe it would be better this way. I know you care for her, for Shu-sama too in your own way.”

“I owe everything that I have to the lord here.” Tatewaki glared at him before his gaze lowered when he looked beyond Naruto to the princess behind him. “Chiyo-sama. I can’t abandon the lord. I can’t abandon this place.”
“Can’t let go of the old country?” Naruto asked, a trace of wistfulness escaped into his voice.

“Once you give your vow huh.”

“You seem to understand part of it.” Tatewaki hesitated. “Are you certain we will lose?”

“Shu-sama and Chiyo-sama wouldn’t be removed otherwise.” Naruto admitted. “And I can feel it, a force coming closer that you guys can’t deal with. We ourselves did this much and we could have smashed in and pulled them out no problem.” He admitted. “It would have gotten messy but… if we had come in to grab them most of you wouldn’t stand a chance. This is bigger than that, they aren’t creeping… they are coming for you. For this country and this castle. Under whose orders I don’t know but I do know even Shu-sama can’t make whoever this is stop. All of this will fall.”

“I can’t-“

“You can’t stop me.” Naruto kept his hand in Chiyo’s one as he kept eye contact. An explosion far behind them in the town solidified his words. “You don’t have much time, either I get her somewhere safe where Shu-sama will protect her or she can die here with this place and everyone else. You, her father, this country or I can complete my mission.”

“Chiyo-sama will be somewhere safe?” Tatewaki asked suspiciously.

“I’m from Konoha.” Naruto admitted. “I already know this country didn’t play fair with Shu-sama. Konoha knows all about how you snatched him and had him brought here. He never got to see his parents again, his people and his supporters, he was a kid those years ago and your people, your lord snatched him by the cheapest way possible.”

“Konoha knows…” Tatewaki said softly.

“We really did all of that?” The hand in his slackened just a bit. “We did that?”

“Yes your father did that.” Naruto did not turn to look at her but spoke to the man in the way. “Which makes this kind of poetic in a messed-up way, just you guys can’t afford whatever these people are being paid.” Another explosion and Naruto could hear the destruction and the screams. It had begun whatever the fuck that was. There was the sense of evil approaching, evil and strength and he did not want to have to look behind him to confront it.

“Swear to me boy.” Tatewaki lowered his sword. “I don’t even know your name or your true face.” That caused Naruto to smile. The henge was easy to dispel. Behind him Chiyo-sama gasped but Naruto kept her hand in his and he met the man’s gaze head on.

“Uzumaki Naruto, I’ll get Chiyo-sama safely out this country to Shu-sama from there to their country where they will be safe.”

“Uzumaki Naruto.” Tatewaki nodded slowly. “I’ll remember that, get her to safety.” He stepped out of their path, the moment he did Naruto recalled the transformation and started to run, he allowed himself one last look to the samurai that had already turned to the castle that had begun to burn.

On the sword, for the sword for the master. It was as if Naruto had thought he would end up any different. He pulled Chiyo-sama with him as they went into the forest away from the destruction behind them.

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“Sensei who is that?” Sakura had only a glimpse of cloaks before she felt her sensei grab her by the
arm and fling her sideways.

“We go, now.” There was no arguing with that and while she was not stupid, she could feel the sense of wrongness from the people? Persons? It looked like many but—well while she did not want to take them on she didn’t want to leave with no information either.

“We’ve got what we came for anyway.” It was herself and her sensei that was in the most danger. Naruto had already set off with Sasuke so that just left them, they had gotten a little loot happy. Whether that was he or her sensei’s fault she did not know but the palace was clean. Good thing too since it looked as though the place was not only going to fall, it was going to burn to the ground.

She felt sympathy for the young princess about her home but Sakura could not help but wonder who the hell else had been contracted to this place. There had been so many jobs and different people to do them. Grab Shu-sama and bring him home safely so he could take over. Grab Chiyo-sama. Loot in the name of Konoha. Now… the land had to burn?

This sort of thing, it was her first time being in the middle of something so crazy and she knew it would not be the last but she could not keep herself from looking over her shoulder at the red cloaks approaching. The arrows raining from the sky. Something told her to look behind her and one thing she had learned after becoming a Chuunin was that even if she did not know why, strange things needed a hard glance for later.

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How long does it take a small country, a small castle to fall? Apparently less than an hour because by the time they had gotten up the mountain Sasuke looked behind him to see only smoke rising and no buildings. It sent a chill down his spine because something told him that while that was impressive… it could have been done faster, he had felt that. Felt that malice and bloodlust but while it was not Orochimaru. It was something just as scary.

Naruto had charmed his way out the situations. The princess by his side, the old guard giving them the blessing. They had made it out without more complications. Kakashi had sent them a signal that he was near and fast approaching with no complications.

That was all of them, mission complete once Shikamaru’s side had run into no troubles. At least no troubles for their mission. On the other hand… the destruction of the place they had just been. Sasuke had not seen that coming at all. Just a short time ago they had been there. A few hours ago, that had been a country. Now it was rubble and it had happened so quickly and they had been a part of that whatever the hell that had been. Whatever happened next, it would be up to the two that they had rescued. Also he swore he had seen something in the sky for at least a second.

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“Well it is a happy ending in a way.” Sakura muttered half under her breath. “They shouldn’t have had Shu-sama in the first place.” She kept her voice low as they travelled slow enough to accommodate the princess that was glued to Naruto’s side. Naruto had dropped the transformation but her arm seemed glued to his elbow. She couldn’t blame her in the end though, everyone had a rough day but for the princess it had to be the thing of nightmares.

Her country gone, her people gone. Servants and confidants. All gone and everything rubble even the belief in her father and their people. There was no doubt to whether the princess knew the truth about her friend and what her people had done. Her heart had to be broken but she still kept with them, walking with them determinedly. That took guts, that took strength because she had walked
away from it all.

Made Sakura wonder if she could do that. If she would walk away from everything for a friend. While the lord had done wrong not everyone had been in the wrong. Of course, there had not been much choice. Chiyo-sama had been their mission but, to come so willingly when most would not have expected her to.

Come to think of it, it was not an unfamiliar situation when she thought about it except... there had been nothing for Naruto to return to right? But it was a similar enough situation, maybe that was why she clung to him. Maybe that was why they had connected while the girl did not get it.

Still, in Naruto’s situation there had been nothing behind him and to think about it, nothing behind her either. It was either be strong, move on and build anew or... burn, fall to pieces with nothing. Her heart clenched and she almost fumbled in her steps as she watched Naruto’s back with Chiyo-sama.

“He’s going home and at least he’ll have a friend.” Sasuke said next to her. It surprised her a bit because he thoughts had wandered away so fast that she had almost forgotten she was sort of speaking at him. “This is for the best because now there won’t be any more back and forth with political hostages.”

“It’s a wrong righted with a better situation because with no one else Shu-sama and Chiyo-sama can do what they need to without power hungry adults in the way... hopefully.” Sakura added on. “I mean... they are older than us but in the world they are about to step in... how much can they do?”


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“This is a rather nice rendezvous spot.” Naruto admitted as their teams settled. “Really nice, almost luxury nice.” He watched the glance exchanged between his sensei and team ten’s. “Am I missing something here? Why is there a luxury cabin in the woods?”

“One day Naruto.” Asuma-sensei smiled, Naruto narrowed his eyes at the man but the man’s attention was on the two reunited. Chiyo-sama was crying into Shu-sama’s shoulder. Her body shook lightly as her hair was lightly stroked. That was to be expected of course, after everything she had seen. At least she had something good at the end of the trail.

But then again so did he, his dream, Iruka-sensei. Now he had his team, he had the Konoha nine. He had Konohamaru and company and while they weren’t what he had lost they were just as important. Not better, not lesser. Just as important. It might take some time for Chiyo-sama but she had the strength to understand and build again. The ghost of her country would live with her forever, a hefty weight but somehow it looked as though it would not crush her. Not just because of her friend, it might just be untapped strength.

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“She knows what her father did was wrong but she still mourns him. Shu-sama also mourns him.” Naruto was not surprised when Kakashi-sensei joined him on the guard watch. Silence remained between them for a few moments the only noise the noise of the forest and the sound of crying and whispers from the cabin.

“It isn’t going to be happily ever after.” Naruto pointed out. “She knows that, we all know that.
Shu-sama gets to go home but a country is gone and her father is dead. Everyone she knows is gone. Childhood friends, guards, servants. Her buildings and history, her streets and familiar sights. Every bit of normality is gone.”

“It’s the way of politics, of this sort of game.” Sasuke said from behind them. “She knows that now. She’ll make her way from her and she isn’t doing it alone.”

“She has Shu-sama to help her adjust but she’ll be working hard not only for herself.” Sakura said softly as she joined them. “It isn’t the happily ever after most would want but considering the circumstances this is the best we can get. Not happy but less obstacles.”

“Mission complete.” Naruto stood up. “Still troublesome though.”

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“Naruto right?” Shu-sama picked him up the moment he came in the room. Naruto had not been sneaking or anything but it still raised his estimation of the guy some. “Thank you, for bringing Chiyo safely.”

“No problem.” Naruto shoved his hands in his pockets as he searched her face, tear tracks from crying as was expected. “How you doing?”

“I-I.” She broke off before she got to her feet and pulled away from the hug she had been wrapped up in. In the fairly decent cabin she still looked above it all. “I don’t want this to happen to Shu again, to myself again. I’m going to do whatever it takes.” She gritted out, Naruto bit back a shudder because that tone, those words made memories better left unstirred within him. “This isn’t going to happen to us again. We won’t let this happen to us. We’ll change the world so that he won’t have to lose people again and I won’t have to lose a home again.”

“That’s good, that’s a good plan a good decision. Both of you will be in a good position to prevent things from repeating.” Naruto agreed. “I like that, but the games that Daimyo’s play they don’t just affect you. It isn’t just who suffers and who will suffer. It trickles down to all of us. Not just you, not just your family is affected by this game of politics that royalty, and rich lords like to play. Power struggles are the norm as long as there is someone with something that someone else wants. As long as someone thinks someone else has it better and they have the means to do something about it. There will a struggle and it will affect everyone the stronger and bigger you are. The higher up you are. Chiyo-sama, Shu-sama when you enter your country you will be at the top. The rest of us have to follow your orders, your dictation and what affects you, will affect us all whether we know you or not.”

“I-“ Shu-sama said before Chiyo-sama shook her head. “You go first.” He said softly.

“We.” She said softly. “Understand and we won’t forget, especially me. I can’t forget, I won’t. A better world for us all without these foolish games, without these prideful struggles.” She promised.

“We are the truce that should have been.” Shu-sama promised. “Others shouldn’t have to die over simple things. Most importantly we should be striving for something different, safer. All of us.” Just what Naruto wanted to hear and he even believed them. Horrors in their eyes but determination too, it would have been crushed under the weight of the elders before them. The two of them, they just might be able to do it. Chiyo-sama help the knowledge and weight of loss and Shu-sama had his years of captivity to know why the games of the rich and royal were dangerous. They shouldn’t make the mistakes of those before them. At least he hoped they would not.
“It’s a strange ending.” Kakashi said softly as they watched the people welcome Shu-sama and Chiyo-sama. “At least the faction that wanted him dead were taken care of before we got here.”

“Pity he doesn’t have more supporters, this is a pretty big country. Least it is bigger than hers.” Naruto said softly. “Guess that is going to be their country now, after the rubble is cleared and stuff.”

“Least they have somewhere to go.” Kakashi said softly. His gaze sought the rest of their team. Sakura sat on a log her gaze on the scene below. Ino was right next to her, her legs brushing Sakura’s. Chouji stood with Asuma a little away. Sasuke was not close to them but he was not far away either he was partly in the shadow of the trees his eyes on the country. Shikamaru stood behind Sakura and Ino his arms folded and a look of concentration on his face. “Are you okay with how it all worked out?”

“Honestly?” Naruto’s voice dropped to a tone so low, Kakashi knew it would not carry beyond them. “I don’t regret what we did. Not us now but… me and the others back then. I don’t regret that, that we put him there but I’m glad that now he is here and he gets to go home. He’s a different person now.” Naruto said softly. “And now… he’s got somebody with him and the two of them? I think they are going to work hard and be something great. It would be nice to have people on our side in their world who won’t play these sorts of silly games because in the end? These two countries? They are smaller than us. Than Konoha, they are weaker than us too these sorts of fights and struggles only hurts them and the people under them. The two of them understand that better than anyone. I won’t say it was the right thing to do but it worked out in the end for him. Maybe her too.”

“I hope it does.” Kakashi settled his hand on Naruto’s shoulder and gave a quick squeeze before his hand dropped. It was in acknowledgment of what the boy had so willingly shared with him. An insight to his mind and thoughts that he did not have to share but he did anyway.

Naruto was right about the countries being small, about the struggles being pretty meaningless in the end because of the bigger picture and the bigger countries. Naruto was right about so much of it and while Kakashi knew Naruto had seen things on level someone his age should never have to see it only firmed his own resolve about protecting Naruto better from this point on.

The young lord and lady, they had scars that would never heal. They had losses that were carved so deep yet others would never see but they would endure, they had to. They had promised to and while they were a small section of the world it was a starting point.

These people who had connected not only with each other but with Naruto. The mission could have gone a whole lot worse especially with the nasty surprise they had been forced to leave behind. Still, Kakashi had all his team and he had them unharmed along with completed objectives.

This mission would be something for his team to think over. Sakura, his newly minted Chuunin would be asking the hard questions in the coming days even while she evaluated everything and herself. Even as she trained harder than before. Even as she dedicated herself to her team and their teamwork.

Sasuke, he just might start looking at people a little deeper now. People beyond his team. It looked as though Sasuke had understood something out there or maybe he had just found another ideal to cling to as a shinobi. Regardless, Kakashi was looking forward to the change even as he knew Sasuke’s frustrations with training would rise.
There was no guessing where Naruto would be turning from this point on. He could hope, he could
guess but Naruto always ended up surprising them all. There would be more training. More
bonding, more smiles for certain. More secret smiles between Naruto and the Hokage. More blue
eyes watching the village closely, for what Kakashi was still unsure to the exact intent.

For Asuma, it was neither Kakashi’s job or business to be worrying where team ten would be going
from this point on but he could see very few opportunities for slacking. In fact, he doubted any of
them would want to go slack off in the coming days. Maybe the easiest way to put it would be that
hard training days were ahead of everyone. Hard work, for the shinobi of Konoha and the
displaced, emotionally scarred children of the Lands of This and That.
This is a pretty big angst filled chapter so enjoy!! about 3-4 weeks for the next one since this chapter was so huge ^.^ hear from you darlings then!! Does this chapter answer any previous questions? I wonder~

“So why exactly are you here?” Sasuke asked as he watched the feed scatter in the light breeze.

“Well partly because I wanted to see you doing chores.” Sakura leaned against the post and laughed at the glare that came her way. “Partly because I didn’t want you to waste a trip to the grounds.” Her gaze drifted quickly over him before it returned to his face. “We’ve been called by the Hokage for another mission.” Sasuke’s gaze must have given him away because she smiled. “I don’t think we will be away that long. Somehow I think… well this feels sort of like a diplomatic mission. Least from the summons.”

“If you are here.” Sasuke’s gaze went to the mostly docile chickens that had gathered. “Where’s Naruto?”

“He was with me in the grounds. He already set off to coral Kakashi-sensei because…” She snorted. “It’s Kakashi-sensei and it is damn early in the morning. He came back last night after all.”

“Naruto’s going to pull him out of bed?” Sasuke set the basket down and shoved the fussier hens aside.

“Sensei’s not that bad.” Sakura snorted. “I bet he’s training or doing something secretive. He has his lazy sides but if a summons came to me. Then a summons went to him too.”

“I wonder what they need all of us for.” Sasuke scattered more feed and watched the hens. “Think we’ll be out from the village for a while?”

“It’s us so… it’s going to go to hell in some way. Even if it isn’t us that gets affected the most.” Her tone dipped. “I’m always ready for a fight but it isn’t just us you know. I don’t like the feeling that we can’t help.”

Sasuke knew what she was talking about. “Not everything can be cured right away.”

“Still, I want not only us coming out safe and on top but the best possible situation. The best possible outcome. I want not only us to make the best decisions for us but for the team and the mission.”

“We learn from mistakes Sakura.”

“That doesn’t make it easy.” She said softly. “That doesn’t make it stop from burning and all we can do is try harder the next time but-“

“What about this time.” Sasuke finished.
“I don’t know how Naruto does it.” She admitted. “I’ve been thinking about everything he has to have endured and I think back to when he got dropped back in our class and- everything and everyone we must have seemed like children to him.”

“In his eyes we just still might be.” Sasuke had finally emptied the basket. “We still don’t know everything about him but while he passes us in the understanding in certain matters, we are equal in everything else.”

“You know, I was going to say I don’t want us to get left behind but…” A smile spread across her face. “I guess that’s what everybody must be thinking about us huh? Crazy, wild, beastly team seven.”

“They should try harder to catch up.” Sasuke allowed a small smile to escape. “We are unlike anything they have ever seen. They have to run to have a chance at it.”

“Cocky but truthful.”

“The three of us, they don’t stand a chance currently and the way we are improving.” Determination spread through him. They won’t have the chance.”

“Then let’s live up to our beastly reputation and work hard on this mission too Sasuke-kun.”

XxX

He could feel it in his bones, there was something big about the mission. He had known by the bird that had fluttered down to interrupt his sparring with Sakura. As Kakashi-sensei would say, Naruto could fight with Sakura at the level that was more than fun for him. Her reflexes had gotten amazing. Sometimes things slipped and she caught it. That was good, she and Sasuke they might not know it but they were coming at the point to stand next to him.

Which made it all good because the one pointing him forward was Sakura. The one whose orders he followed currently was Sakura not only because it felt good but because she knew the way. Naruto did his own thing but Sakura did as well. Chuunin suited her, responsibility suited her in ways he doubted she understood. It felt familiar it felt good and the way they all looked at her, Sasuke, Naruto himself, Kakashi-sensei. Naruto knew they all felt the same way.

The way she was now, the way she was developing. It made his insides clench in anticipation but in a few years. She just might become quite a beast herself. Naruto still wanted to protect her, her soft side, her tears but he had no problems if she wanted to push him aside and deal with a problem herself.

Pretty but strong. Pretty but deadly, Naruto’s favourite kind of person. It was not like that but that did not change how he felt. Seeing her determined, focused, it worked him up until he was ready to go too.

Sasuke too, with Sakura herding them, directing them. She was their Chuunin and Sasuke showed it all the ways they could while they still could. Chuunin was a title that they were coming for as well but for Sasuke, Naruto knew it took something out of him but not in a bad way to be directed. Sasuke was relaxed when he depended on them all. When he listened. Most their missions were the type that you had to adapt and adapt to craziness quickly but when it came down to them, the four of them. Or the three of them. It was Sakura’s directives they followed. Her plans and her words. They gave their all and they came back to her.

They were a team, they were hers and Naruto never wanted to hurt her like before. It had been
unavoidable but it had been crazy, reckless. They had not thought about it back then but while they had been throwing everything on the line her heart had been hurting for them.

Of all people Naruto knew her worry and fear. He did not want her to feel like that over him, over them. Sasuke neither so they had to fight hard, they had to come back and bring a relieved smile to her face. She had to trust that no matter what they would come back safely.

They were a team, all of them and with every training, every hang out session. The closer they got to the point sometimes they smiled because they knew what the others were thinking. With every moment Naruto could not help but feel relieved.

His team, Sasuke, Sakura and Kakashi-sensei. They had his back and he had theirs. Of course they did not know everything about him and he was certain the other way was true as well but it was enough.

They were getting stronger together. Faster together and their names were spreading far and wide. That’s what Naruto wanted in the first place so he was fine with that.

The missions were still cases of mix up, it could go good and stick to the paper summary or it could go hell in a handbasket with them fighting their way out and Naruto having to watch the two members of his team face parts of the world they knew existed but had never seen face to face.

Fine shinobi they were becoming all of them. For the village, for the team. For his team Naruto could keep his head down and his mouth mostly buttoned but he knew that with every day he was a step closer to unravelling the secrets that every single adult in the village seemed to have.

Every day he got closer to telling Sakura and Sasuke, showing them the truth of himself or at least one of them. Somehow it felt as though Sasuke might be the first, he just had a feeling. Although Sakura was who he spent lots of time with. Hanging out, talking, joking and doing other things. Sasuke was the one he spent the most silence with. In the Uchiha compound in what had to be Sasuke’s quiet spot.

Naruto couldn’t keep his eyes off Sasuke’s sharingan whenever Sasuke showed it. Kakashi-sensei was so mean about keeping it hidden and never bringing it out to play in sparring. Naruto doubted Sasuke would have the same hang-ups.

Still with every big mission he wondered about the cards he was gathering to his chest and the cards that Sasuke and Sakura had to be gathering. By unspoken agreement there had been no flash jutsus but they all knew that they had them. They all knew that but somehow, they kept silent about it. Whether Kakashi-sensei had taught Sakura something special as was promised was unknown to him because Sakura had not shown him yet. Same for Sasuke.

Naruto’s feet slowed down at the end of the training grounds at the feel of something chilling his spine. He turned just in time to see white cloaks vanishing into the forest and Kakashi-sensei emerging just where the cloaks had disappeared. Full Jounin uniform and a stride that said not only had the man been briefed he knew more than Naruto.

“I thought I would have to dig you out of bed.” Naruto eyed the man and futilely searched for the ANBU that had been there a few seconds before.

“Not today.” Kakashi-sensei’s tone was almost cheerful if a bit tired. “Besides, the Hokage would have sent some annoying people to rouse me from my little journey of contemplation.”

“Not the journey of life?”
“That happens somewhere else.” Kakashi-sensei’s hand dropped to his shoulder before it started to lightly guide Naruto away from the path he had been on to the direction of the Hokage tower. “I assume you were with Sakura this morning?”

“She’s gone for Sasuke.” Naruto peered up at the man whose eye looked tired. “Hey… how bad is this going to be?”

“Bad? That’s up for discussion.” Kakashi-sensei’s tone was a mixture of tired and amused. “But it certainly is going to be busy. Very busy and delicate.”

“Delicate as in…”

“Eggsheells for most of us.”

XxX

“Are you ready?” Tenten asked the ground in front of the Hyuuga compound. “Stupid idiot, I’m always the one waiting, always. The only time you manage to get a heads up is if you never sleep from the night in front. Start training from night until day of course I’ll come and find you.” She kicked at a loose pebble and sighed. “I could have been with Sakura.”

“I’ll let you get back to that soon enough.” The gate opened to Neji’s mostly blank face. “I could have heard you from the other side.”

“That’s good, it isn’t as if I’m going to keep this sort of thing to myself anyway.” Tenten muttered. “You’re late.”

“I had a small discussion that carried on a little longer than I thought.” Neji hesitated. “Then Hinata-sama wanted to ask me some questions.”

Well that was not new but it was unexpected. Neji had lost the eternal burning anger towards Hinata but there had to be that small sense of awkwardness between them. Neji had tried to kill her after all. Out of frustration yes maybe and while he had fought to save her during the Konoha madness they were not exactly friends and Neji had not exactly gone good on all the Hyuuga clan which was good. It was too soon for any of that and when it really came down to it. They did not deserve it yet.

Having their dirty laundry aired was only the start of it. While she was sad for Neji’s loss she was happy about Naruto. The boy who was a mystery but when it came to the earth-shaking things that he did, did not seem to care beyond his team. Happy go lucky, it was really cute.

Still, with Sakura a Chuunin, a well-deserved title in Tenten’s opinion she didn’t get to see her except for the few baths, the few shopping trips that were mostly supply runs and the training sessions. She couldn’t exactly hog Sakura either, the girl did have a team and while mission team ups were seeming the norm. Team Gai was not exactly fit for the long running disaster trips Sakura kept finding herself on with her team.

A few months ago, Tenten would have sworn her team could handle everything but well, time did tend to tell. Still, she would not mind getting to see team seven in their element. She already saw the team seven sensei but that wasn’t exactly his best looks. Well… lately he had been looking more respectable at least in her eyes. Being there for Gai-sensei.

“Sensei is waiting.” She told Neji before Neji took the lead. She did not even mind him taking the lead that much. Her thoughts were full. And honestly who could blame her? The last few months were a certain eye opener.
“Jiraiya-sama?” Iruka had not exactly expected to start work and find one of the most legendary shinobi of Konoha waiting for him in the school room. “Is there something you need?”

“I was just looking around.” The man laughed. “Iruka-sensei right? The brat talks about you a lot. I’ve heard so much about you and since it was your words that got Naruto to tag along with as little fuss as possible. Just wanted to pop in.”

Iruka was flattered and wary. “Thank you.” Then the embarrassment set in. “Naruto talks about me? To you? A lot?”

“It’s always Iruka-sensei this and Iruka-sensei says that. Kid scolds like nothing you would believe.” Jiraiya-sama laughed. “It’s adorable and I know it is not all you but you do have something to do with the way he is now. His dream and some his values. His strength. Don’t forget that.” He was gone through the open classroom window before Iruka could find his tongue to say something. Instead he was stuck burying his face in his hands as he blushed from his neck to his ears.

Sakura’s eyes went from the Hokage to her sensei to the cloaked men at the corner of the room to the shivering men next to the cloaked men. She blinked once her eyes cool before they went right back to the Hokage. Naruto allowed himself a smile at her before his eyes went to the Hokage that was gleefully sending them towards trouble.

It was not often that they knew a mission was going to go to shit before they even started it. In fact, this had to be the first time that team seven stepped into the Hokage’s office for a personalized mission and knew that the mission was so going to hell and back. They had not even heard anything yet. Naruto could sense Sasuke counting up the expenses for having to replace weapons. He could feel Kakashi-sensei next to him and he knew the man was thinking ways to help them work hard but still keep them safe.

Not one strange client oh no. This looked like a total mess and Baa-chan had not even opened her mouth. This was a super mess it was going to be a bloody mess and Naruto knew it all of team seven knew it because this was the first time they had entered the Hokage’s room and had another country’s ANBU as clients.

This was the first time and judging by the look on Tsunade baa-chan’s face there was no easy way around it and it was messier than they ANBU told her, it had something to do with the miserable beaten guys with them and there was no way that it was not going to blow sky high and destabilize something important.

Politics, diplomacy, playing nice. Naruto did not want to say that these people had come to the wrong Hokage but he could see the Sandaime peacefully drinking some tea as he contemplated the mess and then maneuverer his way around it keeping the peace and not stepping on any toes.

Tsunade baa-chan looked as though she had already tried to get rid of them to ease them all the trouble and then realized that she could not without trodding on toes and while she normally would not mind that. Something else had to be at stake.

It was probably where the miserable men came in. Two things and Konoha, a diplomatic mission a play nice mission but blades in the back but that was to be expected. Naruto’s blood warmed up the longer he stood in the room with the foreign ANBU.
Kiri hunter nin masks, when was the last time he had seen one so closely? He had seen bloodied ones. The ones the others had taken for themselves for the days they had to confuse and blend in. Naruto had worn one too once. He knew now Zabuza had given it to him to keep him quiet after Haku had gotten himself one but Naruto had still worn a mask like that.

So close to these shinobi and he doubted that they knew who he was, where he had come from. He was unable to stop a smile from forming as he watched the Kiri nins. He would get the full story about the mission but in light of all the recent events it was good to see his old hunters even if they did not know that their former prey. One of them at least, was right beside them.

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Well the mission was going to shit so Sasuke guessed they were getting the challenge they had been asking for. Something that would push their physical skills to the limits not just their emotions and minds. By the looks of things all of them were going to have to dip their fingers into the pie that was diplomacy.

Naruto’s energy was slowly filling the room or maybe that was just Sasuke so aware of Naruto eagerly eyeing the foreign shinobi up. Sasuke could guess about who they were and while he did not know yet the exact mission and reason why them of all people alone. There were many lazy Jounins around Konoha. He was on a team with one, he could look at the future mess and just know that a team of four jounin would suit the mission the best.

Except… it just might be too flashy for whatever the hell this was. Or maybe the Hokage simply could not spare so many officially high ranked shinobi on one mission. Sasuke narrowed his eyes at the woman behind the desk. He did not understand how she thought, even Naruto who liked her the most even as he talked about her as though she were an old lady from down the street got frustrated with her often. Many times Naruto and even Sakura hotly debated her motives when they got as little information as possible before they were shoved off to a shit storm.

She had an agenda, everyone knew it. Sasuke had overheard everyone in the shinobi life or anyone that had been close enough to the shinobi way debate the Hokage’s possible agenda. She had to have one and while it may not look obvious to most people she most certainly had an agenda when it came to team seven and most certainly had an agenda when it came to Naruto and his boatload of secrets.

She knew everything or at least most of everything. She liked to summon them to her and give them personalized missions. They were her favourite pet team, it was not just because Kakashi was on it. It was not just because of Sakura and the Chuunin she was becoming.

It was not about Sasuke either not because of his lineage and his own troubles. It was about Naruto yes but not wholly about him too. Those two had something between them, he had seen enough smiles between them to get that.

Naruto did not say why he had come back with that necklace but he had confirmed the Hokage had given it to him. That seemed to have sealed some deal between them. The Hokage liked Naruto and honestly Sasuke was not surprised, it was easy to like Naruto as weird as he could seem. Naruto was easy to like and he liked back just as easily his affections the easiest kind of desires Sasuke had ever come across. At least on the surface.

Still when it came to team seven the Hokage had her own agenda. Something that involved all of them together and he could understand a little bit of what it just might be. While she could not afford to lose face and send all her talented Jounins and ANBU she could send her Chuunin and genins in training. It would not be too much of a show of force. Of course individually the
members of team seven were making names for themselves.

But Sasuke highly doubted the other countries were paying that much attention to the little ones from the Chuunin exams that closely. With Sakura as their Chuunin, with Sakura developing fast and being the shinobi people could not wait to see excel… the beastlier darker parts of the team also excelling were shielded from immediate sight.

Naruto and himself. Mostly and currently credited as Sakura’s weapons people just did not understand just how all of them thought and how they worked, there was no containing Naruto when he reached bursting point but he would listen and he could be guided. Sasuke… he knew he needed somewhere to pour everything and battle was the best way. A heavy hitter, doing what needed to be done protecting and using his body to do it because he couldn’t do anything else. He was shinobi, he was team seven anything else was-

Wrong.

Sasuke’s eyes went to the Hokage whose eyes went from team seven to the Kiri shinobi to team seven again. He would not claim to know her full agenda but he did know that since she was pushing them on a mission guaranteed to fuck up, that they would all have to be more on guard than before.

“These three men.” She said softly as he eyes moved to the men huddled at the corner of the room. “They are survivors from the Katabami mine. Anyone know where it is?”

“Vaguely.” Kakashi said only silence from Naruto. Naruto did not respond but he did give a considering look towards the survivors. “Our destination?”

“Something like that.” A flash of distaste went through her eyes as she lowered her gaze to her desk. Sasuke smiled at the glare she aimed at the Kiri ninjas. “I’ve been hearing about some disturbances in that direction but now we have locations and we have names. I’ve called you here today because you will be doing work not just for me in investigating these matters but you will be assisting Kiri in their hunt as well. You must be on your guard at all times.”

Sasuke could remember the last time he had let his guard down a little bit on a highly tensed situation. His shoulder had felt as though it was burning off. He was not going to chance any of that. This complicated mission guaranteed to go to hell he was going in hard from the start. He could afford nothing less.

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“What the hell.” Sakura breathed when the door closed behind the Kiri shinobi and the miners were escorted out. “That’s a lot that has to be on our plate. We have to keep an eye out for these dangerous criminals with dangerous artefacts.” She glared at the closed door. “From Kiri, we have to look out for highly dangerous, shinobi with dangerous weapons that make them more dangerous. We have to rid the village of the gang terrorizing them… we have to do these other things too. Even for us, Tsunade-sama this is a lot of work and so much of it is dangerous.”

“Correct.” Tsunade-sama’s lips curved up in a smile as she sat back in her chair. “Which is why I’ve assigned team seven with a backup team.”

“What?” Naruto barked out before he laughed. “Now that one is new, we aren’t the backup but we are getting backup?”

“Complaining?” Tsunade-sama’s words were steel even while her eyes showed a small glint of
playfulness.

“Complaining? You have to be joking. You are right Baa-chan.” Naruto demanded as his stance eased. “What took you so long? Or do you know something we don’t? And I mean about this mission, we already know it is going to go to hell. Do you know something about where we are going that makes this dangerous especially for us?”

“What do I know huh.” Her eyes went over all of them. “Konoha has been keeping an eye on that part of the region because of the unrest and because of how close it is to us. Security risks cannot be tolerated especially now. Cases such as these also can’t be tolerated for very long. That gold mine has been drawing some suspicion but until the miners came to us Konoha was unable to officially interfere.” Her mouth twisted into a frown of distaste. “I don’t want to have to deal with Kiri right now but we can’t deal with runaway shinobi with dangerous weapons right now either. Although the weapons sound powerful they and the wielders have to be dangerous as well.”

“The lack of information Kiri gave us leaves me concerned.” Kakashi-sensei spoke up. “We don’t know exactly what these criminals are capable of.”

“Which is why I’m so cautious about the heads up and the request.” The Hokage shoved her chair back and got to her feet. She paced to her windowsill her eyes on the outside even while she worried at her thumbnail with her teeth. “I don’t want to play nice with Kiri but we don’t have a choice now. Them coming to us… there is too much activity in that region and too little information. We need as much strength as I can get for you while maintain the cover of a simple diplomatic favour and errand.” She shook her head. “Annoying idiots.”

“So who is with us?” Sakura asked as her mind reeled. Shikamaru was a no, as a Chuunin it would simply be too much visible power on the mission exactly what Tsunade-sama was trying to avoid. It could be team eight but someone she doubted that. She flicked a glance at her sensei whose eye was trained on the Hokage as though he was doing his best to try to read her.

“Good timing.” She smiled as her entire body relaxed. She turned towards the door prompting them all to turn just before the polite knock. The door quickly swung open and Sakura blinked at the green that filled the doorway. “Right on time Gai.”

“My diligence burns just like my youth.” Gai-sensei stood in the doorway a smile on his face and his fist clenched. Right behind him was Neji who looked accepting of fate and next to him already looking Sakura in the eyes with a smile on her face was Tenten.

Sakura had not even allowed herself to hope for such a team up. With all that had happened she had resigned herself to waiting or it never happening. Team seven was paired up left and right but team Gai had never been an option. It looked as though that had changed now and she was ridiculously happy about that. She smiled right back at her friend. The mission might be going to hell before they stepped out the village but at least she had Tenten along for the ride.

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“I know that team seven is familiar with team Gai.” The Hokage noted as she retook her seat. Sasuke watched the way Naruto’s eyes went to Neji and looked him over before they flicked away. Sasuke had no problem ignoring the elephant in the room but he really hoped Neji would hold it together. The guy seemed to be fine, the perfect shinobi listening to plans but… Naruto had shaken him down and flipped his entire world and beliefs inside out.

Familiar with team Gai? Of all the teams it had to be the one that team seven was the most emotionally invested in. Sakura and Tenten were almost always together when they could be.
Naruto’s feelings towards the sensei and the student who dressed like the sensei.

Naruto had skipped out the village for Lee. For a chance to heal him and while healing and progress was slow the fact was that Naruto having known team Gai and Lee for such a short time at the first opportunity had tracked down someone to help Lee. Giving them a Hokage in the process but the facts still remained.

Naruto was fond of the sensei too. Sasuke had seen the way Naruto watched after him. He might give Gai a hard time in terms of nicknames but he had been sad for the man and Lee. He had stomped the most talented Hyuuga in the name of Lee and Hinata.

Then of course there was the last person who was emotionally invested as much as he allowed himself anyway in team Gai. Their very own sensei. Sasuke had heard enough, seen enough to know Gai had not been joking about knowing Kakashi and being able to at least keep up with the man.

It had just been a glimpse of a sparring session but it had been enough for him. Sasuke did not doubt their skill. He had seen Kakashi leave them to go find Gai at the hospital enough time to know that the friendship was real too.

Most would have said before the final Chuunin event that the ones with the strength would have been Team Gai. The ones with the brains, brawns and raw power. The ones to bring it all down and be ruthless with it. Of course that was before team seven had gotten their heads on straight, before all of them but especially Sasuke understood what was on the line and what stupidity could cost.

Team Gai had used their time wisely, skipped a year to get ready to face the harsh reality of the Chuunin exams. Team seven had Naruto dropped into their lives. There was no other way to get ready except hit the ground running after Naruto and hope to catch up. they had not caught up fully yet but they were almost there. It was why they had been given the mission, the team least likely to draw the most suspicion but able to give some power would be team Gai even with a missing member.

Sasuke had not seen much of Sakura’s training and sparring with Tenten but she did not get that good on her own so quickly. Team Gai focused on a different kind of training, if anything getting to observe them and their teacher’s ways would help them. Sasuke still had his failings, he still had to open his mind more to possibilities even while he did what he had to.

Still, no matter how long it took the fact remained that their mission had too many objectives and those were the ones that they had been told about publicly about. The things that Kakashi, Gai and maybe Sakura would be told about… whatever agenda Konoha just might have.

It was a good thing the mission was paying well. He could feel his supplies diminishing before he had even packed. Who knew how long they would be out the village.

“Gai’s familiar with the area even if you aren’t Kakashi.” The Hokage sounded smug. “Keep your eyes open while you are out there. Take care of the trouble keep our Kiri guests happy and of course, be careful.”

“As careful as we can be Tsunade-sama.” Kakashi reassured.

“We got this one Baa-chan.” Naruto’s smile was a mix of cheeky and reassuring. Just make sure that you guys pay for our dry cleaning alright? It’s going to be a busy time of it.”

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“It’s an area we frequent for training runs.” Gai folded his arms as he watched Kakashi. “We haven’t gone in a while because exams were coming and then with Lee… there was no time to spare to go back in that area again. We were quite friendly with some of the locals. We usually frequent a shop.”

“This isn’t the curry shop is it?” Kakashi’s brain was quick to link everything together. “That curry has to be really good or really trying for you to be there so often Gai. The way you talk about it I’m never certain if I should keep my distance from the area or now. Mah, well I can sniff the place out while we are there.”

“Ask Lee.” Gai smiled. “That place has the best curry around.”

“I’d rather ask the other two members of your team about that curry.” Kakashi said dryly. “Somehow it feels to me as though their tastebuds would line up along with mine along with the sense of self-preservation.”

“Nonsense Kakashi.” Gai patted him hard on the back. “I know you can handle spicy food. Even when we were younger you handled spices that defeated normal men.”

“There was very little handling going on from those dishes and I know a very brave very respectable man who hid on missions for two weeks in order to avoid those dishes.” Kakashi allowed himself a nostalgic chuckle. “Besides your definition of me handling it and what actually happened is two completely different things. There are tastebuds that died heroically those days and I think I even died a few times.” Kakashi confessed.

There were some spices that should have never been discovered by man and they certainly should not have been mixed with food like that. It should not have been given to the unexpecting either. He could remember those days, they were so close and so real. Right in his mind’s eye and so clear it was as if he was looking through a window to the past, his past. It made him a bit nostalgic even for the smell that had seared his nose, his stomach and had sent the man he looked up to running for cover and milk.

“You still conquered it!” Gai declared his hand clenched in a fist. “So cool Kakashi.”

“Because I didn’t run away screaming?” Kakashi asked dryly before he shook his head. “I think it was so hot that it ended up damaging some of my nerves, I couldn’t move even if I wanted to. That experience doesn’t make me feel any better about what you have planned Gai.”

“Curry isn’t curry until the flavours bask you and set your soul aflame Kakashi. That is what helps fuel the youth!”

“That really isn’t making it sound any more appealing you know.” Kakashi shook his head. “Now I’m warier than before about this thing.”

XxX

“Missing persons, trouble at the borders I’m pretty sure Tenten is worried about some curry…” Sakura trailed off as she sat in the window of an empty academy classroom. “This mission is so troublesome and it hasn’t even started.”

“We have back up right from the start. I’m already concerned.” Sasuke leaned against the desk as his gaze flicked around the room and the desks of the classroom.

“We aren’t the back up, we have backup and it looks as if it is going to be pretty decent backup.” Naruto muttered. “Well most of it anyway.”
“Are the two of you going to behave?” Sakura frowned. “Do I have to worry about you two on this mission?”

“Was I the one that beat him?” Sasuke looked insulted. “I don’t have a problem with them once they pull their weight and don’t slow us down.”

“Who is the one that wanted to fight him when he was saying all that stuff about Naruto during the match? I wasn’t the only one pissed about him underestimating Naruto. A few more insults and you might have let me go and jumped in yourself.” Sakura scoffed.

“Wait, when did this happen?” Naruto interrupted. “I didn’t see this.”

“You were too busy wrecking the field.” Sasuke rolled his eyes. “It’s not important and Naruto settled the score, there is no reason to care anymore. Anything from this point has to come from his end.”

“Well he’s professional and I’m certain he’s put those things behind him at this point. At least from what I’ve heard from Tenten. I think he’s been working with his clan too. Getting back on track and helping them out. Naruto helped him.”

“Naruto’s help could be rather dangerous for a Hokage if that is what it takes to turn idiots around. The village full of concussions.” Sasuke folded his arms. “He was an idiot, he got what was coming to him. Nothing was more annoying than the way he spoke to us.”

“Especially you Sasuke-kun.” Sakura sat up in the windowsill. “I recall the look on your face when he came for you. He was really cocky well the whole team were weren’t they? People change.”

“We we will see how much they have really changed, considering they didn’t even snap a Chuunin out of the whole exam debacle…”

“I just love the way you guys talk about me.” Sakura said dryly. “Be serious… the both of you. I’ve been watching Neji. Since his defeat he’s been training just as hard as the rest of us. He was already the top person in his team just because he lost doesn’t mean he was weak.”

“Oh I never thought that.” Naruto snorted. “He’s smart and strong he just limits himself and back then he was an idiot. I’ve seen him in the training ground sometimes you know. Nothing happened to him…” he had sensed Neji close sometimes too when he was calming himself and meditating.

“I think we are getting off track.” Sasuke pointed out. “We have our objectives, we have to look for the hidden ones and I’m concerned.”

“About Tsunade-sama? If she could have gotten away with throwing the Kiri shinobi out the window I think I would have. I wonder if they came with a request scroll from their Kage? That just might piss her off.” Sakura swung her feet gently.

“Most likely they did and if they did come with a scroll from their Kage…” Naruto frowned as he thought about it. “Damn it, we have to guess through these diplomatic things. We can’t afford to let Kiri get the upper hand though.”

“Are you good with that? I mean… it is Kiri.” Sakura pointed out. “They might try to keep an eye on us or even snatch the glory at the last minute, I just see us finally cornering these criminals and them swooping down to claim the glory.”

“And protecting their village secrets. Bloodline thing.” Naruto corrected. “I’m not surprised if they do tail us if they feel we are on a better track than them. All villages hoard information on the
others. Kiri has lots of secrets even from themselves. They are the ones shrouded in the mist you know.”

“Well Konoha is too big to hide.” Sakura smiled before her smile faded. “But even we have lots of secrets too huh.”

“Hiding in the open can be your best option sometimes. Clan secrets put a target on your back.” Sasuke’s arms unfolded slowly, he softly touched just under his left eye. “Shinobi would do anything to steal another clan’s secrets. It is a step for survival. If their weapons are better than yours you have to know how to stop it or get one of your own.”

“Especially when it is so visible.” Sakura breathed. “Nobody has more visible clan abilities like Konoha.”

“Did you or did you not see those Suna shinobi?” Naruto demanded as he shook his head. “Konoha has some freaky clans.” Sasuke raised an eyebrow at him. “Obviously not yours.” He stressed.

“Come on Sasuke you know I don’t mean your clan. Your clan is cool but some other clans you gotta admit, their bloodline limits… really freaky and it is just as obvious. Konoha has some cool eyes but the ones with the bloodline limits? That is scary and I’d rather grab one of those. I’d rather take one of those out first chance I got.”

“It’s common sense.” Sakura agreed. “You expect the normal thing when fighting shinobi but when bloodline comes into play you better hope you have a trump card.”

“Isn’t that why we are doing things this way?” Sasuke pointed out. “And villages have to be protective over the assets they have without that, they lack power. Others getting their hands on it means they are weakened. Kiri can’t afford more loss of power… right Naruto?”

“Zabuza did mess them up a bit and stole a lot from them.” Naruto agreed. “There was the bloodline purges too, people like Haku killed because of what they could do. Kiri is messed up and it is messed up that shinobi still fight for them. The leadership has to be insane. The focus on normal people and not bloodline limits… just wrong.”

“Bloodline isn’t everything.” Sakura pointed out before she sighed heavily. “But in that case I doubt we will bring home anything interesting.”

“Information will have to be enough.” Sasuke shook his head. “I’m tired of the hopeful looks we get from the Analytical departments every time we come back from long missions.”

“I think.” Sakura confided as she leaned a bit forward. “That they pray our missions go to hell. Did you see how they were after the Land of Snow? They want us in dangerous missions.”

“You think they could tamper with missions?” Naruto frowned.

“They aren’t the ones that do it otherwise I would have told Tsunade-sama something.” Sakura frowned. “Still we are bound to learn something out there. We have so much to do I hope we don’t run into whoever those Kiri shinobi are looking for but knowing our luck-“ She broke off at the sound of footsteps in the corridor.

She slid from her seat in the window and took two steps forward her direction to face the closed door. Naruto joined her at her left side while Sasuke stood on her right. They remained silent until the door pushed back to reveal Iruka-sensei.

“Sorry I’m late.” The man smiled before he noticed Sakura and Sasuke. “Oh are all of us going for ramen today? I must have gotten my plans mixed up.”
“About that…” Naruto said sheepishly. “We have to prepare for a mission so I was going to ask you if you and Konohamaru could watch my apartment and plants for me when I’m gone? I still want to eat with you but I gotta grab some things if I’m going on this mission. It’s a challenging one.”

“A challenging- Oh! I guess you’ll have to get ready indeed.” Iruka-sensei’s face saddened for a bit before a soft smile formed. “I guess I’ll buy you a quick meal now and when you get back right?”

“Right!” Warmth spread through his chest at Iruka-sensei’s smile.

“So Sakura, Sasuke you joining us? I like the idea of a send off after a warm meal. You are leaving right away right?”

“Sensei did say meet in the evening.” Sakura considered. “Who knows, we have team Gai with us so you never know. We might just be taking off at dawn or something but we could cover a lot of ground even if we leave in the evening.”

“Well I will try not to keep you for very long.” Iruka-sensei smiled. “Let’s eat and then you guys have some work to do.” He leaned back outside the door before he halted and a grin spread across his face. “You know have I ever told you guys how amazing you look together like that?”

“Us?” Sakura asked.

“Look good like what?” Sasuke asked right after but Naruto who had been watching Iruka-sensei the whole time knew exactly what the guy meant. He stepped sideways behind Sakura who had stepped forward one step along with Sasuke at Iruka-sensei’s statement. That brought him a step behind them and right in the middle.

He grinned as he flung his arms around their shoulders to bring them all closer together. He ignored the huff from Sasuke and the squawk from Sakura to laugh as he looked at Iruka-sensei. “We look great as a team don’t we?” He laughed.

XxX

“Lee!” Even in a hospital Gai-sensei could be so loud. Tenten shook her head as she followed the man into the hospital room with Neji at her heels. He was quiet, not a new thing for Neji but he was contemplative too and she did not have to guess at where his thoughts were, the mission and team seven but that was a worry for later. For now they had come to see Lee and she could put the troubles and worry out of her head for a few moments.

“Looking good Lee.” She teased as Lee peeped over the shoulder of their sensei who had hugged to poor boy in the bed. She was glad that although Gai-sensei had given up all dignity and was weeping as though they had not seen Lee for weeks that Lee had not followed their sensei into tears. His eyes were suspiciously misty however.

“Tenten!” His voice was even cheerier than the last time. That had to mean something good. Better news perhaps. “Neji too!”

“We are just here to pop in on you and see how you are doing but…” Tenten made a show of looking around the room before she rested the small basket on the table. “Looks like you had a quiet day so far.”

“Quiet days are really peaceful nights! That is when you rest your body for the mission ahead.” Lee’s eyes shone happily. “Even rest is a battle!”
“Oh Lee!” Gai-sensei declared.

“I’ve been telling you two something similar for ages.” Tenten muttered dryly. “But we are going on a mission so we should be gone for a while.”

“I understand.” Lee nodded. “I’m fighting my own battles here as I try to maintain my youth in the face of all these challenges. I’m certain that I will be rewarded with not only knowledge but boundless youth Tenten!”

She loved her team but sometimes she just did not get them. “Uh huh.” She smiled. “Well we are supposed to be passing by that curry shop you like so much for a mission. Want us bring some back?” She finished softly. The curry was torture and cruelty to the senses and mankind’s greatest destructive weapon but for Lee… she could bring some back home for him.

“The curry of life?” His eyes watered and she smiled. Moments like this? Totally worth it.

“So bring back a bowl?” She teased.

“Tenten!” if he could have flung himself off the bed and hugged her he would have. So she was a little glad that Gai-sensei’s weight was what was keeping him on the bed.

“I know I know.” She smiled.

“All you want is the curry?” Neji asked from behind her. She had almost forgotten he was with them.

“Just be careful as always.” Lee was so sweet, so pure hearted.

“Oh!” How could she forget. “Sakura is coming with us, well we are backup for the mission her team was assigned to so I’ll tell her you said to work hard okay?”

“Sakura-san?” Lee’s eyes were curious. “Back up for team seven? Sakura-san, Sasuke-kun and Naruto-kun?”

“Yeah it doesn’t make much sense to us either but those guys need help sometimes too.” Tenten shrugged. “I’m just glad for the opportunity. I’ve never been with Sakura on a mission before.”

“I can only hope that we will do missions with team seven in the future.” Lee looked slightly down. “I would love to pace myself next to Sakura-san and Naruto-kun.”

“Naruto considers you a friend.” Neji replied. “You can pace yourself next to him at anytime. He won’t mind.”

“Exactly Lee!” Gai-sensei got to his feet. “Naruto is as fond of you as you are of him!”

“Naruto-kun went for Tsunade-sama for me.” Lee clutched his sheet before he smiled downwards. “He’s amazing and a good friend. He’s so amazing and strong.”

“Well…” Tenten peeked back at Neji before she gave in and sighed. “I think Naruto would have been happier if you were coming along with us too.”

“Thank you Tenten.” Lee smiled. “When I think of Naruto, of team seven I feel the burning of youth inside me but I have to keep it simmering, my time will come soon.”

“Don’t strain yourself for heaven’s sake. We need you back Lee.” Neji’s arms were folded and he was staring at the far wall but it was better than she had expected so she let it all slide with a smile.
His bag packed, his stomach full and a few moments to himself. Naruto sat cross legged on his roof in the afternoon sun with his eyes closed. They were about to walk into a mess and he had to say he felt anticipation in his soul.

The mission sheet told him that he was going to run into a fight. While he worried about just how big a mess everything would become he was looking forward to it. Yet again he was in close proximity to another and even better they were going to be thrown into chaos together.

The perfect conditions for observing. It was not the full team but he would get a feel for how the team really worked. He might get a closer look at the Hyuuga clan jutsu. Learn more about Bushier-brows sensei. Get a better understanding of team Gai all while out from the watchful eyes of the village.

He had a smile on his lips as he chuckled to himself about all the possibilities. It was going to be a shitstorm but that was the best place to hide sometimes. Right among the chaos.

He would be looking out for his team, trying his best but it would be stupid not to check out his future rivals in the next Chuunin exams and it would be foolish not to look at hints to the puzzle that was Konoha.

A village was its people, a village was its history and a village was its future. Naruto was Konoha’s future, he would be Hokage but before he dealt with the tomorrow he had the ‘today’ and the ‘yesterday’ to deal with and he was tired of waiting.

“XxX

“We will be leaving soon.” Gai hesitated as he watched the sleeping form in the hospital bed. “Continue to be brave Lee. Be strong of heart. I personally will bring you the Curry of Life because you believe that it helps.” His hand tightened on the doorframe. “And because I want to believe as well.”

“XxX

“Well leaving in the morning is still good.” Tenten admitted to herself. “Still I thought we would have left right away considering but it is not up to me is it.” She finished in a sigh. “I hope the mood is good today, it better be.”

Team seven with them, she was glad for them and while Neji still was not saying anything Neji was glad too. Or at least looking forward in a way she did not understand. She knew that he wanted to be closer to observe team seven or to be more precise… observe Naruto.

Considering what she had heard from Sakura and the things she had observed herself, well honestly she was not that surprised. Who could not look at Naruto closely after meeting him? Talking to him. It was never right away it was just the little things. Things that had her wracking her brain, tilting her head to the side and asking herself what had she just seen?

What the hell had he just said? What is he doing? But… why? It never hit you all at once it was just little moments that made you stop and blink. Sakura seemed to have adapted and while Tenten knew the pain of having weirdoes on the team Naruto was most certainly weirder than most. In fact, while Lee was a training maniac along with their sensei spouting off the most embarrassing and ridiculous things and Neji was their firecracker, a genius with a short tricky fuse. She would take that over whatever weird things Naruto brought with him.
Sasuke was cute too… the things that she saw made her glad for her own team. Besides she fit in too. Where else could she train and drag Lee and Gai-sensei the way she did. Who else would support her like her team did? Although Neji was now being more supportive than before, a bit. A slow progress but a nice one.

She guessed Sakura felt the same about her own team while she acknowledged that team seven most certainly was not the norm. the look she got on her face when they overheard others talking about Naruto. The way she stood in front of him sometimes, the way she looked others in the face when they watched Naruto too long. Team seven was weird, but it did not make them unlikeable.

Naruto was strange but he liked Lee, visited him and did all those crazy impossible things for him. So he was a little strange. She could live with that. If she wanted normal well she would not be a shinobi to begin with.

“First time for everything.” Naruto said as he watched the Hokage mountains. “We ready to go?”

“Kakashi-sensei is on time.” Sakura’s glance to the rest of team Gai by the gates patiently waiting was quick and subdued. “We already know we are walking into a mess. Might as well get going.”

“True.” Sasuke looked eager to leave. “Let’s be on our way.”

“Yeah.” Naruto breathed as his eyes went from the Sandaime’s rock face to the Yondaime’s. “Let’s get going already.”

“Looks like we are ready now.” Kakashi-sensei had been standing with Gai-sensei the entire time.

They were just as amazing as Tenten had thought they would be, they had a formation and they took it so seriously from the gates. Sakura had changed so much from the girl that had tugged at her heart in the hospital. She had taken Tenten’s words to heart but… it was not just Sakura who cared and worried.

They acted like any other young team with different personalities. Laughter, jokes, some silence. Some boredom here and there but their eyes kept sweeping the scene around them as they walked. Their packs were full their hands at the ready the further they got away from Konoha.

Everyone seemed engaged but there was a difference in team seven. It was not exactly a light-hearted mission but Tenten thought that at least they could ease into it.

Neji was quiet next to her, his gaze on all the team seven members equally. He kept looking at Naruto which drew quiet stares from the boy in return. No smiles, no emotion really and on a face like Naruto’s it was kind of disconcerting the way he could go blank like that.

The stare never lasted long. Just when Neji stared too long Naruto would look back, access him, Tenten could see Naruto look Neji over before he dismissed him and went back to his team.

There had been none of the anger Naruto had carried towards Neji which was nice and it was too soon for friends but… she had thought that there would have been something at least.

Kakashi knew that Gai wanted to say something. He knew it even while he pretended that he did
not notice. He and Gai were holding up the ends of their group happily trailing along keeping an eye on their team and chiming in with accurate answers to questions.

He knew Gai wanted to say something, he could even guess to what it was and that was why he had been so worried about taking a mission with Gai and his team. Gai had known him for a long time, he knew his movements and he was currently the only person that could beat Kakashi without having to resort to other types of jutsu.

He knew Kakashi’s body language and could track his thoughts and plan by observing his exposed eye. Gai had been watching Kakashi for years so it was no surprise that he picked up Kakashi’s habits and concerns the moment their team had made it past Konoha’s borders.

Gai was still behaving the way he usually did for the sake of the teams but he wanted to talk and Kakashi did not want to hear it, not just yet because he knew what Gai wanted to talk about. It was the thing that made him not challenge the Hokage on the way she played with his team.

It was the thing that made him irritated when he saw so many ANBU and the evidence of ANBU everywhere around his team. It was the thing he pretended not to notice with Jiraiya-sensei teased him. It all had to do with Naruto.

Almost as if he could sense Kakashi’s thoughts Naruto glanced back to them. His eyes bounced from Kakashi to Gai before he looked back to the front once more. Kakashi allowed himself a small sigh even as he continued to watch Naruto’s back. He knew exactly what Gai had to say and he did not want to hear it, because Gai was right.

XxX

“Kakashi.” Gai said when they took a break.

“I know.” Kakashi answered, he watched his team secure the perimeter before Sakura and Tenten sat together to talk quietly. Neji sat by himself. Sasuke lay down on the grass his head on his pack. Naruto on the other hand sat down, crossed his legs and rested his chin on his chest.

“Do you?” Gai asked softly. “He’s home Kakashi. You care too much, you are worrying too much. Naruto is Konoha’s. You watch him so much… it is worrying.”

“I know.” Kakashi agreed. “I can’t help it. He’s here but sometimes it doesn’t feel like it. It doesn’t feel real it is only when I see him.” He trailed off. “The nightmare isn’t over Gai.”

“I didn’t think it would be.” Gai clasped him on the shoulder with a firm grip. “I know you care for your team but you knew from the beginning that Naruto would not be a normal child. You have a Chuunin under your care. You have gifted shinobi under your care and the time is going to come when they will be out of your sight.”

“I’m not prepared to let them go as yet.” Kakashi closed his eye for a brief moment before he reopened it. “I just want to do better this time or at least get as many moments that I can.”

Gai’s sharp inhale told him that he really understood. “Kakashi-“ He cut himself off and the hand on his shoulder tightened. “That sort of thinking is dangerous.”

“I know.”

“You should trust the boy more, from all reports.”

“He is still young.” Kakashi said softly. “He has enemies all around him, targeting him and
everything he holds dear and he has a terrifying habit of wanting to meet these things head on. He’ll be cunning, he’ll be sly.” Naruto had the heart of a joker after all but blood told true and so did nurture. Naruto had the heart of a warrior too. He liked to face his opponent face to face and take them down. No matter the costs or the odds. He wanted to fight the bad guy. That scared Kakashi.

“All that means is that he will make a strong shinobi in a few years’ time. A strong leader. You have to have faith Kakashi.”

“I do.” Kakashi did believe Naruto could do amazing things but- “I just want to make sure that the things he misses I’m right there to take care of. It is what they would do. I’m just protecting him in their place.” The words tasted partly of a lie but Kakashi did not change his words instead he continued to watch the boy who had drifted away from them mentally as they rested.

XxX

There was a change in the air that happened in different countries. Sasuke could feel the change in the air that told him soon rain would be coming and that it would come hard. The journey had not been a hot one but rain was still welcomed.

It would help them with their investigations and covering their tracks. They were not a hunter team that would be hindered by rain although their tracking and hunting skills had gone up considerably lately. Sasuke watched Neji as he adjusted his headband and his hair.

Naruto did not seem to care about the Hyuuga that much but Sasuke had watched Naruto keep him in the corner of his eye. Originally Sasuke thought Naruto’s hormones would have kicked in by now and gotten blinded by Neji’s face and hair but seeing Naruto so indifferent gave him a pause.

Then again, personalities had a thing about disgusting Naruto as well. He liked sunny happy people or polite people. Neji regardless of the hair must be firmly on no territory. That and maybe the things Neji said still haunted Naruto.

He had not missed the upset way Naruto had said he would have Hyuugas cut their hair. It was more than a preference there. Neji maybe most the Hyuugas had reminded Naruto of someone. Three guesses to who.

Still the question was to whether Naruto would be able to work with Neji properly, whether he would save his life if needed and of course Sasuke had to see if they could work together too. Sakura would complain if they did not at least try. So far Neji had kept his mouth shut. Once when he finally opened it nothing too stupid came out of it, Sasuke may be able to deal. Otherwise he would get his chance to punch someone in the jaw.

XxX

“Oh nice little… place the way Gai-sensei was talking about it.” Sakura cleared her throat as they all slowed to a walk. “It looks like a cute little inn Tenten, does the curry of life really come from here?”

“Something like that.” Tenten glanced back at them with a sigh. “It looks a little beat down than before though, actually kind of less active I hope trouble hasn’t hit here as well.” Naruto peered down at the place, not small but not big either, it was a simple establishment where the owner had to live in the part at the back. Still the front looked welcoming and after all of the hype up he was ready for some food.
“Do your thing we guess, we can get started after you guys catch up and stuff, the owner is your friend right?” Sakura smiled.

XxX

“So what happened is that the kid they know ran off and joined the bad guys?” Naruto’s fan flicked into sight before Naruto brought it up to his face and slowly let it slide open. Sasuke watched the contemplation slide into Naruto’s eyes. “Not exactly a new story or an unexpected one. What was he running from? Or running to?”

“Not everyone is you.” Sakura shook her head with a snort. “From what I overheard…” She eyed the establishment and from where they could hear some of Team Gai’s loud voices. “I think he didn’t want to be here anymore. This sort of life, feeding people. I guess it is not that exciting or whatever and he wanted to be stronger, cooler. Being a tavern keeper, a cook. Well compared to the other people getting what they want and being strong. To a civilian it would be tempting wouldn’t it? It would seem cool.”

“Especially if every single day you just saw people pass by with cool stories, things that you want.” Naruto sighed before he flicked the fan away it quickly returning to behind his back. “Must be boring, day in and day out the life you really want out of reach, so are going to save this guy?”

“Well he sounds like a messed up kid and don’t act like you don’t want to save him too.” Sakura rolled her eyes before she grinned. “Better than anyone else you understand about coming back home right?”

“Well my circumstances are a little different I didn’t run away to be cool.” Naruto snorted. “But yeah, sometimes coming back home to fix things can be the hardest thing you ever had to do, not run off not survive on your own with others but coming back home to fix shit, or in his case admit he was wrong and stuff. The life he is trying to live… I don’t think he knows the dangers. If he admired Gai-sensei and Lee and the stories of all the people that passed through, if he really admired them and he knew the risks he would keep his civilian self home. I am down for scaring him.” Naruto grinned.

“I’m in.” Sasuke admitted as he shifted his stance. “He’s not part of our official mission but I don’t mind doing a public service, idiots should stay home where it is safe.”

“Bet the leader he has gone after only sees him as cannon fodder anyway.” Sakura glanced to Kakashi who had been watching them the entire time. “What do you think sensei?”

“Well I think we can show him how much cooler shinobi can be.” Kakashi started only for Naruto to snort. “And we can show him how much better and safe life is hearing about the terrifying stories instead of having to live them.”

“Sounds about right.” Sakura smiled before she glanced at the little tavern. “Um… do we tell Team Gai or do we just feel it out?”

“We’ll adapt to the situation as seen necessary.” Kakashi assured. “In the end once there is a happy ending Gai won’t mind too much.”

“So it is official then!” Naruto laughed. “Let’s scare the living shit out of this boy and make him go running home!”

“What do you have against civilians running away, you were mean to the princess too.” Sasuke snorted before a raindrop hit him right above his right eye, he wiped it away and eyed the darkened
sky with distaste.

“Some people should never run. It isn’t for them. They just aren’t made for it and there is no reason for them to run. They don’t have the heart for it too.” Naruto muttered. “Running is hard, staying is hard but somethings can be resolved by not running. The people who pick running as their first resource? Not suited. Others fight it out, challenge, scream it out. They fight first it is when you have no other option. That is when you should run.” Naruto’s fist clenched before he visibly forced his hands to relax. “Running isn’t a game you know.”

XxX

“What the hell is this guy’s plan?” Naruto’s voice startled Tenten as they stood on the pathway up the mountain. “What is the leader getting out of this? He is hurting them the work isn’t going to go any faster.” The rain was matting Naruto down, he went without a cloak like most of them but chose to stand in the rain. “I’m missing something.”

“I’ve got a bad feeling.” Sasuke had on his cloak but his head was turned towards a little distance away from the small village. “What was that sound?”

“He likes burying people alive.” It was almost as if Naruto had not heard a single word spoken. “Why does he like… what the hell does he get out of it? Enjoying funerals? Is he an old person? A child? Shinobi don’t enjoy funerals but that is what he is isn’t he?”

“Naruto.” Kakashi-sensei lightly tapped Naruto on the shoulder. “Your thoughts?”

“We are going to have to kill someone.” Naruto said softly. His tone made Tenten’s body chill. “This doesn’t feel right. We came here to shake down the boss and get the kid but this doesn’t feel right. I can taste the cold waiting.”

“You don’t mean…” Sakura broke off to swear. “I knew this was going to be a fucked up mission. Don’t tell me that our objectives all just joined up together in this mountain town.”

“Wait Sakura.” Tenten spoke up. “What are you saying?”

“The mission Tsunade-sama gave us to keep the peace.” Gai-sensei spoke up as he folded his arms. “We just ran right into it.”

“You can’t be serious.” Tenten whispered. “Here? So close?”

“It’s the perfect place but I have to admire their guts.” Naruto eyed the mountain. “Still we aren’t certain yet but keep up your guard.”

“First information, we need eyes on the targets and the objectives.” Sakura flashed them a smile. “It’s messed up but don’t worry. We’ve handed messy.”

“And dangerous.” Sasuke took a step closer to a mountain.

“This is going to be good.” Naruto’s entire focus was the mountain. “Rain everywhere… perfect.” For a moment his comment confused her until she recalled his fight against Neji and the water he had summoned only to turn into a thick mist. She would have said something but she knew the time for conversation had passed. The mission was what they had to focus on, and that silly boy that Lee had liked so much.

XxX
“Someone is in there? Right now?” Sakura’s voice trembled for only a second before rage consumed her features, Neji found himself watching her instead of the grave. “Dig them up, right now. Dig them up!” her grip on Karashi’s shirt lifted the boy into the air. “Do you have a fucking explanation for this? For that?”

“He can’t breathe.” Sasuke offered as he used one of the shovels the gravediggers had left behind to start digging. “Let him breathe and then he can give you his excuses.” Neji watched as Sakura’s arms bulged and tensed before she drew her hand back with the struggling Karashi in it and threw him across the field. He crashed into the small hut.

“You held back Sakura-chan.” Naruto grunted as his clones took shovels. “We are going to need you here in a second.” The sound of metal hitting wood carried even over the sound of rain. “Let the people who know him get answers first, then we can do some in-depth interrogation. Or let whoever is in here do the talking.” Naruto’s clones vanished as Sasuke reached into the grave to yank the coffin open. “You okay?”

“Raiga-sama. Raiga-sama.” Muttering over and over the dirty man stumbled out, his eyes were wild and his brown hair matted in the rain he did not even seem to notice the rain. “I worked so hard Raiga-sama and you promised my family would be safe if I came along, if I gave up my friend. Raiga-sama my family my-“ He crumpled over Sasuke’s extended arm Sasuke’s other hand raised at where the man’s neck had been a few seconds ago.

“He’s done a number on their heads.” Sasuke said quietly. “Do you think he has a family left to take him back to?”

“He could.” Naruto agreed, Neji watched him eye the graves. “Or they could be here, he isn’t broken but he is close. These people. They have seen things civilians not in a war should never have to see. Even during war, there are some things people should never have to see. They’ve been oppressed and terrorized. I don’t think we are going to get much help.” His voice lowered. “This is about to get more fucked up especially if these people are forced to bury their own friends and family."

“They are going to need help anyway, you don’t get occupied by someone who can turn people into this in such a short time.” Sakura frowned. “I heard from Tenten that they were here not too long ago, before the exams.”

“Exams were a while back though.” Naruto pointed out and he scowled at their surroundings. “Damn it, we just got here and already it is downhill. They aren’t any good! How can he think that is something strong? He’s just sick!”

“He’ll learn.” Sakura patted Naruto hard on the back. “For now we need more information, movements, routine a hideout an aim of something but first let’s get this man to people who would understand him best.”

XxX

“Is it going to be cloudy like this and rain every single day?” Sasuke’s hands cupped the rain. “These clouds have been looming since we arrived.”

“I think it has to do with the area.” Naruto watched the light drizzles. “I wouldn’t be surprised if it is overcast every day around here, even the air feels different when it comes down to it. Tastes different too.”

“That has to do with the valley and the mountain too although I doubt the air is that healthy, don’t
forget they are mining.” Sakura shook her head, “I wish we knew that sick bastard’s motives. All we get is that he’s strong but that just can’t be it. We need routines and not the routine he has of killing people off because he thinks someone should be buried alive. He’s sick.”

“Exactly what I’m talking about Sakura-chan but if Kiri is looking for him he’s dangerous. Can’t let your guard down we don’t know if he is at his best or not.” That frustrated Naruto to serious ends. “But we will get what we need to know. Hopefully team bushier brows can knock sense into that idiotic kid. He’s better off going home to him mom instead of being knee deep in this mess.”

“Just because he should does not mean he will. He seems… determined.” Sasuke shook his head in distaste.

“Looking like the scare the pants off him and send him running home plan is back and stronger than ever.” Naruto sighed. “He’s an idiot.”

XxX

“Something is wrong, someone is watching us.” Tenten said, she spun around glaring at the various rocks and structures, the broken pieces of wood and metal that showed buildings and huts had been there but destroyed for whatever reason.

“Oh yes.” Sakura said softly as she looked around where the villagers were staying. “Someone has their eye on us, they have for a while and I’m not surprised.”

“Three guesses to who.” Sasuke was staring up the mountain. “And if it isn’t troublesome it doesn’t count.”

“Do you feel that?” Neji demanded as his pack slipped to the ground. “The air.”

“It’s growing cooler.” Gai-sensei looked around them. “We should retreat a bit, we don’t want to bring anymore damage to them.”

“There is plenty going on here that will be unavoidable and as bad as things are, as bad as they look right now they don’t need a shinobi battle on top of all the shitty things that happened.” Naruto’s hands tensed before he cracked his knuckles. “I’m ready to go when you guys are but they are scared enough for their lives and of Raiga-sama.” He finished bitterly. “Let’s go back a bit and make him come to us, he wants to anyway.”

“Can you sense him?” Sakura asked as she turned away from where the village was, her steps brisk as she headed further up the mountain. “Feel him?”

“He’s keeping his need to kill to himself or it is so faint even I can’t feel it.” Tenten watched as Naruto craned his neck to see their senseis following. “Do you guys feel anything.”

“Not right now.” Tenten was relieved at Gai-sensei’s cautious expression. She was not the only one thank goodness. “You really think you will be able to feel him Naruto-kun?”

“Few things can terrify a village on sight and saki, bloodlust is one of them. What better way to keep them on their toes and keep the terror fresh? The moment they feel that.” Tenten was not imagining the cold look in Naruto’s eyes, she knew that she wasn’t. “Everything that he has ever done around them and too them comes rushing back fresh. If he was broadcasting the bloodlust the moment he came to them, they will remember the warning. They will regret running and feel that they have no chance of running now.”

“How are you so certain of this.” Neji asked when Team seven had nothing to add to Naruto’s
“I just am, I know a few things about this sort of thing.” Naruto brushed off. “Some of it is common sense when you want to keep someplace fairly isolated. Of course it did not work out so well since some people managed to run off and escape, and ask for help.” He sighed heavily as they trailed up the mountain. “I can’t help but wonder what the hell his goal really is. He isn’t too right in the head that is fairly clear but at the end of the day. He’s still by himself, no matter how strong he is, you can’t fight dogs on your own for very long and ruling like a king in a castle over people like this? A place like this? That’s for the weak.”

“But how do you know for certain.” Neji pressed, Naruto spared a look back at him before he looked forward again.

“Nothing is for certain but that is the thing that makes the most sense, it is the most likely. These people are terrified out of their minds ya know. It isn’t a joke, he’s killing these people one and one and he is having a laugh at their expense, the way he is going the whole village will be buried alive. They know this, they know he won’t stop but how can they stand up to him? He’s just one man after all and it like facing a demon, as scared as they are? They don’t want to be sent to hell that badly even if it is inevitable.” The words made sense but somehow felt a little wrong, almost as if Naruto was not talking about their target, call her crazy but that was how it felt at least a little bit and she could not help herself from staring at his back as he moved up the mountain. She knew she was not imagining it in the least. The longer they were in this rocky mountain range, the more that she was certain that everyone really had a reason to be looking at Naruto oddly.

XxX

“There really isn’t any saving them without removing the boss and the people under him.” The higher they got the colder it got and Sasuke could feel how unnatural that the cold was.

“That’s one part of this mission that will be enjoyable.” Sakura’s back tensed for a moment. “Did you see how those children looked at everyone? At adults?”

“Our help isn’t going to be finished at taking them out.” Naruto pointed out. “They won’t forget and forgive so easily. They had to have watched parents and friends die this whole time. No one is safe. That is the truth they know.”

“This guy and anyone who follows him blindly are unforgiveable.” Sakura snarled.

“Calm yourself.” Sasuke lightened his words with a soft brush to her elbow. “He isn’t our only mission.”

“That idiot.” Sakura shook her head. “I seriously can’t believe, even when he knows he isn’t safe either. That idiot.”

“Well at least he is not completely blind.” Naruto pointed out. “Honestly, you can’t trust a single thing in this mountain pass. Everything has been warped.” His eyes flicked ahead. “Is it bad that I’m looking forward to smashing this guy’s face in?”

“It is bad that you think you are getting there first.” Sakura snorted.

“Sakura-chan I still have you beat in speed.” Naruto teased, his words were playful but his body had not left a state of readiness. “I’m getting in the first punch.”

“So you think.” Sakura stopped as she stared at the path ahead. “Rage just might give me wings.”
“So cool Sakura-chan.” Naruto came to a halt and so did the rest of them. “Let’s see who gets him in the end okay?”

“The answer may surprise you.” Kakashi said as he spoke from behind them. “Now these bandits are close, you ready?”

“That’s for them right?” Sasuke jerked a thumb towards their backup. “We’ve been ready since we got the mission. I can’t help but wonder how much mission damage we are going to claim this time.”

“We might have to fill out a whole new form.” Naruto said as the temperature continued to drop. “Is there a form for landscape changes?”

“There aren’t that many people that would require those sorts of forms.” Kakashi sounded amused. “Let’s go then.”

XxX

“There is someone ahead.” Sakura used her hand to keep her team behind her. She could still remember the land of snow and how easily Naruto had moved not only faster than her but more prepared than her. “That guy in the back, that must be Raiga.”

“He’s the only one I can feel something from.” Sasuke’s tone was contemplative. “Still he isn’t reacting like how I thought he would. Does he think we can be negotiated with?”

“Something is odd about that cloak and hood he is in, isn’t he from Kiri?” Naruto said softly almost contemplating. “That’s a weird getup even for a criminal. It is almost as if he is hiding something.”

“Hiding how disgusting he is.” Even as she spoke Sakura had to acknowledge Naruto’s words, the cloaked figure in the back watching them. There was something odd about the clothes. “But those seem too big considering what we can see of him.”

“I don’t like it.” Naruto murmured.

“Me neither.” Sasuke answered. “Those before him are no trouble.”

“Then let’s take them out shall we?” Naruto’s feet shifted the sound almost too loud. “Sakura-chan?”

She gave the orders now, she would look for Kakashi-sensei but she knew that when he wanted to step in that he would. When he felt that they could handle it he left them to themselves. Still, the man that led this team was dangerous. “Don’t get too close.” She warned. “We don’t know what they are capable of.”

“Neither do they when it comes to us.” She watched as steel glinted in Naruto’s hand. “But far can work. We can make it work.”

XxX

They were backup, Neji knew they were backup but after listening to them plan their way forward he had expected to be of some help. He had taken one step forward to find Gai-sensei’s hand blocking the way. The way the man had smiled down at him and shaken his head at him spoke words for itself.
Stay and watch.

Neji was not blind, he knew there was something about team seven that was different and he that that when it came to that, it started and ended with Naruto. Sakura was the Chuunin but Naruto was the catalyst for the changes.

Maybe Tenten had noticed by now, she most likely had. After the exams, after being so close to the team she had to have noticed that the way that team seven worked was not only unique. It worked for them.

Still he tasted bitterness at the back of his throat anyway when Sasuke and Naruto leapt forward to those waiting at the end of the path. Not to the cloaked figure middle but towards those to the side. A flat out run before they reached some line invisible to them and leapt backwards. From Sasuke flew shuriken and a rain of kunais all aimed towards those that were to be removed. From Naruto there was nothing but a flash of steel flying.

Then the bodies fell. So quick and they were back at their Chuunin’s side almost as if they had never left in the first place. The way they worked and the way they worked together, nothing wasted almost as if they were reading minds.

The cloaked figure in the middle now alone did not move even when his comrades fell. That just told Neji just how dangerous the person had to be. Still when team seven remained ready with stances that had few openings he could not help but wonder where they came in. Gai-sensei wanted them to watch. They were backup waiting for a chance to help out but so far team seven had it covered.

Unknown criminal or not, for all they knew they would get in the way and was not that insulting in so many ways that it just burned his throat again in bitterness. It took effort to swallow the bitter feeling away instead he focused on team seven and their backs as they waited.

“Normal people.” Sakura said softly. “They went down quickly.”

“It’s a good thing we got the kid out first.” Naruto answered back. “Now we can go hard without worrying about those between us and him.”

“To him they are cannon fodder.” Sasuke’s glance at Naruto spoke volumes. “He’s just as bad as any noble playing games with other’s lives.”

“He’s worse though.” Naruto insisted with a hiss. “He’s shinobi isn’t he? Wasn’t he? Of all people he knows what he is doing and the bastard is doing it anyway. It pisses me off.”

“That makes two of us.” Sakura muttered as the air temperature continued to drop. “Be careful, he’s ready now.”

“Not even going to speak then?” Sasuke shook his head. “Fine then.” The air chilled further as mist started to form, lightly first drifting around their feet but in a few seconds, it was thicker. Obscuring the ground and rising upwards. Neji focused his eyes as he heard a snort from Sasuke. “He picked the wrong team to want to do that with.”

“Well it’s a thing.” Naruto sounded almost defensive. “I mean he’s from Kiri isn’t he? Mist is a thing! He has to do the mist and I gotta say it is far better than I expected.” The mist rose past their shoulders. “But he did pick the wrong people to want to play in the mist with. I wonder if he knows any silent killing.”

“Naruto…” Sakura cautioned.
“I’m not taking him lightly I swear.” Naruto promised as the mist hid everything. “Still, I don’t like
the feeling he is giving off right now.”

XxX

“A hidden mist specialty.” Naruto honest to goodness sighed. “Least we are on the right start.” He
said before the mist blocked them from seeing anything. Tenten could not even see her hands.

“We can’t see much.” Sasuke’s voice came from in front of her. “I don’t like that.”

“There’s Neji don’t forget.” Sakura’s voice was calm. “Neji, can you locate the enemy for us?”

“I’ve been trying!” Neji sounded flustered and confused. “Something is wrong. I can’t see a thing!
I should be able to see them but I can’t see anything!”

“We’re dealing with something rather unknown.” Sakura’s voice lowered. “Kakashi-sensei, any
chance you can?”

“This fog is fairly thick but I can make an attempt, however even I am having trouble.” Kakashi-
sensei’s voice was just as calm as the rest of team seven’s had been.

“Troublesome.” Sasuke muttered. “This is all his fault.”

“He’s good but it doesn’t work like that.” Naruto sounded amused. “I knew something was up. but
anyway Mist doesn’t work like that and especially not this one. Something else is going on.”

“I think the bastard is trying to retreat.” Sakura said slowly. “He was fine with a confrontation
before right? Yet now… mist and nothing so why… what happened when we got here? We took
out his little guards but that did not bother him. We saw him face to face, sort of and we…”

“Outnumbered could have something to do with it.” Sasuke shifted around, Tenten had a feeling he
was looking at them. “But I think it has something to do with the sudden mist, exactly what
happened with you three?”

“Us?” Tenten frowned. “Nothing happened with us what are you-“

“Neji…” Gai-sensei said slowly. “When did you focus your eyes on the targets?”

“Just before the mist I wanted to get a good look at who we were dealing with.” Neji said slowly.
“Then I couldn’t see anything ahead of me.”

“You think the enemy can interfere with Neji’s sight?” Kakashi-sensei sounded intrigued. “I’ve
never heard of something like that before.”

“Neither have I.” Sasuke picked up. “These people don’t like us but I have a feeling they especially
don’t like Neji over there. Naruto might be correct about having something to hide.”

“It isn’t as if the mist is thick enough that we would miss sound and that they could attack us in the
mist like that.” Naruto muttered. “There is something they don’t want Neji to see and that makes
me wonder about all the powerful scary stuff this guy is able to do.” The mist around them was
fading bit by bit. “How much of these amazing things is bullshit? I’ll be seriously put off if the
whole thing is some sort of magic trick you know. Besides we still haven’t felt any real intent
towards us.”

“We keep poking our noses around and we certainly won’t have to worry about that.” Sakura
snorted. “Let’s retreat for now, I think it is fairly safe to say that the guy ran off for now. We’ll get him again later when we are more prepared. I want us to go over everything. I don’t want to miss a single detail.

XxX

“He’s suspicious.” Sakura muttered as she tugged at her bun. “We need to get close but I could just feel something nasty coming from him.”

“How did he manage to trip Neji up?” Tenten wondered as she kicked back. “It doesn’t make sense, of all the things Neji should be the one least affected by fog.”

“Not everything is infallible.” Sasuke corrected. “But this just gives us more insight to exactly how he works, we already know he doesn’t care for anyone but himself and his wants. Now we know that he has some sort of boost that allows him to mess with sensors. My guess is that since sight was affected whatever that he has with him has to be able to affect chakra based abilities.”

“An elaborate genjutsu?” Tenten wondered aloud before she shook her head. “No Neji would see through that right away wouldn’t he? So what is going on?”

“I think we might have stumbled across the real reason Kiri wanted to play nice with Konoha.” Sakura tugged her knee to her chest as she stared at the floor and rocked in her seat. “Something like this… they really don’t want him to go. I’m sure the artefacts are important but abilities like that? They would do anything to get them back, make an alliance with the devil himself in order to get information. It makes sense when you think about it.”

“So… what are we going to do?” Naruto asked them. “We have to move quickly, we don’t know how he is going to run or even how he is going to retaliate. “We can’t afford mistakes either.”

“Naruto’s right.” Tenten glanced around at them. “When our senseis return let’s think about how to do this. There will be more throwaway underlings but for certain our target is the one that has something to hide. We can’t let him escape.”

“It’s going to be difficult though.” Naruto pointed out as rain picked up on the roof. “Bad weather is increasing.”

“These mountain pass people have the worst of luck.” Sakura sighed. “First the magistrate milks them relentlessly and then their saviour is a demon in disguise that they can’t run from no matter how hard they try.”

“That’s why it is our job to help them our Sakura-chan.” Naruto got to his feet and stretched. “Second approach time.”

XxX

“They were prepared for Neji this time.” Sakura steadied her stance as she watched the mist rise again. “Good thing we already predicted that, did you see? Naruto, Sasuke-kun. He has something weird about his back.”

“It doesn’t seem to be part of him.” Sasuke reached to Naruto and hummed when Naruto slid the short sword into his hand. “I have the feeling that whatever this is, we have to get it off of him. It slows him down but he refuses to abandon his burden.”

“That speaks for how important it really is.” Sakura agreed. “So? We ready to relieve him of his burden?”
“Sasuke.” Kakashi-sensei spoke up. “Naruto’s your final distraction. Cut whatever it is lose, Sakura and Team Gai will be the targets and the first distractions while Naruto gets you in close.”

“And you?” Sakura watched the way Naruto eyed their sensei. “Where will you be?”

“Making a lot of noise in this mist.” Kakashi-sensei said grimly. “We clear on that? Good, disperse!”

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“Let’s weaken his footing, shall we?” Sakura sounded way too excited considering the circumstances but Tenten found herself smiling right back.

“We protect Neji right?” Tenten confirmed. “We act like he’s the one guiding us.”

“Exactly.” Sakura smiled, a large smile with lots of teeth before she leapt forward. “Let’s go!” With her in the front and Neji right behind her they took a large curved path towards where Raiga loomed ahead. They were not looking to make actual contact. No it was hard enough having to trust their eyes and senses. No what they were achieving was much better, before the mist could shroud them. Before they could confuse them with fake chakra signatures. They were going to cut them off.

The small explosions from the tags were a distraction that anyone could see through, maybe even the way that Sakura used the explosions to disappear into the ground. Not a second too soon because the air intensified before a bolt of lightning tried to drive them apart.

Tenten had felt the energy from that blast, still she kept to the plan. Right against Neji and Gai-sensei as they used everything they had to get to the point that was needed. Her scrolls felt light in her hands and the rain of kunais towards their target lightened her heart even as she saw the second bolt coming for them.

But then Kakashi-sensei was right there, between them and that and she was unable to speak when the bolt of lightning divided and hurtled past them.

“How on earth did Sakura deal with such tension Tenten did not know, her heart was in her throat when the bolt of lightning divided and hurtled past them.

“Nice going Kakashi.” Gai-sensei said as if such things were normal. As it was she was not the only one stunned, the cloaked figure staring down at them, at Kakashi-sensei. That was before the rocks began to tremble. The light mist was bothersome for her to see what was going on but Sakura fell back just as the mist started to lessen around the cloaked figure.

Naruto appeared so suddenly it seemed like magic, coming up low from the cloaked figure’s foot and so deadly with it her hand was at her throat before she could stop it. Naruto’s hand moved too fast for her to see exactly what he had in his hand that he slashed with. Still she saw the way he discarded whatever it was and latched onto something else as he reached for the hooded Raiga. The swords in the man’s hands came up already sparking.

How on earth did Sakura deal with such tension Tenten did not know, her heart was in her throat when she watched Naruto grab the hilts of the swords while in mid air and used his body to pull Raiga towards the edge. “He can’t be serious.” She whispered even as she saw Sasuke appear from behind his sword already drawn and the downward slash aimed at the unusual lump on Raiga’s back. “He’s crazy!”

“That’s Naruto for you.” Sakura sighed even as Naruto flipped over the dangerous part of the edge and Raiga realized that whatever had been on his back was gone. His scream of anger filled the pass. He would have gone for Sasuke if it had not been for Naruto running back up the wet rock
face. It was insanity the way he reached the safe areas so quickly ninja wire in his hand. What it was for confused her until she saw the bottle and tag come flying after. In this rain, would it even?

Yes it would. She had no idea what had been in the bottle but Raiga shrieked when he caught aflame. While Naruto and Sasuke switched to taijutsu to try and gain ground Raiga was battling the flames and them and he was still doing fine.

All too the soon the flames were out and Raiga was fighting again but instead of the calculated moves from before that were devastating they were wild and almost clumsy. The loss of whatever that was because it was not a body part, Raiga seemed to be unharmed. The loss of whatever that had been seemed to have shaken him up greatly. The lightning he summoned was missing and weakened and just when Naruto and Sasuke drove him to the end of the path. Raiga screamed a sound of rage before he bowed his head and mist suddenly cloaked everywhere.

“Naruto!” Sakura called as the mist stopped them from seeing anything. “Don’t go after him!”

How on earth would Naruto be able to navigate such a thick fog in the first place? Tenten’s brows wrinkled but before she could say anything there was a disgruntled call from where Naruto had been last. “Fine, fine Sakura-chan.”

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The mist had cleared enough for them to examine what it was that had Raiga so powerful and what he had been so reluctant to leave behind. The moment she got closer Sakura was unable to stop herself from thinking that it looked like some sort of cocoon.

She shook that thought from her mind as she cautiously approached. She used Tenten’s staff to remove the remains of Raiga’s cloak away and she was greeted with the sight of glaring red eyes. She was unable to stop her hands from freezing when she saw the sullen face and the light purple hair.

While she kept her calm exterior, she could feel panic from team Gai, them giving life to the feelings that were trapped inside of her.

“What the hell.” The distress in Naruto’s voice snapped her out of it. Kakashi-sensei was already next to Naruto his eye watching carefully as Naruto stared down at the boy all wrapped up. Naruto’s face was pale but he looked physically sick as he looked at the boy his eyes swirling with thoughts that were moving too quickly for her to grasp for her to even dream of reading. “Who the hell are you!”

That was exactly what Sakura wanted to know and while they would get to the bottom of the bigger mess they had gotten themselves in, she doubted that Naruto would be able to handle it. It was strange since so far Naruto was able to handle anything thrown at team seven but she could look now and see that this boy and this situation was more bothersome than anything they had faced before.

She could and would handle this. She turned back to the boy careful with her gaze as she watched him. “Do you have a name?” She asked softly.

“Give me back to Raiga.” The boy’s response was, rude even as he spoke politely.

“What the fuck.” Naruto hissed from behind them. “No way, no fucking way.”

“We’ll get to Raiga in a minute.” She kept her voice soft. “Why are you like this? She tugged at the cloth binding the boy. “Is it okay if I take this off?” Her voice slightly hardened. “Should I take
“I can’t walk too well.” The boy admitted, Naruto swore from behind them. “That’s why Raiga takes me around. He’s really strong.”

“I see.” Sakura answered, she really did not but she put confidence in her answer anyway. “Were you the one helping him fight us?” It had to be the only explanation but it was better making him confess.

“Raiga’s showing me the world.” The boy’s eyes moved from beyond her for a moment. “He cares about me, we understand each other.” Naruto’s muffled cry hurt Sakura’s heart but she pressed on anyway.

“Do you have a name?”

“Ranmaru.”

“Can I get you out of this thing?” She asked, when she received a nod she tugged at the cloth only to reveal some sort of bag that the boy was in. She kept her guard up waiting for any attacks even as she noted that the bag had to be comfortable. Maybe even warm but it still did not change the mess they had gotten themselves into.

“I want to go to Raiga.” Ranmaru’s eyes caught her. “He made this family for me, for us. I’m not supposed to leave him.” So young, her heart hurt and she wanted to throw something heavy.

“Don’t you have a family somewhere?” She doubted it.

“I was always alone but Raiga found me.” The smile that brightened his face, considering the circumstances it should not have been so damn bright. “Raiga’s my everything, you have to give me back right now and go away. All of you.”

“I can’t do this.” Naruto’s voice was choked up with disgust and anger. “I can’t do this right now.” She listened to him turn away even as she coaxed her best sympathetic voice out. She was not surprised when she felt the presence of her sensei leaving a few seconds later. She doubted she or Sasuke could get to Naruto where he was now.

XxX

“Fuck, fuck fuck fuck!” Naruto raged as he punched the rock over and over, his body was shaking. He was hot even though the rain was drizzling he was being consumed with rage and disgust. He did not even care. “Why! Why again!”

“Naruto.” Kakashi-sensei said softly behind him.

“Not now sensei.” He bit out as he kept his gaze fixed on the large rock before him. “Not now damn it! Fuck!” He punched again and again. His heart clenched and his shoulder shook when the first tear escaped. “Not again.” He whispered. “I can’t keep seeing this shit again.”

“Naruto.” Kakashi-sensei’s voice was louder this time. “I know.”

“Know what?” Naruto demanded. “What do you know? Do you see what I can? Do you feel what I feel?” He punched the rock again and again. He seethed when a firm hand grabbed his wrist. “Don’t.” He warned.

“You think I don’t see?” Kakashi-sensei said softly. “In that boy, in Raiga you see a repeat of
“He’s so young.” Naruto bit out. “Already so loyal. He has a shitty past, that isn’t the worst of it. He isn’t that much younger than me. Maybe three years or so?” Naruto snorted. “Another year or so and he would be the age I met Haku at. It isn’t right. I shouldn’t have to see that sort of shit again! Another fucking swordsman. Another kid that deserved better!” He raged, he used his captured wrist to yank himself around to stare his sensei in the face. “Why am I seeing this shit again! Why this? Why is it always people like… he’s strong. God knows he is strong that just means Raiga won’t want to let him go. Why is it this again!”

“I know.” Kakashi-sensei admitted. “It should not be this again but it is. It is different this time. You really think it is too late?”

“Raiga is going to get him killed.” Naruto whispered. “I don’t want to see that.” Kakashi-sensei’s free hand cupped his face and tilted his head up just enough that Naruto could meet his gaze.

“Then we will make sure that Raiga doesn’t get him back.”

XxX

A young pretty boy with talent and skill, a swordsman from Kiri. Add in the troupe and it would be something from Kakashi’s past that still gave him chills. There was very little known about Raiga and while Ranmaru had to have been with Raiga for quite some time for the level of loyalty he gave the man, Kakashi was still glad that in many ways that Ranmaru was still a child.

The look on Naruto’s face when he saw the child. When he realized the implications. He had seen more than a child, he had connected the dots faster than many of them and saw the situation for what it was. A tool, Raiga and Ranmaru. Ranmaru was Raiga’s very important tool the two of them working together but with Raiga calling the very dangerous shots. Only a blind man would not notice how dangerous it all was. Only a blind man would not notice how dependant Ranmaru was on Raiga. Only an idiot would not see how closely Ranmaru resembled Haku.

It had to be so painful for Naruto. Kakashi in no way thought that Naruto had finished healing from the loss of Haku. Had he come to terms with it? That Haku had died yes, but there were still so many stages of recovery that Kakashi had not seen Naruto cover yet. That he was still waiting for Naruto to reach. As sad as this was, the anger was a good thing.

Still, it was easy to see Raiga and Ranmaru and see Zabuza and Haku. It was almost chilling if he were to be honest. While Haku had been some sort of mastermind, Raiga was obviously now learning, it was chilling to think of the heights he could reach under Raiga if he managed to last that long. He already had fairly good control over his bloodline limit whatever the hell that was.

Kakashi hesitated with Naruto in his grip before he released the boy’s wrist. The rain was soaking the both of them but Kakashi kept Naruto’s chin tilted up towards him before he slowly dropped it. Naruto’s gaze was still on him. So many conflicting feelings inside him, inside both of them he was willing to bet but this was no time to falter.

“I really find it hard to talk to that kid.” Naruto whispered as the rain continued to fall.

“I understand.” Kakashi’s hand hovered over Naruto’s shoulder before Kakashi gave up and swept the boy into a one-armed hug and closed his eye. “I understand.”

XxX

“So they didn’t want him anymore so they stopped feeding him?” Tenten winced. “I wish I could
be surprised but when it comes to normal people and bloodline limits… well there is always this feeling of horror and fear towards what they can’t understand. It is natural to be wary of a bloodline limit and so strong in a child with no warning. I can’t exactly see that turning out well for a small village.”

“Especially in a land where those with any abilities were feared and killed off.” Naruto’s voice was mostly muted. “There was this huge purge, many in Kiri either tried to breed out the abilities or kill off those in clans with special abilities. A nice plan in theory, breeding it out but traits awaken sometimes years down the line or sometimes get even stronger.” He shook his head. “I’m guessing in Ranmaru’s case the blood had already been weak and then when it mixed… hell I don’t know but sometimes when you try to get rid of something in fear it gets even stronger.”

“That is what happened to him.” Neji asked, Naruto fell silent for a moment his eyes on Neji before he smiled.

“The purest clans don’t always bring the strongest members you know. Too strong of blood, too weak of power. Sometimes you got to let it breathe.” He sighed before he glanced outside to the rain. “I don’t like this, Raiga’s going to come for him and he so badly wants to run back.”

“We aren’t going to let him. Raiga is clearly unstable.” Sakura shook her head. “The plans he had, I don’t know if he was always weak in the mind but while he is capable of caring for Ranmaru’s body and trying to keep him safe he is clearly dangerous. They just need an enemy stronger than them that won’t care about Ranmaru and they are both dead.”

“Somehow I don’t think the kid would actually mind all of that.” Tenten watched as Sasuke watched Naruto. “After everything he has experienced, all he wanted to see was the world. Now he wants to see the world but he wants to be with Raiga more. Even though Raiga brought pain to his village.”

“They were starving him, he was going to die there.” Naruto closed his eyes and sighed heavily. “I hate this, so many people here. Headstrong and determined to go where common sense should tell them they should run away from.”

“You’re one to talk.” Sakura snorted, that got a knowing laugh from Naruto.

“Well loneliness is a big factor in it but from what I saw, Raiga doesn’t exactly have a pretty face to lure the kid to hell and back.” Tenten watched Naruto frown as he contemplated something. “Ah! That bastard wasn’t pretty either though but he was better looking than Raiga.” Naruto mumbled. “If you could get past the teeth. And get past the attitude maybe and while he was crazy he wasn’t flat out insane like Raiga obviously is and he let people give opinions and listened to them too he wasn’t running straight to death so maybe he is a little better? Not for me but it isn’t like I don’t get the appeal when you have nothing but I don’t know about running off with someone who was trying to kill you for god’s sake.” Naruto shook his head violently leaving in Tenten in confusion because in that moment she had not been able to follow any of Naruto’s thoughts.

XxX

“He isn’t a good person.” Naruto insisted Ranmaru’s face took on a mulish look before the boy turned away. “I know what I’m talking about you know. He really isn’t, Raiga isn’t a good person at all and for you. The things you told us? What you guys want in the end sound like completely different things. You want to see the world and he wants to kill people so he can think back to ‘good times’ ‘happier times’.” Naruto mocked. “So he can cry and feel good about it. The only world he can show you is one drenched in darkness unless you plan on seeing a world without anyone else in it but the two of you.”
“You don’t understand him.” Ranmaru’s voice was firm but there was just a tiny bit of uncertainty there.

“You can’t change him.” Naruto pressed. “You really can’t. If anything he would end up changing you. He’s twisted inside and it started a long time before he met you.” It took effort to keep his words calm and his body steady when he wanted to rage and swear, when he wanted to throw the truth at the boy who seemed to be blinding himself on purpose. “You want to see the world, you want to get better but the way he is, he is going to get himself killed. He is not strong enough to take everything on. He might be good.” Naruto admitted. “He might be a former swordsman but he is not invincible and he can’t run with you forever. It just puts you in danger.”

“Raiga-“ The boy cut himself off. “I want to see the world with Raiga as long as I can. As long as I can be with him.”

“And I’m telling you.” Naruto sat on the bed and grasped one of Ranmaru’s hands in his. “You won’t get to see beyond this country if you keep sticking with him.”

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“You okay?” Sasuke asked when Naruto stormed out of the little base. Naruto rolled his eyes as an answer and Sasuke sighed. “You don’t have to keep working on him.”

“Yes I do.” Naruto groaned as he tugged at his hair with both hands, he played with the ends for a few seconds before he dragged his hands down with a sigh. He propped himself on the wall closest to Sasuke before he unzipped his jacket halfway down and released a loud sigh. “Kid’s exhausting but I’m one the few people that know what exactly is in his head. That is what makes it so hard and while he is a stubborn wall there is common sense in him. That’s the frustrating part.”

“We don’t need his compliance to finish the mission.” Sasuke pointed out. “There is no need to frustrate yourself with him. He might have gotten caught up in a bad situation but in the end he is not our target, he was a small obstacle that is removed from the situation.”

“Is he really?” Naruto snorted. “Those abilities of his… when you really think about it. Kid has guts, and strength. It isn’t like Raiga is going to abandon him, leave him alone when that it the most powerful thing he has right now besides his sword. He might even care about the kid in his own way once he doesn’t get in the way of long term goals.”

“The kid will make fairly decent bait.” Sasuke pointed out. “He’ll come to us and we won’t have the kid interfering with everything else.”

“Thank goodness for that.” Naruto’s head fell back his throat exposed as he stared up at the storm sky. “I hate this, I hate how messed up that kid is and I hate this mission.”

Sasuke was not able to understand all the things that was Naruto’s life and the threads that connected to Naruto’s past but this he did understand. “This mission is troublesome for all of us.” He said softly. “The sooner Raiga is neutralized the village will be on the road to back to normal. Then we get to go back to the village, maybe then the kid can catch a better break.” Naruto smiled at his words but Sasuke could feel in his gut that Naruto had already started to plot away.

XxX

“You got this?” Sakura asked when she saw Naruto throw his jacket over a tree limb. He glanced back at her before he sat with his back to the trunk and dropped his hands into his lap. “Don’t let it get to you.”
“But it is getting to me Sakura-chan.” His eyes lowered to the ground before they flicked back up to her and held her gaze. “Every word from his mouth, every insistence that we give him to that creep and my body burns.” He gritted.

“It bothers me too.” She admitted. “But there is not much we can do but get him out the way. I hope those Kiri nin aren’t too far away. They should be on our trail keeping an eye on us right?”

“I thought they would be.” Naruto frowned. “They should have been, it makes the most sense, them keeping an eye on us even if it isn’t too heavy of a gaze. Just to make sure we are doing what we are supposed to but making sure that we don’t steal the prey that is theirs. That they haven’t at least popped up by now… it is not as if they can’t travel to here… it really makes no sense.”

“Looks like it is up to us after all.” Sakura sighed. “And Team Gai, they’ve been great help so far.”

“Yeah.” Naruto’s gaze had drifted to the tree’s leaves. “Nice having some backup once in a while.”

“Yeah, it really is.” Sakura watched him for a few seconds afterwards before she gave in and went back inside.

XxX

“It’s the same story.” Naruto said softly as he watched the dark clouds and the mountain ridge. “The exact same story and I don’t want it to end the same way.”

“It isn’t the exact same story.” Kakashi-sensei corrected as he took a seat next to Naruto. “It is just the two of them and you can stop this in its tracks.”

“Haku didn’t listen to me.” Naruto said softly. “Ranmaru doesn’t want to listen to me and that is exactly the same. He understands the truth but there is this thing inside him. This need inside him and I can see it so clearly, how he would throw away common sense and throw away his life in order to stay with him.”

“All of this is why you should not let it get to you.” Kakashi said softly. “You know better than anyone how this story can go don’t you? Even though it looks the same it really is not. You are not who you were from back then, you know more and you can do more.”

“But it is still the exact same story.” Naruto closed his eyes for a few seconds as his heart clenched. “It’s so twisted, so wicked it seems like fate. What is it about swordsmen from Kiri that they keep latching onto these kids and tying them up so securely that they don’t want to leave that they are not able to leave until their lives are in so much danger that they not only will get killed but they would accept that fate? He’s a child.” He finished hoarsely. “He’s just a kid no matter how strong he is no matter what he has seen. He is still just a kid.”

“I know.” Kakashi-sensei said softly. “I know he is, just like you were when you followed Haku, just like Haku was when he joined Zabuza. You were all just kids. It does not make it anymore right, it does not make it anymore painful but you were all just kids when you made decisions no child should have to make, shinobi in training or not. Gifted or not. Those were decisions that none of you should have had to make.”

“Exactly.” Naruto said hoarsely as his throat burned. “We shouldn’t have had to choose that sort of thing, we shouldn’t have to think that death would be okay as long as we can have one more second of happiness. We shouldn’t be so tied up into knots that the moment someone shows us kindness and love we’ll do anything for them.” He closed his eyes. “People like Zabuza that do the things Zabuza and Raiga do are bad but it crawls my skin when I think about how much worse it can get
“Naruto?” His sensei asked softly.

“Sorry.” Naruto shook his head to clear his thoughts. “Raiga is bad but I know Ranmaru can be helped it is just it is so damn hard! To talk to him, listen to him and see him. I couldn’t help Haku, I couldn’t save him and I knew the more I pushed the harder it would get because we had different goals in the end. We so badly didn’t- no I so badly didn’t want to leave Haku behind I would have done anything to get even a bit of him for myself.” Naruto snorted. “Trying to save him from the inside, he was too wrapped up in Zabuza’s agenda. It was too late for me to save him from the inside but Ranmaru… I don’t want to lose him to this foolishness.”

“You won’t we won’t.” Kakashi-sensei promised. “They are apart that is the important thing. Considering the obstacles and the missions we are already half done. The wayward boy, the surprise that is Ranmaru. Raiga has lost most of his pieces.”

“That doesn’t make it safe.” Naruto said softly. “That doesn’t make anyone safe, that just makes Raiga far more dangerous.” He shuddered as he thought about it. While Haku had been strong and smart, while he had been one to fear while others overlooked him at first it had never done well for others to forget Zabuza. While no one really dared to try and touch Haku because he was Zabuza’s spokesperson he had also belonged to Zabuza.

While Haku punished several out of line. Zabuza was always there as a reminder that everything was his and that but his will the group moved and that those that tried to change his ways, tried to take away what Zabuza saw as his alone got the demon instead of a man. Not many dared but there had been few who wanted to push matters, push boundaries and while many in the group had come and gone Haku had been absolute and permanent. Not many with sense would go after him but not all of those who ran held onto sense.

The threat of losing what they saw as wholly theirs. It had been the look of ownership that had creeped Naruto out but he could still remember it. He could still remember how bone chilling he had found it the first few times Zabuza had lost it over people trying to kill Haku right under his nose or taking him away. Naruto did not know Raiga but he knew the man would never sit down while the best thing to ever happen to him was taken away. Ranmaru to Raiga was valuable. The man would come for him, try to take him back and run away. Raiga if left to his own devices would get Ranmaru killed. Naruto could see that and he was not going to allow that to happen.

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“The preparations are finished.” Sakura nodded as she looked over the map. “We are spread out fairly thin but it is going to work after we lure him to the correct area. Should be easier to subdue him when he can’t shock us out of our skin.” She finished in a frown. “Still before we can get him there we have to draw him out and just maybe eat a few of those attacks.” She flashed their sensei a smile. “That’s you sensei.”

Kakashi-sensei sighed a loud drawn out sigh as he read over the map that had scribbles all over it. “As dangerous as it is, it is a good plan. Even me acting as bait.”

“You’re fast.” Sasuke pointed out as he ran his finger over the map highlighting the paths. “I’m your pretend backup so I might have to eat some of these attacks too, or deflect them.” He finished in a mutter.

“Don’t strain yourself.” Sakura scolded. “We can’t have you running out of chakra. As it is, the plan is that we come across him when scouting, we lead him away to where he can’t use the
lightning so freely. We lead him up to Neji and wear him down and subdue him.” She glanced at
their sensei warily. “Any chance those Kiri shinobi will pop up the last second and help us out?”

“I highly doubt it.” Kakashi-sensei shook his head. “It’s for the best. Ranmaru-kun would not do
well with them and I doubt he would take to them, nor they to him. The old prejudices still linger
even in the new eras.”

“That’s a fancy way of saying they still hate bloodline limits with a passion.” Sasuke snorted. “We
can handle this ourselves fair enough.”

“Let’s hope so.” Kakashi-sensei mused as his fingers moved over the map. “Ranmaru-kun isn’t the
only one we have to worry about. The mines, the runaway. There is too much for Kiri to suddenly
pop in and claim all that might have been theirs. Far easier to let Konoha clean up the messes when
it comes down to it honestly.”

“A little too honest sensei.” Sakura sighed. “But you’re right, as much as I would love most of this
out of our hands it is our job in the end. We’ve come this far, we should finish it. Not only for the
people working in the mines but for Ranmaru too. Everyone involved needs closure if they are to
move forward to something better.”

“The way he is now, what kind of future can that kid even have.” Sasuke shook his head.

“A future where he sees that no matter what he can do, who he is we all have the same red blood.”
Sakura said softly. “We are all humans who laugh, cry and suffer and we are all on a journey
whether we know it or not. A path towards hope, towards the sun and sometimes you don’t make it
to the end of the path with everyone but it is okay. But you have to keep towards that path to the
sun with everyone else.”

“You want the kid to realize that Raiga isn’t the only one? Good luck with that.” Sasuke shook his
head. “Naruto’s already tried.”

“I know.” Sakura admitted. “But we can’t just leave it there and I can see that he knows, he knows
what he wants, what he needs and what Raiga’s goals are lay in two directions. We just have to
make sure that he knows it is okay to pursue that goal without Raiga.”

“That sounds like a lot of work.” Kakashi-sensei mused. “Are we up to the task?”

“We are something.” Sasuke’s head bowed over the table and the map. “We have to give the kid a
backbone and some common sense. What a job ahead of us.”

XxX

He could not let that happen again. He kept getting their faces crossed in his mind. He kept getting
the situations messed up but what he knew for certain was that he certainly could not and would
not let it happen again. It would not happen again. He knew to his bones that Raiga would get
Ranmaru killed, that sort of devotion, the kid would jump right into death’s arms for Raiga without
a second thought and that was so wrong.

So terribly wrong. Naruto would not be letting that happen. While his team planned he listened.
When they set out he set out as well his mind clear to what he would have to do. Raiga would get
the kid killed but not on Naruto’s watch, with the current plans there was enough preparation to
take Raiga enough by surprise and do what had to be done.

He did not doubt his own power or his own abilities but in the shinobi world people were hard to
kill. Naruto was not underestimating Raiga but he knew he was prepared enough that he could do
enough damage that the man would not be able to walk away from.

Ranmaru might turn cold eyes on him afterwards but he would be alive. Also even if it did hurt Naruto, he was not Haku in the end so the hurt would be fleeting. Naruto on the other hand he knew that what he was doing was for the best.

Raiga was too dangerous, too unstable and worst of all he was too reckless. Ranmaru did not deserve what Raiga did and while he thought Raiga was the friend he needed, the person that would be with him in the way he deserved. He was not, Raiga might care for Ranmaru a little, be obsessed a little but Ranmaru’s abilities would always come first and that would always make Raiga place Ranmaru right where he had no business being. Right in danger. Naruto was certainly not standing for that. He was doing what had to be done, what should be done.

XxX

It was a tricky plan but Neji did not see it failing spectacularly or with casualties on their sides. No the only tricky part was keeping Ranmaru from doing something foolish and risky but Kakashi-sensei had talked to Gai-sensei quietly before he had taken the boy aside for a few moments. Whatever that had happened in those few moments kept the boy quiet, almost docile.

Neji had his own suspicious about what had happened but while they could not trust the boy alone it was better having him as docile as possible and not using his abilities against them. Neji was unable to stop himself from sneaking glances to the boy that sat quietly with Gai-sensei. His gaze was not unfocused but he kept staring at the paths ahead along with the light mist.

Neji did not think the boy could interfere but he could admit some regret that the boy had to stay with them while they carried out their work. Raiga would be detained, Ranmaru would not be allowed to stay with him. Tenten and Gai-sensei had some hopes that Ranmaru would bond with the miners and the town enough to want to stay but… he had seen team seven’s faces when they watched the boy. They doubted that happy ending.

On Naruto’s face, this pained look kept appearing with every glance but there was also this deep sort of concentration that Neji could not understand either.

XxX

The fog got quick fast, Raiga kept dodging them and going to higher ground and while Sasuke did not mind that he did find it extremely annoying. He wanted to pin the man’s hands to his sides because Raiga kept letting loose and it was extremely annoying and exhausting having to dodge all the time.

Raiga had not gone over the edge to insanity yet. He was already crazy but he was still capable of rational thought. After everything that had been said and done Sasuke had expected to be confronted with a rabid beast demanding the return of what they had stolen away.

Instead they had gotten this bad tempered but slightly cool shinobi running them down. Swordsman of the mist, Sasuke could really for the first time see that from him. He could really see how Raiga was worthy of the title and the sword. This man was not the crazy idiot they had been running down, this had to be who he had been while with Kiri.

A man of calibre, a man that was worthy of the name. That had the abilities. Sasuke gave into temptation and looked back as he ran from the man running them down. He slipped from shadow to shadow sometimes his footsteps fading into the mist. It was hauntingly familiar. He looked in front in time to catch Kakashi looking back at him. Disapproval at Sasuke’s distraction was in the
man’s eye. Sasuke snorted as he picked up the pace. Kakashi could hardly blame him for being a bit curious.

XxX

Not too much, not enough that Raiga could sense him but enough that he would be able to do what he had to do, what he needed to do. Just enough of himself that he would be hyper aware of all the current world around him and all the changes.

There were many ways to hunt, bait and switch. Traps but of course the best way to catch someone was the moment that they themselves were the hunter about to close in on their prey. They had managed to lead him in the area of the correct pass but it seemed like it was hell on Kakashi-sensei and Sasuke to get him down the mountain.

That was okay for Naruto, he could see in the mist. He could watch it all as it occurred as the mist got darker and heavier. It wrapped around him as heavy as a cloak it felt a bit like home but he refused to let that distract him. Instead he took a breath to steady himself. Another to centre himself while he waited for the right moment.

He was not an excellent swordsman he was barely average when it came to people who had been using swords their whole lives, he had plenty to learn and when it came down to it. Raiga had been a swordsman of the mist. There was not overlooking that fact, Naruto was trained by Zabuza but not like that. Never with one of their swords. For all that he had envied and watched Zabuza’s sword he had never held it in his hands. He had never gotten to use it.

The day would come where he would but while he did not know the swords he knew of them he could guess from what he had seen and he was enough to take Raiga by surprise. There was no fair in a battle like this. With what was on the line there was no such thing as fair there was only what had to be done. There would be no duel only execution.

Raiga had targeted Sasuke, it was in his walk. It was in the way he targeted as he chased. Naruto waited behind the corner and kept his breathing as slow as he dared. Raiga came around the corner of the cliff his footsteps echoing in the mist when Naruto moved. The quick response was expected, the sword he fended him off was also expected. The quick battle with him losing? Both he and Raiga expected that. But the battle being with a clone? That Raiga had not expected.

It was in his stance as he looked around. Naruto absorbed the quick memories even as he stepped forward. “Guys like you.” He said softly as he announced his presence. “They are bad for kids like Ranmaru. You think you’re doing a good thing but all you are going to do is get him killed.”

“Konoha shinobi.” Raiga’s swords lowered as he watched Naruto. “Give him back.”

“You will get him killed you freak.” Naruto hissed. “You think he should stay with someone like you? All you can offer him is sadness and funerals! The world is worth more than that.”

“Ranmaru… is not allowed to leave me. Give him back.” Raiga’s stance changed even as the atmosphere did. Naruto shook his head as he took a step forward too.

“I’m not going to allow you to get him killed. Whatever you want, whatever your goals are, whatever you are aiming for. Die for it right here by yourself. Don’t drag kids into this fucked up madness.”

XxX

“Wait.” Sasuke said as he looked behind him. “Where is he?”
“Not behind us anymore.” Kakashi stopped as well. “Did he catch on? He was reluctant to go down any further but we would have cornered him midway. Where did he go… to the top?”

“If he wanted to try and cut us off or cut my path off he would have gone up.” Sasuke shook his head as he watched the mist. “But I don’t think that is it. I’m certain that is not the case at all.” He could feel in his gut a tightening and his mind was on how silent. How unnatural and still Naruto had been. “Something is wrong.” He admitted. “I’m not certain but…” Naruto wouldn’t be that reckless and foolish would he but he could remember the exam and how Naruto for a few seconds had been his rescuer. He might find it hard to talk to the kid but he was certain that deep down Naruto wanted to save him. “Shit.”

“Naruto.” Kakashi swore. “This mist is so thick, what does he think he is going to do? Sticking to the plan-” Kakashi cut himself off. “Right… fuck.” Sasuke blinked at the curse. He watched the shadow of his sensei slap his hands to his own face. “Of course, of course I should have thought of that. Let’s head up.”

“Sakura?”

“We can’t warn them now. As it is it might be already over by the time we get there.”

XxX

It was just enough, to take him by surprise. To overwhelm him because while he was older, harder and seasoned there were plenty of things that Raiga had never seen before. It had cost him to slip under Raiga’s guard his shoulder burned like nothing else but the force knocked them both back off the edge.

Still Naruto had not expected the force from Raiga’s sword and the rasengan to blow away all the mist. Both he and Raiga wore looks of surprise though for different reasons. Raiga for the deadly blow to the chest, Naruto because as they tumbled off he could see everything.

He could have sensed it but seeing was something else. There was nothing left in his hand, the rasengan had dispersed into Raiga, the force of the winds knocking the mist away but Naruto was not done yet. He ignored the cry of alarm as he fell instead he yanked the sword away from Raiga, it was not made for cutting, it was more for stabbing and he made do to use the man under him as a launch pad as they hurtled to the ground below.

With Raiga’s sword in his chest falling to the bottom of the mountain pass Naruto felt secure enough to finally start saving his own hide. His hands took a beating when he grabbed at the wall, sliding down several feet as he tried to balance it all out and secure a hold with chakra while trying to avoid breaking or twisting something vital.

He had to grab and release several times with his hands being torn as he finally slowed down enough for him to try and launch himself to different areas. He used his feet, his hands and finally slowed down enough that he was hanging on looking to the dark silent path below. Rocks had been falling with them they had broken plenty of the rocky area he would not be surprised if Raiga had ended up buried but Naruto liked to make sure.

His hands throbbed before he sighed and started his journey back up. He could feel that he would have plenty of explanations ahead of him. A scolding would not hurt, he had done what he had set out to do. History would not repeat itself. Raiga would have gotten the kid killed, Naruto had removed the threat.

XxX
“I’m not even fucking surprised.” Sakura whispered when the mist disappeared to reveal Naruto and Raiga above them. She bit her lip as she watched Naruto fall over the cliff. “I’m not surprised and I’m doing rather well right not pretending that this is not terrifying.”

She knew he could handle himself. She had watched him play all sorts of training games that when it was all boiled down. It was terrifying. He could handle this. It looked as though Naruto was on top of things.

Still her heart was allowed a few moments of panic as she watched him fall over the edge. Considering what she knew she was still allowed to be worried. She always would be worried. Still, she was not surprised that Naruto had moved on his own. She just wished he could be less reckless about the whole thing but then again. It would not be her Naruto if he did that.

Still, terrifying but understandable. She really wanted to know how he had gotten the mist to blow away. She knew most of the jutsus that he knew, that he used but this was the first time she had seen something with so much force that-

Well… now that she thought about it. It was not exactly true was it. She sat down on the nearest rock and placed her head in her hands for a few seconds. Her guard was not exactly down but, she really needed a moment.

Xxx

The kid had screamed, Ranmaru had screamed and Tenten did not blame the kid at all. It had happened so fast she was not certain what had happened she could not even begin to guess what must have gone wrong all she knew was that there had been this pressure everywhere around them before the mist was just gone.

Blown away, blown back while lightning had been flashing so crazily in little balls above them. She had seen orange. Seen Raiga locked together with someone and had put together the rest as her heart leapt out of her throat at what she saw.

She joked enough with Sakura that Naruto was a bit reckless and crazy. It was how she and Sakura started to get close in the first place. Tenten understood reckless boys that made your heart hurt. She understood caring for teammates and having to watch them do what they thought was best. She understood being a step behind and seeing stuff that no human should have to endure and no sane person should attempt.

She understood that but she was quick to acknowledge that to her knowledge no one had it as bad as Sakura so obviously did. Naruto and Sasuke were handfuls. They were insane, she had no idea what on earth pushed them to the lengths that they went.

Neji trained day and night. Neji pushed himself into headspaces that scared her sometimes. Lee was flat out crazy with a thirst for strength and thrill that hurt her heart so badly she feared it would stop sometimes. Those were her boys, she got that but Naruto and Sasuke there was some well inside of them that they kept tapping.

While she joked that Sakura had it rough it was one thing to see them training. It was another thing to hear the rumours. It was something else to have the proof before her eyes that there was something seriously wrong with Naruto. Forget reckless, forget crazy those were obvious things but what had her so shocked was how easily he did such crazy things. Even Gai-sensei would not knock his opponent off a cliff and fall with him.

She did not even know how he had managed it but seeing them locked together falling towards the
dark pass below. Rocks and boulders disturbed by whatever they had been doing before the mist cleared. It was a terrifying picture that robbed one of breath. She did not blame the kid for screaming, she wanted to scream a bit herself but her breath was caught in her throat and her tongue was dead.

Absolutely insane, that was team seven. That was what Sakura had to deal with and never had Tenten been so glad for her team that while they were wild and rowdy from time to time with some questionable traits. They would never drive her to the edge of madness she felt herself teetering on around team seven.

Off a fucking cliff as graceful as he could. All she could think about was how the hell would he get out of that situation? A dark path with heavy rocks. Tenten glanced at the kid who stood rooted in place his hands to his chest as he stared at where Naruto and Raiga had fallen. Granted it was some distance away but that did not change that they could see the darkness of the pass. It looked fairly quiet, it looked dark and treacherous and considering the way they had fallen. She doubted Raiga was okay, Naruto had seemed quite determined from what she had seen as they fell after all.

Tenten swallowed as she looked around them. First, they had to regroup and they had to make certain that team seven’s absolutely crazy reckless mysterious ninja was alive and well. Then… who even knew. Her mind was not that clear at the moment.

XxX

Neji’s mind was a whirl of information. He had felt the sense of something being wrong just before the explosion above. Was he surprised about it being Naruto? Just before the figures had been revealed, he had known that there was only one person it could be plans or not.

Naruto taking Raiga head on had not been the plan however and while he was curious to how on earth it had ended up that way he was not surprised about it. He was accepting of it as well even while he admitted to himself that certain things may have gotten harder. He doubted Ranmaru would accept the turn of events.

It was so harsh, so violent the way the two fell over together but even while he was concerned for Naruto’s fate he had to admit that it felt inevitable. Naruto had shown signs of being uncomfortable with the situation. While Ranmaru separated from Raiga worked in their favour, Neji knew that the man would be trying to get Ranmaru back with every step that he took. It was messy but simple. It solved things.

Still he desperately wanted to know how Naruto had been able to do what he did. As reckless as he was, how strong was he really? Neji had felt himself slightly under Naruto but he could not put himself in the same situation, locked together with a dangerous shinobi. Still taking head on some of those attacks and falling over a dangerous edge with him to uncertainty. Those were not odds that he liked. That was not a situation that he liked either but while he could watch and say that the situation felt like a Naruto situation. He could not see himself doing the same.

Not in that way at least. He was not going to be hard on himself, admitting the short comings was the first step after all. He and several other people could agree that honestly, there was no one else like Naruto. No one who thought like him, believed like him and who had eyes like he had. He was insane, insulting you in one breath and complimenting you the next.

Neji knew he had lots of training to do to be right next to Naruto and while he was concerned, he could not help but wonder how much further Naruto would go in the search of his world. He was loyal, protective with his own sense of right and wrong.
For the kid he had gone after Raiga. He put his life on the line for someone he barely knew and had barely spoken too but that itself seemed to be a Naruto trait. From what Neji knew himself, Naruto had barely known Lee, spoke to Hinata-sama occasionally but he had fought like a beast for them hadn’t he?

Naruto was the strangest person Neji had ever met and he made Neji take looks at himself to evaluate what he saw. He was not at the level where he could do something so crazy. Neji would have relied on his team or maybe his abilities. Next time, he would be ready to meet threat head on and be secure in the knowledge that he would come out alive no matter how scraped, battered or bruised he became. It was all part of the journey.

Neji sighed as his heart calmed down, honestly sometimes Naruto made him wish they could all grow up faster while at the same time he wanted to savour every moment as it happened. Still, he was glad he was on the team he was with. Lee included, as fascinating as Naruto was. It was too crazy for the current him to be stuck with every day like that. Maybe in a few years or something.

XxX

Sasuke could not accurately describe how he felt when it happened, he and Kakashi had been running towards the top when the air had changed, it had been an increase of pressure right before the wind and the force had come.

He had known who was behind it even though he had not known the what. He had looked up in time as he watched the sparks fade away around Naruto and Raiga. His eyes had watched the way that both of them had fallen down to the pass below.

He had been concerned if only because he had not known what exactly Naruto had been thinking. Naruto was reckless, Naruto was concerned with the boy. While Sasuke had watched Naruto pull off some awe-inspiring stunts he knew Naruto could be like a dog with a bone sometimes. He had no idea whether Naruto was in the mindset to save himself when it got too dangerous.

Naruto had gone around them in order to take out the threat he had seen. Sasuke had to admit that not only did it seem to be a hundred percent Naruto it was fair. Still, he found himself remaining calm only because he knew Naruto and he knew he would not go down easy. He had crawled towards Gaara back then after all determined to do something even when his body was barely responding. Sasuke could still remember that.

Still, Naruto had been so determined to kill off Raiga he had said nothing to them. That did not bode well and it spoke to the mind set he had been in at the time. Whether Naruto had been of clear enough mind to shake off Raiga in time would be seen. Personally, Sasuke wanted to think that the deed had been finished using whatever jutsu Naruto had pulled off.

But he had seen too many people get back up after things that should have killed them. Strength in the shinobi world called for some dangerous and unsettling things. Who knew how hardy Raiga’s body was. Sasuke was all for making certain that the man was dead if that was what Naruto wanted but it did not change things that much.

He wanted to believe so he would. He wanted to believe that Naruto’s self-preservation had kicked in enough that Naruto did not follow Raiga to the bottom of the pass among the rocks and boulders that had broken off. While Raiga was dangerous, Sasuke doubted the man would have been able to recover that much in order to throw off Naruto and save himself.

Naruto had surprised them all after all, there was no overlooking it. Raiga had to have been taken off guard by Naruto’s reckless and crazy move. For a Konoha shinobi to come out the mist like
that? He would have expected that from Kakashi most likely.

A shinobi of Kakashi’s calibre. It was to be expected that he could turn those things on their heads. It just made more sense when one thought about it. The things that Kiri shinobi did. Things passed down and belonged only to a village. Sasuke knew that his sensei would be able to pull it off and use it to his advantage. That sort of thing was enough to get into someone’s head and make them stop. Create enough of an opening.

While Raiga had recovered quickly enough in order to obviously retaliate at Naruto. He had not recovered enough to prevent whatever Naruto had done. Sasuke just hoped that Naruto’s anger had not driven him to crazy lengths after all, they were all a team in the end.

Sasuke knew that Raiga pissed Naruto off. There had been that look in his eyes after Ranmaru had been discovered and after Naruto kept trying to talk to the boy. While Sasuke did not know exactly what Naruto was thinking, he understood that this was something that led back to the parts of Naruto that was mostly quiet. Still after everything that Raiga had done… Sasuke was not going to mourn him. He just hopped Naruto’s anger had not made him get dragged down with Raiga. That sort of person should go alone always.

XxX

Kakashi was not just upset, he was scared and he was pissed. He was a pot of bubbling emotions and he had been since Sasuke realized that Raiga was no longer following them. It had been a fairly rough plan. Rough on him as he had been running and calculating his chakra as he played bait.

Still he had been proud of his little team as they worked to finish up their mission, tie up the loose ends and secure Raiga. Honestly, he was pissed at himself for forgetting about Naruto. He was irritated at himself for forgetting how Naruto had sounded, how he had looked just at seeing Ranmaru.

He was an idiot for thinking that Naruto would let Raiga be taken in alive. It was like a nightmare for Naruto who held onto his past so tightly. Who had loved his friends so much. Who held onto his memories and the love he had found even while he accepted the bad along with the good and tried to forge a new place to find home.

Memories of Haku, or Zabuza. They had to be so vibrant and so loud in Naruto’s mind every time he saw Ranmaru. The worst of it would have to be Raiga, playing the role though he did not know it. Naruto’s anger at Zabuza, his frustration and disgust that had never gotten resolved thanks to Kakashi and Konoha.

While Naruto was at the point he could discuss his friends and their faults with a laugh he was still angry. Haku who was used, Haku who Naruto had loved regardless of his faults, who Naruto still loved and carried with him every day.

It had to be terrifying for Naruto to see what he saw as Haku’s story playing out yet again. Not being able to do anything or save the one he so deeply cared for, except that he could do something this time. That had to be it. That had to be it. Kakashi could feel to his bones that was what it was.

He had seen the parallels after all but still this had been insane and reckless. He did not even know fully what had happened. There had been pressure and immense power before the fog had been blown away like a curtain and he had seen a sight that made his heart drop down to his knees.

Naruto locked in combat with Raiga as the two fell over the edge to the area to the pass that they
had been trying to lure Raiga to. Of course they had been planning to lead him to it by running. Not throwing Raiga over the edge and joining the bastard on the ride down. Honestly, Naruto just could sometimes be so reckless that it hurt Kakashi’s heart and his stomach.

While Kakashi had read reports on Naruto’s little training adventures, while he had sat in on quite a few of them and marvelled at them while his stomach twisted up in knots sometimes for others. While he had spoken to Naruto’s watchers sometimes and learned things and prepared himself for several small shocks, while he had done all of that and he knew that the drop over while terrifying was nothing close to what Naruto did for training and sport. While he knew all of that, his body and heart would not settle until Naruto was before him and he could make certain with his own eye that Naruto was alive and fine.

He was tempted to do something because of the horrible shock the boy gave him too. Squeeze him a bit for the reckless move that had been unnecessary. Kakashi could have changed the plans enough that he took out Raiga and delivered the body to Kiri after Konoha looked it over. There had been no reason for Naruto to do that.

Kakashi’s blood was so hot, it was pumping through his veins so fast as he tried to calm himself but his nerves just would not let him. He wanted to strangle him for being so reckless and careless letting his anger get to him. He wanted to share his fear and concerns let the boy know exactly what he was putting Kakashi through with these crazy reckless things.

It was certainly hard to make a decision on it all but one thing for Kakashi that he knew that he was going to do was that he was going to find him. This sort of thing was taking its toll on him, having Naruto out of sight was hard, having him in danger was worse. Knowing that people were after him and that they lurked in the shadows waiting to snatch him drove Kakashi out of his mind and made him paranoid. Having Naruto be so reckless was hard on the heart, he was actually feeling lightheaded. Just a little bit.

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His hands were injured, spilt open and bleeding feely. They were trying to heal as he scaled up the rock face but with every rock the healing was wasted. Naruto paid no mind to it. When he got to the top then he could focus on things like that.

Part of him wanted to ask the fox exactly why he was pouring so much energy into healing Naruto but Naruto just wanted to regroup, fix up his hands and see what they had to do next. Raiga had left a bad taste in his mouth and he was just relieved that it was finally all over. He was ready to face his team and he was ready for the next step now that he could push reminders of the parts of his past that pissed him off was no longer so blatant and right before him as though he could not do anything.

Well he could do something now. He had just proved it. Not again, he would not see that again.

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Tenten felt relief when the hand scrabbled over the edge, they had all ended up together at some part. The kid, Ranmaru had gotten picked up by Gai-sensei and she guessed that it was funny in a way but she had been too worried. For Sakura, for Naruto to actually be thinking clearly. For Sakura, for Naruto to actually be thinking clearly.

When they had run into the rather calm Neji she had relaxed as they grouped together and waited. She had wanted to bite her nails. Do something to vent her frustration but instead she had paced the edge and huffed before she gave up and sat next to Sakura whose entire focus was on the edge of the cliff.
Naruto was completely insane, that was her thought as they waited the rain a light drizzle on them. They waited with a few mutters from Sakura and Sasuke occasionally and an intense silence from Kakashi-sensei that she could feel at her back. It scared her a bit the man’s silence and total focus. Everything was so quiet until Naruto’s hand appeared.

The whole atmosphere changed, it was as though a breath had been held the entire time that they had been there and now it had final been released. It was the breath of fresh air she had not even known they had been missing, after the dirty hand followed filthy mud covered blonde hair but the wry smile that popped up afterwards made her stomach settle. She had known by Neji’s patience that he was fine but it was his appearance that set all her worries, all those moments of shock and fear right to the back burner. He was not her team’s but she was so glad to see that smile.

“Hey.” Naruto got to his feet and eyed them all, he was filthy covered in dirt, mud and he had some blood on his shoulder that looked as though it should be his but for some reason she could not see a bleeding wound. “Um mission complete I guess.”

“You’re an idiot.” Sakura got to her feet and dusted off her dress slowly and deliberately. “You couldn’t have let us in on the plan?”

“Sakura-chan.” There was just a tiny bit of regret there. “This was something… I had to do by myself. Couldn’t take the chance. It isn’t that I didn’t trust you or the mission. It is just that… there really was no other way to get the true ending.”

“No other way?” Sakura’s voice was contemplative and quiet. “You certain?”

“From the moment I saw him I was absolutely certain that there was no other way forward than this.” Naruto ducked his head at Sakura’s stare. “There really wasn’t any other way Sakura-chan. Guys like him… this whole thing. I didn’t mean to be I had to do it else it wouldn’t have changed anything.”

“It’s a long way down and those rocks had to have done some damage. Maybe did our job for us too.” Sakura sighed before she placed her hands on her hips. “You are still an idiot.”

“I know.”

“You are supposed to talk to us too. Don’t run off and do your own thing. We won’t always forgive you for going and doing stupid things and getting hurt.” She tilted her head in the direction of Sasuke and her sensei. “But we get it, it had to be done. We aren’t totally mad… much. Scare us like that again though…”

“Sorry Sakura-chan.” With his head ducked like that he did look regretful. It even tugged at Tenten’s heart a bit there.

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“You are an idiot you weren’t thinking clearly.” Sasuke said as they trailed down the pass. “Did you have to do it like that? Did you have to go behind our backs like that when you know we’ve gotten our hands dirty before and that we would do it again?” Naruto did not respond fast enough because Kakashi watched the way Sasuke crowded Naruto against the rock wall. “You aren’t protecting us when you do things like this.”

“I know I’m not.” Naruto’s tone was simple but Kakashi could feel the buried emotion. “This was something that I had to do. I didn’t want to talk about it.”

“And we can guess why.” Kakashi watched Sasuke’s hand fist Naruto’s jacket. “But you can’t just-
we need to know what you are thinking you can’t just- don’t you trust us by now? We would have changed plans for-“

“I don’t want you to do that for me! It had to be me! It was my problem, it was the only solution I could see. There was only one outcome and I know this because I’ve lived this!”

“We understand that!” Sasuke’s hand clenched tighter. “We know! That’s why we aren’t pissed about you taking matters into your own hands. We are pissed because you said nothing, you pretended to go along with us and you did your own thing as if we are children! Or idiots! If he had given us too much trouble we would have killed him too! We wanted to!”

“But you shouldn’t have to!” Naruto’s anger had bubbled up. “It was all wrong, so wrong and he was never going to leave that kid alone he was fucked up in the head and it is the same story all over again. You can’t save the kid with the shadow lurking like that. He had to die!”

“We know!”

“Then why this?” Naruto’s hands clamped down on Sasuke’s wrists. “Why are you mad at me?”

“Because you keep trying to leave us behind! We’re a team and while you do your thing from time to time you are always supposed to include us. Going behind our backs makes it look like you don’t trust us. From the moment you saw him.” Sasuke’s hand tightened. “You had planned to kill him and you planned from the very beginning to leave us out.”

Naruto’s mouth opened and closed a few times before he closed his eyes and his head slid back and thumped against the rock. “You’re right.” He said softly. “But I had to be the one to do it.”

“I get that.” Sasuke’s grip loosened. “I get it now but it would have been nice to know what you were thinking and not having to see everything at once. You did what you felt you had to do, it works out for us but don’t act like you’re all alone out here.” Sasuke shook his head. “We wanted him dead too, at the right opportunity any of us would have taken him out. He was too dangerous.”

“I just couldn’t…” Naruto’s head came back up as a half smile came to his lips. “I messed up.”

“Yes you did.” Sasuke shook his head. “You’re an idiot but don’t do things like that. We get it, me, Sakura, Kakashi we get it but don’t do shit on your own when we could easily help you.”

“I was dumb.” Naruto grunted. “Damn it, I got so shaken up from the kid and that stupid bastard.”

“If you had gotten yourself seriously injured…” Sasuke sighed. “Did you forget already?”

“Of course I didn’t…” Naruto swallowed. “I knew I could- but that isn’t an excuse is it.” He finished in a mumbled. “Damn it… hell let’s just go and see the bastard buried already.”

“Least you understand what you did wrong.” Sasuke backed away before he followed the others that had not waited on them. “Try not to do it again.”

“Sasuke lecturing me… ah I really fucked up.” Naruto straightened his clothes before he followed. Kakashi remained silent and still where he was for a few more seconds before he followed. The moment his footsteps registered Naruto shot a look at him his eyes regretful before he turned back around. Kakashi just kept his breathing slow and calm as he followed behind.

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“Sensei.” Naruto had dropped back a considerable amount. “Um… I’m sorry.”
“Sorry for what?” He was proud of how his voice was calm and normal, soothing and not showing the panic and worry from before. The sheer fear and of course the bubbling irritation and anger that Naruto had gone off and done that, he had not even talked to them he had just done that like if team seven did not matter as though they did not understand as if Kakashi would not understand the dilemma as if all those months had meant nothing.

“I shouldn’t have done that, Sasuke was right.” Naruto frowned as he walked next to Kakashi. “I don’t know what I was thinking, that was really stupid. Incredibly stupid.”

“Do you know now?” Kakashi heard himself ask. “What you were thinking?”

“It was stupid, really stupid I just feel so embarrassed right now even though I’m glad that he’s dead because… well you know. “Naruto sighed. “But I can’t believe I let it get to me like that, that I thought that I had to do this by myself when that isn’t true. I know that people need help and when you have help you should use it. I’m strong but I’m not unstoppable, asking for help doesn’t make me weak but… for a few moments there since I heard the whole thing it felt like it was all up to me.” Naruto’s tone was soft and confused. “And that’s stupid because it hasn’t been me and up to me for a long time. I’ve always had someone to help me even if they are just behind me waiting to lend a hand. I like having people have my back.” Naruto’s tone had changed a soft pleading.

Kakashi’s eye met Naruto’s gaze and he was unable to stop himself from giving in a bit. He could see what Naruto meant, how the boy felt and even though that did not change things, it did not change Kakashi and how he felt, what he was burning with. Even though it did not change any or all of that he could admit that Naruto knew the problem and that Naruto was going to deal with it. Those few seconds where Kakashi’s heart felt as though it was going to stop. Naruto was going to make sure that it did not happen again. Kakashi did not like feeling as though he was stranded on the top of a mountain and the first strong breeze would throw him over. He did not like it at all, he had finally gotten firm ground under his feet he was not going to lose it so easily.

“We are supporting you, don’t forget that we are here.” Kakashi paused. “Haku was your most important person, not being able to save him doesn’t mean that you are trash. You couldn’t do anything back then.”

“But I did do something now.” Naruto pointed out. “It isn’t Haku but… it is how it should have been even if he hated me afterwards. This.” He stressed. “This is how it should have been, how it is supposed to be. People like Haku, strong, sweet, beautiful and they tie you up in knots because deep down they are good.” Naruto stressed. “But people like Raiga, people like Zabuza.” He bit off a shiver. “They catch them early and the only path for people like Haku and Ranmaru afterwards is death. People like Zabuza, Raiga… they never win in the end and if they do it is while standing on a mountain of bodies. I can’t let Ranmaru be another body.”

“That’s how you know you did the right thing.” Kakashi said softly. “But take care of yourself too, just because you can does not mean you should. We are here too and while technically the plan was a good one. Using us as a distraction… it still leaves us feeling a bit unwanted.”

“That’s my bad sensei.” Naruto looked frustrated. “I can’t believe I thought something so stupid, that I did something so stupid. This, everyone means so much but I put everything at risk because I just couldn’t see past the nightmare. It was a dumb move. Rookie move, I’m not alone and I didn’t use all I could. Even if some of you didn’t like the plan and what had to be done… I know you would have gotten it at least. Even if Baa-chan would have gotten mad at you. Sakura-chan I knew she hated him and wanted him dead too. Sasuke wouldn’t have cared if we killed him or not. I knew all this but I thought it had to be me.”

“We all make mistakes, just try not to repeat this one.”
“Thanks sensei.” Naruto’s smile was brighter. “Of course we are talking as though we’ve confirmed that he is dead and even though he fell and must have gotten buried, I’ve learned a body is nice to confirm things.”

“If he lived through that, then we’ve got trouble on our hands. I’d be doubting you living through that.” Kakashi glanced over Naruto. “Even with your added boosts, you would have some trouble walking away from a drop over like that and several stab wounds.”

“You saw those?” Naruto was impressed.

Kakashi covered his sharingan with his hand. “I try to make sure I don’t miss the important things.”

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“Good thing we didn’t bring Ranmaru.” Tenten winced. “He doesn’t need to see this.” Hell she doubted that she should be seeing this either. Whatever in hell this even was. She could not believe what in the hell she was looking at. Naruto had… he had done all of this?

The pass, most of it was still accessible but still the rocks, the destroyed pathway. Hell the obvious place that Raiga had fallen, his swords somehow penetrating the damn rubble. It was terrifying when she looked at it because shinobi could do amazing and deadly things but this did not feel like shinobi work at all.

She had felt that way when she had watched the two fight and fall after all. There was a feeling of a deadly duel with combatants locked and it was way beyond a simple mission. She had felt like that and it certainly looked like that now. They had travelled all the way to the bottom team seven taking time to chew Naruto out from time to time on the way down.

Sakura had not done it but the look she had sent Naruto spoke volumes to Tenten. It seemed as if Naruto and Sakura had already had their understanding. Either Sakura was nicer and more understanding than Tenten had originally thought or Sakura understood Naruto better than most people on her team or even the village because while Naruto kept shooting Sakura apologetic looks Sakura seemed fine and with each look she seemed almost amused.

A complete difference from her team members who had seemed almost ready to explode. Naruto and Sasuke had obviously had their talk but Sasuke’s folded arms and the way he glared at the sky spoke of the lingering irritation. Kakashi-sensei had felt terrifying on their way down the mountain pass. She was not afraid to say that she had walked quicker than normal to avoid the feeling of that lurking at her back.

They were going to work out whatever that was that was bothering them and she was so damn relieved that she was not a part of that team. Just watching made her want to flinch. Still it looked as though it was the end to all of their problems. Buried under the rubble after falling off a mountain. Neji could not see his chakra either. Dead was dead mission almost complete.

Still, she was allowed to say that team seven gave her conflicting feelings right? That when she watched them together sometimes she felt this burning fire in her and urge to get stronger and do better with herself and her own team because damn it wasn’t fair that they were so amazing, so strong and so good. It just was not fair.

As often as she felt that light envy, there was this bone chilling fear that she could not shake even though she tried. Naruto was the start of it and it followed to Kakashi-sensei because as much as the man horsed around with Gai-sensei he really was everything he was rumoured to be. Efficient
strong Jounin that was far stronger than he acted day to day. Gai-sensei was amazing, he had his cool moments from time to time but goodness… Kakashi-sensei had this feel to him sometimes.

Yes it started with Naruto but didn’t everything when it came to team seven? There was those looks Naruto drew. The way he looked back at people almost daring them to say something. A secret between most the shinobi of the village and Naruto. Something that made Naruto walk through crowds sometimes like a shadow.

Something that made him different from the rest of the shinobi in the village because there was a difference. She knew it, the other genins could feel it she knew they could. The other shinobi did but everything verbally confirm that Naruto was different.

There was that thing that Naruto did sometimes. Separate himself from them, the things he said when he talked about them being village shinobi. It confused her but so did everything about him honestly. How could he have such a happy smile, be such a little flirt but still scare the crap out of everyone like that?

Sakura had it rough, thanks to everything Sakura had been forced to change and Tenten said forced because circumstances changed them all. The fear of loss pushed them to be harder and stronger. While she herself loved to train loved her own brand of fighting. Too many moments lingered in her mind and steadied her hands where they would have shaken. When she thought of that and she saw team seven… well she cared for Sakura a lot but that still did not stop the envy. She was proud too because who wouldn’t want a team like that? But she was not ready to be on a team like that. It was too intense.

They were good, they were smart but they worked in ways best for them. Tenten? She was not prepared for that the way they locked themselves in determined to be each other’s shield and sword. It was intense and all of them had a feel sometimes to them. Sometimes it felt as though the shadow that so strongly marked Naruto as different had spread to all of team seven and that it was so strong sometimes even in the brightest light all you could focus on was that shadow.

She cared for Sakura, she liked team seven but she could not ignore the huge thing that they had become in such a short time. She could not say that she would or would not make the same decisions that they would make but she could say that they gave things a different feel. There was so much mystery wrapped up in team seven, so many things unsaid and she knew if she wanted answers she had to not only look at Naruto. She had to look at the people that were holding this big secret. Sakura did not like how adults, how older shinobi watched Naruto. Even though Tenten was one of them, she did not like how people were beginning to watch team seven.

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“Looks like that is the end of it.” Naruto said quietly. It was a big pile of rocks. He could even see Raiga’s arm sticking out of a part of it. The swords, it seems that he really did love them more than anything after all choosing to protect them as much as possible rather than toss them away.

Honestly, Naruto was not even surprised because from the very beginning. Raiga had reminded him of Zabuza and Zabuza had been crazy about his sword. No one had been allowed to touch it besides Haku and sometimes not even Haku. That sword had been like a part of him with him carrying it as though it was the lightest thing ever. He could still see Zabuza in his mind’s eye carting that sword around as though it was nothing.

It had been a part of him, a part of his identity and his reason. So Naruto was not surprised that Raiga had chosen to treat that sword as best as he could even with his last moments. While Zabuza had surprised him in his last moments by acknowledging Naruto and trying to treat him like an
actual person did not change the core of what Zabuza was.

What he had done was cruel but he had done it anyway. Did not change the facts before all of them. Raiga had been dangerous and Ranmaru too compromised to see the situation and act on it. Just as Haku had been. There was no ay someone as smart as Haku, as cunning as Haku had not seen the way that the tides had been changing. Haku had known but he had stayed anyway, fought anyway. Kept loving anyway and that was painful to think about, it had been painful to see and he could admit that it had been foolish.

Seeing Orochimaru, learning the truth about Kabuto… he could look back at Haku and know that while Zabuza had not been as dangerous as Orochimaru. While he could admit the two of them were different threats on different levels it did not change how Haku and Ranmaru were ready to throw their lives away for the dream of a blood-soaked men way below them.

It was foolish but Naruto knew that when you were alone. When there was the hell of not really existing to people, any hand looked like an angel. No matter how clawed it was and no matter how it snaked around you and refused to let go as you were drained away. It still looked like an angel, a saviour even when you put the pieces together and could see for yourself just how wrong it was.

Raiga was better off dead, for Ranmaru for everyone else Raiga had been around. For all his victims and the families of his victims. He was better off where he was because while he could care for Ranmaru he had been clearly too unstable and had not been good enough to be anything to Ranmaru but a reason the kid got killed eventually. A killer justifying a kill, sometimes Naruto amused himself.

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Rain was kind of fitting, it had started at the most ironic time for them, at least to Neji. He had stared at the rubble for a good long time making certain that there was nothing. After the lengths Naruto had gone to in order to make sure that the man was dead he did not want any mistakes.

Team seven had seemed already certain about the death but there was no mistaking the relief that went through Naruto and the rest of team seven when Neji confirmed it. He could not look away. Every moment with Naruto was a journey because with every second even if he did not know it he was revealing another part of himself.

While he did not want to deal with the young Ranmaru one on one he did care. He was loud, could be a bit brash but he did have a deep heart as well as a deeper understanding of the world, how it worked and how cruel the world could be and how cruel people could be. It made Neji wonder just how far he could go, it made him want to watch him for as long as he could. It made him dread Naruto burning out but once Naruto had support he doubted that kindness would be burned out by the realities of the harsh world.

Naruto was strange, a strange person, a stranger shinobi but there was no doubt that he cared and that he wanted to do the right thing. Even if no one cheered him on. Even if everyone scorned him. That sort of determination to go forward, to do good. Neji envied it and he wanted to see more of it. But he already knew how to see more. He just had to keep watching Naruto.

The drizzles picked up and he turned away from team seven and the rubble. The job was finished so it was time to let Gai-sensei who had stayed with Ranmaru know what had happened to Raiga. Then it was wrap up and time to go home. Ranmaru’s fate… such an intelligent boy with a strong gift. While he would not thank Naruto or the rest of them, Neji doubted that he would be alone for long. The old woman had taken to him a bit. Sometimes one person watching was all it took.
Well when things were going right it seemed like something had to go wrong. Team seven had left to start assisting the miners leaving team Gai with Ranmaru and their still very stubborn Karashi. Tenten could not help but blame herself. They had been helping old Sansho build a shelter for the upcoming storm.

They had looked away for what a few minutes? An hour or most but they had come back after their work to find the two of them gone! Ranmaru was still not fully well there was no way that he could walk off. Sakura had looked over him, Neji too although while they had pinched faces when examining his legs, they said with work he could become strong.

With work and food but unspoken had been the time. There was no way that he could have walked off. He had to have nagged Karashi or judging by how mouthy Ranmaru had proven to be maybe bullied him into carrying him because one thing Tenten had noticed as that Karashi was weak to strong orders.

Not necessarily a bad thing she was not going to tear him apart for things like that but facts were facts and Karashi found it easy to buckle to strong orders from those he regarded as either stronger than him or higher up than him in status. It was cute when it was his mother with a spoon. It was gut clenching terrifying when it was Ranmaru making him do crazy things as if a storm was not coming.

It was not as if Tenten did not know where they had gone, they had not run away, well not exactly. She knew where Ranmaru had gone she did not know what he was up to but she knew where he had gone because she was thinking of the face that he had made when they spoke of the fall and the rocks. She had seen the way his eyes had misted over. She had pretended not to hear how he had muttered about how he was not useless.

She remembered all of that now as she ran towards the path that led to where Raiga was buried. As a shinobi she was faster than any civilian could dream of being but if they had a head start most of that was moot unless she could cover great distances in a few seconds and that was just impossible. It would make traveling to other countries a breeze but there was not a single shinobi that could get that done. Some had faster paces than others but they all had human limits.

Still, while they had a head start on her, maybe an hour or so she knew she should be able to find them by the grave and nudge them back to the house where they needed to be. It was not that she did not sympathize or understand. Maybe Ranmaru going to see the grave himself was a good thing. Maybe this was what he needed it order to say goodbye and start a new thread for his life but maybe she was hanging out with team seven too much because she could just feel a knot of dread in her stomach urging her to run faster.

“Remember that time with the nuns and the cave, that mission where we thought it was all over and Sasuke-kun had just started to fix his tools when that priest rigged the cave to explode?” Sakura asked softly as they sat watching the villagers below them working around the mine. “Those few moments before it all it went to hell. It feels like that right now.”

“I know.” Naruto’s head was tilted back as he sat on a large white rock. “It feels like the calm. Like the eye. We know better than anyone that the mission isn’t over, we aren’t safe until we are back in Konoha.”

“Well said.” Kakashi’s book snapped shut. “So? What do you think we are missing?”
“Something big maybe a puppet master?” Naruto mumbled before he shook his head. “It doesn’t feel like that kind of situation though.”

“But it does feel wrong enough that I’m expecting anything crazy to happen, anything unbelievable is not out of the cards.” Kakashi watched as Sasuke surveyed those below them before he checked the dark skies. “It has to do with the storm in some way.”

“You’re never going to get over the seal that blew up in your face are you.” Naruto sighed. “It was wonky, it could have happened to anyone we’re lucky it wasn’t the seal to the underworld that it was supposed to be. Besides I’ve been thinking for a while now that the storm seems to be getting stronger. It’s been coming on fast now but…”

“It seems almost unnatural right?” Sakura glared at the sky. “And we can hear the thunder, it isn’t close yet. Still faint but we can still hear it. It’s going to be a big storm.”

“I can’t help but wonder what the hell it is going to bring with it.” Naruto frowned. “I’ve been seeing some faint lightning flashes but nothing serious but it seems the closer the storm gets the more we are seeing and the stronger it is getting. I can’t help but feel like it is going to be a problem.”

“Naruto this whole mission was a problem. Those idiots didn’t even turn up to take care of their own missing nin and he ended up causing all of us trouble. How he’s been just sitting there like a king doing all these things and they didn’t find him is beyond me.” Sasuke shook his head displacing several drops of water. “All of this has been a pain.”

“I don’t want to jinx it but I think the other countries or at least Kiri has decided to start testing us I mean it makes no sense but it seems like this was a test of some sort to see if we are still the same Konoha or something.” Sakura shifted her gloved hand, her hand coming to rest under her chin. “The local and non-local lords have finally calmed down with the ridiculous missions and we are not being flooded like we have been the past few months so maybe the other countries think it is their turn. They can’t exactly challenge us to war so testing our shinobi in ways they think best might be their moves.”

“Well thought out Sakura.” Kakashi was proud of her clear thinking. “That seems to be exactly the case, now that the lords have settled down the other countries are making their own small discrete moves concerning Konoha’s stability and strength. Not exactly spying but just testing. Tsunade-sama can’t exactly refuse official requests for help.”

“Baa-chan can though.” Naruto pointed out. “She totally can and she would do it too she has that kind of attitude sometimes. If you don’t think she wouldn’t rip up the paper they send in you’re deluding yourself.”

Naruto sadly had a valid point. “Tsunade-sama would refuse the requests for personal and non-personal reasons but the council would not let her.” He stressed. “Tsunade-sama might want to lock Konoha down and prevent others from seeing our strength and operations too closely. She may want to control exactly what they perceive but as Hokage she still takes advice from the council. She can’t alienate them too much so while she may want to give into her impulses her goals do seem to be long term.”

“Baa-chan being mature.” Naruto seemed amused. “Still I don’t like it.”

“You better pay attention because it will be you before long that has to deal with other countries looking at us and wanting to test us.” Sakura snorted. “Still I don’t like knowing I’m right this time. They are gathering information on us and making us clean up their messes and for what? to make
sure we are still one of the strongest countries.”

“And to locate the biggest names and the biggest threats. I wouldn’t be surprised if they are trying to map down the Hokage’s thoughts and movements.” Sasuke’s words were quiet and halted Naruto and Sakura for a moment.

“Well if they can figure out what baa-chan is thinking then they should be nice enough to tell the rest of us because I can’t figure it out. I don’t think anyone can because it looks like a mess most of the time or like she’s running a labour force or that she’s trying to milk our team for every bit we have.”

“Certainly, feels like it.” Sakura sighed. “But I’m sure the long term benefit is for the village, for the teams too because as annoying and frustrating and frankly dangerous most of these missions are, we are getting stronger.”

“But stronger for what?” Sasuke asked. “Is she also preparing for war?”

“Maybe but what kind of war?” Sakura tapped the rock with her free hand. “If anyone can figure her out from these things, they deserve a medal.”

“They should also share with the rest of us.” Naruto snorted with a wave of his hand. “Instead of leaving us in the dark because we don’t know what Baa-chan wants and what she’s planning.”

“I’m certain it works out in the end.” Kakashi tried to reassure.

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Neji knew something was wrong before he saw the note, the weather had been acting up. The lightning had gone from eye catching to suspicious and unnatural. By the time that he and Gai-sensei returned and found the note and Tenten gone Neji had known that the mission was not over.

He was angry at himself for not noticing that Ranmaru and Karashi had disappeared. He had been busy storm proofing the place but if he had been on his guard he would have known. Tenten was on top of it gone off to bring them back before they got hurt and worse but Neji could just feel that something was wrong about the whole situation with every second the feeling that the mission was not complete nagged at him.

It made him want to set off as well, to the grave at first but to warn team seven even though he knew that they had not dropped their guard the slightest. He was frustrated with the situation; the storm was coming in hard and fast. The weather was unpredictable and dangerous. They were still in a situation that could turn on them. The mission with every second did not feel complete.

Gai-sensei had that look on his face again the look usually popped up on him seeing familiar faces but not being able to place them exactly. This was that look but it was aimed at Tenten’s brief note. It was not a question to whether they would set out after her or not. They were a team and while she could handle two kids the matter of the storm and Neji’s bad feeling remained. He suspected that in Gai-sensei there was an even deeper feeling of unease.

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Naruto had known that it was not the end of it but it still sucked to be proven right, why did he have to be proven right about the end not being there? It would have been nice to be wrong. he would have been happy getting back behind Konoha’s gates with nothing else happening.

He did not know how it had happened, he did not know why but he had quite a few suspicions
lurking at the back of his head. What mattered was what was right before he proving to be really troublesome. No one liked facing dead men.

“Konoha shinobi.” Raiga snarled. “You fucking bastards.”

Naruto would have done so many things to be wrong about them being finished but he was still going to face this problem head on because that was what he did. It was what had to be done and his feelings from before still stood. People like Raiga had to be taken down. Before they rose to power over a pile of innocent bodies was preferred but no matter when it had to happen, the past should not be repeated. Not past like that, not with fate like that waiting.

“He’s supposed to be dead.” Sasuke said dryly. Naruto heard Sasuke slide his kunai into his hand. “I’m certain that he was declared dead and that Sakura poked his hands and everything.”

“He looks rather alive to me.” Kakashi-sensei said cheerfully. “Alive and rather pissed wouldn’t you say Naruto-kun? He obviously took some damage but he’s standing before us.”

“Standing but how.” Sakura murmured. “Those are mortal wounds I can see them now that he isn’t buried in rocks and rubble and look at his chest! His face! He’s covered in wounds that should have killed him if not right away but eventually after falling.”

“He’s still standing and he’s breathing Sakura.” Sasuke pointed out. “Let’s accept the fact that he’s supposed to be dead and correct the situation because he’s looking more and more alive by the second.”

“I can’t help but wonder what the hell happened.” Sakura sighed as she changed her stance, the ground underneath her made a soft sound as she readied herself. Naruto followed the lead by changing his own stance, he was still ready to leap forward but he was on the defensive because the situation was just too weird.

“How isn’t important now until we’ve corrected the situation. We can worry all about how and why when we are making sure that it does not happen again after he’s dead… again.” Sasuke answered as he shifted to a defensive stance.

“Is it me or does he seem a bit angrier than trying to kill him would allow?” Kakashi-sensei mused aloud. “He did not seem the type to get mad about assassination. What do you think is his main problem with us?”

“Besides trying to kill him?” Sakura tone was disbelieving. “Isn’t that reason enough?”

“I have a bad feeling about how he came back to life.” Naruto muttered.

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It was worse than she had feared. Karashi was nowhere to be found but the fallen figure, the figure slumped over the destroyed grave was Ranmaru and it did not look good at all. She blamed everything for this situation. The weather was crazy and getting crazier. The kid that deserved better, Tenten feared the worse for him with every step that she took.

Missions were rarely easy but couldn’t they win this one? Her hands shook as she reached towards Ranmaru’s shoulder. The boy’s face was pressed into the dirt and rubble of the destroyed grave. No swords, around and no Karashi she could guess what had happened.

Somehow Raiga was not dead. She had no idea how he had pulled it off, if Ranmaru had known. Facts were still facts and Raiga’s body and sword were gone, Ranmaru was either dead or in bad
shape and the mission was not over because there was a man that was supposed to be dead and buried walking around.

Hell she was more than a little freaked about that because Raiga had been clearly buried under rocks and rubble his swords the only thing about his still undamaged. Neji had examined the makeshift grave. Sakura had too but somehow the bastard had crawled out of that grave and was walking around?

Ranmaru had been back with Gai-sensei there was no way that he had been able to interfere with Neji’s sight again. There was no way that he had been able to do that so what the hell had happened there? Was it a latent ability? Some sort of freaky miracle? Or had his ability have something to do with it?

As she got to her knees and turned Ranmaru over she was prepared for the worst. She had been braced for the sight of the worst possible scenario but when she rolled him over and she saw his face a gasp of relief escaped her. He was dirty, breathing shallowly but he was still alive. Whatever the kid had done he was still alive to hear about the consequences.

But she could see him getting slowly better by the second, she dreaded to think what he must have looked like after doing whatever he had done. She tugged Ranamru close to her shoulder as she eyed their surroundings. No Raiga, no Karashi and while she hoped Raiga had not killed him in a fit of rage she had to consider the situation. Raiga had not wanted to leave Ranmaru, he considered him valuable. Valuable enough that Raiga came back for him and only had retreated in the first place because the odds of getting him back at that moment had been too slim.

Still it must have been a bad enough seen for Raiga at the very least. He must have clawed his way out or something and seen Karashi and of course Ranmaru doing whatever just lying there. It did not excuse anything. Did not make it right or anything but Tenten could see that it must have looked pretty damn bad at least on Raiga’s end.

He had thought that was the end maybe. Been certain about is death, maybe a bit accepting of it because he might be a crazy bastard with no morals or very few morals at all but he was still a shinobi and when death came looking sometimes you had to accept it.

So he had clawed his way out, seen Ranmaru and the rage and confusion must have overtaken him. Swamped in disbelief? Because Ranmaru had been left here while what… Raiga went on a suicide run? Were things really that serious? He needed the kid but not that much. His death should mean Raiga running away to find the next useful something and saving his own damn hide but what if it was not like that?

She cradled Ranmaru to her as the rain picked up and she thought it over. She doubted Raiga had run, no she doubted that because she could see how the lightning was flashing, the storm had arrived but it was being amplified and she had no doubts as to the source. Things had gotten unnecessarily complicated and she had no idea who she was supposed to blame besides the obvious. Raiga was wrong but Ranmaru… whatever he had done why had he done it? Putting his life at risk for the sake of being useful again? It just hurt her insides thinking about it.

Team seven would be ready to face Raiga if Raiga was going after them again but…

Why couldn’t this be a bit easier on them why did it have to be like this and so annoying like this. She tapped Ranmaru’s cheek as his colour improved. She just knew that things had gotten worse but there was only so much she could do but there was so much that she would not allow to stand.

Maybe a second was all they could buy. Maybe a few moments maybe it could all be cleared up
although she doubted that last one but if Raiga was rampaging because he thought Ranmaru was dead and he blamed Konoha shinobi or the world for taking Ranmaru away even though it would be Ranmaru’s own decision and Raiga’s fault. If Raiga was rampaging with those sorts of delusions he needed to see the damn truth for himself face to face and Tenten was going to show him if she had to carry the boy over all the mountains and passes herself through the storm.

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“He’s blaming us?” Naruto roared, Kakashi grabbed for the boy’s shoulder and gently pulled him back before Naruto could launch off at Raiga. He registered the shaky Karashi nearby his clothes muddy and burnt. “He’s blaming us like if he hadn’t been filling the kid’s head up with bullshit for years creating the damn motivation!”

“Ranmaru…” Sakura said quietly. “I don’t want to believe it.” She raised her head and gritted her teeth before she continued. “But I can see that happening I know it did and while I’m not okay with it… I will accept it but not his claims that it was our fault.”

“We didn’t even know he could bring people back from the dead or we would have kept an eye on him ourselves.” Sasuke pointed out. “We aren’t in the wrong for trying to save people and do our jobs. Raiga’s fucking insane if he thinks for a second that we are going to accept the blame for what he caused. If the kid is dead now then it certainly is his fault. He drove the kid to make those choices.”

“He can’t be fucking serious.” Naruto’s shoulder was tense under Kakashi’s fingers. “Our fault? He’s the fucking one- he got the kid killed! He’s the one that drove him to that point! It is why he had to die in the first place! From the moment I saw him I knew he would be the reason Ranmaru would get killed! I knew if we didn’t separate them that he would get the kid killed and now he wants to lay the kid’s death at my feet?”

“Naruto… breathe.” Sakura said softly. “Don’t let him get to you. We are here, we are here right next to you. He’s laying the blame at all our feet and we are not going to have that.”

“Right.” Naruto nodded as the tension from his shoulder eased a bit. “Fuck that guy… I refuse to believe that Ranmaru… after we worked so hard he threw his life away. Why? Because that’s the future he saw for himself? What about his dreams? His hopes? The wishes he had as he lay in that bed waiting for death or a saviour? He wanted to see the world and you are telling me he ended up dead in the middle of a rocky mountain range in order to save a delusional washed up kiri shinobi that can’t take criticism and wants to live in a fantasy world where people cry and think about good things only, not the shit he does to them?”

“The blame for that I’m not accepting.” Sasuke said before he edged closer to Naruto. “This isn’t our fault and if we have to beat it into this idiot and have him take responsibility for the things he set in motion it’s a fine way to end this mission properly.”

“If it is true… damn it.” Sakura sighed before she too shifted her stance. “I wanted to help him but it seems we can’t save them all. Even if we lose Ranmaru, there are plenty of villagers here who need our help we can’t just mourn one we have to think of everyone who suffered under him. He won’t acknowledge their deaths as anything but entertainment!”

“Mah…” Kakashi shifted his own stance as he stood behind his team. “We all seem pretty fired up, let’s go then.”

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“It’s your fault.” Raiga snarled as he held up his swords. “You took him from me.” Sakura bit back the rage that statement brought up and instead calmed herself. She could not afford to get mad she had two hotheads ready to do that for all of them. Instead she watched Sasuke and Naruto at her sides ready to leap forward and fight.

Naruto was almost a lost cause his head was so hot of Raiga and what he represented and meant. The thought of Ranmaru being lost to all of them had to bother Naruto more than anything. She would have to take advantage of his rage and guide him not try to smother it out because that chance was long gone there was no sense thinking about it.

Sasuke was calmer, a lot cooler than she had thought that he would be and she was relived. Although she was willing to bet that was because Naruto was too fired up. it was a chance to see Naruto’s naked thoughts and emotions. While they got the full brunt of affection. Well almost full because she knew Naruto still held back, it might be for their sakes and for what they could currently stand with their modesty but Naruto still held back and they knew it could feel it.

While it made her curious to how far Naruto could go to how far he would go she had to admit she was fine with what he chose to share. Would she turn down the chance to observe his naked rage and emotions? Of course not it was better to observe them in controlled circumstances than in life or death missions. She had to know what she was working with it was that simple. It was not easy, it would never be easy but it was what they had it was that simple. It was not easy, it would never be easy but it was what they had it was what she had.

Naruto was usually so controlled and locked down they knew this, she knew this. She had complained about it but there were always cracks. Moments that something got to him and he was a different person before their eyes, either a bloodthirsty amused killer. A rage filled boy that seemed older than their years shouting hard facts at someone. Naruto had his moments of cool but she knew that pure honest emotion lurked under there and that it had the force of a hurricane.

Considering what someone like Raiga had to represent to Naruto he was doing rather fine at handling his emotions. She was impressed because she doubted she would be able to handle it so well. She doubted many shinobi or many people could stop themselves from giving into the rage and doing something about it. She was mad at Raiga on principle for what he had done to the villagers and to those that followed him. She was not that emotionally involved and yet she had to fight to stay her hands from doing something to the man before her.

Naruto had to have the strongest will to be able to control himself. his head was hot now, he was angry now but he was still in control even when it seemed like he had snapped somehow, somewhere he was still in control she did not have any proof to back it up but it certainly felt that way. She just could not explain the feeling that convinced her but she was positive that she was right. They had not seen Naruto without control yet and she just could feel that if he ever did there would be no holding back and it would be the greatest destruction ever seen around.

He seemed capable of it. She could sense it in him. So while his head was hot now, while he was angry, frustrated and a bit regretful now she could still guide him forward to deal with their opponent. While she was pissed at the situation and Raiga she had to think about everything that had led them to the point that they were at. Raiga…healed and attacking them once more. They could handle them but she wanted to do it quickly and without too much damage.

Naruto’s strange body aside she, Sasuke, Kakashi-sensei the three of them still healed like normal people although Kakashi-sensei was questionable because Sakura had never seen the man get injured or show proper fatigue. He gave her cute little warnings on missions but she had the feeling that he could carry on a little longer a little stronger than he gave on and that frustrated her to the core. While Sasuke and Naruto were her first defence. The ones who hit hard and fast it was her
responsibility to make sure that they came back to her in one piece.

Raiga’s ability and his swords, relics of Kiri or not they were really fucking annoying. Most likely Raiga had caught onto Kakashi-sensei’s and Sasuke’s little game from before and either would be striking harder or aiming at Naruto or herself. The swords were really annoying and the range that the attacks had. It was a literal lightning ball destroying the surroundings and everything it touched. While it was fascinating in theory it was fucking annoying to have to face.

Still, they did not have time for delusional murderers. They simply did not. While Sakura had been trying to put the things, she saw and heard into practice it was not easy taking textbook and applying it to real life. It was frustrating because most of the time people referred to normal things, everyday situations with the occasional wild card when her team was not normal and they drew all the wild cards from every deck available.

“We trust you Sakura.” Sasuke said so softly that she would have missed it if she had not been so attuned to every moment and every breath around them. She cracked a small smile at Sasuke’s words because a year ago she would have never dreamed to be in this situation.

“He’s not going to want to let us close.” She said slowly. “I think he’s probably wary of letting us get in too close because of the situation with Naruto. Whatever Naruto had up his sleeve last time won’t work again. He’ll be on guard for that and from the rest of us that means Chidori is out Sasuke-kun unless you are certain that you have enough space and time to get to him but considering what he is I bet it might be a waste of time.”

“Sounds about right Sakura.” Kakashi-sensei sounded amused behind them. “How do you want to proceed?” It was that sentence there that sparked a sort of understanding just then. How did she want to proceed. Kakashi-sensei was letting her choose the moves. Usually when things started to get above their heads or it got complicated Kakashi-sensei would laugh before he took over, leaping before them since he could. While they usually shared the mission duty this was the first time that she got to choose the moves in something so dangerous for a lot of them. Kakashi-sensei and Sasuke were at a disadvantage. Or so Kakashi-sensei claimed he was at a disadvantage. That was a wait and see thing. Still she was unable to help the huge grin that formed as she stared at the furious man ahead of them.

“He’s only one and I doubt he can handle all of us at one time. We have to be careful and on our guard. He’ll let lightning fly the moment we get too close but we can drive him down.” She glanced at Naruto to see him already watching her. He was still aware and hot headed she could see it in his face but the smile in his eyes, the pride. That was for her and she knew she deserved it. “I think we all know what we are going to do. Sasuke’s first then Naruto.”

“That’s what I’m talking about Sakura-chan.” Naruto’s voice sparked warmth in her gut and she had to look away.

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Raiga had lifted his swords in order to block a swing that never came. Sasuke easily tossed over the sword to Naruto as he came in hard from Raiga’s left side his arm coming up to pick up the sword his aim already changed to aim for Raiga’s weak side.

Raiga proved himself by changing direction quickly, slamming the swords into the ground before he called forth lightning. Naruto’s sword nicked him but he had to quickly fall back to avoid getting caught up in the blast. His eyes he closed tightly to protect them from the sharp light.

Raiga’s attacks were annoying and frustrating. Being knocked back like that was expected but
Naruto kept bringing up the past and parallels that would only hinder him. He was in control so far and focused on what he had to do but rage still burned. It was dimmed with every second that Raiga kept his mouth shut but they could only keep Raiga too busy to keep talking for so long. Raiga was pissed, they were pissed and not exactly a good situation for everyone.

It made him wish that Raiga was an amateur at this. Then it would have been over so quickly and easily. Naruto would not even have to put in that much work. Some light bloodthirstiness. Intense saki to really shake things up before he narrowed in and it would be over.

But Raiga was someone that he could not beat head-on on his own yet. Raiga was good and Naruto knew you did not get one of Kiri’s swords by being a delusional idiot. You earned those cursed swords. Raiga had obviously earned his and while Naruto wanted to send the bastard to a speedy and painful death he had to acknowledge that Raiga was pretty damn good. Naruto had taken him off guard before and he could see it would not be happening again.

Although Raiga obviously had something stupid planned by his attack on them. The guy liked funerals and wanted to attend as many as he could. He was sick and twisted because instead of travelling around and attending as many funerals he could of people who died of natural causes the sick idiot caused funerals by burying people alive. He might find it hilarious in his sick mind the current situation. While he thought to punish them, Naruto knew that Raiga had no real plans beyond trying to kill them.

Raiga might think he could succeed but Naruto knew better. He could even guess at Raiga’s plans and while he hoped the bastard would allow death to take him after getting what he wanted he did not want that either. That kind of stupid sacrifice reeked of Zabuza and he was trying to stop the comparisons before it drove him crazy enough that he stopped caring and just attacked head on. That would be a very bad thing, if he got out alive he would be in seriously bad condition and he would be disgusted with himself for losing that amount of control.

Losing that amount of control would be like tempting the fox inside of him. Luring it closer to eat his soul because the fox wanted Naruto to get that angry, he wanted Naruto to get that frustrated he wanted Naruto to lose that amount of control so that Naruto would grow weak enough to demand help like that last time. Naruto had people who he cared for and he would not see them broken before them, looking at him with fear. He would not be covered in the blood of his friends again. Once was enough he would not slip that far again. He had a leash for his control and while he was close to bucking it. He was still fine.

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Neji was forced to stop by the way that Gai-sensei suddenly stopped and turned in the direction that team seven was. When he watched his sensei frown in that direction his gut twisted. When lightning struck that side of the mountain Neji gritted his teeth and swore.

This was not supposed to happen, this was completely crazy and it made no sense. They were almost to where Tenten should be and she should be there. She had better be there because while all of this was crazy and getting crazier he really needed her to be there. Team Gai needed to regroup and provide backup to team seven as soon as possible regardless of the status of the storm. They were given as backup in the first place. They could not shirk their duties.

Who knew what kind of madness team seven was facing currently. Even though everything was crazy and getting crazier they had to regroup and deal with the new situation and the new threat. Neji did not want to even think about how the impossible had become possible. He just wanted to find Tenten and deal with the problem but permanently this time.
The fucking bastard had gotten his shoulder, Sasuke was a lot calmer than Sakura and Naruto currently were but that did not mean that he was not a little angry. He might find Naruto being ticked off interesting he might be enjoying following Sakura’s orders and directions but he was not heartless and he was not blind either.

The villagers that had suffered had struck a pang within him. Seeing all those families fractured, seeing all those graves and knowing that if Raiga was not stopped there would only more until the range and passes were filled with them and the village was silenced permanently.

While he had been angry at Naruto for wanting to leave them out of things and act alone as though he was the only one that deserved to do the right thing he understood a little of it. He had not been happy with Naruto for trying to leave them behind after everything they had done to stand on the scatterbrain’s level that was for certain.

But while he had not been as raged filled as Sakura or Naruto he was getting there slowly with every attack he was forced to eat because Raiga was that fast and that strong. It was almost as if he was powered by electricity. It made no real sense but that was what it felt like and it pissed him off. He just moved too quickly. While Sasuke could follow it with his eyes his body could barely keep up and he was angry because he had no idea what was truly going on under the surface.

He had been forced to use his sharingan in order to keep up with the swords that he could not guess how Raiga would use them next. One minute he drove them deep in the dirt and the next he was holding them to the sky before he called down bolts of lightning that would have given them trouble if it was not for Kakashi stepping in and doing something.

Sakura directed them from a step behind but even she had been forced to step forward and parry Raiga because of how quick the man moved and how quickly he kept moving. It was annoying, it was frustrating and he had no real idea on what exactly they could do to move in closer. They were fighting a man that should be dead, that had been declared dead. Sakura had checked his pulse and without Neji to confirm it they had no real idea who exactly they faced. Was it an actual zombie with plenty of juice or still human Raiga but resurrected?

It was crazy how many wacky theories and ideas came to his head when he was faced with a problem now. It was almost laughable but team seven just kept running into some weird shit and Sasuke doubted it would ever stop.

But he did not want it or need it to stop. This was his team and he wanted to face challenges with them. This was all he had this team, this life, this craziness and he wanted to improve and grow. Right to the top with all of them. No matter what it took, there was no obstacle that he would not remove eventually, this was what he had, what he had chosen, craziness and all.

But while he still had a cooler head than Naruto, Sasuke was still fighting the urge to try and snatch away one of Raiga’s swords and sticking it someplace unpleasant or in the bastard’s shoulder. There were no words to describe how ticked off he was with the bastard and the games he was playing. Sasuke’s shoulder was burning from that last attack, he really wanted to return the favour in the worst way possible.

But with the bastard switching from swinging his swords around and around like some sort of fancy knife or lasso, from the switch ups in sword styles that so far only Kakashi and Naruto could keep up with… Sasuke was going to try and keep his cool and keep his distance from the bastard until the right chance came up.
They were wrecking the landscape, they were totally changing the face of the mountain with the fight and while that would be impressive to some Sasuke could only think about how Raiga’s style of fighting had completely changed up. He was sloppy enough in some ways but his rage was burning bright enough that he was almost scarily focused with technique. It almost seemed like they were fighting a completely different person. All of this for the boy and while Naruto found that to be a reason to get pissed, Sasuke found it a bit sad.

Whether the boy had died or not the fact did not change that they were being blamed for it. That was annoying, even if it hurt Raiga should face the truth about himself. that he wouldn’t face it was another reason that Sasuke felt himself getting stirred up more and more. Facing your true self sucked but it had to be done, it just did disservice to those around you to deny it.

But maybe that was why he was so fired up. While he was not Raiga, he was not exactly facing everything with open arms either but at least Sasuke was keeping the truth and the consequences to himself. That bastard could learn a thing or two from him.

XxX

The rain was coming down heavier and Tenten was slightly grateful to it for helping clean up Ranmaru’s face. The boy was still unconscious but he was coming out of it fast and she doubted anyone would be happy to wake up with a mouthful of dirt no matter the reason.

She had heard the explosions, she had seen that something was happening not too far away and she knew what Ranmaru had done she had sent up a quick prayer for Karashi’s fate. If he had been still alive when Ranmaru had been weakened she hoped that Raiga had still kept him alive and still kept mindful of him when attacking team seven because who else could Raiga be attacking with such vigour? It was worse than before she could feel the intensity from the lightning where she was and that was not good at all.

She was more than concerned as she dragged Ranmaru to a shelter. She was worried about Ranmaru’s fate, Karashi’s fate because the old woman had been nothing but good to them and Lee really had like the kid. Tenten had sworn that the feeling was mutual as well. The two had seemed to take to each other in that weird way that boys had sometimes. She had not been too concerned about how things would get resolved in the end but now that Raiga was among the living again and going on rampage with Karashi and Ranmaru helping him get to that point.

She could not help but worry and who could blame her really? This was something crazy something out of the most twisted fairy tale. The enemy coming back to life to exact revenge. It was ridiculous and as she dragged Ranmaru with her to a shelter she could not help but long for her team.

They had been on their share of what the actual hell missions but goodness. If this was anything like team seven had to face regularly not only could she be glad that they finally got some backup Tenten was concerned for the fate of the shinobi world if this sort of thing could possibly be a regular. The dead was supposed to stay dead damn it. Nobody should be able to survive a fall like that strange abilities or not. Raiga should not be walking around like now.

But he was damn it to hell. He was obviously walking around and starting havoc once more. Tenten released a relieved breath when she managed to make it to the half-destroyed hut. It was not the best shelter but it had most of its roof and a mostly dry bed that she could wait for Ranmaru to wake up in and she could keep the kid dry. Not the best but considering the crazy circumstances it was the best they had until they could move out. She had no doubt that her team would find her quickly. While she would prefer that they all head out together to help team seven together she was fine following them if they decided that back up was the most urgent thing.
Although the kid was breathing better and his colour had improved she could tell that she would be sitting on her ass for a while longer waiting for him to wake up. She watched his face as she placed him on the straw bed, he was such a young kid, such a pretty kid. That he was mixed up in all this shit was more than a shame it was a tragedy that she hoped had a light at the end of the tunnel somewhere.

XxX

Finding Tenten was a relief, they had been searching as they ran and when they had found the open destroyed grave Neji had worried for just a few seconds before he registered that Tenten had come along after the grave had been destroyed and had not been there during. It had been a sigh of relief from him until he started to look for her chakra signature.

Locating it uphill was a bit of a surprise but when he saw the destroyed shack he understood, especially when he saw the second but weaker chakra signature. Tenten was just sitting there waiting on them and when she flashed a smile at him Neji felt a surge of relief even as his mind started thinking about their next move.

“Tenten good job, you’re fine too.” Gai-sensei gave Tenten a look over before he clapped her solidly on the shoulder and moved over to Ranmaru. “We seem to be having a bit more trouble than anticipated.”

“I’m not surprised honestly.” Tenten got to her feet and stretched. “We were prepared for some sort of wild ride remember? This is team seven after all but I gotta say we got the short end of the stick here.”

“What are we going to do here? With him?” Neji nodded towards Ranmaru. “We can’t leave him here undefended.”

“We are taking him with us. Right now I’m certain a misunderstanding is going on and while I have no doubts about team seven’s abilities. Ranmaru might be the only one to calm Raiga down enough to see reason. He’s fighting under a misconception and that out there?” She gestured towards the lightning and explosions a distance away. “Is because of anger and grief, when I saw him I thought he was dead, he’s getting better. He’s a little weak but Raiga should at least know for a few minutes that he did not kill Raiga and while we can we should try and talk some common sense into the kid.”

“After so long with Raiga and his influence is such a thing even possible.” Gai-sensei said softly as he knelt by the bed he gently touched Ranmaru’s cheek. “It takes strong will, strong character in order to throw off influence such as this. So far I’ve seen only one person able to do such a thing and sometimes I wonder how much was really thrown off. Anyone can change but considering what this boy believes to the core of him Tenten you will have to reach deep and find that one bit of uncertainty that has to lurk inside of him. We may not have the time for that or that weakness, that need for a different life opposite what Raiga presents may be covered by the need to provide and serve. Deep emotion, deep love makes one do such sacrifices such as this.”

“So you are saying it is too late?” Tenten’s voice trembled. “It can’t be! I’m not going to give up on this kid because of a few mistakes and a few misconceptions. What he wants and what Raiga wants is different. He wants a better life for the both of them! He’s conflicted I know this I saw this Gai-sensei! You had to see it too!”

“But he still chose this, to throw his life away to risk it.” Neji said softly as he watched the boy breathe shallowly. “That can’t be ignored either. While he is conflicted facts can’t be changed that while he wants one thing he willingly turned his back on it in order for Raiga to have another
chance and see his own dreams through. Even though Raiga himself might not want that either.”

“So what the hell are we going to do now?” Tenten growled before a loud lightning strike flashed
the entire shack. “We can’t leave him to his own devices, he needs some sort of closure and he
needs to understand the problems and find a different solution.”

“We can talk to him.” Neji answered. “Might not do much but sometimes talking can get things
moving, all we can do is try. You never know we might tell him the things he needs to know in
order to make the right decision.”

“So for now we wait for him to wake up?” Tenten said softly.

“We wait for him to wake up.” Neji answered.

XxX

Sometimes it was just dumb luck that tilted everything on its head. For Naruto it was the lucky
lightning blast that caught him in the chest and threw him into a rock. Sasuke was right by his side
when he stumbled to his feet, Naruto could feel Sasuke’s arm on his shoulder but it did not register.

Already there was a curtain in his mind already there was a desensitised feeling that had nothing to
do with the injury that he took. He could already feel himself healing he could already feel the
difference. He knew he was being spoken to but he could not hear. He knew that the situation was
serious but he could not see beyond Raiga.

Except that it was not just Raiga he was seeing something was wrong with his vision and he did not
mean just the physical one. He knew he should be concerned about the laughter inside him that
was closer than it should be but he was too busy getting his short sword into his hand.

Everyone had a breaking point everyone had little minefields inside it just took work to get to them.
Naruto knew he had not reached his breaking point he still knew friends and he still knew foe but
everything was so separated and fuzzy all he could do was walk forward and shrug Sasuke’s hand
off his shoulder and point his sword at the man that kept flickering from his sight. One minute
Raiga, another Zabuza. Something was wrong with him he knew that. He could feel that something
was wrong but he could just feel himself descending into something.

He had not been holding back but he had not using his full potential against Raiga. He could have
been shaking the man up all this time he could have been getting in his head the way Naruto knew
that he could and he should have been but he had been battling images this entire time but no more.

No one was guiding his hand this time it was just him a heavy hand and anger in his mind. No one
was guiding his hand but the scene kept changing on him when he knew that was risky. One moment
he was in reality, Raiga before him wrong, delusional and dangerous. The next moment he
was smaller, weaker and facing a man that was the most annoying conflicting idiot in history.

He was Uzumaki Naruto and that would not change. He was going to take their lessons, their
teachings, their love with him for the rest of his life but he was not going to forget their errors, their
mistakes and the fact that he always had a second goal from the moment he had realized what he
had landed himself in.

He had known Haku would fight him, he had known what he had to do would cause Ranmaru not
to like him but he could have lived with the kid not liking him. He would have survived Haku
turning cold eyes on him because he had known, he had hoped Haku would have recovered enough
to heal and move on even without them. Even if he had to cling to Naruto like a vine it would have
been okay. Anything but the fate that everyone could have seen. That Naruto had tried to save yet another and the same mistake, the same situation was right before his eyes. He wanted a mission completed with a sense of satisfaction.

He had been hoping, been planning that entire time. He had stayed back with Haku because that was the way to strength and he could have saved him. He had believed to the bottom of his soul that he could have saved Haku. The only way this could turn out… the only option he was willing to accept was Raiga defeated and Ranmaru okay. The kid had to be okay or at least clinging to life. He just had to believe. If he had died there just to give Raiga another chance it was his hell all over again. Foolish Haku giving Zabuza even five more minutes. That had been deemed more important than anything else even him.

So he had this bastard before him, the bastard in his past lurking in his mind’s eye and the repeat of something that was one of his greatest nightmares. Not today and not now.

His feet was lighter than before, his body was lighter and while everything fuzzy the laughter was loud and clear and his mind had never been so awake and active. He might be losing it just a bit but he was mad and he had every right to be.

Raiga’s face when he realized Naruto was just a foot before him crouched low was almost priceless. Anger made him fast, there was rage filling him and boiling his chakra. His chest was so tight and hot he needed to move or he would be wrapped up in flames.

Naruto saw the swords come for him and he parried. It hurt his shoulder, the clash was loud and he did not imagine the sparks that flew or the tingle that went through his body but while his feet sank into the ground he did not move. His eyes met Raiga’s, surprised through all of that rage. His arms hurt like nothing else but rage kept him standing. He was not going to move, he was rooted.

His hands were above his head fighting the weight of the two swords but even as he sank into the mud he refused to be pushed back. He could see Raiga right there before him, he could see Zabuza. He could see everything he did not want to see, it wrapped it up tightly and burned him from the inside out. He did not need this, he did not want to see this.

“You need to take fucking responsibility for what you’ve done.” Naruto rasped as he felt a hotter feeling wrap around his gut giving him the chakra, giving him the strength to start to push back the swords and to push them away to the shock of Raiga. “If he’s dead, if he is in the ground that is because you put him there! He is just a kid! He was just a kid that needed something! Someone! And you couldn’t fucking hold it together long enough to be something better than this! Than the weapon they made you to be! You wanted to be yourself didn’t you? Isn’t that why you left? To be a person? So why the fuck would you do to him what they did to you?”

“I didn’t—” Raiga snarled.

“You did!” Naruto snarled right back as Raiga’s hands were forced back. “No… you didn’t do what they did to you. You did worse because even at your hardest you would have never thrown your life away for them. You saw too much and you knew you had value.” Naruto sneered as the rain covered his face. “You knew you had value but you took away his and blame us for what you set into motion.”

He could not do the rasengan the way he was. There was no way that Raiga would leave him alone to focus for that long and besides Naruto did not want to try that anyway. As powerful as the Ransengan was, his personal favourite new move not that he would tell the perverted letch any of that. No matter that he loved it, he had used it already not only had he used it already but Raiga would be wary of that and any hint of that and Raiga would run rage or no rage.
Still Naruto had been trained even though he did not act like it all the type. Swords work had been beaten and hammered into him. He had a few years of watching the backs of some of the most talented people he could ever hope to see. So many sword styles had been right before him, so many teachers, so many babysitters and while those were the good things he had been taught he had been taught the bad things too. He had soaked up everything and now it was up to him to decided how he was going to use it.

While the laughter was loud and the warmth so hot and growing he still knew who he was and he still knew what he wanted. Except that those were his future dreams and his current want was a lot darker and further in front of him.

The switch of two hands on the sword to one caused him to lose some ground but he was quick to come back with the needles, Raiga leapt back spitting curses as Naruto used that time to snag a vial from his jacket pocket. He had practiced the moves over and over again in order to get speed and in order to avoid any snags. Everything went smoother than expected.

Now while he had watched a lot and practiced a little there was nothing like the real thing, however he had seen evidence of this before. He might need a little help but there was nothing wrong in taking advantage with the body that he had. The vial was cool on the tongue with the liquid to follow. He had to gain ground himself in order to slam the sword into the ground and clap his hands together as he focused. Now he knew Shizune nee-chan had done something similar but he was buying a different sort of time. He had no illusions about this working. He and Raiga were at home in the fog but thanks to Kasumi Naruto was at home to all sorts problems. He took a deep breath before he blew hard. He watched the sprinkle mix with rain before everything exploded into a cloud of purple haze.

He snagged his sword up again balanced it with two hands as he waited. He had no illusions about what Raiga would do and he was rewarded when he heard the first crackle. It was easy to dodge the sword swinging to disrupt the purple mist and to run enough that the crackle of lightning did not touch him. He kept low forcing Raiga to swing low.

He slid on the ground and through Raiga’s legs not to attack the man but to keep him moving, keep him breathing hard, keep him swinging hard all while Naruto waited for that one opening. That one slip up that would give the two of them the opening to either advance the fight or end it.

Sometimes you had to bite the knife that came at you in order to get your sword in your opponent’s belly. There was a slip of an opening at Raiga’s left side. It took two steps back and a zip forward from below before Naruto was able to come up close enough in order to aim his sword at Raiga’s arm. His sword met flesh but Naruto coughed at the punch that he ate along with the hand that quickly transferred to his neck.

“Got you ya little shit.” Raiga snarled down at him. “I don’t know what you are but I’m not even going to give you a funeral. I’ll leave your body right here for the birds to eat and no one to remember your happier times.”

“Sorry to disappoint.” Naruto smiled as he tasted blood. “But I’m the one that got ya twice… stupid.” Raiga’s face when he heard the hissing of the tag. It was almost worth the pain in his body. “You won’t be able to run that fast.” Naruto chuckled as he relaxed his body to a startling degree for Raiga. He slipped out the grip leaving his sword and the tag to it. He tried to flip backward but the blast caught him and flung him away. He knew he was fine but it really did hurt.

XxX

There was no ignoring the fact that Naruto was on this earth, on this team to give them heart
attacks and drive them to worry. They had just covered Naruto doing reckless and dangerous things. They had just covered Naruto doing reckless and dangerous things on his own and what had he done? Dared forward regardless of their warnings and did what he wanted to do.

Kakashi did not care that it had worked and he could not bring himself to what he cared about was that while it had worked whatever Naruto had done Kakashi’s heart and lungs had been put under strain. While he had been amused at Naruto’s secrets and a little wary at what the boy chose to cling to and cultivate a few of what had happened had him on edge.

He was not blind to the plants, the growing jungle around Naruto’s apartment. He was one of the shinobi apprised of Naruto’s weekly and monthly shopping list. While he tended to cluck his tongue at the lack of really good healthy food his eyes were always lingering on just what Naruto tended to buy. Nothing Naruto did in Konoha was a secret it was just a matter of who that information went to and while Kakashi was one of the lucky people he could only imagine the people who possessed the same knowledge that he did. The same people who came to similar conclusions that he did.

Naruto was dangerous, this they already knew simple of who he was. Because of where he had done, what he had done and of course the people he had listened to that he still listened to.

Kakashi would like to think that the little trick Naruto had used to slow down Raiga had come from some Konoha shinobi that he knew. He knew the jutsu, he knew the application and he even knew the poisons that tended to be used.

But he doubted that Naruto’s knowledge came from a shinobi of Konoha. He had suspected the Jinchuuriki’s healing helped Naruto in several ways but now he was certain that Naruto’s body was altered in ways he had not guessed before. It had been cute back then, he had simply assumed the Kyuubi’s healing compensated for any dangerous tricks.

However that poison cloud had been so strong that Kakashi had started to feel the effects where he stood and had to move to prevent Sakura or Sasuke from getting too close and turning weak. He wanted to say that Naruto had plenty of explanations ahead of him but he knew that Naruto would laugh it off and say that only after Konoha started to explain.

It was frustrating, there was so much that they did not know about Naruto’s time with those missing nins. So much about what they had done to him and not just his psyche. Kakashi had sworn that moment had drawn them even closer, that Naruto’s utter revulsion towards Raiga and what he had done meant that he was stepping closer to Konoha while coming to terms about the truth about his circumstances and past.

He had known it had been a hard life but he had not thought Naruto was capable of that. There had been flashy fights. Desperate fights but he so far had never seen Naruto fight like that. He had been so fast Kakashi had been forced to use his sharingan. He had been unnaturally strong for a few moments shocking Raiga but that was understandable. No one expected a kid Naruto’s age to be able to hold back an adult for any amount of time. Especially not an adult that trained with the sword for such a long time. Raiga’s swords might not be heavy but they still had a force to them.

It was frankly scary. he could only wonder what else Naruto was capable of even as he felt worry at how Naruto had just changed before them. Not fully because his eyes were still blue although they had flashed in fury. No fangs, no distorted words or deeper colour around his eyes or deeper marks on his cheeks. It had been as if something had taken over but not the Kyuubi or to be more exact not yet.

Their words had not reached him, their panic their concern had not reached Naruto and as pissed
off as that made Kakashi he could not help but be fascinated at something people never got to see even if they lived a full life.

Had any shinobi saw two swordsmen of the mist fighting? Fighting each other? Before Konoha shinobi? The thought was laughable but although the sword Naruto carried held no name that was the fight that they were watching. No real big jutsus just the bare minimum but Naruto fought hard with the sword and he fought so skilfully Raiga’s rage was forced back as the man had to fight Naruto one on one with Naruto as his only focus.

It was haunting, it was terrifying and it was beautiful. Naruto’s short sword would hold damage that might not be able to be repaired. The sparks that flew from Naruto wielding the sword his eye on his opponent and only that. That intense focus even as his hands moved so fast and his feet blurred with his steps. The most frustrating thing about it was that they could not interfere. To see Naruto on his own like that. Kakashi wanted to do something drastic but when Naruto and Raiga seemed to have the one up on each other his heart dipped that was until Kakashi registered Naruto activating the exploding tag. Then his heart leapt out his stomach and plummeted down to his shoes before Naruto tried to escape and got caught up in the blast.

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“Oh… nice catch.” Naruto muttered lazily as he blinked up at Gai-sensei. “Totally didn’t see that one coming.” His throat was thick and all he could taste was bitterness and blood. “Did I get him?”

“I don’t think he’ll be walking away from that Naruto-kun.” Gai-sensei had him dangling over one arm but he was looking over his shoulder back at Raiga. “He’s still alive I’m sad to say.”

“That won’t take out a swordsman. Have to chop their head off or take out their heart or something like that. I mean we should take off his head so he doesn’t come back or something.” Blood bubbled in his throat and he wiggled in Gai-sensei’s grip in an attempt to flip over and spit. “I need a quick second.”

“You can have it, we are here to back you up and we’ve brought someone along as well.” Naruto got lifted up enough to see Ranmaru standing a small distance away pale but determined.

“Oh…” Relief swept over him so strong that his body trembled. “He is alive.” And it looked as though he had caught some common sense because of the way he was looking at Raiga. He looked like a boy still loyal but wiser, something had changed. Maybe it was possible after all. Maybe it was going to be different. “I’ll take those few seconds now.” He whispered.

XxX

“You’ve got to see this isn’t the way.” Sakura said while her insides burned at the need to take over, take over and press on because while Naruto had been scaring them all she had been there standing and accessing. Standing and waiting for the right moments. He had turned everything over for them but… Ranmaru was bringing them something now. “You’ve connected with other people that aren’t Raiga you know the difference now. Karashi-kun, the old lady both of them would love to have you around and help you see the world.”

“That doesn’t.” Ranmaru looked frustrated. “I’m not going to leave Raiga-san!” Well she could hope couldn’t she?

“Then what are you going to do? We came here to help these people out.” Sasuke’s voice was low and annoyed. “You want us to turn a blind eye to him killing all these people?”

XxX
“No! It’s just.” Ranmaru scowled at them before he turned to Raiga. “It isn’t about them, we don’t have to have funerals all the time. We can live in the world without killing don’t you want to see what a world like that would be like?” It was cute to try and appeal to Raiga but Sakura had her doubts.

“Think about the kid for once!” Tenten was angry. “You were mad because you thought he was dead right? It would have been all your fault if he had been! Obviously he’s loyal. Obviously you care about him! Do something for him this time! What are you getting out of this lifestyle huh? Isn’t it meaningless without him?”

“Tenten is right.” Neji folded his arms as he watched Raiga. “No matter what you think you seek to gain it’s all meaningless if he’s dead correct? We have our doubts about you but Ranmaru believes in you.”

“Ranmaru.” Raiga looked pained. “You chose them?”

“What?” Ranmaru looked stunned. “No! I didn’t I never would! I’m not now but I’m tired of killing and being sad all the time.” He was loud and frantic. “I want to live with you! I want more laughter and I don’t want to lose you I want to get strong and see the world and make good memories and—“ With every word he stepped towards the injured Raiga his hands moving as he spoke. “I don’t want to leave you! I want our family to grow and people to love you like I do! You’re so strong and kind even if you don’t know it! It isn’t fair at all how people judge you!”

“He’s wasting his time.” Sasuke said softly. Sakura dipped her head as the response before her gaze shifted to Gai-sensei and their own sensei that had drifted closer to him and Naruto that lay in his arms. “Raiga’s too valuable and too dangerous. The kid can go but he can’t and while Ranmaru won’t get it…”

“Raiga hopefully will connect the dots.” Sakura whispered back. “He can’t hurt Ranmaru, he doesn’t want to and he isn’t able to, his stance changed when he started to walk towards him. More protective and defensive than attack.”

“So what will Raiga’s move be.” Sasuke murmured. “He’s injured, he’s surrounded and he has one of his most precious possessions right before him.”

“Naruto would freak to hear you talk about Ranmaru like that.” Sakura scolded softly before she sighed. “But it’s disturbingly accurate isn’t it?”

“Very.” Sasuke confirmed. “Let’s hope the fool can make the right decision before we have to take matters into our own hands.”

“Naruto won’t let him leave this pass alive.” Sakura admitted. “And I find it hard to do it too. He’s killed a lot. Even for Ranmaru’s sake I can’t see letting him leave. I can’t allow him to roam free and while capture sounds nice… he’s too dangerous.”

“He is isn’t he.” Sasuke said softly.

XxX

The rain was fucking up his vision, or maybe it was his injuries, letting himself go was never a good idea. Ero-sennin had helped him get comfortable with the idea of asking for help but Naruto knew that there was no way that he would ever be good ever be cool with accepting help from the depths of himself.

Maybe Sora was right when he called it his other self. All Naruto know was that he had done
nothing but be born. He had done nothing yet he lived with the knowledge that a monster waited to
swallow him whole. That it was not just him in danger but it was those he cared about too.

He put everyone as risk when he got careless. He put everyone at risk when he forgot himself,
when he let himself go into the dark and he could not let himself forget that. He honestly did not
forget. Reason got faint, the laughter and taunts sometimes got louder the more that emotions
drowned him. When helplessness, anger, the feeling of loss drowned him. That was when he was
truly weak, at the mercy to the fox that lurked within him.

Still he knew that there was something still protecting him. Still guiding him still keeping that last
gate whatever it fucking was closed. He knew that, he was thankful that he had not fully snapped
yet. No matter how loud the laughter and taunts got. No matter the teasing manipulation he was
still safe. Those he cared for were not in danger as yet no matter how faint their voices got to him.
He was glad he was so grateful because he knew that he would only see more and more upsetting
things as he continued along the shinobi world.

He was supposed to be on the right side. He was supposed to be doing good and leading towards
the better future but he still saw bad things. He still saw shitty things and it hurt. Especially when
he knew he could do something now. No one was holding him back. No one was saying that it was
not his fight, he could do something now. That was what kept him going. Kept him fighting.

The tears he had bit back then, the helplessness in his gut that had lingered even as he pushed on
with the others. He was supposed to have left that behind with the regrets of the group. He was
supposed to have turned a new leaf with a different bunch of people. He was supposed to as a
shinobi of Konoha feel less helpless.

It seemed that he still had a lot to learn when it came to people, to situations and how the world
truly worked. He had known Konoha was not perfect he had known villages were not the
perfection they liked to pretend to be that village pride was something amusing when you tossed
all the different shinobi together and gave them something to work against and for. He had known
but he had thought everything would be a little different that his self who had loved, despaired of
being left behind or thrown away. That he would be able to turn to his younger self that had
despaired over his age and what he could do when it came to Haku. He had thought he could look
back and say it would never happen on his watch again. That he would save Haku and the ones like
him. He had sworn it when he realized everyone’s warnings about Haku had come true.

That reminder to himself mad him blink faster as he strained out of Gai-sensei’s grip. He had to see
this to fruition no matter what. the pain was nothing. If he lay there and let things go along like
they were he would never forgive himself and that was what was truly important there.

“Thanks.” He smiled as he flicked a glance over the two worried senseis. Kakashi-sensei’s gloved
hands were squeezed shut as he watched Naruto. There was nothing Naruto could do currently to
erase the man’s worry so he stood tall and watched Raiga and Ranmaru. He watched them and saw
their images for just a second replaced with Zabuza and Haku. He saw it and wondered, he saw it,
gritted his teeth ignored the pain in his back and accessed the situation. He could not change the
past. He could not erase the loss, he was alive. He was here and the only thing he could do was
fight for the future, the future he had dreamed of. Recognition, love, respect and equality. There
were many obstacles to it but he was not afraid to remove them one by one.

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“We can start over.” Ranmaru sounded so desperate, “There are all sorts of different people out
there they aren’t like the people who hate you and try to hurt us. Everyone is different in this whole
wide world Raiga-san we don’t have to kill anymore. If we keep going and we keep trying… wall
of us can be together without any pain! We won’t have to remember the good times while crying because we will have them all the time! We won’t have any more funerals that we have to be regretful and sad at!”

Naruto watched Raiga watch Ranmaru. His face was guarded but his eyes weren’t. Maybe Naruto would have been better off not seeing the softness in Raiga’s eyes maybe he would have been better off not having to register the regret and the determination in Raiga’s face. Still he was relieved to see Raiga come to a decision that would benefit the most of them. Although the decision would cause some noticeable pain.

“I think.” Raiga said softly as he clutched his swords. “It’s time for one last funeral. A big one.”

“Raiga-san!” Ranmaru sounded desperate and Naruto pitied him. “You don’t have to! We don’t have to anymore we can be together forever and forever! I’m not picking them! I want a future where I’m with Raiga-san every day!”

“Ranmaru.” Raiga’s mouth curled into a smile before lightning struck throwing Ranmaru back until he fell by Tenten. “By the sounds of things this is goodbye, this last funeral will be for myself.” Gai-sensei inhaled sharply at that. “Don’t cry too long for me, this is where my journey will end I’m too tainted to dark to enter the world and the future that you speak of but I’ll be waiting on you for the walk to the next world.”

Because he knew what Raiga was going to do Naruto did nothing but watch Raiga struggle to raise the swords high once more. Because he accepted the decision he did nothing but watch. It settled something in him after all and seeing that calmed so much inside of him but he had forgotten that while the situation was similar he did not know Ranmaru that well and while this was the first sacrifice of this kind that he was seeing he was not foolish enough to think everything would go as said.

Still while he eyed the lightning blast and the affected area he was still tuned in intensely to their surroundings and the people around him. That was why he felt it before he saw it. But he was so disbelieving he did not believe it and that was the wasted few seconds. Everything overlapped for a moment and he was younger again. That feeling froze his brain and his legs.

He was forced to watch not just Raiga’s last moments but Ranmaru somehow getting up and to Raiga. Naruto was so focused he was able to see the way that Ranmaru landed in Raiga’s arms, see Raiga’s startled face melt into acceptance before the lightning blast blinded them all. There was a soreness in his throat that registered when he was able to see clearly again. Not just from the tears running down his face but he had been screaming and had not realized it. Naruto stared at the chunk of missing rock that Raiga had stood on, fallen once more below. He stared at the empty space before a hiccup escaped him and he fell to his knees.

XxX

“What the hell.” Tenten was aware of being wrapped up in someone’s arms. Of someone holding her back from the missing space but she was too busy staring at where Ranmaru should be, where he had been only a few moments before. While Raiga had been crazy.

While he had gotten the situation and had not been willing to change or stupid enough to think that the past was erased. She had no idea what exactly Ranmaru had been thinking. She had seen his resigned smile she had not been imagining it. He had really in those scant seconds before the lightning hit, in those last few seconds he had been happy.

She could not handle it, she could not deal with it and she had no idea what she was going to do
because it had not been perfect but there had been a proper ending for this mission. Raiga dead, the boys taken care of. Some snacks to carry home for Lee. Team seven happy with their hard work.

That had been the plan, that had been the hope and it had been going so well. She had no idea why at the last moment Ranmaru would have chosen certain death. There was no way Raiga could walk away from death twice. No way that both of them or either of them survived that fall. They would go and check because it was what they did but they were not going to find anything. They were not going to get any hope she could feel it.

Such a fall, they were both recovering from injuries and reckless decisions and that lightning bolt had been powerful, they would be lucky to even find bodies. It was not fair, she did not know how to feel. It had been just a few seconds; the kid had moved so fast. She had no idea what he had been thinking but the horrified cry she had heard just after the lightning hit. It had not been her or Neji so that left…

Team seven, she saw Naruto’s kneeling form but it took her a while to recognize it. The shaking shoulders, the loud obvious tears. She had not known that Naruto had cared like that. Well, he had a big heart but the kid had been so resentful. Tenten watched as Neji’s hands around her tightened when Sakura knelt next to Naruto and did nothing more than hold his hand. Sasuke took his other side as Naruto’s sobbing grew louder. Tenten watched Sasuke tug Naruto’s head until it was against his shoulder.

“We know.” She swore she heard Sasuke say. “We know.”

XxX

“I feel sick.” Naruto gasped as he stared at the ground. “I feel like I’m going to hurl.”

“Do it if you have to.” Naruto knew he was no imagining how gruff Sasuke’s voice was. “We’re right here with you.” Naruto’s breath hitched as his sobs and tears continued. He was tired, he felt awful and while he was healing physically his mind was impacted by what had just happened.

It was not fun, it was not cute it was the worst possible outcome, so awful he had not even thought about it happening. It was the worst thing to happen and it had happened so quickly. He was so disgusted, so angry that he wanted to rage at the skies and demand answers from people he knew could speak no more.

Just why did it have to happen again? It just was not fair.

XxX

Somethings happened for no reason, there was no logic to it and no matter how much you cried, how much you screamed and raged at the universe and fate there was no answer. Kakashi wished the outcome could have been different. He also blamed himself. if he had been a little smarter about it all then maybe another kid…

Ranmaru had been so young. He bowed his head as he accepted the circumstances. They were all kids, Ranmaru, Haku. His team, all of them so young and so determined. So young and needing something so they looked in the wrong places.

But he could say that but wasn’t Kakashi the same?

Well now. He could remember the warmth and he could remember the comforting hand and shoulder. To those who had nothing just a piece was the entire world. It was not as if he blamed Naruto. It was not as if he blamed any of the kids. At the end of the day it was the adults that put
them in circumstances that forced them to leave.

It was the shinobi world just how it worked and fuck if it wasn’t sucky as hell. So many kids died, so many kids would continue to die in the shinobi world they currently lived in but Kakashi was a selfish man he was a man who did not want to lose anything else. He would fall on his knees, beg and plead in order to keep the things he had allowed himself to have.

Knowing the faults and the truth of the shinobi world was just the first step but when he managed to look at his team together, Kakashi felt true hope. As heart-breaking as the situation was. Naruto would rise over that too. Shinobi were the ones that endured after all but even shinobi needed some props sometime.

Naruto was hurting, Naruto would hurt. Kakashi’s team was hurting but it was Naruto that was hurting the most, Naruto with another pain. Naruto with another scar and not only was it unfair. It was just not right. The boy had made his choice. The wrong one, a deadly one because surviving that was impossible. That and Kakashi had known what his eye had seen.

Certain death, had the boy really and truly seen no other way forward but that? Was he actually happy with that? Kakashi could only lower his head and listen to Naruto’s heart break a few steps away. Listen and wish he could do more than stand guard. He could offer no words, no real comfort all he could do is bare witness and he hated that. He had sworn his watching days were over.

XxX

“You happy with this?” Naruto questioned as he ran his hand over the broken charred bodies. Raiga’s swords were all too easily tugged away. His eyes watered as he touched the charred bodies. They had been easy to find. “This is how you wanted to end it?” Maybe not Raiga but Ranmaru had known he had recognised the truth and he had still done it.

The way it was never supposed to be, the way that Naruto had never wanted to see again. He hated it, he hated it so much but yet again he had to face it. Yet again he had to witness the one thing he had promised he would not let happen again. They had been so close, they could have saved him but Ranmaru hadn’t wanted it.

“You okay?” Sasuke had been one step behind him since the final clash and it was just what Naruto needed. He felt as though he could be supported if he was to lean back but he would not. He had started forward and he would see it through.

“No.” He admitted as he turned away from the bodies. They would be buried properly or taken up to be brought back to Konoha. It was up to someone else that was not him. “This wasn’t a victory.” He held the swords in his hands, precious dangerous artefacts yet he did not feel any yearning when he looked at them.

“No it wasn’t a victory in full. We didn’t win everything.” Sasuke’s tone was soft and while his eyes said that he understood Naruto. Naruto knew Sasuke still had a long way to go.

“I’m tired of history repeating itself.” He said softly. He held the swords up to his chest. “I’m sick of it happening over and over when I know nothing will change. That it is the same mess all over again yet nothing changes. I’m sick of it.” His voice hitched at the end of his words so he shoved the swords towards Sasuke. “Take them, this isn’t the victory I wanted and these aren’t the swords I need.”
When the veil thins

Chapter Notes

Of course it isn't abandoned, just been a little busy darlings. Kinda swamped and stuff but I want to finish 2 arcs by the end of the year so that's my goal. Been taking some me time (got some games i wanna play etc so I try to squeeze in a 1K here and there but lots of stuff go into the chapters and building takes words ugh) But I'm glad you darlings are here thanks for reading still and I've got like tons of work to get through!

Last chapter was kinda emotional... you have a small break from that you're welcome lol

“Well welcome home to me or whatever.” Sakura sighed before she kicked off her shoes. “Night mom, night Dad.” She told the dark house. She could sense her parents in the house, that they were home and sleeping but that did not change the facts that she had arrived home too late to see them. She lived with them but only caught glimpses of them because of how busy she was and how busy her team was.

Still she would not change being a shinobi for anything. She would just have to adapt. Besides she was certain that her parents were proud of everything that she had achieved. All of them treated her vest with pride after all. Even though the vest was a lot of work. Tons of it.

She stifled a yawn as she put her shoes away. The exhaustion had hit only a few hours ago but she had wrestled it back knowing the paperwork ahead of her. Now in the safety of her own house she wanted to do nothing more than fall into her bed but there were little things to do first. Unpack her bag, put away her weapons. Check her room, check the house, clean up… so many things before she got to actually sleep. She muffled her groan and shuffled down the hallway. The sooner she started the sooner she could sleep until noon. Unless another mission or errand got dropped on her.

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“A letter for Naruto?” Iruka eyed the package that had tagged along with the Konoha reward. “For Naruto alone?” He asked aloud even though he could see the fancy script on the letter. Uzumaki Naruto. There was a huge heart over the dot in the letter I and that made him wary. It was not as if shinobi did not get admirers but those tended to be Jounins. Adults, at least types like these. For Naruto…

Well kids like Naruto got things too but their thank you’s tagged along with the official things not with a package of their own. He sat perplexed as he stared at the letter. He could not exactly open it. He did not have the authority and it was sort of rude even though it was suspicious. He cautiously sniffed the package and frowned at the sweet scent. There was not much he could learn from looking at the outside of the letter so he got to his feet. This seemed like a problem for the Hokage if he could get her attention for a few seconds.

XxX
“If someone could tell me when things will slow down enough for me to enjoy the nice teenage shinobi life, I would be more than grateful.” Naruto muttered to his apartment door. His mind was tired but his body was fine. He was more than fine getting back in Konoha after dark after an interesting and exhausting mission.

He wanted to joke around with his team and his sensei but it almost felt as though there was no time for that. They were always at work, if not training then on a mission and not just on missions but sometimes split up. Understandable when he had to think about how vital Sakura was to everyone but it still sucked.

Although Sasuke grumbled and came back in a dark mood whenever he was summoned by his clan he still went to keep the peace and because he really had no choice to what requests his Dad put in for him. Naruto was uncertain to Sasuke’s clan’s aims when it came to Sasuke but since he did not want to rock the boat he, Sasuke and team seven had finally gotten, he kept his mouth closed. It was not as if he was sharing everything at every turn.

Still if it was not just Sakura yanked it was Kakashi-sensei or Sasuke or Naruto himself leaving him confused and tired most of the time. Naruto just did not understand why. Sakura had Chuunin duties to pull her away. Kakashi-sensei might be their jounin sensei but he was a Jounin of the village and a very talented one too. They could not afford to skip him on vital missions, he had to get yanked whenever they could. Sasuke’s clan had secret shit going on and there had to be a reason they needed Sasuke to come to them. There were reasons for everyone getting yanked.

Everyone but him and Naruto knew it. Most the missions he was assigned away from his team, while he was a vital asset he knew that he was not necessary. That others would make do just as well most of the time. Tsunade baa-chan was playing with him, testing him and whatever her goal was, whatever her true aim was. Naruto could feel that it would shake up the entire village.

He looked, he could look and see that his reassignments most of the time made sense. Some missions needed that edge that he had and while he did not exactly want to pat himself on the back and stroke his own ego he knew he had an understanding and darkness that not that many genins had.

He was a darkness too. A secret that lived among them and it would be so easy to hold that against them but he was on a separate path than them. He had started with the village but he had left. He had changed outside and he was happy for that. He was grateful for that but it did not change that how he saw the world and how the typical genin saw the world was different.

Well when he had to actually think about the whole thing, he had been seeing the village differently back then too. It was why he had left. Back then the whole thing had been hard. Been painful and his chest had hurt to walk around, to walk and listen and watch those cruel eyes on him. It was not that different but it was better, he was stronger.

Still it would be nice if Baa-chan could tell him something instead of making him tea and smiling at him. It was a little unnerving the way she looked as though she had it all figured out already. Naruto knew she did not have him figured out yet. There was no way that she did. Whatever her plan with him was she was keeping it close to the chest and not telling anyone. Shizune nee-chan’s face was as expressive as always and there was this tension between the Hokage and literally anyone else when it came to the missions.

She was so secretive. Naruto admired that. He admired it but he was allowed to be irritated by it too because he was irritated at how often he was left in the dark and how no one had any answers about what he was supposed to do.
He would like to have something to say for the inevitable questions. Even he got tired of smiling the questions away. When the others wondered what it was about him that made the Hokage send him on such blatantly obviously dangerous missions with no back up. What the hell could he say to that?

How could he explain why he should go instead of them it was bad enough that his answers and suggestions got people asking questions. It got him funny looks and while it was amusing how some took to the new way of thinking… Naruto was pissed that people so easily were not going to begin to think of other solutions or other opinions. The genins were being forced to learn. The shake-up of the battle on their minds and heels but it was not enough.

If anything, anger would linger in them and create problems. There was no sign of it yet but Naruto just knew it would raise its ugly head soon. He had heard enough praise and enough mumbles to know how the genins would go down sooner or later. Something he decidedly was not looking forward to.

What he was looking forward to was a briefing, an explanation. Some information. On his secrets, on Orochimaru and his plans. On the people in the village, some information or some light shed on half these secrets would be more than nice but even Naruto needed a rest sometime so he was about to settle for a quick rest in his apartment.

XxX

It was not fair how often she had to leave her bed. She was rarely there and even when she was there she could not sleep most of the time. Her body was ready for rest but her mind… the number of books that she fell asleep holding. The amount of scrolls she woke up wrapped around because instead of wasting the energy she decided to use it.

She was tired of being the new Chuunin already. She wanted to work with her team and she loved the new experiences but she really wanted more time with her team. Growing with them, going on missions with them and even getting bone tired with them but that was not likely to happen anytime soon.

She snuffled her way out of the covers and blinked at the sight of the sun in the sky. She did not want to move. No team meetings, no meet ups and certainly no summons. She did not want to move unless she had to. At least for a while longer because just because she had no one calling her did not mean she did not have anything to do.

In a shinobi village there was always something to be done and as a Chuunin it was her job, her duty to help out. No matter how much work it was and no matter how tired she was. She had a job to do and she had to let everyone know her getting that jacket was not a mistake.

XxX

Shizune seemed to have an appointment or something. She kept hurrying her tasks. Kept checking the time and whatever she had to do, it had nothing to do with helping Tsunade with her Hokage duties or Tsunade herself and that certainly had her attention.

It was not boring having Shizune around. It helped with everything but with the way things were moving so slowly a distraction was nice. Especially since sake was banned in the office. She really could do with a bottle of something as the days moved so slowly and each piece on her board moved lethargically.

The knock at the door was the best distraction even as Shizune eyed the door. “Come in.” Tsunade
raised her voice. The door opened and the person ended up surprising her, the cute little school teacher that had Naruto’s love and devotion. It was not a cool glass of something strong but it certainly looked to be an interesting few minutes. “Iruka.”

“Forgive me Hokage-sama.” His bow to her and Shizune was quick and the package in his hand caught her attention. “I just received this and it concerns me. There is protocol but that should go for someone older and…” His face twisted. “Naruto is not.”

“That’s correspondents for satisfied clients, right? That is for Naruto personally?” She questioned even as she knew to her bones that it was. “Bring it here.”

“Tsunade-sama!” Shizune looked conflicted. “Isn’t that for Naruto?”

“Naruto is a Konoha shinobi and someone under me.” Tsunade said dryly and she began to read the contents. “He has no privacy when it comes to foreign correspondence and I’m certain the boy knows that as well.” She paused at the scent of perfume or incense and then at the hairpin that fell out. It looked like quality, it looked expensive. She ignored the note and instead stared at the hairpin. “By any chance is Naruto being courted?”

“He is way too young for that.” Iruka’s response was fast and curt. “Naruto has only begun to be a shinobi. For someone to pick now of times before he has become a Chuunin to try and steal him away for their people is under handed.”

“Is that what it is Tsunade-sama?” Shizune questioned as she hugged a stack of reports.

“It’s practically a love letter.” Tsunade said dryly as she read the contents. “Well at least on the surface it is. I think Naruto has won himself an admirer and won Konoha a loyal client.” She looked over the letter to Iruka. “Provided Naruto tags along on the mission. Now what do we have here?”

“A problem.” Iruka’s hands were balled into fists. “He is still a child.”

“That he is.” Tsunade mused. “But then as I read this… ‘My people and I can’t thank you enough, your assistance brings us peace and we are able to sleep at night. I beg you to take this simple gift that I pray you will take. Something that has been with me for a long time, my hairpin that was given to me in love’ I’ve got to say Iruka. I’m not surprised but I don’t have to like it. More will follow.” She predicted. “Clients are not blind, let us hope our shinobi aren’t either.”

“So Naruto-kun… he gets to keep it? And the letter?” Shizune pressed.

“The contents will be looked over a few times but if it checks out Naruto can have his little admirer’s gift.” Tsunade decided. “And Iruka, make sure he talks to someone about things like this. Not just you. I don’t want this concerning him.” Although it most certainly would, the little brat would be overjoyed. Well, she liked seeing him that way.

XxX

Sasuke was glad for the chance to escape and take a walk. The police station was a prison to everyone. Those incarcerated or not. He had started feeling a craving for anything other than paperwork and cleaning. He had been tempted to work some sort of training into the routine but… not under the watchful eyes of so many people. He would not risk it.

It was nice to escape. Even though the forest was a strange place to escape to he had to admit it was a place he would not run into too many people. Shinobi ran through the forest all the time but anyone actually looking for him would find it hard to locate him. Unless it was a persistent
member of his clan and wasn’t that just depressing.

Still the forest and the training grounds were a shinobi’s haven. People trained there, people relaxed there and people took opportunity to do damage there too. The amount of times he ran into Naruto doing some weird shit. The times he saw Sakura working and the times he said nothing to her because her concentration was too high.

He and Naruto were going to have to pull her aside soon. Kakashi too maybe because he got why she was pushing so hard. But the shame was on his and Naruto’s end and mostly end. They had scared her, made her cry and while he wanted to wipe that fear away there was nothing they could do but get stronger. But as strong as they were, as hard as they trained they needed experience and time. Something someone needed to tell Sakura. They weren’t adults and if Naruto of all people could take advantage of youth and the passing of time then Sakura could cool it just a bit and try and sleep more instead of throw herself into the way of everyone needing help.

But Naruto or Kakashi would put it nicer than he could manage anyway.

Something drew him to the river side, maybe it was hopes of seeing someone that he knew. Someone he could observe or maybe it was that he had seen Naruto so many times around that particular clearing. A clearing that took more damage each time except for that time that Naruto sat still doing nothing.

He was halfway there when he sensed a fight ahead. He made it the rest of the way there his weapons already out his eyes changed before he remembered where he was. How Konoha was now and of course who the hell he was rushing to help. He suppressed his presence just in case he was wrong and carefully climbed a tree in order to look down at the scene.

His eyes caught it all, there was a moment of confusion as he saw the woman because she was unfamiliar until he saw her face and it clicked for him. She seemed unfamiliar because when Sasuke saw her she had a pig or a hundred and one files in her arms. For her hair to be flying as she attacked Naruto her face twisted into concentration. Sasuke had not seen her before.

And his favourite idiot was laughing, enjoying himself. Thrown through the air but Naruto bounced back up laughing his face and shirtless body covered in bruises and dirt. A spar it had to be. It was not as if Sasuke for a moment thought that the combined efforts of himself and Sakura were enough. Naruto needed more, a challenge because Sasuke always saw how Naruto held himself back. He needed someone with the strength to actually stop him. That was not Sasuke yet, it was not Sakura yet so in the end Naruto had to stop himself and could never rely wholly on instincts.

Which was why Naruto sparred with Kakashi. Sasuke had seen them a few times, the energy that both of them put off, sooner or later Naruto would be showing that to them. The way Naruto let go his focus totally different, his traps and tricks on a different level because Naruto trusted Kakashi to stop him, he trusted him to stay alive no matter what he did. Maybe Naruto did not know it himself but that sort of trust was something to aim for. It was a respect shown that maybe Naruto did not understand that he was giving.

He had seen Naruto fight enemies. Seen him go all out, seen him calculate and recently go on a spree that made it seem as though no logic could penetrate Naruto’s skull. There was no doubt in his mind that Naruto knew how dangerous he was and he knew that getting out of control was the most reckless selfish thing he could do. It was in his apologies, the awkward way he held himself afterwards. It was in his tears.

So sparring with the Hokage’s assistant? Well it was a surprise but Sasuke already knew Naruto
liked the woman. She spoke softly to him, smiled at him and he was sure he had seen her calling Naruto a few times they were together in the village. No, sparring with her? Unexpected but he had travelled with the woman so maybe Naruto had gotten a taste of what she was made of and wanted more. After all he could not exactly keep Kakashi to himself.

Still, Naruto’s flexibility as he dodged needles, caught some and hurled them back. It made him glad he had activated his sharingan even as he watched the two of them fight. The sad thing was that he could see how out of her league Naruto was. Naruto had to be holding back some things. It was just how Naruto was but the way she got out his way so quickly and tossed Naruto around. It was a dangerous match but the feel was more of an older sibling tossing a kid around.

“Hope you are ready nee-chan!” Naruto’s smile was almost too bright before he took something from his pocket and bit it. A soldier pill? Something? Who knew what it was but Naruto’s focus as he made hand signs that Shizune obviously knew left him speechless.

“You remember it from-“ She cut herself off as Naruto blew out a plume of light purple smoke in her direction. Out of caution Sasuke covered his face even as his mind raced trying to figure out if he had seen that before from Naruto. Naruto used poison he knew that. He seemed immune to quite a few of them judging by how easily he used them but while he had seen tricks with poison it had been nothing like that.

Still it seemed as though Naruto had gained the upper hand as he switched his kunai to a defensive position and stalked towards the thickest of the smoke as he searched the ground. Which was why Sasuke was startled when the woman dropped down from above her hands covered in light blue and quickly tapped Naruto on his hands and bent down to slap him on his legs. Naruto’s cry of pain had him so startled that Sasuke was going to reveal himself before the woman let out a long sigh.

“That’s that.” She said dryly before she sent the smoke to disperse. “My win Naruto-kun.”

“No way!” Naruto groaned from where he still lay on the ground. “Don’t heal me yet! I can still move! I can still fight! Let me get used to this!”

“Why would I let you get used to that?” The woman groaned as she sat next to Naruto on the ground. “I had not been planning on letting it get as drastic as that but you pushed me Naruto-kun.”

“I should be used to it what if it gets used on me? I gotta be able to fight back.”

“That’s a restraining method one. A dangerous one.” She frowned. “Just let me heal you already, I didn’t do it as severe as the last time but this isn’t something to play with. The wrong person could ruin you.”

“But he managed to work past it.” Naruto mumbled as Shizune set about healing. “You too.”

“I don’t think someone will be doing this to you anytime soon.” Shizune said dryly. “So other than refusing to accept the loss, how are you feeling?”

“You’re really good Shizune nee-chan.” Naruto sat up with a wince before he tapped his left leg. “I think I was already healing.”

“You most likely were, you have been healing quicker these days. How is your throat?”

“Hmm? Oh yeah that sort of stuff doesn’t bother me and this was my own paralytic that I made. Doesn’t affect me.”
“I can see that but all the same a brief check up before I have to go back to the tower.” Shizune smiled at Naruto warmly. “You pushing boundaries aside, this was fun.”

“Told ya.”

XxX

“Must be nice to be a civilian.” Naruto groaned as he watched the hustle and bustle of the village. “Even when they are busy they have it so much easier than we do. It’s not fair ya know. We are always working, always going and then what? A break for a few seconds but that means only a break from leaving the village.”

“There is always something to do.” Chouji agreed as unwrapped a meat bun to pass to Naruto. “It never stops for Shinobi. It is worse if you have a clan.” He shifted on the roof as they watched down below. “Or just being in a clan because means extra work when you finally get a break.”

“Don’t talk about it.” Naruto groaned. “Sasuke’s always busy and even when he isn’t someone wants him for something. I don’t think I’ve ever seen an Uchiha goofing off. His Mom is always doing something or cooking or seeing someone about something. Only way it could be worse would be if Sasuke was supposed to inherit.” He laughed before he clapped Chouji on the back. “You and the rest of your team have it rough huh.”

“Training, lessons, missions and then you do it all over again. We are doing it at our pace but it is still tiring.” Chouji sighed long and tiredly and Naruto joined him. “As Shikamaru said it really is a drag, even in this time of celebration we have it rough.”

“Makes you wonder who has it better, Chuunins, Genins or Jounins.” Naruto sighed. “Or maybe the lucky ones are the civilians after all.”

XxX

“He can say some cute kid stuff after all can’t he.” Sparrow said in a chuckle. “That’s good to see.”

“Children should be children sometimes.” Tenzo chuckled as they sat behind the two genins watching them watch the town. “They should have more cute moments like this.”

XxX

His family were home, Sasuke knew that he could hear them in the house he could sense them but he was still in his room. He was far more comfortable in his room by himself than out there with them where he would be pulled away from his thoughts and where he would be forced to interact and speak.

Something he would rather not do currently. He was good how he was. He wanted time to himself. He just wanted to think for himself. He just wanted to let the thoughts come and he wanted to be alone somewhere he could relax and let his guard down where eyes were not heavy on his back. Where gossip would not follow his every step. Where expectations he had no intentions of following would not find him.

With every day, with every event. Every little old lady. Every gossipy old man his resolve hardened. With everyone that wanted to reminisce he knew that he was right to trust his team. To pick his team because there was no room to breathe here. He was trapped and no one noticed.

He had started to drown a long time ago and he would do anything to shed this fake skin of his. To throw off the chains that tied him down. What he truly wanted he would never get as Uchiha
Sasuke, son of the clan head and brother to Uchiha Itachi. As long as he was... he would never... he could never step forward and be the man he thought he wanted to be. That he needed to be.

So he would be the shinobi the village needed. There was pride in that. There was benefit in that. He could use his frustration, his feeling and his need to be the shinobi his team needed. To fight alongside them and protect the village that was his home. To protect his clan and his family. He just did not need to be in the middle of it all.

He was not avoiding feelings, he was not avoiding reality he was facing it more than the others were. He was a marked person and he knew that he was one of the hunted even as he worked as a shinobi. He was not safe, just like how Naruto was not safe. Naruto was using this time to recover and heal become a person that could be with them in ways Sasuke suspected the other Naruto was unable to without pushing their limits.

Naruto had no idea the things he did to them sometimes. Sasuke did not mean to freeze up, he doubted Sakura did either but sometimes Naruto took you off guard. How casual he was with his body. How affectionate he was and Sasuke had been around Naruto long enough to notice when the boy was holding back. It was in his eyes, the way he watched and accessed you. Naruto knew when to stand down. When a hug got too dangerous, when a fight was passing the limits of what Naruto could control.

The amount of time Sasuke had looked up at Naruto and seen wildness. Seen a fighter that would keep going if he gave the chance and he had known remaining very still was necessary so he did not set off something in Naruto. Sakura had seen it too and while they trained together they had a small advantage over Naruto he wished they did not. Naruto knew he had to hold himself back, Naruto knew they would fight to submit while his first inclination was always to the death. Sasuke understood that. A child, a child that had to fight an adult knew nothing about subduing.

They depended on Naruto to be able to call halt. To be able to stop himself but that would only be for now. There was no way he was going to let that stand. Besides these few months with Naruto had taught him a lot about Naruto.

He had watched Naruto laugh, he had watched him be distant in ways he had never thought be possible. He had watched him angry. Watch him be amused at adults around him sharing in a joke that Sasuke wanted to be let in on. He had watched Naruto cry shamelessly, watch him blame himself and shed tears and it had hurt him just as Sakura’s tears had.

That mission, Sasuke knew why Naruto had fought so hard, why the leash on his control had slipped. Naruto had wanted to save the boy so badly. He had thought he had it in the bag and then everything had gone to hell and Naruto had withdrawn into himself.

His gaze went to the swords in his room. The swords that somehow after everything he had been allowed to keep. Kakashi had said something about them being the best for him because of their conduit nature and while Sasuke liked to look at them. Like to touch them and clean them he still could not get the look of Naruto’s face out his head because Naruto had been devastated then he had been resigned in a way that bothered Sasuke.

“Can’t I change fate? Or is it destined to always be like that? No matter what, they will always pick... him. I can’t win.”

Naruto’s words just would not leave him. It had been a sullen trip home and he had been unable to look away from Naruto for a minute. It had been the first time since they had started taking missions together. Since Naruto had come back that Naruto had been so open and grieving. He had just bounced into their lives all happy and different but to hear him, to see him like that. What the
hell was Sasuke supposed to do?

He had the swords but he did not want to use them, not that he could. Not yet, maybe not ever. They were strong they belonged to a dangerous group and while Naruto swore up and down that the swords had no weird powers, least not these. Sasuke could not help but be a little wary. He was allowed to be after all. These swords as beautiful as they were, as strong as they were. They were not part of his history. Unlike Naruto who was aiming for a different sword a sword that Sasuke felt Naruto deserved more than any other Konoha shinobi.

But Sasuke needed to get stronger. In order to support his team. In order to support Naruto because while Naruto had his head on straight in most matters. He just did not keep it together that often. That mission. Naruto had snapped, that was the honest truth. The parallels had gotten to him and Sasuke had not needed Kakashi to say a word to know it.

After that mission they should have been given down time not kept busy like this. He had no idea what the mission office and the Hokage was thinking. Naruto might look like he was coping with Haku’s death and while he had accepted it that did not mean he had moved on. This mission, that boy’s death and the choice he had made. For Naruto the parallels and the hopes and dreams he must have been clinging to must have shattered something inside of him. It must have been like losing Haku twice.

Sasuke could only imagine how that moment felt for Naruto. That was why he needed to train more. That was another reason he had to get stronger and while it felt as though he was getting nowhere he would keep going. He had to. There was nothing else for him to aim for. This was all that he had, the life of a shinobi and team seven. Training was all that he could have to himself.

Even though he wished secretly that he could just be different be someone else. Even though holding back and keeping silent silent tore at him. Even though he felt as though the body he walked around in was alien and when he looked around as though he was some sort of intruder. Even though with every pull at his insides he wished it was different that he was not cursed. That he could be like Naruto, like Sakura.

Even though he wished it was okay to say what he really thought. What he really felt and he wished he did not have the blood and the burden of the name. even though he wished he did not have the blood, the burdens even though his love for his clan and his family would strangle him the longer he spent with them. He wanted to be normal even the Naruto kind of normal. Instead of the feeling that he had reached the understanding of an old man before his time.

Around this time people sought connections, family and friends. Sasuke only felt fear for the truth. He only felt dread and the feeling that he was suffocating among them without them noticing. With every preparation he longed to be elsewhere. With every question he wanted out. With every joke and plan he longed for an escape. With every moment that he had to play along to the game that had been started a long time before he was aware, he longed for the freedom he had with his team.

He would rather be getting stronger, putting his skills to the use and making a name for himself that had nothing to do with who he was but with what he could do for his team and the village. He wanted to keep his friends alive. He wanted to make certain that they made it to the top together. He wanted to use his flame, his frustrations and make something good out of the entire mess. Maybe he could outrun the whole mess if he ran fast enough.

Maybe he could have team seven and be satisfied enough. Even with Naruto around reminding him of the things he could never ask for. Even with him counting the days down that the complications would begin. He loved his team, he got more from them than they would ever know.
Naruto and Sakura were his friends. Kakashi could be an annoyance but he was there for them too. Them close to him, accepting him without words. Without prying, it meant so much to him he just knew that deep down this warm feeling was what Naruto felt too. He just knew that they would fight together, discover things together and when they could protect each other from physical threats or the not. Even when they were not physically there.

Sasuke sighed before he left the swords where they were carefully balanced before he reached for Naruto’s little gift. Naruto could be naïve sometimes in the weirdest ways, pure in ways Sasuke would have never thought possible. A heart like a child’s but sometimes when he did not know it, Naruto gave the biggest help. Sasuke could hang in for a little while longer, he had team seven.

XxX

It had been a troublesome mission but Shisui ended up missing it in the end. He had gotten used to watching over Naruto, he knew his squad had. They had gotten used to keeping an eye on the kid, speculating about him. Wishing him well and of course being very very surprised over the things the boy would do.

It was the Jinchuuriki watch duty and of course there was the expected dangers but in the end they had been watching over a lonely kid and seeing him acclimatize to Konoha. Try to make a place for himself and while he had not spoken that much to the kid face to face. Shisui had felt as though he had gotten to really know Naruto during those months.

He had felt as though he had seen some parts of the kid that showed that while he was dangerous, strong and plenty of things to note. The kid was cute and he in many ways was a kid. Shisui had watched him train, he had watched him garden. Water and trim plants and sing to them. Watch the kid fight to bring life to plants that looked halfway to manure territory.

Watched the kid read, seen how kidlike and small he had looked curled up with books and scrolls either marking the books up with notes or gnawing on a pen as he read. He had watched as the kid stuck his tongue out in frustration over a passage in a scroll or a book. Looking younger than his years and less like a shinobi. On the flip side he had seen Naruto focus seriously his body tense as his eyes darted over pages.

He had watched the kid sing and do his laundry, watched as the kid showed off a shocking lack of modesty in his own house and outside. But no matter how many times he put that in the report no one did anything, no one said a thing and while there was nothing wrong with a kid being so free there was a time and place right? He might kill one of his peers flashing all that skin and the way he liked to get up close and personal sometimes.

Ah youth, how Sasuke and little Sakura had not managed to faint yet showed their strength because Shisui was unsure to what he would have done at that age. Maybe laugh it off? Certainly, run away right?

Still, kids were kids and their childhood days were already numbered. Why not let them have their fun? Even while Naruto on his own was a bunch of different things, the kid was having fun in his own way. Shisui felt really sorry for those people who got the wrong end of the things Naruto sat about making. It had made ANBU nervous for different reasons. For Shisui it had been the skill, Itachi had commented on the knowledge.

But it had been a good while since Shisui had gotten to sit back and watch their jinchuuriki and while everyone had their reasons to put their all into the mostly unnecessary watch it had soothed them. Naruto was one of theirs and he was where he belonged in Konoha. To them he was a precious member of their village and while he hoped Naruto felt the same. The way Naruto clung
to the lessons and people of his past made him wonder if they had been too late in retrieving the boy.

Did Naruto trust them, did Naruto trust the village? Could he? He was at least amused with the adults in his life. He did not seem to hate the ANBU and while he was far more emotionally developed than most would expect there was some guilt lingering. Jinchuurikis had it rough and Naruto had held some sort of happiness before they took him back. The least they could do was try to make the boy secure and happy.

Considering who Naruto really was it was the least they could do. It was why so many had fought so hard and refused to accept suggestions of his death. It was why so many in the village had unified after all. But while they knew and they felt guilt. Naruto knew nothing.

Those like Kakashi who had to befriend Naruto in their own way since they were banned from the truth. So many things Shisui would actually like to tell Naruto even while he wanted to apologise. He might be ANBU but the weight of human lives was a heavy one.

The Hokage must know what she was doing but Shisui could sympathize with Kakashi because he found himself wondering what Naruto was doing far too often.

XxX

He was getting far too used to seeing his little brother’s back. Watching Sasuke walk away just made his heart drop to his toes. It was never supposed to be like that. It was not even the natural order of things. As the older one he was supposed to be showing Sasuke his strength and his back but Sasuke was the one turning away, Sasuke was the one walking away and growing stronger out of sight.

It was a strange thing to feel surrounded by so many people, so much of their clan. In the middle of a crowd and the sight of Sasuke walking away from it all made Itachi feel so lonely. He barely tried to reach out these days it only hastened Sasuke’s departure. Sometimes it felt as though he would not come home if he had a choice, staying out late with his team. Something that many did but it felt as though Sasuke drew out that time until he had no choice.

He must sound like an old man sulking in such a manner but even during this time when people looked to family and clan Sasuke as usual was distant. It made his heart hurt, it made him feel lonely because there was so much he wanted to say, to share and Sasuke wanted no part of it.

He did not even want to sit in Itachi’s sight for too long. Did not want to stand next to him, did not want to meet his eyes. Every single time Sasuke would tense up or grow sullen before he dismissed himself or just walked away.

There was always a harsh instruction towards Itachi not to follow and that hurt. Still he could not put away his feeling of longing as an older brother. He could not do it up close but he wanted to watch over Sasuke still. Protect him even when Sasuke was determined not to let him do it. Still he had been hoping around this time that Sasuke would lower his guard enough for Itachi to at least pat him on the shoulder. Hold him maybe.

Some said this was teenage rebellion, a brother’s jealousy but Itachi could not help but feel that it was something far more worrisome than that. All he could do was worry, especially since he knew and others knew that Sasuke was not safe.

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Maybe it was a sign of their strength that missions went even easier than normal. Maybe it was that or maybe it was their levels of paranoia that let them see things quicker. Think faster and of course wrap things up faster. Sakura would like to think that it was a sign of their strengths but she knew that it was more than that.

Even though C-ranks and D-ranks were easy missions she never let her guard down. How could she or any member of her team? Their first C-rank had turned out to be nothing of the sort after all. That and she was aware now how things could lurk around every corner. There was also the matter of her boys.

She spared a glance to them walking behind her. Naruto looked so alive, his eyes sparkled, his skin was glowing. He kept smiling and as he walked along his hands swung or the rested behind his back as he stretched. There was just something about travel that brought out the best in Naruto. He looked so eager and so happy. Who was she to judge him for that?

While he did not exactly seem muted in the village, Naruto was just a better wandering soul. Eager and attentive even while his guard was way up. only a fool would think he was happy and carefree. Blue eyes found her gaze and Sakura watched Naruto’s eyes warm in fondness towards her before he grinned and looked away.

Honestly, he was so damn troublesome. Normal people did not do that. They did not look at you like that and make it not only easy but make it seem as though it were nothing at all. Naruto was weird but she was happy with him. It never failed to amaze her how someone who went through as much as he did could look so alive and happy. Even though the struggle of it inside him could not be easy. He was honest with his smiles, honest with his tears too. Honest with his desperation and frustration, his anger. Someone that felt so much, experienced so much yet Naruto’s smile was like the sun warming you on a cold day. It was too much sometimes.

Still on a summer evening like this one after a fairly easy mission and on their way back home Naruto and his smile was rather nice to look at. It suited the mood. It was very easy to keep looking at Naruto.

Next to him his hands in his pockets and keeping quiet was Sasuke as usual. It was not that he did not speak. He talked quite a lot when he was ready. He had opinions that just flew out when he got heated but so far, the only one that got him passionate about anything was Naruto.

That did not mean he did not care about her though. Too many times they had complained together and sighed over the entity that was Naruto. It was kind of amusing how Naruto had both of them suffering. They thought the same thing and both of them could not look away. It had created a strange kind of friendship between the both of them.

Watching over Naruto, studying Naruto and of course shielding and protecting him from anyone that was not team seven. Deflecting Shikamaru’s questions, shielding him from others eyes too. Sasuke’s eyes met hers a little curious before they shifted to Naruto. Sasuke’s face lightened a little bit the edge of his mouth tilting into a smile as Naruto watched their surroundings with a grin. Sasuke’s shrug when he met her gaze again made her smile because when it came to Naruto no one understood her dilemmas like Sasuke did.

Even though she worried about Sasuke too. She turned back to the front her body alert even as her mind wandered. It seemed so long ago now, the Chuunin exams, everything that had happened. She almost felt like a different person. Everything had changed, even her team. Even everyone else. There was a new Hokage, everyone had changed and were getting stronger. It was not that long ago really but in a way it was. Time had flown on and yet there they were. Her team different but closer.
That did not change the matter of threats. Danger hovered over her team, shadows and secrets. Shadows she could only watch out for, it made her nervous. It worried her and there was little that she could do but get stronger, keep her boys as close as possible and plan for everything she could. That taste of fear still lingered in her, it still jolted her awake at night.

She would not be left behind and she would not lose them. She sneaked another look back at them. Naruto had pried a stalk of grass from somewhere and was trying to tease Sasuke with it. Sasuke had removed on his hands from his pocket to bat it away while he rolled his eyes.

It was cute, it was sweet and things like that made them look like the kids others would suppose that they were. Their ages were young but their minds were not. The things they had seen. The things they had experienced had changed them. They might resemble kids. They might seem to others to be them but they were shinobi. But that did not mean they should let summer times pass them by, every laugh together they had to value, every single smile. It was one reason why she took so many photos.

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The end to a successful mission, a clear evening and of course finishing the mission early and safely with his team. For Kakashi there could be nothing better than that feeling. His team was safe, the mission was over and while it had been boring for him it was yet more experience for his team. Now there was nothing left but to usher them back home to the safety of Konoha.

The setting sun was no real bother to Kakashi or his team, they would arrive at the gates after dark but that was nothing new to them. Once they got back as soon as possible it was perfect for them. They could walk all night if they ever had to. They had the stamina for it, the training for it too, especially Naruto.

Listening to his team talk softly as they made their way home. As a team leader could there be anything sweeter to hear and see? They were a mere to steps away, Kakashi on their heels as their group walked together and Kakashi felt so close to them even as he contributed nothing to the conversation.

To be fair, he was not the only one but Naruto was contributing far more than he who watched and listened. It was rare for Sasuke to dominate a conversation, rarer still for both Sakura and Sasuke to have the back and forth after a mission so maybe Naruto was just taking it in to remember later. Kakashi was certainly committing it to memory.

His little team, so busy because of Konoha and because of the Hokage but closer than he had thought they would be in so little time. So close and only getting closer.

“A village is close.” Sasuke said suddenly. “I think they are having a celebration.”

“Most villages are around this time.” Sakura answered. “Still they are sort of loud, must be nice to be that carefree.”

“Maybe we’ll pass right through it.” Kakashi spoke up. “Nothing wrong with a few minutes of detour.” His team fell into a small discussion as they got closer and closer to the little village debating the necessity of looking, looking at the celebrations but not actually stopping and of course bothering to detour at all. It made him grin behind his mask as he listened.

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The evening was cool as they talked together. while Sakura did not see the sense in detouring and
Sasuke did not think it was worth it to just walk through and not stop, Naruto was happy for the chance to see something new and to see new people.

Sakura and Sasuke might not have noticed but they had picked up their pace and were level together as they complained. Naruto did not mind, he liked looking at them. He liked seeing them together, his team, his friends. The road was a well-kept one and they could hear the village, the noise on the wind. It was a good end to the day and their mission.

The cold wind that blew made him frown as he walked but there was something more right away that made his steps falter. That cold sudden breeze had been startling for one but for a second, he had sworn he had heard some sort of bells. He turned his head in confusion.

Had something touched him too? He looked around and around aware of his group stopping. He looked past Sakura and Sasuke aware they had not noticed anything. It was when he saw Kakashi-sensei’s cautious looks that he stopped. They watched each other for a few seconds before Naruto forced himself to relax.

“Let’s keep going.” Kakashi-sensei said softly.

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“Last day of the festival huh.” Kakashi watched Sakura smile down at the food that had been given to them as they walked through. “Lucky us then.”

“You know how it is.” The stall owner grinned as he fanned himself, his threadbare shirt clung to him as he gestured around. “Everyone is excited and relieved. Some hopes that their relatives visit them during this time. Some feel as though they were already visited.”

“That’s disturbing.” Sasuke muttered half under his breath.

“Visit huh.” Kakashi watched as Naruto’s eyes went from the villagers to him.

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Was it possible? He did not want to think about things like that. He hated to be thinking about things like that but he had felt something back there. For a second it had felt as though not only someone had walked right by him but someone had touched his shoulder.

Sasuke and Sakura had not heard anything, not felt anything but he was certain Kakashi-sensei had. He was willing to bet on it. But, wasn’t Kakashi-sensei the person that was most like him? The man understood him in ways that nobody else did. That was not all, Naruto could feel it the longer he was on his team and the time he spent alone with his sensei.

His thoughts drifted to the troupe even though this time he did not want them to. For him to think of them now when his heart was so light. As much as he would like to think so such things, hope they were not only watching over him but use this time when the two worlds were nearer to try and comfort him.

It was painful.

He missed them, he always would and carrying them in his heart was hard enough. To think of them so near but out of reach. He wanted to drag them to him again. Touch them and it was not fair, if those stories were true it simply was not fair because if he could he would never let them go. Losing people was not easy, there was no true method to moving on and the reality of shinobi meant that someone had to lose someone or something.
Like he had… Like Kakashi-sensei obviously had because he had heard it too hadn’t he? He had felt it too. Another reason why they were similar. His sensei’s eye tracked him so Naruto looked the man straight in the face, if the troupe was looking over him even all now Haku too. Would they be happy? Would they be proud of how he was living, how he was striving? And if they were watching over him, who was keeping an eye on Kakashi-sensei?

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He wanted to interrupt but he ended up doing nothing instead. Sakura sighed next to him, obviously she had the same problem as well. Something had happened back there, Naruto and Kakashi had gone so alert so fast. Not panicked but worried, concerned and then later in the village he swore they had both been wistful. Something had happened that connected those two again but the air was so heavy he doubted he would be able to get answers out of either of them.

Naruto was a mystery but sometimes so was Kakashi. The way both their eyes had been wide open as they searched for something. The look both them exchanged before they continued on, Sasuke would love to know what had happened and maybe one of them would tell him sooner or later. When they finally got back home.
Training was an everyday thing for team seven. Sometimes together, sometimes separately and while those like Kakashi and Naruto did their own separate training they always came together at some point of time to see that the others had improved. That the others could still hold their own and that they were working on their weaknesses. That they had gotten stronger, that they still moved like a unit. That they could still work as a unit.

It was why Sasuke did not mind getting pinned to the ground by his team as often as it happen. Granted having Kakashi or Naruto was an experience in itself. While neither Kakashi nor Naruto let themselves get too out of control. Kakashi barely had to do much to take them out. Naruto on the other hand, it showed how much he had to struggle to keep from letting his true instincts out. All too often the hand on Sasuke’s neck would be too tight or Naruto would vanish from his perception or vision and he would be on his stomach or back with not a clue how he got there.

Naruto was good and he just kept getting better and that was frustrating. But Sasuke knew that they were taking this time to learn new things. It still rankled when they had their ‘no jutsu’ training spars because automatically Naruto came out on top.

But it did improve them and their teamwork even though they all had to eat dirt and get pinned all the time. Sakura was way too smug when she managed to get one over on them. Sasuke still was trying to figure out how she had managed to get that leglock on him when he had been certain that he had her during the fall.

To watch Sakura pin Naruto, well there was a reason that Kakashi looked so amused all the time. Hell, Sasuke got uncomfortable sometimes and he knew it was nothing like how it looked and someday soon they would be able to stop Naruto from looking so damn happy at them getting one over on him. He and Sakura had limits and they were only human. They were going through a troublesome time of development and Naruto really did not make it easy.

He truly did not make it easy on them. Sasuke was not one to fixate on those sorts of things but his mind went to some places lately that he wished it did not. It pissed him off more often than not because that was not a concern of his.

Still the no jutsu training was a pain in the ass for them because Kakashi would just plop them down in an area and say go at it. Anything but jutsus and while that sounded workable in theory, fighting Naruto was like fighting a madman. No jutsus did not mean no weapons and the problem with Naruto was that every single thing was a weapon.

Sasuke had silently laughed at Sakura until it was his turn to get humiliated by grass, dirt, a rock,
fricken splinters and anything that Naruto lay eyes or hands on. Naruto was just way too adaptable. It was annoying and it was scary. Getting choked out by a cloud of dust was just as humiliating as it sounded. Naruto was just slippery there was no holding onto him unless you had grabbed skin and even that was up for debate.

They might as well start calling him Uzumaki Naruto the nudist because the amount of times during the no jutsu training Naruto had gone ‘fuck it’ and just ripped or discarded the piece of clothing someone had him by was… fucking ridiculous. Kakashi found it funny too, Sasuke guessed his face had been priceless the time Naruto ripped the sleeve from his jacket when Sasuke snagged onto it during a fall. The look on Sakura’s face when Naruto just let Sakura pull off his pants when she had him in a secured grip…

He guessed all of this was pretty fucking funny for Kakashi in the end. Pretty goddamn hilarious. At least their sensei when he showed them up did not have to work too hard on it. If they pulled a fast one on him he always looked pleasantly surprised but Sasuke knew they could not take Kakashi at his best alone. Not yet at least.

Still it would be nice if for once Naruto could tone down the… whatever the fuck that was when he got into it. It was the last thing he expected when Naruto was going all goofy over every pretty faced person that smiled at him. That he could get so aggressive, hell Sasuke swore a time or two when Naruto had him pinned that something else was looking at him through Naruto’s eyes. He had not said anything but he was fairly certain that when Naruto had him pinned, was straddling him that his eyes not only were shaped wrongly but that someone else was behind them.

But he kept his mouth shut and accepted defeat. He also thanked the gods that his body had not done anything stupid or embarrassing. Facts of life were facts of life and while sparring could get heated and he and Naruto always ended up in close combat fairly quickly. He did not want the idiot gloating over facts of nature. The idiot already got carried away with himself. Sasuke was not going to entertain that too.

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The rate of their progress together as a team was startling. It did not seem like anything but when she consulted the notes that Kakashi-sensei had urged her to start she saw improvements in leaps and bounds that looked legendary. It was hard to believe that this was her team. She was glad for that but it was hard to believe when she looked at the paper.

She would love to get her hands on the notes of them that were from when the team had first been created. Mostly because she knew that if she were to compare it to where they were now it would look absolutely crazy.

She knew the reason too, they were pushing themselves for the village. Pushing themselves for each other, for their own reasons and the reason that her own progress and Sasuke’s progress was shooting sky high was because they did not want to lose to Naruto.

Rivalry was alive and well on team seven. She could not begin to explain how thick the rivalry was between them. They cared for each other, she loved them. They loved her but while they supported each other and encouraged each other she knew there was a voice at the back of their heads because there was a voice at the back of hers insisting that she not lose no matter what. That she would not get left behind. They had their strengths, their weaknesses and they complicated team wise for that but she knew to her bones that they put their all into everything because they did not want to be the one holding the team back.

She was always pushing herself, always going hard from the beginning and while she herself did
not talk about it. There was always the fear at the back of her mind of losing them. The team that she had, there was the reality of the shinobi that was refreshed every time she put on her jacket or every time that she put her hair in a bun.

Every time that Kakashi-sensei let her take the lead on a mission and she gave the orders. Every time that she went out or she engaged with an enemy. Every time that she scouted, every time that she read orders. There was the question along with the reality. Was she doing the right thing for her team? Was she putting them at risk?

She wanted to protect her team, her boys and that was the mantra that beat through her head the moment she felt tired or she felt weak or she wanted to waver. There was the image of Naruto’s back. Of Sasuke’s and she wanted them to look at hers too. She wanted to keep them safe but most importantly she wanted them to do what they had to do and trust her to keep herself safe.

And they were getting there, there was trust building in their teamwork. In their bonds and only a fool would miss it. With every time they trained it grew, with every take down she managed. Every time she took Naruto by surprise, took Sasuke by surprise. There was pleasure, there was approval and most importantly there was trust. There was pride too but she knew they were proud of her. She was theirs, their teammate and their Chuunin. They respected her and her orders, it was cute.

Of course Kakashi-sensei had most likely been aiming for this outcome between them for quite some time. Maybe since the beginning. Honestly she would not be surprised if it was like that. They had come a long way and they had quite a journey ahead of them to be Jounins, for Naruto to be Hokage.

Because he would make it, she could feel it. She could see it. The way that he spoke, the way he understood and the way he drew people to him. The eyes of the village had been on him but she had always felt that it had been in a strange way. One day she would learn the story that the village was keeping from the rest of them. One day she would understand the whispers, one day Naruto would be able to tell them because she knew that he could not and while he was sparse about the stories he told about his past. She could feel that he wanted to tell them, tell her that one.

It was in his eyes when he looked to her after sitting to lunch in public. The way he rubbed her hand in his grip when the village distanced themselves as they went down the street. It was in his smile to her when the eyes followed them around. He wanted to tell but he could not so she would wait, both she and Sasuke would wait.

But they would see him be Hokage. The rest of their year group. At least the genins, they knew Naruto and could not keep away. Their eyes or their presence. And Naruto made friends so easily. It was cute, it was amusing but it was so weird Naruto how he got into these situations. He did not even try yet he had eyes and hearts following after him.

Kurenai-sensei might have an amused smile when she watched Naruto be helpful and polite to her team. Her and Asuma-sensei both, Naruto had stars in his eyes from her attention. It was adorable to see the way he would glow under the attention and smiles.

But he drew people to him with his various ways. He took charge of situations, like with Lee and Hinata. Lee doted on Naruto, her visits always left her amused when Naruto came up as a subject. Hinata’s eyes followed Naruto but so did Neji’s and the rest of the Hyuugas. Sakura could admit to doing some fast dodging in the market place to avoid Hyuugas because she trusted her gut when it came to sensing drama and the Hyuugas seemed to reek with it. If a blow-up was coming she wanted to avoid it.

The Hokage… whatever that was going on between her and Naruto. It was confusing and cute too.
The smiles between them. The secret looks that she just could not understand. The way that Naruto spoke to the Hokage as if she were just another person. It was amazing and she just did not understand. But the way people watched him, the way that Naruto remained true to himself even as he battled his own pain and shouldered things that seemed too big for their shoulders.

She could almost see the man he would become. One with a broad back, one that saw the world and wanted to help but had an understanding that she was not gaining. Naruto would be Hokage one of these days and with every day she grew more and more certain.

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His team had developed so fast and they had reached a point that Kakashi could only begin to guess where they would head next. Not just keeping their training physical, they read, they talked and they played games. They trained their skills.

Shinobi did more than fight and it delighted him whenever he saw them practicing their subterfuge on people. On him. On how bright the will of fire was growing under this new generation. They learned from others and they learned from Naruto himself but some of that was spite learning. Sasuke could endure only so much humiliation Kakashi understood.

It was cute, it was satisfying and above all it was necessary. He wanted them strong in bonds and body, in mind and soul. The missions would only get harder as they advanced. They needed to protect themselves and make the right decisions because while Kakashi did not want to linger on it. He was highly aware that sometimes he would not always be there and that during that time they might need strength the most.

Which was why he was so happy to watch them. Relieved to see them fight. To test them himself and see the growth in them. There were many benefits to the Gai’s way of approaching things but he did want them prepared for any handy caps that might come up. He wanted to open their minds too.

Something that sparring with Naruto they would have grasped. Honestly, it was hard not to agree with Shisui’s fear sometimes when he watched Naruto like that. A few more years… a bit more and Konoha would have had something uncontrollable on their hands. It was not obviously apparent but Naruto truly did think out of the box in a way that even missing nins did not think. He was such a wild adaptable child and that was the influence from the outside.

Kakashi was still unsure to how he felt about that. Should he be grateful that Naruto was strong and would not crack so easy or should he feel resentment because someone like Naruto should not have had to suffer at all? It was a question he felt he would always struggle with. Because every time he watched Naruto’s pure and honest smile. His simple delight, his mind would ask him if Naruto would have been able to smile like that without those shinobi.

Kakashi asked himself the question but he did not want an answer because he and Naruto were alike in some ways. Ways that kept growing the longer they spent time together. Kakashi liked to keep Naruto in sight and Naruto… the boy did not push him away because he understood it too.

The boy called for honesty and while Kakashi tried to give it where he could his hands were tied. They were tied and it frustrated him. Sometimes he felt the words on his lips. Sometimes when he and Naruto sparred alone and he inevitably got the upper hand he looked down into blue eyes or red ones depending on how rough the spar was. He looked down and the knowledge ached to come out.

But his hands were tied so he said nothing. He just poured his frustration into looking out for
Naruto. To taking care of him with food and weapons, with books and scrolls. With plant food and company. He did the things he was allowed to and wished he could say more.

XxX

Should she be sitting watching her boys horse around? Maybe not but she was not the only one doing it. Kakashi-sensei was right next to her and he looked amused if anything. Both of them were thinking the same thing as they watched Naruto and Sasuke play around and spar.

God but it was good to be able to see them relax and smile. They both were thinking that she knew. Besides they needed breaks sometimes too. They all needed a little bit of breathing space from the missions that came back to back. While the Hokage tended to utilize team seven as much as she could Sakura was aware that they still had some ways to go. That did not mean her team could not handle the small things.

Quite the opposite actually, after the mission in the land of snow their reputation had changed. It had grown and she knew that only more missions like that would come. It was the way of the world that they worked in. while there had been a good outcome that time that did not mean that every time would be the case and she was fine with that. They could not change every single country and while she had a feeling Naruto wished he could. She was aware that they could not and she accepted that, Naruto just accepted that there were currently things he could not change. Sasuke did too.

But one day the time would come where they would be strong enough to change everything they came across. The time was not there yet but that was the path they were currently running down on.

With all her research and reading she became more and more certain that her team was more than ready for a shift in their missions. Their training time was more than spars and seeking out weaknesses. It was plans and putting things into motion. Feeling each other out and being able to reach what the others was thinking so they could act accordingly. It was being paranoid and being able to back each other up and trusting their individual strengths.

She felt confident in sending her boys out before her. Not just that they could handle themselves but that they would fight to come back to her. They were so close that her heart barely fluttered when she made the big decisions to how they would operate. Naruto might be a vicious thing but Sasuke had quickly joined him in how savage and efficient he could be.

She guessed she herself fell more to the practical side of things. So far anger had not taken her over. There were just obstacles preventing her from getting back to her team, a weird way to look at things but it was what it was. She was stronger in her own ways too but not just in body she had her mind working overtime and that was just the way she liked it.

“You’re distracted.” Her gaze was drawn back to her sensei and the piece he used to capture hers. Hell she was fairly certain that he had been cheating a bit there too. That he had used her distraction to move around the board. Kakashi-sensei was like that. She sighed as she scanned the board.

“This is a learning lesson so it doesn’t matter.” She smiled before she stole two of his pieces. “It’s a nice day isn’t it?” She asked as her gaze went back to Naruto and Sasuke who during her inattention decided to compete at throwing kunais at targets.

“It is isn’t it?” Kakashi-sensei’s eye went to the other two and she watched the warmth and fondness grow. “A good day.” Sakura smiled in agreement. While they had crazy missions, hard training days, it was the time outs like this that were important too.
“Your move.” Kakashi said as he looked away from Naruto who was meditating and Sasuke who had started on cleaning his weapons. “Take your time.”

“I will.” Sakura reassured him. “Sensei do you foresee the missions like the land of snow and the land of That happening again?”

“The shinobi world is an unstable one.” Kakashi pointed out as he watched Sakura hesitate over her pieces. “The entire world is in such a state and the shinobi world survives, it thrives on the skirmishes of others. On their pain so being contracted to fight wars, small or not is a guarantee. It is how we choose to solve the problem that sets us apart. Not every small war will need a thousand to fight.”

“Shinobi as man power certainly solves things doesn’t it.” Sakura’s piece was sacrificed and Kakashi hummed in cautious approval. “We can easily overpower many civilians.” Her eyes went to him before they went to Naruto. “Some of us are almost an army ourselves.”

“Yes imagine our firepower to an invading normal army.” Kakashi hummed as he contemplated the board. “Take us for example, regardless of numbers I image that we could easily subdue many a civilian with the right preparation. A four-man cell like ours would be able to easily suppress uprising or squash wars of certain sizes.”

“Yes we would.” Sakura frowned at the board when Kakashi’s move led him to take two more of her pieces and block a path. “The way we are now, the way that Sasuke and Naruto are I know they can handle any small war that we might find ourselves in. While as a team we find ourselves in some rather interesting situations I’m confident in our abilities.” Her smile when she made her move caused Kakashi to chuckle. “I have the feeling we will continue to uncover many plots, get neck deep in many messes but I know this team will come out on top.”

“Ahh.” Kakashi sighed. “The game is blocked. But I also feel the same, once the wars are small we should be able to handle it. Normal people, normal armies against tam seven are no trouble at all. We have ways of dealing with numbers and you could say they have no idea what they are up against.”

“I feel like I’ll be able to do even better now.” Sakura said as they waited for their bean bun orders to be called. Sasuke watched the way she glanced at them before her gaze went to outside and the light drizzle that had started. “These last few weeks have taught us a lot. I’ll be able to direct you even better than before. I can feel it, I know it.”

“We trust you Sakura-chan.” Naruto had been craning his neck to look outside but he had a bright grin to flash to them both. “Both me and Sasuke know you’ve been training hard for the both of us, we trust your judgement and your guidance. It was just experience the team needs and we’re getting that.” He shifted so someone could slip by and his voice lowered considerably. “You’re learning, the both of you are and that’s what is important in all of this.”

“Right.” She nodded. “We can handle what comes.”

“Not just that.” Naruto shook his head. “We’re good with you and you’re good with us. You learn how to throw your weapon by learning it. We are the weapons you send out Sakura-chan. That’s why it is going better now and why it will continue to improve. We’re a team and the better we know each other the better we can fight.”
Exactly what Sasuke had been thinking for the last few missions. While they caught onto Sakura’s train of thought faster than usual. Sakura’s plans were better and worked things out for them faster with better results.

Naruto had his moments where he took over sometimes or got the situation or even had it half solved before they could assess properly but he and Sakura had come into their own as well. They had become a team to be reckoned with and there was no ignoring that others had recognised that. While other teams were not exactly weak they weren’t on their level and they certainly did not have the understanding that team seven had.

They were united, they were hard hitters and quick thinkers. All of them were leaps and bound ahead of what was expected for those their age. An entire team that progressed so quickly. That was this strong? It was one thing to have strong genins, strong shinobi on a team but for an entire team to be like they were? The others simply were not ready but that was okay. Sasuke had never planned to wait anyway. His team kept his pace and encouraged him to get better. Whatever got in the way, they would handle it together. That was what their team did.

XxX

“Where did the book come from?” Tenten smiled when she saw that Lee had woken back up. “And why are you reading it now? Shouldn’t you be training now Tenten?”

“Well it’s raining for one.” She said dryly as she untucked her feet from underneath herself. “Another reason ignoring that I could be like you mad people and train in this crazy weather is that this is a sort of training too.” She smiled at his confusion before she gently tapped his nose with the spine of the book. “Sakura gave it to me and it’s helping a lot with how I see things.”

“So this book is also your training.” His confusion cleared up. “These studies will help you in the field! That’s great Tenten!” It was nice to have someone happy for her on her team and nice to get the compliment too. She beamed at him before she sat back into her chair to resume reading. “Tenten?” Lee’s voice was hesitant. “You think you could perhaps read to me?”

If asked later she would swear that her heart did not melt. “Of course Lee, it’s better this way anyway they talk so much about blind dependency this chapter someone might be able to help me out with it.”

XxX

What was strange was that while Neji had been a boy devoted to duty and his own goals things like this had never been a necessary thing for him. It was something to pick up along the way but the longer that Gai watched and accessed the more he could say with certainty that Neji’s outlook had changed.

His wants had changed and it showed. A boy who wanted revenge and to do his duty as the strongest. A boy who had accepted a heart-breaking fate had changed. It was a beautiful thing. It was the correct thing to happen and Gai was for it. He would not forget who had sparked it all. To him it was a bit of fate, a miracle of youth.

That did not change the new path Neji was on now. It just showed how much better things would be. How much the boy had learned and how mature he had become. It was one thing to be able to learn the rules. Memorize them but it was something different to take them into your heart, apply them to yourself. Live the teachings and apply them to your friends.

He did not want to get ahead of himself but he was fairly certain that this was the path that Neji
was currently on. It was in his speech. It was in his eyes it was in the allowances he gave his clan,
his teammates and himself. it was the way he allowed himself to soften.

It was in the grave that he visited with a different stance. Little Naruto thought when Gai thanked
him that Gai was thanking him for Lee. As much as Gai was grateful to Naruto for that it was more
than that and he wished that one day he would be able to explain to the boy the true story and
everything that Gai was thankful to him for. Bringing back Tsunade-sama, giving Lee hope,
changing Neji’s mind and heart and of course bringing light back to Kakashi’s eyes. Gai would just
like to say thank you but he knew the words would be barely enough.

XxX

Team seven were so frustratingly strong it just pissed him off, it pissed him off because they were
just weird with it too! It was not a game, it was not funny it was their lives as shinobi and the life of
a shinobi had meaning. Death had meaning, war had meaning and while he was fighting going
forward he kept seeing the dust that team left behind.

It was more than that too. He was learning more about his clan and his duties. He was learning
more about shinobi and he watched more. Not just others but his team. They needed each other and
while he felt disappointed with himself with not making it to the massive Finals he could
acknowledge that more than his body needed work.

He was not fond of criticism but he not only did he not want to lose. He honestly to the bottom of
his heart wanted to do more. He saw the Hokage and marvelled like everyone else. He helped with
fixing the village like everyone else and he winced with Iruka-sensei at the sheer amount of work
the man had to struggle through. It honestly was not an easy job but he wanted to do more, he
wanted to get stronger and look out for his team, his village and keep them safe.

Because he would rather bite his tongue than have team seven and Naruto as their fucking shields
while he sat on his ass or sat helpless knowing nothing and unable to do anything. That just was
not how he worked.

XxX

They had wanted to be strong shinobi, strong women and somewhere along the line they had
gotten off track but they were back on it. Just that Sakura kept trying to leave her behind. Sakura
looked good in her jacket, the confidence suited her. Her smile was bright and the way she walked
with her team, the way they walked with her.

Only a shallow person would be jealous of that. Her boys were different and she cared about them.
Chouji with his heart of goal. Shikamaru who tried harder than others saw. She had been with them
for almost her whole life. Shikamaru’s jacket had changed him, he was still the one they looked to
as a true leader because of his knowledge but she liked to think for herself too.

She wanted to use what she had to match too. The more eyes you had, the clearer the picture
became. She wanted to support too, she knew she could and she was not slacking. She was not
relaxing until she got further ahead and helped not just her clan and her friends but her village.

XxX

So many of them advanced because it was expected of them. That was not a bad reason too but
people needed something deeper, something human to progress and bonds with other human
beings kept your heart strong.
His mind was strong, so was his strength but it came to emotions and bonds he had work to do. One thing about team eight was that it taught him kindness, it taught him patience and it gave him a place to belong along with people who tried to understand him. It was not a bad thing and while he had his own reasons towards working hard, doing it for them too was not a bad thing.

XxX

He had been working more since getting the jacket and he had been worried and having more trouble sleeping since the very beginning. His game style had changed. How he thought had changed. Everything had changed since he put on the jacket. While he wanted to be just him and do the correct thing that he could using intelligence, logic and of course not getting himself killed there was something he could not ignore.

Naruto.

The boy had to be an idiot, he was the biggest idiot with a smile that would not quit. Somehow a kind heart too and he was the biggest contradiction he had ever had to face. Someone like him was strong, someone like that was changing his team into something that Shikamaru would actually not mind to help out.

Team seven were simple beasts but it was more than that. They were stronger than before. Not just physically it was in how they moved, how they thought. Sakura was the Chuunin but Shikamaru found it hard to tell the difference between her and the rest of her team. They all had their strengths and weaknesses no doubt but they all could lead and people would follow.

And for him? He still wanted the simple path but he was looking to the next step. Helping his team, guiding them and training with them while he looked to the next step himself. He had never seen the sense or felt the urge to compete before. Even though team seven did not notice, they were firing all of them up. It was a pain too. Who wanted to get fired up and have to do even more work? But who wanted to be caught slacking and end up pulling everyone down? Lazy people found the easiest and quickest solutions and he had that up on everyone else. Konoha was not going to speed along and change without him, he was going to add something too.

XxX

He really liked it on her but he was itching for one of his own. Naruto’s eyes eased open and his gaze sought out Sakura’s figure as she sat doing reports a bit of a distance away in the training ground. Sasuke was doing pushups. Had been doing them for quite some time and as impressive as that was Naruto’s eyes were on Sakura.

When she had gotten that jacket he had been a bit envious but he had felt proud too. After everything that had gone down it had made sense. Everything she had done, that he had heard about her. While he and Sasuke had fought hard and everything the fact remained that Sakura had resembled the Chuunin Naruto admired the most in those moments.

Naruto had his own beliefs and his own way but Sakura had been so loving, so fierce and protecting. She had the heart of the matter down and her strength had not been anything to sneeze at either. Her mind was quick and while she was now catching onto the devious side of things she was really smart.

That just meant he was proud, ridiculously proud to have her as his team’s Chuunin even while he himself was disappointed that he did not make one. Disappointed while a bit understanding too. Sasuke got it too. They had both learned afterwards and in the hospital that they had to try harder, get stronger and they knew that now that Sakura had hers. It was time for them to get theirs.
Taking the lead was not as hard as he had thought it would be considering that Naruto had been stuck in follow mode for most of his life. He liked to do his own things but that was now when he had the freedom to do so. It was harder than one thought to slip anything by Haku or Alya. Being babysat all the time meant that either he shared his ideas or he kept them to himself.

Somethings he had happily blabbed out but some things were better off kept to himself and he had done that with the main troupe. But with Sora he had gotten wistful, with Sora he had spoken of dreams and hopes. Plans and adventures. Gotten a rude awakening from the rest of them too but keeping things bubbled up indefinitely was no way to go.

But actually leading people, well when he had the knowledge to lead them forward that was. He had no problem sharing information that would keep them alive or help out in the mission. It was vital to teamwork after all but it was strange too because these things he used to lead were the things others taught him or things he watched others do.

After being played with and tossed around by the adults and the troupe he had figured out how to teach others but with less frustration and tears. Less bruised pride too. They had taught him some useful things the lot of them. He could help others, help his team and help himself too by combining the things he saw and applying them to the various situations. That was progress, was he Chuunin material? Well he was strong but considering the way Iruka-sensei kept watching him when Naruto took time out to hang with Konohamaru who knew. Or maybe he was just big brother material. It was nice being the older one for once. Have someone to teach and stand in front of to protect.

XxX

Strength was one thing and leadership skills was another. Clan duties were also a royal pain in the ass along with the demands that came with it. When he reached two hundred Sasuke dusted himself off and reached for his bottle of water. Sakura’s movement of hand caught his attention as he sat on the ground and he followed it as she reached up to scratch at the hair caught in a tight bun.

His eyes dipped to the jacket that she wore loosely and turned away to hide his smile. One thing he was happy about was the change in Sakura. When they first began he would have never thought he would have cared so much about the two members of his team but now he thought about them, fought to protect them. Made contingencies for them, preferred to be with them than on his own or at home. He had also watched them cry and in some cases dried their tears and gave them comfort.

Sakura’s tears had hurt back then. He and Naruto, they had fucked up at that time and been not only reckless and careless they had been cruel. He himself had been foolish but the rest of that had been reckless as well. She cared for them and her continued fight to get stronger showed him that she was not over it. She most likely never would be.

Twice they had gotten into situations, dangerous ones that gave them injuries that could have been deadly. While he had his own nights where he woke up thinking of the forest he was certain Sakura had her nights too. That did not change that Sasuke wanted to get stronger.

Not just to prove himself, not just to protect himself but he wanted to get stronger for a reason just as strong as those and just as important as that. He had a deep wish, a heartfelt wish that he knew he could share with no other person and the closest he could get to that was to throw himself into not only his team but his duties to the village. That was why he needed to get stronger. He needed something for himself. To make something of himself that was different to what others thought about.
He needed to get stronger and make his own version of that. He needed to get stronger so that he had his own place that he would be happy. Where he could stay because the longer he talked, the longer he stayed, the longer he looked around and listened the more that he felt that this team was forever. There was something about them and while Naruto had his darker side, his unpredictable embarrassing side he still had that sweetness about him and Sasuke wanted to protect that too as much as he wanted Sakura to not want to be worrying about him. He would not say it aloud anytime soon but he wanted to be strong enough to make his team proud for when others looked back to the Hokage’s team because he would not say it but Naruto would make it.

XxX

Was it greedy to be already looking ahead? Sakura certainly did not think so. She knew from asking around that the way to Jounin was a lot longer and harder than the path to Chuunin. That was fine, she did not mind the challenge. She looked forward to it. Why the hell should she stay where she was?

She should be looking to get stronger, get better and know more. Not just for herself but there was her team to consider. She wanted to help them better, she wanted to help the village more and she wanted to have more to offer. She already offered something and she was growing as a shinobi from the village.

Kakashi-sensei most likely found it and her amusing but that was fine. She had her weakness but she was learning how to compensate and overcome those. People did not make it easy but it was fine. All of it was fine.

She was not weak, she was capable of growth and she could survive anything that others wanted to throw at her. She would survive and she would come back hard.

XxX

“Have her toss you at a few annoying missions and maybe the hero worship would dim a bit Tenten.” Sakura teased, Tenten watched her yawn before she fell back onto Tenten’s unmade bed. “Honestly sometimes I feel as though she doesn’t want team seven in the village operating. We’re always on a mission somewhere and while some are far and easily done some are far away and long. So long.”

“She’s still the Hokage though.” Tenten pointed out. “And she’s an amazing shinobi too.”

“She is isn’t she.” Sakura mumbled as she rolled over to hug Tenten’s pillow. She nuzzled it her hair brushing the brown sheets before she sighed and sat up. “Naruto’s seen her fight and stuff and I’ve seen the reports on her. She’s amazing as a shinobi.”

“See!” Tenten gloated. “She’s an inspiration have you heard about the things that she’s done? That she started?”

“And she’s even more amazing because she is going to help Lee-kun.” Sakura smiled. “She’s treated as a myth even now but she’s incredible. She’s done so much, she’s so strong and everyone loves her even though she’s been gone for so long and even though no one knows what she’s doing with the various shinobi teams or even security.”

“Tsunade-sama always has a plan. It has to be something amazing and good in the long run. She’s one of the legendary Sannin. Whatever it is it has to be big and something only she can do.”

“If you say so.” Sakura teased. “You really admire her I don’t know how this hasn’t come out
“My chakra control isn’t suited for medical jutsus.” Tenten admitted. “But I can still love her
determination and her work. She is not just limited to medical jutsus even if she is the most
amazing medical shinobi ever. I mean ever. So I want to master something too and work hard just
like she has.”

“She’s really your inspiration isn’t she.” Sakura grinned. “She’s a hard worker… just like you and
your team.”

XxX

It was not just his team that Kakashi heard about and kept an eye on. Since everyone wanted to be
checking out his team it was only fair to return the favour. He had to do that since so many teams
had members whose curiosity was legendary and could cause trouble down the line. That and
Kakashi liked to see where they were going and how fast they could put the picture together.

So while hearing and looking he saw something that would touch not just the Sandaime but
something that would touch many from previous generations and maybe all the way back up to the
first Hokage.

The will of fire ignited and burning bright. Although the current holders might not notice. Most
likely did not notice just what they were letting burst into flame in their hearts. These little teams
with bared teeth and naked determination. What a sight to behold.

Those who refused to be left behind or out shone. Those who took their envy and turned it positive.
Those with their scars on their hearts. On their innocence. Those that wanted to not only do
something but keep something close to them. Keep their bonds tight and true. Kakashi liked to see
that and he was seeing plenty of that.

He saw shinobi with their eyes not on just the symbolism of the prize but shinobi looking to see
where they fit in the new scheme of things. Shinobi looking to protect their own and shinobi
looking to change themselves and the world around them.

Kakashi could feel the shift, he could see the shift in them and he could see where it was leading. It
was honestly amusing because rivalry could inspire you. That feeling of not wanting to lose or look
weak and while that urged on many of them. Many of them had their own things that they had
nudging them on. As it was, while many would see the attainment of a jacket as their next step to
change and improvement. Other saw it as a sign that they were moving onto the next stage in the
village. In his eyes most of them were still young regardless of talent.

In current times there was no need to rush. He preferred the gentle progression more than anything
else but he knew that soon there would be no stopping these new flames. These genins and
Chuunins that called Konoha home that had something, someone to protect. The exams when they
started back were going to be amusing to see. They were not there yet most of them but they were
on the path and the heart was the most important part, then came the talent. But by the looks of
things, they would have that talent polished up by the time the Exams rolled around again. The
future in their hands looked bright. Just the ones from Kakashi’s generation and before needed to
clean up the threats lurking but that was fine. They were used to clean-up and darkness.

XxX

“It’s still so amazing.” Sakura admitted as she swung her feet. “Sometimes I wake up and I don’t
believe it but then I get out of bed and everything comes rushing back.” She touched the shoulder
to her jacket and smiled. “And it’s worth it you know? I feel so happy and proud and then I find my team waiting for me.”

“Never lose sight of that feeling.” Kurenai-sensei smiled. “And from the looks of things your team is fond of your status too.”

“Sasuke-kun and Naruto love it.” Sakura laughed. “Sometimes I feel like telling them to behave because they weren’t this obedient to Kakashi-sensei you know? To the man that is always late and has the worst excuses they do whatever but for me they are my little obedient soldiers.” She snorted. “It’s cuter than it should be.”

“Naruto-kun and Sasuke-kun are the last one you would expect to be following orders so meekfully but they follow your lead.” Kurenai-sensei mused. “They respect you a great deal and it shows.”

“We’re a team.” Sakura answered. “We respect each other equally and sometimes they are the ones that have to give me advice. I’m their Chuunin but they are still capable themselves.”

“Well maybe this is their way of spoiling you.” Kurenai-sensei swung her feet as she looked around the shop. Hinata ducked her head when Sakura’s gaze lingered for a bit too long. “Your team has accomplished so much in so little time.”

“At least say what it is.” Sakura laughed. “Naruto’s accomplished so much. So many things are directly his fault. We all share the trouble but Naruto’s senses and his eyes when it comes to mysteries have to be the best. I’m glad we get to help people but honestly Naruto gets us moving.”

“H-how’s Naruto-kun?” Hinata’s face was flushed red.

“He’s either training or on a mission.” Sakura answered honestly. “He was complaining that he doesn’t get the amount of time he would like to spend with Iruka-sensei or his other friends. I understand that completely but Naruto’s Naruto.” She laughed. “He’ll always be smiling for us.”

“That’s an adorable way to put things.” Kurenai-sensei smiled. “But Naruto-kun’s been great help for the times he partnered with us.”

“Being on different teams changes your outlooks on things. Everyone has their own strengths and while I find the genins teams have their reasons for being constructed the way they do I can’t help but hope for the day that they can indulge us in a mission just for us you know?” Sakura grinned. “Wouldn’t that be nice Hinata? There are so few kunoichis around, would be nice to see what we’re all made of and team up properly for once.”

“An all-girl team?” Kurenai-sensei looked surprised. “Well with the ratio the current way it is I can’t exactly blame you for wishing. You’re friends with Tenten and Ino right?”

“I’d like to take them both on a mission someday.” Sakura admitted. “Even a training trip sounds nice. Don’t get me wrong I love Naruto and Sasuke-kun and they work with me better than anyone else so far but I shouldn’t be limited to just them.” Her eyes searched Kurenai-sensei’s. “You understand?”

Xxx

Sakura’s hand on her ankle to yank her back into her grip surprised Tenten a bit. It took her off balance enough for Sakura to gain the upper hand and flip her but she had not been training with Sakura so long for that to be the end of it. She did not have the room to pull out any scrolls but she had weapons on her.
A slash from her kunai got Sakura from straddling her and she was able to roll up only to have to block Sakura that had come after her again. She had gotten faster since their last time. Tenten felt her face twist from the strain as she held Sakura’s hands back from stealing her kunai. She poured all her upper body strength into avoiding contact even as she used her leg to sweep Sakura’s out from under her.

It was the perfect distraction and with anyone else she knew they would have a few seconds of hesitation and disorientation. Sakura did not let up her guard instead she fell like a puppet with the strings cut and Tenten could only switch weapon hands and follow. Sakura picked a direction to roll at the last second and Tenten missed grabbing her by a hair as Sakura landed on her feet and twisted. More flexible than last time too.

Her eyes were alive and focused. Maybe Tenten shouldn’t be analysing Sakura so intently but Sakura had asked for this spar and she wanted to know where her habits lay and where she was making patterns. Tenten could tell her the improvements but as always there was something new to the mix.

She herself took a step back and allowed herself a deep breath to settle herself. She had to focus or she was of no use to anyone. The kunai she tucked away and withdrew a small scroll from under her wrist band. She was getting better at the power she powered into these things now. She had a long way to go but she would acknowledge her small steps.

Enough power to summon the shuriken’s and she kept them in her hands as she waited. She had approached and met with a stalemate. The next move would be Sakura’s there was the tensing in her body, no sign on her face before she leapt forward.

Tenten let the shuriken’s fly knowing they would miss. Sakura’s hand reached for her and she rolled to duck it. Came up early to snag the back of Sakura’s Chuunin jacket. She had a moment of glee before she stumbled back the jacket in her hand.

She frowned taken aback before wire wrapped around her hands. She glanced into Sakura’s amused gaze before the tag at the end of the wire in Sakura’s hands got her attention. Honestly, it felt as though Sakura just could not slow down. “I give up.” She sighed.

XxX

“How’s Lee-kun?” Sakura asked as she uncorked her bottle. She took a grateful sip before she started to drink earnestly. Tenten did not respond so she watched as the other girl continued her punches against the practice stump. “Did you do a team visit lately?”

“Lee’s…” Tenten changed up her pace with a high kick. She left her leg there and panted. “He’s Lee you know? Happy, bright. Optimistic and we see him so often and it seems like everything is going right but I can’t help but worry. It’s Tsunade-sama you know? But it’s Lee and he’s poured so much of his hopes into this. Gai-sensei too.”

“I know.” Sakura said softly. “That’s why I’m asking because the surgery date’s been chosen right?”

“But the way that idiot thinks we’ll have to keep him knocked out until he can actually start walking again.” Tenten resumed with fast hard punches. “Always pushing themselves and never listening and never obeying what common sense and their bodies tell them.” Sakura got to her feet when Tenten’s head dipped both her hands pressed against the stump. “Even if it is a success, the surgery is just the beginning and I know that but it doesn’t feel like Lee does.”
“I’ll be here.” Sakura promised. “We’ll sit on him together and help him until he’s on his feet.”

Tenten chuckled at that. “That’s the thing Sakura, I don’t think he would let us. This whole time he’s been sitting in a bed watching us and I know what he’s thinking. I know what he feels. He’ll want to do it on his own when he shouldn’t. When he can’t but he’ll do it anyway.” She whispered. “I just don’t want him to make anything worse. To make his body worse. I just want him to get through this and let us help him so he can be okay enough to get stronger on his own but he won’t see it that way.”

“Yeah.” Sakura sighed. She sighed again before she hugged Tenten tightly from behind. She was warm and tense but she relaxed the longer they stood together. “I totally get where you’re coming from. Lee too but it’s hard to accept help and hard to get the words out but we’ll be here for him and if he trips he can lean on you. His team.”

“Yeah.” Tenten sounded relieved. “I’ll be right here.”

XxX

“It wasn’t like this.” Sakura frowned to herself. “It was more, it was graceful. It was there but when I thought back over it. It was smooth and like a flick of the wrist.” She took a few steps back and returned her kunai to the sleeve trap she had. She was about to retry when the shake of leaves caught her attention.

Sasuke was in the trees above watching her with slight confusion. “What are you doing.”

“I should be asking you that.” She smiled. “Don’t you have clan missions? Are you skipping Sasuke-kun?”

“With my father lurking?” Sasuke scoffed as he straddled the branch and shook his head. “I’m finished, all that inactivity has me bored. What are you doing.”

“Trying to get my own interpretation of something down.” She laughed. “Do you remember the land of Snow? How Naruto just… was Naruto?”

“More Naruto than usual.” Sasuke confirmed. “You’re talking about the plans again.”

“Not just that. Just how he always seems ready and I don’t mean just being on guard I mean how he’s always got a plan even though it might be completely crazy he always has one. He listens to directions yeah.” She admitted “But sometimes he just reacts perfectly. A little like Sensei.”

“Not like Kakashi.” Sasuke’s head tilted up as he thought. “The way he is ready to meet someone head on. I get that. I can do that.”

“I know I know.” She waved away the discussion before it could start. “Both of you are my very important fighters and I use you accordingly. You can take out just as many as Naruto Sasuke-kun calm down you’re both cute.”

“Hn.” Sasuke fell silent for a few seconds and Sakura took that as an agreement before she started her practice again. It was imitation yes but more than that. She was chasing his shadow so she could step in front. The one who had taught her without words how to do that had been Naruto.

It had taken her a while to see that. To see that he himself was chasing shadows but he was not chasing with the intention of being left behind. No that was not Naruto, that could never be Naruto. He was not hiding in the shadows he was leading them and she was inspired by that. Watching him she saw people she never met. Saw cultures she never heard of. Naruto was… Naruto but he was a
walking tribe too and that inspired her.

She whirled to her left and felt the slight ache in her ankle but the kunai was in her hand and while he was not there it almost felt as though Naruto was by her side helping her out.

“You’ll pick up the speed later.” Sasuke said from above. “But you’ve almost gotten the form down.”

“A compliment from Sasuke-kun.” She laughed softly. “I’m coming up in the world.”

“Or you could fumble in his footsteps.” Sasuke snorted. “He moves but it’s a contradiction, shinobi or not. Weird past or not no one should move like that and it’s different every time.”

“He’s pulling something from somewhere.” Sakura laughed. “Pulling strength and determination and who knows what else when he’s fighting. He’s amazing and he’s ours.”

“Lucky us.” Sasuke murmured but she could hear the smugness.

XxX

Physical strength was not all of it, if anything team seven had taught him that he had to be quick on his feet and accurately predict not just the enemy but his friends too but who the hell could predict Naruto? He was as wild as wildlife.

Sasuke placed his hands on his hips and allowed himself a long sigh. He had stopped hanging out here before graduation but he was back. He had a long way to go in everything but he should not get beaten and outwitted too badly by the wildlife behind the Uchiha compound. No Shisui and no Itachi to back him up but that was perfect.

Just him and whatever he could find. A wild boar or a fox, he would defeat them and he would understand them by the time he went home.

Sometimes it felt as though Naruto had some elaborate plan but sometimes it felt as though his brain was on a level that humans could not reach and only wild things could touch. It was primal, it was savage and he was not there yet, he did not understand yet but he wanted. Every second with Naruto made him want to learn more. He was not the only one that felt that way, the whole team, the whole village did. He bet they wanted to tame him too.

There was something lurking in Naruto that rose from time to time and it had nothing to do with his missing nin past. Sasuke was positive of that but how the hell could he communicate or even understand what lurked there. How could he when he did not understand that thing Naruto and even Kakashi could tap into?

When he moved he thought about so many things, the world slowed down and his brain thought and thought before he moved. Naruto thought too but Sasuke knew that Naruto reacted far more often. He reacted to his gut and his instinct just as much as he thought and pondered things out.

Konoha was sort of lacking on the dangerous great beasts of instinct but that was fine with him when it came down to it. He could occupy himself with what Konoha had to offer. It was not as if he had not embarrassed himself with kitty missions in his youth.

Hell maybe Naruto was more like those shinobi cats than people would think.

XxX
“Something like this.” Sakura mused as she changed up the board and her newly named pieces. “Would be terrifying to normal people wouldn’t it?” She smiled at her sensei as he studied the new layout of the board. “It looks risky but when you apply what those two would bring…” She trailed off in hope.

“Sakura.” Kakashi-sensei leaned further over the board before he looked back up at her. His eye showed delight. “You’ve come up with something amazing here. Traditionally if we attempted it would be a risky and dangerous move but as you pointed out.” He chuckled before he tapped the two newly named pieces. “This isn’t normal at all.” He adjusted the rest of her pieces and nodded. “But you know there will be confusion among the ranks and panic some important pieces might escape.”

“I know.” Sakura admitted. “But since it is those two I’m not that concerned about any getting away. It’s the ones behind them that the focus will be on.” She nudged her other pieces. “The ones that will be aiming at their backs. Those are ours.”

She got startled at the firm clasp to her shoulder. Kakashi-sensei’s hand was warm and she could feel that behind the mask he was beaming. “Good job Sakura.” Her heart lightened considerably.

“This is all hypothetical.” She mumbled her focus on the pieces. “A what if but since it is us more of an eventual thing. Just wanted to make sure we had a plan for when it does happen. I don’t expect it to though. Not even with our tracks record.”

“You never know.” Kakashi-sensei tapped the piece that represented him before he moved it to cut off the retreat path. “But just know you can still depend on your sensei even though you’re a Chuunin. I’m here to catch all of you.”

He could be a lazy adult but he could be so inspiring sometimes. He was perfect for their team. “So you say Sensei.” She teased.

XxX

“We could swallow the whole tactics book and still be lost in the field.” Naruto pointed out as he watched the street below. You learn from experience but you use your imagination and prepare things too. Adaptability is what you’re thinking about here. You can’t plan for every eventuality. Some things you would never imagine happens and you gotta deal with it. You could prepare for two things and then the two things combined with a weird thing happen but you’re prepared for one and two separately.”

“Naruto has a point.” Kakashi-sensei looked up from his book where he sat on his bed cross legged with Sasuke who was squinting with a paper Kakashi had handed him minutes ago. “Expecting the unexpected is nice but rolling with the punches is nice too and this team is getting a reputation for that.”

“How nice.” Sakura said dryly. “I’m not that flattered but I guess we sort of are too. In your opinion sensei how are we doing on formations?”

“Cleaner than when you first began.” Kakashi-sensei snatched the paper from Sasuke and flipped it over. “That’s progress in itself too.”

“The more we do the more we learn.” Naruto pointed out. “Not just from people we fight but from each other. Bonding is a thing and we know each other far better than when we first started and we’re growing together no matter what the two of you think.” He finished in a sigh. “We’re growing together and we move thinking not as one but a unit. That’s good for the stuff we have to
do, it’s nice making my way somewhere and finding the two of you there.”

“What about me?” Kakashi-sensei gently took the paper away from Sasuke as he addressed Naruto. “I find you easy enough don’t I?”

“But that’s your job isn’t it Kaka-sensei.” Naruto teased. “Just because you enjoy popping up on me doesn’t change the fact that you have to find me and you have to predict where I’m going before I move properly.” The grin Naruto sent Kakashi-sensei’s way almost made Sakura speak up but she rolled her eyes instead.

“Formations, tactics... hello we were talking serious stuff here.” She tapped the bookshelf with her nail. “Let’s go?”

“Skills is what we should be working on in our down time. Polishing and maybe picking up things useful for later.” Sasuke’s glance towards her was understandable, she was not lacking but her current amount seemed smaller than theirs.

“Tenten’s been working with me but I don’t have a to go flashy weapon yet.” She smiled. “But Sasuke-kun and Naruto seem to favour swords the most.” Her gaze trailed to their sensei whose hands rested on his bare ankles as he watched them. “Sensei seems good with everything he gets his hands on but maybe he likes swords more?”

“One uses what they have.” Kakashi-sensei chuckled.

“I just don’t see myself with a sword.” Sakura shook her head. “Needles and kunais are good too but midrange combat and is better with longer weapons in the end.”

“We’ve got time to find something that works.” Naruto pointed out. “You’ll find what suits you the best and then you’ll train in what isn’t your best or your worst either.” At Sakura’s glance he continued. “Shake things up and keep you unpredictable. It’s best not to pour your all into one thing.”

“I’ve been doing a lot of reading too.” She glanced around the room. “It’s seems weird to say this but I do want more training while things are manageable like this. It just makes sense you know? I want to get as many things down as I can while there is time and while we still have time.”

“I’ve been focusing on things.” Sasuke said softly. “Things get to me sometimes but I also want more training but I want training with this team.” She blinked at the honest confession. “This place is the only place I can focus and feel as though I’m doing something. We understand plenty about ourselves and where we’ve went wrong but training here makes what we do more real. Getting stronger and helping the village.”

“You can say that again.” Sakura smiled. “As much fun as I have with Ino and Tenten this is where I get most of my progress. It’s for you guys obviously but in the end its for Konoha. Easy to forget with all the cute little rivalries around I’m guessing.”

“I know nothing about that.” Naruto grinned. “But in this sort of climate there is no real rush and you and Sasuke have to remember that. Everyone’s riding the emotions from the war and our year groups are running and fighting hard to improve because of that. That’s fine, that’s accepted no need to push beyond that. The world’s messed up but we’ll come to understand it in time. That’s fine too.”

“It just feels as though we are being left behind continuously.” Sasuke said softly and Sakura nodded. “We’re right here but before we know it the dust is in our faces.”
“It just looks like that to you.” Kakashi-sensei spoke up before Naruto could speak. Naruto closed his mouth and nodded. “To myself and maybe Naruto, it looks as though you’ve grown wings.”

“I’m not that far ahead of you guys.” Naruto teased. “I’m right with you but you go like this I gotta work twice as hard because it feels as though you’ll leave me behind. Something to think about there.”

XxX

It did not just take time to learn it took time to master and Sasuke knew that. You learned by trying, by watching. Mostly by failing and by analysing yourself. You learnt by that and it took time. Understanding took work and effort and it felt as though others did not understand that smart or not that took work too.

Even he was frustrated with himself sometimes. Top of the class had taken him only this far. He had work ahead of him but it was more than physical. It was the mental things to. Maybe he should take a page from Naruto’s book and indulge in some meditation to settle himself. it seemed to work for him.

There was just so much all at one. There was the clan, his team, the village and himself. there were threats everywhere and threats towards himself. there were secrets from him and for him. There were things lurking in the dark and while with team seven he was given a reprieve and a light he did not always have it.

He was not always with them even though he tried. Living for the village was a new direction he was trying but having to wait on his skills was annoying. Having to wait to improve was annoying.

Those things in his room he was fascinated by them. He kept touching them, polishing them and he held them in his sleep sometimes. Those swords.

He had not told Kakashi yet but he had tested them. Wanted to see if he could correctly use them and he certainly did. That dazzling display that had burned his ceiling and made him grateful he had waited until he was alone to try it.

But he was not ready yet. The guy had been a lunatic but he had fought them well and it would be a disgrace to fumble with them. Besides while he wanted the use the swords and fight with them next to his team other things kept nagging at them. Just as how Naruto was waiting for his ‘true’ sword. Sasuke would wait for the time to properly use the ones he had been given. Waiting sucked though

XxX

He had gotten up early for this, he had been planning a visit but time and missions and he had not felt in the right mindset for it so time had gone on and on but he was happy to go now. It had been a while since the last time and many things had happened but this was not just going to see the graves, it was a proper visit. A grave visit that people did for family graves because that was who Naruto was going to. His family.

So he needed the incense, he needed the offering and he wanted to do a little clean up and bring a flower too. It had been a while since he had last seen them and he wanted to clean, pay his respects and have some time to himself as Naruto not just team seven or Konoha’s Naruto. He wanted alone time.

It was weird he was going to a grave to get that. He did not dislike team seven activities he just
needed some reminders and some good air so he was going.

It had taken him most of the morning to finish cooking which was why he had gotten up early. He had cut his meditation short and felt odd about it. Wearing his normal Konoha clothes to the gravesite felt strange but he had training first.

And while he had clothes it was not as if he had that many to begin with. Mostly just disposable mission clothes and a few other necessity clothes. Nothing too extravagant and certainly nothing expensive. He missed his running clothes but that was a dream away certainly.

His mind was occupied during the morning team seven training and when he gathered his stuff and waved goodbye to his team he certainly felt amused in his heart. Even as he walked alone he did not feel that way.

The gravesite was pretty empty but since criminals were buried there. It was no real surprise. Naruto cleaned and did the clean up on instinct, he only took a deep breath when everything was finished and the incense was burning.

He was lonely but not like before, it was a throb when before it had been a deep hole. A nagging itch. He missed them, they were family, all of them were. They were not the best, they were not right about everything. They had their flaws, their sins and burdens but they were his and he had been theirs and all he had was the memories he carried inside and the lessons he had been taught. And the things he had observed.

He missed them, he guessed he always would. He could not help reaching for them, thinking of them. Craving words or presence. Looking for them and anticipating them but it was a different thing from this point on because he was not alone.

There was Sora and Morgana and he understood more than he had back then. Everyone made mistakes. People who loved could be blind to faults and sometimes things worked out in the weirdest ways. Sora was fine, Morgana was fine and he was playing by Konoha’s rules and pace and gods above was that exhausting.

So many things he wanted, so many things he was doing. So many things going on and the eyes of the village. The eyes if the adults kept watching him. He needed a break to remind himself of who he was and what he was doing. Remind himself not just who he was but what he wanted. What he really wanted and the best ways to get it. Remind himself of the obstacles in the way and of course what he wanted to protect. There were regrets too, the people who would never see what the future would bring but he would send news to the other world if he had to.

Naruto smiled at the gravestone and felt tension from his body seep away. They were with him in his heart. Their lives, their talents their mistakes and grief he was carrying with him but while it was heavy he would never let them go. He would add to them as he continued to his dream too. Looking at the grave brought calmness and resolve to him.

Thanks to them he had seen a world many would never see. Meet people many would never meet and never understand. See a balance people did not know existed and he got to see evil lurking in the weakest of people.

He had his dream there were many things he had to do before he got it. Many things he had to learn. Many things he had to try before he could. Growing up was just one of them it was a long journey to Hokage. A long journey to where people would cheer his name but he was getting there. Not just for him.
A long way before he could save those with eyes like that. Eyes like him. Eyes like them and a long time before he could learn words to sway guys like that. A long way before he sword could reach people like that. But he was getting there, time was needed, more time was needed but he was getting there.

Still time before Konoha told him why when he mentioned that woman’s name people looked like that. It was still a waiting game.

XxX

Naruto’s back could look so lonely sometimes. Watching him struggle away with his burden was not something Sasuke wanted to do but tagging along on the grave visit was not something Naruto wanted him to do so he had to watch. He understood wanting to be alone sometimes but even during times like this it left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Grave cleaning items, food and much more Naruto had turned up with in his little basket and Sasuke had wanted to say something. He had ached with the need to speak but no words had ended up leaving his mouth towards that.

He knew, the whole team knew that those gone meant something to Naruto. They were family they still had a hold on him and they lived on with him. They were part of that strange world that he was trying to understand, they had formed Naruto into the weirdo that they had now. He knew this, he understood this and he knew it would be intruding to tag along.

Even if Naruto wanted them there it would be intruding and Naruto had not wanted them there. He had known this, Sakura had known it too but that did not change much.

“And that’s enough sulking.” Sakura’s light tap to his head made him turn away from the street Naruto had disappeared down. “Back to training.” Her smile was a little wry, when it came to Naruto she was the only one who felt the way he did and that reassured him.

“Sparring or…” He trailed off as they walked together.

“Let’s do basics and work our way up.” She suggested. “I think I mentioned this last time but you’ve been getting faster lately I want to see how it will work out in combat.”

“You’ve been faster too.” Sasuke pointed out. “Stronger too.” He wanted to say that her punches and kicks felt heavier but there was no way to say that and make it sound good. Upsetting Sakura through a badly worded compliment was not on his schedule.

“Training and new diet.” She grinned. “Also lots of people have been chiming in with great advice.”

XxX

“You’re too tense.” She scolded as she slid back and climbed off him. He watched her tuck away the kunai into her jacket. “Just now I shouldn’t have been able to pin you.”

“But you did.” Sasuke pointed out as he sat up. “You got me.”

“For the third time.” She said dryly before she sighed heavily. She rested her hands on her knees before she glanced back at him. “I get it you know but you shouldn’t let it get to you. It bothered me in the beginning but you are forgetting something very important Sasuke-kun.”

“What’s that?” he dusted himself off and got to his feet.
“We aren’t Naruto, we aren’t them.” She stressed. “But we can teach him things too and we’re the ones here with him right now. We can teach Naruto things that they can’t. We’re giving him experiences he never had and he enjoys being with us. We’re a team and he’s a weird wild card but he’s ours.” She stressed.

“And we can teach him?” Sasuke muttered as he stretched. “Aren’t we the ones running after him most the time?”

“You know that isn’t what I’m talking about. He can be open but I swear sometimes his eyes are so… naïve.” She breathed. “He knows so much but he doesn’t know everything and that’s where we come in. He’s open and frustrating and lewd and shameless too but we have things to give him that he doesn’t have. We can give him things. We can teach him the things he doesn’t know. Naruto values information too you know.”

“He has big eyes for lots of things.” Sasuke muttered as he changed his stance. “But we’re all equal in his eyes.”

“That doesn’t mean we won’t grow bigger in his eyes.” Sakura changed her own stance her legs close together as she waited. “Now try to loosen up or I’ll be taking the genius prodigy title away from you.”

“You wish.” Sasuke breathed.

XxX

It was foolish to be hung up over dead people. That was plain and simple, they were alive and while he was envious about what Naruto had learned and the places he had been. There were a few things he did not envy Naruto for. The loss.

They lived on inside Naruto but his eyes carried the burden. That was not just it, Naruto felt betrayed by their deaths and he could not pretend that he did not know that. His words to Gaara that day, when he had been dragging his broken tired body forwards. When he should not have been capable of moving but he had done it anyway.

Sasuke had remembered. He still did and everything from Naruto he remembered and thought over. While he had his own pain and agony Naruto had his too.

But he still managed to smile so brightly. He still managed to shine so brightly and so hopefully. Even look at those he called friends and family with fondness even though through Naruto’s own words and hints by dying they had abandoned him.

There was no understanding those bonds. There was no understanding the shape they had tried to mould Naruto into but Sasuke could try. He could supress the inadequacies seeing Naruto leave for grave duty rose inside him or he could think about what he could give his friend.

The village when it came to Naruto was strange. They had their own rhythm their own heartbeat but Naruto changed all of that and he knew Naruto knew about it.

It was not as obvious when he and Sakura was with Naruto. When it was the three of them it was subtler but when Naruto was with Kakashi or even when he was on his own. No, especially when he was on his own Naruto changed the flow and rhythm of the village and it was just uncanny.

There was nothing like it, there was no explaining away how strange it was. The adults, anyone older than them really the way they watched. Their behaviour and the way things hushed as Naruto passed by or walked among them. That was another mystery that needed to be solved because
Sasuke had his own suspicions.

When it came to clan, when it came to Konoha there was a lot that Naruto did not understand, it was pretty obvious to anyone. Naruto was learning Konoha from the ground up and anyone knowing the circumstances would understand and sympathize.

Still for a Konoha shinobi to be learning about Konoha like an outsider and being regarded with that strange aura. It was not hatred it certainly did not feel like hatred but it was something that Naruto brought out in others.

They could not look away from him even when they pretended not to do so. Everyone was just watching him almost as if anticipating. Understandable in some ways if they knew Naruto had vanished, kidnapped and seduced into the life of a missing nin but it was more than that.

Almost as if they were waiting on something from Naruto or that there were even more secrets. He would not be surprised if there were even more secrets. Everyone had secrets but Naruto’s ones seemed to hang over the village and he knew it.

Sasuke had his new resolve to keep him strong and it was not an overnight thing. It was not going to be an easy thing but it was all he could cling on to in the face of everything that was around that was frankly terrifying. Orochimaru was still out there, he could not talk about his true feelings and his clan could be suffocating on his own.

The thing about team seven was that he did not have to be alone. He could be himself, son to no one. Brother to no one. Cousin to no one. He was Sasuke and then came his abilities and what he could do. While Naruto had no one else in the village he had them.

So something Sasuke could share was himself. There was the saying about one person’s trash and another’s treasure. Instead of running, he could bring a shield and bring a smile to Naruto’s face instead.

XxX

He was in a pretty good mood and honestly that was what counted. He had spent so much time there and it had just melted away. He had not done that much after the clean up just waited for the candles and incense to burn away into nothing.

That was all he had done but, in the end, he had felt so clean and refreshed by the end of it all. He had played with some keepsakes and mused on the past but with a smile and a good mood. He had remembered things that had been forgotten.

There had been a few nips of longing here and there. For the bits of past that he remembered. For the feeling of unity that had been stripped away the moment Konoha had found him. There was something about a large group together.

The camp, the troupe had held good memories and not so good ones but they were his memories and what he had left so of course he would cling to it. He was who he was, Uzumaki Naruto and while he currently knew himself he knew there was more to himself that others were hiding. More to the bastard fox inside of him than he currently knew but he was not exactly going to ask the fox for information.

He had to play a waiting game and he was not exactly happy with that but he did not exact have a choice considering he was somewhere with little backup. There was his team of course but they could not support him the way the troupe did and he was happy about that. Zabuza’s group would
have demanded answers and Naruto had to try diplomacy and maybe a little creeping around to get the truth that he craved.

A little silly in the scheme of things but it was what it was. He knew that if he were to ask, Sora and even Morgana would sweep him away. All now he could have been across the sea if things were different.

No, not exactly and he knew that too. Haku would not. Haku had not been able to release him even back then. No matter the consequences and the harm. Even with Naruto growing to something that would have shattered his first dream. Sora and the others had been sent away but not Naruto, it would have never been Naruto and only Zabuza could have done it.

But he had not done it either had he. The chance had been there too and he had liked some the others far more than Naruto. Even now the stupid man was still a weirdo. A weirdo in life and he had died a strange one too. What could be said about that honestly.

It had been a nice time thinking of them of all of them. The work that had to be done to develop himself. the little things that he missed, that he craved. He carried them all inside his heart and it was not a burden. He missed them but he understood more now, he was growing still.

Still the silence made him miss them. He still craved a touch, a caress. He missed being coddled and teased and he missed the noise. He missed being surrounded but it was fine. The troupe was never supposed to be forever in the first place.

He was as fine as he could be. They had gone on first and he had his dream to pursue. It was just hard to forget sometimes that they all had a promise and he had been left behind. Was he thankful, was he grateful. He would just like one last lesson, one last talk but the world did not work that way.

Naruto frowned when he spotted a figure waiting for him along his path. Usually he was the sort to detour a lot or use the rooftops to head home but he had been still in his thoughts so he had tried walking. Not directly through the village though. He was not in the mindset for that.

Still for Sasuke to be waiting for him like that. Here and not at home. It made a smile come to his face and his steps quickened as he approached. Konoha was a place to return to and he had people like Sasuke waiting for him and wanting to know more about him. It was just a question of what he could and would share. It was not as if he wanted to hide in the first place.

XxX

Kakashi had been informed of his cute team’s whereabouts and had made plans of his own while the Hokage made use of almost every free Jounin in her disposal. It had gotten to the point that Kakashi suspected she thoroughly enjoyed seeing the dejected stances on them when she sent them off to boring parts to work.

Sasuke and Sakura training alone and Naruto had gone off for a grave visit. The visit was long overdue in his opinion and the training between Sakura and Sasuke was nothing new. It improved them both and while Naruto did not underestimate his teammates and their potential and strength. That was something Sakura and Sasuke were still learning.

Never to underestimate a powerup. Emotions were amusing things and the way one could be fired up in a battlefield or a fight. He thought they would have learned from being around Naruto but honestly they just did not seem to get it. It was cute but they were learning. He was impressed with how Sakura clung to the facts she knew refusing to put anyone in danger.
That was the once bitten twice shy thing. But more twice bitten a thousand times shy. Between the battle and Orochimaru, Sakura would be loath on taking unnecessary risks. If she made a move she had to be certain. Of the people and the variable, of the path and the enemy. It was a good head on her shoulders she had. While she trusted she kept in mind the things that could happen, a bit too much but who could blame her. She was young too, a sad thing to cling to in youth.

Adorable little Sasuke was Sasuke. He had changed so much and even now he was still changing. His attachment to his team was growing. His affection towards them was something that Kakashi had not exactly predicted considering how it had started.

Maybe touch starved Naruto had rubbed off on them more than originally thought. Naruto was not shy about touches and hugs. He and Sakura had their own bonding thing going on there and while Kakashi had amused himself at his team’s expense he had to admit the current path was sort of eye opening.

The brats were going through puberty after all. Not that Naruto behaved as though it was a problem. Sakura following suit was just expected but Sasuke? The way he initiated touches and not exactly hugs but contact was something to smile about. He was not as scared to get touchy during the spars as he had been originally.

Mostly because there was no clean fighting and no clean wins with Naruto. People got dirty, people got exhausted and hands went places. It had been funny the first few times to watch Sasuke stumble over apologies and he wrestled a win away from Sakura or Naruto. Now with Naruto who fought like a cornered beast Sasuke fought back with intensity and got his win no matter how dirty he had to get or how half naked his opponent ended up.

Scandalous. But cute too. As Gai would say, Youth.

His team was turning into something adorable but powerful too and this was the progress that amused him but he liked to see. Still he had not expected this. He had planned on invited Naruto out after his time at the graves but it seemed as though Sasuke had beat him to it.

In fact, it seemed as though Sasuke had a fairly good idea going on there too. So while he was a little disappointed because he missed their talks, Kakashi was going to sit this one out and not crash in on it.

Sasuke had done more good than he knew. They looked like normal village shinobis side by side but as they entered the Uchiha compound Kakashi had to admit that they were the vision of progress. He did not have a name or direction to what bothered Sasuke. He did know the boy was trying to conquer it by throwing his all into the team and comrades that he had. It was a familiar decision that Kakashi could admire.

To how it would end up… well it was a matter of time and seeing how it ended. Still he had faith in them. He had hope for his team. He had been watching them this entire time. That and with the addition of Naruto he felt that a change would come. Sometimes it felt as though Naruto brought change with him.

There was only so much that could be done by themselves. Healing each other, relying on each other would help them grow. Kakashi settled down on the roof he had stopped on and watched as Sasuke and Naruto disappeared in the direction of Sasuke’s house.

Progress, sometimes it could feel quite a bit lonely for others too. But he could not exactly hog Naruto to himself and after such a long time with his former family. The things that Naruto needed was to be surrounded by people and while no one would tell him. The Uchihas were the best place
for that. Naruto’s ties and past with the Uchihas were unknown to him but the clan had a fairly long memory. Sasuke had done the right thing and the others would welcome Naruto as they had the previous Jinchuuriki before him.

Also there were many that wanted to make a move but could not because of the constricting law. But there were ways around that. They could not directly approach but shinobi took advantage of the little openings presented and Naruto in the Uchiha compound was the perfect tear.

XxX

“Your clan symbol is everywhere you know.” Naruto teased as they walked together. He waved a hand at the walls. “I know about claiming territory but isn’t this too much.”

“The Uchiha are a proud clan.” Sasuke’s smile was small and quick. “We wear it everything because it is a point of pride. We’re part of the founding as well but putting the clan symbol on everything was something from the ancestors. We do it mainly from habit and because we aren’t as plentiful as we once had been. Very few founding clans are.”

“I didn’t know that part.” Naruto frowned. “It certainly looks like plenty of you are around.” He waved at an old couple that passed them. “You guys stick out with the pale skin and that bone structure and those eyes.” He finished with a sigh when a young woman called out to Sasuke. “That hair too, black hair is common but the texture of your hair is unique to your clan.”

“Soon you’ll be saying you’ve fallen for my entire clan.” Sasuke huffed. “I wouldn’t be surprised considering how you drool over my brother and mother and Shisui. Just leave my Dad alone.”

“It’s not like that!” Naruto denied as a flush spread over his face. “Let’s get to my house before someone in your target range appears and we are really in trouble.”

“What’s my target range?” Naruto frowned, he scowled when Sasuke pulled ahead his strides long but pace lazy. “Hey! What’s my age target range Sasuke!”

XxX

“Have you used them yet? You don’t take them with you.” Naruto ran his finger over the blades. “You’re taking good care of them.”

“It is going to be a while before you see me taking these things out on missions. They are too strong for that and I don’t know them that well.” Sasuke took back the swords before he eased them back where they had stood before. “You gave them to me and they are important pieces. I can’t shame them and I can’t go to lose them so easily.”

“Yeah I was kinda outta it that mission.” Naruto admitted softly. “But I feel like this is the right choice. You’ll carry them forward and make something of them.” He smiled at the two swords. “Someday really soon you and I will make a real entrance onto the field and everyone will just stare at us with the swords.” He laughed.

“So we should get Sakura one of them too?” Sasuke questioned. “A legendary sword.”

“Well I don’t see why not I know about all of them.” Naruto frowned. “If you have that one and I
get the other and I know Kiri for certain has those but Sakura wouldn’t want just any…” He mused. “There are two I’m considering but who knows whether she would like them or not. The history for both is kinda bloody and the second one I’m thinking of… well Sakura isn’t that kind of fighter. It’s a powerful sword but… I’m thinking she’s good with the smaller things.” He laughed. “Now how to get it.”

“Oi.” Sasuke tapped him on the head. “I was just joking you know.”

“I know you were joking.” Naruto laughed. “But I’m not. Konoha has its hands on two legendary swords. Why not a third? Why not make our team the best ever? Hell why stop at three? Get Kakashi-sensei one but the question is which one would suit him the best.” Naruto pretended to muse. “But he just might be able to use them all. He’s fairly good.”

“He’s an accomplished swordsman.” Sasuke corrected. “He might use these ones better than us. Maybe these two even better.”

“This one is a power and imagination sword and you have to have the right affinity. He’d be able to use it. He’s a Jounin and he does have lightning nature.” Naruto muttered. “But I have the feeling he would get the feeling for it and give it right back to you Sasuke. Didn’t he let you keep it with no protest to begin with?”

“Well yes.” Sasuke muttered, Naruto laughed before he stroked the swords again. “I was expecting them to end up in the treasury or something.”

“Spoils of war.” Naruto replied easily. “That and they are watching us. Waiting to see who and what we’ll become. Some very good weapons were left in our care. We understand that we have to earn the right to use them. That’s the fun part. We’re going to work hard, train hard and show that we deserve the things left to us.”

“I’m quite certain that sword was left for you.” Sasuke huffed. “This one was just given to me.”

“I don’t think so, these are some old swords. Some old pieces of Kiri history and they outlive their owners but don’t think Raiga didn’t have a way to keep it out our hands if he needed to do so. He might have expected me when he thought about it but he left the rest of things to us.” Naruto frowned. “He’d seen your moves, Kakashi-sensei’s moves and he wasn’t dumb you know. Still because it’s you and think you’ll do it fine. Find a way to bring some kind of light to the darkness these shinobi keep finding themselves in.” He paused to think. “You could also ask the Hokage on a book on the swords. I’m not going to know everything.”

“Never thought you would.” Sasuke huffed. “When it’s time I’ll use them but it isn’t now.”

“Yeah not now.” Naruto muttered. “But soon. Not today but one of these tomorrows will require it and you’ll be ready. I can’t wait to see it.”

XxX

It had been a nice day for them, a bit amusing to be called out by his mother and dragged to do her grunt work but Itachi had enjoyed it. Their way back to the house had resulted in them running into his father and he had fell two steps back so his parents could walk side by side.

Just looking at their backs made him smile. Watching his parents could lighten his day and his mood. All of them had come a long way but Itachi loved his home and his family. He loved his clan too, every member of it. They had also come a long way as well.

There had been a bit of warning but he was still surprised to actually come home and find Sasuke
home and with a guest. Naruto looked up at their entry with a bit of surprise and Sasuke’s face was blank even as he sat with Naruto in the living area which these days he never did.

At least he was not the only one taken aback. His mother raised her hand to her throat for a few seconds before politeness took over.

Itachi knew things about their mother that Sasuke did not. He knew things about Naruto that Sasuke did not but he had to admit that he would be tempted to trade that information to get Sasuke soften towards him the way he looked at Naruto when Naruto got overwhelmed by their mother.

“Of course you’re staying for dinner Naruto-kun.” His mother’s bright smile lit up the house. “It’s no trouble at all.” His father nodded in agreement as he shrugged out his jacket. Itachi followed his mother to the kitchen and watched her watch Naruto and Sasuke.

“Mother.” He said softly… it was just a slight reminder.

“He came on his own.” Her eyes flicked to him and back to Naruto. “He sought us out on his own and look how happy Sasuke is.” She whispered. “As often as he wants, you know Naruto will always be welcomed among the Uchihas and you know in this house his blood counts as one of ours.” Her eyes held a faint light that challenged him.

“You can’t tell him yet.” Itachi cautioned.

“His face… his eyes.” She said softly as she removed pots and pans from cabinets. “I just want to look a while longer. You understand that right?” She rested her hand against his cheek. “You’ll give your mother that much right? He’s here. An Uzumaki and an Uchiha. Our lines are joined in friendship once again. There is nothing wrong with making sure that he knows he has somewhere to go. People to trust.” Her eyes flashed red. “And that will always be our clan.”

There was a place his mother went sometimes to think of the past. A place she went alone and her back looked unlike anyone Itachi had ever known. A person that was not his mother and had thought only of regrets and the past. Itachi pretended that he did not know the place or the reason, he let his mother grieve in peace. “Of course mother.” He leaned his face into her touch. He understood too, all the Uchiha mourned.

XxX

The Uchiha clan were pretty, they were honestly too pretty and it was not just a fair kind of pretty it was a strong type mixed with delicate and Naruto knew Sasuke was going to give him hell when they were alone again. He knew but he could not help himself.

They were pretty okay? Sasuke family alone had his eyes wide. He was a kid in a toy store looking at everything at once. Itachi was a strong delicate beauty but he got that from his mother. Sasuke’s Dad was the silent type and he was not hanging out with them but he was nearby. His build made him wonder who Sasuke would take after when they were older.

Well waiting was half the fun anyway. Still Sasuke’s mother was just amazing. Her eyes and her voice and she was so friendly. She could tell him anything and Naruto felt as though he would comply without thinking.

Well, he knew this about himself anyway. It was so warm with them. The entire family was just warm. He slumped against the table when a neighbour called for Sasuke’s mother. A few seconds to catch himself before he made a bigger fool of himself as he undoubtfully was doing.

A candy was shoved under his nose. “Here.” He had to be making a right spectacle of himself if
Sasuke was being sympathetic. “You didn’t have that many stars in your eyes.” Sasuke mumbled as he sat next to him. “Besides I don’t blame you. She’s like that sometimes.”

“Your mom’s really nice.” Naruto chewed the candy slowly. “I like your family Sasuke, your house.”

“They like you too.” Naruto raised his head in time to see Sasuke watching his father as the man read scrolls and had his feet up. “And I like them too.”

“Your mom knows a lot huh.” Naruto mused. “Even outside your clan.”

“It’s her duty. That and she likes doing that.” Sasuke broke off another piece of candy and shoved it in his direction. “You’re welcomed here, she went overboard a bit but that’s what she wanted you to know. Me too, here is nice with you around.”

“Sasuke.” A huge grin spread on his face.

“That and it makes it easier for you to gawk at my clan.” The smile that spread across Sasuke’s face was quick and vicious. “You make it so obvious. I don’t know what to do with you. You are my clan’s biggest fan and you stare at everyone. I should be concerned but you have too many stars in your eyes to be a real threat.”

“It’s not my fault!” Naruto hissed. “And no one should be allowed hair like that! It’s so silky and smooth and all your faces are like-“ He cut himself off to groan. “It isn’t fair.”

“What isn’t fair?” Sasuke’s mother had returned and, in her hands, she held a large watermelon. “Kai-san gave us a watermelon to share. We’ll have it after dinner so why don’t you stay for that Naruto-kun?”

How the hell was Naruto to deny a request like that? That and it was really hard to say anything but yes to Sasuke’s mother. She just had this intensity to her and the way she looked at him had him agreeing before he thought of anything. He did not want to intrude or anything but they were the ones making the request after all. After the day he had, to be welcomed like this made him not want to go anywhere.

XxX

“So well thanks and everything.” Naruto rubbed the back of his hair as Sasuke waited at the entrance to the Uchiha compound. “I know they said it was okay and stuff but sorry for intruding for so long and I know I thanked your parents already but thank them again. And thank your mom for the watermelon and-“

“I get it.” Sasuke snorted. “It’s no big deal. Not to them, not to me not to us and you enjoyed yourself. I know it, they know it. They only way it could have gotten better was if Shisui had stopped over.”

Sasuke was the worst. “You know I’m trying to improve myself right?”

“You’re failing.” Sasuke said curtly. “You flail over my entire clan once they are over a certain age. You’re so predictable. I’m half afraid of what will happen to us when you’re Hokage.”

“What’s that supposed to mean.” Naruto wasn’t that bad.

“I almost feel as if we’ll be forced to marry you or something. The Uchiha harem.” Sasuke scoffed before he laughed. “You’re so obvious with it.”
“If you want me to behave.” Naruto pointed his finger at Sasuke. “Turn it down! That whole thing your clan does.”

“How about you take out your eye and the problem is solved.” Sasuke rolled his eyes. “You’re a brat with no self-control.”

“It’s called puberty.” Naruto sneered. “And I’m not ashamed of the changes my body is going through. I’m calling it as it is. The Uchiha clan are growing some beauties! There!”

“How shameless.” Sasuke turned away but Naruto heard the soft snigger. “Get going, it’s already late and you’re the one that refused to stay the night.”

“Yeah.” Naruto smiled. “I gotta get back but Sasuke.” Their eyes met and he grinned. “Thanks for today. I needed that.” Sasuke’s nod of acknowledgment was all that he needed to turn around and set out on his way. Before he turned the corner, he turned back to find Sasuke watching him. He lifted his hand to wave goodbye and laughed when after a few seconds Sasuke lifted his in return. “He’s sweeter than people would think.” Naruto mused to himself. “It’s cute.”

After such a day it had been nice to get that. Sasuke had given him a relief and as Naruto walked through the village with the remainder of his stuff the happiness remained but his thoughts just kept tumbling around in his head.

The Uchiha made him feel so welcomed. Sasuke’s mom was really nice she was smart too and the way she had treated him. It felt so good but there was something in that house.

It was more than that. He had a suspicion about Sasuke’s problems. He had heard a few things during his time away but there were some things you only saw when you were looking for it. There was a rift in that house even if they were trying to ignore it.

Naruto did not want to be rude, he did not want to pry but he had gotten used to reading eyes watching him. Sasuke’s mother did not hate him but she had secrets. She was a nice lady, a pretty lady but this was the first time since meeting her that he had felt as though she had some sort of intention. With every smile and coax from her, he had felt the trails of a web on his back.

They did not want to harm him. He could believe that, or at least he did he was trying not to get fooled by a pretty face. Still those few seconds when one was surprised and unguarded. There had been something there but he was not going to press it. He had to bid his time.

He was not letting go his questions about the past. The dead were dead but he was not going to forget them. There was no sense raining vengeance down when they knew what they were in for. Besides, by leaving him behind to this fate that said more than anything what they wanted him to do. He had to play smart and he had to stay alive.

Konoha was full of dark corners and secrets. He had to held them hide some too and that pissed him off. Paying his respects had cleared his head but the compound and the entire day had his thoughts in turmoil with each other.

Pretty people aside, Konoha had so much secrets. He had his own too, he had his dream and he had his team. He had lots of growth ahead of him and he was getting there. The time was coming but it was still in the distance. He was proud of his own skills but he knew that he could improve.

He was living for himself, he was living for them he was living to uncover the secrets in his past and he was living for that promise. For those promises.

He unlocked his front door and scanned for activity before he walked in and locked behind
himself. He stripped off his clothes as he made his way towards the bathroom. He set aside his things to deal with before he flicked on the light to the bathroom.

The sight of his reflection caught his attention and he wiped his palm across the mirror to meet his own eyes. The crystal hung around his neck and his eyes were just how he knew they would be. Determined. There was just so much going on and everyone wanted trust from everyone. Konoha wanted him to trust them and he did but not all the way and not with everything. There were people who knew things that he needed and he needed to know why.

Soon the time for answers would come. Not yet, he could not be too hasty. Not if he wanted to get everything that he wanted to get. That sword would be his, the hat would be his. The answers to his past would be his and the last thing.

That warmth he had felt from the Uchihas… it would be nice to feel that in every corner of the village but that would take time. But time was all he currently had, it was a waiting game.

XxX

He couldn’t sleep, he had been trying and he had managed to drift off for an hour but he was back up and awake. No matter how long he stayed still he could not drift off. No matter how long he stared at the ceiling either nothing happened. He had no choice but to get up and grab clothes.

Meditating just might help but he did not want to. He wanted to move, he wanted to walk and although it was late at night he was going to do it. He was not afraid of the dark or those who worked in it. He had become one of them a long time ago.

His body was burning hot so he left his jacket behind and instead stumbled outside in his pants and mesh shirt. The streets were dim and no one was on the streets. As he left his apartment the sense of calm and relief that swept over him almost made him feel ashamed.

It had been quite the day when he thought about it. Hanging with his team, visiting the graves. Thinking of the past. Missing his friends and then leaving the graves. To be found by Sasuke, to be welcomed by Sasuke and his entire family. To find even more secrets and people that he liked, people that liked him but were holding information to themselves.

Even though Sasuke did not speak Naruto could not hold it against him. He had secrets too lots of them and there was something he could tell Sasuke but he had no idea how that would change their friendship. Saying something like “I heard your brother’s voice months before I ever saw his face.” Well that might not go down too well.

He shoved his hands in his pockets as he picked a street and began to walk. A big circle would calm his blood, cool his head and hopefully his thoughts. There was just so much going on at once and he had no idea how to feel.

He was Uzumaki Naruto that would never change. His experiences, his promises, the people he met. The people he loved and the people he loved. It was up to him to become what he wanted to become, he knew he could do it. He knew he could overcome and he knew he could do better than those before him. That did not change the loneliness.

He was not an idiot, he knew how adults worked and he knew how the world operated. Knew of the evil that lurked everywhere alongside the greed. He knew very well how these things went and he was not fine with it but he knew his limits. Currently no matter how strong he was he could not win every battle.
There was stronger, there was scarier lurking. Team seven and Konoha was currently home. They were his friends and he was going to be by their side in the village as he worked for his dream.

That did not mean he had forgotten anything. But he remembered how it was in the troupe too. He knew why Haku had kept him and not the others, he knew that even the troupe had kept secrets from him. There was only so much you could hide in plain sight. Sora had told him to open his eyes and he was trying.

It was hard but he was trying. The thing was he had already forgiven them all, no matter what new things he might remember or discover. What new thing he might fully understand he had already forgiven them.

The promise that had been broken. He forgave them for that. Together.

The only ones that had been together had been them but he forgave that. He forgave them because he still carried their messages and teaching inside of him. That and he was not alone, not in Konoha and certainly not out of it. He just had to make certain that those two things never overlapped.

He had forgiven, he had made the choice but the others like Sora they had been under Zabuza too. The plan for Kiri had been to conquer and take over with a wave of blood. Naruto had never wanted to take Konoha like that. He did not want to do it like that now either.

The plan was simple, work his way up and become a strong shinobi and play by their rules. There was no hurry without Haku. No Haku to save meant he could take his time. Sora and the others after everything could never live under Konoha’s rule. He doubted they could live under any of the great countries rule either.

A lot of reminiscing had gone on because of Obon. Even regrets had crept up but this was not the time or place for those. What if Haku had stopped Zabuza from taking that last job. What if the group had split and they had gone across the sea together. What if he had spoken up back then.

It did not matter, there was no sense in playing what ifs. He could only learn from his mistakes and the mistakes made before him. He had to use everything he had been taught and he had to soak up everything around him as well.

He held no grudge towards those he liked in the village. All his irritation was towards him being denied what he rightfully was owed, the truth. Sometimes it felt as though the answer was right in front of him.

Naruto kicked a rock as he turned down another street. The streets at night were just perfect.

XxX

After he had watched Naruto enter Uchiha territory Kakashi had not dreamed that he would run into him again in the same night. He had just come from the memorial stone. Time had gotten away from him again while he stood there and he had only taken awareness of his surroundings when an ANBU member had left.

It was not just evening, it was night and he had decided to walk home when he caught sight of Naruto. He looked like a lost child with only his shirt but Kakashi was pulled to his figure as he wandered the streets. Naruto looked up in time at him when they met where the streets crossed.

He looked tired but since he was outside Kakashi guessed Naruto’s insomnia had made a return. That or something was just plain bothering him. Kakashi tucked his hands into his pockets and picked a path that did not lead to his apartment. He walked halfway before he turned back, Naruto
was watching him but after a while he followed Kakashi down the path. He caught up enough and soon they wandered side by side.

The silence was comfortable and the village was quiet. Just the normal sounds of wildlife around them as they explored Konoha. Naruto did not seem to want to speak and honestly Kakashi did not know what to even say. Instead he thought over both their days as they walked together.

XxX

Kakashi always popped up when Naruto needed something. It was sort of ironic. It would be nice if he could give Naruto the other thing he wanted but he doubted that would happen anytime soon.

Time passed as they walked together and he felt more and more relaxed as they walked through Konoha. Everything was different at night but not in a scary way, Konoha was peaceful without anyone on the streets and there was no tension around.

Naruto had just gotten into a mood when Kakashi-sensei picked a street that led out of the commerce part of Konoha. It intrigued him as he followed because he was fairly certain ahead was woods and some old clans’ territory. Not even to the training grounds or anything.

They walked silently only the sound of their footsteps occasionally filling the silence. He felt no need to speak, there was none. His bigger thoughts had melted away with the walk now with Kakashi-sensei by his side he felt calmer.

They had just passed one the lakes when they turned off the main path. Naruto kept his gaze on Kakashi as the man led him because it no longer felt like aimlessly wandering around. It felt like a destination.

Kakashi coming to a halt sort of startled him. Naruto glanced around behind them and the lake to further ahead where wildlife had reclaimed what looked to be a house. He glanced up at his sensei then back to the house and the ruins that it was before he looked back at his sensei.

The man was not looking at him, his hands were buried in his pockets but the way he looked ahead made Naruto’s heart throb in his chest and his throat dry. This place was of some sort of significance to Kakashi-sensei.

This house, this ruined cottage meant something to Kakashi-sensei and he had brought Naruto here. He had shown him. Naruto knew the saying many houses one home, he knew it was not the possessions one was to focus on but the feeling of a home.

Kakashi-sensei had brought him here, he had shown him this a part of himself when he did not have to. He had opened up and shared something and he did not have to say a word. Naruto got it, it was important to his sensei’s past.

This little cottage, Kakashi-sensei was trusting him with not only the location but the significance to him too. His shoulders relaxed before he reached out and tugged one his sensei’s hands from his pocket. He squeezed his hand tightly to show the message had been received.

Honestly first the face and now this. His heart felt tight in his chest. Naruto got it, he knew how the games were played when it came to secrets and villages, he knew his sensei’s hands were tied but this just told him that if they weren’t Kakashi-sensei would give him it all and that soothed him.

He knew he could trust him.

Kakashi-sensei’s hand squeezed his in a tight grip. “Should we head back?” Naruto whispered as they watched the small cottage.
“We should, it’s late.” Kakashi-sensei turned around and Naruto went with the soft tug. They went back down the path. Passed the lake and the river that Naruto had not noticed the first time. Went back into the hub of the village towards his apartment in silence.

With each step Naruto felt so warm and relaxed. They stayed quiet but like as before it did not bother him. It was good enough being by Kakashi-sensei’s side. It was only when they reached his apartment and he reached for his keys did he realize they had held hands the entire time.

“Goodnight.” Naruto told him when he was by his door.

“Sleep well.” His sensei told him before he hopped over the railing. Naruto did not bother to watch him leave, he knew that his sensei would be gone before he could reach the ground. instead he entered his apartment and locked up after himself.

During his shower he felt better about his eased heart. He missed Haku, he missed the troupe so badly that it hurt to breathe but they had made their choices and they had their code. The troupe had ended there and they had trusted in him.

Being happy with his sensei and his team was nothing to feel guilty about. The troupe was the troupe, Konoha was Konoha and he was the only things that connected them. There was no overlap. If they were watching over him they would be proud of what he had accomplished. Maybe poking some fun at him here or there but he had done things they would be proud of. He was going to make it to their level and he was going to surpass them all. Everything they had he would master, that was how he would honour them.

Naruto collapsed face down in his bed after his bed. His entire body felt tired. Still that meant he could finally go to sleep. It had been a long day, so many weird things and he had come back from something that others would think was the weirdest of them all. The strange thing though was that what he had just experienced with his sensei felt like the only normal thing of the day. Being by Kakashi-sensei’s side relaxed him and brought him peace. With those thoughts in his head Naruto finally fell into a dreamless sleep.
Yes yes the fic isn't abandoned *heavy sigh* until I say it is just assume i got caught up in RL things okay? The chapters are big darlings. I urge you to look at the word counts before you get impatient. I had been hoping to upload in june so I could explain that I'm overseas on vacation so I can't exactly be writing the way I could if I was home on vacation (purple has friends and a life thanks wait until September when i can just go from work to home and have no life)

My goal is to get this arc finished and at least 2 by the end of the year but I have some outlining to do and idk how big the next chapter will be. Could be anywhere between 30 and 50K tbh. I'll be honest right there. Lots of things have to go in that chapter.

~I'm sleepy as hell I pushed hard to finish and look through this so I could post it early Sunday morning~ yay... There are lots of hints in this chapter about future events. I hope yall darlings pay attention. One more chapter to bring to the end of the simple missions arc. Yup all these missions had a purpose. I'm glad I left yall on a good chapter cuz I'm so happy I'm getting somewhere with the development. This is a looong fic so if you're still riding with me kudos and much love!

It's a long chapter so get comfortable ^.^ about over 50K or so. It's a monster chapter and I need a good break lol. I'm still on vacation and running around doing tourist stuff! Hope yall enjoy the chapter

The worst thing they could do was to relax. The worst thing that Konoha could do would be to pretend that everything was okay now and that the bad things would never happen again. Letting down their guard was the worst thing that they could do.

Orochimaru was their wake-up call and Tsunade knew that. The Sandaime hopefully knew it, Jiraiya knew it as well. The council needed to acknowledge it but she was not going to hold her breath for that. She knew how they thought and she knew better than anyone what they were really like.

Something was coming and she did not mean just the meddling of the other countries. She did not even mean Orochimaru, the reports were coming and something was stirring. Something bad and the village needed to be ready. Team seven was ready, as ready as they could be with their age.

It was a unique team and she had to give her sensei her admiration. That was a team of beasts, how he had recognized the sleeping beasts in the other two she simply did not know. She just knew they would work for Konoha. They had the will of fire in the marrow of them and with Naruto accelerating their growth there was nothing but good.

Even with her holding Naruto back. The truth was a strange thing to keep captive but how would he react? Was this the time for peace? No, it was not, it was the time for focus and the time to fight. To let one thing slip would be to let everything slip. If she were to say who he was she would have to explain why and what and all the secrets would fly out and not everyone was ready for that.
The village needed to be stronger before mouths stared to flap. People needed to be ready and they were not. The new generation needed to be ready for anything. The war had been a slap in the face but not all of them were battle ready and she knew it. Jiraiya knew it. They had to be stronger and not just them it was why she had made the moves that she had.

She had holes in her own administration and she hated that. There was information she was holding onto until the right time. Things she had dug up that she was sitting on until the time to motivate her entire village came.

Still there was the darkness lurking on the continent that she could not ignore. The things she could not uncover no matter what she did. There was Orochimaru with his fangs still aimed at the village. There were those shinobi lurking waiting for Konoha to slip up and bare its belly.

She had not been bullying team seven she had been preparing and while she adored Naruto she understood him a bit better than even that brat did. She did not mind the games but she was not going to put her village at risk. The brat wanted the hat but she wanted him to want the village too, all of it with its good and its bad. With the dirty secrets and betrayals.

Doing things the old fashion way would only hurt Konoha and the next generation. Times had changed and they should change with them. Konoha had suffered losses over the years and they could not afford anymore. They got missions of all sorts, they got all sorts of ridiculous requests every single day. Good for the money but the risk to Konoha was currently too great.

They could not afford any slip ups. Jounins were their precious commodity. They could not afford to lose them. She would not tell them of course but currently team seven minus Kakashi was the worth of a single Jounin. They would all become Jounins in their own right eventually.

Following on Team seven’s heels were team ten of course with team Gai hard on their heels. Team ten would be eventually overtaken by team Gai the moment Lee returned of course. She had been keeping her eye on them all. All of the genins and new Chuunins.

Risking their elites were foolish, it had been foolish in the past and it was foolish now. It was better to have the elites pass on their knowledge as much as possible and foster the new generation. Look at Kakashi’s team.

They were the flagship of the future generation even if they did not know it yet. They had smarts, they had power and they had unity that kept growing stronger. There was unrest on the continent and rumours of it across the sea.

She could not waste a single squad, she could not waste a single shinobi on foolishness. Missions had to be completed swiftly and completely. They were not at war but they might as well be. The current unrest and darkness she could sense in the air was the tension before a battle.

She was a Sannin and she knew to trust her instincts, the safest Konoha shinobi currently were was behind Konoha’s gates. They could not afford to have them outside them for too long. For themselves and for the village.

They had to get stronger, they had to be ready and she was going to do whatever it took to get them there. No matter how crazy or strange others thought her actions. She knew what she was doing and she knew how to get the results that she wanted. Two birds and one stone. She could not waste her squads and she had shinobi to train. Tsunade tapped her empty sake bottle against her cup and sighed alone in her darkened office. She had the feeling they were running out of time.

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Hiruzen was not too surprised by Tsunade’s moves. He had to agree with her as well. Konoha could not afford to lose any special shinobi. It was difficult enough to get Jounins and ANBUs. To lose one was a blow to the village.

Others would not see to where she was aiming with her directives but he could. He could see some of her thoughts and he could see a bit of the direction that she was aiming towards. He was proud of her, she had taken to the role as if she had been born to it. She had never wanted it but while she did this he could not help be proud.

She was not doing it just for the village, it was for young Dan. It was for the fallen Nawaki; it was for Naruto as well. Hiruzen refilled his pipe as he watched the full moon outside the mansion. He was retired again finally. He should stop poking his nose into official matters and focus on his grandson.

He should be, it was almost too difficult. There was the subject of Naruto to consider. There always had been the subject of Naruto to consider. Hiruzen had simply failed the boy, they all had. Failed the boy and failed Minato. This was not what Minato had wanted, this was not what the child of those two deserved.

He should have been raised with care and smiles. The village should have accepted and loved him but instead not only had he suffered but he had been warped into the child he was now. Telling the truth would not solve it, it was too late.

The original plan had plenty of holes but it was the only real option left. The boy had clung to the memory of two people and preserved a bit of himself. He had made strong bonds with his team. Deep bonds with members of the village in his age group.

The older members of the village had failed but the children were a different matter. The slate could be wiped clean and Naruto could have what he deserved with them. There were the Ino-Shika-Cho children whose eyes were on him already. The Hyuugas young and old were focused on him.

The Uchihas had acted as expected and moved to solidify their ties once more. Kakashi was alive again and healthier than he had been in years. Hiruzen could barely remember the last time that Kakashi had been so relaxed and happy. Maybe before the war, maybe during the academy.

There had been so many losses in all their lives but with Naruto back the village could heal and the village could change. With Tsunade at the helm and Jiraiya supporting her things could finally be fixed.

There was no avoiding the truths of the threats beyond their gates. Hiruzen could feel it stronger than ever. It had started with the foolish Orochimaru. It would not end there, if anything with Orochimaru they were able to sense other darkness.

Too many strange things were happening. It was not safe outside of Konoha but for Konoha to remain safe they had to keep face. He did not envy Tsunade her current job. The clans had to be pacified, the village had to be kept running and the children had to be trained.

Children like Naruto, children like Konohamaru had to be trained and they had to be protected. Naruto even after all his years away was a good boy. The way he was with the children younger than him, he was still mischievous. He was still a boy that enjoyed laughing but to hold that against him when he resembled those that came before him was ridiculous.

He could smile so sweetly after everything that had happened. The good thing about retiring was
that he himself could stop holding himself back. Having tea with his grandson and having him invite Naruto over was nice.

One thing Hiruzen would not miss was the reports on Naruto, not just his movements but the things inside his head. The first psyche evaluation had been rough but the check-ups that followed had made him cautious. It had never felt dangerous towards Konoha but Naruto had been a string pulled tightly.

Konoha had failed him but the boy still wanted his dream. He was more their child than people knew. They had taken him from the home he had made their own but he called himself Konoha’s still. His path was a strange one but it was still a good one. His flame might be a different colour than usual but it was still the will of fire. They just had to wait and see how it would grow. Hiruzen did not envy Tsunade’s tasks at all.

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There were still too many people testing Konoha with the ridiculous reports and the ridiculous missions. Ridiculous missions were how they made their money but she was trying to use the people she had at her disposal to take care of their problems.

Many of these things were linked and only a fool would not see it. She was no fool, she could see the string tying the missions and strange cases together she just could not see the beginning of the string and she could not figure out who held the end of it.

She needed more squads, she needed more shinobi but there were too many things she was trying to keep her eyes on. What she needed was Jiraiya’s assistance too but it was easier to deal with the village than his wandering ass. He was still bitter about Orochimaru going to ground and she did not blame him too much but there was nothing they could currently do about that.

They had bigger problems on their hands with all the unrest. Others might call it a stroke of luck but she was calling it what it was, someone stirring the pot and all of them getting splashed.

Smaller things turning into big problems and that was a problem. The surge of missing nins around the land and even beyond. Quality shinobi making a run for it. Kingdoms falling, treaties failing and important artefacts being snatched and ran with.

It was not a coincidence, in no way could it be. She was not blind, she could see the lines and something was starting this. Even if they did not know it a shift had occurred and others were reacting. What they needed was information but what they needed was to play catch up on the missions too. They had to calculate their own actions and their own impacts as well.

There was no time for messing around, it had started small but it was bigger now. Team seven had proved reliable from the first Land of snow mission. Following on their heels was team ten on their collaboration and separate missions with team seven. They got how things worked.

It was not a coincidence that missions were falling apart these days. The bigger the client the more unstable the environment. Still the way treaties were being broken left right and centre meant that smoothing new was going on and she wanted to understand just what that was.

She wanted to find them whoever they were. She needed information but she could not get it from just anyone or anywhere. The treaties of the five countries was little stronger than paper. Look what had happened with Suna to begin with.

They had to be wary, they had to be careful not to get caught up in a dangerous flow. She had been
pouring over missions and reports but could uncover nothing. That alone told her to be wary. They could not afford to waste their manpower but they could not let the chance to raise their reputation and sharpen their fangs slip by them either.

Team seven were making quite the name for themselves and Konoha. Requests were pouring in because of them and their work. Well most of it was legitimate but Tsunade was willing to play along for now.

The missions had their ups and downs but she could read patterns on the wind too. She had been thinking since the last play nice mission she had sent team seven on. Collab missions were nice but it was about time to test things that were a little bigger.

She could call it a training camp to their teachers and let them figure out her intentions themselves. So far Naruto was doing well in inspiring everyone else. Doing fine in raising suspicion too but what could she do? He had to integrate himself properly among his peers. They had to get to know him and how he worked.

When the time came to fight they would fight for him, they would defend him and they would work to protect him even from himself. She herself loved the brat but he was too reckless. He could not be trusted with himself.

It was not arrogance but it was something. He would go far, he would become Hokage but he had to ease up on the stupid reckless acts. She got it, it was puberty he had to blow off steam and work through frustration but he had to learn the balance.

He had to limit himself and the others needed to know how dangerous and strong Naruto could be. Not to fear him but to understand him. He was different to them and they needed to understand that. Raised outside, taught how to best them. They had plenty to learn from Naruto and they had to start right away.

Instead of wasting time and resources she had to be careful and send out those that could handle the issues that she saw cropping up. she had to do that while not putting them in real danger. The last thing they needed was the little ones coming face to face with Orochimaru or this unknown darkness. That was what she was trying to avoid. As it was she suspected they had brushed it twice already and that was bad enough.

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The princess was up to something but when was she not? Jiraiya watched the night sky as the cart rattled along. Farmers were nice people and people in the country were nice no matter the time. They understood the burdens of travellers.

He almost wished he was in Konoha but the fun of the open road and adventures called at him too much. Although currently the last thing he was thinking about was travel and books the feeling still applied.

Maybe that was why he and Naruto got on so well. He got the kid he really did. There was something about the world outside the village. About the places they visited and had yet to visit. About walking among people who you could never see again and that you left behind at the town’s borders.

Still he was on a special mission for Tsunade and while he wanted to get back to hunting for Orochimaru and hunting down leads on the information Orochimaru had given up Jiraiya was following Tsunade’s lead.
When he got back he would tease and trouble Naruto a bit. Who knew how much the brat had grown by. He was a quick study and he looked at things strangely but his strength was no joke. The quicker he mastered himself the faster he would develop.

That was the scary thing about Naruto. No one should know themselves so fully at that age. He still had a few things to work out but after that Jiraiya suspected nothing would be beyond Naruto’s understanding. It was scary, it was fascinating.

He wanted a front row seat to it. He wondered if Kakashi was prepared.

All of that and he had not even started to use the beast inside him. What the hell would he become? Would Konoha be able to withstand it? He really wanted to see Naruto soon.

He blew a bit of hay away from his mouth as he watched the full moon above. Sometimes he felt homesick but most of the time he thought about friends and the past. It was nice having Tsunade rely on him but that changed very little about the circumstances.

The work, the gathering of information and of course the rendezvous and spying was good for the intel but it was more than that. Jiraiya wanted to get back to the problems aiming and Konoha soon. Orochimaru would rise again and soon. The group Orochimaru had been involved with was still out there.

They wanted a jinchiuriki. They knew where to find them and that chilled him to the bone. Naruto had to be able to defend himself better and he needed to be better protected. They needed information and they had to be careful, every single one of them. One wrong move could set the ball rolling and Jiraiya doubted they were ready for that.

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‘‘You come to lose or you have something else planned?’’ Shikaku eyed Asuma as the man continued to make plays on the board. ‘‘It’s late.’’

‘‘Something is coming,’’ Asuma chewed on the unlit end of his cigarette as he eyed the board.

‘‘Something is stirring,’’ Shikaku agreed. ‘‘Even the Hokage knows this.’’

‘‘You mean even the brats know this.’’ Asuma watched Shikaku remove another important piece from the board. ‘‘I’m worried about our manpower.’’

‘‘We all are worried about our manpower,’’ Shikaku used one of his pawns to block Asuma’s ridiculous play. ‘‘Jounins are important to the village. We can’t waste them and we can’t hinder or sacrifice the coming generation. A tricky situation.’’

‘‘We’ve never had this before,’’ Asuma frowned at the board. ‘‘Even in my generation with plenty of talents and during the war. We never had this before.’’

‘‘Have we had a Naruto before?’’ Shikaku smiled as Asuma made a half decent play before he blocked it. ‘‘There is a foundling in our mist and if you listen to Shikamaru he’s going to lead us all in ten years or so. I’m inclined to believe it.’’

‘‘Naruto confuses the ones that don’t know,’’ Asuma smiled. ‘‘One or the other but with both of them? In one body and then add this other part to it… we’ve never had a Naruto before.’’

‘‘We were never ready for it either,’’ Shikaku acknowledged. ‘‘And the things he’s doing to the other, the way he’s changing them just by walking ahead. I like what I see even if it seems a bit
familiar.”

“It really does doesn’t it.” Asuma murmured. “I worry about the others. They don’t know everything and even at this point it is hard to explain.”

“From the beginning works wonders.” Shikaku made the final move and won the game. Asuma acknowledged it before both of them removed their pieces from the board. “It’s a long story but eventually it will be told. It’s too big to be covered up forever and the kids are too smart not to see.”

“What will they think?” Asuma dropped his pieces into the box slowly. “How will they look at us? I’ve been thinking this for a while. Even if Naruto accepts and forgives the village do you think the rest will?”

“Some of us don’t deserve forgiveness.” Shikaku said bluntly. “But forgiveness is not about who deserves what. If they want to hold it against us we should let them. When I think about the possible alternative. The children being forced to go along with the hatred and mistrust I prefer this to that.”


“Shikamaru does what he wants, my child makes his own decisions on who he wants to play with. With who he believes in and what he should do.” Shikaku smiled. “There was nothing to fear after all and I always preferred the gentle approach when necessary. The kid is a good kid, a bit strange but when you consider the blood.” He trailed off.

“Point made.” Asuma played with his lighter. “Point made.”

XxX

Tsunade-sama had been busy with paperwork for days and she was concerned. She was worried mostly because Tsunade-sama had been barely drinking. Of the sixteen hidden stashes of sake in the office the Hokage had only touched one of them. She had been too busy otherwise.

On her feet, with the paperwork or with meetings. Shizune was concerned that the stress was getting too her. Even with her delegating there was just so much. Maybe they needed another assistant or maybe the stress was getting to her too.

The reviews and the reports, the back and forth and the meetings. The negotiations and then requests on top of that. It tired her out and she barely had to interact with the council. She made sure the Hokage was on top of things but just looking at the paperwork depressed her.

The highlights of her week had to be seeing some of the people she had grown up with in the village and whatever team seven were up to.

Sparring with Naruto-kun was not exactly a stress reliever but it was an amusing way to spend the time. Naruto-kun kept pushing his limits, it was sort of adorable but currently she was still on the top of her game. He was good but she knew how to get more than a few over him. It was fun, it was playing and it made a few moments lighter and she deserved that.

Taking him for lunch brightened her day too. Or watching him and Tsunade-sama have tea or just sit together for a while. She had been taken over by him but she was not alone. It was a bit of fun to see the Hokage pick on him and his team a bit but she knew Tsunade-sama had only the best intentions.
What the end game was she was uncertain. Team seven had improved by leaps and bounds but the things they had seen as a result made her ache for them a bit. Naruto had seen quite a lot but there was no time for him to sit and heal like he should.

If it were up to her he would be fitting in with the others and developing slower. However, it was not up to her and she doubted Naruto would let anyone slow him down. He was impatient but cute with it. Everyone’s eyes were on him but secretly as he rushed ahead.

It was hard to imagine he was the boy with such a huge burden. She found it hard to believe herself and she had seen his eyes change. She had read his files too and she had healed him. It was still hard to believe and she knew she was not alone.

The only thing that worried her when it came to Naruto was what the council had to be thinking. She knew the results and reports were not enough. She knew because Tsunade-sama’s face when she came back from those meetings were dark with rage. She knew that the more one talked to Naruto and the more at ease he felt, the more terrifying things he revealed. The scariest things were the things he revealed as though they were normal.

Healing was a process and they were doing all they could but it took time. That was something she doubted the council or those on the outside would allow them.

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“Today.” Naruto told the empty clearing. “I’m going to try a new dance altogether.” The troupe had been noise and motion he missed that, they had adored him but they had been a band of trouble when they had downtime too. Troublemaking and noise, it had been fun.

Some people just made good teams, some people had ended up being the best partners and he was keeping with that. He knew who worked best when it was two on two. He had seen so many combinations. Most hastily formed out of necessity.

Still when it came to fighting and carrying on what he remembered it was just his one and he carried all the knowledge they passed on inside him so he had to make the combinations.

Kasumi had been a dance of her own, add that to Ryu and they had been a graceful and solid combination. Kasumi and Kaya, Kasumi and Raiya had been something too. Kasumi had been able to match almost anyone. She changed to fit them, good skills for an assassin and something Naruto had been trying to copy to various pieces of success. Not perfection, not yet but that would come.

Kasumi’s movements were like Haku’s. Like the wind, graceful and free and he had to remember that as he stepped and moved. Fighting was a dance, combat was a dance all the same rules applied.

Kasumi had been a poison woman and Naruto was happily carrying on that part of her. Mai had used poison too but not to the extent that Kasumi had. While Naruto enjoyed finding new ways to combine Ryu’s style and Kasumi’s he had to acknowledge that there were more pieces to it.

It had been a long time since he had thought of her warmth. A long time since he indulged of thoughts of her laughter and play. Still, of everyone that he knew Kaya had turned jutsus into a form of magic. He doubted he was as good at fire as she had been but he had seen her team up with Kasumi before. Any civilian would have called them witches if they had seen what he had seen.

Now Naruto was going to copy what he had seen and replicate what he had been taught. He was going to be that witch from this point on.
The problem was that she needed Jiraiya where he was and she needed her new teams exactly where they were. She doubted these things were unrelated but she had no people to spare in the squashing that was needed. She did not wish bad on them. She did not hate them either but she knew what the little ones would think.

She knew what Naruto would complain and say, she knew how Kakashi would look at her and while she tried not to care she did care. Kakashi concerned her and she knew why the brat was the way he was. She was not going to say Sarutobi-sensei had been wrong to assign the way that he had but it did cause problems.

Kakashi was devoted to his team, she had no doubt that he would destroy a country and himself rather than let something happen to them. He had that self-destructive behaviour wrapped up in possessiveness. She understood that but what she could see was that he seemed to forget where the lines were.

They were shinobi, herself too. They belonged to the village and they were there to serve. For Kakashi to get so caught up and so possessive. She was concerned, she was very concerned. He would stick to the letter of the duty she was not worried about him saying something wrong but she worried for Kakashi’s future. He was stretching himself thin and they all knew what happened to strings that were too tight with tension.

She did not even know who more to be concerned about in that situation. She would prefer to not have to think about it at all but she could see the faint outline for the future and she could see the rising clouds coming their way.

Minato had given them a rather interesting problem to deal with in the end. So many reports she had gone through in order to discover the mystery. She had only ended up launching a bunch of investigations in order to find the true stories. She was still quite some ways from uncovering those as well.

Still she did have some interesting information and she most certainly was waiting for those items to come back to Konoha. She was a pretty poor loser when it came to betting money but things like this and things like the long game. She was rather good at it, years of experience which put her ahead of her cute little opponent. She had no problem waiting for the time being. It hurt no one and it was better to have things where she could see them.

The things she could not see that irritated her the most. That led to long nights in her office pouring over reports and information packets. Others would say that it was too soon. That they needed more time to stretch their wings and normally she would agree.

Normally it would be too soon to send ones their age in, even with their senseis with them it would normally way too early to send them anywhere near such situations but they were not normal. They might have been but not now, they had been fanned by the wind that was Naruto and all their fires were burning bright and strong.

The council would complain, they would harass her and those in the shadows would watch her closer than they were currently doing but the only one who knew the current truth was her.

The little ones would think she was bullying them but the truth was that she believed in their growth and ability more than anything else. She would trust them with this and await the news of not just their growth but their triumph too.
She could hear the earth turning and the grass rustling in the distance, she could feel the change in the air. She could not assign recklessly. She could only hope that most of the others would catch on and understand in time. Spoon-feeding days would soon be over.

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The air in the Jounin station was tense, Kurenai knew she was not imagining it. She sat on the chair as she waited on Asuma and Kakashi but she was aware of the change in the air. They all felt it. They all sensed something but they could not identify it.

Things had calmed down a little mission wise but only on the surface. The tactics of the Hokage had changed and they were all aware. They were braced for something and they did not even know what. It had her nervous. It had her wary and it made it difficult to relax.

She had her team so she was not required to do too much outside of them. She had the few odd requests but she was not as popular as Asuma and Kakashi were. Their names were the big ones even after all this time. For her she knew that if she were to be called that things had gotten grim on the genjutsu front.

She kept her eyes closed as she used her senses to feel around the station. Everyone was on edge and who could blame them. They had not fully recovered from the attack and the missions that Konoha had been assaulted with would bury even the hardiest soul.

It was almost like wartime again. All the battles, all the intrigue and the death. They all knew it even if they said nothing else. Something else was coming.

There was the taunt from the Exams that lingered in all their minds. The fear that came with it. Only a Sannin could beat a Sannin, they all knew that but it would not stop them from trying. Orochimaru had slithered into their lives, half destroyed the village. Injured the Sandaime and tossed the village and parts of the shinobi world into chaos before he disappeared. That was a fact.

Still she could not shake the feeling that something bad had set its sights on Konoha. That something bad was coming. It was hard to focus on her team and their determination and accomplishments when she could feel a chill and a darkness coming their way.

She was trying to be positive, trying to look forward but she could see she was not the only one that felt this way. She had wanted to brush off the attack as a one-off thing but she doubted that with every strange mission she observed and the whispers from beyond their borders.

The Hokage’s new movements were just solidifying this for not only just her but everyone else. Something bad was coming once again. She could feel it, the problem with that was that if they had a warning like this. It might be bigger to handle than what they had ever experienced before and she doubted many were ready. She did not know if any of them were. Only a Sannin could beat a Sannin that was supposed to be true to this day but… Orochimaru had been fleeing, hadn’t he?

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Everyone was working so hard all of his former class were working so hard it was adorable to see. Iruka smiled to himself as he shuffled off another tray of scrolls for sorting later. While Naruto tended to catch his attention out of habit he was keeping an eye on the others.

Kiba, Hinata and Chouji. Shino and Shikamaru. Sakura, Ino and Sasuke all of them were working hard at ridiculous rates and it was not only humbling but amazing to see. He had never expected
growth like theirs even from Sasuke and Shikamaru. Maybe it would be favouritism to say that Naruto had something to do with it.

By now all of them had found that something they needed to protect and that something to make them stronger for more than themselves. By now they must have found the part of the village they would fight to nurture and keep standing.

It made him a little eager for the next time that the Chuunin exams would come. Shikamaru and Sakura had earned theirs. The rest of them were going to get theirs the next time too. He could feel it; once nothing got in their way.

Iruka pushed back his chair as he held a correspondence scroll in his hand. The moment he had wrapped things up he would go back to the classroom. He ignored the busy pace around him and made his way to the window. Clear skies, it looked like such a normal day but he could feel something tingling at the base of his spine in a warning.

The days lately had not exactly been peaceful but they had been good. No hospital visits, no near deaths and no missions suddenly jumping several ranks. His class had even been well behaved and focused, something that made him warier than anything else. He could only hope that these good days were not a fluke, a calm before a storm. He could hope but shinobis never did rely on that sort of thing. It was better to prepare for the typhoon.

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“Shizune!” She had made her decision but she had ended up delaying it. She had known from the first reports what she was going to do she was even resolved to it but she had ended up wasting precious time instead of following through with her own decision.

It was not as if holding back would change anything or delay the progress that had already started. This was the final ribbon cut for certain but not saying anything changed nothing. The changes had already been made there was nothing more to do but to issue the individual orders.

Besides she needed these reports and she needed to see the results of her careful planning. She needed this test and this was the safest one she could find. They would think she was bullying them but she really was not. They would look strangely at her, they would be suspicious. They had every right to be but they would follow her orders in the end and they would return to Konoha, every single one of them.

It was not just that though, she would have used as little assets as possible and that was the true aim here. “Call team seven, team eight, team Gai and team ten to me immediately! I’m issuing them on a top priority mission!”

Papers scattered at her words and Shizune fumbled as she met her gaze. “All of them Tsunade-sama? At the same time or…”

“I want all the teams before me so that I can brief them. In the case of team gai everyone but Lee.” She finished dryly. “Lee is to remain exactly where he is but the other two I want before me in my office as soon as possible. Get to it!”

“Yes Ma’am!” Shizune scrambled her way out the office and Tsunade felt her body slump in her chair. She turned the chair to face the window and allowed herself a few moments of indulgence as she watched the morning scenery outside. It had already begun.

Such a big team, so few Jounins as well. For what she was about to do normally a team of four to
eight Jounins were the norm followed by a large multitude of Chuunins. That or a large team of ANBU but the problem was that she did not have those to spare.

What she had was what she was currently sending. The genins and Chuunins with high potential that were nothing like what people expected of them. Genins and Chuunins with high adaptability rates and a high drive to improve. Genins with a good record behind them and a ton of luck and understanding on them. Chuunins that were considered wet behind the ears but were great candidates for future Jounins.

Normally in missions and situations like this people set squads but she was sending her teacher Jounins out there into the field. People would think her mad for this, she doubted they would see what she was desperately trying to achieve.

That was fine though, she was fine with them being in the dark once it worked out. She would wait on her toes for them to return and for the team leaders to give her the results. She would keep her eyes on the reports on the team leaders too. With things changing like this it might be time to take action and stop turning an indulgent eye to the developments.

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So the time had finally come, Kakashi watched the teams assemble outside the tower with a heavy heart. This group was big and if Lee were there it would only be a bigger asset in their favour. Finally, the Hokage had made her move.

He already knew what they were going to hear, they had been leading up to it for a while now since she had gotten into office. The team ups with other groups. Throwing Naruto into the wild with the other teams and now this. He had seen it coming but that did not mean he wanted it to.

Just because he had known it was coming did not mean he thought they were ready for it. He understood a little bit of it. There was a reason so many of them had such hard Jounin missions for weeks. Missions that two Jounins were the norm but it was their one.

They could not risk their Jounin force and they could not waste time outside Konoha’s walls. Kakashi had come to realize that all too soon. He had his own reasons for hurrying back so he had not been too bothered. He had poured his all into completion and on getting back to Konoha and his team as fast as he could.

Even his little team had their own speedy reputation no matter how big and dangerous the missions ended up in the end. No matter how risky it ended up they rarely wasted time outside the village. Missions that would take others months took them weeks. Missions that took others weeks took them mere days but that was because of his team and how they worked. They were a solid team so far and their limits were different.

Their stamina had increased, they moved fast and they moved different he doubted they understood themselves how strangely compared to others they moved. They had all adopted Naruto’s methods of travel and while not fully it was close enough to the missing nins fleeing but it was close to the ANBU’s silent night travel as well.

He had been waiting for his team to figure that out after exposure to so many other teams but it seemed sometimes being verbal really was the best option. Kakashi watched as Shizune and Naruto spoke in low whispers asthe groups gathered together.

He could hear their words and he felt it was better for Naruto to press than for him to press Shizune. It never worked well for him. It had not exactly worked in the past either, he guessed
exposure to a Sannin turned one immune to most tactics.

Still that did not mean that he wanted this. He was not exactly prepared to watch his team learn there were things they could not do on his own and while it was amusing to see all the younger ones figure out how an army worked and where they fit in. He did not think he was prepared to place them all on a true battlefield.

Because that was what was coming next, he did not know where or what but he knew why them. He could sense what the Hokage’s intentions towards them were. He knew it was another test too but not just for Shikamaru and Sakura no this was a test for Naruto and the other genins.

He was uncertain to whether he agreed on this. Teaming up with other groups had been amusing in the beginning a chance for a break and to slack off. A chance for them to observe other teams and make deeper bonds. Kakashi was aware that the Sandaime’s intentions were being carried on by the Godaime while he himself was not a fan of the decision.

Children were not fools and the more they saw the more they would judge for themselves. Still there would be many of them that would resent too. He did not want them to resent Naruto for hiding when the boy had no choice. Sakura and Sasuke would forgive once they understood. Once it was explained slowly to them. The others… Kakashi was still unsure on the path to take.

Still, for his team to have so many secrets around. He did not like it. With the truth out, they could make deeper bonds and grow even stronger, protect each other even better.

The only solace he could take with the coming fight was that at least he was by Naruto’s side for this. There had been the dreadful time with their unfortunate mission that resulted in Naruto confronting his fears and himself. Where Kakashi had seen not just how fragile Naruto was but how strong he was as well. To keep standing, to keep fighting and to keep walking. To not let it crush him, it made Kakashi want to protect him more and to show him as much as he could.

He doubted there would be a chance to show Naruto much on this mission. For Kakashi to show himself, his true self in the small ways that he could. This mission whatever it was, he knew that the Hokage would want them to trust their team as much as they could and give them challenges.

It was a painful thing if he were to be honest. He would be questioning himself the entire time wondering if he had shared enough, taught them enough. Still when it came to his team it felt as though it would never be enough.

“That’s everyone now.” Shizune looked around them. “The Hokage is waiting, let’s go.” Well, Kakashi had to do what he had to do didn’t he? Still he trusted their growth and their determination. When it came to team seven he knew exactly what they could do and for this at least he could be there to help them if they messed up in any way. Whether or not it was part of the training lesson.

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The scroll was in her hand and they were all before her. Tsunade got to her feet when all the teams lined up before her. She could do this sitting but it felt so much better to address this standing, felt more respectful too.

There was Kurenai and her bunch, they looked ready to go already. She had been receiving some good news from them. Give them some time and they would be making names for themselves all over the country and among other hunter teams. She might even have to recommend a new division for them when they got older.
Gai’s team was a man down but they were not out. She doubted they could ever be. Even back when he was a kid the energy was exhausting. His team were nowhere near the exhausting level that Gai had been but they had their own little thing pushing them. She could see that, there was the Hyuuga and the little weapon devil. Tsunade liked them, she wanted to see this team at its best but what they currently had was not shabby either.

Asuma’s team were… well she never thought you could divide a person’s personality and stick them into other people but there they were. No wonder he got along with them so well. It was really amusing how much of the young Asuma she saw in all of them. Young Asuma had been so many things at once. That he had developed his team this much and kept bringing out their good points… she was a little uncertain to how much was Asuma’s efforts and Shikamaru’s. Still she had not just faith in their ability but their growth.

Kakashi’s team… the dark horse. Sensei had his reasons for making the team the way he did and she could accept the logic but it still had her shaking her head. It was practical but for a man who valued heart and kinder emotions her sensei had made quite the few fumbles.

Was Kakashi’s team a strong team? Oh yes and growing stronger every day with tighter bonds. Their development was soaring ahead of every expectation people had. There lay the danger, the whole thing could be laid at the feet of one cute little loud-mouthed brat.

Still team seven was a unit and a good one at that. She had no doubts to their ability. They were capable of backing up and they had good heads on their shoulders, all of them. Haruno’s was way better when it came down to it. It was why she was Chuunin, that and she kept the two other hot heads in line. That was what she was looking for.

Tsunade had sent these four teams many places since she had taken office and not regretted a single move or mission. Now she was about to make her next play and while she knew they were ready and that she had no other choice if she wanted to be prepared for the future-

She was allowed to feel a tiny bit regretful towards things. Regretful and a little bit cautious. This was a good thing. This would secure not just them but Konoha. Konoha’s future rested in the coming generation and before her stood the teams that she personally felt would make the biggest changes.

Things were already happening, with their growth some things just might be possible. That did not make this mission easy of course. That did not take away the risk but Tsunade was doing only what she could. She was taking a gamble as well if this did not make them believe. If this did not solidify them not only would nothing else would but nothing would motivate them to where she knew they could go.

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“I’ve called you before me for a reason.” Tsunade baa-chan looked serious as she watched them. Naruto had known shit was going to hit the ceiling the moment they had come in, lined up and she had just stood and watched them for a few minutes without saying anything. Call him a little crazy but his blood had warmed at the hint of that danger. A habit of his that really needed to break sooner or later. “I’m about to assign all of you before me here on the same mission.”

“All of us?” Naruto could not even blame Sakura for her surprise. He was a little surprised himself, he had thought they were getting sent in different directions at least but that was not how it sounded at all. “We are all going the same place? On the exact same mission? All these teams?” Sakura’s voice had not wavered as she questioned the Hokage, her voice had hardened with each question and Naruto’s pride in her made his gut flutter and he had to duck his head to hide his
“I’m with Sakura.” Shikamaru spoke up next. “A mission that requires all of us? Our senseis too? That is sounding less like a mission and more like—“

“War.” Tsunade baa-chan said bluntly. “That is what it is, our ally has asked for assistance and the Daimyo wants this taken care of as swiftly as possible. They may be civilians but we can’t treat the situation lightly. Four Jounins is the extent I can currently spare but when it comes to ability and power I believe the rest of you have talent way beyond your current stations.” Naruto was unsurprised to have Tsunade baa-chan’s eyes on his. “This is a mission that will test you, nothing like the missions you have had before. You’ll have to use your wits and your judgement and I’m counting on all of you to make the right decisions.”

“What’s the situation.” Sasuke’s caution made Naruto nod in agreement. “Does the enemy have mercenaries and money? Is it a situation that has already got out of control or are we going in before it blows out of control?”

“When was the last report?” Shikamaru followed on. “We had to have had some people there already if the situation is this grim now then we have to at least know a little something more at this time. If all of us are gathered how badly is this out of control.”

“The enemy has gathered their own fighters as Sasuke has already guessed.” The Hokage’s face twisted in distaste. “They are gathering mercenaries, not shinobi and they are foreign mercenaries. They are making their army with them. Currently they are still recruiting but the plan is to overwhelm with numbers. A show of force, we are looking to take care of this before their numbers become hundreds of thousands, they have the money.”

“That’s not good.” Asuma-sensei’s voice was low. “That sort of money and they are picking mercenaries without shinobi ties? This is just their first step.”

“That’s why we are going in first huh.” Shikamaru sighed. “We have to get there as soon as possible, that sort of money is going to lure every cockroach in a hundred miles. Hell, this is the chance many have been waiting for too.”

“It’s a shit show about to happen.” Sakura sighed. “This is bad, this is very bad. This is a time-based mission.”

“Which means we will have to be our way right away.” Neji’s voice followed Sakura’s. “This situation will be troublesome for not just them but for Konoha.”

“The entire Shinobi world.” Tenten tacked on. “They aren’t looking for shinobi but there is bound to be a few run away washouts right? Who knows who exactly they have. Numbers is bad enough, imagine people in there that can get the drop on you.” She finished hesitantly. “Are we even enough?”

“You’re more than enough. All of you have had your rough starts but I’ve been watching and listening to you this entire time.” Naruto smiled when the Hokage smiled at him. “This is currently what I can do but I have faith in not just your abilities but your growth. You have all learned important lessons over the past year, not just your senseis are proud of you. Don’t mind your village status. I feel all of you are capable of so much more.”

“Well when you put it like that Baa-chan.” Naruto grinned. “It’s hard to say that this mission is crazy and we would rather skip it isn’t it? But we wouldn’t be who we were if we didn’t meet this sort of thing head on. If Baa-chan thinks we can handle it then it’s going to shit.” He declared. “But
“we’ll be okay.” Sakura and Sasuke’s eyes flicked to him and he felt warm all over before he continued. “We’ve got each other and we’ve done some dirt and seen some shit, with all of us together we will handle this and what we can’t do.” He jerked a thumb to Kakashi-sensei. “Well there is a reason we have Adults you know? To watch our backs.”

“Well what do you know.” Tsunade Baa-chan was obviously fighting a grin but she gave in. “You do listen.”

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“This is about to be some big shit.” Naruto remarked when they exited the tower. “All of us? And Baa-chan was hinting that might not even be enough. This is going to be wild.” He could barely suppress the excitement and glee. The thrill of not only the hunt but the thrill of the challenge was riding him. How could it not? Team seven had been craving more for so long now. They finally had that chance.

“This mission is about to be expensive.” Naruto was not fooled by Sasuke’s big sigh, he knew him better than that now. “How much money do you think we’ll lose in supplies?”

“Land of snow wasn’t that expensive.” Sakura chided even as she visibly fought back her own excitement. Her wariness she allowed to surface so they could all see it. “If we are careful enough we might not even have to do more than strike a few blows.”

“It depends on the situation.” Sasuke pointed out. He folded his arms and eyed them. “Hoping for the best isn’t how we do this. It’s too risky, we assume it has gone to hell and act accordingly. We go in making sure nothing can retaliate. Judging from what we heard this is a war. This isn’t something we can solve by offing a few mercenaries and slipping into the leader’s bedroom and feeding them poison.”

Naruto heard a muffled something behind them but he was too busy focused on his team and agreeing with Sasuke. “He’s right. This might end up being a show of force. It’s why we have to be so big, just because most of us are genins doesn’t mean anything.” He was unable to resist tapping Sakura’s Chuunin jacket. “Besides, they won’t have what we have and we’re team seven.”

“You’re not alone out there you know.” Shikamaru sighed loudly. “Don’t hype yourselves up and forget the rest of us.”

“I don’t see why we shouldn’t.” Sasuke grumbled as he turned.

“I don’t see how we could forget the rest of you.” Sakura elbowed Sasuke as she faced Shikamaru. “We’ll be all depending on each other over the next few days. I have no doubt that it will take all of us to do this and that it will be taxing on all of us. We are not just teams now. We’re a unit.”

“Well said Sakura.” Kakashi-sensei’s hands clasped down her shoulders. “We are all a big unit now. An unconventional one.” He drawled as his eye roamed over them. “But one all the same. Looking forward to working with each and every one of you.”

“The job won’t be easy.” Kurenai-sensei’s voice was soft but firm. “Don’t get carried away because you faced one or two battles before. Things can change in an instant.”

“Oh we know that.” Naruto breathed. “Some of us are well aware how the tides can change in a few seconds.

“We don’t have much time before we set out so everyone should get ready.” Kurenai-sensei watched them all before she turned to the other senseis. “You should take this all seriously. Look
over what the mission entails and as team seven said, prepare for the worst. Just because we are there doesn’t mean we will be able to shield you from everything.” She paused and the glance she exchanged with the other senseis was telling.

Except for Kakashi-sensei, the man avoided that look and instead cleared his own throat loudly. “Many of you think you can handle what is coming. Many think you don’t need to be shielded from it, you have a lot to learn about war. Tsunade-sama has many hopes with the outcome of this particular mission. Some of you understood her double speak. Some didn’t and that is fine, in the end it comes down to us your Jounin senseis to decide what you are ready for and what you are capable of.” He paused and the way he looked down at team seven made Naruto’s gut warm. “Growing up should be a slow process, take it from your senseis.”

“But this is a war right?” Tenten said slowly. “We can’t ignore that, we can’t forget that. It’s a war that we have to stop even though they aren’t shinobi.”

“Some of the most dangerous people in this world have no knowledge of shinobi village or arts.” Gai-sensei’s voice was firm. “In situations like these no one should be underestimated. Plenty of shinobi have been felled by civilians’ hands. Don’t underestimate desperation. It gives birth to terrifying cunning.”

Silence fell among them all. Naruto had no doubt the other teams were contemplating things but his eyes kept going to the senseis. Kakashi-sensei was correct that in the end it was up to them how much they participated. The other teams were good, they were strong in their own ways but he doubted they were team seven.

He doubted they thought how they did. Acted how they did, feared how they did. They had seen them fight but he doubted they would understand what team seven was about. He knew he was partly to blame for how the team was. The rest of the blame could be placed at the war’s feet. Orochimaru’s too, Sasuke and Sakura… he knew that they still thought about that man. The fear he had placed in Sakura was what drove her to keep fighting and be so damn great.

Baa-chan had appearances to keep up and there had to be another reason she was giving them their debut like this. He had no doubt that they would handle this. There was no way he was going to die there. Not to them and not when he was so far away from his dream. Mission would be accomplished through hell or high water. No matter what he had to set ablaze or how many he had to escort to hell.

They were ready for this. Team seven had been preparing for something big like this and they would prove themselves and prove to themselves that they were on the right track. Naruto would not lose anyone on this mission either. This unit was his, he would prepare correctly and he was going to fight hard.

“Everyone should pack hard.” Asuma-sensei instructed them all. “Expect the worse and prepare for it. Stock up on all your tools while you have the time. We leave in the morning first thing so have everything prepared before then. Get a good night’s sleep and prepare to be gone for a while.”

This was really going to be a big one. Not the way Naruto had honestly expected but he was going to take what he could. He exchanged glances with Sasuke and Sakura. They already had reserved everything but another look would not hurt. He had to go through his various stashes and see what would be useful and relevant. He had to talk to Iruka-sensei as well and tell the man to look after his plants. So many things to do, so many things to take care of before they set off.

So many things but his blood was still pumping from the excitement. This was what team seven had been preparing for. It had to be and finally it was here and they would handle it. This time they
Tsunade wanted sake she wanted a huge bottle for herself but she was not going to allow herself to have it. She had faith in them and she had faith in Naruto. The teams had been carefully selected. She had personally gone over this information herself.

There was nothing more she could do but wait on the results. In the past this would have been unheard of. In the past many would have assumed the worst and waited not just for news but how many survived. Tsunade wanted this to be different.

She since the very beginning and her first lost had wanted Konoha to suffer no more. She believed in them and their capabilities. She was going to be honest with herself, she chose this the way she did because she believed they would all come back alive.

Maybe a bit injured, maybe with their hearts bruised but for certain alive. That was all she was asking for. It was all she wanted and what she had been aiming for all along even as improbable and dreamlike as that sounded.

She just could not help herself. There was just something about Naruto and something about what he inspired that let her think things like that. It was a hard mission ahead, she had to tread carefully but she was leaving this in those children’s hands. The first steps towards Konoha’s new future.

She could only hope everything would pay off. She really wanted that sake but this time she would go without it.

Sasuke wanted to take the swords, it was a foolish thought but he actually wanted to take them. Not that it would get him anywhere when it came down to it. He could not tap into their power, he cleaned them more than he tried using them.

They sat in his room unused the majority of the time. It was ridiculous this urge now that the summon had come. The swords called out to him but Sasuke ignored the call, the time would come for those swords but this time was not that time. Not this battle, not this possible war.

He had not been joking earlier, this was going to be an expensive mission. Supplies would be used and he just knew there would be a lot of fighting. Ninja wire, shurikens, paper tags and bombs. Under Kakashi he had been mastering various fighting styles and because of team seven he had ended up having to do a lot of various types of shit.

There was no other team that did what team seven did. It was perfect for growth, Sasuke had landed on the luckiest team because plenty of stuff he had never dreamed of encountering, thanks to team seven and Naruto’s ability to draw trouble to them, they had all gone through shit.

He was not blaming Naruto though. He was more thanking him for the opportunity, without these things he would have been frustrated and bored. With the struggles of the team they had grown, gotten closer and a lot stronger. Sasuke had found strength and better yet he had improved himself.

There were things he was still coming to term with but with team seven he could admit one happy thing to himself, he had a place he belonged and a place he would kill to keep. People he would get his hands bloody for. Naruto needed no protection but Sasuke would kill for him, kill for Sakura.

There was the new closeness that team seven had achieved that was blowing him away. It was
mostly because of Naruto. Hell, it was all because of Naruto because no one else did what they did, this was not normal but Naruto made abnormal feel normal. He made them good and he made them feel safe. That was what was important to Sasuke.

Could you fall in love with a team? Because he just might have. He loved his village, he wanted to work hard for them but his team was something else. Here he could be Sasuke and no one else. Here there were no expectations nothing too abnormal and he could walk by their side, run by their side and fee free.

Still, the swords kept calling him, he looked at them although he knew better. Naruto had helped him learn a bit more about them. Kakashi had told him he was willing to help him figure out how to learn them eventually. Not now though, Sasuke had some ways to go.

What to pack for a war? What could he do? He already knew didn’t he? In the land of snow, what would he have needed to help Naruto if they were to face the bastards head on? Because that was what they were preparing for.

To meet them head on, they might be civilians but they still had to prepare. Naruto personally made some of his arsenal and he did not speak much about some the things he used but Sasuke had been watching on the sidelines for some time. He liked the idea.

Sakura trained with team Gai, or to be more specific Tenten from Team Gai and had picked up some weapons and ideas from them. Sasuke had his clan and while there were plenty of traditional things he had picked up and learned there was always his bloodline to think about when it came down to it.

There were so many abilities that came with the Sharingan, he had not even begun to unlock his true power but there were stories and warnings that lurked within the clan that made him hesitant. His parents had obviously unlocked most or maybe all their power.

Shisui, Itachi the way they sometimes looked so old told Sasuke more than he needed to know about the Sharingan. Shisui and the way he had been watching him since that mission. That told Sasuke more than the clan stories of the Sharingan had ever told him.

Shisui after Sasuke had woken up in the hospital, Shisui was a smiler a charmer but he looked at Sasuke with a small bit of sadness these days. There was so much Sasuke did not know and so much he was only now beginning to understand. The Sharingan was power but it was sacrifice too.

Nothing was free. That was the rule of everything.

They were going to fight, they were going to fight hard and he had to use everything available to him. New things only if he was pressed. He was going for speed and accuracy. Ninja wire, potions, tonics that were already cleared. Sasuke began to slowly sort and pack.

There were kunais and new versions of shurikens to use. Poison tips and tags. Things he had borrowed from Naruto in the heat of the moment and never given back. Decided to practice with. He and Sakura did not speak about it but he had seen and heard enough to know that poison really did not have an effect on Naruto.

Sakura had whispered some things to him when they were alone, things she had seen. Little things that she had noticed but got distracted by in the heat of the moment. Naruto’s admirer in the market from that time had given him some good stuff back then. Free was nice.

It was a bigger bottle than Sasuke was used to but it would work well, that would also come along.
Scent changers. A gift from Kakashi from quite a while back. Naruto’s gift would remain home. Sasuke still needed it but in a situation like this he did not want to chance losing anything.

Because he would go back for it if he lost it. He just knew that. He could not risk that so he would keep it home.

He moved to his chest before he carefully opened it. His short sword was in there. There was the temptation of those other swords but he had to be smart. There was something else there too but Sasuke was not going to look at that weapon. He had not since the academy and he was not going to start now.

Maybe a longer sword would be better, anything could happen and he had been practicing with it. He took a scroll from the pile in the chest and concentrated on placing those just in cases swords into the summoning scroll.

It had not been a habit of his before but Kakashi and Naruto really rubbed off. Sakura had gotten into the habit too but she was really more of a show of force than anything else. Honestly, sometimes it felt as though that girl was stronger than the rest of them.

Sasuke would not mind if she was. It was kind of inspiring.

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She was thanking the gods above for not just her Chuunin budget but for her thinking ahead and stockpiling. Team seven ran through weapons like water and finding quality was harder than it should be in a village like theirs. She just wanted kunais that would not break or chip.

Wire that could be used more than three times. She wanted to retrieve her damn weapons and her needles. That shit was expensive. It pained her to have to rebuy tags. She liked tags and paper bombs but what she did not like was the price.

Team seven made them get pretty creative when it came down to hand to hand and grabbing the closest thing but when it came to planning ahead they all ran off to what they knew.

And what they knew was village sanctioned weapons, swords and kunais. Needles and tags. Staffs and poisons. Everyone had their own fighting style, Sakura was trying to find hers but she had to admit that close range was her forte. She could get up and personal and she knew that if she was allowed close enough she could end plenty of things.

The thing was she doubted she would be getting up and close in this battle ahead. She was not only a Chuunin but she took over and commanded her team. She had been learning how to fight from the back but there was little she could do from fighting behind Naruto and Sasuke.

They were her tanks and she adored them but that did not mean she did not want to get dirty too. She could clean up the mess behind them and look beyond them to the best place to send them and their power and stamina.

Sometimes it felt as though those two could never tire. Sasuke kept trying to keep up with Naruto and sometimes she had to laugh at all of them. Kakashi-sensei too because the man gave up trying to keep up with their energy and sat next to her to watch Naruto and Sasuke just keep going.

It was amazing, it was inspiring and it gave her ideas.

She knew what Kakashi-sensei would try to do on this mission. Give her as much control as possible for her team. She had no idea what the other senseis would do or even Shikamaru but she
knew that the one who knew team seven the best was her.

There was all that information in her brain on the other teams she had not even known she had gathered. All those collaborations and team ups. All those things Naruto had spoken of or things she had seen herself. She had a vague picture on everyone and how they could be directed and led.

It was not about shining and a way to Jounin. It was about getting the job done and everyone back to Konoha in one peace. That was what Tsunade-sama had been aiming for. It was what she had been hinting towards.

Sakura got the other thing too, this was their chance to make names for themselves and develop in ways they would not have been allowed to before but most importantly. They had to come back home first.

Her pills went into her bag, her wires, her kunais, her tags and paper bombs. The nunchucks and the short sword went into the summoning scroll. Little weapons and her shurikens into her pack. She was as ready as she could be. She was braced for the worst and preparing so they could emerge the best. Only victory would be accepted, only outcome she wanted was everyone home safe.

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“So, what are we going to do?” Shikamaru really wished he had a good answer for Chouji. “That whole thing was intense.”

“It’s only going to get more intense.” Ino moved to bite her nails before she stopped herself and made a fist instead. “This entire thing is going to be wild, I hope Asuma-sensei can handle it.”

“I hope I can handle it.” Shikamaru mumbled as he sat down on his bed. “The things the Hokage was saying and the things she was not saying. I’m going to be honest. This looks like we’re going to be in a lot of shit.”

“Team seven seems pretty ready.” Ino whispered. “Sakura looked excited.”

“Team seven is insane.” Shikamaru shook his head. “We aren’t them, we can’t be them but we can do our best. Work hard and do what we are capable of. We can’t look at them. They are crazy, they have limits we can’t see or imagine. I’m going to be honest here, if we try to keep up we’ll be pushing ourselves and while it feels like we can handle that. That we are prepared for that, considering what might go down we might be barely able to hold up our end of this.”

“Don’t be like that.” Ino’s anger was expected. “We’re not going to lose to them.”

“It isn’t about winning or losing its about experience and it is about knowledge. Team seven has done plenty of things we haven’t. we’ve had our own crazy missions but this is something new. Something we shouldn’t even be doing. It isn’t about one upping it is about sharing the burden. All I’m saying is that we won’t be the ones carrying the most. That’s the Jounins and that is team seven.”

“What about you?” Chouji’s stillness made Shikamaru’s heart dip. “I’m going to do what I can.” He ran his fingers over his hair before he sighed. “I’m going to do what I can but at the end of the day, I might not be able to keep up. it will be an experience.” He admitted. “I hate that part of me that’s excited about this, being around team seven just means troublesome things will come.” This need to do his best and not fall behind. It had to be Naruto’s fault.

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“Oba-san.” Shisui was unsure to how welcomed he was in the house but Mikoto stepped aside to let him enter. “I heard about Sasuke’s mission.”

“So did I.” She turned towards the kitchen but Shisui noted how she had not mentioned how she got her information. He was willing to bet his eyes it had not been from Sasuke. Not the specifics and not before she had already found out for herself.

Sometimes it was easy to forget what a terrifying woman she was. Itachi loved his mother, Sasuke too but Shisui was older than them and while he never saw her inactive per say there were things shinobi could never erase.

Mikoto always had that way about her that called to children and adults alike. She was soothing, she tames the beast inside without really trying.

However, inside her was things that Shisui would never poke at. He had been there that night. He had been there afterwards. He had watched her withdraw in ways people still did not understand. There was a part of Mikoto missing, a part that was once again growing but not as before.

He hesitated to say there was a jagged edge inside her now. He hesitated to mention the sharpness and desperation and cunning he saw in her eyes. Most of all he hesitated to voice what he saw happening. She was for the long game, she always had been. She could move quickly when she had to but she had always been a planner. Back before she had Itachi, back before many things. She thought ahead.

“Are you worried about Sasuke?” He kept his voice low as he watched her prepare dinner. There was no tension in her body but his senses kept him alert as she moved around to chop vegetables and to occasionally stir the large metal pot on the stove.

“Sasuke’s been working so hard lately.” Her tone was so calm that Shisui found himself swallowing nervously. “It sounds like a hard mission ahead of him but the Hokage is the one who gave it. I know she trusts in our clan’s abilities and in this team.” Her smile at him made cold sweat break out down his back. “Sasuke-chan has his friends with him and I trust that Tsunade-sama knows what she is doing.”

“He does have his friends with him.” Shisui swallowed. “They’ve overturned so many odds on their own. This will be nothing to them. Sasuke’s gotten so much stronger just being trained by Kakashi and with having the other two as team mates.”

“Kakashi-kun always was talented.” She stirred the pot slowly and dropped the chopped vegetables in one by one. “Always smart, not as mouthy as he used to be. Less a stick in the mud.” Shisui bit back his snort at her observation. “Better a sensei than I thought he would be but make no mistake, what’s improving Sasuke-chan is friendship. Love changes Uchihas and there are many times of love Shisui-chan.” He felt a shudder when her red eyes met his. “Don’t forget that. Uchihas know love better than anyone else and we value all of them.”

“The Uchihas can’t.” it was useless to voice it but he had to try. “We can’t be involved.” He knew this, they all this. She most of all knew this.

“I haven’t done anything, I’m just a mom encouraging her son and watching him grow. Sasuke’s friends are our friends too.” Her eyes watched him carefully. “Am I breaking the rules Shisui-chan? Getting to know the team my son is on, it’s what any normal parent would do.”

But she was anything but normal and after what she said Shisui felt concern grow. Konoha had secrets and Uchiha clan had their secrets too. As much as he liked watching Naruto, Shisui had his
own secrets regarding Naruto’s secrets.

He had no opinion on the Sandaime’s rules but he knew the older generation of Uchihas did. Mikoto was the wife of the leader but she held more power than most people understood. It was through her many people came together and continued to exist so easily.

There was love and there was loss, Uchihas felt that to an extent that it could drive them mad. Sometimes Shisui doubted that he was sane. Sometimes he felt so detached from it all. Sometimes all he had to cling to was that what had happened to him and others would not happen that way again. That the ones after them would be safe and that they would protect them.

For Mikoto there was the thing she was not allowed to admit. The loss she had to pretend did not exist. Through her the Uchiha was chomping at the bit to heal themselves through the light they had once had.

The rules stopped her from speaking but there was plenty you could do without words. Mikoto was out to tie Naruto to them through any means necessary. Shisui knew this, the Hokage must know too. Only the children would not understand.

An Uzumaki in Uchiha lands once more. The two lines intertwined in any way possible. Mikoto was a woman of patience, she would wait it out and she would plan. They could just stop her from speaking but the way she was currently. Shisui doubted they could keep her from interfering.

If she ever moved against that decree. Most, many. Hell, all the clan might just move with her. He had no idea what to do with that information.

It was not as if he thought the Uchihas and Naruto was a bad idea. The kid needed someone to tie himself too. Something solid like a clan because what kept Shisui on watch and what made him paranoid was Naruto’s situation.

Did Konoha deserve the kid’s forgiveness? Fuck did they even have it? That question was always in his mind. Could they forgive themselves for putting the kid through that? It had been necessary to get him back but… some certainty on Naruto would be nice.

“Sasuke and his team are going to be gone for a while.” Shisui kept his voice low. “They got this.”

“I know that.” Her eyes had faded back to black. “I have faith in Sasuke and his little friends, Sasuke might be a little different now but he’s strong like his father and his brother.” And like her Shisui added silently.

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“Akamaru is up to this but I want to make sure.” Kiba confessed to his sister as he waited in the exam room. “This sounds hard. This sound really rough and I don’t want anything to happen to him.”

“You’re not as careless and stupid as you used to be.” She snorted as she checked Akamaru’s eyes. “You’ll be fine. Go out there and be with your partner. Not back down on your team. Don’t bring them any shame but make sure all of you come home. Listen for a change too. Not just to Kurenai-sensei.”

“I got it.” He mumbled. “I got is nee-chan.”

“I half expected you to bluster how you know, you know.” She grinned before she checked Akamaru’s ears. “You’ll do fine, better than fine I feel. I expect to see you come back all smiles
and stronger than before. Both of you.”

XxX

“I know you don’t like hurting people. You’re kind but that kindness doesn’t mean you have to restrain yourself.” Shino and Hinata were in the forest together behind Shino’s clan land. “We know you can do it. Fighting doesn’t mean you don’t care. It doesn’t make you an awful person.”

“I don’t want to hurt anyone but I don’t want the rest of you to get hurt either. If there was a way to stop them without…” She hesitated. “I don’t know how I feel about killing anyone on purpose.”

“We have to get used to that reality because people will put us in that position. It will be us or them. Our friends or their friends. The mission or them, you have to choose correctly. You’ve been choosing correctly so far.”

“What do you think…” She paused. “Naruto-kun chooses so easily.”

“I don’t think it’s easy at all but as we are not confidants we won’t know the true story until we are. What we can know is what we can do. It’s all we can do, make sure we work smoothly and don’t inconvenience anyone else.”

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“This is going to be rough.” Kurenai admitted as they stood together. “I’ve never heard of, I’ve never seen something like this before.”

“It just shows how much the Hokage believes in us.” Gai leaned against a tree trunk and contemplated the leaves. “I understand some but not all of the Hokage’s choices.”

“This is about them in the end.” Asuma admitted. “The brats, this is about them. We have to make sure nothing happens to them and that the client is satisfied but she wants us to give them a little more control. Slacken the grip.”

“But are they really ready.” Gai mused, Kakashi remained silent as they spoke. “This is something many of them would have never experienced.”

“Kakashi?” Kurenai’s voice prompted him to unfold his arms and speak.

“They are ready.” He said softly. “Not just my team, all of them having been chomping at the bit and stamping their hooves waiting for something like this. Something more, this is the safest way to give them that and push them in an almost controlled environment. They are still working through how they felt during the attack. Still restructuring their thoughts and themselves. They need more than D and C ranks can give. It’s the best we can currently do while protecting them.”

“So we give them more control.” Kurenai looked uncomfortable with that idea. “I know many of them think they are ready and that they have it handled but do they really? The attack on Konoha affect a lot of us.”

“It made them ask questions they still haven’t finished answering.” Asuma pointed out softly. “They have a long way to go and this is a step towards that. A bigger step than we would like. Steeper than we would want but considering the road we are going towards we have to deal with it.”

“Sometimes I wonder what the Hokage is thinking.” Gai said softly.
Kakashi sighed loudly in response. “Me too.”

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“A rather big mission and a big group too.” Tenten grinned as she rooted under her bed. “Lee’s going to be so envious.”

“And worried.” Neji said from behind her. “How much are you going to pack?”

“A lot.” She grunted as she snagged her extra scroll chest and began to drag it out. “I’m not falling behind and I’m looking forward to using my all. I don’t care if I’m half asleep on our way back to Konoha. I’m not looking slack next to Sakura and team seven. I refuse to come up lacking.”

“Team seven certainly sounded ready for this.” Neji said softly. “Are we?”

“We’ve seen shit Neji.” She flipped open the chest and met his gaze as he sat in the chair across from her bed. “We’ve experienced shit too, not like them but we have our own experiences. It’s time to add to those and it’s time to grow further.” She grinned at the small smile that flickered across Neji’s face. “We are growing ourselves too.”

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“It seems like fate.” Naruto mused as he removed the armbands from their casings. There were two sets of them. A pair for himself and the other a gift. He had been wondering when to test his own set but it seemed as though a way had been made. He found that rather amusing.

Well more than that too. Another mission ahead. This one not only thrumming with importance but with warning too. It was going to go to hell. He was going to get covered with blood and the demon would step forward. Not the fox but the one that had been trained inside of him.

He could not be lax when it came to preparations. That could make or break the mission. Preparations could change the outcome. Better to be paranoid and overly ready than unprepared. It could cost time or someone’s life and Naruto was not going to let that happen on his watch.

He knew Baa-chan was making a gamble on this mission and with them. He knew and he was actually cooler with it than he thought he would be. He guessed he was aching for the good outdoors and a good fight. For the opportunity to become stronger.

He had been working on making what he thought about come to life. There were routines and blending that had been working but needed real fights to apply. Still he was hesitant to bring all his cards out to play even in this situation.

Especially in this situation. It was why he was working so hard on his other skills. Not just his special ones. His sword work was very important to him and he kept up his training. He was still working with the rasengan too but that felt more like a last resort. He did not know why but he felt off pulling it out.

In the end he had plenty in his arsenal to pull out. Even against an army of civilians. He hated to bring it up, he hated to mention it but a war against them was nothing new. He had watched, he had overheard plans for this sort of thing before. He knew how to strike and he would do it hard.

There were plenty of ways to fight those that were not shinobi. Ways that did not underestimate them. Also a way to stop the fight and keep Konoha’s reputation. Even make it better. Of course that was only if an opportunity was presented.
They did not know the exact lay of the land currently but they were assuming the worse. It was the best thing to do because things changed in an instant and it was hard to settle things that had gotten out of control. They were up against something massive. Tsunade Baa-chan did not have to say anything but Naruto knew, this was another step forward.

Those who knew war always craved peace. It was just facts. Naruto knew a world that would make no sense to others and he knew the shinobi world. He knew fear and he had brought it. He was going to bring it again, he could feel it. The only thing that made him hesitant was the others.

The senseis knew who and what he was in more ways than one but not the other teams. He did not know if they were ready for what he was capable of. Hell, he doubted they were ready for team seven all out. He knew what he was but Sakura and Sasuke, fuck they were keeping up with him.

The others just might not be ready to see team seven the way they really were. Focused, vicious and single minded. Team, mission and protect what was important. Their unit was different, to let the others see them pushed to the limit. He was wary, cautious.

Hell, he was half afraid of being pushed to the point that he made a deal with the fox. All this he had to consider when getting ready for this mission. He might not want to reveal all his tools and secrets but some things he did not want revealed just yet. Being treated as normal and one of them was something he still wanted to hold onto.

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What did he have? What could and would be used that he had readily available? Naruto made a list as he sat shirtless on his bed. The list was just because, his mind had been whirling and active since Baa-chan had opened her mouth. He knew what he had and he knew what he wanted.

Still there was the slim chance that stealth and not force would be the way. He had quite a few poisons that had finished drying. A few more that needed more drying but what could he do about that. Quite a few mixtures he had already grinded up and placed in various needles or applied to dust bombs.

He had a few paralytics ready for easy smearing as well. He liked to be prepared when it came down to it. What he really disliked was running out. Even though he knew it was not that much a big of a deal he still panicked when things ran out.

Back then it was hard to get a hand on supplies. Naruto’s plants grew and kept growing because he never wanted to run out. He did a lot of his own shit because that was the way it just had to be. That and because he was still a little wary to depend on the village for every single thing.

If he knew how to do it already why not make it himself? he had the skills and instead of it getting rusty he could put it to use and even adjust things to his liking. Ryu’s bands were an example. Sora would be ecstatic over getting them when Naruto finally managed to send them away.

He had held fix them, he had helped mould them. Making them had been a challenge in more ways than one but they most certainly were up to the test. Naruto was almost eager to see just how far he could take them.

There was the tiny bit of excitement in his gut at the thought. There had been a similar thought when he had fixed Kasumi’s fan and decided to use it himself. There was that sense of something that anticipation deep in his soul that he did not even want to try to fight.

Was he eager to try Ryu’s shit? Hell yes how could he not? He had watched their backs. He had
been watching all their backs for so long, admiring and envying them. This was a chance to stand where they did and carry on with them and for them.

It might seem weird to others, hell it was a bit weird to him too but there he was allowing this to shape him. To form his way forward and not just how he fought but how he looked at things too. He was a brawler, an all or nothing kind of fighter. He liked elegant things too but he knew he could get covered with blood like the best of them and scare the shit out of anyone like the worst of them.

He had learned from the best and it was hard to keep that a secret. sometimes he wanted everyone to know. Sometimes he wanted everyone to know what he was, who he was. Where he came from and just where the fuck he was going. To the top, to the Kage’s seat and to the summit but he was going there his way.

The senseis knew so much but they did not know everything did they? Not about Sora and not about the final meeting. Naruto had to keep that to himself and honestly what was one more secret among the bunch he already had?

He eyed the plants and trays in his room before he sighed and allowed himself to slide down in his bed until he was staring at the ceiling. It was honestly a rough life sometimes. He was about to go into a war zone and he did not have a single clue which Naruto to use.

The team seven one obviously but goddamn was it hard to figure what cards to use. He might not have a choice and though he sort of doubted that anything could happen. It was a stroke of luck no one had seen him use his cards the other times.

He was still enthralled with Sasuke’s Chidori. Sasuke had not exactly been bringing it out to play on missions treating it the way Naruto treated the rasengan even though he did not know it. It was a strong move, it was a powerful jutsu but it could use improvement and that was something they both knew.

There were so many other things that both of them could improve when it came down to it. Rasengan did not mean he had made it. Except it sort of felt as though he had. The words Ero-sennin had spoken to him still lingered.

Naruto sat up abruptly and the paper drifted from his chest to the floor. “That old pervert!” When was the last time Naruto had seen him? He had seen him a time at the hospital, hadn’t he? And there was that time he had been in Tsunade baa-chan’s office when Naruto had come calling. There was that time that the Sandaime and the old pervert had been in a tea house looking all disgusting but Naruto could not put a finger on the last time that he had seen the old pervert lately. Not that he was looking for the old man.

He never was looking for him but he always seemed to pop up and he always went looking for Naruto. There was much he did not get about him but when it came to Naruto’s secrets the old man not only knew a bunch he was highly trusted by Konoha officials. Naruto should pay him more attention just based on principle.

It was hard with the guy being such a raging pervert thought. There were those moments he was a decent guy and human being but the pervert moments covered those completely. It was far too easy to forget just what he was dealing with.

Still he was known in Konoha and he liked poking fun at Naruto. That and he always kept finding him even when Naruto was trying to be alone. How he was able to narrow in on Naruto no matter where he was in the village. It was almost like what Kakashi-sensei did.
Naruto said almost because there was this feeling to it that made him cautious. Ero-sennin came straight to him sometimes and Kakashi-sensei obviously tracked him down and searched him out. There was a difference there. In technique or what they were doing or something. Yet another secret.

The thoughts of Ero-sennin made him sigh, he doubted he would see the old pervert before the team set out. He doubted the man would have any good advice to give him anyway. Just the same old same old shit as usual and teasing.

Naruto could get that anywhere. Hell he got that from everyone that welcomed him back with open arms. Iruka-sensei was still his favourite place to go when he got back home. He did not think he would ever get over the way his eyes softened at Naruto. The relief that came over his face, the smile and of course the words and the hug he always swept Naruto up in. the hair tousle. All of that was worth coming back for. All of that made it worth so much.

It seemed as though he was always bidding farewell to Iruka-sensei but in the end, what really mattered was that soon they would be saying hello again. Iruka-sensei was family Konohamaru too. He had to inform the man to keep an eye on his plants again. There was no doubt they would be neglected otherwise.

Naruto had quite a few delicate vines along the wall of his kitchen and he did not want anything to happen to them. He liked gardening. He liked to make things grow. He was willing to admit that he spoiled and pampered them a bit but, in the end, he reaped a bountiful harvest.

Some of the harvests were notably not his though. Kakashi-sensei obviously felt slick with the tomato vine he had snuck into Naruto’s house. The tomatoes were rather huge and they tasted good too. Naruto was trying to ignore how the vine had gotten in his house to begin with.

Obviously Kakashi-sensei had him fairly figured out. Naruto was not going to ignore food in his house and he was not going to ignore a plant and anything it gave him. So Naruto was not exactly forced to use the tomatoes but he did get fairly creative with them.

The vine was a sweetheart and really easy to take care of. She gave lots of tomatoes and she did it constantly. She was a hard worker and while Naruto was amused he admired that too.

Still he out of spite foisted off some the tomatoes on an unsuspecting Sasuke just because he could. It was amusing how greedy Sasuke could look towards a salad or a basket of tomatoes.

Kakashi-sensei was waging his war on Naruto’s diet and while the gift baskets and the pointed notes along with the food was cute, he really found the vine to be something a little different. Naruto enjoyed gardening and he liked plants. He liked what gardening represented and he loved what it gave him.

Supplies, a good view and food. Plants were just amazing.

There was a future there, with the plants and with building a home because that was what he was doing. He had set down roots even though others might not see. Plants took care, they took time and affection and those were stuff he could only give if he was actually committed.

He knew people had questions about his intentions. He bet that many kept a wary eye on him for not just his demon inside. It was sort of funny how they had not seen the answer right inside his apartment.

The past was hurtful but it was gone, he was resolved to it. He missed the troupe. He reached over
the edge of his bed to scoop up the note. He missed them, they were his family but from the very beginning he had two places to go to. Eve with them he had thought of Iruka-sensei and the Sandaime.

Even with them he had dreamed of Hokage and changing things. Even with them he walked two paths. He was still walking those paths, just he could not go back only forward. There was nothing behind him, he had to find new places to belong to and one of those places was right here in Konoha.

He was committed to his dream and he was working hard for it. For the that, for the chair and for the change that he would bring. Bit by bit, people by people until it spread over the continent and across the sea. He was still a bit a way from that but he was allowed to dream.

He had set down roots in Konoha, he had grown attachments to people and places. To routine. He had developed hope right alongside many in his year. He was a little different to them. A few new experiences but in the end they all had red blood.

He had suffered in the village and out but one thing he had learned in the Chuunin exams was that anybody could carry hurt. Neji was a prime example. A village did not mean everything was fine and rosy. There was plenty of shit to be cleaned out and while he did not like looking at Neji too closely the rage he had felt was long gone. Hinata and Lee had been avenged and Naruto was able to close a chapter within himself that he had not even known had been open.

Now back to the list and the situation. All these people, all these senseis. This extremely crazy mission ahead of him. Just what was he going to do, who would he show? He could feel the danger lurking ahead and he could feel a grip on his shoulder and a voice urging him to pick up a sword and make them fear.

Make them shake in their boots, make them freeze where they stood. He could feel soft hands around his neck urging him to be precise and careful. Laughter in his ear and a kiss to his cheek reminding him to make the first encounter the last. A warmth against his back reminding him that his steps had to be sure and his connection to the world around him could not be disconnected for even a moment.

Who was he going to the battle as? Uzumaki Naruto of course, every single part of him. The before and the after. All parts of his journey were going to go to this looming shitshow because to do otherwise would be a disgrace. If he managed to put on a show well, there were plenty of Jounins to explain what he couldn’t.

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“The best way to let them spread their wings would be to let them make the decisions wouldn’t it?” Asuma said softly. Kakashi shrugged and that drove a sigh from Gai. “We have to take this seriously, the Hokage has a mess on her hands that not only do we have to clean but we have to allow or charges to grow from it as well.”

“We’ve all experienced surprises on our journey of youth.” Gai said softly. “But this will be something different no matter how well prepared we are, no matter what we face.” He sighed heavily and it seemed as though he aged. “No matter how we feel or who we bring with us. This will be different.”

Kakashi remained silent among them before he sighed. “As much as I enjoy letting my little ones take the lead I agree with Gai. I suspect this will be nothing none of them have faced before, special circumstances or not. They will grow from this but we have to be there to help them when
“That’s a nice way of saying to let them cut their baby teeth on this war and then clean up the blood.” Kurenai laughed softly. “I don’t know how they coped with our generation.” She smiled.

“Were we anything like this?” Asuma played with an unlit cigarette. “I don’t think so, we had our troubles and our prodigies but we were nothing like this and we never did anything like this.”

“A large gathering outside of a training camp is unheard of.” Gai murmured. “But this is technically a training camp, just the way we are training them…”

“We’re taking advantage of the conflicts around us to get some hands-on experience.” Kakashi finished softly. “Regardless of the experience that some of them already have I think they will make the right decisions. I know they will surprise us and when it comes down to it. The ones to clean up any mistakes will be us. It’s our duty and our way of protecting the next generation.”

“Well said Kakashi.” Asuma paused before he glanced upwards. “Do you know what the council is thinking? What the Hokage is? Is something coming?”

“Something is always coming. It the nature of the villages.” Kurenai bit her lip. “But this is just another step towards preparing for what bigger picture that the Hokage sees.”

“I wish it could be easier.” Asuma sighed. “I wished it wasn’t so complicated.”

XxX

“Maybe your bag is a little heavy.” Naruto mumbled as he sat on Sakura’s bed. She flashed him a frown in response before she lifted the pack again. He shook his head at the visible strain she emitted. “See? Too heavy.”

“He’s right.” Sasuke said from next to him. “It’s good to be prepared but you still have to move with this stuff. Some those things either have to go or they should go into scrolls.”

“Maybe three extra water canteens are too much.” Sakura gave in and she began to rifle through the pack. “I wanted to pack extra after that mission. You guys know which one. Just in case water becomes a problem.”

“Those guys huh.” Sasuke sighed as he rolled over on the bed. “What a silly rule.”

“I thought she was talking about the time our canteens ended up exploding.” Naruto mumbled. “Doesn’t she mean that?”

“Well now I mean both.” Sakura frowned as she held the extras in her hand. “Okay, one extra is good enough.”

“I don’t think we have time to study.” Sasuke pointed out as he flicked a finger to the scrolls slowly tumbling from Sakura’s backpack. “Information is a good thing to have on a mission but we can’t carry a whole library with us either. I doubt any of us can pick up an entirely new technique through this mission alone. Especially not from reading it only.”

“So Sasuke-kun is saying he can’t do it huh.” Sakura teased under her breath before she tossed those onto her shelf. “The rope stays, both of you know how handy that has been.”

“We’re going to get a reputation.” Sasuke groaned instead.
“Sasuke-kun should wear this don’t you think?” Naruto was amused how Sakura had ignored the bag sitting pointedly in the middle of the room and had gone to the hung-up clothes instead. “The blue one is cute but this black one really says something.”

“If you are going to talk about clothes talk to the boy two steps to your left.” Sasuke said dryly as he undid the straps to his bag. “You want to see what I packed or not.”

“Before you rag on my clothes I’ll have you know they are warm and cheap.” Naruto laughed. “Easy to accessorize too and this colour makes it a challenge to hide so its extra work. I can throw it off anytime.”

“I really forgot about the fashion disaster behind me.” Sakura mumbled as she joined Sasuke. “He waves it away by praising his cheapness too. What a team I’ve found myself in- how many shurikens do you have in here?” She demanded. “Is that a sharpening stone? Really? Sasuke-kun we are only going to find weirdoes like that time further up north. We aren’t going there this time. Do you have to be that paranoid?”

“A sharpening stone is a good idea though.” Naruto chimed in to only earn an eyeroll from Sakura. “What? it totally is!”

“I’m not going to touch anything you haven’t cleared.” Sakura stated the moment they got to Naruto’s apartment. “And have you gotten even more plants?” She sighed when she looked around. “I think some are blooming too.”

“I really forgot about the fashion disaster behind me.” Sakura mumbled as she joined Sasuke. “He waves it away by praising his cheapness too. What a team I’ve found myself in- how many shurikens do you have in here?” She demanded. “Is that a sharpening stone? Really? Sasuke-kun we are only going to find weirdoes like that time further up north. We aren’t going there this time. Do you have to be that paranoid?”

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“I’m not going to touch anything you haven’t cleared.” Sakura stated the moment they got to Naruto’s apartment. “And have you gotten even more plants?” She sighed when she looked around. “I think some are blooming too.”
“It works out in the end, you have no idea how helpful most of these things are Sakura-chan.” Naruto flashed a grin before he waved to his bag on the bed. “I’m perfectly packed. I was just thinking to add some food for the road.”

“We’ll have to hunt won’t we.” Sasuke murmured as he took a seat at the table. His fingers played over the preserved flowers there before he drummed his fingers on the table top. “We can take snacks and I know my mother will send us with food but we will run out. Even if we were going at our pace, we’ll be going to a pace of a much bigger group. We are going to be fairly slow.”

“You’re right about that.” Naruto admitted as he sat on his bed and flipped open his pack to expose the contents to Sakura. “We aren’t even really that big but the other teams move differently to us in the end. There is no sugar coating that we will have to make lots of stops even if they push themselves. We don’t want them to push themselves to exhaustion so we have to make every moment on the road count.”

“We won’t be stretching food on the road.” Sakura frowned as she gingerly peeked through Naruto’s bag. “Don’t look at me like that.” She scolded when she met Naruto’s patient gaze. “You like booby trapping your things and after finding out how much poison you like to have on you. I would rather be safe than sorry.” She slid a heavily sealed bottle out of the bag with a huge sigh. “We can only take so much food with us so it is up to us to be able to handle ourselves accordingly. You can find fruit and trade everywhere but I doubt we will be allowed near to towns.”

“I doubt that as well.” Sasuke had continued to drum his fingers on the table top the soft rhythm almost soothing. “It’s best if as little people know our comings and goings. Being seen or noted would be different. I suspect we will keep to the fields or roads rarely travelled.”

“The only thing good about those roads is that the chance of finding something to hunt becomes at least ten times larger.” Sakura sighed. “But we can’t waste too much time either, I wish we could ask Kakashi-sensei his plans.”

“Kakashi would have just dropped a bunny or a deer on our heads and call it a day.” Sasuke pointed out. “With a bigger group of senseis I doubt he will behave the same. The mission might be dangerous but because of the company we can’t exactly behave as usual. Even Kakashi-sensei would reel in his normal behaviour.”

“That’s asking for too much.” Naruto barked out in laughter. “He’ll be the same lazy man he’s always been.” He assisted Sakura in carefully shifting some small scrolls so she could finish inspecting what he had packed. “I think that he might let us detour for some hunting or he and the other senseis might keep an eye out and do some hunting for us. They might even use us to do it just to see how well all of us can work together.”

“That last one sounds more like it.” Sakura’s hands brushed his as they counted the shurikens and needles in the various pouches. “We are bigger than before so they must have to see how we are going to work together. we have worked together in the smaller sense. I know the senseis train together and must have worked together but we are a big squad. They have to figure out the weaknesses before we run into trouble.”

“I’m thinking they must be wondering about the imbalance of power.” Sasuke murmured, he had Naruto’s attention immediately. “We already know how we are. How we work and how to move together. not many people can keep up with us as how we are. Few can keep up without pushing themselves beyond their limits.”

“That’s the thing isn’t it.” Sakura sighed. “That’s where Shikamaru and I will have to come in because if we stay together in a big team the entire mission there is going to be imbalances.
Everyone is working hard but team seven works differently. I have no doubt they can hold their own but when it comes down to it…”

“Kakashi-sensei will deal with it.” Naruto reassured her, he brushed her hand with his and gently pressed his thumb against her wrist. “We’ll find a way to match up with everyone that doesn’t hold us back and won’t tire them out. I have faith that between you, Kakashi-sensei and Shikamaru that we will find a way.”

“Bet Kurenai-sensei is in there too.” Sasuke yawned and Sakura laughed.

“Assuma-sensei as well.” She teased, Naruto was tempted to flip her off his bed but she had learned from the spars too well. There was a high chance she would wrap herself around him to the best of her ability and drag both of them and the bag to the floor.

“Okay you know what.” He sighed loudly. “I don’t have faith in anyone.” He stressed and his team laughed at him. “We’re all fucked.”

XxX

“Sensei?” Naruto was actually taken by surprise when his teacher appeared. Iruka-sensei had arranged a quick dinner with Konohamaru and it had been entertaining to fend the younger boy off as Naruto ate his fill of the barbeque meat.

He had managed to wrestle a promise from Konohamaru to stay mostly out of trouble and to train hard. Also to be careful with the kitchen section of plants when he watered them. Something needed to be left alone and Naruto did not want to come back home to hear about any incidents.

It was times like this that he seriously considered repeating history. Konohamaru was still young and Naruto remembered the process but it felt wrong somehow. It would give him a peace of mind like he bet it had given Kasumi but he was still reluctant.

He could always come back and change his mind when it came down to it. He doubted he would though there was just something that felt a bit wrong with doing it. It would have to be a secret too and he doubted he could hide the process from everyone.

Konohamaru was the Sandaime’s grandson, there was no avoiding that. Konohamaru had guards wherever he went. He was highly monitored and Naruto was no fool he knew that anything he did with or to Konohamaru would be watched or even documented. There was no going around that.

It would be nice if he had one less thing to worry about though. He could not help but worry. Still it had been a pleasant night aside, Iruka-sensei had paid and laughed at his antics with Konohamaru and Naruto had enjoyed the hug and squeeze Iruka-sensei had gifted him with. He was getting sort of spoiled there but who cared.

He had not expected to be accosted by his sensei on his way back to his apartment. In his apartment yes, outside the apartment as in the hallways yes. But on the streets on his way back? It had made him jump even after he confirmed that it really was Kakashi-sensei.

“Sensei.” He said softly as the grip on his shoulder slid down to his wrist. “What’s up?” He turned his body so he was closer to his sensei even though it forced him to look up at him. Sometimes Kakashi-sensei had moods where he was so tense all over it seemed that the right word and he would spill everything Naruto ever wanted to know.

Kakashi-sensei had been opening up that was for certain. Naruto had to give him that, there was the trip that night that still made his heart clench in his chest. The nights when the man sat in his
room and spoke to Naruto in the darkness and they talked about things Naruto needed to speak of but feared tainting Sakura and Sasuke.

“I-I W-“ Naruto watched as his sensei’s eye stared down at him before the man carefully blinked and the emotions in his eyes that were so turbulent faded away. “You ready for tomorrow?”

“It’s a war not the end of the world.” Naruto pointed out as his sensei’s grip remained on his wrist. It was warm and not exactly uncomfortable but it really felt as though his sensei thought he would run. “Even civilians have wars and I’ve seen them been dealt with. I’ve had enough examples.” He admitted. “I’ll follow your lead and Sakura’s lead but I know how to really end a war and if I see an opening I’ll take it.” He promised. “You should know that, they do.” Sakura and Sasuke really did. They might despair a little about it as well but in the end, they understood that about him more than he thought anyone could.

“They do and I do too.” Kakashi-sensei reassured him. “That doesn’t stop the-” He visibly stopped his words. “I worry about you.”

“I worry about me too but I wanna live.” Naruto tried to reassure him back. “I wanna be Hokage and I gotta live to do that. I’m not trying to die before I get there you know. I can’t help my head being hot sometimes but I can be careful and think about my team. I won’t put you guys in danger but when it comes to taking out a threat I can be very focused.”

“I know that too.” Kakashi-sensei’s free hand rested on his head softly. “Sometimes I wish it could be easier for all of us.”

“Easy isn’t the shinobi way.” Naruto pretended to frown. “Besides, in all the crazy missions that we have been on as team seven, you really think we don’t have this sensei?” He teased. “We’ve seen so many things gone to hell. We have been at ground zero just how many times? And made it out alive how many times? And controlled the situation how many times? Come back without a scratch a good how many times? You doubting us? You doubting me?”

“Now how can I do something like that when you remind me of things like this?” Naruto could tell that his teacher was smiling. “How can I doubt us or you when you remind me how we managed to get through time and time again? Even against the odds.” Kakashi-sensei hesitated then. “But this is different. The more people added Naruto means that the group has to move differently. I know you know that but the bigger the group the bigger the danger.”

“Even in war.” Naruto agreed. “But I feel as though we have it handled. The rest won’t want to lose to us. That’s a plus.” He tried his best to keep his sensei’s gaze. “We’ll be careful the way we always are. They are part of our squad now. All of them and team seven doesn’t want to lose anything, we don’t want to lose anyone.”

XxX

So he had gotten escorted to his door by his sense and gently pushed inside. Naruto was trying to absorb the entire encounter when he should be sleeping. It was hard to sleep when he thought about it.

Kakashi-sensei was just weird, Naruto adored the man and the things he shared but the man was really weird. Now he had Naruto nervous at the back of his head because he knew that it was the shinobi way to conceal things.

He did not kid himself, he knew that the adults were hiding things. He had come back to the village knowing this and he had left the village knowing that the adults in Konoha hid shit. He knew the
Hokage never told everyone on a team what they were facing.

He knew that different agendas could be on the same paper. He knew that while the Hokage had spoken to all of them together that did not mean that she had not pulled the senseis aside to address the Jounins directly.

He knew that Tsunade baa-chan had a lot riding on this whole mission. Not only was it a test, it was the only solution to a problem she was obviously handling.

Konoha had slowed down on the mission front but they still were lacking when it came to manpower. They needed more people but Konoha was still vulnerable. Most of the damage had been fixed but there was still construction going on.

That could not be ignored, Konoha needed people at home just as much as they needed people out there doing missions. Naruto got it he really did, the smartest thing to do was try to take advantage of the manpower she did have all while making it seem as though it was really nothing serious.

This mission could go to shit but it would be a success once they all came back alive. Why? Experience.

It was why Haku had been careful with who Naruto was allowed out with. Why his excursions had been different from Sora’s and Morgana’s. Why he had more watched than participated in the bigger trouble. Haku had not wanted to lose him but he had not wanted Naruto ignorant either.

Double edged sword because if he had been with Sora a bit more he would not feel this apprehensive. He knew he would not die. He knew how to really end a war and he doubted any civilian war was ready for what he could bring. Dying was not a fear of his but he knew it would be a tiring mission.

Harder than maybe most of the missions before. Or maybe not because they had been working hard this entire time. They were going to go as hard as they could the moment they had the signal and a target. How much could they hold up against Konoha’s fresh generation going all out?

Konoha’s fresh shinobi from the wake up call of the war and the realities form it. All of them had been working hard. All of them had been looking to see how they measured up. this was an opportunity once they did not get arrogant.

Naruto had a few cards up his sleeve. He honestly wished he had more. The memory of his sensei in the street made him sigh before he unzipped his jacket. He would love to think more on it but they had an early start in the morning.

XxX

“I think we are ready.” Shikamaru said as his father began to clean up the game pieces. He had lost of course, ridiculously as well but it had certainly been an experience. He only won with Asuma and lately it seemed as though Asuma was trying to give him a run for his money.

“Don’t forget yourself or the people with you.” His father cautioned as he swept the pieces into the box they usually stayed in. “Remember to watch and listen.”

“That’s all I’ve been doing since I graduated Dad.” Shikamaru muttered. “I know there are thing you aren’t telling me. Things Asuma isn’t telling me, things the Hokage and sometimes.” He lowered his voice. “Thing Mum isn’t saying. I’m not stupid, things don’t add up.”

“There’s a bigger picture out there.” It was not a denial but it was not an agreement either.”
Shikamaru rolled his eyes. “Trust your teammates. You do trust them don’t you? No matter what you think about their personalities.”

“You know Dad.” Shikamaru said tiredly as he got to his feet. “He’s the weirdest guy I’ve ever met and weird stuff surrounds him like a coat but when it comes to Naruto.” He fought back his smile and lost. “I can’t keep my eyes off him. I think he can do it you know? Be Hokage someday even though there is so much about him that doesn’t add up. he motivates everyone around him and he’s so damn weird.” He shook his head. “But when he’s around you just know it’s going to be okay and that you can try your hardest. He’s strong in ways I just don’t get.”

“You better get to sleeping.” His Dad said quietly.

“You’re right.” Shikamaru agreed. “Maybe one day we’ll learn what’s so weird about Naruto right Dad?”

“Well today isn’t that day.” Shikamaru shook his head at the laughter in his father’s voice and instead went to his room.

XxX

That time before dawn, Naruto usually woke this time anyway. Best way to start the day was with meditation. He would water his plants, check over them before he sat down and focused. It was just a quick one. He liked to be actually outside for a proper meditation.

Still it was a good way to wake up since his body was almost back to everyone elses. He still felt as though he was a little reversed even after all this time. He was older than before and he had seen so much but he was still Naruto.

Today was a little different though. Naruto had gone on missions that started early before but this was the first one that they knew exactly what kind of hell they were walking into. It was a little different from the two times that were similar enough.

They had known a mess was coming but not what type of mess. It was a different thing when you knew that you were walking straight towards a warzone. His skin was tingling with the anticipation. They had been working so hard, all of them had been training for this. It was time to apply and see exactly how they measured up.

He was a little concerned about the others but he knew they would catch up. in the field it was fall behind or adapt. He was a living example of adaptation so he had more than enough faith in not just them but everyone else too.

His pack was ready, his team’s packs were ready. They had checked over what everyone had in case of emergencies. Sakura had gotten tired of it being a surprise so this worked for them as well. That and he did not want to accidentally poison anyone with his shit.

Kakashi-sensei was always careful and his team too but they were never certain about what exactly they were touching. They did not know now either but for certain they were careful and had an idea about what they were seeing and what to leave alone.

Shared supplies were the norm for a close-knit team and that was team seven down to the core. Close, tied and Naruto adored that.

His breathing settled and the feeling on his skin settled until he felt less sensitized. Until he was able to breathe properly. Until he was able to roll his shoulders slowly and feel a hundred percent in control of his body.
He was always in control of his body but the stillness he wanted to achieve before he met up with his team and the others was necessary. He already knew how they would be looking at team seven, scrutinizing them. Watching them every step of the way.

It was not that he did not want them to see nothing. The thing was he really wanted them to see team seven at their best. Their best was not a Naruto full of bloodlust and nerves. The bloodlust could come later. Even though he was just aching to let Zabuza’s teaching run through his veins. He was aching for the opportunity.

That was not going to happen right away though. They had to get to the location first and they had to see what exactly kind of mess Konoha had to solve. Gods above, he could not wait to see how his team would handle this. He knew they could. He knew that Sakura and Sasuke had come to the point that they could do this.

He was excited for the chance to walk on this field with them. Just the thought of facing this war with his team almost brought the shivers back. He knew they would get dirty but team seven could handle it. Sakura would instruct them, they would lead them and when Naruto saw an opening he would do a strike for Konoha. He just needed to spot that one opening.

XxX

She woke up and she did not think about the chill or that her parents were still sleeping. She woke up and her mind went straight to the mission. Sakura covered her face with her hands and took a deep breath, there was anticipation in her gut along with a pinch of fear. However the fear was nothing new.

She felt that was normal, it was more realistic that pinch of fear that she carried within her. It kept her remembering what was important, getting her team home. That was at the front of her mind with every mission. Doing what she could so that the mission could be completed and her team could come safely.

That was what they did and her job as Chuunin was a big one. She slid out of bed and sighed before she forced herself up and to walk to the bathroom. She wanted to indulge in hot water but she turned on the cold instead and splashed it on her face as she watched herself in the mirror.

She trusted her boys, she trusted her team. She even trusted the others that they would be working with for the mission. What she did not trust was the mission. There was too little known, she knew that there was a chance they were hyping themselves up for nothing and that there would be little to nothing to be done before they could go home.

Still the amount of times she had seen everything go to hell in a handbasket told her to assume the worst. To assume that they were really walking towards war. To assume that she would have to use the tactics that she had been learning all this time on her boys. She met her own gaze in the mirror before she frowned and turned away.

First the shower, then she would get herself ready. Check her bag one more time and she would stretch and leave. She would leave a note for her parents the way she always did when she left on early missions. She might hesitate outside their door too but there was little she could do. She had already told them about the mission. They were proud of her.

They had hugged her tightly the night before. They were proud of her for being a Chuunin and for working hard. She knew she was not letting them down.

Still she would not mind at least a goodbye breakfast or something. Her mother had packed a small
bento to carry along with her. That would make her smile later on.

XxX

Sasuke had opened his eyes and known that he was not the only one awake in his house. He was not the last, that was one of the good things but there was a feel to his house when other people were awaken.

Most importantly his mother had the entire house feeling different when she was out and about. He rolled over before he made himself get up. he did not want to linger. Even if he ended up being a good hour early to the meeting spot he savoured the chance at being out of his house.

This mission was going to be a hell case but Sasuke was eager for it. Team seven tended to have crazy or plain bad missions but this was their first mission like this. Firstly, they had backup. Secondly, they knew most of what they would be walking into.

Sasuke needed this second chance to prove himself and do something for the village. He might have been congratulated for his efforts but he knew the truth there. He could have done better and at least now he would.

This was their chance to show not just their peers but Konoha what their generation was capable of and everything Sasuke had been holding back he could let free. He knew that Naruto was looking forward to the chance to really fight.

He was looking forward to it too because while they were better at fighting with each other. There was no forgetting that fighting Naruto could change dangerous in an instant. They were pretty good at sparring with Naruto but Naruto’s first instinct seemed to put down with force and to put down someone permanently.

You never knew when you would flip that switch that would turn Naruto into someone else. He was already a bunch of mysteries. Sasuke had all his thoughts and all his theories and no real way to really test them out. A little frustrating but he had other things to work on.

He glanced at his pack that sat close to the door. His team had gone through it with him but before he left with it he would look through it one more time. He had enough, he had better have enough supplies. Normal team seven hell missions fucked them up usually but if he ran out he was stealing from the nearest person or non-team seven member.

It could not be helped, if he ran out and they still had then obviously that meant that Sasuke was putting in more work and his efforts were actually needed. He hoped he would not be pushed to do jutsus from the get go. He had more chakra than Sakura but he doubted there was anyone he knew that could keep up with the nutcase that was Naruto.

He eyed the swords that sat in his room and ignored their call to instead go to the rock Naruto had given him. It had company there, the wishing rock and coin but he needed the rock more. He held it in his hand and squeezed the smooth rock in his fist. He counted to ten once and then again before he let it go and rested it carefully back on its soft place.

The wishing coin he had held so many times. The rock too, it showed evidence from it. He had gripped the rock until his skin cracked and tore, the same with the coin. He had held them tightly until his hand bled as he wished and wished hoping that something would hear him.

He traced his finger over the coin and wished for his team’s safety before he scanned his room and picked his clothes for the day. Blue for the road because the sun was a thing and he was not trying
to bake to death. The only time he would want heat was at night and Naruto was a living heater.

When he left his room, he tried to listen for any other signs of activity besides his mother but there was nothing. No hint to Shisui or Itachi roaming around. With their ANBU duties he would have usually said that there was little chance to them being home around now but it was different now.

Shisui and Itachi were just always underfoot in the house and while most people would be curious. Sasuke just wanted to keep moving away from it all. His shower was slower than he usually took because he was savouring the hot water, he was not spoiled but things were rough on the road. Swimming was one thing but it was another to have to bathe in cold water for days.

He was no princess but he was going to savour this hot water until he could get it again. When he left the village, it was whatever they could afford to do. He was actually looking forward to it. Naruto had said it best, when they stepped out the village they were on an adventure that few could imagine.

From his bath he clothed himself and went to find his mother. He was relieved to find her alone but slightly alarmed at the small bag he saw waiting at the edge of the table.

“Sasuke-chan?” His mother’s bright smile should be alarming but instead he took a seat and waited for what he knew was coming. “Give these lunches to your team members okay? I made enough for all of them. Little Sakura and Naruto.” She smiled. “Should I make one for your sensei too?”

He would never live that down. Kakashi would taunt him and hold that over his head for the rest of his life. “He can sort out himself.” He mumbled as he eyed the food. “Mom you don’t need to do this.”

“I know I don’t need to.” His mom was at the stove stirring something in a saucepan. “But I want to Sasuke-chan. That’s why I do it. Do you understand? I do these things because I want to.”

“I get it.” Sasuke said softly. “I just don’t get why you want to do this. Naruto and cook and Sakura usually has her own things.”

“Your team is a special part of you Sasuke-chan I want to help take care of that.” Sasuke watched his mother as she cooked. “Now I know you have an early start so hurry and eat and tidy up before you go.”

Well at least she was not going to try to keep him in until the last minute. Sasuke found himself smiling before he pulled the plate of eggs towards himself.

    XxX

“You ready?” Part of Shikamaru wanted to question having Ino in his bedroom so early but he felt so fuzzy all over that he was willing to roll with it. The crack of dawn or maybe before, Ino demanding something. It felt about right. “We can’t lose to team seven get up already!” That certainly sounded about right.

Shikamaru fought his way out of his blankets which took longer than it should have before he blinked at his empty dark room. He frowned at the room before his eyes went to his alarm clock. Had he been sleeping? Had he dreamed Ino?

“I want to go back to sleep.” He groaned before a yawn took that over. He gripped his sheets tightly before he gave up and pushed them away from himself. did he want to get up? no, he wanted to go back to sleep but they were about to start this crazy mission and going back to sleep would help nothing. He would still feel tired and he would still feel as if it were a pain in the ass.
It really was a pain in the ass, this early start. This big team, all these secrets everywhere. The entire thing was a fucking pain but he had no choice but to go ahead and use his brains as much as he could to make sure everyone stayed alive. So that people knew him getting this jacket was not a mistake. He could curse team seven for making him take this seriously.

XxX

Would he ever stop revelling in the mist? Would he ever stop savouring it the way that he did? Dawn always brought the dew, always brought the mist that hung low and went up to ones’ ankles. In Konoha the mist behaved differently to the open road but Naruto loved it all the same.

It really was a different thing but he loved it. Missions could start at any time but he loved the ones that started early in the mornings. It made them feel like shadows slipping from Konoha to do their work. It was easy to get lots of ground covered once they left early.

Team seven would get ground covered anyway but for certain leaving Konoha early helped with a lot of it. He was unsurprised to see people waiting at the gate. He was early but for a mission like this people would want to leave as soon as possible.

Besides, his team moved early anyway. He knew that the others would want to compete, not to lose so they would do their best to turn up as early as possible. It was sort of cute.

He had not expected to be the first at the gate so he was fine when he was able to make of Asuma-sensei’s figure by the booth speaking to the Chuunins on guard. Not too far away sitting on a log his pack in his hands was Sasuke.

Sasuke was always one the first to arrive. Naruto had tried to beat him a time or two but he found Sasuke just was always ridiculously early when they had to meet to do something. Sakura had not arrived yet but Tenten was leaning against a tree her pack by her feet.

Kakashi-sensei was nowhere to be seen but Naruto had not expected the man to change his ways overnight. He doubted the man would be fully late but he doubted he would be early. Kakashi-sensei had things he liked to take care of before he left too. Naruto did not know what those things were but he knew his sensei did them.

He was prepared for the wait though. He gave those gathered a greeting before he took a seat next to Sasuke’s log. He rested his pack in his lap and released a breath slowly and centred his body. There was no harm in using the time to focus.

They were early after all, all there was to do was to wait. Naruto could use his time and his mind to think things over while he had a chance. When things started happening everything would be a blur. This was one the few times left to think as slowly as he wanted or needed to.

He could not afford to waste that time. His bag was a comfortable weight in his lap as he turned over in his head the mystery that was Konoha. He did not expect to solve it but he was hoping for a new insight.

XxX

“I expected to be the one to fetch you.” Kakashi felt slightly amused in the early morning. He had gotten to the stone early, apologized for being back again so soon and tried not to fall too deep into reflection. He had decided to swing by the hospital afterwards to check on Gai but… this was a pleasant surprise.

Gai had been the one waiting on him. Pack and all his eyes serious. He jerked his head to indicate
that Kakashi should start walking so Kakashi fell into step next to the man. They managed half a step before Gai spoke. “I wanted to wake Lee and tell him goodbye but I decided against it.” He said softly. “I’m surprised that you tore yourself away from your business so quickly.”

“I can’t afford to let my team down.” Kakashi admitted. “Besides, this is something a little different than usual. This is a training missions and for one I’m eager to let my team loose and see what they can really do. If they are keeping in line with my expectations or if they have exceeded them at this point.”

“You don’t think you have overestimated them in any way? That isn’t like you Kakashi.” Kakashi heard the light scolding in the words and shrugged with a laugh.

“Come on Gai.” He murmured. “Have you seen them? Really looked at them? My team seven is something you would pay for underestimating.” He was glad that his mask hid his grin. “They’ve excelled on every front so far and every time they did better than I ever could have hoped. They have been waiting for something like this. Not this for certain but they want to go all out.”

“Everyone has been watching them.” Gai answered after a moment of simple silence. They had made their way through most of the village and were closer to the meeting spot. “Eyes are drawn to your team and the shine they emit. Even you can’t help watching them.”

“I never knew a team like this was possible.” Kakashi said after he allowed Gai’s words to wash over him. “I’m still amazed, I think I always will be. It isn’t just my team, everyone will be putting their best foot forward. This mission will help push everyone in the best way possible.”

“I’d ask what the Hokage is thinking.” Gai said softly. “But I already know that only the Hokage herself knows what she is planning. The rest of us can only wait and marvel at her insight later one.”

“She’s got a plan and it involves all of us here right now.” Kakashi agreed. “Things are changing even if people don’t see and it isn’t what she is thinking and planning. It’s what the Sandaime was thinking and what he was planning and how the next generation are fulfilling those hopes and plans in their own way. Even though he never told them.” He nudged Gai’s shoulder so the man would see what he saw.

Not too far ahead of them were three people. Neither were a member of his team but one was a member of Gai’s. The other two were members of Kurenai’s team. They did not look a hundred percent comfortable walking together but they were together and that was progress Kakashi doubted they would see.

Neji, Kiba and Hinata. Considering the past, the bad blood and everything else he had not exactly expected this. He was still a bit wary over it. Slightly cautious so to say and who could blame him? Who could blame anyone?

Still this was a step towards what the Sandaime had always wanted. Towards what the Sandaime had been trying to achieve. It would not have been possible without… well work from all over and of course Naruto. Naruto was the big wind blowing through the village and everyone was being affected.

It was a good thing, this mission as well had so much riding on it. So many of those coming along watched Naruto closely while they knew nothing or next to nothing. Team seven was a unit but there was so much Kakashi wished he could share.

Team 10 had Shikamaru staring boldly and Ino chasing team seven. It was actually amusing how
hard she was running after Sakura. She was whipping her team into shape as she went but her aim was Sakura and not to get left behind. Maybe Naruto was in there too because Ino’s eyes were always so curious. Chouji’s too but the boy seemed to accept Naruto how he was.

Naruto liked Chouji well enough and the two seemed to have it easy. Kakashi had spied a time or two and while the boys talked about silly or meaningless things in the end they simply enjoyed each other’s company and taking things slow. Who knew how that was helping Chouji but Kakashi would assume that it was helping in some way.

The fight that had changed Neji, the girl that Naruto had championed in front of the village and many foreign shinobis. That was a story fir for a story book. Naruto had changed the life of two teams so easily. Team eight and team Gai had been honestly minding their own businesses and been deep in the mire that was their minds before Naruto appeared.

Neji seemed to be on a new path. Team eight were working harder. Kiba had lost some his cockiness and was running full tilt in Naruto’s direction. From what Gai could say so was Neji. His gaze was fixed on Naruto’s back and while Neji had never been the talkative type there was no avoiding the fact that he had changed because of Naruto and was maybe thankful a bit towards him.

Tenten had Sakura and while she obviously did not get Naruto she was quick to understand that most of the things Sakura came with, came from Naruto. Maybe she would ask him for a spar sometime.

Shino was like his clan honestly but there was no denying that Kakashi had enjoyed foiling Shino’s plans on seeing what made Naruto Naruto. The boy was honestly too smart and quiet for his own good. Kakashi got the curiosity and he got where Shino was coming from but the boy moved too quick and let his feelings decide.

Not a bad quality but they were trying to get away from things like that in this day and age. Still, in the end a lot of back were fixed on his team and on Naruto. That made them push themselves and re-evaluate themselves. They did not want to lose, not to team seven and because the battle was still fresh in their minds they did not want Konoha to lose because of them.

The Sandaime could have never predicted their tragedy that had involved Naruto but Kakashi had to admit that this Naruto was the best thing to happen to this generation. Naruto was healing cracks that the rest of them had been pondering how to fix. It was when he saw things like that, that made him know that Naruto really could carry on the dream and walk in the footsteps before him and become Hokage.

“Kurenai and Shino.” Gai nodded to a side street to their left. “I expect Asuma will be waiting. So far everyone’s youth is pumping through their veins. If everyone is there when we get there we should leave right away. No sense in waiting. We have quite the distance to cover Kakashi.”

“I was thinking the same thing.” Kakashi murmured as the gate came into sight. Right away he spotted his team huddled together. Sakura sat by Naruto her back against his; her pack in her lap watching the road to the outside quietly. Naruto was doing light meditation, Sasuke sat on a log watching the Chuunin guard booth.

Team eight had assembled themselves around their sensei. Neji had joined Tenten by her tree. Kakashi stood by Gai as team ten stood surrounding Asuma by the Chuunin booth. They were all here and everyone looked wide awake.

There was a low energy thrumming through them all. There was very little he could say about it.
Little he felt he could tell those gathered. The Jounin senseis knew how they felt, their charges had their own feelings about it.

There was no sense in delaying anything. They were all here and they were all prepared. All they had to do now was get on their way and see exactly what kind of mess awaited them all. They had to let the kids use their wings after all.

Naruto shifted slightly and Kakashi’s gaze flew to him. He looked relaxed and at peace, even the night before when Kakashi had sought him out he had looked calm. He watched Naruto stretch a bit before his eyes opened and his blue gaze went straight to Kakashi. The readiness and peace did not surprise him.

“It’s time to go.” Kakashi said softly.

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Sakura would not dare call the mood solemn when they left Konoha, no the atmosphere was far too different enough for that. However, it was different to many departures. She and her team were wary and cautious but they always were.

The strangeness did not come from her team and her boys for once. Instead it came from almost everyone else. From the other Jounin senseis to the others and it made it hard to focus on her surroundings because she wanted to focus on the rest of them instead.

Wasn’t that just amusing in itself? She guessed she was having a little taste of the medicine that team seven shared about routinely. It was as amusing as it was good.

She had assumed that Tenten would have stuck a little closer to her. She enjoyed being out with her so much and usually Tenten tried to be in eye catching distance if not arms reach distance. For her to be with her Sensei and Neji was not exactly a shock but it was a surprise.

She was so focused on them it kind of took Sakura back to when they first had started talking. She had given Sakura more than good advice, there had been support mixed up in there too. Support she had needed as she dealt with her feelings.

Crying had been good back then, she had felt so clean afterwards. Still the way Tenten had connected to her and understood everything she felt and wanted to say. She played a big role in Sakura’s current development but in the end they were on different teams even if they were good friends.

Friends or not the mission was what mattered right now. Tenten had a sense of humour but she was not one to slack off. Still Sakura had thought they would have been working together or at least a little bit closer on the journey. They had rather far to go and it would have been nice to keep an eye on Tenten from up close to see how she handled the pace.

It was an unexpected development but she could live with it. Ino was riding herd on her team and that was a fulltime job in most cases except that they were pretty organized and Ino did not have that much work cut out for her.

Shikamaru looked alert and work ready, that was a shock in itself because Sakura had seen him turn up to Chuunin meetings ready for the meeting to be over. She had seen him on missions where it looked the moment they stepped through the gate that he was ready to go back home.

For him to be alert and ready on the jump actually had her a bit concerned. Chouji worried her a bit too. She was used to him snacking and watching nature, for him just to be so silent and not dig in
his bag for anything. It sort of made her sad too. They were all changing. They were all growing up in their own ways and they were prepared.

That was what the air felt like. Battle readiness, it felt as though everyone was prepared for the worst. She could admire them for that but she knew from experience just effort was only tiring in the long run on missions with long journeys.

A casual readiness was far more preferred on the journey to somewhere far away. The closer you got to your destination the more cautious and careful you became. If you got cautious someplace close to the border you had already lost.

That was a lesson she had learned from not just Kakashi-sensei and Naruto but Sasuke too. Sasuke’s explanations had come tied up with explanations for tracking and hunting. Sakura had not even known that he was that interested in it. She had known he had done some but he had been able to keep up with Kakashi-sensei’s explanations and even simplify them.

Still what she had come to learn in the end was that it was best to be aware and curious about your surrounding and slowly step them up as things went along. They were a few days away from their destination. Being so paranoid was only going to work against them.

They for certain had to pay attention to the world around them so they could catch onto things being out of place and avoiding traps but not to this extent, the academy taught them the basics and they still had them. When it really came down to it the easy walking and watching that team seven were doing was the way to go.

They were too far away from the place, they really were. Naruto had taught her that you had to take in the scene around you and access it. Keep doing it on the journey and have at the back of your mind the idea of what normal was and look for the things that were not normal and the things that seemed too normal.

Both were the signs of a trap. She had taken that to heart, so early into the mission she was not that bothered or paranoid. They were certainly walking into a shit show but she knew her team and her group would be fine. She had faith in them all.

She had faith in the senseis too. Kakashi-sensei was the type to always be testing you so in this matter she did not trust him. He would sense danger and if he thought she should be able to handle it he would say nothing. He was the worst.

Naruto caught her eye and she held his gaze before he smiled and tilted his head towards team eight. They were a quiet bunch together. she was amazed she got to use such a description on Kiba but the evidence was there. His dog was asleep on his head as he walked. He was on Shino’s left-hand side while Hinata was on the right. He was filled with energy as he walked. His body kept moving and she knew he was scenting the area and watching every grass that surrounded them.

She felt sort of sorry for him because the paranoia would only get worse when they cut through the mountains. There was a place to be paranoid, the pass always had dangerous animals roaming. Creatures that feared no man.

“It’s sorta cute.” Naruto whispered into her ear and she rolled her eyes before she shoved him in the shoulder lightly. Only Naruto would find fun in the others discomfort. What was she to do with him. She hoped the senseis told them something by the first break because was not looking forward to having to do that.

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“Well we are doing better than expected.” Sasuke heard Sakura’s voice as she stood with the senseis and Shikamaru. “I guess we can continue pushing forward right?” He tilted his container over to finish emptying it. “We might actually shave a few days off at this pace.”

“Once we don’t overexert ourselves.” Asuma-sensei took the map from Sakura. “We have quite the few detours to make so we don’t run into anyone or disturb any areas. Coming back is a different story however if we go around that is time we have to use.”

“It’s going to be cold in this area.” Kurenai-sensei mused. “Everyone is prepared for that right? I didn’t think we would make it there on the first day. I assumed we would have passed through and stop for a break not make it there in time for night.”

“It’s an unwelcome surprise.” Shikamaru muttered. “It’s going to be cold and we can only afford a small fire in that area.”

“We’ll make do I guess.” Sakura sighed. Sasuke grunted when Naruto sat on his log and rested his head on his shoulder.

“I wanna get going.” Naruto muttered into his shirt.

Sasuke understood that feeling all too well. “I do as well.” He murmured before he allowed himself to sigh. A break was a quick fifteen-minute stretch and water break. Sometimes a refill while they were at it. To stop for an entire hour and have a meeting was unheard of and not part of team seven’s standard operations.

They had group meetings certainly but that was at the end of the day when they really could not travel anymore. Those meetings happened as tents were being set up or food was being prepared and they were checking over tools. Team seven usually kept in constant contact along the road anyway.

Sasuke was not going to say it was wrong but he was going to think in the peace of his mind how annoying it was. They had pushed ahead further than he thought such a big group could go that was nice.

They were still going to lose an entire hour to this little meeting. His empty container dangled in his hand as he groaned to himself about how slow it was. They were taking their time but when on the road he just wanted to keep going, this was not even close to their limits. The only reason he had drank water was because it gave him something to do.

“I wanna get going.” Naruto groaned again. “Sakura-chan.” He whispered under his breath. “She looks so good doing her Chuunin thing.”

“I want to get going.” Sasuke grumbled as he felt Naruto’s hands tangle with his.

“Refill the water first.”

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Shikamaru honestly did not know if he was proud of himself and his progress or not. The entire thing was a drag and he was kind of pissed at himself for putting in all this hard work but the thing was he really was glad that he put it in too.

He knew his abilities, his strengths and his weaknesses. He did not overestimate his abilities. If he could do something then he could do something and if he could not. No hard feelings about it. Another way would be found or he could indulge with not bothering.
Until team seven popped up with their weirdness and forced him to pay attention to them that was the way Shikamaru did things. Then there was team seven, them and Naruto. Then there was the war and the entire mess that he still was not over because it revealed so much of them and him.

There was Chuunin stuff and responsibilities and Naruto. Add to that a new feeling getting awoken in his chest and Shikamaru was only able to be truly lazy and relaxed in the village. In the village off duty and with Chouji or Asuma.

The Hokage found things for them to do if they lingered anywhere official too long. She had to have been a former academy teacher because that sort of thing only they did. That and parents now that he thought about it. That kind of ‘you look as if you’re doing nothing let me give you something to do’ attitude that parents and teachers worked with.

Seriously a drag. The entire thing was a damn drag but when it came down to it they really could not do anything about it. Beside bitch in private and Shikamaru had been doing just that thank you. Lots of that.

There were benefits to the madness, to the pace and even listening to Ino. Shikamaru did not think the appreciation would be able to make it past his throat so he was going to go along as always. Except he really could not go along as always entirely.

Seriously, curse team seven. They had done this thing to the rest of them. They were weird and freaky, there was something seriously up and wrong with Naruto. Things did not add up but Shikamaru was supposed to act as though he could not see a thing. That sort of thing really pissed him to fuck off. He was allowed to be irritated and pissed.

But he was not the type to walk around all irritated and pissed. He was not pissed now but as they got close to their stop for the night he was proud and he was irritated at how proud he felt. They had pushed themselves hard the entire day.

They had left Konoha early and pushed their way forward. Few to little breaks for the entire day and no one had complained. Hell people had been prepared. Only the senseis had made the break stops.

Shikamaru guessed all of them were trying to show their improved and good sides to team seven. He knew it because all of them had teamed up with that team before so he knew that they knew. He knew they understood how freaky strong that team was.

How much further ahead and developed they were in ways that would make others envy. They had not insisted for stops because they all knew team seven would not need them. They had pushed themselves in speed because they knew team seven travelled fast.

Had it paid off? Well team seven seemed the same way as always but they were a lot more lax and easy than Shikamaru had expected. There were ready, battle ready he knew that from the things he had overheard but he had expected that intensity that Naruto had sometimes to make an appearance.

It was a serious mission and they were not exactly taking it easy but they were far more relaxed than Shikamaru had hoped they would be. On the breaks they had not huddled together but simply rested, kept an eye on their surroundings and the path of the sun until it was time to move again.

The only reaction he had really seen from them was the hour-long break that was supposed to include lunch as well. Naruto had scarfed three buns from his bag so quickly that Shikamaru still doubted that he had seen them at all. Sasuke had drank water and rested on a log in the shade.
before Naruto joined him.

Sakura had been with him and the rest of their sensei’s fine tuning the path they would take after the break. Keeping away from well lived areas was a must. Theirs was mostly a stealth mission until further advised. In his eyes all he saw was a march towards war but it could end up being lesser than that.

The Jounins doubted it though, he saw it in their eyes, in their faces. Shikamaru had gone through the document that had been given to Asuma too, he doubted it himself. Sakura as well, it was in the way she spoke to the others and even to him. She also thought they were preparing to stop the war.

She was not off guard or anything and she was as close with her team as always but he could not explain what he thought about them. Still he felt good about not keeping them back so far. Even though the others might want to pretend otherwise he knew who they would be depending on if it came down to powers. Team ten was good with their teamwork and their own abilities and while team seven only had Sasuke’s abilities both Naruto and Sasuke’s strength rivalled anything they could throw at them.

Hell Shikamaru wanted to know if he could manage to outwit and capture Sasuke if it came down to it. Sasuke was smart on his own but team seven shared information and tactics among themselves almost like a hive mind.

Sakura was becoming a tactician in her own way. Shikamaru saw the books and he had watched her watch her own team. She had her own way and he was looking forward to see that being applied. He wanted to see how both of them would measure up on the real-world stage, not a game, not practice or even sparring. The real shit.

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It was cool outside when the groups finally made it to where they had decided to camp for the night. Kakashi really understood what Kurenai had been originally been hoping for but when it came to the determination of the kids he was really not that surprised how it turned out.

They did not want to lose, none of them did. They wanted to push themselves because they hated that it looked as though they were lacking. For normal people this was way beyond their expectations. The kids should have been glad with achieving this much but he had been watching the looks towards his cute little team all day.

They were not satisfied with even that much. They wanted more, they wanted to travel further and work more. They wanted strength they wanted to be stronger and they kept measuring themselves against team seven and pitting themselves against them. Their eyes were burning into his team and he could not help but wonder if this would fuel his team too.

The others’ attempts to catch up, their gazes burning on them could end up pushing his team even more. His team was already developing at an incredible rate. If these used the others chasing them as motivation what else would they achieve?

Kakashi was looking forward to everyone’s progress. Not just his team, his team first of course but he was looking forward to the young sparks growing in number, power and intensity.

Still he was proud of them for fighting so hard and making it this far. They still had a long way to travel but they had earned a good rest. It was not spoiling them, it was just facts. The adults could take over the watches and they could start the fires too.
Kakashi could just pretend that everything else would go perfect. He had allowed himself to forget quite a few things. One was that usually the teams had accommodations or tents. This time they had neither so they had blankets and sleeping roles.

No matter how close a team thought they were. One thing he had discovered was that currently in Konoha there was no other team like his. No other team as close as his currently were and that was all because of Naruto. Many thought they got team seven but he had no doubt that they were in for a rude awakening. He hoped the others would be able to sleep.

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Well he had a feeling that Kakashi-sensei was playing nice because the other senseis were around them. They had barely started to set up for the night ahead and the night watch before Kakashi-sensei offered to catch dinner for them if they didn’t have anything.

Naruto was positive that the shudder that went through his body at the nice offer went through Sakura’s and Sasuke’s bodies as well. “We’re good.” Sasuke had eyed the man suspiciously. “My mother sent food along anyway.”

“Thanks sensei.” Sakura had said warily before she dragged them to go wash up. Naruto had peeked back behind him to find Gai-sensei attempting to console Kakashi-sensei. Even though the man’s head was bowed in apparent dejection he was certain that the man was laughing at them. It was just a feeling but he was sure that he was right. Kakashi-sensei would find that sort of thing hilarious. He was a goof like that but it was what made him fun sometimes. Still trying to baby them like that not only was worrying it was creepy.

“The sky is going to fall in.” Sakura muttered under her breath. “Something fucked up is going to happen, you guys better not wander too far.”

“I wasn’t planning on going anywhere.” Sasuke grunted. “I think the company has gone to his head. When has he ever done anything for us free of will or guilt? Or made us help out halfway?”

“Maybe he’s under evaluation.” Naruto mused. “But more importantly, what did you Mom cook Sasuke? I know you said she sent for all of us but you didn’t say what?”

“I can’t wait until Sasuke-kun steals my tomatoes as usual.” Sakura sighed. “I want any radish you have Naruto.”

“You haven’t even see what she sent and you’re assuming. “I’m taking your cabbage.” Sasuke muttered.

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“Team seven is really close huh.” Chouji said softly as he watched them. They were not exactly isolated but there was no way he was going to try to get in between what was going on. The three members of team seven sat together facing each other in a circle their food in the middle of them.

It was not as if they were absorbed fully in each other. He said that because while they looked at each other they were also looking over each other’s shoulders occasionally even as they ate together. Chouji shook his head when he saw Sakura feed first Naruto with her chopsticks before she leaned over to do the same to Sasuke.

Ino inhaled sharply when Sasuke picked at his tomatoes with one hand and fed Sakura with his chopsticks absentmindedly with the other. Chouji was unsure to what to say when Sasuke ran out
of tomatoes and leaned over to steal Naruto’s. Naruto opened his mouth in protest and Sasuke poked a piece of fish inside while Sakura laughed.

Shikamaru shifted when Naruto fed radish to Sakura before he switched it up and fed food to Sasuke as well. There was nothing unnatural or stiff about their movements. Conversation was quiet among them and flowing well.

There were no hesitation in their movements as they fed each other. Chouji did not even think that they thought about it before they did it. It seemed like instinct. It was so smooth and natural that all he could do was blink and continue to watch.

They were aware of their surroundings and they were aware of themselves but the way they were together showed just how close they were. It was just that he had not expected them to be that close. He did not think there were many people that could be close. That was sort of couple close.

It did not look sappy and awkward the way it was when couples did it. While there was a bit of teasing with team seven. It did not have the same feel that sappy couples did.

“Close?” Shikamaru said softly. “I guess you could say that. Or they are just weird.”

“Sakura looks like she’s having fun.” Ino’s tone was glum. “Sasuke-kun and Naruto are feeding her so easily and letting her feed them too.”

“That team is weird.” Shikamaru muttered. “I swear they are in their own little world. There is not a single thing normal about them.”

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Team seven struck again. Kakashi had quickly hid his face in a book when Asuma and Kurenai kept looking at him during dinner. Gai had been complained to way too many times to be surprised about what everyone had seen.

He thought it was cute, a symbol of bonds and youth. He would not be bothered by team seven’s closeness. Not yet anyway. Kakashi just had to wait until everyone turned in for the night for the stares to really start. He bet that he would be pulled aside as well.

Asuma would rightly assume that it had something to do with Naruto. Kurenai would be concerned, for modesty sake and for the sake of the kids themselves. Still that was a horse that was long out the barn. The horse was in another country.

Naruto had needs that Konoha had denied and they were lucky that Naruto had two people willing to meet them. Naruto enjoyed not just affection but physical contact as well. Kakashi had nagging suspicious about Naruto’s level of tolerance and acceptance but there was no way to pry without tipping off the boy.

Sakura and Sasuke were happy to meet Naruto where he was and it actually helped with their teamwork. It helped them grow as a team and as people too. It was not something any sensei worth his salt would suggest but since it came from within the team and no one had asked Kakashi anything he had said and done nothing.

It was simple affection and only a blind man would not notice how Naruto lapped it up. that fluffy feeling of friendship and comrading. Naruto was addicted to it and it showed. They were together and they had each other’s backs. When they were like this Kakashi was allowed a look into Naruto’s past.
They said kids copied what they saw, followed what they knew. There was not a doubt in his mind that the things Naruto did were things he had seen before and either wanted for himself or had experienced with the group.

Maybe that was how the others interacted. Whatever it was it was how Naruto shared affection with his team. It was how they returned it in kind. Sasuke and Sakura had been changed by their interactions with Naruto and the people they were becoming made his heart warm.

To him they were still brats, their bodies were being changed by puberty and the realities of the world around them but they still had that childish innocence to them. Even Naruto.

Naruto who had seen so many shades of people. Seen the truth of love and possession. Seen pain and lies up close, seen the other side of shinobi life and seen the failures that existed in the shinobi community. Even that boy had his innocent free side.

He could still laugh and tease, he could still have his shine and sparkle. Kakashi wanted to keep him that way but he knew better than that. He knew how foolish such a hope was because while that was an important part of Naruto it was not all of him.

That part of his team was a small part. That carefree devoted part of them that he got share in. that was just a small part of them but that was fine with him. He liked the team that had many different shades to them. Still he hoped that team seven’s bonding would not bother everyone else too much. They were in for quite the rude awakening.

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“That breeze settled in.” Sasuke muttered when he returned from cleaning up for the night. “It’s going to be windy all night.”

“Sounds nice.” Naruto laughed as he shucked off his jacket and switched his normal undershirt for a vest.

“Naruto you’re the big spoon.” Sakura rolled her eyes as she dragged on the longest shirt in her pack. “You’re the only one that pumps off heat so you’re in the middle.”

“I’m always in the middle unless it’s boiling outside.” Naruto shrugged as he got off his pants as well. “Sakura-chan are you side or right side?”

“Sasuke-kun?” She preferred the left side because Naruto tended to roll that way and drag whoever was there into his warm embrace. She was not trying to wake up with sniffled in the morning from the cold. Plastering herself to his back worked as well but that was more effort.

“Right. I need room.” Sasuke’s glance to the sleeping bag told her how eager he was to escape the breeze pulling at their exposed skin. “The senseis say they have the watch.”

“That’s so…” Naruto trailed off before he slipped into the sleeping bag first. “So weird. I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep deep anyway.”

Sakura climbed in next to him and sighed when Naruto pulled her head down on his chest. She had no idea why but he was always warm. It always felt nice. Sasuke loved it too and there was something about being able to hear their breathing and their heartbeats.

When it was colder out she preferred to hear Sasuke’s heartbeat when they slept. The worry was never far from her but hearing them breathing, hearing their heartbeats let her know that they were right they with her and alive.
In no time at all the sleeping bag was zipped up and they were warm and close together. If she were to wiggle more on her side she would be able to brush Sasuke’s toes with her own. It was the ideal situation but for their team it was the way that things were at this point.

She would rather be like this than anywhere else. Having them by her side when she slept was a good feeling. Naruto’s arm was warm under her shoulders and his hand on her waist as he pulled her close was warm. Her hands brushed Sasuke’s where they were on Naruto’s waist.

She could hear the small fire cracking not too far away and she could hear the other teams as they settled down. The senseis had to be somewhere as they were on watch. Even though she knew that they were there it was hard to turn everything off and fall asleep.

She was being lulled to sleep by the sounds of the night and the warmth of her boys but her senses were still alert even as her eyes drifted shut.

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“It was never like that before!” Kiba hissed as he watched team seven. “They didn’t do it like this before right?” He softly hissed at Shino. “They used to be close together but not like this right?”

“Maybe it was something we were not allowed to see until this moment.” Shino said softly as Hinata hid her face in her hands. “It is rather private.”

“If it is so private why do we have to see it now?” Kiba hissed. “It’s like they are dating! All of them!”

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“What a glorious portrayal of youth and bonds.” Gai beamed while Kurenai struggled to find her tongue.

“Oh wow.” She finally managed to say. “It certainly is something.” She finished under her breath and she watched the team drift off to sleep. From what she saw, Sakura was already there. Naruto’s fingers were playing with Sasuke’s hair as the boy drifted off against his neck.

Sakura’s head was on Naruto’s chest as they slept together in the same large bag. She was sort of speechless. It was one thing to suspect about team seven’s closeness and relationship. It was another to see something like this.

She did not mean to eavesdrop but she did tend to overhear things. Iruka had always been a dear friend and his worries in her eyes were not unfounded. Naruto could be very sweet but there was always that moment he switched up on you and you wondered what manner of child he was.

He said adult things, adult jokes. Yet he could be painfully sweet and attentive on other matters. She did not want to say he seemed to be the type that could walk through blood and be okay but sometimes that was the fate she saw for him.

Was she concerned about the games team seven played? Yes, because regardless of their path and their careers they were children in the end. They had great strengths, good heads on their shoulders from Sasuke to Sakura to Naruto. They were strong kids.

But they were still kids, it was one thing to support each other but she saw problems in the way they clung to each other. She doubted that they would have started it if Naruto had not been lost to them once. So, what could they do but observe?
They had put them on this path. Kurenai could only hope their ways would not turn out the way it had for them but she wanted them to have a means of support for when the darkness swallowed hopes again. It was a cute picture but she was still concerned for what they could become.

XxX

“Oh my.” Asuma blew out a stream of smoke as he chuckled. “Kakashi you had anything to do with that?”

“I really look like the type?” Kakashi stood in the branches of the tree opposite of Asuma and shook his head. “I thought you knew better than that.”

“You always were prickly.” Asuma agreed as he took another drag. “Naruto then.” He nodded to himself. “Goodness, that kid is full of surprises. That does seem like something she would do. She was always the physical type. Bop you on the head, half strangle you in a hug. Kiss you like she was your Ma. Blood really tells.”

“I guess so.” Kakashi admitted. “There has been so much that I think I forgot that part of her too. I’ve been so caught up in the now and the recent past that I forgot the beginning of all of this.”

“He makes people move, he makes people come to him. That isn’t just what he learned. It is who he is and it is in his blood. Both sides.” Asuma mused. “Still I don’t think I ever saw this before, they really look happy Kakashi. Your little team really gets along. I know about one or two but all three? You’re out to make history.”

“Me?” Kakashi questioned softly. “That’s all them.” He admitted. “I’ve just been along for the ride they have been taking me on.”

XxX

“I knew they were close but…” Tenten shook her head as she turned on her back. “I had a feeling they were wrapped up in each other but it really is equal in the end.” She was a little envious of it too.

There were close teams she knew that but what Sakura had was so solid. They not only cared for her, they were complete with her. They depended on her and they loved her in their own ways. It was amazing, it was something to envy.

“Team seven understand how team works better than anyone.” Neji said softly from his bag. “That’s why they work so well together, their feelings are strong. They work together and because they are so close they are able to predict each other, watch out for each other and move together. they truly are a unit.”

“Well you aren’t wrong.” Tenten admitted. “But they make others feel left out, Sakura and I are friends but I wouldn’t mind some of that from time to time. Their connection is on another level and it is hard not to feel a bit wistful. Their team is so strong and successful and I can’t help but feel it is because their bonds are stronger than anyone else’s.”

“Their connection gives them strength and their ability for compassion makes them not only stronger but smarter too.” Neji paused before she heard him roll over. “Also, with Naruto as their centre they make the biggest strangest changes.”

“At least you can see that Naruto is their centre.” She murmured. “For the longest time I thought it was Sakura. I know better now.” The boy lying in the middle as his team mates wrapped around him and slept. It showed the true face of team seven for certain.”
“They are close aren’t they.” Gai said softly as they switched with Asuma and Kurenai for the watch. “You have a strong team Kakashi.”

“I know.” He agreed, he watched Gai sit on his branch and braced himself.

“Naruto however.” Gai’s voice was serious as he tilted his head back and watched the night sky. “I see why you are concerned but you need to remember what he is Kakashi.”

It was usually easy to follow Gai and his thoughts but this time Kakashi was left blinking in confusion. “I know who he is, I know what he is Gai. He’s my subordinate, my charge and my responsibility. I’m here to protect him and keep him safe no matter how hard he tries to make that.”

“Kakashi.” Gai interrupted. “Naruto changes people, the people around him. The people with him and the people he meets. That does not exclude you.”

“I don’t mind being changed Gai.” Kakashi admitted softly. “I have no problem with that. I wouldn’t mind being changed to be able to face this future Naruto seems to be chasing.”

“Old friend.” Gai’s hand was firm as it gripped his shoulder. “It appears that you do not understand my words, I would leave you to contemplate it but I’m too worried. Even if you refuse to admit it. It is obvious to those who know and watch you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Kakashi laughed softly. “How many people are watching me closely?”

“Myself.” Gai answered. “The Hokage.” Kakashi froze at that. “Some of her movements are tests for you Kakashi.”

He had suspected but to hear it made him grit his teeth. “I suspected so.”

“Kakashi the boy changes people, you too. I personally feel you need to confront yourself before your inner self confronts you.”

“I confront my inner self all the time.” Kakashi said softly. “When I watch him walk forward, when I watch him smile. When I see the people that live on in him. My inner self trusts in him and the future that he will bring.”

“Kakashi… you aren’t ready.” Gai sounded almost disappointed. “You’re being naïve my friend and that is unlike you.”

“We seem to have switched roles because the one being suspicious and pessimistic usually is me.” Kakashi watched Gai as the man watched him. “Can I not allow myself to enjoy the bright future? The dream?”

“You can’t allow the brightness of youth to blind yourself to limits and reality Kakashi. Else when the darkness comes…”

“I won’t let it.” Kakashi interrupted. “It won’t touch my team and it won’t get Naruto.” Gai’s tired sigh bothered his heart a bit but Kakashi’s resolve hardened in response.

Xxx

“Where are you going? It’s an hour before we’re supposed to get up usually.” Sakura’s sleepy
voice alerted Asuma where he sat by the dying fire. “Oh goodness is that the cold right now? Don’t move! Sasuke-kun your feet is like ice!”

“Speak for yourself!” Came the muffled reply. “Naruto where are you going? It’s at least another hour before training.”

“Go back to sleep you two.” Unlike his teammates Naruto sounded quite awake. “I wanted to get some meditating done before we move for the day. You two can nap for a little longer I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Of course we are going to wake up when you move like that.” Sakura sounded put out. One minute I’m warm and next I’m cold again. You’re still getting up?”

“You expect us to sleep now?” Sasuke sounded disgruntled. “Fuck it’s cold and Sakura isn’t any better. We might as well get up.”

“You’re like ice yourself!” Sakura snapped. “Sasuke! Don’t put your hands there! Put them lower where I won’t feel like my hands won’t freeze.”

“Shh!” Naruto’s voice was filled with laughter. “We’ll wake everyone. Sakura let go of my leg.” He laughed. “I’m going to the corner of the camp.”

“I can’t get warm like this.” Sakura’s groan was loud. “Fuck it… we might as well get up I can’t sleep like this.”

“What an annoying start to the morning.” Sasuke hissed. “Why do I have to get up so early and face this cold? I’m going to start working out.”

“That’s going to warm me up for certain.” Sasuke sighed. “Next time I’ll just tie you up.”

“That’s an idea.” Sakura agreed before there was more rustling. “It’s not fair I’m all wrapped up and Naruto’s just wearing thin boxers. Does lava run through his veins or what?”

“Or what.” Sasuke muttered. “I don’t feel like moving.”

Asuma watched the half naked boy in question stroll past him to the trees edge. “Y’all can come too ya know. Feel the breeze, sit in the river and feel nature.”

“Fuck off!” Sakura snapped before she gave a muffled groan. “Pushups in ten Sasuke-kun. Pushups in ten.”

XxX

After a rather amusing start to their morning team seven was back to their usual selves and Kakashi was enjoying hiding his laughter as his team quietly bitched among themselves. He knew how much Naruto enjoyed his mornings meditating in nature and the morning argument was nothing new.

It had not gone as bad as it could have gone so he was certain the rest were not that traumatised by how close team seven was. Kakashi could still recall Sasuke’s awkwardness and Sakura’s involuntary squeals when they had been figuring themselves up.

Many mornings that Sasuke or Sakura had found it awkward to be too open with Naruto. Sadly, those days were past because they had been rather enjoyable. Puberty still had its clutches on them but Sakura and Sasuke just accepted them as facts.
What an honest pity because Kakashi had really enjoyed the embarrassment of his team and how they had struggled to find a way to accept their bodies and their developing reactions. The morning cries of alarm or horror.

Of course, Naruto was so open and accepting those moments had quickly swindled into nothing. He was so frank and open about himself and the natural order of bodies that it made Kakashi a bit wistful. It worried him a bit too since Naruto knew a lot but how much he knew and how much he had experienced was still something unknown.

He talked frankly to everyone and he knew his limits. He talked frankly with Kakashi but there were things that he most certainly held back. How many things did he know? What had he experienced? Had those shinobi and lost people touched him?

What had been Haku’s true goal beyond tying Naruto to him? It was nice to see Naruto slowly wake up to the truth of Haku but it was not fast enough. Naruto had so much healing ahead of him. There was so much that he needed to face.

Kakashi sighed as he watched his team’s backs as they led the group as they cut across the plains to get to the main road. Travelling made his team energetic and excited, new places, familiar places, before it used to be just Naruto that came alive when they left Konoha now they all did it.

They all had those big sparkling eyes when they saw something new. It was adorable and their laughter, their curiosity and that enjoyment was something that Kakashi would kill to protect.

They were on their way to a rather unknown mission but he had no doubt that his team could handle it. They had been training for this moment and his team possessed a deep strength inside them. They were strong on their own but they were even stronger when together. He had faith in them.

XxX

Ino was on guard and she was serious but she really could not keep her eyes off team seven for too long. They had that air around them that was hard to ignore, she was nervous about the mission and her performance but team seven seemed to be taking it easy by comparison.

Not fully easy because she had seen how much arsenal they all had on them. She had seen them working out in the morning too. She now understood how Sakura had put on muscle so fast and she understood how she had gotten so strong as well.

She had to admire her even more for keeping her team in line because Sasuke and Naruto really were crazy and they really did love her. Their training involved serious moments but plenty of laughter as well. Lots of back and forth commentary and guidance.

She had never thought Naruto could be serious like that or that he would have so much to say. So many things to teach even during something like a training spar. The way that Sakura and Sasuke listened attentively too her aback.

She had seen team seven train before, run into them quite a few times but nothing like that. Certainly nothing like what she had seen. They were all so close and they were all so strong and serious. That they could be so calm and carefree showed how strong they really were.

She had to make sure she did not bring them down when the fighting really begun. She would not be able to live with herself if she brought them down in anyway. She had to lend her support not just to her team but to this mission.
She had to put her all in so she could raise her head high and keep it high. She knew her strengths, she knew her talents and she was not going to slacken up for anything. She was going to tighten her belt, push herself as far as she could so that she was not left behind.

Sakura had landed on an amazing team and Ino was envious. Not because Sasuke was there and he was paying attention to Sakura but because Sakura was growing by leaps and bounds to be a person that most certainly go down in Konoha’s history.

The young them, their dreams of the future. When she looked at Sakura as she walked ahead, her bun tight and her teammates by her side. Ino saw a Sakura her younger self did not recognize. She wanted to be someone that her younger self would be awed by too.

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“I’m creeped out.” Sasuke murmured as they sat together after dinner.

“I can’t believe he cooked it.” Sakura said softly as she stroked Sasuke’s hair as he lay across her lap. “He caught it and cooked it. I’m scared.”

“Is he being evaluated?” Naruto yawned as he leaned against Sakura. “Is that a thing? Can he be demoted as a Sensei? Is that why he is playing nice? I can’t believe he cooked us food.”

“Maybe he snapped.” Sasuke muttered. “Maybe he is going to make us pay for it in other ways.”

“I can’t believe that he didn’t make me write the map check sheet.” Sakura murmured. “Is he feeling okay? Sasuke did you check to make sure he isn’t under a genjutsu? Naruto still sucks at detecting it.”


“I checked several times.” Sasuke waved his hand. “On the road, afterwards. When he was cooking and when he was reading that perverted book of his. He laughed at me.”

“Think he’s possessed?” Naruto nudged Sakura when they all fell silent after Sasuke’s spoke. “I have some talismans on me.”

“I don’t think that would work on whatever demon that would get hold of Kakashi-sensei.” Sakura sighed. “We would need a priest, some blessed ropes and water. More talismans and at least a god or two and some temple monks to attempt that.”

“You do have a point.” Naruto admitted with a sigh. “You really do. Still I can’t believe he cooked for us without us begging. He hunted for us and he acted like a sensei.”

“He’s keeping up with the paperwork. Maybe he has been replaced.” Sasuke muttered. Naruto watched Sakura’s fingers freeze in the middle of Sasuke’s hair at his words. “A switch.”

“Only if the switch is a Kakashi-sensei from a completely different dimension.” Naruto snorted. “I think maybe he is being evaluated or he doesn’t want the other senseis to know how lazy he truly is.”

“Aren’t they all friends?” Sakura mused. “They should already know shouldn’t they? Maybe not Gai-sensei. He’s the type to see things optimistically. I bet he sees Kakashi-sensei through rose coloured glasses no matter how useless sensei is. But I don’t see Kakashi-sensei managing to put on an act like that for his whole life. They have to know how he really is.”
“Or know is true face.” Sasuke yawned before he froze. “Hey… do you think…”

“It’s possible.” Sakura muttered. “No way he had that mask from childhood. They are all around the same age so at least one of them had to have seen him.”

“But who.” Naruto breathed. “That has to be our next level of investigation. Think it was Gai-sensei?”

“I’m thinking Kurenai-sensei.” Sasuke shook his head. “She treats him differently to everybody else. Almost like a big sister.”

“You’re crazy.” Sakura dismissed. “He’s so easy with Asuma-sensei. They had to have known each other for a long time and it seems like they know a lot of secrets about each other. That has to be it.”

“Well only one way to find out.” Naruto pointed out softly. “Of course we could all be wrong because-“ He cut himself off. “Baa-chan.” He whispered. “Tsunade baa-chan!”

“The Hokage?” Sasuke frowned. “What about her?”

“She’s old enough!” Naruto pointed out. “And haven’t you seen the way she talks to sensei sometimes? To all of them? She knows them! The first time she saw Shikamaru’s Dad.” He recalled in a whisper. “She spoke to him the way she would a kid. There’s no doubt she was remembering what he looked like younger. She does the same thing with Kakashi-sensei and he already said he did know her when she was back in the village. That means…”

“When he was younger maybe academy age or even younger.” Sakura’s eyes shone gleefully. “No way he had that mask the entire time. But how to we get the Hokage to share with us or lead us to the right direction?”

“How much sake can we afford?” Sasuke muttered under his breath.

“Sasuke-kun!” Sakura scolded before she sighed. “Actually, you may be on the right track. Buying it would be risky though.”

“Hey… Naruto breathed. “Think we can steal some if there really is a war going on?” His team stared at him and he continued. “Sneak in… steal a vat or something and bring it back to Konoha. It isn’t like we haven’t stolen stuff in the middle of chaos before. I have some storage scrolls.”

“Me too.” Sakura mused. “But do we have something to put it in? liquid is something different when it comes to sealing.”

“Let’s cross that bridge when we get to it.” Sasuke muttered.

XxX

Tenten knew the moment they had gotten close to the border of their destination. Not just in the way that team seven were so alert and how with every step she felt a quiet pressure. It was in the landscape itself. The road leading to the border.

It was in the behaviour of the people they passed. It was in the grass and the trees. Everything was ducking and running for cover from every moment and noise. People were starving. She could see it and she could taste uncertainty and fear.

She had never felt anything like it on such a scale. It made her nervous and jumpy.
“There is no doubt what we are going to be walking into.” Naruto said softly and she jumped in surprise at his voice. “It’s definitely bad ahead.”

“Force recruiting.” Sakura’s voice was cold as she walked. “No boy children above fifteen. Either forced to join or killed for not joining.”

“They will be the first to surrender, the problem isn’t those that were forced into joining.” Sasuke’s voice was so cool and calm as they walked. “The problem is those that got up and joined willingly. They’ll fight until they are cut down.”

“The lands are divided.” Naruto pointed out. “It’s bad and it is only going to get worse further in, we don’t have a choice.”

“We have to protect huh.” Sakura stretched before she sighed. “It is going to a battle alright but at least it won’t be all mercenaries.”

“I hope there won’t be any missing nins in here but I doubt they would stand among the commoners. They would be somewhere with power and position. The rest would be fodder.” Sasuke glanced behind them before he shook his head. “I doubt there is a single shinobi in this mess.”

“It would be nice if big number were all we had to deal with for once.” Sakura sighed. “I can only hope there won’t be any weird technology. Naruto try not to get hit with anything weird.”

“Is this about the land of snow?” Naruto groaned. “Tell me this isn’t about that mission in the land of snow.”

“It is.” Sasuke and Sakura said simultaneously.

XxX

“Oh my.” Shikamaru heard Sakura say as she sat on a large rock. “They really are going to a problem. We can’t let them advance any further.”

“That camp is huge.” Shikamaru shook his head as Ino rested her hand on Sakura’s shoulder. “The encirclement is crazy too. We can’t afford to let them meet.”

“You’re right.” Sakura agreed. “I mean this isn’t as bad as we were expecting but it is still bad. They have a lot of members and they are outfitted with not just weapons. I really was not expecting chariots, who supplied them with that?”

“That had to come from the Hidden stone right?” Asuma-sensei said as he sat with Kurenai-sensei. “This is bothersome.”

“It really is but it is not as bad as it could be, as Sakura said the trouble is the numbers. Quelling it certainly won’t be easy.” Kurenai-sensei gazed out over the plains. “We can’t afford them clashing and we can’t afford them crossing this part of the land.”

“We will have to make our base here then. They can’t walk across without us seeing and they can’t sneak across without running into us.” Neji said softly. “We have to examine the situation a bit more before we plan our move.”

“He’s right.” Kakashi-sensei’s book snapped closed. “Not only is this a big area but this is still an unknown situation in many ways. While we have our instructions, there is much we don’t know about both sides. The opposition is tricky enough and getting information will be hard enough but I
doubt you shall have any trouble gathering information and working to finish the mission.”

“Oh it’s Kakashi-sensei all right.” Naruto laughed from where he sat high on another rock. “Sending us out there to do our thing while you sit back right sensei? I was getting concerned with all the hand holding you were doing the whole time.” Naruto laughed.

“Naruto.” Sakura groaned before she rolled her eyes. “Well he’s not wrong. nice to have you back to normal Kakashi-sensei.”

“I hope you banished the demon.” Sasuke snorted from his tree branch. “Don’t let it back in so easily.”

“I can’t be nice once in a while?” Kakashi-sensei mused.

“No.” His team snapped simultaneously.

“It’s creepy.” Sakura shook her head. “Do one thing and stick to it. I still can’t believe you cooked for us. It’s not your style unless you want something. You’re more of a throw to the wolves while you supervise type sensei. Stick to what you know.”

“Be your true self.” Naruto laughed. “It’s creepy otherwise. I thought you were up for evaluation.”

“Your team has you pegged Kakashi.” Asuma-sensei snorted. “So, do we let the Chuunins take over from here? Just to hear their thoughts. Shikamaru? Sakura?”

“We need to do two things.” Shikamaru got to his feet and brushed off his pants as his mind raced. “Observe the client and speak to the client. We gotta see the situation from their side and we need to see what moves they are making while they are unobserved and when they think are being watched.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Sakura agreed. “But we need to keep an eye on the army being assembled across the plains and get an idea on their leader and their structure. We have to start thinking about sabotage and we have to think about how to run them off and diffuse the situation from both ends.”

“Sounds like a lot of work but I’m certain everyone here can handle it.” Kakashi-sensei tapped his book against his leg. “Let’s hear what you’ve got so far.”

XxX

“So I’m not on the team I expected to be on.” Kiba said softly as he followed Shikamaru. “This is weird.”

“Is it?” Ino shrugged at him as they walked through the tall grass. “Shikamaru is pretty good at figuring out where people should go and for this we can’t afford mistakes.”

Kiba nodded in agreement before his eyes went to Shikamaru and the boy walking by his side. He lowered his voice further. “I didn’t think he would listen to anyone but Sakura.” He hissed.

Ino winced and looked at Sasuke as he kept pace with Shikamaru. “You’re not wrong.” She whispered. “But we need him for stealth and in case we get caught… least that is what Sakura and Shikamaru said.”

“Naruto’s good at stealth too.” Kiba recalled.

“Well Sakura is using him for something else so…” Ino shrugged. “We’re investigation team A.”
It was the wrong time to be admiring the view but Naruto was unable to help himself. It was amazing how places on the same continent could be so vastly different. Every land had something about it that was just awe inspiring. Just flat out amazing as if nature had intended shinobi and other people to settle down in these places from the very start.

The land of fire with its vast forests. The land of wind and the vast almost unending sand. The land of vegetables and the plains and field that it consisted of. Naruto had mixed feelings about the entire thing but at the end of the day a mission was a mission.

He would complete this one to the best of his ability. That did not mean he could not try his best to take in the world around him before the chaos descended.

Because the chaos would descend he could taste it on the air and he could feel it in the plans. He already knew what he would have to do. He already knew how he would be put forward to be used. Did he mind? No he did not.

It was not just for the mission it was for the land around them. The animals that should have been growing wild and free living their lives like nature intended. Giving their breaths to the world around them and participating in the balance.

Naruto shifted his stance as he stood at the top of the pine tree. His hand rested loosely on the bark as he kept his gaze moving to the land below. The armbands he had made were a comforting weight on him. It was not the warm embrace or Ryu but it was a phantom touch and that was honestly enough.

He knew the way to really end it for good. He just needed the opening but for now he would follow orders and keep his eyes open. The land of vegetables was a really pretty place it did not deserve to be destroyed. It most certainly did not deserve the chaos coming its way.

There was a balance in these things and right now it was being torn apart. What could Naruto do but help? What could anyone do? It was more than mission there was a bigger problem underneath the entire thing. It was not just the enemy that had to learn something.

The client had to learn too. Naruto understood that, he understood that a show of force and skill was necessary to show off how necessary shinobi were. They had to slam home how inadequate others were it was a tactic he understood all too well.

Did he approve of it? Well that remained to be seen because underestimation got people killed. Getting cocky got people killed and there were many dead spread out across countries and time to prove him right on that.

Shinobi were not infallible, they could be killed but that did not mean that they had nothing to fear from civilians. With the right about of pressure and force they could topple a small shinobi regime. Even the most talented shinobi had to get tired at some time. He had to run out of chakra and jutsus eventually.

If there were enough people ready to throw their lives away for a cause like that. A force could do anything. That was why shinobi always had to be careful that they walked that fine line when dealing with clients, when on a mission.

They had to make sure they never pushed those that were normal to the point that they would do anything to rid themselves of a threat. They had to awe the civilians not terrify them to the point
that they wanted to do anything to be rid of shinobi. That they swallowed most of their fear and threw away their lives in an attempt to rid themselves of what they feared.

Naruto knew how most of the world was and he knew how he would like most of the world to be, it was a long journey to achieve the balance that he felt the world needed. There was plenty he needed to learn, plenty things he needed to get. Lots of blood that would cover his hands along the way and people he needed to win to his side.

It was missions like these that made him long for the strength of a Hokage. It was also missions like these that made him glad that he was anonymous enough that his deeds would not be that big a deal. He wanted to help, he wanted to save but he knew only one way to end this all for good.

It was good that the enemy’s forces were not too large. The vehicles would be a problem for only a bit. It was a good thing that he had listened to his instincts. A good thing he had been training so hard with his team. He knew where they would go from here and he did not mind at all.

This mission was turning out to be a very good thing for all of them. For team seven to the other teams. They had been aching to test themselves since the war and now the opportunity had come for all of them. This was not a mass scaled thing but it was large enough that they would be able to see how far they had come.

How much further they needed to go. For Naruto he would be able to slip a bit of the leash that he tied himself up with. He could feel that, he could feel that he could let a small bit of truth free here without any consequences. He felt as though he could use this opportunity to teach and explain in a way he would never be allowed usually.

Shinobi raised in Konoha and Konoha alone did not get the facts of the real world. They had gotten a taste of it in the war, maybe some the other missions had done something as well but he doubted the others understood the way his team did.

He doubted they met the characters that he had, he doubted a lot of things. This had been a good place to go to. It was a sad thing that the balance was being destroyed so callously but they were there to teach a lesson to everything so it worked out in the end.

XxX

“So this is what we want to happen?” Asuma asked as he sat next to Gai. He snuffed out his cigarette and played with it between his fingers. “They are doing okay so far but I feel like hovering.”

“We have to give them their space.” Kurenai shrugged as she leaned against the pine tree’s trunk. “They do have some unique insights. We have to believe in Sakura and Shikamaru.”

“Oh I believe in them.” Asuma sighed. “It’s just that this is much harder than I thought it would be. I get they are trying to put theory to practice now but their movements are far different to what we would do.”

“But we.” Gai said softly. “Are Jounins, we have years of experience under us, they are now in the beginning of their youth. They understand not to waste this opportunity. It was us who said they were ready. We have to let them crawl and walk. We have to let them trip and fall on their own. We will pick them up and dust them off afterwards or watch them pick themselves up.”

“Well said.” Kakashi agreed from where he lay on a nearby log. “All the teams are taking this seriously. Far more seriously than most would expect. Considering what we are up against and
their current strength this mission is just right to help them understand not only their limits but where they are physically and mentally.”

“That doesn’t mean we won’t worry.” Asuma muttered. “Sakura and Shikamaru are Chuunins. Amazing Chuunins and not offering at least a proper hand feels strange.”

“I’m hearing your words but they aren’t coming from the person I thought it would come from.” Asuma rolled his eyes at Kakashi’s words. “Even I am concerned for my own cute little team but in case they slip up I’m right here.” Kakashi said softly. “I’m here to clean up what they miss, to correct any big mistakes because even this is a learning experience. I haven’t forgotten the most important thing about them. They are still green.” His pause as he looked at the sky concerned Asuma. “Even Naruto.

XxX

“Okay Neji, Hinata.” Sakura looked up from the notes she had been making. “I’m going to need the two of you to go to these locations that I made on your maps and tell me what you see. I marked the locations that I need you to pay special attention to. I want it all, groups of deer, squatters, water running that isn’t on the map. I want all of it.”

“Right.” Neji took the map from her before his eyes met hers and held. “We’re going.”

“Safe journey.” Sakura nodded, she held her breath when Neji left in the direction she sent him and Hinata glanced at her and nodded before she left as well. She had purposefully sent them far apart because…

Well she did not know how fixed things were with their clan but she really was not trying to have any dead teammates or anything like that on this mission. They seemed fine but the tension was just ridiculous and Hinata did not need pressure or stress.

She needed to relax and do her best. Her best was incredible. Sakura knew this, that was why she wanted to draw it out to the best of her ability. If that meant making sure that nothing distracted her like Neji or Naruto? Then Sakura would work around it.

Besides she really did need the abilities that their eyes held. Sasuke had been a bit miffed at first but they both knew she did not need him or his skills yet. He could quickly put anyone in a genjutsu if anything bad happened with the investigation team A

Her investigation team B was focused on the enemy and the plains that would be their battlefield. As much as she wanted to start laying traps and the such they needed a better look of the lay of the land.

She needed a much better look at the enemy and the people who could get caught up in the crossfire and she needed to get the real story of the conflict out as well. There was no turning back the tides at this point.

This was something she had been training for. This was something she had been anticipating and she could not afford a single misstep. She had faith in her team and she had faith in the others around her but she was not playing by herself.

She was playing against an enemy and that she always had to remember this was real life and people did anything to win. There was no such thing as fair only winning. The only victory she wanted was everyone safe and mission accomplished.

She would not lose anything precious to her ever again. She would not experience that fear and she
would not free. She was there to fight hard for what she had. She had come this far and she had to share what she had earned with others.

The strength and knowledge that she had accumulated at this current time. She would share and use it to keep everyone safe and give them victory. Her boys were her strength and she was there to protect and guide them. That was not all she was there to do however, when it came down to it she had the strength to shelter and protect them.

Everyone would make it out alive and every objective the Hokage secretly wanted. They would achieve, they were bringing home more than a victory. They were out to better the name of Konoha. This was a stepping stone yes but not one to be underestimated.

A rock with moss could ruin everything if one underestimated it. Sakura was going to do no such thing. She was prepared to fight hard and she was ready to draw the line in the sand. The enemy would not be allowed to pass them but they had to make sure they could not flee either.

She was looking forward to see what information investigation team A would yield. She on the other hand had to start shaking up the opposition. War was not just a physical one and one thing she had learned was that men loved rumours like no other.

It was time to get in their heads.

XxX

“I think you should keep it light.” Naruto drew his knee up to his chest as he watched Sakura make her plans. “You’re not wrong, you have to get in their heads but you can’t rush it either Sakura-chan. You have to take it easy with it. Can’t scare them to the point they think someone is there.”

“I was wondering if to send anyone in but that’s too risky.” She sat on his long and nibbled the tip of her nail. “We have to wait to see the new reports from Hinata and Neji before we make any big decisions. There are more horses than I expected.”

“That means merchants or in on it.” Naruto hummed as he switched legs. He tilted his head back. “The capital has to be a mess if the merchants jumped ship to the opposition. Unless they are playing both sides. I doubt that they are.”

“We have two days before our official arrive to assist so…” Sakura trailed off. “That’s more than enough time when you think about it but things might have escalated even more by then. We have to have the big picture by tomorrow evening at least. Draw the client’s attention to us and confront these guys before they get any closer.”

“It’s a packed schedule.” Naruto mused. “We can do it. We might have to do some cleaning in the capital too though. That many horses mean merchants and merchants always have their fingers in political things.”

“I’m certain Konoha has their own fingers in this land.” Sakura muttered. “It’s an important client but I doubt Konoha would let it be so wild, free and unmaintained without some ears and eyes somewhere.”

“You would be right.” Naruto admitted. “I really don’t see Konoha just letting a place like this go with such an important client around. But I don’t see the chance for placing people in place to influence things in our direction.” He paused before he sighed. “Before now I mean.”

“I know what you mean.” Sakura slumped against him. “There’s going to be some gaping holes and who knows what countries will try to fill them.”
“Not much we can do there.” Naruto shrugged lightly. “Merchants are merchants, they sell things. They can sell information too so we just have to be careful what we clean and who takes their places. The opposition and the bands of mercenaries he uses they have to be stamped out no question.”

“They are hyping themselves up.” she looked at him and wrinkled her nose in disgust as she continued. “I don’t know what possessed them or what they are even thinking but they are hyping themselves before they commit these horrible crimes. They think they unstoppable. They think their leader is some great general.”

“He’s human and all he has is their numbers.” Naruto shook his head. “Maybe he has some fancy sword work but at the end of the day he is nothing special. He is just hiding among their numbers. They are too stupid or too greedy or too fearful to see the real picture before them.”

“It’s just sad.” She leaned against him once more and sighed. “Not all of them think that way but there is no way to separate those forced into serving from those in it for the bloodlust and the glory.”

“Can’t risk it even if we could.” Naruto murmured glumly. “That’s currently beyond us Sakura-chan.”

“It’s okay.” She rubbed his arm softly. “I’m just wishing we were stronger now but I know it is a progress. One day we’ll be able to save more than one side. One says we’ll be strong enough to save the people on both sides. The people that want saving and those who don’t even know they want saving.”

“And what about the others?” Naruto asked softly as he played with the few strands of her hair that had escaped the bun. “The ones who don’t want saving and who glorify what they have done.”

“We do what we have been doing so far.” She responded softly. “We make sure they can’t hurt anyone else. We do that for those that can’t fight, for those that can’t protect themselves. The ones causing the pain and suffering deserve to be escorted right to hell’s gates.”

“I don’t mind shoving them right in. just show me the bastards Sakura-chan.” He whispered. “When the time comes Sasuke and I will do what we have to do and we’ll stop them. They won’t step a foot over the rock line.”

“You promise?” Her fingers on his arm were tracing a small pattern

“I swear.” She turned to look at him and nodded before she relaxed by his side and continued to trace faint lines on his skin.

XxX

“This isn’t good.” Ino whispered as she read the scrolls. “This really isn’t good.” She whispered, there were no words to actually describe what she had read so she just passed them to Chouji and Shikamaru. She watched Shikamaru’s eyes darken at the first announcement.

“A kid?” Chouji whispered. “They killed a prince?”

“They killed lots of them and not only that.” Shikamaru’s mouth twisted down. “These taxes are ridiculous. Its obvious someone corrupt had a hand in this.”

“What about the royal line?” Chouji breathed as he switched scrolls with Shikamaru. “Hell what is going to happen with the client now? He only has two kids left now right? And one isn’t…”
“That isn’t just it.” Ino ran her fingers down the scroll until Chouji read what she had seen.

“Oh my god.” Chouji whispered. “They can’t be serious.”

“That explains the opposition’s show of force.” Sasuke rolled up the scrolls he had and handed them to Shikamaru. “The Hokage is going to need these.”

“We can’t let them clash.” Shikamaru whispered. “They have no idea what they have.”

“They know enough.” Sasuke casually picked up another scroll. “They know it is destructive and they know it is valuable. They don’t have shinobis of their own. They don’t have the arts of the Samurai, they are desperate.”

“Stupid too.” Chouji muttered. Kiba glanced at them where he stood by the door before his squared his shoulders and focused once more on being the lookout.

“That’s enough of here.” Shikamaru swallowed. “We need this, we need all of this.”

XxX

“Let’s see what we have.” Shikamaru said the moment they returned. “So far on our side it doesn’t look so good.”

Sakura looked past him to Sasuke who seemed unfazed. “Anything good?”

“There’s sake.” He tossed out as he made his way further into the camp.

“Well there is that to look forward to.” Sakura sighed before she returned to Shikamaru. “Let’s see what we have and what information we’re lacking. I have the feeling this isn’t going to take more than a few shows of force on our end to make the opposition back down but the problem lies in the court.”

“This has been going on far longer than you would think.” Shikamaru winced as he brought out the scrolls. “We’re dealing with dead royals and traitors.”

“Oh doesn’t this seem familiar.” Sakura sighed under her breath. “Sometimes no one comes to save you.” She shook her head and gestured for Shikamaru to follow her. “Let’s talk.”

XxX

“This sucks.” Shikamaru said softly as he sat next to Sakura. “This is really and truly bothersome.”

“It’s fucked up that’s what it is.” She laughed softly in response. The evening dimness made the plains below into a vast sea of dark. There were the soft sounds of the grass dancing in the breeze below them but Shikamaru could not even really appreciate any of it. “I’ve seen political messes before but this is something else. Can we even be nice here?”

“I don’t want to lose anyone but this mission.” Shikamaru sighed before he allowed himself to fall backward. He lay on the huge rock and sighed up at the sky. “Why am I a Chuunin.” His words got a bark of laughter from Sakura. “I’m serious.”

“Oh I’m just laughing at how little we’ve changed since we got our jackets.” Sakura laughed as she stretched to the sky. She laughed again before she fell back so that she lay looking up at the sky just like him. “I ask myself that question almost every mission. Don’t get me wrong.” She laughed. “I love being a Chuunin but sometimes there are some big messes out there that make the entire
“How are we supposed to get through with this.” Shikamaru sighed. “It’s all so bothersome, it’s so tiring and exhausting.”

“Tell me about it. It really does wear off quick but the responsibility is always there. Always lurking.” Sakura said softly. “During the exam, I was scared out my wits. I was terrified and that fear made me do things I did not even think was possible. I almost lost my friends, I almost lost everything I held dear. My village was attacked. There was lots of fear and anger inside me.” She paused and a heavy sigh came from her. “It’s still here, it will always be here and because I don’t want it to grow I get of my butt and face the exhausting shit.”

“The world has some shit I don’t think we are prepared to see.” Shikamaru said softly. “It’s one thing to know how to deal with a mission in theory but people are completely different things in the end. You can know how they will act and you can know the best choice but sometimes you don’t know how that will affect you.”

“You learn to live with the guilt. The academy prepares you for lots of things.” Sakura paused and it felt as though she was thinking about something specific because she laughed softly. “But they really can’t prepare you to deal with a lot of things. Konoha is complicated, shinobi are complicated the rules are all over the place and there never is one answer.”

“Do the mission, protect your friends.” Shikamaru said softly. “That’s usually what they say to live by.”

“Complete the mission, make Konoha look good. Uphold the reputation by any means necessary so that the village can survive. Protect your friends.” Sakura said softly. “It’s so hard to protect everyone. So far, I haven’t had to put anyone in danger or someplace where I know they’ll risk their lives or the odds or not in their favour. So far we’ve been lucky.”

“That time will come.” Shikamaru admitted. “Sooner or later we’ll be bound by logical decisions.”

“Political missions show you the worst parts of people.” Sakura said softly. “I’d rather be other there recovering something or helping a small town or lending assistance. Anything but treading lightly and whispering behind the scenes. You see the ugly parts of humans.”

“You can see the ugly parts of humans no matter where you go.” Shikamaru dragged his hand over his face. “I was prepared for war, I was prepared for some fucked up stuff but I don’t think you can ever be truly ready when lives are on the line and people with power just don’t care.”

“Me neither.” Sakura said softly. “I mean considering how it could have been I’m glad this is as bad as we have to be. Still, I would have liked something a little better to deal with you know? Some flag to cling to. Some hope, hell a handkerchief from some princess so I can keep the faith.”

“If only we were that lucky.” Shikamaru said softly. “It’s depressing how hard we work, not just us but shinobi from all different countries. No matter how hard we struggle and how hard we try. Someone is going to think there is no need for us. I guess that’s how it works. Maybe one day we’ll be shoved into a small part of a continent and we’ll struggle to keep our way.”

“I don’t think so.” Sakura sat up at his words. “Shinobi have been around for so long. We inspire awe, we inspire fear but that’s how humanity works. You can get mad at the system but you have to try and change it else you will repeat the cycle over and over again. Once is enough for me.”

“So what are we going to do?” Shikamaru sat back up and rubbed his lower back. “There are so
“Part of me wants to scream nothing and another part of me wants to scream everything.” Sakura admitted softly. “We have to take everything from them. Their chariots, their weapons. Their will too.” She finished softly. “We have to fight and fight hard we have to be polite and sweet, the heroes of a play but slip in the darkness and be the avengers too.”

“We can’t half assed it huh.” Shikamaru sighed. “Pity.”

“Please.” Sakura dismissed. “You never planned to half ass it in the first place. You just got a little overwhelmed at the darkness.” He startled when her hand covered his. “It’s okay, we’ll make it through this and we have the others waiting and depending on us. We have our senseis behind us too and they wouldn’t leave it up to us if they didn’t believe in us.”

“Damn.” Shikamaru sighed. “You’re the one reassuring me here. My head must really be a mess.”

“It isn’t like I don’t understand.” Sakura admitted. “We don’t have that much time to clean everything up and people are going to die. You and I did well at the academy, we get the rules better than most of the people who graduated with us but sometimes the rules aren’t anything. It’s hard to follow them when you see what it is really like.”

“Yeah.” Shikamaru said softly. “You know, this is a really peaceful place. I’d like to be around here in harvest time.”

“I’d like to be around here for spring.” Sakura laughed. “I bet it smells wonderful. Hopefully I’ll be able to come back here in summer and see what the land looks like when it isn’t being strangled from all directions.”

XxX

“Hold on for a second.” Ino gasped from where she sat straddled on what she had thought was a bandit. “Aren’t you a girl?” The figure under her started to squirm under her words. “Oh no you don’t.” She hissed before she held the person’s hands down. “Hinata! Take off this hat and veil please.”

Hinata’s were slower than she would have liked by soon enough Ino was blinking down at a face she had not too long ago seen a notice of mourning for.

“Your highness?” She whispered even as under her the girl began to struggle once more. “How on earth…”

XxX

“You’re looking really good for a dead guy kid.” Tenten held her staff to the throat of the boy dressed in bandit gear. “You’re looking healthy and hale so I’m going to venture and guess that your twin might be alive as well.”

“Don’t get involved.” The boy tried to snarl before she pressed her staff harder against his throat. “Don’t get in our way! This country is finished! They sold their souls for a pipe dream!”

“Don’t get involved.” Tenten narrowed her eyes before she shook her head. “We’re from Konoha kid. We’re neck deep in involvement. We were sent to put your country to rights and we’re going to. With or without your help. You gave me quite the workout. You’re a slippery one but I’ve met slipperier.”
Tenten flipped her staff around and down. Away from the boy’s neck. There were many ways to deal with him but she was going to go for the route with the most information. They were running out of time before the opposition mobilised.

“Now I would like you to tell me everything that is going on in this country.” She said softly. “Who are you running from and why. I want to see if everything adds up or not.”

XxX

“This is hard huh.” Naruto mused as he sat by the small fire. “It’s a small country but it has so many problems.”

“Everyone thinks they are dead. We can’t just let them run away. They’ll actually be dead in less than a year.” Sasuke shrugged. “It looks like they really are the only survivors from the line.”

“Well the client would be happy in the end but we bring them home it’s the same situation.” Naruto sighed before he reached for his bag. “We missed two but there is a good way to take care of all of this. It’ll move the deadline up further though.”

“We’ll be ready.” Sakura confirmed as she sat with Shikamaru. They had scrolls in their hands and determination on their faces. “We need somewhere to put those kids that is safe. We have to secure the area around the client and we have to do it as quickly as possible.”

“Sounds about right.” Sasuke nodded as he reached for his own bag. “That leads to the team that is still out?”

“We need some of their clothes transformations won’t help here it has to be authentic.” Shikamaru glanced to the trees. “Kiba, Tenten, Neji, Shino. That’s the best team for acquiring what we need for the next phase.”

“Everyone can’t die by the sword.” Sakura took up as she rolled up a scroll. “That’s where Shino, Hinata and Neji comes in. natural tragic causes because they are the ones closest to the client and we can’t afford suspicion.”

“We’re going to put on quite the show. It’s going to be in legends for years to come.” Shikamaru said grimly. “I wouldn’t have gone this way but due to circumstances we have no choice. Ino has to take out the archbishop in a rather flashy way. Flashier than I would like. When he goes down that’s the signal for everyone else.”

“Not everyone is going.” Sakura pointed out quickly. “We have to have people ready for the last phase so we can’t have you running here there and everywhere exhausting yourselves. “We need people to plant the trail and suspicion.”

“Don’t forget who has to be collateral damage.” Shikamaru rubbed the back of his neck with a sigh. “It has to look natural because officially we aren’t here yet.”

XxX

“Ready?” Shino asked as Neji and Hinata arrived.

“We’re ready.” Neji’s eyes were already fixed on the tower ahead. “It’s time.”

“Let’s proceed” Shino adjusted his hood before he turned to Hinata. “Are you prepared?”

“Y-yes.” She nodded. “Let’s go.” She finished softly. “I’m prepared for this.”
“The others will be here soon. We need to be in place before Ino moves.” Neji’s stride changed into a brisk pace. “We can’t afford to waste any time.”

Xxx

“So I’m a runner.” Naruto teased as he tugged at the stolen armour. “Cute.” He examined himself. “There’s some irony in here Sakura-chan.”

“We can’t have you fighting so hard right away and we can’t afford to be caught up fighting on the client’s territory. It’s best to do our thing and put the blame on the other side.” Sakura poked Naruto’s shoulder lightly. “Just don’t forget what you’re here to do. You and Sasuke-kun are the distractions. The ones to make the loud noise. The ones that will let people get a good look so they can identify the people later.”

“Right.” Kiba pulled at his armor. “We gotta run hard and fast.”

“Those that are vital for tomorrow can’t fight today.” Sakura said dryly. “Don’t forget that in the morning is when the last stage starts, we have to move quickly and we can’t afford for anyone to get a good look at us.”

“There’s plenty we can’t afford here.” Sasuke muttered as he crammed the helmet further on his head. “We still look young and small; the shadows can only do so much.”

“So mist?” Naruto offered hopefully.

“Of course not.” Sakura muttered. “Don’t be ridiculous. Think of this attack as a distraction, two predators in a chicken coop. We’re the ones running around startling the hens but then there is the momma fox outside waiting along with the papa wolf and cousin’s hyena to get the wayward hens that are flustered.”

“Wait why are all those predators hanging out together.” Kiba questioned. “That wouldn’t even work.”

“You get what I mean regardless.” She snorted. “Kiba unlike Naruto and Sasuke you actually have work to do and targets. Do you feel up to it?”

“Are you seriously asking that?” Kiba snorted before he flipped the crude spear in his hand. “Well the choice of weapon is new but I don’t have a problem with this.”

“I wonder who is going to make it to camp first.” Naruto chuckled. “I can vanish like no other.”

“I think I have more than a fair chance.” Sasuke snorted. “Besides if you think you’re going to leave Sakura back here I have something to tell you about your own personality.”

“Oh like you’re going to just leave her here and go to sleep.” Naruto scolded. “Don’t speak for me. And if you think that I think you’re going to stroll into camp and leave Sakura-chan to come back
by herself you don’t know you.”

“I think both of you are going to do what I tell you and go back to camp.” Sakura gripped both of them by their arms and sighed. “Get back to camp and get ready for tomorrow. I don’t want any shadow clones walking around. I don’t want any mysterious poisoning I just want the two of you to make a lot of noise, stick to the shadows and go back to camp. Wait for me if you have to but we can’t have you in the stage.”

“Not fair Neji gets to go.” Naruto grumbled half under his breath.

“Neji can kill without making it a suspicious looking scene. You however.” Sakura looked him over. “You can too I guess but it still looks suspicious in the end. I’d rather have the Hyuuga way of things and a few bug bites to help us out than the bloodbath that you and Sasuke would bring. There is a time and place for everything.”

“Tomorrow better be ours I didn’t come here to sit down.” Sasuke muttered.

XxX

“Deep breaths Ino.” She whispered to herself as she watched the target. Shikamaru’s hand found its way to her lower back and she smiled at the clumsy rub that he gave her. It was a comfort still so she accepted it.

Her task was an easy one in theory. It was simple on paper. It really was but when it came to the applying well… there was a reason she was taking slow breaths as she crouched next to Shikamaru. She had never done something like this to an actual person.

She knew how to, she had studied it but she did not know how to carry it out. She was a bit nervous about it. She was a bit concerned about it. More than a bit concerned because she only had one shot. She had to drive the target insane and kill them in one go. She had to make it a huge spectacle.

Shikamaru was there to make the target stay still long enough. Their visible confusion would only add to the spectacle in the end. This was a show that they were putting on. The true story was something only they would know but the people of the country they would only know what they allowed them to see.

She was the opening act. Through her the story would build and grow but she had to get it done perfectly. No one could see them, no one could find them and it had to look crazy but insane. That was a lot of pressure but she could do it. Shikamaru had faith in her. Sakura had faith in her.

She was not going to fall behind on this. She came here to do her best and she came here to make sure that she was not left behind. Her father had been proud of her, she was going to make sure that he always would be starting from this moment.

“I’m ready.” She whispered to Shikamaru, the hand from her back disappeared and he sighed next to her. “Let’s do this.”

“On the count of three, he’s right there in the middle of the hall.” Shikamaru whispered as they peeped over the balcony. “I capture and you get in his head quick. I’ve got you. One, two.” He gritted from the strain as he began to use his ability. “Three. Capture complete.”

XxX

“Sounds like the party is starting.” Naruto said when the screams started. “Damn Ino’s incredible
people are freaking out over there.”

“And that’s our signal.” Sasuke adjusted his helmet once more. “Fuck I can’t wait to throw this mess away.”

“The courtyard is where we make our appearance huh.” Naruto whispered before he laughed. “Sakura-chan is taking most the fun from this but fine fine. Let’s get this party started. Kiba you ready?”

“Shut up I was born ready.” Kiba snarled. “Let’s get going.”

XxX

“That sounds like it.” Shino said from where he crouched. “It’s time. Our targets have been located. It is time to move.”

“Hinata-sama.” Neji looked up from where he sat against the wall. “Are you ready?”

“Y-yes.” She nodded. “I’m ready. Let’s go.”

“I feel more vibrations the guards are on the move.” Shino said softly. “We have nine targets. That is three each. Let’s move.”

XxX

“You’re always so out of it when you come back to yourself.” Shikamaru complained as he ran through the trees. “Damn it I swear you’ve gotten heavier Ino.” He complained as he tried to keep her secured on his back. “Hurry up and wake back up already.”

Even though he was rightfully complaining about how annoying it was to have to carry her before they carried out the next phase he was proud of her. That had been incredible. The entire scene had been downright amazing. Ino had done better than he had hoped.

It came out better than they had spoken. Better than had been scripted. Shikamaru had started it with the capture. Their target had shown his confusion at being held still. It had been shown on his face but after that, after that had been all Ino and it had been just crazy.

He knew she had been working hard. He had known she had been nervous, scared of not living up to basically everyone but the way that she had just come with that had him grinning deep inside. Ino had gone all out and he was fucking proud.

She could take the rest of the night to recover and he would not care. Their target had gone down so well, nobody else could have done that. The way he raised his hands to his head. The way he struggled. The fucking babbling of nonsense. When he had grabbed the wooden cup and bashed his head in Shikamaru had felt pride deep in his chest.

The bleeding from the eyes had been gruesome but when he had made the run for the sword and fell over the stairs he could have hugged her. They had been the opening act and Ino had owned the fucking stage. She had nothing to worry about in his opinion.

He had been worried too, not just about her but about pulling this off in the way that would benefit everyone and protect as many people as possible. Some things people just did not need to know. It was fine if Konoha knew it alone. They were acting in Konoha’s best interest and it was best that they never forgot that.
Still he kept his legs moving and he hugged Ino a little tighter on his back as he raced looking for the spot that they had secured. Everyone in the hall had rightfully started to freak out at the violent dramatic death but that was only the beginning. Next was the others.

The others on the outside, the others on the inside ready to take out their targets one by one. Shikamaru felt his blood pumping as his mind worked and whirled. This entire mission was just crazy and insane. Part of him kept wondering how their senseis were thinking about this.

They had given the reigns to himself and Sakura they were just watching things unfold. They would give advice if asked. Shikamaru just knew that they would but so far all they had done was sit, smile and listen. So far things were doing just fine and more importantly everyone was still alive and uninjured.

They just had to keep it that way and they had to do what they had to do before the time limit they had given themselves ran out. This was just fucking insane but he had never felt more alive than this moment.

XxX

No injuries, they had no fucking injures. She was flying high even as she shuffled along to the meeting point. It had been harder than she had thought to keep an eye on everything and everyone. It had come down to trust and it had come to be that it was harder to trust than she had thought it would. She was hyped though.

She was flying high on the success and even though far behind them torches were waving from a confused frightened crowd she was not afraid. She was elated, she was a few minutes away from squealing and doing something. She was so damn happy she did not know what to do with herself besides get to the meeting point and get back to the camp.

Confirmed kills and it had gone down marvellously. They had to safely ditch the stolen materials soon but the lie had been carefully set. Everything had gone down as it was supposed to. Konoha was not here to play and they were not here to make careless mistakes. Of course the little detour for team seven had been plenty amusing. Naruto would have to explain what he was going to do with that wood sooner or later.

She was a little regretful if she were to be a little honest that more could not be done but there was only so much they could do before their deadline. They had made it early and they had to use that to their advantage because they saw a nest of snakes. Most of those snakes were now gone and how wonderfully had that gone down?

She had not seen it with her own eyes but considering how well everything went she was proud of Ino. She knew Ino had been working hard but it was obvious that she had thrown in her all behind her part. The panic, confusion and fear caused by the first death was everything it was supposed to be. They had taken advantage of that and moved on from there. She was so damn happy.

They had kept to the shadows but she knew what the people had seen. The rumours would grow. They only had a few hours until the next phase and she was ready. The army would be mobilized and while normally there would be no doubt who would crush who.

The others had no idea that Konoha not only was already here but they had already made plans for them. Or to be exact she and Shikamaru had made plans for them. First however she needed to have a small meeting with everyone about the final phase.

After she checked in with everyone and made sure that they were all on the same level then they
would speak about the next phase.

That big army needed trimming and the force needed to be pushed back. She already knew what she wanted to do. Maybe Shikamaru did as well, she knew that Kakashi-sensei most likely knew what she wanted to do. She had been training and learning for something just like this after all. She just hoped everyone was ready.

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“Okay.” Naruto sat by the fire and crossed his legs. “About tomorrow, let’s talk Sakura-chan.”

“You’re a bit early.” She teased as she took a seat by his side. Sasuke was quick to follow. The rest of the teams did the same until all of them were huddled together watching the fire in the middle. Their senseis drifted into hearing distance and sat quietly a few paces behind them and waited. “I already know how I want to deal with tomorrow.”

“Finally, now let us in.” Naruto grinned. “Tell us.”

“We can’t let them pass us here.” Sakura said firmly. Sasuke and Naruto I think you already know what I want you to do.”

“I didn’t pack all of this for nothing.” Sasuke snorted as he watched the sky above. “We’re up first right?”

“You and Naruto currently have the most stamina and force. You’re the freshest out of everyone as well. So far you haven’t done much and I did that for a reason. You’re to meet them head on. The rest of us is here to catch those that slip through the net.”

“What strategy are we using here?” Shikamaru asked as he hugged his knees to his chest. What way are you planning to use them?”

“It’s a rather unusual way. Rather unorthodox.” Sakura admitted with a shrug. “But I plan around my tea, I take in what they are good at and how they think. I know how they work best. They are going to start at different points and work their ways through.”

“I don’t think I get it.” Shikamaru muttered.

“I’ll show you it later.” Sakura promised. “Right now, we only have a few hours to get enough rest because in the morning the other side will be coming.”

“Want any help?” Asuma-sensei asked from where he sat. “This is not just a mid-range and close battle; long range will be useful too.”

“I’m aware of that.” The smile she aimed over her shoulder at Asuma-sensei was bright. “I’ve already got that figured out. For now I’d like to congratulate everyone on such a great job. Phase one was completed marvellously.”

“Better than expected, better than even hoped.” Shikamaru picked up. “It was done so fast too I’m impressed.”

“Me as well.” Sakura whistled. “Free and clear and everyone hit so hard and fast. I don’t even know what to say. Even those on the ‘only if possible’ list got hit. That’s better than I thought it could be. We’re doing better than great.”

“Tomorrow let’s continue with that.” Shikamaru yawned. “Everyone should do a check before
sleep. In the morning is the big one.”

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“It’s the big one.” Ino whispered as she stood on the ridge looking down to the ridge below. It was early in the morning and the grass danced in the wind quietly. “They’re coming.”

“Everyone knows what they are going to be doing right?” Sakura said as she knelt at the edge. “Naruto, Sasuke-kun don’t forget what you’re up for.”

“We take them by surprise.” Sasuke said as he adjusted his pouches. Ino watched him test his short sword before he slid it back to the straps on his back. “Ready Naruto?”

“Oh you bet.” Naruto purred. It was hard to keep her eyes on him, she was not certain but every time she glanced his way something ran up her spine and she had to glance away.

She had not expected him to ditch the jacket. She did not think anyone had. The black shirt he had donned over his mesh one had her a little confused but what had her was the sword that Naruto had strapped to his back like Sasuke and the various weapon pouches he had on him. There was some sort of curved sword that hung on him that curved to his back.

She had no idea where he had been carrying half these things. Just as she had no idea where team seven had vanished a few hours before during phase one. It had not been long but she knew they had been missing.

Hopefully she would learn why eventually. Naruto however had this energy to him as he waited. He was practically vibrating in place as he stared at where the enemy would appear. She had watched him get ready since morning and she had the feeling she had not really seen everything that he had on him.

Sasuke and Naruto were dressed and calm. She had a few nerves in her gut but she was there to make sure no one went through. She was determined that she would not fall behind. She felt all them had known that team seven would take centre stage sooner or later but she had not expected anything like this.

Team seven was strong and yes they were up against mostly normal people but she had seen the camp. She had seen the diagram for the numbers of people. Those were hordes of people and Sasuke and Naruto looked calm at fighting them. Sure Naruto had shadow clones and all but this was still a war being fought with a few people. With them leading the charge the risk of injury and anything else got higher.

She did not want to ask if Sakura knew what she was doing or not. Whatever she had shown the senseis and Shikamaru must have at least made sense because Shikamaru gave in. He looked wary now but he had given in.

She was sure Sakura knew what she was doing, she had faith in it all but she had the feeling that whatever she saw happen was going to make her look at her friend differently.

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“You understand the strategy, right?” Sakura sat on the edge as they watched. Neji and Hinata stood on her right. They would let her know when the army got close. She already knew they had mobilized. However, with an army that big she knew they would be heard long before she saw them. “Naruto, Sasuke-kun can I send you?”
“Sakura-chan.” The sheer delight in Naruto’s voice made her look up at him. She had seen him in many ways but she knew she had done the right thing by the glee in his face. His eyes were dancing and the way he was fixated on the ground below told her a lot. It told her everything about what they needed to do. “You know I’m going to end this as soon as I’m down there right?”

She did know. She knew what he and Sasuke would do and that no matter if she told them not to that they would do it anyway. It was fine, she understood that because she would do it too. After that mission where Naruto had gone off on his own they had all gotten brutally honest with each other. No time to protect hurt feelings.

All of them knew from this point they would be getting their hands dirty. Sakura had to hang back and direct them so she could not be back to back with her boys. However that did not mean that she would not be fighting and accompanying them.

She had not trained this hard, studied this much for them to take the lead and try to lead her behind. She was going to be with them every way that she could. “Naruto.” She said softly. “Give them fear, Sasuke-kun. Naruto, if you hold back I’ll beat you myself. Give them everything and then some.”


“I don’t know how to hold back.” Sasuke snorted as he slowly slid his sword out. There was a change in the air. Sakura did not need Hinata and Neji tensing at her side to know that the army was getting closer.

“They are coming.” Neji snapped as he took a few steps back from the edge. “The horses are coming in fast.”

“That’s us then.” Naruto turned to wink at her. “Let’s go Sasuke!”

She watched them leap over the edge to run down the rock towards the fields. She took a step back herself before she started her hand signs. Kakashi-sensei had taught her this as defence but as well as it was appreciated she needed it for something else.

“Ready.” She gritted her teeth as the huge wall formed. “Take…This!” her punch smashed the wall she had summoned and she watched through dust and debris as the rocks went flying forward past her boys to the coming horses. There were screams and panic as the horses and riders went down. Those that were not crushed by the debris flailed in confusion and that was when Sasuke and Naruto reached them. “Final phase starts now!”

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He felt cool all over but that was not all of it. Time felt so strange, so slow and Naruto loved it. He had been hesitating on just what to do when Sakura had told him to go all out. He guessed she knew what had been on his thoughts.

He had been miffed that he had barely gotten any action so far but now that he was coming up on the crowd he was willing to forgive and forget.

There were so many things he just could not do when he was sparring or even fighting an adult in Konoha. There were always things he could not reveal. So many things he could not do because they were always watching for more.

Here now he could allow the ghosts to slip free. Running always made him feel free but when he had the sword in his hand he felt like something else entirely. He and Sora had learned from
Zabuza but so had many others. It was himself and Sora that had stuck the entire thing out.

He knew exactly what he wanted, he knew how he felt right at this moment. Ryu’s gifts were on his arms and the feeling the metal gave him. He could not stay still. He did not have the ability that Ryu had, he doubted that even after all this time and work that he had the same control Ryu had. Even after all that concentration Naruto was not a monk.

He could not feel the world the way that Ryu had but that was okay. What he could currently feel was good enough. He could hear the panic and he could feel the people sharper than when he was buried in mist looking for his target.

Rocks exploded forward above him and he laughed loudly as Sakura’s attack went past him to smash into the first row of chariots. Sakura would never fail to make him laugh and make him proud. It was a good opening but he and Sasuke had it from here. Those that managed to make it past them would be swept up by the others.

However, Naruto doubted that they would be able to even use their legs properly after he passed them. He nodded at Sasuke before he launched out and away. He started running right alongside the oncoming army before he started to curve. He knew what he was doing. His left hand held his sword. His right hand slipped into his pocket for the first poison bomb. The first wave would not be doing anything but going down.

When Sasuke had gotten far enough away Naruto let the ball dropped and reached for the fire cracker and launched it behind him. The explosion brought dust in the air and panicked screams. He felt the calm wash over him. It drowned him a bit further as he reached for the small scythe. Now the real work would begin. He could see his target almost as if there was nothing in his way.

He knew how things like these ended and he would be the one to take the head. A smile grew on his face as his stance lowered and he claimed the life of the man closest to him with a slash.

He felt cool all over his body. The first person had barely even fell and he had picked the next too. Their spears were held loose and high. It was all too easy to dodge the first lunge and get them in the ribs when they missed. Before they could even recover from that his backslash got them from the unprotected arms to their necks.

A moment to pause for the supplies that he had. A simple drop where he stood and then a throw. The panic was rising and it would only get higher.

His feet moved faster than most were able to keep up with. He came up between a group of five. They never even saw him. The scythe got them all in the part of their armour that was weakest. He had noted the flaw the moment he had put it on.

It felt as though no time at all had moved. The bodies were still dropping. Naruto flipped a kunai into his mouth and focused on his goal. There was panic all around and he had to not only cut through the herd he had to trim it too. There was nothing wrong with that. He was looking forward to it.

The lust in him was rising. He could smell the blood and it was already on him. He wanted to cut them all down. He wanted to make them cower. It was not a nice feeling but after everything they had done he wanted them to know there was something to fear. Shinobi.

What was Sasuke doing? Well Naruto hoped he was putting that frustration that had been built up into good use. Sasuke had been looking forward to the chance to really test himself for ages. They all had, the power levels of the opponents were not the problem. Team seven were not afraid or
even bothered by that.

No they had a question that needed to be answered. How would they do against an army? Naruto lowered his stance as he ran, he doubled back and leapt forward. He slashed and he threw kunais and tags. He created chaos and pain all while he got closer to the target.

So far, he had the answer to that question and it was pretty damn good.

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He would never say that it was easy. It was hard work and that should be acknowledged. He had trained for the sword and he had trained in order to keep up with Naruto. Taking a life was not easy but he had learned early on in team seven that sometimes it was necessary.

Sasuke had made his choice. He had chosen his team and his village, that was what he had to protect. That was what he had to dedicate himself to and when it came down to it that was what he had left and there was where all his emotions would go.

It was not easy but he had been fighting hard towards a moment like this. He was nothing like Naruto but he held his own pain, his own darkness and shame. He could not unleash it towards his team mates but he could unleash it on these people before him.

His sword moved so easily and his legs as well. His speed had really increased. With people like Naruto and Sakura but his side he had doubted it but when he compared himself to these normal people he saw how much he had improved.

His eye was a gift and he was learning how to use it. On these people it seemed like a waste but he put his all into it anyway. He dodged spears and crude swords. He got enemies in their vulnerable spots. Took men down at the knees. He dropped bomb tags and paper bombs.

He knew that the others were waiting for those that managed to get through but Sasuke did not feel like sharing. He flipped over two men and when he ducked behind another and two others got speared as a result Sasuke took that opportunity to throw the bottle of oil into the air.

His hand signs were faster than before but he knew he could be faster. He had lots of work to do on that. He aimed for the place where he had come and his fireball hit true. He did not stick around to see the damage. He heard the panic and screams that was enough. His sword was back in his hand and Sasuke continued on the path that Sakura had laid out for them.

Quickly get behind them and then cut right through them down the middle. It was crazy but it was them. They were quick enough and strong enough to do such a thing. Divide and divide again. Confuse the enemy and take them out. He and Naruto had enough stamina and Chakra to do such things. The first pass would be with sword and weapons alone. If any more force would be needed then they would go all wild.

As it was there was panic on every corner. The group was so huge he could only see others either trying to engage him or running away. No sign of Naruto but there was such a strong feeling of death and something unworldly on the field that he knew that Naruto was more than fine.

He most likely had set that part of himself free and was having the time of his life. Sasuke just wished he could get a closer look because when Naruto hit that zone he was truly unworldly. Not a move wasted, fast on his feet. Quick reactions for everything, he was a beast untamed, he was death among mortals and Sasuke envied him for that.

But he would find his own way. He was only beginning to hit his stride to his true power. He
would not be left behind in anyway. This was all he had so he was going to give it his all and then some.

A sword attempted to slice him from behind so he sidestepped even as he reached up to grab a spear from a man that he passed. Sasuke’s sword removed his head from his shoulders even as he used the spear to launch himself into the air.

Naruto had left him with a pretty amusing toy. Naruto’s tinkering was dangerous but there was no denying that they worked. It was supposed to be good with fire. All Sasuke had to do was bite down, do the hand signals and blow.

The spicy taste was slightly expected but the long plume of flame that spread from him made his heart warm for his team mate. Even as he paid attention to those that were aware of him around them. Time was moving so slowly for him that Sasuke could not even figure out what they were saying.

The moment they registered his falling body among them his sword was in his hand and slicing. The moment heads turned to acknowledge him kunais and needles flew to hit their marks.

Bodies fell from all directions as he carried along on the path. Two curving arrows making their way to the back of the pack while taking out as many as they could. They were the first rush. All Sakura’s idea except it was just the two of them. However, two was more than enough and she knew that. As long as it was himself and Naruto two were enough.

Hell, Sasuke was getting into this. His mind was clearer with every move and he kept getting calmer. The more he ran and fought the more he thought. The slower everyone else got around him, he was unsure to whether that was the sharingan or whether he had hit some stride in shinobi development.

Whatever it was he could see that their plan was working even as he dodged, twisted and cut his path through the hoard. There was confusion as some that were spared tried to turn back. However, he had not checked his and his team’s bags for nothing.

He was nothing like Naruto, poison would actually affect him but normal people did not get up from explosions and so he used those things to his advantage as he cut his way through. His circle had begun to round up the way it was supposed to when those in the back noticed him.

He guessed they had been watching the chaos unfold. Watched the bodies flying and the explosions coming their way. They had decided to stand their ground. it was admirable. Sasuke paused long enough to unroll a scroll from his pouch and summon the disposable blades he had bought and sharpened himself. his good sword would not be wasted here but he would get some good practice in.

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“What is this.” Tenten whispered as she stood rooted in her designated spot. “What are they?” She did not want to say that she was afraid but what she could see before her. She had thought she knew what they were like. She had teamed up with them, observed them. Hell, she had gone on missions with them.

She had no idea that this thing that consumed the field was team seven. Naruto and Sasuke alone had the entire army covered in this… thing. It was not physical but she could hear, she could see and gods above could she feel. Sasuke was the one nearest to them. She could see his path and while she had seen violence before.
This was something different. The difference in power was so obvious, the difference in skill and ability. They were mowing them down. Sasuke, who knew he was that strong? That fast? That fucking terrifying? Because what they were doing was more than cutting a path. They were taking them out, they were taking out large numbers at a time.

They were there to make sure no stragglers got through but gods above. She did not think they would be able to move or fight after Sakura’s first attack and then Sasuke’s.

Sakura’s earth wall had startled her but the way she had smashed it and sent the chunks flying at the first wave. Tenten had seen horses smashed and chariots destroyed. The timing of it. The rocks had barely landed before Naruto and Sasuke had gotten in there.

She had held her own doubts about the entire formation but now that she saw it she saw what Sakura had been thinking. This move showed her faith and understanding in her team. She understood not only how terrifying they were but she knew how to utilize the fear that they brought with them.

She could barely concentrate on Naruto’s side of things. She was just too fixated on Sasuke. He was fast and he kept moving, kept moving through the people and the progress he was making. Even if they were to try and clean up after them they would have been left behind.

If they had done the full assault that had originally been on the table, team seven would have pulled ahead and left them behind. They would not have done it on purpose but their energy and strength told her enough.

There was no way they would have been able to… do any of that. She had fought before, killed before but this was just something insane and on another level. It did not even look human they were so fast. So quick and she had no idea what they were thinking at that moment. She doubted she could react that quick. Sasuke was cutting through and causing chaos behind him. There was panic and screams coming from the section Naruto had run to. Puffs of different coloured mist and everything. She did not want to say she was intimidated but she did not want to lie to herself.

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Just what had Naruto done to get like that? Kiba felt limp as he watched what he could from his station. He could have sat on the grass because the few that got away wanted help more than to fight. He had kicked a few people unconscious that had scrambled his way.

Big deal that, they were weak, trembling and running away from the chaos of their unit. The carnage that Naruto was raining down on them all. The little he could see from explosions and blood splatter was terrifying enough. He knew Naruto had a strong side, he knew he had a little dark side. A scary side buried under all that goofy lovesickness.

Kiba got that but this thing running through the army did not even look human. Was that fucking Naruto? He was scared and he was on the same side. All he could see was the speed and the dropping bodies. Akamaru was refusing to come out of his fucking pocket.

Ahead all he could see and all he could feel was death. Kiba was not a religious person at all but where Naruto was, there was this deep feeling of something unworldly and ungodly walking among them. He could not blame the bastards that could still move for running away.

How many hands did Naruto even have? Was it two? It seemed like more. There was blood flying, explosions happening everywhere, fire blasting in all directions. Needles kept soaring through the sky and he kept moving through the crowd.
It was terrifying, his heart was in his throat. He had known Naruto was strong and a little dangerous but this was something different. This was something beyond what he had thought. He had worked so hard and thought he was upholding something but team seven, Naruto was leagues ahead. Who was that person ahead of them?

Could Kiba do that? He could not do half of that with his team with him. That Naruto could be mowing them down and having others paralyzed with fear like that. The entire place felt fucking cold and his heart was pounding in his throat. It was being squeezed unmercifully. What the hell was this even.

Naruto’s path was so damn fast and true. His sword was just a blur of silver and the other things he had too. It was hard to tract. Harder to predict. He had made it to the second set of chariots. Even the shields were no damn match for him.

All Kiba could do was watch with his mouth agape and that pissed him off somewhere deep under the gut wrenching awe and fear. He watched Naruto leap over and flip over several chariots before he landed on the biggest one. It only clicked what had happened when he saw the head fly through the air.

Naruto… had gotten the fucking general. Of course, he had. Of course, he had. The battle had barely started and everything had been turned over on its head.

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Shikamaru watched the general’s head soar through the air and he could not even feel surprised. He had two choices when the battle begun. Watch Sasuke or watch Naruto. He knew that Ino would pay attention to Sasuke with Sakura next to her so he had felt free to focus on the boy no one wanted to give him answers on.

He was… concerned about team seven. Not in the way many would be. He acknowledged their strength. They had been through shit and they had something a little different to them. Their team had been created for a reason and he was guessing that this thing they had done with themselves had to be it.

All his research, everything he had heard about had never brought anything like what he was seeing to his attention. Hell, Sakura’s plan had seemed fucking crazy until he had watched them carry it out. She knew what she was doing.

She knew what she was doing when it came to them. She did not know too much about getting into the enemy’s head, Shikamaru could see that. When it came to tactics it was obvious she had now started but she understood how her people worked.

She understood the generals, the rooks and pawns under her and that was made obvious with every move and plan that she made. She observed, she listened and she did everything to provide support. She had learned from the last war, she had taken to that jacket and become a terrifying girl.

But she got Naruto and Sasuke to an extent that Shikamaru doubted he would have. He grew up with Ino and Chouji and while he could make plans that used their strengths he would have never done what she did. That she knew that well and trusted them well showed how different team seven were from everyone else.

He was not even that mad. To get angry would be too tiresome. Right now, he was too busy in observing Naruto. Was the boy even human? Where the hell had he gotten trained? It was hard to pretend that he was like the rest of them. Sakura and Sasuke were weird and all but Shikamaru had
Not Naruto though, Naruto had been gone and there had been no explanations. He was different to the rest of them. He thought differently, he fought differently and sometimes when he looked at things Shikamaru was uncertain to who was looking at things.

It was a strange thing to say but it was what he thought and what he felt. Still team seven was a unit. Not one easily matched, not one that others could beat easily or through tricks either. They were so knitted together Shikamaru doubted just anyone could throw them off.

They worked together but they were not dependant on each other for every move. Case in point the move they had dominated the field with. They worked with each other, they worked together and they worked around each other. However, they were damn strong and good on their own too and that was fucking terrifying.

Naruto was… scary. Shikamaru had known Naruto had been holding back a lot but this was something different. He would swear there was no thought in Naruto just actions. That was how it really felt as he watched. There was destruction and chaos everywhere he went and looked on the field.

Things his eyes missed that he cursed himself for. Weapons stolen to cause damage. Paper tags and other mini bombs thrown everywhere.

The entire scene felt as though they had made an unholy contract somewhere and unleashed something that was not meant to be in human hands. Naruto on the field doing carnage did not look or feel human. He felt like the stories of warriors infected by gods who could only fight.

Shikamaru knew there had to be some rational thought in there somewhere. There was no way that Naruto was currently all reflexes as he was down there. There was a small pattern in his attack. He had stuck mostly to the plan and thrown the attacking army off by circling them and cutting through. He had made disorder in the ranks.

Had Shikamaru expected Naruto to claim the general’s head? No not really but when he saw how easily Naruto sent the head flying he was not that surprised either. Naruto stood tall on the chariot and caught the head to lift it high. From where he stood Shikamaru watched the army come to a realization.

He watched comprehension grow among them, he watched the fear from those who had seen. He watched the others realize something was wrong. those not being distracted by Sasuke or those not slowly dying or already injured.

He already knew what was coming but it still made his breath catch in his chest the way that the divide happened. There were those smart enough to understand what had just happened and what would happen and then there were those who let the flow of the battle guide them.

Shikamaru shook his head as on Naruto’s side of things the chaos began. Some backed up, some began to ran and he shook his head as others let the rage guide them and turned to Naruto. Automatically throwing their lives away. The ones closest to where Naruto stood lost their heads so fast Shikamaru was unsure to what blade the boy used.

That did not stop those that were determined to throw their lives away. With the general dead the battle was over, there was no one to lead. No one to pay and no one to carry out the threats and link the accomplices. Only the smart ones saw that. The ones who kept fighting were fighting for a cause that held less water than a well after a drought.
It was not as if they had not gotten touched. Ino held her hand to her chest as she stood a little way behind Sakura. Naruto and Sasuke had taken down the majority of the people and they had bundled up the rest to be dealt with.

Still her heart had been in her throat when Naruto and Sasuke finally approached them. They were covered in blood. There were some scratches in their clothes and bits of smoke but the look in their eyes was what kept her quiet.

Naruto did not feel real, he did not feel human and she had no idea how Sakura could walk up to him and Sasuke so easily. She could still recall the feeling that had settled over the field with them down there. It had felt like the end of everything and she had no idea what that was. Was it bloodlust? If so it was a taste she had never felt before.

Naruto was even walking differently. That smoothness, that focus. That was the walk of a predator, a four-legged creature and she could not help but be wary. She was so messed up that she was even seeing things. Naruto’s pupils seemed sharper than usual. Almost cat like.

He had his swords hanging off of him and she was certain some of them were not his. He had lost the trophy head thank goodness. Still, he was covered in blood. Head to toe in it but he looked so casual and comfortable in it.

She had known something was a little off with team seven. Especially Naruto, they had all known he was strong too but this was something different. Naruto was so different to them it was scary. She had fought hard but what they had done was unhuman. It was just carnage and death from the moment Sakura had let them go forward.

How on earth did Sakura deal with that? With Naruto? No… not just him because while there was this off feeling about Naruto. Sasuke had been with them all along and the Sasuke she had just seen had been just as scary.

He had matched Naruto. The amount of dead and the amount of carnage that Sasuke had brought. He was just as filthy as Naruto. He was just as scary. He had fought hard and now he looked as though nothing had even happened.

She watched Sakura greet her team. Watched team seven check each other over and hug it out. She did not begrudge them that moment but all she could feel in her heart. All she could think about was how strong team seven really was. Now that she saw the gap between all of them. She did not even know if she should try to cross it. Where they stood was scary. Where they stood she was unsure how to get there and if she even should.

So how exactly were they supposed to catch up to that again? Tenten felt more than a little tired. She felt a little afraid too. She had been with Sakura all this time, watching team seven all this time but it seemed she had seen nothing.

They had tried so hard, trained so hard but team seven had zoomed on ahead in all the ways that mattered. They were beyond the horizon and they were shining so brightly ahead that all she could do was try to dash after them.

And they were younger than them too. It was sort of scary. She could fight. She could hold her own but that speed, that reckless everything. Naruto, hell Sasuke as well. The both of them were on
a different level when it came to fighting.

Genins? Those two? That was a fucking shame right there because not only were they strong but they could read a field like none other. There had been so little communication during that attack and they had adapted.

Team seven had shown everyone up. Tenten was still proud of everything she had gotten done but she had to admit that she was just feeling this burning need to train even harder. The mission was completed. The enemy was wrecked, Konoha had won and she felt tired.

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“They did well” Gai said softly. “Far better than expected.”

“I knew they were capable but they really put their all in.” Asuma had his purse in his hand. “I think I have just enough to give them the treat that they deserve.”

“I didn’t think they could make me any prouder.” Kurenai smiled before she turned to Kakashi. “Kakashi…” She said lowly.

Kakashi knew a conversation would be coming but he folded his arms and gave his best eye smile and kept his tone light. “Maa, who knew how incredible my team could be too huh? They are incredible like everybody else.”

“Kakashi.” Asuma rolled his eyes. “You saw what we saw.”

“I saw my team working for Konoha.” Kakashi said softly. “Right now, I’m very proud of them. They put their all into this. They might not have done what you wanted but I think my team showed not just their teamwork but where they are in their current development. Remember that the Hokage wanted them to grow and test themselves through this. All the teams did that.”

“What Naruto and Sasuke… hell what Sakura did.” Asuma said softly. “Kakashi listen to yourself. Are those even kids anymore?”

“According to the laws set in Konoha when they graduate and come under us.” Kakashi said softly. “They are soldiers not kids anymore. I see nothing wrong with their current development. This is something they chose for themselves so they wouldn’t be left behind and so they won’t lose something important. As their sensei I can only support them.”

“Support them?” Kurenai whispered. “Kakashi what we saw today, I don’t think I saw outside the war. I don’t think you would see that outside ANBU.”

“I’m here to make sure that they can get back up. I’m here to help them learn.” Kakashi unfolded his arms. “I’m not heartless, I know what too far is and I’ll stop them long before they reach there. They still have fire in their eyes and they know what is important. That they are willing to protect it is a plus.”

XxX

“Come here.” Gai held his arms open. He was actually expecting to be denied so when Tenten and Neji fell into his hug he stiffened in surprise. “You did well.” He said softly as he tried to see their faces. “Neji? Tenten?”

“I need to work harder. Learn more.” Tenten’s muffled voice floated up to him. “I could only watch. I had to stand behind them and I knew I wouldn’t have been able to keep up.” She grabbed
fistfuls of his jumpsuit. “That sucks sensei!”

“I’m not strong enough.” Neji muttered. “But I will be in all the ways that matters. I won’t hold
anyone back. I’ll show that I’m strong enough to trust to stand on my own feet.”

Gai could only swallow and hug his students to himself. he was bursting with pride but as he
hugged them he sighed because their envy was something he had felt all too often. The feeling of
youth and rivalry. It seemed they had set their eyes on something rather complicated.

Uzumaki Naruto really did change everything he came near. They would see whether that was a
good thing or not soon enough.

XxX

“I’m not going to fucking lose.” Kiba snarled softly. Kurenai watched as he soothed Akamaru with
one hand and bunched the other. “I’ve been taking this thing seriously too. I won’t lose here.”

“I need to study more.” Shino said softly. She almost missed it.

“W-we can all do it.” Hinata tried to reassure and Kurenai smiled because she knew her team was
going to be just okay.

XxX

“You’re quiet but it’s a rather scary sort of quiet.” Asuma took a drag and watched Shikamaru.
“What’s up with you?”

Shikamaru’s gaze was so sharp that if he were a different man he would be concerned. As it was he
just grinned and blew out a plume of smoke in the boy’s direction. Sadly he did not choke but he
did flip him off.

“Asuma.” Shikamaru said softly. “I’m done asking questions about that so don’t worry. I don’t
need to be hand held. I can work things out on my own.” His glance towards team seven spoke
volumes. “Sometimes you have to follow your gut.” His eyes fixed on Asuma. “Team seven is
nothing like us.”

Nothing wrong with being honest. “No but that isn’t your fault. Your team is something special
too. The Ino-Shika-Cho combination is something vital to Konoha’s growth and maintenance.
Team seven is something a little different this time around. Don’t think too much about for now.
You’re still young.”

XxX

“Even for us this is rather fast.” Kakashi teased as his team waited for the others to return. “Four
days and completion. How was the taste of battle?”

“I can’t believe the move worked.” Sakura laughed as she reached her hands up to the sky. “I still
can’t fucking believe it!”

“Most of the shit Naruto gave us is gone.” Sasuke muttered as he checked his bag. “Restocking is a
must when we return.” He paused and the smile that spread across his face made Kakashi’s heart
warm. “Fighting like that was interesting. The heat of the moment created some awareness inside
of me. I don’t think I felt anything like it.”

“My blood was pumping something fierce.” Naruto laughed. “I barely got to see Sasuke in action. I
“Far less collateral damage than we thought we would have.” Sakura smiled. “Although those clothes are a bust you two. It’s a good thing Naruto brought an extra for himself. Sasuke on the other hand that pants needs burning when we get back.”

“Missions like this just keep getting more and more expensive huh.” Naruto groaned. “But anyone else get some crazy ideas for training after that whole thing?”

“Let’s wait until we get back to Konoha to hammer shit out.” Sakura laughed.

“Did you have to release your saki the way you did on the field?” Sasuke groaned. “Yours is so damn invasive it is hard to do anything but react. What the hell were you thinking?”

“I wanted to introduce them to a few people.” Naruto laughed. “Didn’t go as planned but I think we did more than good.”

“Fantastic is more like it.” Sakura smiled. “Now it’s back to Konoha to report.”

XxX

“Oh.” Kakashi said softly, he slowed his steps as Naruto looked up at him. “I didn’t mention how impressed I was with your sword work did I?” He had never gotten to study it the way he had been allowed to this time.

He had not wasted anytime. It was worth the tired feeling. He recorded every slash and every stance. Every change in Naruto’s eyes and ever step that he took. It had not been one style it had the taste of many. If he dared to think it, he would say Naruto was making his own style.

He could guess bits and pieces of it all. Zabuza, some of the others. Things Naruto had observed and things he had experienced. All of that had been present but Zabuza was who had held the most influence over Naruto’s developing sword style.

It had almost been like watching Zabuza fight. They had similar steps. If Naruto had been holding a different sword it just have been difficult to see him as him. As always Naruto was full of surprises. Kakashi had enjoyed watching them forge their own ways.

They refused to stand still, they refused to lose. They refused to be hand fed and Kakashi enjoyed that immensely. His little team brought joy to his heart. They had carved their presence on the land and he was elated.

“Thanks.” Naruto smiled at him before he shrugged. “I was trying to be a bit more connected to things. Was going on gut feeling. Instinct and reactions. Worked out better than I thought it would but I had to run about a lot sensei.”

“I noticed.” Kakashi smiled. “I’m glad to see how well thought out everything was.”

“Well we aren’t exactly amateurs.” Naruto laughed softly. “Besides, this was a good test. If everyone had not come together the way they had we would have had a tough time of it. Still I think Sakura-chan got some good data from this mission. I know I did.”

“Oh.” Kakashi mused. “What did you learn?”

“That I have to work even harder.” Naruto grinned. “I’ve barely gotten started.” That should not make Kakashi smile but it did.
They were back far earlier than she had expected but with team seven with them she was not that surprised. She waited on them to reach her while her heart warmed in her chest. She had taken a chance and it seemed it had paid off.

Would betting on Naruto every time give her these results? There was just something about him. Look what had been done so far, look at the changes in the village. Not enough changes but things had to begin somewhere.

She was proud of them and she did not even have the full story yet. Did not even have the full report yet. Her gamble had paid off in more ways than one. She knew how competition worked. She knew what rivalry did to people and teams.

She knew what she would be searching for when all of them walked through the door to her office. She was willing to bet her hidden stash that she would find it. There would be a fire burning in their eyes.

Why? Team seven of course.

Naruto was capable of lighting fires under people and getting them to do things they wanted to take their time and do. Sadly, none of that was allowed now. She had taken a chance on these kids and she just knew it had paid off.

She was going to celebrate with a glass after the meeting was over. The teams would train and work even harder after this. It would benefit the village even more. Naruto was a good push for the others but that was not all. Keeping him in their sights would help further down the road.

She had to pull the senseis aside sometime soon and get evaluations from them. This mission should have opened their eyes in various ways. Was she looking forward to sitting down with that brat? Of course not but it could not be ignored.

Shizune’s knock to the door made her smile. They were here. Now to thank them, hear the report and get ready for what would come next. She could not wait for their names to spread like wildfire. Good times were coming for them all and she could not wait.

“Sensei’s paying?” Sakura demanded as they stood in front of the ramen shop. “The rain’s going to fall isn’t it. The village is in danger!”

“When you say your treat that means the entire meal or the first round of bowls.” Sasuke questioned with a scowl. “Say what you really mean.”

“Maa, I’m hurt.” Kakashi-sensei teased as he leaned against the fence. “I have some money and after you worked so hard sensei wants to do something nice.”

“Think he bribed that money away?” Sakura asked in a loud whisper.

“Bet he stole it.” Sasuke snorted.

“Some poor subordinate somewhere is crying over being robbed.” Naruto sighed. “But ramen is ramen and I’m hungry.” The smell was driving him crazy. “Sensei says he is paying so let’s make him pay first and then eat a feast.”
“Now that’s an idea.” Naruto sniggered when Sasuke snatched the wallet away from their sensei and he and Sakura took seats inside. He had made a step to join them when he glanced up to see his sensei watching him.

“You did really well.” Kakashi-sensei said softly. “All of you worked very hard.” The hand that rubbed his shoulder was warm but after everything Naruto was not going to let it stop at that.

He grabbed his sensei’s hand after it slid from his shoulders. He intertwined Kakashi-sensei’s gloved hand with his bare one and smiled up at him. “Sensei.” He smiled.

“Yes Naruto?” His sensei’s eye was on him as the man waited for him to continue.

Naruto squeezed the hand in his as he thought on how to say what he was thinking. Then he sighed loudly and just let it flow. “Sometimes I feel lonely, I really do. But you know what?” He laughed. “With Sakura-chan and Sasuke I have something. I have them, Iruka-sensei, Konohamaru. I have you sensei.” He said softly. “Thanks for letting us handle this on our own. We needed this.”

“I know.” Kakashi-sensei said softly. “I knew it wasn’t anything you couldn’t handle. I’m proud of all of you.”

“We’re only going to get stronger from here.” Naruto promised. Team seven is going to get stronger.”

“And I’ll be here every step of the way.” His sensei smiled. “Shall we go in? I’m up for a celebratory ramen.”

“I’m up for ramen period.” Naruto laughed. “But let’s celebrate everything one time. One day sensei, we’ll be in Jounin jackets treating you!”

"Let's not rush that day." His sensei chuckled. "You can take your time."
If everything could be perfect

Chapter Notes

With this chapter I can happily bring an end to what I've been calling the simple missions arc.

I've been so tired I really had to take a break from writing this. I just popped back and forth to do scenes here and there but as usual. Huge ass chapters and I wasn't really in the mood to tackle the chapters.

As always, no the fic wasn't abandoned. I hadn't abandoned it- just have patience. Writers block happens, even though I have the outline for the chapter down I can't write the scene cuz I'm not ready or I don't know how to tackle it.

I have a RL and work and RL can be draining and the last thing I want to do is kill myself to finish a chapter. Sometimes all I can do is squeeze in a 1k here or there and of course I'm trying. Seriously I am. This fic is my first priority to finish mostly because its so big and there is much I want to do.

Still there are things that I myself want to do. Things that I think will help me. I took a break to work on my own original fic. Publishing that is a gift to myself and honestly this fic took a backseat to that as I fleshed that out. Sometimes I need to take a step back from the pairing and even this fic to work on other things. Just relax omg

I most likely won't be able to start the next arc until the year turns. I have things I'm trying to finish in my WIP folder so I can enter the new year with less burdens.

And speaking of burdens. I got the comments and the messages, yes yes I know. Most of you would like me to have a Beta. Great wonderful that sounds real nice but that would slow me down. Like I'd rather deal with that when the fic is finished for many reasons.

I just really see at this point anyone else will slow down my progress. It's not me handing over the document and it being business as usual. I'd have to send along notes and the document. Because this is on Word not Gdocs. I'd have to check over each chapter as it is. I'd at least have to explain my flows and writing styles along with my notes. This is time I could be doing something different.

And if I were to have a beta, I'd really prefer someone that I know or I'm familiar with. So that I know what I'm getting or what I'll have to deal with. What this means is while many of you darlings have been reading this for a while, I don't know you.

Like seriously, we're not acquainted or anything. Sometimes it's the first time I see you commenting or messaging me. I get that some of you are coming with good intentions but keep in mind. I'm writing and uploading this. I really really don't know who is still reading or who they are. It's one thing if you're a friend and we talk but come on darlings. Strangers don't do this. Please.

But I'm busy and tired, I'm glad I managed to get this chapter out because I can look at my outlines again for the next two arcs. Hopefully smaller chapters ahead. Hopefully I can get less ~More, update soon~ stuff too cuz... I'd rather silence than that. That takes
away my motivation, cut it out. I have my own rhythm and expectations of myself. I
don't need any of that. I don't want it and I see it as very rude. Honestly I don't think
fondly of that, somethings should be kept to yourself. Like those sorts of comments.

As always Kidnapped and Raised by Ice and Sword is a very long story. A slow
burn(an actual slow burn v.v) I don't know how many of you darling are still here for
the ride but I'm looking forward to seeing how next year will treat us all.

Honestly I'm hoping for less stress, more time and motivation for next year.

Days off for team seven felt off regardless. No matter what Baa-chan said a shinobi was never at
rest he could understand the how of that now. The things they saw, the things they did, the things
they feared insured that they were never fully at rest even with the security of the village.

Well former security because Naruto knew that there were many shinobi unable to sleep after
Orochimaru’s attack. He could not even blame them. He had his own agendas but he slept fairly
lightly. A habit he could not shake.

Sleeping with his team was the closest he got to peace and rest. He knew they had his back and he
had theirs. That was the closest to safe that he could honestly feel. If he was not with them, he was
on edge and his thoughts wandered. His impatience grew and he got nothing done.

To others he guessed it might look like business as usual for Naruto but he knew what he could do,
what he should be doing and he was well aware that when he was training that his thoughts got
captured in other places.

Sparring was the best idea he had come up with. His training needed work and he needed to gauge
himself against the people he marked as dangerous and as adults in general. He needed to know his
limits, well he needed to know lots of things.

Going against Sakura or Sasuke was not only fun but it helped in lots of things. It helped them and
it helped him calm himself. he knew he could trust them in ways he doubted they could currently
understand.

He knew what they could do and he trusted them to keep up. He was looking forward to the day
Sakura or Sasuke accidentally triggered that kill or die instinct in him that Haku and Zabuza had so
carefully crafted in him. He could not wait for the day that they managed to stop and block that
uncontrollable response.

Kakashi-sensei could do it, Shizune nee-chan could too and those two adults tended to put him
down pretty hard when they came across that. He was unsure to just what it was that set him off
for these moments. Sometimes it was when he was being pushed physically, sometimes it never
happened.

All he knew was that things got quiet and his body moved and his head got quiet. Even the fox was
quiet to him then. With anything and anyone else that mode would get Naruto’s opponent killed. It
was actually funny how he got tossed around and smacked down like a little kid.

One day he would gain control over every part of himself, his body and his mind. He was on the
hunt for truth right now. Truth and balance but he would get everything he wanted in time.
He had to admit that things had changed for the better recently after his last big mission. A weird kind of energy with everyone and he had to say it reminded him of the others sometimes. That determination and focus. He was impressed with it even as he was amused too.

So much those next to him could not know. So many things Konoha hid from everyone, if he was to try and ponder Konoha’s motives or reasons it would hurt his head.

Honestly days off just ended up with team seven being them as usual but when he was on his own what else could he do but train?

Besides put his own plans into action? Naruto rolled onto his side on his bed as he stared at the blank paper on his bed. He was supposed to write but his thoughts were too cluttered as he lingered in the apartment. He was getting nowhere.

He chewed slowly on the hairpin in his mouth before he lightly tugged it out of his mouth to tap the elegant decoration on the top against his temple. He had decided to laze around home after his normal training and get shit done but thinking was hard to do when he had nothing around him. It felt too empty. Too hard to focus without some signs of life.

If he was not trying to do this, he would be fine but because his frame of mind needed to be different, he needed to be elsewhere. The silence of his apartment was keeping him back and making him waste time. It was nice to lounge around without a shirt or a pants but going out for food might not be a bad idea.

Because he needed to think clearly and plan accordingly. It never hurt to be cautious.

XxX

The cool breezes blowing through Konoha were a blessing. Kiba had been putting up with the unnatural morning and afternoon heat before and during training but getting to walk with his team accompanied by a cool breeze was like bliss.

It had been a good training for all of them. Having a morning mission that had ended way too quickly did wonders for his emotions. His ego too if he was being honest. He was still affected by the memory of team seven but for his current self he was proud and he was fucking allowed to puff his chest out about all of that.

They all were.

He had no idea what made him glance at the tea shop but he did and a flash of gold caught his eyes so he was forced to look closer. His steps slowed and he felt Hinata and Shino slowing too, glancing where he was glancing.

He knew when Hinata spotted him, he could feel her embarrassment rise even while the boy in question was paying them no mind. Paying no one mind actually. Kiba watched Naruto lounge on the bench outside the tea shop as he scribbled on a piece of paper with one hand and tap a peculiar hair pin against a tea cup with the other.

He was alone, no Sakura or Sasuke in sight and it felt weird for that. Somehow it felt as though you always saw team seven members in Konoha as a unit. Yet the one that gave everyone the biggest headache was all on his own.

Nothing wrong with that but recently it just seemed as though Naruto was never in the village without somebody by his side as he did shit. There was either his team or his sensei. The brats he kidded around with at the academy or their old academy sensei. There was always someone.
Naruto was alone when he trained most the time but among villagers? Did going for ramen count?

Not to Kiba, to see Naruto so relaxed and unbothered just hanging out in the village. Writing and smiling to himself felt so strange he could only stare. The boy was a weirdo. A frustrating one and when he thought how much Hinata liked him he wanted to rub his hands over his face to remove the stress.

It would never leave his lips willingly but Naruto looked really at peace right where he was. His hair had grown out too. Somehow Kiba had not noticed, he did not really care but this far away and with the afternoon sun shining down on Naruto’s head he saw not only gold but a hint of something.

But Kiba was not going to stick around for any insightful thoughts. He spent too much time fixated on Naruto as it was and his team had other things, they could be doing that did not involve thinking about any part of team seven. It was team eight time.

XxX

The hospital had a new feeling, maybe it was her. Everything just seemed so bright and sunny. Maybe it really was that Lee’s wing just felt brighter somehow. Tenten smiled into the large bouquet of flowers before she tried to calm herself. The date for Lee’s surgery was coming closer.

That they had an actual date had her so excited. Nothing like her sensei or Lee though. Nothing could touch them. She was glad about that, she was so happy to see them happy and she was happy for Lee too. The Hokage was so impressive, so kind and just awesome.

The Tsunade-sama was going to save Lee. Tenten had to wipe away a relieve tear that escaped down her cheek. With every day, with every second that ticked down her team was closer to being not fixed but whole again.

Lee’s presence was sorely missed. He was the balance and the sun as well for them. He helped Neji, he lightened her too. He was someone their Sensei could pour his hopes in and have to understand him. Gods above knew she and Neji tried but Lee was in a class on his own.

Having him away from them, thinking he would never return to them. Soon he was going to be back and she could barely wait.

XxX

Tsunade-sama kept rereading her notes and smiling, Shizune knew why that was. Lee-kun’s surgery was fast approaching. There was no doubt that he would pull through. The boy had been following all the rules and been working with them so he would be in the best position.

Tsunade-sama working on her craft was something that Shizune never failed to enjoy. The way her mind worked, the things she saw, the way she understood medicine and the human body. That Naruto had helped her back to the woman she used to be.

That Naruto-kun had healed her heart and gave her hope always warmed Shizune’s heart when she thought of the young boy. Naruto-kun always seemed to be someone’s topic of discussion but when one thought of the situation and the boy it was slightly understandable.

Only slightly, the poor boy had to be frustrated no matter how open minded he was.

With everyone’s eyes on him, with his past behind him. So many restrictions, the one responsible for lighting the fire in all these young shinobi. So much was on those young shoulders but his eyes
kept sparkling bright and he kept making friends, heavily dedicated friends.

Honestly, she was rooting for him. The way he was with the others his age when she knew he was so different to anything they had ever known. The way he was devoted to their happiness and safety. The way he treated Lee. He really was the son of those two.

Maybe that was why even Jiraiya-sama could not help doting. Maybe that was why everything just seemed so bright lately.

XxX

It was on every Jounin’s lips. The topic of team seven, Kakashi had to be pissed. The brat would never come out and say anything but Jiraiya knew that Kakashi had to be fighting back his annoyance at everyone when it came to his team.

They just couldn’t stop talking about all of them, it was actually hilarious. Jiraiya had heard so much about the Chuunin that he was almost convinced there was nothing more to hear. Hell, the way he heard things maybe Jounin was not as far away for the girl as people speculated.

She had the necessary craziness that so many Jounins had after all. Now after team seven had returned victorious after that mission the talk about her had just seemed to increase, it had to be making Kakashi fucking insane.

The other brat too. Not Naruto but the Uchiha one, eyes were already on him because of who was watching him. Hell, it was the smartest thing to do after learning something so slimy wanted to steal it away.

Still the brat might become something incredible if he was currently running at Naruto’s side the way he was. Jiraiya had laughed himself sick after some the reports. The brats were being amusing little brats. The way others talked about them, it was hard to think about them as the same brats in the park not so long ago.

Well, then there was the whole Naruto thing. The brat was growing, improving and stuff and Jiraiya was happy for him. Proud too but he had not lived this long by ignoring the feelings in his gut. Tsunade was preparing for the surgery but she was also feeling what he was feeling.

Jiraiya wanted to be ridiculously happy about all the little brats’ growth. He wished he could have laughed and gotten himself drunk. Toasted the brats’ future and drunk with his sensei. Maybe watch the sun rise and marvel at the new generation to carry the flame.

He wished that he had been able to do that. He was too concerned to do so. It felt weird to think it, weird to say it but the brats were improving and growing so quickly. It almost felt as though it was too soon. They had experience but it did not feel like enough. He was concerned for them all but what could he say?

So many things he was not allowed to talk about to begin with.

He really wanted to take some of them aside and let them get the frustration and feelings out. Sadly, all of them were too young to be out smoking or drinking. He could not exactly throw books at them either, all he could offer was his current series after all.

That certainly would not help them with their confusion and frustrations. Well it might help with some frustration but not the type that was currently eating at all of them. They were finding their own ways but that did not mean Jiraiya was not concerned for them. Especially that brat Naruto, he already had so much on his plate, then he went on adding more. For the sake of friendship.
Honestly that boy, he needed to stop being so cute.

Xxx

When had her home started being so empty all the time? Itachi and Sasuke were always gone these days, no one really popped in to see her besides the clan. When clan members popped up it was always about clan business.

When had things become this way? When had she begun to have to start looking around for her children? Itachi had always been the one to be looking beyond things. He loved home but keeping him there had always been difficult.

The boy had always loved outside the village and learning. Clan had never been able to hold him down and at least now her husband knew Itachi would never be confined and limited by clan duties. Put them in a bit of a predicament.

But Sasuke, her sweet little Sasuke. He had stopped smiling first. First his eyes then his full smile had vanished and she still had no reason to why. He went from clinging to Itachi to pushing him and everyone else away.

Was he really happy? Kakashi hinted to it. He had given her some photos that she kept hidden but it was still very painful. She loved her sons, she loved her clan but it felt as though she was alone sometimes.

Something was eating at Sasuke but what could she do? Unless they were fully alone, she could not draw him out his shell. He was only really animated when his team was around. He had amused looks, he smiled, joked and played like a boy his age should. Shinobi or not skill had nothing to do with emotional maturity.

But what could she do? Mikoto slowed her chopping of the evenings vegetables and contemplated her large pot. She had been moving slowly this entire time but she had a small fear in her heart and a longing in her soul.

This thing with Sasuke’s team. It was one thing to use them as an excuse, it was one thing to do her best to lure little Naruto to her. She could not be obvious about it and there was no guarantee he would come to her on his own. Seek her out without Sasuke.

Those eyes that he had. She had waited so long to see them sparkle in mirth towards her. She had waited so long under uncertainty that it was hard to sit down and wait it out.

But Naruto was one thing, Sasuke was another. He was her child; her little baby and she was concerned for him. It was one thing for him to try and stand on his own feet. She was fine of that, she was fine with his accomplishments. It was that she did not know where his heart and his mind lay that had her heart troubled.

With the clan Sasuke was cold, with his team he was animated. He was happy.

That behaviour obviously said that they had done something wrong but no matter how she wracked her brain she could not figure it out. She could not place a finger on a reason or situation for Sasuke growing so cold towards his clan. The way he pushed himself away, it was as if having the same blood as them disgusted him.

She was hesitant to voice that of course. Still it was hard to ignore. It was not because of that incident. She knew for certain Sasuke had no idea about their foolish mistakes. She knew that because he was still ignorant about little Naruto. If he had known about the clan’s folly, he would
have known Naruto was the reason for them coming to their senses.

But she knew that Sasuke knew nothing. But his distancing continued and she was at a loss to the reason why. He had been so sweet in his academy days, so adorable proud of his father, his brother and the clan.

She had enjoyed days of listening to Sasuke ramble on and on as she cooked. He had spoken of the clan, of the future and the love he had for his family and his clan had always made her smile behind her hand. He had been so cute.

What had they done? Or was it just Sasuke? Whatever it was all she wanted was to see her son happy. She wanted to see him relaxed and smiling. At home he was polite or distant and it was so painful each day made her crumble a bit more inside.

But she knew he would not smile with her. Not for her either although he would try. She wanted his pure and natural smile so she would have to go to where he relaxed the most. Where he smiled freely.

She swept the vegetables into the pot and covered it over gently as she set the stove to a low point. She gently removed her apron and rested it on the table before she tied her hair back and up. She needed even if it was for a few seconds and from a place of hiding to see her son’s smiling face.

Xxx

Such a bright day but she slid through the shadows so easily, they were so small but she found them all. They embraced her and she found that sad and amusing. To have to sneak on her son, to have to keep one eye on him all the time. When had it come to this. Why had it boiled down to this

Was this the only way? Mikoto kept her head low as she moved through the training grounds, she was searching for the signs. The signs of their team, each team had a feel and there was always some hint to where they were.

Team seven felt different to everyone else and it was not because of her son. Not even because of Naruto or Kakashi. The feel of them together as one felt different to all the other teams and even the wildlife knew it.

It was not just little Naruto throwing them off, no that was hardly the case. The team were on a different level of awareness and danger. It benefitted the village, of course it would but they gave off a strange air that eventually would be too hard for their peers to ignore.

Sasuke had already been too smart, too talented and too quick but thankfully not like Itachi. Honestly, she could only deal with one of those. But maybe if he had been, he would not be so distant now.

She paused when she came to a split clearing, one lead to the river and the other lead deeper into the grounds. There was little to go on, no sound carrying but she turned towards the river anyway.

It was not a hot day, it was fairly warm but she had gambled at the feeling ahead. Gambled and had been richly rewarded. It had been a while since she had to tie up her hair and adjust her clothes in such a manner. It turned out that she really did still have it all.

A couple hundred yards from the river a tree heavily creaked. Mikoto watched the clearing ahead with her eyes activated before a blur of colour slowed down in her eyesight. Kakashi leapt easily over broken and fallen trees to snatch the young Chuunin from the sky by the back of her neck.
Mikoto watched the safe throw Kakashi gave before he used both hands to catch the blonde spitfire that came up from the ground. An all-out almost ferocious attack. She marvelled at how easily Kakashi caught him before he threw him with a bit more force towards the river. Naruto bounced on the surface before he was back up.

Her breathing hitched when she saw her son drop from above Kakashi a kick aimed at his back. A kick that was quickly pulled back when Kakashi moved to intercept. Her son flipped in mid-air used a branch to change his balance before he used himself as a step for his little Chuunin to use as a way to launch herself at their sensei.

With little Naruto quickly following soaking wet missing both his pants and the shirt. She knew she had seen the boy with them just a few seconds ago but he was back into the fray with only smaller pants on and dripping wet. It was a serious situation, sparring should be taken seriously but all she wanted to do was laugh.

XxX

She had heard of it, seen hints of it but it was another thing to see her son so happily indulge in it. It was shinobis new favourite topic. The scandalous closeness of team seven, Mikoto had her ear to the ground of course she had heard about her son but beyond their sitting closely and some touches she had not really seen anything.

Her son on the grass his head in Naruto’s lap while little Sakura used Sasuke as a prop as she made notes her hand occasionally stroking Sasuke’s side. Naruto’s head tilted back as he played with her son’s hair and watched the sky and trees above his head. She had heard but seeing was another.

They looked completely natural. Kakashi had that book out again and seemed to be giving his team a rest. He looked engrossed as usual but when it came to that book when was he not? Still that was not the reason Mikoto still lingered watching.

Sasuke’s look of contentment as Naruto played with his hair, his soft smile as he spoke animatedly with his team mates, it made her so happy. So proud that it brought tears to her eyes all while it brought heartbreak. Sasuke did not smile like that for them. She could barely remember when his smile had been that open and free.

What she did know was that it was never for the clan, not for them and certainly not with them. Team seven was where Sasuke felt the freest and obviously the safest. She had no choice but to accept it but that did not mean she did not feel lonesome. As a mother and as a shinobi of a village she knew and accepted her boys walking away and growing up. just for Sasuke she had not expected it so soon and like this. She wished she had more smiles of his to cling to.

XxX

What was a free day for team seven? Well providing that they were all together and all off duty at the same time that introduced a day of work for them all. Just because there was nothing official did not mean there was no work to be done.

They all did weapon checks, supplies checks. There was studying all of them did, just because Naruto was a bit crazier and wilder with how far he was willing to go to experiment did not mean that the rest of team seven were slacking.

There was plenty to consider along their ways. Plenty of things they wanted to try before actual combat so a day off for them meant seeing how much better all of them had come since the last time they had fought.
Sometimes it was their sensei but most of the time it was with each other. There was really no better way to teach each other and to understand what the other was thinking and feeling. For Sasuke he liked to take these moments to get a handle on whatever Naruto cooked up for them.

Sakura liked to see their limits. Liked to guess how far they could be pushed and if there were cracks to be wary of. She had her formations to think of so Sasuke really did not mind that, besides she was putting in a hundred percent right alongside them so it honestly worked out in the end for all of them.

Kakashi would watch them and toss in his opinions or he would actually join them when he felt neglected or something. Sasuke never knew what got the man into being a proper teacher and joining them. He would love to know what it was that randomly lit a fire under the man’s ass so he could do his work on time for once.

Whatever it was, it was random enough that he still got shocked when Kakashi was just there between all of them or above them stopping them in their tracks because he wanted to ‘play’ too. He could really fuck off with that attitude, fuck if he knew why Naruto and Sakura thought it was cool. It was only for now that he could call joining them playing. They were still weaker than him but not for very long. They were growing with every single day.

In ways they really did not expect to either. Sasuke watched Sakura pick herself up before she wound up the stray coils of hair that had escaped her bun. Watched her pick back up her ninja wire and curl in tightly in her gloved hands.

As to himself he switched his staff to his left hand and contemplated Naruto as the boy gracefully fell from the treetops above where he had kicked Sakura down from. One hand dragged through his blonde hair as he stood up properly to push it out his eyes as he contemplated Sakura and Sasuke.

It was Naruto’s turn to be it and what a time they were having. Non-lethal weapons and they had to work separately to bring him down. Sasuke doubted anyone had Naruto’s insane stamina. He had been going full out from the start and he had ditched the shirt and jacket early on but he barely looked tired.

It was insane, inhuman was what the whole thing was. He thought he was used to it but to see Naruto keep getting back up and push them back as he remained unscratched was actually sort of irritating.

Honestly who wouldn’t be ticked off? But Sasuke liked to use those feelings to push him forward. It never did good to let it bubble up and to get consumed by emotions. There had to be a cool logic to it or he made mistakes. Or he got caught up in someone else’s pace when that was the last thing he should be doing.

He switched the staff again as he watched Naruto. The necklace shone against his skin as he contemplated Sasuke. There was no tensing of muscles to warn him that Naruto was going to be on the attack but he knew.

Maybe it was the change of colour in his eyes, a shift of his eyes. Whatever it was Sasuke swung his staff up to ward off the attack and managed to meet Naruto halfway through his lunge.

As expected, Naruto used the staff as a prop, his plan to flip up and over Sasuke, maybe use the staff to choke him and lock off his air supply. Whatever the plan was it was not going to happen on his watch. Sasuke abandoned the staff, shoved it away as hard as he could and ducked into a roll to sweep against the grass for his ninja wire.
When he came up Naruto was on his feet and twirling the staff. “So, we’re playing keep away then?” Naruto laughed as he twirled the wooden staff from hand to hand. “Well now I have a longer reach so let’s see how long that’s going to last.”

Sasuke, just might have made a mistake with letting Naruto keep the staff, who knew how crazy things were going to get. A glance at Sakura told him the same thing. He was not in the mood to walk home with clothes ripped to tell and back, he doubted she was either. Not that Naruto would care.

XxX

“Thank you Naruto-kun.” Sparrow sang as they gathered the bag of coins. “Betting on you always pays off.”

“Cheat.” Shisui. Grumbled half-heartedly as he watched his cousin attempt to pull himself and his clothes back together. “Pervert.”

“Betting against Naruto-kun is for fools.” Sparrow laughed. “I knew he wasn’t going to go easy on them but even I thought they had more of a chance than that. He took them apart.”

“How adorable.” Cat muttered before he coughed. “Say they’ve gotten, faster haven’t they? All of them.” Shisui had to agree with that assessment. All of them had gotten quicker, even Naruto or maybe especially Naruto.

He repressed a grin as Sasuke gave up on fixing his collar and ripped the entire thing off. Next went the sleeves. The holes in the shirt were hilariously large but it was still a shirt. Somehow. Hanging on by a prayer and a few stitches if he were to be honest.

“Who cares how much stronger they’ve gotten?” Sparrow gloated. “It will only be in our favour in the end, even with the boy’s past. Their future lies with and for Konoha, it’s a win win situation for everyone.”

“Especially you.” Weasel sounded miserable. “I wanted fried meat today.” A rustle of leaves told Shisui that the ANBU was shifting on his branch. “I was looking forward to it.”

“Shouldn’t have bet then.” Sparrow laughed before they fell silent. “Well I would have lost if Kakashi-san had joined in. We all would have lost, wouldn’t we?”

Shisui watched the man that had barely moved while team seven sparred. His book had slid down his face a time or two. He had even closed it once and tapped it against his face as he contemplated his team but he had not moved from where he had sprawled on the wooden log when they arrived in the clearing.

Even Kakashi had to just watch sometimes. He did like to join his team, whether it was boredom or the man showing them from time to time how much further they really had to go Shisui had no real clue. What he did know was that he had seen Kakashi spar his entire team and put them all down in a matter of minutes.

And that was the man going easy on his beloved team. He did not think Kakashi had shown his true strength for quite a while. He kept the eye he had gotten mostly covered, he relied mostly on copied moves instead of the talents that he had risen to fame by.

Some would find that boring but Shisui saw that as terrifying because he knew Kakashi would not
slack in that regard. That man understood ANBU and the village in ways he was still working out. His eyes slid from Kakashi to Sasuke to find his little cousin drinking from a bottle from his bag as he watched Kakashi.

He did not blame Sasuke, he most likely felt it too. The closer one got to Kakashi the more confused one got. There was so much there but the incredible thing in Kakashi was the strength. it was tempting to test him, fight him.

But of course, Sasuke had come across Naruto’s and Kakashi’s little one on ones. Kakashi was still holding back but there was no doubt who would be the winner. Maybe he would be able to hold his own against the other part of Naruto too. Who knew, Shisui was not looking for an answer anytime soon. He really did not want to know. He didn’t want to see that part of Naruto anytime soon.

Sasuke was jolted by Naruto resting against his back heavily. Shisui watched the surprise fade to fondness on Sasuke’s face before he reached over his shoulder to tousle Naruto’s hair. Naruto’s laugh was loud and bounced through the clearing before it was cut off by Sakura laying heavily across Naruto’s legs.

That got a laugh from Sasuke and Shisui felt himself smiling at the sight of his little cousin so at ease and so damn happy with his team. He watched Naruto pretend to flail before he yanked at Sakura so he could arrange her to a way that obviously suited his comfort. His back against Sasuke and Sakura in his lap her head against his shoulder.

It was at least sort of scandalous. Anyone else would balk at seeing kids in such a manner, see a team in such a manner but you got used to things and honestly Shisui had been exposed to a lot since he had begun keeping an eye on Naruto.

Shocked at the things Naruto did? Not really it would have to be extreme, like dive off a fucking mountain sort of extreme. What took him away was Sasuke just going along with it and even initiating contact. That was the sort of thing that made him blink twice and look harder.

The closeness of team seven was a topic on almost every shinobi’s mouth. It was why Kakashi was so rarely seen slacking off in the Jounin station this day or anywhere really where shinobi would easily spot him. The man was either on missions or with one of his team. Or he had found someplace to slack that not a single shinobi knew about. If he had, he needed to share that with Shisui before he was run ragged by the police station and the Hokage’s office.

But it really was a popular topic and he could understand why. It was strange how they were and strange how it all fit together. Physical affection among shinobis were not exactly done, there was friendships, there was family but what team seven had done was mix so many different things together and somehow make it so casual and normal.

Broken down so many walls in so short of a time. Shisui knew the blame could be laid at Naruto’s door but that did not change what team seven was. He honestly envied some of their closeness. Having people to turn to that wouldn’t judge you or your feelings. Accept your tears and fears… it was a dream situation that he thought you could only find in a romantic relationship.

But he had watched them comfort each other, support each other. Love each other too in their own little kiddie way. He had watched Sasuke and Naruto pump up their Chuunin Sakura, hug her. Keep her close and tightly.

He had watched Sasuke and Sakura cling to Naruto as his obvious mental demons got the better of him. They were still learning how to solve that. He had noticed from the helpless looks on their faces as they sought for a way to give comfort. Give it in a way that Naruto could accept that they
would be comfortable with.

Naruto’s comfort zones were obviously further than any child had any business being. He turned down most of the things he was interested in doing. Obviously, things he missed doing but the boy had to get his needs met somehow.

The touching, the eye contact, the cuddling and so on. It was now a part of team seven and while it might have started as a way to support Naruto. Sasuke and Sakura obviously took comfort from it too. They rested together when without Naruto. Draped over each other and were more physical, it was to an extent Shisui doubted they noticed.

But Kakashi noticed and all this time he had been keeping a watchful eye on them all. Had he predicted such a thing? Who knew. Shisui most certainly had not, he watched to brush it off as cute brat things. Something to tease Sasuke about someday but he held his tongue always.

His job was to watch and that was what he was doing. As cute as they were, he could not help but wonder what they could become. It felt taboo to talk about other matters when they were still kids.

Well kids only in the physical sense of things because mentally they had grown up a while ago in ways that mattered to the village. Shisui did not want them to be like the generations that came before them. The way they were rushing so earnestly ahead. He did not want to think that a chance of reclaiming a childhood was too late for Naruto. He did not want to contemplate such a thing.

But he just might have to, with Sasuke and Sakura nipping on his heels to be the ones that quickly grew up. the cuteness was only on the surface really. The soft touches the laughter the cuddling. He knew the kind of destruction all of them could bring. He knew it but he wished that soft cuteness was more than skin deep for all of them.

XxX

Self-examination, Sasuke was almost obsessed with it. The moments he spent observing himself. Either mentally going over his actions or watching himself in the mirror to gauge how much he had changed. He spent lots of time doing both. Lately though he had been spending more time observing his body.

Why should he not? The towel hung around his neck as he watched his naked chest in the mirror. His pants were much tighter than before and clung to his hips. It was to be expected after all the muscle he had managed to put on. Whether it would stay on was something that would need to be seen.

He sipped from the tonic bottle carefully. Honestly Naruto’s attitude could be more than a bit annoying but sometimes the people he brought around himself like flies could end up doing some good in the end. He had never gotten around to talking or even teasing Naruto about that guy.

It had slipped his mind and until he had found the bottle again, he had not been studying it. Sasuke had been careful in using it because at a glance and a test the guy had been right. This was far better than anything he had been using before. It made him at least want to get more of it.

He still had a decent amount of it left of course but that was really beyond the point. The tonic was more than useful and in this short space of time he could feel the difference in his body. The routines he had started to use played a part in the shaping of his body as well but this tonic was working wonders. He was so aware of so many parts of his body.

He was healing better too, not faster not like Naruto’s abnormal body. Sasuke did encounter less
problems as he developed and wasn’t that a relief. It would be nice to see how much further he could push his body along.

He should keep an eye out for that guy so he could get more. Maybe use Naruto as bait, the guy had been a fan after all. Maybe fond of him in the way that Naruto liked people. He was a bit of Naruto’s type too even though he had short hair. Well Shisui had short hair but he was an Uchiha.

It was not confirmed yet but Sasuke was at least mostly certain that Naruto had an Uchiha fetish. Or some sort of draw towards his clan. That kind of fascination wasn’t normal, not when Naruto already had a clear ‘type’ obviously his clan was an exception… or Naruto was just plain weird.

But that guy had short hair… but it wasn’t black. Neither was Sakura’s even though it was long actually but Naruto was not looking at them in that way yet. Actually, that Hyuuga the boy Neji his hair wasn’t black either was it. It was not just anger Naruto had felt towards him, their first meeting his eyes had widened before he had caught himself.

Until Neji had started speaking Naruto had looked caught. Then the anger came and the frustration that was not a good example of what drew Naruto honesty. It was never just the looks it was the attitude too. He liked them polite and he liked them friendly.

Which led him back to the guy from before. Naruto had shown off quite a bit for him but it made sense. He was older, he was nicer and he was rather friendly too. A bit of the big brother type. Naruto really liked that sort of thing. Maybe he was longing to see that guy again and at least catch up once more. Hopefully he could tell Sasuke where he got the stuff from before he ran out.

Sasuke lightly touched his stomach and the fading bruises there. That was the life of a shinobi and he accepted it all. He welcomed it all actually, he was proud of it. He kept training and he kept spending time with his team.

He had not felt so relaxed for a long time. He had not felt so good almost ever. His team relaxed him, guided him and he had a place to belong. A place to fight to come back to. With team seven he could be just himself and he could get everything he needed to manage, a place to rest his head. If he was with team seven, he could happily remain Sasuke.

He could be a Sasuke that was worth keeping around and living as. He could survive and live freely if he was with this team. He lightly touched his reflection in the mirror. Traced downwards until he dragged his finger back up to touch above his reflection’s heart. He could breathe freely and without shame if he remained by their sides.

XxX

“Naruto nii-chan!” Konohamaru’s voice really got one’s attention. It rocked through the air and Naruto was unable to stop his smile when he sat up from where he had been lazing away on the school roof. “Come play with us!”

“Don’t you guys have classes?” Naruto leaned over to the side to peer down at them as they stood on the corridor. “You shouldn’t be slacking off you know. Iruka-sensei will get you all.”

“Eh?” Moegi demanded as she pouted. “But aren’t you slacking too?”

“Resting. Resting.” Naruto protested with a shake of his head. “Tsunade baa-chan sent my team on a really annoying mission you know? We got back this morning so I can rest as I like right?”

“Can’t we rest too?” Konohamaru shouted up at him. “We’re free you know! You can ask Iruka-sensei! There was a meeting you can ask if you really doubt us!”
“Hm.” Naruto murmured. “That’s so convenient. Sounds suspicious.” He finished playfully as he tested and stretched himself. “But if the three of you are being so demanding I guess I don’t have a choice, do I?” He admitted as they cheered. “What’s the harm in going off and playing for a little bit? Some training might do you all some good.”

His jump allowed him to catch the railing and swing himself onto the corridor that they stood on. He unwrapped his jacket from where he had tied it around his waist and shrugged it on before he ruffled all the kids’ hair as he took the lead towards the stairs.

“Want to stick in the village this time?” He asked as the caught up with him.

“Ramen later.” Konohamaru was eager to put his two cents.

“Stories.” Moegi demanded as she clung to his jacket.

“Well I guess we’ll figure something out.” Naruto laughed.

XxX

“Udon!” Shikamaru’s head jerked up from where he had been resting at the sound of Naruto’s loud voice. “Wait for us! Why are you pulling ahead? Aren’t all of us going to play together today?”

“But you said who gets there first get to pick dinner!” The boy sounded slightly put out.

“Konohamaru picked the last few times Naruto nii-chan.”

“He did didn’t he.” Shikamaru turned over on the bench so he could peer through the tree to the path below where Naruto walked. “Good point, it really isn’t fair that Konohamaru is the one picking all the time. You guys have favourite foods too. So how about I treat everyone to their favourite snack later?”

“After training?” The young girl holding hands with Naruto asked. “What are we training to do today? More magic?”

“Moegi!” The boy on Naruto’s other side peered around her to shout. “It isn’t magic. Naruto nii-chan already told us it isn’t magic. It’s a weird ninjutsu!”

“That’s one way to put it.” Naruto patted both kids on their heads as he stopped in the middle of the path. “Guess it would be civilian ninjutsu. They would get a kick out of that wouldn’t they? But it is nothing more than advanced sleight of hand things. Its stuff most shinobi know in the beginning but I know how to make it really fancy and stuff. You learn this anyway, later in the academy I think but I was always fond of smoke and mirrors.”

“Naruto?” Chouji said softly as he joined Shikamaru on the bench. “The kids he’s always with…” He finished in a sigh. “If he isn’t training like crazy, he’s playing with them then.”

“What a picture this all makes Chouji.” Shikamaru said softly as he watched the kids surround Naruto and drag him down the path. “But he seems like he’s enjoying himself. Didn’t think I would see that outside of team seven.”

“Well he’s acting like their big brother there isn’t he?” Chouji brushed at his pants. “It kind of suits him in a weird way.”

“Don’t say something so troublesome or I’ll start picturing him as a jounin-sensei and there is no way he is going to make jounin before me.” Shikamaru huffed before he closed his eyes. “Honestly, he’s such a mystery you know? But that’s something I’m going to find out on my own.”
“Because Asuma-sensei won’t help you?” Shikamaru could feel Chouji’s gaze on him, burning his
skin.

“Because Asuma-san most likely can’t help me.” Shikamaru corrected with a heavy sigh. “I don’t
doubt he knows all the information that we want to know. All that and more but I know that he’s
keeping his mouth shut because he has to. I know he finds it funny that he has the information and
we don’t.” Shikamaru admitted. “But I know something and someone is keeping him from
speaking. Most likely all the adults too, if I want to find out the truth, I have to dig for it and I have
to search for it myself.” He opened his eyes so he could face Chouji. “Obviously with help from
you guys too. Most likely this is a big secret that can’t be handled by a lone man.”

“With the state of things and considering just who we’re talking about I doubt one person could
manage it all.” Chouji smiled back. “Even if it is you Shikamaru.”

“I know right?” Shikamaru huffed as he closed his eyes again. “Pain in the ass.”

XxX

This sort of thing was so relaxing he was really enjoying himself. Listening to Konohamaru and his
friends laugh and try. Laugh and hilariously fail and get right back up again to try once more. Their
laughter echoed and sent him back to the past.

Where he did the same, where he tried again and again. Got laughed at but got picked right back up
to try again. Coaxed with words and favours, shown again and again until he got it. Providing it
was a slow easy day of course.

He laughed when Moegi sat by his side and yawned. He patted her gently on the head as they sat
in the small park and watched Udon try his luck at secretly taking toys from Konohamaru. It was
going hilariously well. Udon had a hand for being sneaky it seemed. That or Konohamaru paid less
attention than Naruto thought. Both would be hilarious too.

He allowed himself a deep chuckle before he allowed Moegi to curl up tighter against him.
Looking at those too standing in the park like that just made him smile. It relaxed him more than
lounging on the roof had. It was kind of obvious why.

Loud laughter and the feeling of comfort. Those kids brought him the things he craved and missed
so easily. He had team seven of course but there was just something about chucking everything
away and having fun for a few hours regardless of anything.

“I should make a clone and take their coupons what do you think?” He whispered to Moegi and she
giggled against his shoulder. “So, do it?”

“Do Naruto nii-chan!” Her face was pink from holding back laughter. It was a good sight.

XxX

“This smell.” Hinata watched Kiba stop in his tracks and turn to a direction off the beaten track.
“Naruto? His team is back then.”

“Naruto-kun?” Her heart pounded at the thought and she had taken one step off the path before her
footsteps faltered and she took a glance at her silent teammate. Shino was watching Kiba.

“Sounds noisy too.” Kiba muttered. “Not like team seven though, maybe a bunch of kids or
something?”
“Naruto usually has children companions. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten already Kiba.” Hinata winced at Shino’s tone because she knew how Kiba would take it.

“What the hell! Do I look like I have time to be memorizing everything that idiot does!” Kiba raged before he hunched his shoulders. “Forget it.” He turned back around. “We don’t have time to be horsing around anyway. We can’t afford to slip behind. I’m not getting left behind by an idiot like that.”

“Hinata.” Shino’s gaze was on her. “Do you want to go and say hello? The bugs tell me that Naruto isn’t doing any chakra training.”

She would love to but Kiba had a point. She wanted to say hello, she wanted to say lots of things but what she really wanted to do was have Naruto admire her for something. Be dependable in some way, have Naruto look at her the way he looked at Sakura and Sasuke. Friendship was so far away, she had to work harder before she could take that next step.

“M-maybe next time. Kiba-kun’s right.” She forced a smile as she stepped back on the path. “Besides t-the way the v-village is right now. W-we m-most definitely will see Naruto-kun very soon anyway! W-we don’t have to bother him on his time off. B-besides I’m sure t-the kids waited patiently to be able to see Naruto-kun. We can’t j-just interfere.”

“You’re really kind you know that? Hinata.” Kiba’s voice made her smile. “Thinking about other people and even us like this. No wonder people can’t help but respond. Even that idiot.”

XxX

“Right so to cool down some ices right Udon?” Naruto dangled the bag he had sent his clone to get. “You’ve all worked very hard you guys. I’m so damn happy right now.” He unwrapped the first two and carefully broke it in half. “Udon, Moegi.” He handed the broken ice sticks to them. “Congratulations.”

“Naruto nii-chan!” Moegi looked torn between hugging him and keeping an eye on her treat. “Thank you!”

“You’re welcome so eat up!” Naruto laughed as he accepted a half hug from Udon. “Now Konohamaru.” He broke the second treat and handed half to Konohamaru. “Future Hokages don’t give up right?”

“Right!” That delighted look and that flash of determination in Konohamaru’s eyes made Naruto shove his own ice treat into his mouth before he ruffled Konohamaru’s hair vigorously. Then he moved on to do it to the other two and the park was quickly filled with the kids squeals.

XxX

He was a strange one that was what he was. Neji sat on the branch of the tree as he watched Naruto play with the children. He was so open and friendly. He was so giving and kind to them and he really connected to them. One could easily see how much he cared.

The strength that lurked inside him, it was hard to see when he was like this and that in itself was scary. No sign of the person Neji had seen emerge for quite a few times now, no sign of him. Yet there was this kind boy instead.

Neji liked both parts, the strong thing that he had faced, the strong will shoved inside such a small body. The power that such a small body contained. That was inspiring.
But he liked the other part, the honest caring part of Naruto that could care so easily and fight so hard for freedom. That understood what it was like to live in a cage somehow, that understood the concept of death. That looked it fearlessly in the face. He liked Uzumaki Naruto and he owed him a debt, not that the boy would get that.

The boy that could shed tears so easily, the one that could pick up someone’s vendetta and fight so fiercely in their place. To know about Uzumaki Naruto was to want to learn everything about him. Hopefully Neji would get that chance the harder he worked.

XxX

“I was wondering what he was up to.” Sakura sighed and rolled her heavy shoulders. “Of course, he ran off with the kiddies. Sometimes I swear he’s like one himself these days.” Tenten muffled a snort and Sakura sighed again. “Honestly sometimes I don’t know about him, it makes a cute scene as always though.”

“At least they aren’t in mischief.” Kurenai-sensei smiled as she watched the scene. “As always he’s surprising.”

“Bet you wish you had your camera.” Tenten playfully poked Sakura in the cheek.

“I might as well open a shop and start selling the pictures.” She responded dryly. “They have no business looking that cute you know but what can you do? Everyone deserves a break.”

XxX

“Iruka.” He raised his head at the sound of his name being called to see Kurenai at the door a smile on her face. “Do you have a minute?”

“It’s a never-ending mountain of paperwork.” Iruka admitted with a sigh. “But what can you really do about it?” He finished the scroll before him and rolled it back up. “So where do you want to go?”

“A small walk is fine.” The smile she flashed him made him smile back. She always had this big sister vibe about her. She had been a Chuunin for a long while and he had enjoyed the time they spent together as friends. He had been unsurprised at her promotion and he was happy with her dream team making such leaps and bounds. It was what she deserved.

“So.” He asked teasingly. “What is this about? Team things? Or advice for a dear friend that includes romantic issues?” He eyed her and laughed at the way she rolled her eyes before she shoved him. “It’s nothing serious I already know this.” He stretched when they left the Chuunin station. “So, this has to be a personal matter.”

“I just saw something amusing and had to share it with you.” She took his left side as they walked. “It’s something I knew you would enjoy hearing about as well so I had to share it.”

“Something amusing…” Iruka trailed off. “So the kids then, what team?” He asked with a smile.

“Quite a few of them.” She admitted. “But in the centre of the storm is Naruto of course.” Iruka was allowed a moment of slight confusion and happiness before he heard the sound of laughter and stopped in his tracks. The trees mostly covered them but ahead he saw Konohamaru, Udon, Moegi and Naruto laughing with Naruto behind them. Laughing and giving them attention. He looked so relaxed and happy his jacket unzipped.

The kids were watching him, smiling with and at him. They were all delighted and the way he was
with them as they walked together made him sniffle a bit. He wiped at his eyes to fend away the few tears but it was a useless endeavour.

“You know Kurenai-san.” Iruka said softly as he watched the kids enter the tea and sweet house. “This what I’ve been hoping for, for such a long time.” He admitted. “Since Naruto and I saw eye to eye. That night so long ago. I just wanted him to find somewhere to belong where he could laugh and smile. Be a kid and have friends that would do the same with him. Some sort of support as he battled the villagers hatred.”

“You’ve always been kind Iruka.” Kurenai’s hand was warm on his shoulder. “You’ve been worrying about Naruto for such a long time.”

“I wanted him to have friends since he has no family.” Iruka smiled. “He was always a little bratty but who does that remind you of? Like he thinks of Konohamaru, so do I towards him. Precious, silly but wonderful little brother.” Iruka said softly. “I’ve been looking forward to this for so long and for me it can only get better, the strength in his heart and the depth of his kindness pulls people towards him. His dream is only a matter of time.”

“You mean Hokage?” Kurenai sounded contemplative. “You think he can do it?”

“He connects to people on a level that I see rarely. Sometimes the things he says or the things he thinks sound like they could be coming from the Sandaime’s or even the Godaime’s mouth.” Iruka smiled. “I don’t want to thank the people who took him for a single thing but if they helped Naruto’s kindness and strength grow even one inch, I’ll grudgingly give it. I just wish his development could have been done here. Without the suffering he undoubtedly went through.”

“In his eyes though, those were adventures Iruka.” She sighed. “He’s a weird one but it feels good to watch him.”

“I don’t want to let him out of my sight.” Iruka admitted. “After all these years I want to keep my eye on him and watch him win everything over and become a Hokage that can outdo everyone.”

“Again.” Kurenai muffled a laugh. “Think he can do it?”

“It’s Naruto so of course he can.” Iruka smiled. “He’s got the understanding and the kindness and what he doesn’t know yet is that he has the will and strength to pull other to his cause.” He paused and eyed her. “Gai-san informed me of some changes you know.”

“I have no doubt about that.” Her lip curled before she sighed. “If Naruto lets bygones be bygones then the rest of us will have no real choice. But you know Iruka, I was seriously backing him back then.”

“Of course, you were.” Iruka rolled his eyes. “Who wouldn’t in that situation? But things have been mostly resolved in almost everyone’s eyes. So now is the time for smiles.”

“Smiles and laughter? That would be nice.” Kurenai said wistfully.

XxX

The easiest mission assigned to date but it was actually dangerous too. Just because they treated it like a break did not mean that everything was simple. Shisui paused in the middle of peeling his apple to watch the boy in his room that was scribbling away on his bed.

Watching Naruto so often was a privilege at the end of the day. For Shisui he knew how many people wanted to get close to the boy for their own reasons. All slightly understandable. He got the
concerns of other people and while he was privileged to know the entire truth.

It really was hard sometimes to see Naruto as anything but the young kid that he was. A young kid with a shitty hand. Not much they could do about it, Naruto was proving his strength now and the allies he was making along his way.

Maybe that was the true intention of the Sandaime because with every day that Naruto was Naruto, he drew people to himself. he drew allies and he really doubted they would turn away when they learned the truth. Hell, the way Sakura and Sasuke were, they would be first in the line of defence.

He really wanted to see that day. He wanted to see all of them together knowing everything and making Konoha a better place. Still he and the other ANBU teams looked forward to the various Naruto watches. The things they learned just by observing the crazy kid.

Half the things he did and came up with showed how much better he was for being outside the village for so long. He would have never received the training that he did in the village. Shisui could admit that. He was a bit bothered by Naruto’s emotional attachments.

It was hard to believe the Sandaime and the sensei Iruka had saved them from Naruto pretty much rightful wrath. It was hard to imagine just letting go like that. He knew if it were him things might not have gone down so easy. If he had to watch his friends… his family… for the greater good… he doubted it would go down the same if he were younger.

So maybe that was the difference in will for them. Maybe that was just how the kid developed or even blood showing through. Whatever it was Shisui sure enjoyed watched Naruto learn the village and keep true to himself. He enjoyed watched the boy learn himself and try his best to keep what he was taught, at least the moves and weapons stuff with him.

Shisui bit into the peeled part of the apple as Naruto brought the paper, he had been writing for over his face before he crumpled it into a ball an tossed it away. Part of him wondered what was on the paper but since Naruto had started his tinkering about, Shisui fingered he was better off waiting it out.

Naruto had a head for some these things and considering what they knew about the Kyuubi. Honestly Shisui doubted he would have been ever allowed to tinker like this. Because of his blood he might have been drawn to some of the things but the rest of the things the kid could do? That rightfully belonged as a credit to those missing nins.

They had helped Naruto become someone that Shisui was unsure could have flourished under the old Konoha. Not that current Konoha was much better. People still had their heads in the clouds and other places.

Fucking annoying was what it was when he saw it but what could they currently do? The eyes were on Naruto. The eyes were on that kid and not all were kind. It was a shame; the other kids were shielding him a bit but Shisui saw and heard things.

Most shinobi were thankful to Naruto. The ones with their heads on their necks and not up their asses. Those that had been on a team with him or had observed team seven, or just watched him for more than a few moments saw what Shisui saw.

The team that had been with him to take them to the hospital. Well they saw Naruto and the others a little differently. At the end of the day they were fragile human beings. All of them even Naruto, Naruto was a little tougher of course but he could still be injured. He could still die even with that incredible chakra and life force.
Naruto likely knew that too but he kept moving, kept smiling and walking forward. That inspired people, that inspired Shisui and everyone around him. That drew people to him. Of course, the kid had his awkward kid moments as well as his shameless moments.

While he was cautious Shisui was living for the moments that Naruto grew shy around certain people. The look of awe in his eyes. The way he smiled at certain people. The scandalous way he was with his team. The way he just drew others to being just like him. It was hilarious and wonderful.

The way he was with the Hokage too, Shisui wished she would just tell Naruto but he guessed at this point she really could not. Even though she most likely wanted to. Jiraiya-sama too he guessed and of course Mikoto-san. She and Jiraiya-sama had something in common, seeing someone else in Naruto and wanting to be with him and that light he brought a little longer.

He was getting stronger day by day. He was improving by leaps and bounds but one thing Shisui knew for certain after all these months of watching. Naruto thought of Konoha as home and honestly that was one thing that made him feel better. Having Naruto see the village as his home where he could be safe, it made the watch a lot easier for all of them. Naruto had the village and he had his friends too. The brats, the other teams, his senseis, the Hokages, Jiraiya-sama and of course Sasuke and Sakura.

XxX

Sooner or later he and Sakura were going to be comfortable enough to go along with Naruto in every shameless thing that he suggested. Not that Sasuke currently minded and that was fucked up enough to consider.

His mother would thrash him if she knew how unbothered he was at the thought of bathing in the same bath as Sakura. It was bad enough how easy they were with everything else. But it felt so natural and good, it was soothing and normal. He got a bit of insight to Naruto every time he relaxed and allowed himself not to care.

Nudity was nothing to Naruto, they learnt that in training. Sakura had already gotten an eyeful. More than that with him sparring Naruto. Sasuke himself had already seen plenty too during that sparring match during the rainstorm. He had been more concerned about the mud the two had been wrestling in than the bits of skin covered.

Then he had been bothered about mud getting at sensitive places and the disturbing fact that he was the one that had to spar Naruto next so that just might be him covered in mud naked. Thankfully Kakashi had saved his ass back then and called off the practice and shuffled them off to the hot springs. That had been a blessing.

He had happily and graciously accepted his escape as they cleaned up but for a few seconds there he had hesitated when they had split up. It was not as if he had not already seen his team mates before. Honestly it was more a nuisance to have to stop their talk to split up and bathe. It was that moment that he really understood how Naruto saw certain things.

If only for a bit because after he had that insight the actual thought of doing it came over him and he winced before he continued along the safe routine. A few seconds were wasted for trying to catch a glimpse of Kakashi while he changed but Sasuke saw more scars than the man’s face so he gave up.

Naruto had not even bothered to look; his eyes went from Kakashi’s back to elsewhere as he babbled on about the sparring and how the rain wasn’t that bad.
Sasuke put up with a lot from his team. Weird moments like that were only a small part of it but he would never walk away from it.

XxX

He no longer cared if it made him sound old, hot springs were amazing. After a hard morning’s workout and mini mission, a bath was more than appreciated. Sasuke did not care that it was early afternoon his muscles were demanding attention and care.

No Kakashi because the man had left them at the bath house but Sasuke was not that bothered. He was still going to enjoy himself and the entire process of relaxing and unwinding while in the hot springs was far more important to where his cheap sensei had vanished to.

He was not the only one happy about the hot water and steam. Naruto had rushed through the routine to get out there to begin with. Sasuke would have too if it had not been for the cold chill that ran down his spine every time he tried to rush through the routine.

Maybe with some time he would not feel guilty about rushing. He had only now started breaking away after all and it was a given that it would be weird to him from the beginning. Seriously, it felt as though his mother was glaring with every rushed or skipped step. Sasuke was not going to tempt fate this early.

He had gotten outside to soak eventually. Naruto had been waiting already up to his nose in the water. It made for an adorable sight as he joined him. Sasuke dedicated his first ten minutes appreciating the heat and letting it work his magic.

Just sat next to Naruto in silence his head tipped back and eyes closed. Naruto was silent as he waited him out but occasionally under the water their hands brushed and Naruto would play with his fingers as he waited.

When Sasuke was ready to give Naruto attention again he found blue eyes watching him and who knows if it was the steam or just him tired but they were glittering, shining like jewels and he was unable to stop the smile from building on his face.

Unable to stop it from forming and when it got on his face, he could not get it off either. It would have been good if Sakura could have seen this with him but she was on the other side of the bath. The girls’ side so she was missing out.

“Feels good right?” Naruto laughed softly as he slipped closer. “I was so tensed up with everything but when I come in here, I just relax. I love these things.”

“All of us do.” Sasuke admitted. “It’s the best thing about relaxing, I would take one of these every day if I could. There is no doubt that this is an expensive that cuts into our money. We’re here so often I think it sees us as much as the ramen does.”

“Does it though?” Naruto stared up as if contemplating. “I think I eat more ramen than I come here.”

“I don’t disagree with that.” Sasuke snorted. “You alone eating ramen would be more than us coming here or even you coming on your own or with Iruka-sensei. The other little brats you be with too.”

“How you know I don’t come here alone with Kakashi-sensei?” Naruto teased. “I could you know, doesn’t that sound like something he would do? I don’t just be with Konohamaru and Iruka-sensei you know.”
“You want to see that man outside normal team seven? You would willingly put up with his—“ Sasuke snorted. “As if, you know how ridiculously private he gets. He lets us in but we aren’t all the way in. It’s always him to us and besides food and breaks and training he won’t do more. Not one on one.” Sasuke sunk further in the water until his neck was covered. “But I guess you could come here with that old guy you’re always complaining about.”

“Ero-Sennin.” Naruto groaned. “Ugh, what a pervert. I really don’t get him but he buys me food sometimes. But he’s so perverted and immature and when he’s with Baa-chan it’s a hundred times worse. What kind of hero Sannin is he?”

“People have many sides.” Sasuke shrugged as Naruto slipped closer. “That’s what makes them human.”

XxX

“Now if this isn’t cute.” Shisui sniggered as he kept himself concealed. “That’s what we’re talking about Sasuke.” He was fiercely glad that he had managed to snag this particular watch. He was not exactly eager to spy on his cousin in the hot springs but he was glad to see the interactions between Naruto and Sasuke.

If he had a camera, he could make himself rich from these photos alone. Sasuke’s little fans. Hell Itachi and Mikoto-san would buy them too, especially if they saw how pliant Sasuke got around Naruto.

Hell he was wondering what to do if things got heated in the hot springs. Maybe roll a pebble in or something. Things got intimate with team seven, he was not used to it but he was accepting of it. He saw a growing lack of modesty and way more of Sasuke than he would like. Way more of Naruto too and not an ounce of shame.

Little Sakura too and the way she was with them. Shisui hoped he wasn’t on that watch if they got any closer because he was at his limit. They were still kids but their hormones were surging. Maybe theirs more than Naruto’s because the boy seemed to have everything handled.

So damn accepting of everything and making jokes of things that would have others mortified. That flirting and ease could not come naturally. Shisui was at least hoping so all while he knew better.

But of course, the matter at hand was his cousin in the hot springs soaking with Naruto. Being very close, unnecessarily close and if they weren’t holding hands under the water then Shisui was going to reveal the last location of his back up sake to Fugaku.

And that was never going to happen. He knew those boys were holding hands under the water. They had been talking a bit, normal things. Team seven things, some boy things, shinobi things. That was cute and all but they had been drifting close in that team seven way for a while now.

Shisui just knew Itachi would kill to have his shift. He just knew it. This bit of Sasuke was going down on the books.

The only way Itachi could see Sasuke properly was on shift of course. He knew what it did to Itachi even as he said nothing. How it wrecked him to have Sasuke so far away, but at least he could still see him. Even from a distance.

He watched Sasuke smile before he shifted in the water. Something that Naruto followed as they continued talking. Nothing serious, Shisui could tell by their tone. That playful goading teasing tone so many boys used when horsing around with each other. He was aware of it and it amused
him only too well.

They were closer than most friends stood but that was just another team seven thing. He had spotted Sakura wrapped around Naruto’s back as she briefed him while Kakashi sparred Sasuke. The two had looked comfortable as she whispered into his ear.

Not exactly professional team behaviour but by gods above it was fucking team seven behaviour so Shisui rolled with it. They really did not have a choice there when it came down to it. They had to watch it and they had to put up with it. They did try to give the brats a bit of privacy, not that the kids acted as though that was what they wanted.

Shisui had watched Sasuke wrap himself half naked around his team mates and sadly less and less clothes were being worn on the night cuddle things. He did not want to imagine what the trips out of Konoha were like.

Well he had gotten an earful from Asuma that gave a much bigger vivid picture than he had been wanting. It had been the most painfully enlightening moment in his life because he had known it was bad but… the picture being painted made it hard to look Mikoto-san in the eyes sometimes.

Still it was good to see them acting like kids sometimes. Kids with teenager hormones and a sense of safety. That meant playing around and exploring. He stifled another snigger as the boys playfully jostled each other as they teased each other with words. Seeing Sasuke like this did something for him.

Not naked with another boy and getting closer and closer. Not that part, he was trying to block that from his head, no he meant the playing and teasing. He meant the kid stuff and the smiles that Sasuke kept sporting because it was so rare to catch Sasuke relaxed and happy. Team seven was the only place Sasuke seemed happy these days.

He watched as Naruto tilted his head up at Sasuke, still talking in that playful tone and Shisui shook his head. Naruto was a short one, for his age group at least and it made him wonder how that would change. Sasuke got to look down at him and it made Shisui wonder for how much longer that would happen.

Naruto did not seem to mind looking up at Sasuke. He seemed to find it funny and it really was. Sasuke was the one looking down but Naruto seemed to be the one caging in. Shisui softly cleared his throat as the boys voices lowered and lowered. He skilfully and politely looked at the sky and hummed to himself.

Give the brats a bit of privacy, he was going to hold onto this though and tease the hell out of Sasuke a few years later when everything was declassified. Hold it over Itachi’s head too. He had let loose a little chuckle when a startled yelp and two cries of pain jolted to action.

He glanced down to the two boys once more to catch both of them falling into the water. Naruto with his hand to his forehead a look of pain on his face and a wince on Sasuke’s as he covered his eyes with one arm.

Shisui frowned at the scene as the boys sat in the water his eyes darting from one until the other before he sniggered softly. The two must have crashed together and made a real mess of things. He was not exactly sorry about it.

“Sorry.” Sasuke’s pained voice floated up to Shisui and Shisui bit his glove to keep in the roar of laughter that wanted to escape him. “For a second there I felt a little woozy.”
“Yeah.” Naruto sounded a little dazed but pained. “It’s okay Sasuke. I felt like something shifted just now too.” He gave a soft groan. “My head feels a little off right now.”

“Maybe it was the heat.” Sasuke sounded miserable and Shisui sniggered. “We should get out or something we’ve been here for a while.”

“The heat? You know… just now your eyes…” Naruto slowly removed his hand as he looked at Sasuke. “Well maybe it is for the best you know. I don’t know what happened but… you’re okay right?”

“Yeah.” Sasuke shook his head before he carefully lowered his arm. “You’re okay too right? For you too. Just now, it felt like I just. Like we just-”

“Let’s not worry about it okay?” Shisui frowned at the way Naruto got up and offered his hand to Sasuke. “We should get out and at least check on Sakura-chan.”

“Yeah.” Sasuke nodded as he glanced around the bath. “Bet she’s still in though.” He rubbed his hand over his face before he splashed water on his face. Shisui watched Naruto leave the bath first as Sasuke splashed water on his face and rub his eyes.

“Tough luck I guess.” He muttered as Sasuke left the bath to follow Naruto. It was pretty funny in all but he did feel sorry for Sasuke. Poor kid kept holding his head and covering his eyes so Naruto’s hard head must have really hurt. He sort of regretted missing whatever it was that happened. Who was he kidding he should have watched with the sharingan on.

XxX

There was a process to these things and while he was not an expert Naruto had most certainly been watching for a time. He had watched wrinkled hands take their time from the very beginning. He had no doubt that he would suck for a few times but he knew he would improve.

Helping and watching did not mean he was a master but it meant that once he took his time, he could do an adequate job. The thing about that was currently he had more than enough time. Thanks to Konoha he had all the time he needed to get this done.

He had all the time to practice, to treat carve and sculpt. He shoved his hair back as he took a deep breath and eyed the fairly large container before him. He did not want to keep it outside but keeping it inside with his current lack of space was also asking for trouble.

Things happened and people were nosy, he did not mind explaining but he would rather talk about the finished project instead of explaining what he was doing and all the steps he had to take to get there. He would rather not explain where he had gotten the idea from and why he was doing it.

He had gotten the wood quite a while back but it was only now, he was getting to work with it. That showed how busy he had been for the last few weeks. There was always something to be done or something to work on. Sparring, training and missions. Keeping up with his team or Konohamaru and the others.

There was always something to do or someone to see. Other things he was working on at the same time. All of these things were important. All the things he had learned of before and he wanted to get as many things done as he could before he began to forget the little details. The sensitive things along with the pictures of their hands. The sound of their voices.

He wanted to bring back as many things as he could before he began to forget what it had been like. He wanted to keep going with the things they had.
He knew what he wanted to be and how he wanted to look. He knew what kind of image he wanted to give off when he finally got what was his. Sora had been a bigger help than the boy knew. He had really helped clear up some of the things Naruto had been thinking about as he had gotten wrapped up in his greed.

Everything he had lost he had wanted to grab it once more. It was already impossible because what was lost was lost. He had to carry on their skills, their laughter and hopes and dreams. No one told him to shoulder that burden but it felt as though there really was no other way to proceed.

He scratched his bare chest before his fingers trailed up to play with the necklace. He sighed heavily before he withdrew the scroll from his pocket. He lay it over the container and gave the scroll the amount of chakra needed for the wood to emerge.

He had to gently poke it around for the wood to settle carefully. It would be a few days of carefully monitored soaking. He could leave it under the sink. Cover it over and let the wood soak. He could do that but he knew how shinobi thought.

It would be easily and quickly discovered, it was something new in the house after all. Kakashi-sensei’s eyes always darted around and locked onto the things that were new. Photos, plants or little trinkets. Little experiments, containers or clothes the man’s eyes always sought them out on stepping into the apartment. Who knew what the man did when Naruto was not watching him. Most likely snooped even worse.

Iruka-sensei did not make it so shinobi like but he did do his own thing. He scanned the room on entering but the things he was looking for was a little different. His face always so expressive as he smiled at the evidence of Naruto living happily and settling around.

Sakura and Sasuke’s faces were always curious and cautious. The more they watched Naruto meddle around with bombs and poisons the more cautious they were about touching or interfering with anything new in Naruto’s place. They never went snooping but the kids like Konohamaru were always so curious Naruto kept his things out of reach and under his eye just in case.

He just did not want to get into a discussion during the process. When everything was done and he had another card in his deck he was going to be happy to talk as much as anyone wanted to hear.

He bent down and slowly stirred the water that the wood was in before he got up and sighed. Of course there was the chance that no one would say anything until he said something. That would actually be nice.

XxX

“We haven’t gotten around to that have we.” Sakura lightly tossed the small scroll as they all sprawled various places in Sasuke’s room. “We should get to that you know. Before she comes up with even crazier missions for us.”

“I managed to get my hands on some pretty decent containers.” Naruto chimed in his head buried in Sasuke’s pillow. Sasuke looked up from where he was polishing his kunais to watch Naruto’s naked back as the boy turned over. “We could take out the huge jug and pour them out and give them to Baa-chan.”

“Or we could divide it out and give her a bunch now and a bunch later.” Sakura tossed the scroll high before she caught it again. She lay back against the wall and tapped the scroll against her leg. “What you think about that?”
Sasuke watched the cloudless sky before he nodded. “I like the idea of giving some now and later but the way we are we can find sake any time. I think its best we give her the large haul now and later on find more for her if she accepts the bribe.”

“I like that idea even better.” Naruto sat up before he hugged the pillow to his stomach. “She’ll drink that in no time anyway. Tsunade baa-chan has no limits ya know.”

“Hopefully it will last until we get out the office.” Sakura snorted. “So where do we take the jug out? Here?”

“Not in my house I don’t want my parents smelling sake and getting the wrong impressions.” Sasuke stated dryly. “Can’t we do it somewhere else?”

“Good point about the parents. That means my place is out too.” Sakura mused. “Naruto’s place?”

“Only place you can get away with the smell of sake lingering.” Naruto snorted. “We’ll have to take a good bath after that if you don’t want to give the wrong impressions you two.”

“I really do like the container that this is in though.” Sakura mused. “Pouring this into different jug is the best idea after all. This container just might come in handy.”

“Only if you are going to be making your own sake later on.” Naruto laughed. “I hope you won’t be Sakura-chan.”

“Silly.” She rolled her eyes before she stretched. “I guess we’re off for more containers? I doubt we have enough currently.”

“About a few medium ones should finish it off.” Sasuke’s mind wandered to possible stores and where they could easily make purchases. “Something classy.”

“Guess we could always ask that restaurant where they get those pretty black ones.” Naruto lay back down still hugging Sasuke’s pillow tightly. “That looks classy.”

“Maybe some cups to go with it too.” Sakura murmured. “Let’s split the cost?”

“Why don’t we go downtown? Those stores closest to the shady shinobi medicines and supplies?” Naruto asked. “It’s bound to be cheap there and we might stumble across something fairly good.”

“I was going to say the second-hand store but we can do both, any suggestions Sasuke-kun?”

Sasuke shook his head as he stretched. “It all sounds good to me. Once it is classy in the end, I have no problem. Then it is the case of hoping the Godaime understands what we are trying to tell her.”

“I’m willing to tell her what we want to tell her.” Naruto muttered. “It really isn’t that hard to understand in the end you know. Unless she is being blind of purpose and I just know she isn’t ya know? She knows what she is doing so the moment she sees us and she sees this she’ll know.” He broke off to release a long sigh. “And she’ll laugh ya know.”

“That I have no doubt about.” Sakura snorted.

“But ya know.” Naruto said softly. “She’ll get it, she’ll understand and she’ll be proud ya know.”

Sasuke ducked his head as a smile spread across his face at Naruto’s words. “We know.”

XxX
“Team—” Iruka cut himself off with a small chuckle before he shifted his groceries in his hand. “Maybe next time.” He said softly as he watched team seven walk down the street together. As usual they were easy to find and hard to look away from.

Their body language alone spoke volumes. They were so animated and so aware of each other. Close and intense with every step that they took. Naruto in the middle interacting and touching Sakura and Sasuke. Sasuke and Sakura either speaking to Naruto or speaking over his head as they claimed a section of the street and made their way down it.

There was this aura, this energy surrounding them. As if they were in their own little world but at the same time, they were aware of the world around them and ready for the slightest change.

He did not think he would get tired of the sight Naruto made with his team. The easy relaxed look of his body. The relaxed way he was with them and of course his laughter. The teasing, the laughter the light-hearted behaviour. Everything he wanted for Naruto or at least the first step.

There was no need for him to call out to them right now. Wherever they were going it had to be fairly important. There was time and Iruka could wait, he was happy just getting to see them like this. It was something to store in his memory for later.

Xxx

It had been a long time since he had seen her relaxed and happy. So long that it was hard to get used to even when he was happy to see her this way. Proud to see her this way. He paused in the middle of the doorway and watched her smiling.

It was not directed at him, no she was staring towards the window a smile on her face and it made her so beautiful. It took Jiraiya to the past and to their youth. He would have stayed watching her longer but the need for this meeting made him shake himself and approach her with an easy smile and slow steps.

“Something has you in a good mood princess?” He patted his pocket for his pipe as he took in the piles of paperwork and the black jug on the desk. Pretty intricate work on it, unusual too. Foxfire, lightning strikes and sakura petals on the surface.

Whoever the creator was they had quite the imagination. Jiraiya bet that not many people would be draw to it. It was a striking scene but the longer he looked at it the more peaceful it seemed. Almost calming the way the foxfire floated and the petals fell as the lightning separated petals and fire. Strange work indeed.

“Jiraiya.” Her smile was turned to him before she walked over to her desk. “You’re on time.”

“It’s urgent business.” His hands played with his pipe as he watched the jug. “So what has you in a good mood at a time like this?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” She laughed as she approached her desk. He watched her nudge paperwork from piles. She glanced over some, stamped some and continued on. Her finger touched the top of the jug and trailed over the cork. “Brats being adorable.”

Brats… that smile could mean only one brat. “Team seven and Kakashi?” He touched the corner of her desk with the least amount of paperwork. “Are they complaining again about something you’ve done?”

Tsunade chuckled at that before she tucked her hair over her shoulder. Her glance towards him made his heart clench even as he returned her smile. “Those little brats have a lot of nerve.” She
laughed. “But they are so cute too.” Her fingers drummed on the cork of the jug. “Something like this, they are really resourceful.” A flick of her finger and the cork came off. Jiraiya inhaled and froze at the scent of alcohol.

“They got you that?” He asked slowly. “How on earth did they get Kakashi to buy that?” Kakashi barely bothered to buy alcohol for himself and it was always the cheapest and crudest types. He joined Tsunade and lifted the jug to his face so he could peer inside. He already knew what he would see, clear smooth sake. The scent alone betrayed it. “Brats working overtime.” He hummed under his breath.

“I doubt Kakashi is involved.” Tsunade said dryly as she took the jug back. “I’m not sure if he knows they had it but that’s their bribe to me. A good ransom amount. That’s just the one I’m going to keep in here.” Her eyes glittered with amusement. “The brats gave me bottles Jiraiya.”

“Oh, did they now.” He could picture the little team, they would be so proud of themselves. Naruto would look Tsunade right in her eyes and be flanked by his team. He could see them presenting it. He could hear Naruto’s laughter and he could almost see the brat’s teasing face. “Is this by any chance a bribe? Asking you for less of your little test missions?”

They can’t have everything they want Jiraiya.” Tsunade rolled her eyes as she reached for her desk drawer. “Still they are rather resourceful, I’m willing to bet that this was something that they found on a mission and something they are exchanging in order for leniency. Better treatment. Aren’t brats amusing?” She came up with two sake cups and Jiraiya nodded in agreement. “When did they get this cute?”

“Haven’t they always been cute?” Jiraiya questioned as he poured for Tsunade first and then himself. “But bringing you alcohol, the boy and his team have quite the head of their shoulders. Almost frightening.”

“It’s cute, don’t read anything more to it.” She took a slow sip and smiled. “It’s good sake.”

Jiraiya took a sip of his own and had to agree. “If you were to explain to them your plans they wouldn’t buck so much. But I already know that you enjoy watching their faces as they dance to your tune.”

“It’s for their own good.” Her eyes met his over her cup. “Thanks to them every team is improving rather nicely. The reach goes beyond genin teams. The mood is different now, thanks to team seven things are shifting in a much more manageable direction.”

“They are the centre of it all huh.” Jiraiya refilled his glass before he rolled his eyes. “Come off of it princess and tell the truth.”

“I just find it funny.” She smiled as she lowered her cup. “That he’s asking for a break when he’s the one that doesn’t want the easy road to Hokage.” Jiraiya blinked at that. “There is a lot that he has to learn and the closer they get the better it will be in the long run. The village will change Jiraiya.”

“You haven’t even gotten rid of the old council and you are thinking about a new one and new advisors?” Jiraiya snorted. “We have many weeds to pick before the garden can flourish don’t forget that.”

“That’s why we protect them. They need to be kids for a while longer but we can’t neglect their potential. I’m betting on him, don’t forget.”
“I won’t.” Jiraiya promised. “I’m betting on him too.”

“He’s got quite the mouth on him.” She laughed. “The faces he makes, the things he says. It’s hard not to watch him, it’s hard to do the right thing.” Her eyes lost a bit of their amusement. “There are many things we have to finish before other things that can be revealed.”

“What can I do to help?” He set his empty cup down on the table. “I’m here for you Tsunade.”

Her gaze warmed once more and she smiled. “I know you are. Thank you for that.” She set her own cup down with a soft thump and sighed heavily. “So many things to do, it is nice once in a while to take a break and laugh at the little brats in the village.”

“One of my favourite pastimes.” Jiraiya agreed.

“All these reports and all these people.” Tsunade mused. “And that brat stirs so many people up. It’s quite dangerous sometimes, the way he is I don’t know when he’ll cause someone to snap.” Her eyes drifted to a pile of reports on the other side of the room. “Well, I have some ideas to who will snap first. I need some measures in place for that.” She closed her eyes and sighed deeply. “For the time being I don’t want you wandering too far. No further than three weeks journey from Konoha.”

“Right.” Jiraiya agreed. “So we’ll talk about that report then.”

“And finish off as much of this as we can. I’ll refill it later when Shizune isn’t looking.” Tsunade chuckled. “Those brats are something else.”

“But that is a good thing.” Jiraiya smiled. “They are amusing little brats.”

XxX

The competitions between teams were fierce but among the team members themselves it was intense. Sakura was used to it now. Used to watching her boys and have them watch her, calculating and looking for anything that would give her an edge.

She was willing to accept Naruto as their crazed top contender. When it came to hand to hand and Naruto being serious, he got one over them by any means necessary. They lost points and dignity. Not that at this point that she had much left.

When the urge to win got a hold of you it was hard to focus about things like modesty or even how things appeared. She did not care and no one else on the team did. Learning, striving to get stronger was all that mattered. Not repeating mistakes as you went hard was what mattered.

She had been sparring with so many different people and adapting with each one. Sparring outside the team gave her an edge. For one she was able to spar against another girl. So, she got to see a bit of what Naruto and Sasuke felt and saw.

Another thing was that she was able to see things that might give her an edge. Fights were not just physical. Depending on the opponent things could be fought in their head and with their bodies. She had seen that with Naruto.

Watching him move and seen him fight with emotions flickering across his face almost too fast to catch and process. It was simply insane. She was still struck at how fast his mind went, it caught everything but then it analysed it. Naruto felt it all and he drowned in it when fighting.

Not a simple berserker filled with rage or a divine punisher. He was filled with so many emotions
so many of them conflicting depending on the opponent. He was thinking so many things with each movement. With every strike, kick or bite. To try to take advantage of that sounded like a pipe dream considering how quick battles were. How fast everything was.

At least it had seemed that way until she kept watching Naruto and she kept watching the faces of her opponents. Fights were not just physical, you had to go for their minds too. Exploit them and take advantage of them, exploit the weakness so you could win.

For some it was taking advantage of the fact that she was a female. Not her boys though. Naruto held back but not because she was a girl it was because he cared. She could not take advantage of that either because he always knew how to flip her or toss her down hard enough to make her admit defeat.

Her being a girl was not enough for Naruto to be thrown off. Naruto fought any and everyone no hesitation. He had no problems fighting women or fighting children. The latter obviously bothered him. It could be due to his circumstances or because of the people he faced. Those tricked and lied to, taken advantage of. Naruto hated having to fight those but he did it anyway. Never let up until it was finished.

He let his grief come through afterwards but during the fight he gave it his all. While he fought or pled or he snarled truths right in someone’s face. Currently manipulating Naruto’s emotions or getting in far enough for one slip up was beyond her.

She could not jolt him out of things and give him that moment of fear or despair that she had watched her Sensei and Naruto do. How Naruto did it she was still trying to figure out sometimes. She got the bloodlust, it was human to fear the beast that targeted you. But it was more than that, Naruto’s words or even his actions could send you flying back to confront some emotional weakness.

Kakashi-sensei did not do it often but she had seen him do it. On missions when it was team seven and missions where he led and she followed. Kakashi-sensei was better at it but Naruto was more intense. Everyone felt Naruto when he did whatever he did.

She could not do that, Sasuke neither but the time was coming. They had to use what they could as they picked up as many skills as they could while time and circumstances allowed them. Something else would soon come and they had to be ready. She would never allow history to repeat itself. The nightmare would not come through.

Her boys would be safe and she would save them, she would protect them. It was more than that too, she was not going to hold anyone back and she was not going to have her home be in danger. She was going to protect it and she would stand firm. There were people behind her that she had to protect. That meant that whoever was in her way she had to go through them and put them down hard so they could not hurt anything she cared about.

Facts of life about shinobi. That was how it was, as a Chuunin she accepted this fate. A shadow fell across her scroll and she looked up to see Sasuke. She was not surprised at the least about him searching her out. Naruto had gone off to train and do something. He would pop up later, he always did. Gods above knew where Kakashi-sensei really was he had a habit of disappearing and not always to go and slack.

Somehow it felt as though sometimes she was better off not questioning what he was doing. Some things she really did not want to know about her own sensei. But with just her free Sasuke would want to spar. She did not mind, she was thinking the same thing that he was after all, they needed to get stronger.
It had been a while since their last private spar but that was fine with her. Both of them needed it. It was a way of testing their strength and making sure the other one was okay. They all had things they were thinking about and needed to work out. Seeing their own strengths and seeing their friends’ strengths helped to reassure all of them. She had no problem with that.

“Should we get going Sasuke-kun?” She rolled up her scroll. “Let’s not waste the day.”

“Tag?” Sasuke’s eyes were focused as usual but she could not keep herself from looking further.

“Why not? No big weapons?” She would love a chance to work with kunais and needles.

“Hand to hand. No jutsus.” Sasuke assisted her to her feet before he scooped up her bag. “Keep it simple.”

“When does team seven do anything simple?” She laughed. “Sasuke-kun keep simple for another team. We go all out. That’s what we are, nothing is simple. It’s complicated and beautiful. It’s passionate.”

“Then I’ll add another passionate win to my record.” Sasuke tossed over his shoulder as he took the lead for the training grounds.”

“You really think you’ll get one over me this time don’t you.” She rolled her eyes. “Two wins in a row doesn’t mean anything when you have never made three wins in a row. I’ll kill your streak just like you killed mine last time.”

“Weather was your only advantage.” Sasuke tossed over his shoulder. “Just wind and sun today Sakura.”

“Sometimes I really...” She rolled her eyes as she picked up her pace to follow him. “Your mouth sometimes Sasuke-kun. I’ll cram something in it one these days. Make you swallow some manners.”

XxX

Sasuke watched Sakura pull her hair up. Something he had seen so many times that at this point it was quick effortless and expected. Her hair was more up than not these days, mostly because their group was always training or always doing something.

That and she thought it made her look professional or something when she wore the jacket. The jacket came off next before made adjustments to her dress. Then the weapon pouches came off. Sasuke had already gotten rid of his but the amount Sakura had on her made him shake his head at her.

“What?” She asked as a kunai trap and a few bottles were tossed in the direction of her jacket. “I’m stocking up Sasuke-kun. Testing some things.”

“In the village?” He asked dryly. “Can’t it wait?”

“You never know what’s going to happen. It isn’t as if I had that much.” Sasuke silently stared at the pile. “Most of it is for practice.” Like he was going to believe that. “Some of us are still working on our sword work you know.” That he could believe.

“Doesn’t that girl help you with that?” He paused before he kicked off his shoes. “If she can wave a staff around like that, she can at least be a force for your sword.”
“You mean start with kendo and make my way up?” Sakura barked out a laugh before she tugged on her gloves. She kicked off her own shoes and stood on the grass. The sun was bright and the wind was cool. “Tenten would really love that. But that isn’t how it is with us. She is helping me find the things that suits me. So many weapons out there and so many ways of fighting. I just have to find the right one.”

“Naruto said he was thinking of getting you an axe.” Sasuke confessed. He watched amusement run across Sakura’s face until she gave into giggles. “Considering how he was talking it doesn’t sound that stupid.”

“You just let him come up with this and didn’t stop him?” Her gloved hand covered her mouth as she shook with laughter. “Sasuke-kun we can’t let Naruto collect weapons. What on earth would Konoha turn into? In the end we would end up with quite a few international disputes. Besides.” Her laughter slowed as she lowered her hand. “I’m the one that will choose what suits me best. I don’t want to be locked down to one thing.”

“Likewise.” Sasuke agreed as Sakura slowly cracked her knuckles. “Let’s begin then. When the sparrows two trees away take flight.” They held each other’s gazes as they waited. The wind blew and leaves rustled before birds took to the air. Sasuke leapt forward before he hit a hard slide his hands coming up to grasp Sakura’s leg.

She had come right for him. Down had been the only option. He yanked her back but had to release her quickly and roll as her entire body went lax in his grip. He avoided her punch, she had flipped and bent over in order to aim. He came up a few feet away and raised one finger.

“One.” He smiled. “You’re it.”

XxX

There was a tactical advantage to being the one chasing but that did not mean Sakura liked being it all the time. The way that their team worked they had to get used to running and hiding. Just because Sasuke and Naruto were the ones that hit hard and were hard to bring down did not mean that should be their approach all the time.

It should not be their approach at all. They were still going to be shinobi. Chasing and capturing came with the job. It was the trying to evade part that things got tricky. Team seven had taught her how hard you had to think and work when you were the one being chased and targeted.

Sometimes you came up with some crazy shit in order to get one more second of freedom. It was not that Sakura would not be able to catch Sasuke, it was just that she wanted those moments of crazy comprehension where shit made sense and she was able to pull something creative from desperation and improve and overcome.

She would have her turn. Just she had to bring Sasuke down first. Their games of tag had shown her that she had a good knack for hunting. Finding Kakashi-sensei was not exactly a breeze but she had been getting better lately, better and faster.

She could not see his face but his eye showed her everything she wanted to know. Sometimes their growth took him off guard and he found that a bit scary. She could not wait for the day that he found it terrifying. That would be the day she knew her team had really come far.

But before her was Sasuke, there was no rain to slow them down. No mud or bad weather, just sun and wind. A perfect day with no obstacles. A terrain that they both knew.
Sasuke was faster still, he had more chakra than she did but they had been training with each other and they were on the same team. They knew how the other thought. It was why he had managed to get one up on her in the beginning.

Trying to cut him off would not work well. There was a matter of stamina too. She had to get close and bring him down. Not easy at all and with all the trees around he would try to hide. He liked to go way up and hide among the leaves.

Not much she could do about that. She watched a small smile form on his face before he took a step back. She rolled her eyes as he darted backwards and she gave chase. Through the trees and up he went. If they had been allowed to use something, she would have thrown a kunai with a tag or a rock to throw him off course.

Some seeds from a tree or something. As they raced through the trees her mind just kept picking up all the things, she could have been throwing at Sasuke to cut him off, slow him down or knock him out.

Her path went from right behind him to slightly left, a curve in order to bring her closer and closer. They knew the training grounds well and they knew each other well. Which was why when he noticed her shift in path she stopped running.

She switched to the right side, crawled low on her belly and began to track her way backwards. A few moments before she chanced hiding up a tree. She braced her hand on the trunk and waited.

Her heartbeat was calm as she counted. She watched carefully around her, she listened to the wind blow through the leaves. She listened to the birds and she kept herself ready.

When Sasuke came back, aiming towards the right path to track her she leapt from above. It would not catch him. It would take him out, he saw her instantly and he made to catch her. Maybe throw her but that had never been her intention.

His hands went for her throat as hers grabbed his waist. He would have pinned her if she hadn’t yanked both her feet into the air throwing both their balances off. They rolled on their sides his hands still on her throat and hers on his waist.

One hand released her throat to grab her knee that was aiming for his stomach. Sakura used that loose grip to get enough room to push backwards and to her feet. She kept enough spin to her movements that she was able to kick Sasuke’s right shoulder and send him staggering back a few steps.

Most people would have followed that up with another kick but she would have been caught. “Touch.” She tapped her right shoulder. “Got you Sasuke-kun.”

“Hn.” He acknowledged as his stance changed. “Let’s see you do it again.”

XxX

Sakura had picked up speed, that was not the only thing she had picked up. She was physically stronger, more muscle on her arms and legs. Naruto had joked a while back that sometimes it felt as though a direct hit from Sakura would be dangerous.
Sasuke had not disagreed with him but he felt as though with every hit that missed that he was being warned of a future event. Or he was seeing what she would become. The power of the sharingan?

Well he could joke all he wanted but it did not change the fact that Sakura was strong. She had been before but now it was a focused sort of strong. He had seen her shatter rock with her fists. Fists and chakra but it was still what it was.

Kicked or hit was going to make him lose a few moments. That he could not afford. Catching her like one would try to catch a sword had been working for him but he guessed he had done that too often. She had started to plan and plot around that.

They had to get in each other’s space to win but both of them had problems with that. He was faster than her but she could hit solid and stun him. That was not good at all since he wanted to win.

Nothing made him want to be better than being with his team. Many things motivated him but nothing made him not want to back down like being face to face with his team and trying to prove himself. He belonged there and he had strength, he could be depended on. He would do anything to keep this place.

His spot was right here with them, growing stronger and protecting them. Making them happy and letting them give him a place to belong. He knew what he was capable of. He just had to prove it, keep proving it and be the best at it. Beyond that so no one would question where he stayed and where he belonged.

She was out of kicking reach. The moment he reached forward with a hand she would counter. Moving first was to his disadvantage. It was better to wait it out, many things depending on staying calm and patient.

Except sometimes they did not have that option. Sasuke needed to learn how to win with everything wrong around them. With nothing but disadvantage after disadvantage facing him and snarling into his face. He needed to learn how to do that because that was what Naruto did.

His short dart forward was followed by a half low kick. Sakura dropped to counter it but he used his hand to brace himself and flip above her. She would be ready for that too but there were plenty of trees for him to hook his legs over so her first grab would miss. Then the drop.

He deserved that jab to the throat he got the moment he covered her. He choked, he saw stars even as he tried to tighten his grip. Wind rushed around his ears as he found himself flying towards the ground at a fast pace.

No time to cushion or break his fall. He was unsurprised at being rolled over a few seconds later. Green eyes watched him as Sakura sat on his stomach and held his hands down. He was pinned. “Streak broken.” She murmured, Sasuke tried to breathe clearly without coughing and failed. His body wracked under her. “I think you should have held your breath during the jump.” Her face wrinkled as she got off of him. “That’s going to hurt for a bit.”

He knew that but considering how things were and how it could have gone… he still had his clothes and his dignity. He had some things to work out and if he could get his throat working in a bit, they would certainly have another match but he was happy about how things had gone. Next time it would be him as it.

There was an advantage to that of course. Still he had to work on force and timing. Timing was everything, it was what decided spars and matches. Decided who won and who lost. If he had been
faster, recognized the elbow coming he could have ducked and won.

That was just another thing to work on for next time. As it was, he was proud of Sakura, even though she never let him get more than two wins. It was hilarious. Between them they could not win no more than two times in a row. Her or him. With Naruto, it too good luck for them to break Naruto’s streaks. Kakashi had to step in otherwise Naruto would win always. Especially on those times he decided to hold back less. They all carried more bruises home those days. But they were proud of them, they always were.

XxX

“Ready to go again?” Sasuke had been rubbing his throat as he drank his water. She knew his recovery was good. Not as good as Naruto’s but good enough that the bruising she had given him would not bother or hinder him that much. He just might be a tiny bit husky voiced for a while.

“Let’s do this.” She had been right about the voice. Sasuke finished his water and got to his feet. He stretched before he stripped off his shirt. “I’m it since I lost so we can just start.”

“Someone is really into it this time.” She rolled her eyes before her hands went to her clasps. Off went the long dress leaving her in the training bra and mesh shirt. She had gotten some similar to Naruto’s own after sometime. She would have just used his since she always seemed to end up with a shirt or pants of his after a mission but…

Naruto’s mesh shirt seemed more like a decoration. The holes too wide. The one she had gotten with Tenten was a bit heavier but it was a lot tighter, the holes tiny. She really liked it and it did not keep her hot. Naruto’s own got all the breeze but maybe that was his plan from the start. Who knew with him.

“I feel more fired up.” Sasuke shrugged as he stripped his armbands off and tossed them to the side. “Whenever you’re ready.”

“When the black crow caws.” She grinned as she settled into a running stance. A strong wind blew then and the crow flew up, she waited and when she heard the loud cry, she darted forward right towards Sasuke. To leap over him might be childish but she had a nice laugh as she raced for the treeline.

XxX

“It’s a nice day.” Tsunade watched the village through her window. “A nice quiet windy day. I wonder how many brats are up to mischief right now.”

“You can’t leave and find out the answer to your question Tsunade-sama.” Shizune plunked a heavy pile of paperwork on the desk before she continued. “You have meetings and this paperwork has to be signed as soon as possible.”

“There’s the Jounin meeting too isn’t there?” Tsunade sighed and turned her attention away from the village. “And those annoying old bats too. So much to do, don’t I deserve a reward Shizune?”

“One drink.” Shizune returned dryly. “Just one but after the paperwork.”

“But I don’t want to waste the sake those brats got me.” She smiled. “Silly, loud, cheeky little brats.”

XxX
Everything had a pattern to it. Even fights but seeing the pattern to someone’s moves was not enough you had to be able to counter it and them. You had to be able to stop them and Sasuke still had plenty of work to do before he was able to stop half of what he saw.

Before he was able to take advantage of the openings that he saw. He had to get stronger, get faster. He had to move and be able to take advantage of what he saw. He could not do that with everyone. The ones he could do that for took too much time as it was.

Naruto, Sakura. They took time to figure out and most of the time by the time he found the pattern and spotted the opening he was fighting on the defensive. He had to get better at that.

He needed to get faster. His hand grabbed Sakura’s by the wrist as her punch missed his ear. His arm shouldered her elbow away before he could be hit. His hands moved to her waist as she tried to get distance between them for a kick.

He saw the pattern, he saw the movements but so far all he was doing was keeping up and stopping her. All he was doing so far was countering and pushing her away. He kneed her in the stomach and she staggered, he watched her hands grow slack and his hands went from her shoulder to her nape and back.

His grip tightened and his knee came up again. Her head slammed into his knee with some force and drove a groan from her. When her head came up his hands reached to spin her around. More of a yank than anything else, force to uncentre her as he tried to pin her.

He got a kick that almost took out his balance for his efforts. His hands tightened their grip as he headbutted her nape. He winced from the pain as she slackened. Still her hands were still reaching even as her legs weakened.

A yank to bring her closer even as he flipped them both. She landed on her back hard, the wind was driven out of her as he gathered her wrists with both hands and straddled her. There was no sense in hiding his panting. “Done.” He rasped as her unsettled eyes looked past him.

“Uh.” Sakura groaned and he winced as he looked at her face. Slightly reddened and bruised. Nothing bleeding but that would not be out of place on team seven. “Yeah this is your point.”

He released her wrists and pinched her nose. He ignored her gasp and the sharp muttering that followed. Thankfully it was not broken. He slid off of her and got to his feet before he helped her to her own. Her eyes were focusing once more. He just might have stunned her a bit with the last few.

“Let’s go back.” She said softly as she took the first step. “Grab something to drink and clean up for a bit. Kunai practice until we decide if a next round is worth it so early in the afternoon.”

Sounded like a plan to him. Her arm slipped around his back as he supported her. “Let’s go back.” He said as they began to slowly walk. Some time to catch herself and Sakura would be back to normal. That was how team seven was.

Xxx

Sasuke sank his hand into Sakura’s bun for leverage as he used his strength to force her backwards and off of him. It was more them playing than sparring at this point but they still took it easy. Call it a team fault but none of them liked to give up. None of them really liked to lose.

So even horsing around had that flavour of seriousness to it because they were all looking to win. Even against each other.
He used his thighs to trap Sakura on the ground and ignored her tight grip on his wrist as he tried to pin her flat on the ground. Naruto was growing right with every damn moment. Sakura’s grip really did fucking hurt. She did not even have that good of an angle on him.

The band in her hair along with the pins went flying and Sakura glared at him. Sasuke would have mumbled an apology but he was trying to keep her from moving. “Hey, Sakura.” He panted as she nearly bucked him off. “Who do you think will win years from now?” This was a great time to bring this up as he mentally counted down the seconds. “Me or you?”

He had just reached zero and relaxed, slumping on top of her when Sakura groaned. “Damn it. That kick let you get one over me.” She sighed. Her hand buried its way into his side. “You’re crushing me, roll over.”

“Let me catch my breath.” He scowled. “It wasn’t easy just now Sakura.” If he had not been able to bend her backwards, he would have lost or it would have dragged out even further.

“You can talk you can roll.” She muttered, he rolled his eyes in response before he rolled off her. He propped himself up with one hand and sighed before he rolled again and lay on his back. “Just now, you meant Naruto right?”

“Hn.” He drew up his knee and sighed. “He’s not going to now but a few years from now. Who is it going to be between me and you?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Sakura laughed. “Sasuke-kun unless you start growing out your hair obviously it is going to be me. I’m looking forward to it.”

“What?” He had expected her answer but hearing it still made him snort. He sat up and rolled his eyes as he watched her attempt to bring her hair back to order. “You really think Naruto’s going to pick you to gawk at? Hair obviously means nothing. Look at my damn cousin.”

“Sasuke-kun your face isn’t that pretty.” The grin on her face made him want to shove her but she would see it coming. “Besides he likes a nice attitude. You would have a lot of work to do in order to rank.”

“Shut up he obviously praises looks first. His face when he saw that Hyuuga is more than enough information.” Sasuke ticked on his fingers. “Lots of slick bastards were running their mouths and he had that dumbass look on his face.”

“And how fast did it drop off his face when he listened to them?” Sakura pretended to deeply sigh. “He likes a pretty face and a polite personality. He likes a little kindness, some class.”

“If that was true.” Sasuke snorted. “We wouldn’t be taking such pains to avoid certain teams.”

Sakura winced and he smiled. “Well you’re right there.” Sakura muttered. “Okay but he likes good fighters, that’s how we both know we have a chance.”

“Naruto’s bad for the hormones.” Sasuke glared at the sky. “I wasn’t even thinking like that but he makes you think like that and then he acts like he doesn’t care.”

“Puberty shouldn’t be this damn annoying and confusing.” Sakura agreed. “I know he isn’t looking at us like that but I seriously can’t wait to flip the tables on him. Flip him for a change… emotionally.” She finished in a growl. “I don’t know how he’s able to look like that winning and losing.”

“I want to see him turn red for once.” Sasuke muttered. “But I honestly, no offense Sakura have a
better chance. I have more to offer.”

“To develop a crush?” Sakura barked. “What can you offer that I can’t? Long hair to adore, willing shopping trips. A pretty face, strong spars and I’m a go getter. As Chuunin I’m already ahead.”

“My clan.” Sasuke chuckled. “He gets all the eye candy he wants if he falls for me.” Sakura soft gasp made him laugh harder. “It’s the face and eyes that he likes. My mom and my aunts can give him that kindness and politeness he seems to find irresistible. The Uchiha police station has a training grounds and a sparring room that he can gawk at as many Uchiha’s in uniform that he likes.” He grinned at Sakura. “And you know he loves that police uniform.”

“First of all, screw you for planning to use your clan. That’s dirty.” Sakura hissed. “Damn it! Well I’ll be the first to be financially independent so that means I’ll get a place of my own and he won’t have to worry about people finding us when he falls asleep the way he does.”

“Well in a few years the baths we take will have a whole different meaning.” Sasuke gestured to himself. “Currently you’re stuck in the women’s baths. What you think that steam is going to do to my older body’s aesthetic?”

“Oh, you play dirty Sasuke-kun!” Sakura laughed. “We have no idea who he’s going to look at first like that but it’s Naruto so you never know.” She bit her lip and frowned. “But right now it sounds like you’re winning. I already know I’ll be gorgeous in a few years. I’m damn cute now.”

“That statement fails a bit coming from the person herself.” Sasuke pointed out. “But he’s going to have his first realisation from me. Count on it.”

“Oh no.” Sakura shook her head. “Sasuke-kun it’s going to be me. He’s going to be so damn aware of me there isn’t going to be any other choice.”

“We’ll see about that.” Sasuke scoffed. “You know I’d feel bad about this but... he’s really brought it onto himself. He sees us as kids now but we’re going to cross that barrier very soon and he’ll do for me what he does for them.”

“You mean me.” Sakura chucked. “I can’t until he flushes to a tomato colour.”

XxX

“Damn Sasuke.” Shisui found himself chuckling. “That’s some wicked stuff.”

“Well damn indeed, is that how they think?” Sparrow laughed. “How they really think and feel? He’s selling off your whole clan Captain. The boy has some guts.”

“I’m more amused at how they so easily discuss these things. It’s almost a game.” Cat rested on the highest branch. “Poor Naruto-kun, his teammates seem to be aiming for him fairly seriously.”

“Did you hear how planned out they have this though?” Sparrow demanded. “Come on they know him as well as we do! Maybe even better! The way they have him broken down and analysed, hell they might be better than us!”

“That’s a bit much.” Shisui snorted. “I get where you’re coming from and all but come on. That’s shinobi stuff and one thing team seven is. They are shinobi.”

“But plotting against each other. I thought the sparring was rough but they aiming for Naruto’s little heart.” Sparrow laughed. “They raised some good points though. He really doesn’t look at them like that. I thought he really would but I guess they are too young for him.” Sparrow
snickered. “He likes them like the Captain and the vice-captain.”

“Kurenai-san.” Cat volunteered. “And many many Uchihas.”

“Did he make eyes at the clan leader?” Weasel snickered. “Naruto-kun seems the type to go for the scary types.”

“First of all, I don’t know.” Shisui said dryly. “Secondly please don’t bring that up again. I don’t want to think about that. Bad enough he’s all shy because of Mikoto-san. I do have to agree with Sasuke though, Uchiha clan is a pretty big draw. It would be for anyone but Naruto just wants to gawk at us. Poor kid, can’t get over the looks.”

“He would die if he saw Uchihas sparring against Uchihas.” Cat chuckled. “You should let him catch you and the vice-captain at it. Sasuke’s chances would really rise then.”

“You’re ignoring the girl?” Weasel questioned sharply. “He likes them strong too.”

Shisui was reminded of the ecstatic looks on Naruto’s face when his teammates pulled off something crazy and strong. The moments that they took him by surprise or managed to pin him. There was a reason he was sympathizing with Sasuke in the first place.

“Long hair and Chuunin and she is a pretty girl. He likes her eyes well enough.” Shisui mused. “She might have a chance based on circumstances. It would have to be pretty damn crazy.” He admitted as he folded his arms behind his head.

He froze as he sensed something nearby. He had been lightly scanning this entire time but there was something on the edge of his senses that made him and his team suddenly quiet down. When he realized what it was, he relaxed but not before the person joined him.

“How long were you here.” He scolded Itachi.

“Long enough.” Itachi shrugged. “I’m not alone.” He did not have to point it out. Now that he noticed Itachi he quickly found Itachi’s charge. Naruto was not even alone.

And Naruto had his sneak going on. Pretty cute and it was obvious what he was checking out. Side by side with his sensei, Naruto looked was watching the other two. It was obvious they had no clue he was around. Well they had no clue that ANBU was around either.

XxX

“Ah well…” Naruto trailed off before he tucked his feet under him. “This is sort of embarrassing.”

“Is it really?” His sensei’s eye was on him as they shared the same branch. “You know better than anyone that they are joking.”

“Yeah they are joking.” Naruto laughed. “But they are kinda serious too. Guess I’ll have to brace myself for Sakura’s hotness and Sasuke’s hot body in the hot springs.” He rolled his eyes. “I mean I hold myself back a lot.” He stressed. “They know that but I guess it isn’t enough if they want to take revenge on me like that.”

“They are far easier than they started.” Kakashi-sensei teased. “At least go easy on them.”

“This coming from you?” Naruto scoffed. “Like you aren’t enjoying how embarrassed I am right now.”
“Well I don’t want to lie.” His sensei drawled, Naruto wanted to shove him but instead he stared across to where Sasuke and Sakura were still playing around.

“But they’ve gotten really good though.” He said softly. “In a few years, I hate to admit it but they’ll dazzle me. Not in the way they are thinking.” He rolled his eyes. “And it isn’t my fault all the Uchihas I see are hot. They have that hair and the eyes and I swear all of them have the same damn smile. How is that fair? And they are really nice to me. All of them.”


“Please.” Naruto sighed. “I feel we’ll be in some down and out battle a few years from now and Sakura will be all you know… dusty and beaten up. Her hair a mess.” He sighed. “Bloody from winning and I’ll look at her and feel so damn proud.” He smiled. “I can’t picture me… going for them. Not yet anyway. Besides there’s only one-“ He cleared his throat. “Time will tell but this is embarrassing.” His sensei’s eye watched him for a few moments before the man shrugged and relaxed. Naruto made himself comfortable on the branch and resumed watching his team. A break was nice.

XxX

Say what you wanted about his team, how unconventional they were or even about the actions they took with each other. Say what you wanted but you had to admit that they had one of the tightest bonds in the village.

For a team that had been thrown together to balance and manage Naruto they had quickly become a team that went on the offense and played a good defence. Not that Kakashi did not have to throw in some work there. He most certainly did have to put some work in.

Sparring assistance, weapons maintenance. Lots of things went into making team seven the way it was. Proving an ear to talk to for all of them not just Naruto. Hearing out Sakura’s frustrations or Sasuke’s own frustrations was not only his job it was something that he enjoyed doing.

He was fond of his team and they were fond of him. Even though they liked to poke fun at him. Trash him a bit, drag him for an understandable bit he allowed them to have their fun. They deserved their fun, all of them together was team seven and they had come so far from the little team he had met back then.

It was almost hard to think back that far. Well, Kakashi did not want to think back that far in the first place. He was living in the now thankful for what he had in his team.

Those days of pain and uncertainty, Kakashi would happily skip on those and soak up what it meant to have Naruto by his side, to have his team that was going to change everything. They were not perfect, they all that their things to work through but they were making the effort.

They were changing, not just themselves and each other. The village itself was shifting in their wake. All eyes were on them and not just their antics. All tongues were wagging because of his team. Kakashi was torn between being amused and concerned.

But he did agree with his teams actions, they needed to be closer. They had to understand each other or nothing would change. They had to trust each other for anything to work. He knew what the Sandaime originally intended, he knew what Tsunade-sama was aiming for. Or at least he had thought he knew what the woman was aiming for.

Recently he honestly had his doubts about her true aim. He hated the moves she made sometimes.
He hated how he had to listen and obey. His team was his and it should be all his until they went their separate ways.

He understood losing Sakura from time to time. He was not that happy about it but that was protocol. Sasuke’s issue was clan. Kakashi did not have the confidence, time or balls to challenge that wall or mess. Sasuke was handed over without a whimper from him. Kakashi was not trying to get Uchihas poured on his head like rain. He was not going to have it.

But Naruto was different. Of all of them Naruto was the one who should be remaining in his care indefinitely. But the Hokage kept taking him away and placing him in all sorts of inconceivable places and situations. Kakashi had no clue to what she was even aiming for. To what she was looking for in Naruto.

To what reaction she was seeking out. That mission with Kurenai that still made no sense. Kakashi had sneaked away the reports and read it until his head hurt. He had no idea what she was looking for. What she was aiming at. Naruto made his way, it was something everyone agreed on.

From the Sandaime to Jiraiya-sensei. To Iruka the teacher to the Godaime. Naruto made his own way and they gave minimum interference. The boy made his own friends, he worked around his teams the way he saw fit. It really made no sense to throw him around teams and Konoha the way she did when they refused to declassify Naruto’s condition. Condition.

How many years had it been since that night? How many years since they had been living simply and happily and known fear by chakra alone. Naruto was not to blame he had never been to blame. He was the simple vessel and nothing else.

X

Naruto was still the craziest in the team hands down. He was just flat out insane when it came down to it. No logic to it, no fear with it. He was crazy and he was dragging team seven with him. It was fucking lovely.

They had gotten limber when training with Naruto. Sparring with Naruto taught you to react fast and bend just as quick. Naruto was a flexible as a cat and could fight like one dunked in water. Just with more force and a hell lot more focus.

Sakura bit her lip as she watched Naruto free fall from the tree to only bend in mid-air and loop his wire around another branch. He did not use it to stop his fall instead he kept bending and twisting until he was in the position to destroy the targets Kakashi-sensei had dropped down on him.

Naruto was currently the craziest in team seven but she had the feeling she and Sasuke were quickly catching up to him when it came to the insanity.

She had that feeling because as she watched her teammate and her sensei all she could feel was this rush in her blood. All she could think was how fun it all looked. That was more than enough evidence that she had knocked all the screws loose from her head.

XxX

“Everyone is putting in work.” Naruto whispered as his team slowly walked around team eight’s training grounds. “Look at them go.”

“They still need work. All of them.” Sasuke dismissed as he took the lead. “The reason they are
trying so hard is because of us you know. Team seven wasn’t a special team but not only do we have the best rates for mission we have a Chuunin too.”

“Team ten also has a Chuunin.” Sakura interrupted. “And Shikamaru isn’t bad you know. It’s just his personality can be a bit of a drag for others sometimes. He really is a hard worker. He needs some different motivation. Maybe a reminder of the bigger picture or something. I just can’t shake the feeling that its abstract for him right now.”

“Shikamaru is one the smartest in the village. He just needs things he is interest in.” Naruto glanced back at team eight as they sparred away. He was feeling the need for another spar himself. Something more all out. “He just needs more hands-on experience.”

“Just how is he going to do that? His team doesn’t have our cursed luck.” Sasuke snorted. “The Exams was a good shake up for everyone but things like that don’t happen every day. He has to listen and learn from what the people in his clan are going to tell him. He won’t be able to experience it but it is still learning.”

“But would that be enough?” Sakura frowned. “I’ve been reading up on lots of different things but I don’t think I can accurately identify them if I were to see them right away. Some things are just going to take time. Besides somethings you won’t expect to face because of how long there has been safety and peace.”

“That doesn’t excuse neglect though.” Naruto pointed out. “Everyone has to be ready because you never know what the next day will bring. We have to keep learning and keep planning. We have to keep training and getting stronger so that when it comes whatever it is, we won’t lose. Right now it is fine that they just don’t want to be left behind.”

“It’s only fine once the idiots don’t forget what they are fighting for. Medals and recognition are nice but don’t forget you’re doing it for the village and for those in the village.” Sasuke glanced back at team eight before he sighed. “But candy is the best way to motivate kids. It’s been like that since the beginning of time.”

“Well he isn’t wrong.” Sakura laughed when Naruto rolled his eyes. “For the competitive type doing what’s right is a given. Still to get something, earn something for doing the right thing makes them want to try harder.”

“Once the special thing is protected in the end people won’t care.” Naruto sighed. “But even that thinking will cause problems in the end. But everyone has their own motivation, every team has their own special reason for growing stronger.”

XXX

Sakura had come to talk to Tenten but it seemed as though she was better off coming at a different time. Tenten was fully focused on training with Neji.

Sakura had to admit, this was the first time she had seen Neji pushed so hard. His hair was in disarray. His clothes had dirt on it. Sweat was running down his face and his eyes were wild. She hid a smile to herself as she watched from a distance away.

Neji made quite the picture. She was a little disappointed that Naruto could not see. Neji’s features were his type after all. She was willing to be that this dishevelled Neji would manage to get a small blush from her teammate. It was a pity he was not here, it was a shame she had left her camera behind as well.
He could feel the burn in his arms when he blocked Shizune nee-chan’s attack. She really was strong. Upper and lower body, fighting her was fighting someone solid. Exactly what Naruto needed in order to better improve himself and keep his reflexes sharp.

He still did his own training, he still frantically followed the shadows and ghosts that he could recall but to improve he needed to battle real people. He needed to fight other people, various people from all over in order to improve and understand.

That was the way of things and not only that. That was how it had been for not just him but for the group. You understood others in words and spar and you understood people and yourself the longer you fought. Once you did not get cocky.

Not that he could afford to get cocky anyway. He gritted his teeth and he came up off the ground. striking hard and fast would not work with her. She was used to hard and quick hits. She was used to plenty of different things. Still he had to work his way around her defences.

Her reach was longer than his. Her defence was far stronger. She was fast. Currently quicker than him but at the end of the day she was human. At the end of the day he was not fully human. At the end of the day he was one person but he was never alone. Not anymore.

“What the-” Shizune nee-chan yelped and shook her hand. “Something new?” Her hesitation was enough of a window for him to come grasping at her neck. Still she was a strong opponent he expected her to recover enough at his fast movement. That was why he used her to boost himself up and over her. To twist and bend until he came behind her to aim at the soft spots on her back. It was sort of humiliating to be caught by a shadow clone and pulled into a hug tight against her chest. “Ugh.” He groaned while she laughed.

“This is new.” She teased. “Are you going to tell me about it? Or is it something not complete?”

“Not complete.” He sighed as her laughter ruffled his hair. “Like almost everything else.”

“You’ll get it.” She assured him. “I’m positive you will get it mastered.”

It was so rare to be so tired that he fell asleep on his own floor but Naruto was experiencing new things all the time. The new training that he had picked up along with his other hobbies had him exhausted more often than not.

He did have good stamina, he had always had good stamina but this was something else entirely and he had all rights to be tired. Outside of missions he was still working hard. Outside of team seven he was still constantly going. The only downtime was sleep.

Returning to his apartment at the end of a day really did nothing because Naruto had things to attend to and do. He had his little projects. He wanted to get in a little cleaning and he most certainly wanted to eat and destress.

But even he got so tired sometimes that it was all he could do to secure his home and slump to the floor by his bed. His plan had not been to fall asleep there so defenceless and rather pathetically. Naruto had actually been unpacking the scrolls in his bag when he had nodded off.

He had worked really hard to get his hands on those scrolls too. He had decided to take a few
moments to pack them away safely so he had sat on the floor next to his bed his back to it. He had been yawning his eyes itching with the need to sleep. He had been pushing himself to finish.

He had somehow nodded off and for more than a few minutes. His room had been lit with late afternoon sun and from what Naruto could hear and see it was night now. He had slept away rather comfortably his body taking what he had been careless in not taking. It was actually sort of funny how these sorts of things happened.

He just knew that sort of thing was going to be the norm too. He was used to pushing himself hard and then falling asleep. He hated having to wait for sleep anyway. Naruto preferred when sleep caught up to him instead. It made for safer dreams.

Still to think he fell asleep with the scroll in his hand. The last one he was supposed to secure too. He rolled his eyes as he sat up and rubbed his free hand across his eyes.

He had barely moved before his entire body froze. How he had not noticed it before he had no idea but he was not alone. His breath froze in his throat as he slowly sat up. The scroll was slowly moved under his bed and Naruto reached for the kunais nearby. He turned his head as he waited trying to figure out who and why.

Nobody should be in his apartment around now. That someone had sneaked in when he was sleeping and he had not even woken up was ridiculous. It was almost terrifying. Who were they? What did they even want? Why hadn’t he woken up?

Naruto sat up on the ready and turned to where the intruder was only to freeze. He swallowed as his intruder looked over at him from his kitchen table.

It was fairly dark but there was enough light from his appliances and even some of his tamer experiments to see the man looking at him rather unbothered. Kakashi-sensei lowered his spoon into the bowl of cornflakes and silently watched him back.

Naruto had completely forgotten about him. Well not exactly forgotten it was more like he had never expected to wake and find Kakashi-sensei in the room. The man did come and go and they did hang out in Naruto’s room and talk but Naruto never woke and found the man there.

Judging by how there was no evidence of groceries but Naruto could see that his cupboard had been opened it seemed his sensei had come and do the usual. The difference in this simple case was that Naruto had woken up. Not just that even with Naruto sleeping Kakashi-sensei had stayed after doing whatever he had come to do.

But-

Well it was not just that was it? Naruto relaxed as much as he was able and released all the defences he had managed to snag when he realized he was not alone. Kakashi-sensei had an amused look on his face as he resumed eating the bowl of cornflakes. Naruto’s generic brand that he always bitched about Naruto buying. He did buy replacements sometimes, the popular kinds and far more expensive. Naruto ate them as indulgences but never bought them himself.

But the real thing about the entire thing was that Naruto had not even sensed his sensei. Well his sensei had been ANBU most likely was still taking those missions. Hunter shinobi were on an entirely different level. He might spar one on one with his sensei but he knew he was far away from testing the man’s true skills. Him popping up on him was to be expected. His sensei was strong after all.
It was just that something else he realized when he realized just who it was at his table without a
care in the world. Something else had just struck his brain and made him wonder how he had not
noticed it all along. He should have realized it because he and his sensei had their moments so
often.

Even now he himself had not said a word to fill the silence. His sensei had not moved to do so
either in fact beyond watching Naruto curiously his sensei had not said a single word to him. But
yet the silence was so comfortable. Naruto was at ease and he felt no need to speak.

There was no need to fill the silence with any words. He and Kakashi-sensei understood each other
on that level. They understood and respected each other on that level. Still, conversations past with
his team were running over in his head.

His sensei really did trust him. More than Naruto had even noticed before. More than the man
could even come out and say. He was relaxed and eased in Naruto’s apartment. He was eating
Naruto’s food and had gone and taken some for himself without asking. He always asked when
they were a team. He never took or assumed he was polite and teasing. That was how he was with
them as a sensei.

But in Naruto’s room he was at ease. In Naruto’s apartment they were something else because the
low lights were playing over his sensei’s face. He did not always come out and display himself.
Sometimes when they were alone, he never even took off his forehead protector. But he was bare
like that and so at ease with it.

He was a really handsome man too. Naruto kept watching his sensei’s face and he felt a light flush
run over his body and he swallowed nervously. His sensei was an unfairly handsome man. He was
pretty and it was hard to look away.

It was easy to forget sometimes how pretty Kakashi-sensei was. Naruto would find himself
forgetting all about it and then they would share a moment and he would remember how earth
shattering the man’s smile was. It was distracting, extremely. In the heart pounding way too.

Naruto had seen many attractive people in his life in the past. He had been seeing plenty of
attractive people since he came back to Konoha. He had seen people that took his breath away and
made him flush and stammer. Why was it that his sensei made him forget all the rest so easily?

His face was so pretty that Naruto’s stomach felt light and all he wanted to do was just look. That
was when the man was not doing anything at all. If he were to smile? He doubted he would be able
to take it. Kakashi-sensei was unfairly handsome. His pretty was the heart pounding hand shaking
common sense fleeing variety of pretty. That was just unfair.

“I see more plants than before.” His sensei suddenly said almost startling him. “Just what are you
up to? Are you even crossbreeding species?”

Well he was not wrong but he was not right either. Naruto stretched before he got to his feet. He
stretched again before he shrugged off his jacket and left it on the ground. Clad in his pants and his
mesh shirt he took a seat opposite his sensei and gave a long sigh.

“It’s complicated but it works out in the end. Just trying some ideas, I had and making it easier on
myself. Just relax sensei.” He grinned. “It isn’t like I’m going to give you a dangerous plant to take
care of.”

“You had better not.” His sensei glanced towards to cupboard and Naruto just knew that Kakashi-
sensei was thinking of going for his box of cornflakes and making himself another bowl. “One
“The plant is good enough. I don’t need one that has special treatment.”

“What if they are good security?” Naruto teased only to receive a suspicious glance in return. “Come on they would have to be way bigger than a little pot plant.”

“So you say.” His sensei pushed back his chair and gathered up his bowl and spoon. As expected, he stopped by the fridge first before he picked up the cornflakes. “This brand still sucks.”

“The thing you bought is still up there.” Naruto pointed our dryly. “You can always eat that instead.”

“I thought it would coax you over to buying it on your own.” His sensei teased as he poured himself another bowl. “You need to spoil yourself sometimes. Food is a good way of doing that.”

“Ramen is my indulgence food. It’s also my staple food.” Naruto grinned. “Why didn’t you turn on a light?” He questioned when his teacher retook his seat. “You sat here in darkness for who knows how long. You could have switched on the light or something.”

“The darkness wasn’t bothering me.” His sensei admitted as he began to eat. “Besides I was here before it fell dark.”

“I see.” Naruto murmured. “The dark doesn’t bother me either.” He leaned on his table and watched the way Kakashi-sensei ate. Good manner, smooth and not a drop of milk or cornflakes either. On top of that even eating he was handsome. His sensei looked up at him as he ate. His head still lowered but his gaze focused on Naruto. He hissed and pulled back a bit. Unfairly handsome and just a bit dangerous.

What a combination. Not an unfamiliar one either but when had anyone looked at him like that? Well it was not as if he had ever been looking for that particular look to begin with.

But his sensei really did trust him, didn’t he? Even though they did not speak about it or even refer to it when they were in a group. The Kakashi-sensei that he got to spend time with, the man that took off his mask and took Naruto to obviously personal places. He was unfair in so many ways. If so much was not at risk Naruto would try to return the favour.

He did trust his sensei. He got to come in didn’t he? They spoke, didn’t they? Naruto allowed the man to see him mostly unguarded and he listened. He even took his advice into consideration. He fought back to back with him and he was trying to make the man proud too. If so much was not at risk and other lives beyond his own. It almost felt like he would trust the man before him with everything.

He was mind numbingly pretty. Naruto leaned across his table as his sensei froze his gaze fixed on him. Naruto ignored it all to press his thumb against his sensei’s mole. He swiped his thumb over it his gaze fixed on it. “Sometimes the most unexpected things be hidden.” He murmured as he pulled back.

“They really do.” Kakashi-sensei smiled and Naruto laughed and shook his head as an embarrassing flush ran over him. The man was stupid inducing pretty and it was unfair. It was a pity he had started to safeguard against that sort of thing.

XxX

“Lee-kun.” Sakura smiled around the flowers she had brought. It relieved her to find Lee in his hospital bed and not trying to do pull ups somewhere or something. “You’re looking good!” He looked almost excited.
“Sakura-san.” Lee sat up with a bright smile. “Those are for me?”

“Uh huh.” Sakura eyed the vases in the room before she laughed and started separating hers so they could join the other flowers. “I haven’t been able to come as frequently but I heard about your surgery getting a date! Congratulations!”

“I’m a little nervous I will admit that.” Lee balled his hands into tight fists where they rested on the hospital sheets. “But I’ve been ready for this for such a long time now. I’ve been waiting for this and everything sounds better than I could have imagined. I’ve come so far in all this time. To thinking everything was over to having slight hope.” His eyes were dancing when he looked up at her. “Now my chest is exploded in happiness because thanks to Naruto-kun and Tsunade-sama It’s only a matter of time. My hope is not faint, it’s so big it’s touching the sky!”

“Certainly seems like it.” She took a seat in the window and laughed. “Tsunade-sama is really amazing isn’t she? She’s really done so much and it’s just incredible what she can do.”

“And Naruto-kun is amazing too.” Lee early tacked on. “He went and got her! I owe so much to him.”

“Well don’t let him hear you say that.” Sakura laughed. “As far as he’s concerned. He was just doing what you do for a friend and he considers you and Gai-sensei someone special to him. His friends.” She giggled as she watched Lee’s eyes water. “Come on now, you had to have noticed right? Don’t go thinking stuff like you’re getting left behind or anything crazy like that. You’re an important friend to Naruto didn’t you know? He does it because he cares. It’s the way he is. That’s how friends are.”

“I don’t think there are many people like Naruto-kun.” Lee tried wiping his tears away and gave up with a laugh. “He truly values friendship. It’s so admirable. I really don’t know how I’ll be able to match him. I don’t want to let him down and I hope I can pay him back. Come to his aid. Help him when he’s lost and down.”

“Yeah I know the feeling.” She crossed her feet as she agreed. “But all you can do is your best and be his friend. Naruto’s weird to others but he is good.” She finished softly. “And as his friend you see what he needs and you’ll be able to give it. Support is enough, things like favours and paying back. Naruto doesn’t think about those sorts of things with friends. Friends help friends. That easy and that simple. Friends support friends right until the end and then they pull them back from that end if they have to.” She stretched before she laughed. “That isn’t just a Naruto thing. It’s a team seven thing too.”

XxX

“This looks really nice.” Tsunade smiled as she read through the reports. “Everything is working out nicely.” Even teams not directly associated with Naruto and team seven were going through improvements. It was sweeping through the village.

Just look at them all. They were so hard working and adorable. The reports from not just their missions but their clans made her want to celebrate.

Betting on the brat worked out. Betting on Naruto seemed to always work because look at these results. Team seven were the horse that won the race long before others noticed them out the gate. It was the other teams now fighting to catch up that were making her smile.

Because others heard of Naruto but she knew it was hard to believe a team like team seven. You would have to see them in action to truly believe that they were the way they were rumoured to be.
Tsunade did not have to go on any of the hell missions to know.

She had two perfectly working eyes she could see the resolve in them along with the bonds. She could see them growing stronger and changing with every day. Their bodies were going through changes and their training was sculpting them. By the time they hit Jounin they were going to be masterpieces.

The best thing about all of this was that with their pace they were dragging others along with them. The other teams that had started with them did not want to be left behind so they were working hard too. Shikamaru had been so impressive lately that Tsunade was almost concerned.

But his gaze was fixed on his goal so who was she to stop him? The last time she had seen a Nara so focused it had worked out splendidly for Konoha. Let the little brat keep fighting to prove what he needed to prove. It all worked out in the end because he was pulling his team along and those in his clan looking towards him.

There was that saying that said ‘As do children so will adults’ it would only better Konoha in the end anyway. The children would fall in the wake of those changing so rapidly and those adults would be forced to follow along as well. It was a faster wave than she had been expecting but it was still good all the same. She was rather proud actually. She was excited just reading these things.

Of course everything was in its due time and course. There was no sense in hurrying development. The kids could not be allowed to go beyond their means. She had to find rather could reins for all of them. Long lasting things took time to develop or make so while the teams were improving their power.

The shake up from team seven could be attributed to that. The wakeup call that they needed. No one liked getting left behind by their peers. Tsunade had been wondering on just how to position team seven and she knew for certain that her gamble had been correct.

Team seven belonged at the front of the pack and in time the true formation would be Konoha’s new fire and future. She was going to enjoy seeing the picture in person when the time came. As it was the flashes of what was going to come had her eager for the real scene.

XxX

Balance was everything. You had to be aware of your body as you moved. The fan was more than a pretty weapon. It was deadly and those who underestimated it always fell.

They fell cursing but they fell all the same. Naruto had watched a master at work. That was why he was fighting so hard to make sure that he himself did not fall behind. He had plenty of work ahead of him but he knew that his work was mostly fine.

He had his balance. He knew how to move and he knew how to fight with the flow of the battlefield. He never fought against the flow he always worked around it. Balance and grace. Balance and flexibility.

Some might argue that he was lacking some grace but that was because so far, he had not shown others what he was capable of. Besides he could not afford grace when going up against people like his teacher or even Shizune nee-chan. He had to go all out and fight as though his life depended on it.

Well, currently it did not but it was best to never forget what it felt like going all out.
He was not going to say it was fun to get tossed around but he did find it fun. Back in the troupe training and had been a form of playing for the kids. What else were they going to do on the road? They were never going to be normal kids anyway.

Besides, for them training and getting stronger represented safety. They had to keep getting stronger. They all had fought for that and even now Naruto felt it was the right thing. Still it did not change that to most the older ones that their attempts had been rather pathetic.

Kasumi had always wanted many people to rush her. Now Naruto knew for certain that it was less about her helping them and more her looking for weaknesses inside herself. Something he himself would have to try one day. At least when he managed to get a few more moves down.

He wanted more aces up his sleeves. He wanted more progress. Not just because everything was changing and everyone was growing stronger. It was because he could feel something coming as well. He knew he would never for the rest of his life shake the feelings that had grown on him when he was gone.

He was glad at that. He did not want them to disappear. They just might save his life someday. And he never wanted forget who he was and where he had come from. He did not want to forget the people he shared his life with and the people who had loved him.

He wanted them to live on in him. He wanted to succeed the dreams they had left behind. He wanted to surpass them and there was only one way he knew how. He had to follow in their shadows and go where they never went. He also had to achieve his dream and bring about the changes they thought could only come one way.

He had work ahead of him he knew that. Back then he had lamented on just how he would manage but these days in Konoha gave him hope. He was mostly accepted. Watched yes but there was nothing to fear. He did not fear the eyes that much. He would deal with it.

Besides he had his team. The old lady and her assistant. He had the ramen guy and his family. He had Iruka-sensei and the brats. He had Ero-sennin. He had people and he was getting more and more to acknowledge him and stay by his side. It was crazy but it was almost good enough.

He could almost feel it. He still had plenty of things to do but with every day with team seven he was seeing changes in not just himself. There were more and more people looking at him. People were changing by the day. They gave him a reason to fight for his dream. They gave him a reason to really examine himself.

He changed his stance as his fan slid open. His targets were behind him in no particular order. Different stances for them too. He would have used clones but he was not prepared for that yet. Currently he was thinking about his posture.

His fan held nothing special inside. No needles, it was just unnaturally sharp. That was the point.

He held his fan out as he watched the first target. He released a breath slowly as he readied himself. His focus was on his upper body and his legs. He waited one breath then two. He brought his fan up to his face as he waited another breath. He allowed himself to make it until the fourth breath before he launched himself forward.

A running dash straight forward with his fan to his face and his body low. Just before he could meet up with the target he zagged to the left and rolled to change his direction entirely. Another roll and a twist led him behind his target and he reached out to swipe big and remove the target’s upper straw parts from the pole entirely.
His swipe had his entire body focused low so he set off that way running low as he circled wide around his targets. The moments he had gotten a loop in a dashed towards the centre of them all in order to deliver as many wide swipes as he could. It took him six but Naruto got to stand in the centre of the chaos and watch the targets fall to pieces.

“Fix up.” He murmured to himself as he tapped his fan to his nose. “And another go at it. There has to be a way to improve.”

XxX

“Improve what?” Kiba hissed with his hand digging into the tree trunk that he hid behind. “What the fuck is up with team seven? That looks more than improved to me. How much more do you want to go? Who can even do that?”

“He has mastered many weapons.” Shino said from behind him. “But that fan is strong.”

“Well yeah.” Kiba hissed. “But you saw how good he is with swords right? Maybe this is him practicing with back up weapons.” He felt a twitch of envy inside of him. “He’s really good isn’t he?” He watched the way that Hinata stood behind another tree a flush on her face as she watched Naruto. “You think she’s paying attention to the moves or him shirtless?” He whispered to Shino.

“It could be both.” Shino sounded unbothered by that prospect so Kiba was left sighing as Naruto tapped his fan to his face and contemplated his surroundings. They were still a distance away. Downwind too.

Kiba had been unable to resist taking a look and he knew that his team felt the same way. Naruto and his team had blown them away the last mission they had taken together. but as incredible and frightening they had been as a team Naruto had been terrifying.

There was something about him that did not add up. Kiba knew that the reasons that Sakura and Sasuke were like that was because of Naruto. They were not the mystery. Naruto was. How the hell had he gotten like that? No matter how far back he looked in his memory it made no sense. Naruto was weird.

No matter who he asked people got weird looks on their faces. Kurenai-sensei always changed the subject. His sister looked as though a dog had pissed in her mouth when he started talking. His mom had always looked worried when it came to Naruto. But they had never stopped him with playing with Naruto like other parents had.

He could remember that much.

But Naruto had vanished, hadn’t he? And when he came back, he was like this. It made no sense. Where had he been? What had he been doing and why the hell was he so strong? What drove him to train so hard?

Also, why did his scent sometimes get so damn terrifying? Beyond the bloodlust he would release sometimes that chilled Kiba to the soul. There was sometimes something else in Naruto’s scent and it made no sense. Because it was not always there when he was fighting. Not always when he was releasing that terrifying bloodlust. Sometimes he would just be standing there looking lost in thought and he would smell different.

And whatever it was. That scent scared Kiba. It made no sense at all. But he was better off keeping it to himself because people would just make weird faces when he tried to ask questions. That was how things seemed to go when Naruto was involved. Just once he would like some straight
answers.

But for now, he was going to work his ass off so Naruto did not leave him any further behind.

XxX

He really did like meditating. He liked the quiet mornings that he would sit and relax. He liked the feel of the early morning. He loved to fall into that space that everything was quiet and warm. He had learned so much but this part that he had learned from Ryu was still his favourite.

He had so much to be thankful for but he had to admit to his soul that he was glad that he could be a kid like this. He loved so much but he appreciated so much more.

Maybe he would have been embarrassed and fumbling if he had not been with them. Maybe things would have been even more complicated if he had not spent so much time with them. He had spent time with the girls to the point that he thought nudity was nothing.

He had spent time with the men and he had to admit that he got ribbed and teased a lot but he learned too. He watched them all and they talked. They spoke with each other and even forgot he was there. Many things had gone over his head then but now that he could look back, he could laugh at it all like the men had laughed.

He could smile in appreciation when he had previously only been able to shrug or look away. He was not embarrassed even though he knew it made sense for others to be.

But he was different in the end. His modesty was mostly lost. Most of it, he could admit that. He was not ashamed of his body and his own desires. What he liked was what he liked. Maybe it was a nurture thing. It most likely was.

He had grown up with beauty. The way others had spoken about that beauty had been imprinted on him. How could he for a second think that beauty was wrong?

In the end he had been lucky because people had encouraged him and not only that they had taught him valuable useful lessons. There had been teasing and ribbing. Of course, there had been but everyone or at least the ones closest to Zabuza had been accepting and welcoming. Blunt and honest.

It was hard to be bothered about something natural. It was just another faucet of life. Nothing to be ashamed of. Besides the more you were scared and ashamed the easier it was to turn against you. While Kaya had been quite the small woman, she had been beating Raiya until Raiya had accepted her own feelings and made herself comfortable.

Kaya had been proud of it too. The moment that Raiya had given in and accepted herself had been a turning point to how she behaved and even talked with the group. Zabuza had never really cared beyond his plans and Haku. He had just wanted to use everyone equally.

Something Naruto now knew that people actually appreciated as much as it pissed him off.

Still, with himself in Konoha under the watch of the village it was hard to pretend to be normal. He had dragged Sasuke and Sakura into his world and he could not regret that. Not with the way they felt against him.

The way they were happy to touch and be touch. They worked better as a team and he knew he could trust them. He just wished he could tell them even more. But the secrets of Konoha were not the only ones on his tongue so he had to bide his time.
Eventually he would be able to be as free and honest with them in his words as he could be with his actions and his body. They were growing closer, they were getting stronger. He was loving that.

XxX

The plants had to get pruned as well. Naruto was rather firm on his plant care. He might have a bunch of them but they needed various cares. He spoiled them too but he adored growing things. He did shake his head at Kakashi-sensei’s vine.

The man knew him so well. Almost too well when it came down to it. He knew him well but how could Naruto even complain? This showed how much the man was caring about Naruto. It was care and affection in the man’s eye after all.

Besides what was one more plant in the end? Naruto had so many, he needed them in the end. His vines and herbs. The ones he saw abandoned that needed a little loving and help.

Shirtless he kneeled on his floor as he potted a rather lively vine. Soon he would be able to make new poisons and be able to experiment with new powders. He had been considering for quite some time what would work best when it came to his tools.

He recalled a lot but plenty of the things he wanted to do he did not know the particulars. Some things he wanted to improve but it was really a trial and error thing. He could not even be mad about that. He could not know everything.

That was not even the worst of it really. He had not been taught everything. Most of what he knew was from observing or overhearing. What he knew was bits of pieces of the memories. He had images in his head but where were they getting him?

Back then they had less resources. They had less items and they had to make do with what they had. What he had now was what they had dreamed of having. It was what they had all hoped to have so he could not waste that opportunity.

He was being offered so much just getting to be here. The plants were just part of it. They never were able to plan ahead like this before but Naruto could. He could and he did, he made plans for future weapons, future experiments and it felt good.

Having someplace to come back to felt good.

He got off the floor taking the plant with him as he went. He placed it back in it is original corner turning it a bit so it would get the necessary light. A bit of water over the vine and he was finished with that one.

That was a few plants down and plenty more to go. Besides that was not all he was thinking about when it came to these plants. So many of them were in the same group. He could not help but wonder about more cross breeding.

Certainly, there were some books on the subject. Nobody would mind. They did not mind what he did so far apparently. Nobody seemed to really care. Besides, his dreams were big he had to do big things too. How else could he get close to the big dream that he had?

He had to keep improving, he had to get stronger. He needed tools for that. He had been thinking about cheaper ways to fight. He had been worried about using some poisons around his team but there could be a way to slip past his worries.

The ingredients for the corrosive poison was almost complete. If it worked correctly it would eat
through swords as well. Many ways to use it but Naruto was thinking of a more savage way. War, he had seen a way before coming back to Konoha.

That stuck with him now even though he knew people would not like it. Still, it a sword or kunai was going to be thrown away. Why not give it a good death? That was how he saw it. He doubted others would see it the same way.

It was just that he could see himself making this work. There would be a slight danger to himself but he was confident not to get himself burnt to a crisp by it. Or he could invest in some good gloves. Sakura’s were pretty nice.

XxX

He knew how the clan saw him. How his own family saw him. It was fine, it was better than any of them finding out the truth. It was not that he did not see. He saw the sadness in his mother, he saw the confusion in his father.

He saw the confusion, sadness and pain in Itachi too. It was not that he did not see them. It was just better this way. It was far better for things to go down this way. Separating from them this early would work out for the best. Even though they did not know it.

Sasuke hesitated where he stood on the old shrine roof before he gave in and took a seat. He could have kept going. Gone off and found his team. Sakura was most likely studying or chasing down Kakashi for him to provide equal help on an assignment. Or she was with Tenten again. Or Ino. Or even Naruto.

Finding Naruto would be easy too. Training grounds or at the academy. Sometimes he was with the Hokage or her assistant. Sometimes he was at home working on new things. Sasuke would respectfully wait to be invited inside if that was the case. He adored Naruto he really did but since most of the plants had increased the things Naruto made on the side had gotten terrifying.

And Sakura was right about him being immune to most poisons. There could be no other explanation on how he was so easily able to handle… what he did. He barely took safety precautions. Sasuke had seen him lick a poison as if nothing was wrong. it was poor for his heart.

But it was still somewhere to go.

He could even hunt down Kakashi if he was that desperate or bored. The man was always hard to find. They could only estimate his wanderings so much. For every time they were correct at least three times they were wrong.

Sasuke always swung by the hospital because he knew Kakashi and the weirdo Gai were friends. Sometimes he was able to catch his slacker of a sensei in conversation with the man. At least the man understood what duty meant because he always scolded Kakashi for ditching his.

Not that their idiot of a sensei paid attention to scolding. He always laughed and tried to excuse himself away. The worst of it all was that Kakashi really did suit their team. He got them all of them.

He did not try to hold them back either. He encouraged their progress. Not just that either he had let them find their ways as a team from the beginning. He never gave them instructions on how to handle Naruto either. It had always been a bit by bit thing. A step by step thing for them to figure.

He had poked fun at them figuring themselves out in the beginning. Honestly, Naruto was annoying as he was weird. Puberty was annoying as it was and Naruto’s attitude made it ten times
worse. At least he had not been alone. Sakura had cursed Naruto just as much as he had been in the beginning.

Team seven had given him a place to go.

He had no idea if the other two understood how much that meant to him. Having somewhere to go and people to go to. It was like starting over.

The right thing. He had come to learn that the right thing was sometimes the hardest thing to do but that was okay. He had his team who did not judge and they accepted him. He trusted them too. He had never thought he would be able to fall asleep so soundly with anyone.

But he did with them. He had gotten used to the feel of Naruto’s or Sakura’s heartbeat under his hand. He had gotten used to feeling them near. To wake up choking on hair sometimes. To wake up warm and wrapped up tightly.

He was used to someone coming to look for him or just going out as a team. He grew restless when he could not see them often. That meant something. It meant that he had changed, that he was accepting the new role he had accepted for himself.

He knew how his family felt about him walking away. He knew what pushing them away was doing to them but Sasuke knew that this was for the best.

Black hair tied into a ponytail bounced in his immediate vision and he gritted his teeth and clenched his hands. His breaths turned into ragged pants as Shisui and Itachi fell into view. A serious but still tame spar. He could follow it with his eyes.

Itachi, smaller than Shisui but not by much was using his frame to his advantage knocking Shisui’s punches and kicks occasionally blocking them. Shisui was using his own speed and force to fight back their hands and feet moving so fast that it was almost a blur.

The longer that Sasuke watched them fight the more settled his breathing became. He watched his brother focused on their cousin. He watched the way they battled and the way that they blocked each other. The way they matched each other.

He sat and watched Itachi knock Shisui to the ground only to be knocked down himself and even occasionally tripped down. He watched and watched as his breathing settled. He watched them spar as equals.

He watched until the sparring turned to playing and rough housing. He watched until the focused expression on his brother’s face turned into a smile. He watched until he began to laugh.

He watched and watched as the sparring was given up on and the two of them sat together on the dusty courtyard of the shrine grounds to laugh in their casual clothes.

He sighed before he got up silently. Even this close he was not detected but that was fine. It was better to watch when he knew he could not be watched in return. He felt so hollow watching them. They could laugh so easily. A long time ago he would have been there with them. Now he had no right.

With another sigh to himself he retreated off the roof and left the ground. There were other places that he could be. Other places that he should be instead of here. He had his team.

XxX
It was that time again, well not really. Naruto had just chosen to come and do this and he was glad for it. He knew other people. Other kids his age would not exactly be so eager to come and do this but he could not help himself. he actually found this kind of peaceful.

He never had a place like this before. So this really did not bother him. He was actually happy to do it. He could be alone with his thoughts as he polished the grave stone. Maybe others would be bothered from him doing this but-

He could be alone with the remains of the people that mattered. He even felt close to them. It was a strange thing to say or think but it was the way he really felt. Maybe he would ask Kakashi-sensei if it was okay to feel so at ease at a grave.

It was strange but he felt so close to Haku when he was here. When he cleaned the grave, the memories were stronger. Sometimes he swore he smelt familiar scents. Maybe if he ever dosed off at this grave, he would dream of them. Dream of being embraced by arms that loved him that he would never feel again.

He could hope, couldn’t he?

Even though he knew saying these sorts of things would bother others. He did not want his current team to feel inadequate. They were different there was no comparison. The troupe had been with him then, team seven was now and they were his future.

All Naruto had to do was never forget the troupe and their lessons. He had to learn and grow from this. He had to work hard he had to keep going. He had to improve and bring these ghosts deep into his heart.

“I never want to forget you.” He admitted with his palm pressed against the stone. “The cold, the sadness. I don’t want to forget the trainings. The love, the heartbreak. None of it. I don’t want to forget the loss either.” He sucked in a deep breath before he released it slowly. “I don’t want to forget that I wasn’t alone.”

He could never allow anyone to erase that fact. His history, his true history. He had to cling to it. Cling to the knowledge that he had trained, loved and fought outside the village. Cling to the fact that he was stronger and better for it.

It was not as if he had access to his other true history in the first place. But even when he finally dug out where he had come from with the village. The troupe would be secure in his heart. So many good memories, so many good lessons. It would be a waste to throw that away.

They had chosen to end on their terms. They had entrusted to him their dreams and it might take a while but he was going to make them proud. All of them would. There was Morgana and Sora, there were the others that he knew would find him in time. He just had to keep trying. He had to keep strong and he had to make sure not to give up.

But he was allowed to miss them.

Naruto got to his feet and began to dust off his knees. He picked up the small pail he had brought and dunked the rag he had been using to clean their grave stone. He had enjoyed the quiet moment and he felt at peace after cleaning the stone.

Maybe one day he would make improvements to it. Another stone with the list of their names and who they had been. They were his family after all, not perfect but he had been theirs for a time. He could cling to that. He should cling to that.
“Is that the time?” He grumbled to himself as he glared at the sun. “The morning totally melted away. I swore I just got here.” He sighed. The early afternoon was on him. He had not minded being here but off days were rare. He could have used it to catch up on things. Do some training. He could do it now too but still, he needed to pay more attention to thing.

He kept to himself as he walked through the quieter areas of the village. He had just glanced at the gate of the smaller graveyards for shinobi when a figure caught his attention.

Sasuke would tease the hell out of him if he knew how fast Naruto had recognized his mother. It was a good thing that Naruto was not going to let him know.

Still, he had almost not caught Mikoto-san because the aura around her was different. She had some cleaning tools with her as well. Naruto had been planning on investigating this graveyard when he had privacy and time. It took time to look at all the names.

Still she looked so different he had to frown at her back as she walked towards the Uchiha compound. Village grave visits were never easy. Especially for clan he was guessing. If it was even clan that she was visiting. Naruto was not all too certain that was the case.

Sasuke had spoken about cleaning family graves but the most he spoke about these days were distant cousins that had fallen in the war. No one had died recently or anything and Naruto knew for a fact that most of the Uchiha fallen shinobis were in the main grave yard.

So back to this small one that he had been planning to investigate. He did not like to believe in coincidences but-

Well, it was Sasuke’s mother wasn’t it? People lost friends too, that might be the case. Hadn’t he just come from visiting friends? And not everyone saw death and loss the ways that he did. His attitude on this entire thing was different to others too.

Not everything was about his huge secret. there were other graves in there too. But maybe he should note any clean graves when he finally managed to get in there to look.

XxX

It was this sort of thing again. Another summons again for team seven and Sasuke was not even surprised. Was it going to be training? Another mission outside the village? He honestly had no clue but he did find himself smiling before he ripped up Kakashi’s summon note.

Towel around his neck he reached for a shirt to put on but found himself staring at it instead. It appeared as though this shirt would no longer be fitting him. He had gone through many various clothes since graduating but he had to admit he was rather amused at this shirt no longer fitting.

How long had it been since they had graduated? He was already thirteen and look how things had changed since leaving the academy. How everyone and everything had changed.

Sasuke switched shirts with a sigh grabbing his black instead of his blue. He had bought a bunch of them a little bigger in order to better hide things but it seemed like he was growing into them more than anything.

But was that not what he wanted?

With a quick glance around his room he scooped up his weapon pouches. He checked them to make sure the contents were the same as he had left them as he continued to dress. The two swords
of Kiri gleamed at him but Sasuke only shook his head as he glanced around his room.

When he deemed himself prepared, he quietly left his house.

Leaving the compound was easy and refreshing. But now that he had brought up the thought to himself, he could not help but think about it. His own thoughts in the academy. The decisions he had made for himself and recently. The choice he had come to make. The real decision he had made.

This entire thing was so much fun. Team seven, their missions. Naruto, Sakura and Kakashi. The way the village looked at them. The way the other teams looked at all of them. He was proud of himself and he was proud of the team that were with him.

When he made it to the meeting spot, he jumped down the trees shaking the leaves as he went. Kakashi was waiting. It was going to rain for certain. Naruto was cross-legged on the ground at his side talking up at him animatedly. Sakura was on the opposite tree her head buried in a book.

This there, that was his team. It was what he had chosen for himself. in order to find not just peace but happiness he had picked this group.

“Sasuke-kun!” Sakura’s book snapped shut as she got to her feet. “It’s going to rain isn’t it?” She asked as she nodded towards Kakashi.

“Sasuke! You’re here!” Naruto got up dusting off his knees as he went. “Looks like team seven is assembled.”

“Such cute energy.” Kakashi’s eye was filled with amusement. “But now that we’re all together let’s get going shall we?”

He had chosen this. This was the only path he saw that he could do the right thing. He was happy here, he was satisfied here with his team. This happiness that he held with team seven he wanted to hold onto it forever.

The laughter, the warmth. The missions and the safety. These were all things he had come to know with team seven and he did not want to let go of any of it. They had his back. They cared for him like he did for them. He could be a man to be proud of here. He could serve his village as team seven Sasuke here. Here he could be fine and maybe he could dull that part of him.

“Let’s move.” He announced to his team. “We’re already cursed having Kakashi be here on time.” As his team laughed around him his heart grew light in his chest. Team seven was the way forward for certain. This was the right choice.

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