After the Rain

**Summary**

How could Naruto have predicted she'd end up in the past? Not even the one who caused her to go back had anticipated she'd be dragged along for the ride. The Kyūbi had been trying to save himself, not her. She'd once said that the hero always arrive late, but this was quite the opposite. Naruto would be very, very early this time.

**Notes**

Disclaimer: No matter how much I wish it, I do not own Naruto. I make no profits from this and all I write here is done for the fun of it.
Warning: This story is rated M for a reason and will contain character deaths and violence. Please do not read if this upsets you.

Chapter one – Freak Accident

“When the tree leaves dance, one shall find flames. The fire's shadow will illuminate the village, and once again, tree leaves shall bud anew.”
- Hiruzen

No trees could be seen on this elevation of the mountain. It was above the tree line, so you could only see grass and moss plus a few hardy bushes that thrived in those rougher parts of the landscape. There were gigantic boulders protruding all over that were great for concealing but Naruto did not bother with hiding herself. Instead, she sat right out in the open, visibly on a rock, staring out over the edge of the mountain she had climbed up earlier in the day.

Naruto was a small girl with spiky waist length hair currently looking like a bird's nest more than anything else. Her blue eyes and whisker marks usually made her appearance very noticeable when travelling through villages, but it had been a long time since she had been in one now. She was clad in very dirty clothes, which were random garments she picked up from unsuspecting civilians hanging their wash out to dry. It was a moral line the blonde had struggled to cross, but eventually seen herself forced to. She needed something more than just the oversized jumpsuit jacket that somehow no longer had fitted her since months ago.

She guessed what she was currently doing could be classified as spying. But it wasn't like she did not want her target to spot her either. Either that or she was the worst spy in the history of ninjas. They often said she lacked stealth, but even Naruto knew when to hide or not.

The man was walking along the stream without a care in the world. At least that's what Naruto assumed. Where he was headed or where he came from was a mystery itself.

The reason she was unsure was because her own location was somewhat of a mystery to herself too.
The last couple of months had blurred, and for all she knew she could be in Oto-gakura as likely as Kirigakure. It was hard to tell in these mountains between two different nations.

Naruto wasn't a quitter though and she knew where she wanted to go now. At the very least she'll try and find a way to get there.

But if she got there, it wouldn't surprise her if they kicked her out right away, but what else could she do? Her legs were so short, her physical condition were pathetic, and she was finding it difficult to recognize anything in the past few months she had been wandering through the wild.

Had that much really changed?

Looking down at the man still unaware at the prying eyes evaluating him, Naruto decided that yes, a lot had indeed changed.

It was pure coincidence she spotted him. One moment she had been evaluating how dangerous it would be to take a dip in the stream, so she decided to walk over to the edge to look down the waterfall. At first the huge drop made her head spin. But then she noticed at the foot of the fall was a person, and she felt her mind explode.

Now, she sat on the stone in the middle of the stream. It was a larger stone sticking up from the water only half a meter away from the roaring waterfall, but Naruto no longer felt any nerves about the drop.

The water was uncontrollable here; it was so close to the waterfall you had to avoid this section of water if you didn't want to get sucked down in the abyss. But it was also the best place to get a view down in the valley below, so Naruto found it as an excellent thinking place of what to do next.

Maybe she could just go down and ask? Even if he no longer knew her, surely he would at least point her in the right direction?

He was walking away from her, so if she wanted to act she would need to do it soon. The man was a lot faster than she was, at least the way she was right now, and the worst that could happen was to be sent away.

There was one thing she knew and it was that the man would never hurt a child. Especially a child that is lost and alone.

Mind made up, Naruto stood up trying to figure out exactly what she should say when she approached him. Her eyes were still following the small form far down below as she stepped to get out of the stream.

She shouldn't have done that.

The stone had been filed down by years of constant water; slowly grinding it smooth. Her foot lost grip the moment it hit the slick surface, and then she was falling. The world tilted and suddenly she was under water while her body was jostled around like a rag doll.

She wasn't sure what was up or down anymore as her lungs were screaming for air. The currents in the stream dragged her forward as she was too weak to fight its might.

Naruto really shouldn't have done that.

Hatake Kakashi, a boy of eight with spiky silver hair and black narrow eyes, was currently annoyed.
This wasn't very unusual since a lot of things could annoy Kakashi easily if he was being honest to himself.

It was an endless list and one of those things on the list were people doing their kata's wrong for example. Another was the taste of fried eggs. Why did people do that to eggs? They were so delicious when boiled. So, to Kakashi, fraying eggs was the same as abusing them.

He also had a strong disliking to unnecessary things and activities. Such as horsing around when you could be training; and if you were a civilian, you should be studying.

People should be doing something productive instead of wasting time. Especially when those who lack discipline waste his time for their own entertainment; yeah he hated that.

But more than anything else on his endless list of ignorance and fools; the number one thing on his list that tops the chart was his dislike for rule breakers.

A person who disregards the rules and acts on their own agenda was like a plague to him, and always will be. If it was in the instruction book, it was there for a reason.

No medic should be in an intimate relationship with their patient.

Always be professional while on the clock.

No kunai was to be brought on a mission without sharpening.

And listed high up on the rules was the one that clarified that as a ninja; personal emotions had no place while on duty.

Kakashi's golden rule was; 'always follow the rules.' Simple but effective, and it covered a lot of bases even though the rule in itself was just a short sentence.

Many saw it as a bother at times, but Kakashi was not one of them. He found relief in the carefully written guidelines. As long as you followed them you couldn't do anything wrong, it was the path to being a shinobi. A ninja of the village hidden in leaves.

So when other people broke the rules he so carefully followed, it annoyed him.

Like right now.

The nurse who was supposed to check up on him had spent ten minutes chatting with the doctor about his newborn baby. The nurse had been getting some bandages for him before the doctor had arrived, so she had stopped to talk to the tall doctor. Instead of treating him like her job description demanded; she favoured flirting with a married man who was gullible to her advances.

'Unacceptable.' Was what ran through Kakashi's mind.

It was unprofessional and lack of discipline all rolled up into one scenario. Two of his most strictly followed rules being disrespected and it was affecting him. He was on the urge to greatly remind them to do their job properly before he reports them for neglecting their patient in favour of flirting.

But eventually the pair parted ways and the nurse finally got back to what she was supposed to be doing. She checked up on him and then cheerily dismissed him fifteen minutes later. Kakashi didn't bother to wish her a good evening.

Right now there was also another thing that annoyed him even greater then rule breaking, and that
was saying something. It was his newly acquired sprained wrist and concussion. Which translated into "no training" for a while.

It annoyed the hell out of him; since he almost mastered his lightning affinity before this freak accident just had to happen.

As he walked away from the room he was checked in; he planned his training regime since his newly acquired injury meant no more physical exertions. He concluded on chakra exercises for the next few days until he was able to physically exercise. Hitting up on the books at the local library for Ninjas didn't sound bad either and could help him expand his ninjutsu field and maybe create better jutsu.

He was so focused solely on his training plan that he failed to see who was walking towards him until they were no more than a couple of meters apart. Rearranging his new training agenda and his dislike for the nurse's behavior made him forget who was waiting for him.

'Stupid.' He scolded himself.

Not only had he forgotten something so important, but he should also really be more aware of his surroundings.

A ninja must always be aware of their surroundings, even when your mind is going through a dilemma. No decent ninja would drop their guard and allow someone to come this close to you.

Kakashi made a mental note to train on his awareness along with chakra exercises.

In front of him stood the Third Hokage, Sarutobi Hiruzen. He had brown hair and a short stature who was regarded as the strongest ninja in the village. His face had started showing a few wrinkles as the year passes, but otherwise was as active as he had ever been. 'The Professor' they called him, because he could use all the techniques in Konoha.

Kakashi was unsure about that though. There were many secretive clans in Konoha. The Nara for example never taught their clan technique to others, so how could the Hokage have learned it?

The Third had been visiting someone when he spotted Kakashi being brought in by the nurses about forty five minutes ago, and for some reason waited for him afterwards.

Personally, the young Hatake had problems understanding how the Hokage used his time out of office with people he rarely met besides the formal meetings for mission briefing and what not. The silver haired youth could count on one hand how many times he had personally met with this man.

The entrance ceremony to the academy, the night his dad killed himself, his graduation exam and when he'd once ran into him in the bookshop.

To Kakashi, this hospital visit fell under the category of wasting time. Not that he would ever dare tell the man that.

Earlier; before the whole unprofessional display from the nurse, the nurses had stopped to greet the Third Hokage. For some reason the nurses didn't want him to go home unsupervised and spoke to him about that, which was idiotic, since technically he was an adult.

He had passed the academy exam a whole year ago when he was seven, almost to the day, and should be viewed as an adult. If you were licensed to take lives, you really should be allowed to decide what was best for yourself too.
The argument between him and the nurses dissolved when the Third Hokage kindly told them Kakashi was a responsible child who knew his limitation, and that he himself would make sure he did as told. Which translated into that the Hokage would come by, or send someone by his house every day until his prohibition was over.

So now, they were walking together through the hallway to the main entrance while the Hokage spoke with him. He explained to him to not press himself too hard since the injury was grave itself. If the injury was any worse than it was currently; would have warrant him bed rest instead for the next few days.

At least he should have a supervisor to oversee his training when doing new and dangerous techniques.

Kakashi barely managed to not roll his eyes.

Who exactly would look after him?

His dad was dead. He had been for years now.

He had no friends; none that he could stand talking to at least.

And he hated his current team. They were all older and kept saying he was a stuck up prodigy. It wasn't his fault they didn't follow the rules and couldn't distinguish between work and private affairs.

As they came into the entrance hall of the hospital, the door on the other side of the room opened with a bang.

A woman followed by a dark haired man came hurrying in through the door. Behind them came a boy who looked a couple of years younger than himself.

"Kagami-san, what are you doing here?" Asked the Third and gestured for Kakashi to wait. Abidingly Kakashi stopped, since Hiruzen was supposed to escort him home and he really didn't have a choice in the matter.

"My cousin; the birth has started!" The man said. His face was white as bleached sheet and panic was radiating off his voice and body gesture.

"And her husband is on a three day mission. We didn't expect the baby to be born in another three weeks. He left yesterday and should be back by tomorrow, but I think his child will come before then." He explained quickly as a nurse came hurrying over with a wheelchair.

The woman had dark hair with a pale complexion and was very beautiful if she wasn't making such a painful grimace. Kakashi was thinking he'd seen her before. He had definitely seen Kagami before and it was around the Uchiha district based off his memory.

"Of course and if I remember correctly I assigned him that mission personally. He is currently transferring some prisoners that are classified as B rank criminals. I do apologize that this had to occur. There was no one else available who had the capability to subdue those criminals if something were to occur. Is there anything I can do for you Kagami-san?" He asked politely and patiently while the woman moaning in pain was rolled away by the nurses. The stressed man was torn between sprinting after the nurses or to answer the Hokage.

"Could you please look after my son? He's only five, and this isn't really where he should be. Or maybe someone else could?" he asked, and it was clear he was impatient.
There weren't many people who would dare ask the Hokage if they could babysit their kid. That was what probably made Kagami fumble with his request.

"Of course I will. You can pick him up at the office later, or I'll send someone who's more suited to look after him if it gets too late. I just have to escort Kakashi-kun home first." He said and gestured to Kakashi.

He felt his cheek heat up under his mask. Kakashi hated the feeling of being taken care of. It brought back unpleasant emotions.

"Thank you so much Hiru- eh, Hokage-sama, I would normally never ask bu-" At that moment an ear splitting scream came from the hallway and the man hurried off without finishing.

The Third Hokage watched Kagami run off after the nurses. He then bent down to the child and gave him a warm smile.

The boy had short spiky black hair and long eyelashes. He was a very cute kid and was smiling broadly up at the Sandaime.

"Hello there, is it alright if you spend the evening with me?" The oldest man amongst them asked kindly, and took the boy's hand. The kid eagerly latched on, looking very excited.

"Hallo Hokage-sama!" Said the boy with a childish voice. "My dad tells me you are a really strong shinobi! I want to be like you one day!" He cried out as he started bouncing up and down. Hiruzen laughed while Kakashi observed the kid.

"I'm sure you will be a fine ninja one day boy, but first you have to introduce yourself properly to our third company. You don't want to be rude now do you?" He asked while gesturing to Kakashi.

The Hokage seemed happy to talk with the boy who looked a bit abashed while he smiled sheepishly.

"I'm Uchiha Shisui!" The boy said and looked over at Kakashi while pointing. "Who're you?" He questioned him.

The pre-teen with gravity defying hair looked skeptically down at him and replied in a voice so monotone and uncaring you'd think he was talking to a trash can rather than a human being. "My name is Hatake Kakashi."

"Are you a shinobi, Kakashi-san?" the boy asked eagerly.

"Yes." Kakashi replied back in the same tone he introduced himself with.

They continued the walk again towards Kakashi's residence. The boy had latched onto the Third's left hand while Kakashi strolled on his other side. Hiruzen looked worriedly over at the older boy before focusing back on Shisui again.

"Are you excited about getting a cousin, Shisui?" The older man broke the silence by questioning the youngest of the group.

"I know Mikoto had been very excited about having her first child." He continued and patted the boy's head. Shisui didn't seem to mind though, because he smiled wider. His chubby cheeks puffed up so much that his eyes were forced shut.

"Yeah! I wished he could be named Hashirama or Tobirama! They were brothers once long ago.
But uncle says that it isn't fitting. I disagree though, Hashirama was the strongest ninja ever, and Tobirama was also super strong. I know that is true, since dad told me the story and I know it really well. Dad called them the Senju brothers. But uncle and aunty are naming the baby Itachi instead. It's alright, but not as awesome. I would want to call my brother Hashirama, but I don't have a brother. Since mum has never had another baby in her tummy after me, I never got a brother. So since he's my cousin he'll be like my brother." He explained seriously, saying 'brother' so many times Kakashi lost count.

"And when he grows older, I can teach him all sorts of cool stuff, because I'll be a ninja then you know." he explained excitedly while Hiruzen laughed in response.

Kakashi finally, at that point, lost interest in their conversation and instead started concentrating on remembering chapter twenty one from the book; 'Lightning, and the road to become an elemental affinity master.'

The Hokage led them onto a side street as they came closer to Kakashi's one bedroom apartment. "Have you started the academy yet, Shisui-san?" He wondered when the boy stopped his rambling to take a big gulp of air between all his words. Now he was talking something about activating his Sharingan one of these days.

"No, not yet Hokage-sama. I'll start soon when the Academy opens!" He said eagerly. This comment made Kakashi remember the day's event. He knew that most of the pupils he'd started out with would have recently graduated, just a couple of days ago in fact.

He was aware of this since he gotten summoned to the Hokage's office this morning and been told he would be getting a new team. Apparently the Hokage was under the impression Kakashi needed to be on a team with people his own age.

Stupid really, they'll just hinder him.

Their sensei was someone named Namikaze Minato. He thought he'd heard about him once but couldn't recall exactly where or from whom.

His two teammates would be Uchiha Obito and Nohara Rin. Both were people he'd met before and gone to the academy with for a couple of years. When he was six, he skipped a year after his father's death, and graduated early when he was seven.

It worried him to be on the same team as Obito. He was such a loud mouth and was dead clumsy; it would be hard to do missions when his teammate would undoubtedly screw things up.

Rin was kind enough and seemed to follow the rules better. Even though she was friends with that idiot, at least she didn't show up late for classes every day like Obito did. However, Kakashi had never gotten the impression she was very talented in anything other than medical ninjutsu.

He let out a sigh at a thought that crossed his mind and started brooding about it. In two weeks, there would be an official team meeting and he was required to go to meet his new team. The doctor demanded that he at least rest but he was always a punctual person and would not just miss this just because of a sprained wrist. Besides, it should heal enough by then to be functional if the team decides to do any physical activities; even if it was a good excuse to not meet his team formally.

The streets were dark since the sun has already set a few hours ago. The only light showing them the way was from homes with soft glows from their windows. There was a sole lamp post a bit further down the street that showed an intersection. Shisui and the Hokage still chatted happily with one another as Kakashi's apartment came into view.
With a bow to the Hokage and a wave to the little boy he left them for the night, determined to find some book about concussions the next day.

He would need to be in top form during the team meeting in two weeks, there was no other option but to find a way completely heal in that time frame.

Jiraya thought he might be close to Kumogakure. The scenery suggested it, but he was not entirely sure since it was a while since he last checked a map.

His old map had been taken away by the wind while he was asleep about a week ago. That or an animal ate it.

The tall white haired man was currently trying to return home to Konoha after a long trip abroad. He used his time exploring places, gathering information of what was occurring in the other nations, and editing his book 'tale of the gutsy ninja.' He was still writing the last couple of chapters, but he knew where he wanted it to go, he just needed to word it right.

Jiraiya had to be careful these days though. For a few years now he'd been listed in the bingo book of all the other Four Great Nations except the Land of Fire. It was a result of a clash he and his two teammates had with Hanzo a while ago, which had earned him an S class bounty in the damn book.

These days he went by many titles. Such as; 'Jiraiya The Toad Sage', 'One of the Legendary Sannin', or his personal favourite; 'Jiraiya The Gallant'.

He also had a few nicknames used at a more personal level. Such as 'Pervert', 'Dirty man' and his least favorite; 'Stalker.' He didn't stalk anyone. Jiraya might be a frequent visitor at certain hot springs, but there wasn't a specific person he ever targeted.

Today though, all those worries had fled his mind. It was truly a beautiful day after all, and contrary to his female teammate's belief, he could enjoy more than spying on women.

He had a sense of peace as he walked alongside the river bank. While he was heading homewards, he wasn't really in a hurry, so he let himself be drifted off his path every now and then.

As his mind drifted to his old team mate Tsunade and wondering what she might be doing, Jiraya watched the roaring waves of the river.

Not far up the terrain was a high waterfall, and the stream around here was dangerous since it ebbed out in another waterfall further down.

He found it fascinating how powerful the water could be, and the many different substances water could take. Like ice, liquid, fog, and snow to name a few examples. As he speculated over this he couldn't think of anything else which could compare to water.

If there was, he hadn't come across it in his life. Natural water was as mysterious as chakra, except it minded its own business and didn't need to be influenced. From the moment it was created it just acted however it wished to in harmony with the rest of nature.

It broke down rocks, altering landscape and nurturing life. What on earth would they have done without water?

He smiled a bit while his eyes wandered while his mind vaguely registered something underneath the wild water stream.
Something bright and yellow that didn't fit what you usually observe when looking at a river.

He looked back to the spot again, and saw an object being dragged fast with the stream's current underneath the water.

It took him half a second to realize it was a person; a very small person.

On autopilot he found himself summoning one of his most trusted summon.

A toad appeared in a cloud of smoke right where the palm of his hand had just been. "Gamahiro! There's someone in the water. I need your help to get them out!" He found his voice steady and sure even though a flicker of panic was blooming in his stomach.

Almost before he finished speaking, the toad was in the water, swimming after the fast moving body in the river.

The Toad Sannin ran after while keeping to the shore, the current was lethal to get mixed into and Gamahiro had enough saving one person at the moment.

Whoever this was must have fallen in and gotten dragged underneath the water. Gamahiro broke the surface, and on his shoulder was a small creature with bright long golden hair, lying lifeless like a rag doll. "Get the girl here!" He shouted and the frog came at full speed towards him and laid the girl on the ground in front of him.

Wasting no time he started CPR. The girl was just a small kid. She didn't look to be older than five years old.

She also wasn't responding. Her face looked pale as he breathed air into her lungs, forcing her to breathe before resuming compressions. After the fourth set of compression and CPR, the girl finally started coughing.

Water gushed from her mouth as she threw up the substance which been blocking her lungs. He felt his shoulder sag in relief as wide blue eyes fluttered open and stared at him in shock.

The girl coughed again and rolled over on her stomach to continue emptying her air pipe of moisture. Watching her writher on the ground, he opened his backpack and took out his blanket so he could wrap the poor girl in it.

She was now slowly getting to her knees before staring back at him with wild eyes, clearly in shock. "Am I dead?" Croaked the girl. Her voice sounded sore from all the coughing and hacking she just did. All the while she was looking around, as if expecting to see the gates of heaven located nearby.

"No, Gamahiro here managed to get you out of the stream in time. What happened to you?" He asked looking at her with furrowed brows and handed the girl the blanket. Without a word she accepted it with a nod, before following the river with her eyes; finally landing on the waterfall in the distance.

"I… I fell..." Said the young girl looking up at the thunderous water. Jiraiya followed her gaze and felt himself choke a little. She fell from up there? How had she not been crushed?

"What on earth are you doing all the way out here anyway, gaki? Where are your parents? Are you a fugitive?" He asked still marveling over her narrow escape from death.

She didn't reply right away, and Jiraya looked back wondering what was stopping her. Her eyes had turned glossy, and she was looking downwards to hide her face.
"I'm alone." She muttered seemingly finding the ants walking in row on the ground immensely interesting.

"Oh… How did you end up here then?" He asked sensing they were reaching a touchy subject.

"I walked." She replied silently. Jiraiya was getting very annoyed at her lack of detail and having to force the words out of her.

"And where did you walk from and how long have you been out here in the wilderness? This is no place for a young girl like you." He said while forcing his voice to stay calm and reassuring.

"I'm not sure where I started, but I've been here for a while… Months." She said still watching the march of the ants. Jiraiya looked closer at her. He had been so focused on saving her he hadn't taken notice of the state she was in. Her clothes were stained even after the bubble bath she'd been in, and ripped up badly. She was also very thin.

His memories went back to Amegakure, and the three orphans he'd met there. The toad sannin felt his heart fill with renewed compassion for the lost girl. They didn't say anything for a while and Jiraiya continued studying her.

He noticed the way she talked, it had been with a clear pronunciation and maturity he rarely came across in people so young. She was alone but still had survived by fending for herself for a long time. And she seemed utterly lost.

More lost than Nagato, Konan and Yahiko had ever looked. They had belonged in Amegakure, they had fought to survive and hoped for a better future.

This girl however, seemed beyond hope where she sat with her hands in her lap. The blanket draped over her shoulders and was dripping with water.

She had the face of someone who had nothing.

"You didn't jump, did you?" He asked quietly, placing his hand to her shoulder, making her look up and pay attention to him again.

The idea that a young girl around five was trying to end her life made him sick. What had the world turned into?

At once she looked at him with startled eyes, finally some life came back to her as she shook her head as carefully as she dared, water splashing all over Jiraiya. "No, of course not. I was swimming in the river trying to clean some of the dirt off. I thought I was far away enough not to get caught in the stream, but I stumbled and was dragged down the waterfall." She answered with wide doe eyes and an earnest voice.

Jiraiya sighed in relief. "You're a tough one, aren't you? How on earth did you survive out here?"

She shrugged, but still didn't meet his eyes. "I'm not sure. I've eaten what looks edible, that's why I kept to the river since fish seems like a safe thing to eat if you heat it up.. The only reason I started was because there… There was no one left and I was alone… I was trying to find them, and then I realized I never would." Her voice grew softer and softer the more she talked, and Jiraiya had the urge to give her a hug, tell her everything would be all right, since he'd look after her now.

He tried to shake that thought off, but it stuck like glue. "My name is Jiraiya, what are you called, gaki?"
For a moment the girl scrutinized him, and slowly a change lit up in her.

The transformation from the frail lost girl, to a child filled with life and mischief was instantaneous and marvelous to behold. Her eyes sparkled, her wide toothy smile took up half her face and her cheeks puffed up. It was like looking at a completely different girl then the one she'd been five minutes ago.

"I'm Naruto, dattebayo."

On training ground eight in the Hidden Village of Konoha stood a fresh new genin team ready for their first assignment as official ninjas. All three children were eager for what was to come while their teacher looked as if he'd rather be anywhere but where he was.

One of the genin was a young girl with short, mauve colored hair, tied into a spiky ponytail. The messy bangs which had escaped the restriction of the hair tie fell onto her brown eyes, but not enough to obscure her vision of their sensei instructing them.

Anko held her new forehead protector carefully in her hands. While their sensei asked them to prepare themselves, she was thoroughly studying how blank the metal looked. There was not a scratch or sign of wear on the silvery surface, nor on the cloth it was attached to.

Curiously she started to muse on how long that would last.

Ninjas lived a rough life, and she couldn't remember ever seeing a forehead protector this untouched. Even the academy teachers, who rarely went on missions, never had headbands this clean.

Maybe it was a test? How long could you keep your headband scratch free? Probably not, but Anko swore she'd make it her personal challenge.

Because of their sensei's busy schedule, they were the first genin team to start active duty. Usually all teams had two weeks after graduating before officially starting their shinobi career. Anko wasn't so sure if this was for the sake of the eager genin, or for the tired academy teachers who needed a breather in between classes.

However, Anko and her two teammates had barely been graduates for little more than fifteen hours, and were already meeting up with their new sensei ahead of everyone else in their graduating year.

Gently tying her forehead protector around her head, she looked up at her new teacher.

Orochimaru.

Her two teammates stood next to her looking nervous in his presence. Understandable, the man was a legend after all. He had probably killed more enemy ninjas then all the people Anko had met in total.

Who could have guessed Anko could be this lucky? To have one of the legendary sannin as their sensei? She had always been serious with her studies; it was the one aspect of her life where she truly put in the effort. It had also paid off, since she managed to graduate top of her class. She didn't count that bastard Hatake who'd graduated early; he was a puppet more than a ninja anyway.

Orochimaru held out the two scrolls and explained in a bored and slithery voice how today's agenda would go, why it was so, and the consequences of not following through.
They were all surprised to learn they were not genin yet. First they had to pass this surprise test it seemed.

Their teacher had given out the two scrolls to each of her team mates, leaving Anko without one. The test was that by the end of this hour, the two who still had a scroll was allowed to stay. They would then have to hand them back to him, and if the scroll was damaged they could also fail.

Her team mates were holding on to the scrolls for dear life now, sending nervous looks in Anko's direction. They both knew how merciless she could be when there was something she wanted. There was also no way in hell she'd fail today. The two she had been teamed up with was both weaker than her.

No way would she lose.

Looking away from the two scrolls being placed carefully in her teammate's pocket, she studied Orochimaru's appearance.

He was clad in the standard Konoha uniform all chūnin and up was allowed to wear. The green vest with black ninja pants with bandages wrapping around the shin down to the ankle and standard open toed shoes.

His long black hair was laid tidy behind his shoulders, and his pale skin contrast almost painfully against his hair colour.

She also noted that his headband was unscratched.

There wasn't as much as a smudge on it. Maybe the headband was new, but Anko doubted it.

"You spilled carrot soup on my gama wallet! How could you!?!" Shouted Naruto as she half ran to keep up with the tall man currently holding her only remaining possession; besides the clothes she wore.

"It's a wallet! A damp wallet as well, it was an accident, and it's not like you can't wash it off, gaki!" He shouted back with heat.

"It's about respect, Ero-sennin! You just spilled soup on my wallet, and not just any type of soup, but carrot soup! I hate carrots!" She fired back, and Jiraiya could have sworn her eyes glittered dangerously.

"It's a piece of stained fabric, baka! It's not like I stole your wallet! Not that it would have mattered if I did, there's nothing in it!" he retorted back.

They continued bickering while they walked at a slow pace through the green growing landscape. Jiraiya had, after a few hours of getting to know each other, offered the girl to accommodate him on the road, which the girl had agreed to since she had nowhere else to go.

He was starting to regret it though.

The girl might have been in a very depressed mood a few days ago, but she was now recovering greatly. This had caused her true colors to shine through, and Jiraiya wasn't sure if he liked her attitude at all.

Naruto was loud, outspoken and had very little respect for her elders. This he discovered within few hours of travelling with her.
'Ero-sennin' she had dubbed him, and the name stuck with her. Who had such lack of decency to call him, the Toad Sannin, such a thing?

It was probably one of the more unique nicknames he'd been given, and while it might be true, it also embarrassed him that a child at her age had picked up on his less than flattering hobbies.

"Be thankful I put up with you, brat. I'm a great shinobi and you should respect your elders!" He stated with a nod, his hand folded while they walked over the grassy field of the northern fire country.

"Humpf', what does that have to do with ruining my wallet?" She muttered under her breath. "And where are you taking me?" She added for the fourth time.

Jiraiya had been uncertain where he should take the girl. Bringing outsiders to a Hidden Village was never an easy feat. But the girl was so small, and something made Jiraiya feel that the girl would be a great asset to Konohagakure.

She was brave, fiery and apparently completely unaware with what she could do. It had started when Jiraiya had asked Naruto in all honesty where she got her name from. It was a unique name after all, he'd thought it up himself when visiting the Ame orphans and he was greatly shocked to meet someone with that name. Especially a girl, since Jiraiya personally thought it went better with a boy.

Naruto had flushed slightly, and she said she wasn't sure. It was just the name everyone she once knew called her by.

The Toad Sannin hadn't really expected more of an answer than that; it wasn't uncommon for kids to not put too much thought into names. If you've heard a name your whole life, you never realize if the name is unusual to anyone else.

He then started telling her he was writing a book and that his main character had the same name as her. At first she'd been very pleased. But when he had made a comment about how it was a very unfeminine name and his character fitted it better, Naruto hadn't been too pleased.

It led to a wild chase, where Naruto managed to get a hold of his bowl of soup and threw it surprisingly accurately towards him. It wasn't a perfect throw, the little girl wouldn't have hit him even if he'd stood still since she was far away. Only a ninja would've made the shot, and maybe if she was a bit older and trained a bit more in the ninja arts.

Naruto had gotten visibly angry by the result of the throw, so instead she'd gone after him on foot. Jiraiya had laughed until he noticed what she was doing with unwaveringly fault and determination pouring from her. The girl had chakra, a lot of it, and when she ran at him, she was pushing it out through her feet in wild bursts.

It was not controlled at all and not a mistake someone with ninja training would do. This made him aware of just how much chakra this little girl probably had and at such a young age. He was intrigued by that idea, and wondered if she, while wondering in the wildness, had started doing it as a way to survive. Many people started using chakra in times of need, especially when your life is on the line. It was particularly common amongst children since they do not know how to control it properly yet.

He was very impressed, and started wondering if maybe the girl could be of some asset after all. When he had asked her about this she didn't understand at first, but when he specified what she had been doing she had looked horrified. Her face was an open book, and it was obvious she hadn't been
aware of the chakra she was releasing when she was running at him.

Jiraiya didn't know, and never would, that Naruto was horrified for a different reason. The fact that her chakra control was apparently so poor she couldn't keep it in check anymore.

Looking at her, all he saw as her stubborn and sunny personality. Naruto also had those oh-so familiar eyes. The idea of leaving her to fend for herself was unbearable. He really only saw one option for what to do with the blonde.

"Oy! Did you hear me, Ero-sennin? I asked where we are going, dattebyo!" Exclaimed Naruto with a growl. Her arms folded and her sky colored eyes glinted dangerously.

Jiraiya rolled his eyes but a small smile lifted the corners of his mouth. Her temper, while annoying, was also a little endearing. "We're going home to my village, Naruto."

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading the first chapter of After the Rain! This chapter is sort of part one out of two, and you'll see more of what's going on from Naruto's perspective in the next one.

This chapter has been beta's by AnjoRemix. Who also helped me tons on this first chapter that just didn't want to work. I'm calling you AnjoRemix the great, because that's what you are.

There will be deaths in this story, but with that said I'm trying to write something a little lighter than my other stories. I don't want as much angst, though I can't make any promises. Sometimes I just type and the angst filled words just forms themselves. I think it's mostly when I'm depressed about school work...

There will also be some AU in this story. Not a lot but I have plaid with the characters age a bit. Like Kakashi who is nine but still genin. It just doesn't make sense to me what they're talking about him making chūnin as a six or seven years old. In the manga he clearly took the exam together with Obito and Rin, and I guess they were around eight-nine? I'm going with that in this story at least.

To clarify ages in After the Rain:

Minato 23 (fourteen years older then Kakashi, Obito and Rin. I think that's a good sensei age.)

Kakashi 9 (Still genin, but not for long)
Naruto 6 (Sixteen years old turned six by time travel)

Itachi 0 (Just born in this chapter)
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter two – Play Pretend and Tea Parties

"No, you don’t get it, that’s why I’m telling you. You think you get it, which isn't the same as actually getting it. Get it? - Hatake Kakashi

One Legged Parade was located on the west side of Konoha and was a road leading all the way from the main street to the west side gate of the village border.

The street had originally been named after an incident many years ago before the Akimichi clan had settled in Konohagakure.

One of their clan members, Akimichi Cho, had jumped all the way from a battlefield close to the desert of Sunagakure on his only remaining leg to get help to save his family who'd been taken hostage.

It was said he came through the west gate and made his way through the main street without being stopped. Everyone who saw him felt pity for his injuries, so they let him through. There he jumped straight into Senju Hashirama, better known as the First Hokage, who agreed to help free his clan.

With the help of the Nara and Yamanaka clans they successfully rescued his family from a rival clan, that no one today recalls the name of, and the Akimichi as a result settled in Konoha. Cho was without a leg, but miraculously still survived even after the immense amount of blood loss from getting it chopped off.

To this day, the Akimichi still lived on the west side along the street, and everyone born within the clan has heard the story in greater detail.

Here was also the entrance to the Nara clan compound, but the majority of the inhabitants of the west district were still civilians. The only two clans living in the area were peaceful ones, and the civilians were rarely woken up during the night from ninjas jumping across their roof or random brawls.

This also happened to be the location of Konoha's Orphanage home.

After three days of travelling, mostly by getting a piggy back ride from Jiraiya to increase their speed, they had arrived on a sunny Wednesday at noon. Naruto had been in Konoha for about two days in the custody of Jiraiya before being granted citizenship as an orphan resident of the Village Hidden in Leafs.

And this meant she was back in this kami awful building, which often came up in Naruto's less pleasant dreams from her childhood.

When she had actually been a child the orphanage had been a place of loneliness, relentless bullying and many days with little to no food. They had never bothered to care for her enough and she had remained the smallest of her age group for her entire stay.

Naruto had been given an apartment when she turned eight. It was after the ANBU discovered that she had been starved for two days with only water to keep her alive. She didn't remember it all that
well anymore, but she'd gotten into a fight with a boy a year older and the isolation was her punishment.

As she watched her could-have-been godfather leaving the outdoor grounds from her window, Naruto wondered how it would be this time around. It couldn't possibly be the same since no one knew she was a jinchūriki, and therefore had no reason to mistreat her.

Still, she wished she never had to set foot in this place again.

She let out a sigh while running her fingers through her hair. Naruto guessed it could have turned out worse.

The uneasiness between the countries was growing, and everyone were automatically suspicious of people who were without a home and sought sanctum in their village. Of course, Naruto did have a home, they just didn't know it.

Yet she had been accepted into Konoha during these turbulent times.

This was no easy feat to manage and Naruto knew Jiraiya must have pulled a lot of strings to make it possible.

There had been no disgusted or hateful glares from anyone so far. Only a kind smile from Sarutobi Hiruzen, the surprisingly younger looking Hokage, when she had been introduced to him the day before. It had been painful to see him at first, but was there one thing Naruto knew how to do than it was to conceal her emotions with a smile.

He had asked her many questions regarding her past and Naruto had lied through her teeth about it all.

She claimed she was from somewhere in the north, which strictly speaking was true. Naruto had ended up somewhere in the past Otogakure area when she landed in this time. Something she didn't know before Jiraiya had told her where she was while they were travelling. She had then made her way south through the wild land until she came across Jiraiya.

The blond had explained how her family had lived by simple means outside a small village which later burned to the ground while she was absent. It was the only story she could think of, but it explained the state Jiraiya had found her in and her need to keep moving. If someone was putting people's houses on fire, there was a possibility that she might be hunted because of her age. Seeing her distress the Hokage had luckily believed her.

Naruto had sat through tests done by the medics and they had confirmed that her age was around six. After that was a short visit from someone who greatly resembled Yamanaka Inoichi from her time. Though his hair was a little more brown than blond, and since invasive techniques to barrage into someone's mind was risky; they didn't dare to use it on a six year old.

The man had stayed long enough to confirm that she was telling the truth when she swore loyalty to only Konoha with his lie detector technique, before being dismissed.

There had been questions about what she would like to do with her life and Naruto hadn't been sure how to answer that. Could she just say she wanted to become a kunoichi? Wouldn't that just set off some warning bells and make them suspicious? But it had yet again been Jiraiya who saved her. The white haired Sannin had told them that Naruto had a lot of chakra that she has no control over but with a great potential, and suggested she started the academy right away.

The Hokage had looked uncertain at first and told her that it was a dangerous occupation. Naruto had
answered she wanted to be like Jiraiya one day, and if going through the academy was the way to get there, then so be it. Jiraiya had looked immensely proud, and the old man had chuckled before accepting.

The blond was sure she would have a lot of surveillance for a while, but she had no intention of breaking the trust she had been given from the Sandaime and from Jiraiya.

Therefore she was at last entered into the Academy where she would start in a little over a week for the winter term on the first of November.

While she waited for that day Naruto was reluctantly coming to terms with the fact that she had to go through the Academy a second time and stay in the dreadful orphanage all at once. It had made her fantasize about staying out like a hooligan in the wild.

At least out there she could choose her own bedtime there.

The jinchūriki could hear children playing outside in the garden, enjoying the fall time and playing ninja. She wondered how the people she had once known looked like now, the older generation such as her parents.

Naruto had never been good at maths, but had concluded that her mother and father should be around twenty four at the moment, while Kakashi was around nine.

The Third Shinobi War was right at their doorstep. Civilians were sceptical of strangers since tension and suspicion was running high. It was lucky for Naruto they didn't see much threat in a lonely, six year old girl.

Turning away from the window Naruto released a deep breath and laid down on her bed, thinking about how she had ended up in this situation, and cursing the nine tailed demon fox for being such a sore loser. Never in her wildest dreams had she thought that freak accident could have resulted in time travel. It was a good thing Naruto didn't believe in fate, if she had, the blonde would have cursed them for landing her in this mess.

There was a feeling of frustration building up inside her as she thought back to that day.

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Naruto had been on the island Genbu, located somewhere far out at sea. The only occupants of this island were a variation of interesting, unusual and downright abnormal animals.

They all seemed to have inhaled something when they were young since they all had grown to incredible sizes. Smarter than most animals and were both civilized and ominous.

The island itself was located on the shell of an enormous turtle, where trees, cliffs and waterfalls had been given the time to grow.

Very few people knew of this mysterious island, as it was a very well-guarded secret of the Tsuchikage. But because of the Fourth Ninja War looming on the horizon he had, for the first time, allowed someone from another village to enter it.

Naruto was one of the outsiders that were allowed to set foot on the land. She was being taught by a man named Killer Bee, who was also a jinchūriki, to control her Bijū’s chakra.

The Kyūbi was probably one of the oddest creatures to ever come to island Genbu. He was a large nine tailed fox who, for years, have been sealed away inside human sacrifices. To be able to control such a power would be a feat, but Naruto had been in the middle of trying to do just that when her
world had been turned upside down.

Her mother, who showed herself because of the chakra sealed within Naruto, was trying to help her subdue the Kyūbi to take his chakra.

She had been so close to achieving it. But to do that Naruto had been forced to open the seal and face the Kyūbi. Her goal was to weaken it and then drag out its chakra from him through his tails. To drag out someone's chakra, you had to use your own chakra as a net to catch it. And in this state, with her chakra connected to the Kyūbi's, and nearly winning their intense tug of war with the help of her mother who was subduing the fox, said fox had snapped.

He'd roared so loudly, and with the seal open and their chakra connected whatever he did affected her too. The world had exploded in more colors than Naruto could recognise, and then abruptly gone blank.

When she'd woken up, she was alone, hungry and confused. For about a month she walked aimlessly and heard snippets of talks of the Third Ninja War from worried civilians. That it was approaching and at any moment the war may break out from just how hostile the ninja villages were to each other.

The fox was yet again imprisoned within her. He looked extremely pissed off about that fact too, but had reluctantly told her they were indeed in the past. That it was his doing, and that she was never supposed to have come along with him.

It had only raised as many questions as it answered, but along with her confusion came panic.

Until Jiraiya had found her, she had truly felt lost.

Coming back to herself from the trip down memory lane Naruto again swore she'd get the fox to talk. He'd already admitted that she was stuck here, but Naruto wanted to know more than just that.

Sitting on the top bunk bed and looking down at her room, Naruto couldn't help but feel sorry for herself.

It was such a depressing thought to realize she was back to scratch.

The orphanage looked exactly the same as the first time around. The paint on the walls were maybe a little more intact, the floors less tired, but in all she recognized everything.

The only real difference was that she had roommates this time. There were three bunk beds in her room, and they all looked occupied from all the stuff already being stored in the closets and on the night stands.

The other time she'd been in the orphanage Naruto had been all alone, put in a storage they dubbed a room for her to be separated from the rest of the kids. Back then she had wished more than anything to share a room with the other kids. To have someone to talk to when it grew dark and she got scared.

It was ironic that this time around her wish had come true, but instead she dreamed she had gotten that shed instead. It was better than having to socialize with kids “her age.”

Naruto had always been called immature and stupid, but even if she looked a decade younger now, mentally she was sixteen years old, almost seventeen, and it sucked having to deal with children who thought they were older.
The door opened then, and the shrill voices from kids playing were intensified as a group of girls filed in through the door.

"Hello! I heard we had a new roommate, it's you isn't it? I'm Akiko, who're you?" A tall girl of about six said and waved excitedly as she moved from the door to one of the bottom beds.

Four other girls followed closely behind Akiko and waved too as they presented themselves to Naruto. The only name she caught except Akiko was Hana, a short girl who looked a little older than the rest.

"Um… I'm Naruto…" She replied uncertainly and waved up to the girl in the other bunk bed opposite her.

Akiko smiled brilliantly, her short, black hair falling flat and close around face as she sat down. An awkward silence fell between them as Naruto shifted uncomfortably.

"Do you like horses, Naruto-chan?" Asked Akiko and leaned forwards.

"... They're nice." Replied Naruto and looked back at the girl. "Eh..." She twiddled her fingers as they lay in her lap. "Do you?"

"No, I'm scared of horses since I fell off one during the farm outing last year. I broke my arm and it was really scary." She replied matter of factly.

Naruto was reminded of the time Ero-sennin had pushed her off a rocky cliff and down into the deep cavern while she tried desperately to use the kyūbi's chakra.

It was probably best not to mention that incident...

"I like horses." Said Hana and rolled her eyes at Akiko.

Naruto nodded as she tried to keep up with the strange subject. Never had she talked about something as mundane as horses before.

"I like squirrels, they're so cute." Said the girl with sandy blonde hair next to Hana and smiled idly to the others.

"But they look like mice, bleh', dogs are the best." The last girl said and shook her head.

"Oh, yes. I wish I had a dog, it could sleep in my bed and it wouldn't be a bother at all, but Madam May won't let us. She's so strict." Akiko told Naruto and pouted at the end as she described the old lady who worked at the orphanage.

"I know! She threw out that cat from the kitchen that time. It was so cute too; it was just hungry, you know. I like cats, they're so sweet." Said the girl who didn't like squirrels, Naruto was trying desperately to remember her name but it all came up blank.

"Oh, me too."

"Me too!"

"Yeah, me too."

They all looked at Naruto who nodded. She figured it was best not to mention Tora the cat and how she'd plotted with Sasuke to use his katon jutsu on it after Team Seven's second round capturing that thing. It had probably been for the best that Kakashi had overheard them.
"I still like dogs the most, what animal do you like best, Naruto-chan?" Asked Akiko, and all four of them looked curiously at Naruto.

It was the oddest question anyone had ever asked her, and frantically Naruto tried to think of an animal she liked. After a moment's hesitation she said the first thing that came to mind. "…. Toads?"

While Naruto soon found out no one seemed to mind her company, she still didn't have much in common with them. All the girls seemed to only want to run around with the orphanage dolls or mix it up with 'playing house'. Which was some sort of game Naruto had never heard of in her previous life.

The girls would pretend to be a family and sometimes drag in the boys to play the father or son. Naruto thought it resembled some type of impromptu theatre which was incredibly dull.

They were all civilians and were planned on staying that way. The girls dreamed of prince charming or long lost family members coming to fetch them from the orphanage, and other silly fairy tale dreams that seemed farfetched.

While they were very sweet, Naruto found herself avoiding them at every turn after two days. She had enough of tea parties with mud cakes as fake food, and paper cups filled with tap water to represent tea while the girls played pretend.

However, the incomprehensible games the orphanage girls had dragged Naruto into wasn't a complete waste of time. It was in this fashion Naruto first found out that there was indeed someone she recognized amongst the children.

Mitarashi Anko.

Anko, who had been a Tokubetsu Jōnin in her own time, walked past Naruto and the girls as Akiko offered the blonde a mud cake topped with grass sprinkles. The by passer had noticed this and reacted the way Naruto was wishing she could, by sneering at them before marching away.

Considering how young Anko was in this timeline, Naruto remembered that Anko had once been the apprentice of Orochimaru of the Sannin. It was possible that she was again.

It had taken Naruto a moment to place the girl who'd walked past them, but after about four minutes she finally realized who it was. By the time she swirled around to look for Anko, the girl was already long gone.

The daily routine in the orphanage was similar to those she recalled, breakfast at eight in the morning in the food hall which becomes boisterous despite half the inhabitants barely being awake.

Then there were civilian social studies, a class devoted to civilian history and geography. They also lectured about future employment and made sure to stress how dangerous it was to be a ninja for the village. How short their life expectancy was and the risks while on missions even if the pay was decent. Plus, in the life of a shinobi; there is also the responsibility of protecting lives and taking them. It was true, but it still annoyed Naruto to listen to Madam May go on and on about how sensible people who chose to work in the mail office were instead.

The blond was sure that if the postman had more chakra training the job would be done a lot faster.

After this they had outdoor time for two hours where they did activities such as softball and orientation.
After this they went inside and had an hour of reading and writing lessons followed by lunch. Then there was maths where Naruto was happy to see she could follow relatively easily. They were still just doing the simple stuff anyway.

The day ended with indoor activity before they all headed for dinner. After the meal they could do as they wanted, and most of the kids liked to spend their time outside or in the play room.

Naruto loved the outdoors instead of being cooped up inside majority of the day. So she made sure to spend as much time as she can outside.

Konoha was very different before the Kyūbi attack, or at least that's what she presumed had caused so much change.

The main street was all wrong, and led to the library instead of the Hokage building, and the shops were all in different places. She wouldn't have recognize them if it wasn't for the names. Those hadn't changed much.

It was also here she first spotted her mother for the first time. She was running with a dark haired woman over the rooftops heading towards the Hokage's office.

Naruto had frozen in her tracks when she saw long red hair swirling from the corner of her eye, and done a double take as she recognized who the hair belonged to; Uzumaki Kushina.

The beautiful red head hadn't noticed her staring, they were going too fast for that, and it was hardly uncommon for civilians to stare from time to time. Naruto remembered when she had watched ninjas using the rooftops as a high speed lane to move around the village back in her timeline.

Getting to know this Konoha had taken her a little while. The hardest blow so far was realizing Ichiraku's ramen stand didn't exist yet. Not that she could have afforded a bowl of ramen now that she was didn't receive an allowance anymore, which apparently no orphan got in this time.

It had taken Naruto an afternoon of asking around to figure out that every orphan was completely penniless. Everything they got, they got through the orphanage, and not a penny more. If you wanted money you had to take a job, either working for civilians or as a ninja.

But her lack of money didn't bother her nearly as much as the lack of the familiar ramen stand. It bothered her to not see the stand when she walked by in the street. However, she had spotted the ramen chef Teuchi walking around town the day after she moved into the orphanage. Naruto had almost cried out in greeting.

She hadn't recognized the old man at first since he was so much younger. His hair line had yet to retreat backwards, and it was a rich brown color instead of pale grey. She had the same problem recognizing him as she had with Anko, they were just so young.

When Naruto heard him talk to a seller in the dango booth she realized at once who it was, but the greeting had died in her throat and then she silently walked away.

It would take a long time before she got used to the fact that no one knew her here.

After almost a week had passed, Naruto had settled in pretty well into her new situation. She was getting impatient to start the academy and get it over with. It would be wonderful to get a break from the dreary life at the orphanage too, but she wasn't looking forward to the piles of never ending homework.
The Academy might be boring, but luckily they didn't do kunoichi classes yet. The tension between the nations was so tense everyone was on war time curriculum. Therefore the academy followed a tougher and more combat orientated regime then what they had been the first time Naruto went there.

Flower decoration was such a waste of time. Even though Naruto enjoyed growing plants, she didn't like fluffing them into bouquets. Ino had always insisted they were useful, but Naruto hadn't had the patience for it.

But maybe cutting flowers was better than some aspects of her home life anyway, at least at the academy they were less strict about defending yourself when you were bullied. Something the orphanage had a zero percent tolerance for.

Since she first saw the young version of Anko, the blonde had figured out a few more things about her. Not all of it good either.

Mitarashi Anko was about two years older than Naruto according to her physical age and a newly graduated genin. She lived in the orphanage but was saving up money for her own place. This was something everyone knew since Anko had very recently managed to save up enough money to buy herself a new outfit and bragged about it loudly. She wasn't allowed to wear it while at the orphanage, but when she left in the morning for mission or training she was clad in her new brown T-shirt and beige shorts.

And last, but far from least, she could be an absolute nightmare.

The kunoichi liked to be very visible, and Naruto saw her every single day so it was hard not to take notice of the loud girl. In fact it surprised Naruto that she hadn't noticed her sooner.

But Anko had been bragging extensively about her newly acquired genin status. Maybe when Naruto first arrived the older girl had been temporarily distracted by her new occupation to cause havoc at the orphanage for a little while. Anko was almost as eccentric as Naruto suspected she herself had been at that age.

There was one glaring difference though. After the day Naruto had recognized her during a make belief tea party she had taken more interest in the other girl, and the blond quickly noticed that Anko was a bully.

She seemed to like picking fights and was always rude to everyone. But unlike the bullies Naruto remembered from her childhood, who went in packs and attacked because they outnumbered their victims, Anko was alone.

She had no friends as far as Naruto had seen. Anko sat on her own at lunch and was always annoyed with anyone who came too close. The rest of the kids avoided her like a plague, and she got into trouble with the grown-ups at the orphanage on a daily basis. It was maybe a good thing that Anko was a freshly graduated ninja since at least she didn't attend daily classes like the rest of the civilians.

Anko was the only kid who had never gone to school with the rest since she had gone to the academy instead. That was also the reason why she was the only one who knew how to fight too.

Naruto privately thought that Anko must have been very good as an academy student. She had spotted her walking up the wall using chakra one day, and Anko was only eight years old without anyone teaching her these things.

Naruto had been twelve, almost thirteen when she had been taught that by Kakashi-sensei.

It was obvious that she took her training seriously, the few times Anko was down in the common
room she was reading thick books on different sort of ninja subjects silently. She practices her katas every morning and evening, plus she disappeared for hours and came back looking like a mess. There would be leaves stuck in her hair, her clothes dirty and her steps shaky after her practice sessions somewhere off the orphanage grounds.

It was also the fact that apparently Anko had graduated top of her class, so she had to be quite skilled for a young girl. But yet she lacked that air of superiority that people like Sasuke, Kakashi and even Itachi had worn. All who also had been skilled from an early age; Anko was definitely under the impression she was better than everyone in the orphanage. But it reminded Naruto more of how she herself had wanted to get attention. It was the only way for herself to prove that her existence mattered.

Naruto wondered if maybe Anko was so hostile because she hated her situation. Hated being an orphan and living in this place. In a way Naruto could easily sympathize with her, but when she'd tried to talk to her she'd gotten a book flying at her head instead. She had ducked out of the line of fire in time, but the book had hit a water filled vase full of flowers on the window still, making it break with a loud splash. Afterwards, the blond had then been ordered to clean everything up before Anko marched off.

She was such a bitch.

Naruto also had a strange impression Anko very much disliked her. After the spectacularly failed attempt to get to know Anko, she had been malicious towards Naruto. The dark haired girl would try to trip her in the hallways, make fun of her if she was close by, and scowl every time Naruto looked back to retaliate.

What Naruto had done to deserve such treatment from her; she didn't know, but she figured it was some stupid ego problem that made her look down on everyone who wasn't a ninja.

It wasn't an uncommon trait in that field.

Anko was rash and lacked empathy which repelled away most of the other orphans. Naruto had dealt with much larger ego's than Anko's in the past though, and was never afraid of voicing her opinion about it.

She figured if Anko used this form of lashing out as a way to gain attention, than Naruto would very well retaliate.

Three days before Naruto was set to start the academy she visited the main street again to look around.

She couldn't deal with Akiko and the gang discussing how boring math was, even if she did agree with them. It was strange to realize some kids were just too naive for her to deal with; especially the civilians.

Talking about wanting to become a hairdresser was just something Naruto couldn't emphasize with. It sounded extremely dull, even if Sakura had always loved going there and gushed about the latest fashion. Naruto had always been tomboyish, and that would never truly change.

After an hour of aimless wandering she found herself where she wanted to go, the forest, and started training. She had already informed the staff at the orphanage that she applied and was accepted at the Academy, and had gotten leave to drop the last activity sessions of the day to practice.

None of them could help her out, and the first week she had been forced to do all her training inside
the grounds. But it had soon been clear Naruto didn't need supervision. It had taken some nagging, but eventually she was allowed to go train on her own.

She did one handed climbing today, trying to get as high as possible climbing up without chakra. The task had been scary at first since she had been so weak, and the soreness the day after had been agony. The last couple of times however she'd done a lot better, and now she managed to scale the whole, slightly short, mountainside with one hand.

Today she made it up in an hour, and laid flat on her back, panting when she reached the top. Naruto was feeling more exhausted then she remembered being the last time. Maybe because she'd done it so slowly, it took more out of your muscles to stay still then to move, at least that's what it felt like.

Her right hand was trembling and her bangs were soaked with sweat as she sat up. It was a nice view from here, not as good as the one from the Hokage mountain, but decent enough.

It was so calm and quiet compared to the always buzzing orphanage, and for someone who'd spent most of their time alone it was a big adjustment. In her time she'd been alone even in the orphanage, but now no one had a problem with her. In fact, she was quite popular for some reason. She was the new kid, the only blonde and she constantly got remarks because of that…

It was easy to just sit there and imagine that the village was the one she knew, the one with all her precious people, but it was also glaringly obvious not.

Her father's and baa-chan's face were missing from the mountain, and it was a constant reminder of her situation. Getting to her feet when she felt someone coming closer, Naruto started the tiring route down again with one hand.

The next morning went by like it usually did. Akiko tried to make her join a round of playing house, Naruto refused, then Akiko would get watery eyes and Naruto reluctantly relented. Following was a never ending hour of acting out the role of the little sister of Hana, while Akiko blackmailed a boy into playing her husband.

But lunch did not go as planned. It was the weekend and Anko was free of both training and missions. For the rest of the kids Saturday was basically one big activity day since school was only on weekdays.

As Naruto came into the food hall for lunch, her path was suddenly blocked by a scowling Anko who stood with her arms crossed in front of her.

With a huffing sound she looked hard from Naruto's hair to her red T-shirt and rugged sandals. It was the standard orphanage clothing everyone wore. A red top, to represent they were in the Fire Nation, with the Konoha emblem on the back, with black simple pants and sandals.

The clothes weren't so bad, but since everyone in the orphanage had to wear them it screamed to everyone what you were; an orphan.

"Why do you do your hair like that? It's so childish." Anko drawled and grabbed one of Naruto's pigtails, studying the spiky strands. With a sudden pull she yanked Naruto's hair so hard she was forced forwards by her pigtail. Once she had her footing back the blonde glared up at Anko annoyed.

"They keep my hair out of my face, idiot. Let go of my hair!" She snapped and tried to grab at Anko's hand. Instead the older girl pulled harder, making it painful this time.
"Your hairdo is so lame; it makes you look like a crybaby. Are you a crybaby? Let's check." She said and started dragging Naruto forward by her hair.

All the kids looked frightfully on as Anko forced Naruto across the room towards the abandoned table she usually ate by.

"Let go." Naruto demanded and got so angry she growled the words at Anko. That seemed to both delight her and make her angry at the same time.

"Can't deal with a bit of pain can yah'? You're so pathetic, I am a kunoichi you know, it's basic to know how to deal with pain when you want to become a ninja. Look at you; are you going to cry now? Huh? Answer me crybaby!" She jeered and pulled so hard that some of Naruto's hair was ripped out.

"I'll show you pain, you bully!" Naruto shouted and with one push Anko was on the ground and Naruto on top of her. Her pigtail was finally free when Naruto punched the older girl straight in the jaw. In retaliation from Anko she got a kick to the stomach and a bite mark on her arm.

Around them the kids got to their feet, some shouting for Naruto to beat her up, other for them to cut it out. Naruto didn't bother to listen to what they were saying. Anko had managed to get a hold of her ear, and was twisting it painfully so she'd fallen backwards, and taking advantage of this Anko managed to get free.

Panting they got to their feet, Naruto wasn't sure if the other girl had enough yet, but got her answer when Anko suddenly did a pirouette with a kick. With a small grunt, Naruto caught her foot just as it made contact with her abdomen, and pushed her backwards into the wall. The blonde might be a head shorter then Anko, and her body might be reduced to a pitiful state, but she hadn't forgotten her old skills just yet.

She had to restrain her years of training, experience and instinct as a ninja from taking over. Her body couldn't handle all that yet. And this Anko was not the experienced and sadistic kunoichi she would later become.

With a sound of fury Anko pushed herself off the wall and came at her with another punch. Naruto managed to block it by wrapping her hand around the incoming fist and twisting it sideways. Her palm hurt like a bitch, Anko could clearly throw a punch, but she ignored the sting. The older girl was forced around, and Naruto twisted her arm up on Anko's back and forced her to lean forwards. As she was about to push her into the ground again, a voice bellowed so loud it broke through the commotion.

"What on earth is going on here? STOP IT THIS INSTANCE!" Shouted a woman, making Naruto and Anko freeze.

Madam May pushed herself through the crowd with her eyes fixed on Anko, who Naruto had hurriedly released.

"Mitarashi! Explain yourself!" She shouted and pointed threateningly at the girl with an angry expression.

Anko scowled and looked at the ground, a bruise was blooming by her jaw while she seemed to curse the floor with words even Naruto's good hearing couldn't catch.

For a moment, Naruto relished in not getting the blame. It was a refreshing change compared to when she'd grown up and was blamed for every single bad thing that happened in a mile's radius.
Anko looked up and opened her mouth to explain. "It was Naruto's fault." She said and looked angrily at the blond. Naruto tilted her head with an eyebrow raised while she tried to comb her hair back to its normal state.

"I do not believe you Mitarashi, you're a liar and this is hardly the first time you've gotten into a fight. Now tell me the truth Naruto dear." She said kindly and turned to Naruto who looked smugly back at Anko's furious expression.

"Madam May, I'm so sorry for the commotion. Anko here was helping me with ninja training. It looks like we went a bit too far though. I'm so very sorry madam." She explained and bowed.

For several seconds the meal room went deadly silent, but the best of all was Anko 's stunned expression. Her eyebrows were almost up by the hairline as Naruto continued talking. "We'll clean up the mess and we won't fight here in the meal room again. You see, the bad weather made us not want to go outside."

The woman stuttered as she looked from Anko's now composed face then to Naruto, and back again. She was obviously trying to see if this was a lie or not, but no one in the room admitted to anything to the contrary. Who knows, maybe Anko regularly threatened the kids to cooperate with her.

"I see… You are new here of course, Naruto-chan, but it is common sense not to fight inside, dear. Don't you ever do that again. As punishment you will be given wash up duty for a week. Now go to your rooms. You both have a two hour time-out, and if I see you do something like this again I will not be so lenient with you." She said briskly and put her hands on her waist and marched them out of the silent room.

At the door she turned to the other kids. "Please continue your meal, there's only fifteen minutes left, dears."

As Anko and Naruto were being escorted up the stairs to make sure they didn't try to get out of their punishment, Anko looked sideways at Naruto. Her face had gotten pretty swollen by the hits Naruto had gotten in, and it was very red turning purple. Naruto wondered what exactly Anko had done to her ear too; she couldn't really feel anything except for an intense thumping and dull numbing.

For a moment her angry eyes met Naruto's, and a small mischievous smile grew on her lips, before she hurriedly got the scowl back on her face. Naruto chuckled as they reached Anko's room.

"Since this is far from your first warning Mitarashi, you will get the whole day in time-out as punishment, and you will eat in the kitchen for dinner. Tomorrow you can resume normal activity. I won't stand for this sort of behaviour, do you hear me?" Madam May said sternly to the dark haired girl. Anko nodded, and with a last look at Naruto she was locked inside her room.

When Naruto walked down for breakfast the next morning she stayed a few steps behind her roommates. They were talking about boys and how Akiko had a crush on one of them; the boy who sat next to her during home-room or someone close to there. Naruto wasn't sure since she was trying to ignore them.

Akiko was a six year old kid, so Naruto found the whole thing very disturbing.

As they came into the meal room she suddenly felt someone grab her elbow forcibly, and looked startled up into Anko's determined face.

Maybe she wanted another fight? Naruto wouldn't mind another spar, but this time she wouldn't hold back. Anko seemed to be the type of person who didn't give up, and these random battles would get
annoying after a while.

"You're sitting with me today." She said firmly, and dragged Naruto after her while the rest looked on surprised.

Akiko sent Naruto a scared glance, but didn't interfere. "I think you mean; "Would you like to eat breakfast with me today oh' great lord?" I take better to flattery, Anko-san." Naruto replied and chuckled at the frown the dark haired girl sent her.

"Dream on, I was a little tired yesterday, but next time you won't stand a chance, crybaby." Anko retorted as they sat down by her empty table. Naruto looked at her with one eyebrow raised.

"Good, then I won't have to hold back so much either." She replied with a wide, foxy grin.

During breakfast Anko and Naruto started talking about everything from their intense dislike for mud cakes to the art of being a ninja. It was also confirmed that Naruto's first acquaintances were terrified of Anko, and Naruto had no objections to the sudden lack of tea party invitations for that afternoon.

"I just graduated from the Academy a couple of weeks ago. I passed the exam on my first try, many don't do that you know." Anko bragged while spooning up a mouthful of porridge drowned in sugar and jam.

Anko had done them the curtsey of scaring away two of the bigger boys who was sitting by the table she wanted. "It sucks you're so young Naru, since you're planning on becoming a kunoichi we could have been on the same team if you'd just been my age. Both of the two boys I was placed with failed the genin test and were sent back to the Academy. So I'm now an apprentice instead of a member of a team. My sensei is the Orochimaru of the Sannin." She gushed, sounding extremely proud.

"I'll say though, you have better moves then some of my classmates did back in the Academy. That kick still makes it hurt to lie on my back when I sleep. Wouldn't be surprised if they let you skip a year when you start. A boy in my class did that and graduated at eight. I'm eight too, but I'm an orphan so I was allowed to start a year early." She said while absent-mindedly running her fingers over the kunai she always carried around.

"I'll be awesome Anko. I might not like writing papers much, but I bet you I'll be able to jump up a class before two months, dattebayo!"

"Maybe you will, but no matter what I'll always kick your arse!" Exclaimed Anko excitedly.

"What? No way, I already kicked your arse once, and I'll do it again, dattebayo!" Said Naruto heatedly back.

"What do you mean with 'kicked my arse once?' I so won our fight!" Shouted Anko, now getting angry at the younger girl.

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

"Did not!" They both shouted back at each other.
"Did too! And I'll give you a demonstration to prove it, brat!" Said Anko, and the next moment they were rolling down the food hall while attempting to claw each other's eyes out.

Two minutes later, when Madam May tore them apart, she was so angry Naruto swore there was steam coming out of her ears. Not surprisingly, they got a week of extra dish wash duty, and they had to sit in separate rooms while eating dinner.

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! This chapter was beta'd by the great AnjoRemix! Thank you so much for the help even when your computer is down with virus!

Not much happens in this chapter, but I'm establishing the situation Naruto is in, and also the characters who'll be in the story later. This chapter focused on Anko, and some of the next ones will go through the other main characters. It will be a little slow at first, but I'm trying to get the story on the right track so please be patient with me.

Until next time!
Three days after the first fight in the food hall, Naruto arrived at the Academy at eight thirty in the morning while wondering why everyone was biting their nails. The confusion had been cleared up when a sweet but strict woman announced that a test would start in five minutes, before handing out documents for everyone to read and sign before the "exam" began.

After hurriedly reading the document Naruto realized she had to pass an entrance exam before she was allowed into the academy.

For the life of her, Naruto couldn't remember such a thing in her own time and a sense of uneasiness had crept up her spine.

Because they were doing the tests alphabetically she was the last to go since technically she didn't have a family name. It did not help with her nerves at all.

These days her chakra control was horrible and she wasn't sure what worked and what didn't. Naruto hadn't tested out all her techniques in her new body, so she was praying that the academy three jutsu wouldn't be part of this test. If she suddenly did the Kage Bunshin there would be a lot of questions.

Sage mode was out. She'd figured that out quickly and painfully while roaming the wild. Rasengan was also something she couldn't do, and she figured the same about most of her wind jutsu. Her chakra control was shot, and that was the reason she struggled with everything else. She couldn't even walk up walls anymore…

But this was an entrance exam, the criteria couldn't be that high, could it?

After half an hour of ominous thoughts of failing, she'd been offered a cool cup of water. Naruto had thanked the kind woman and downed the cup in one swallow.

When at last it was her turn - two and a half hours later - her hands were shaking when she entered the examination room.

She needn't have worried though, because it turned out that the test was anticlimactically easy. The chūnin inspector asked her to run at least ten laps around the academy yard, prove she could access her chakra, and be able to read and write. It had taken her fifteen minutes and the test was done with four others in the same room. They struggled a lot more than she had.

By the end of her test the sensei in charge gave her an approving clap on the shoulder and told her she passed with good margins, and then told to meet up for classes the next day. With nothing more to do she made her way back home to tell Anko the news.
The next day Naruto arrived at the academy ten minutes late, and had to sneak into the crowd of new students and parents listening to the Hokage's welcome speech. It was traditional for the village leader to say a few words to the newly accepted students on their first day of classes, and Naruto vaguely recalled he'd done the same in her own time. Still, Sarutobi Hiruzen had a way with people, and easily kept the entire courtyard of people glued to each word.

When the Hokage finished, to a boisterous cheer from parents, sensei and students alike, one of the chūnin stepped up and introduced himself. He was the principal, and started explaining what they could expect from the academy. A lot was obvious. It was to prepare and train future ninjas and all that entailed, but there was also some useful facts. Like how long each school day would last and how the class structure would evolve if and when students dropped out.

The first years were divided into six separate classes of twenty to twenty five students, but only four classes were expected to graduate.

To graduate would leave you with many possibilities. There was the possibility Naruto was aiming for, mainly to get onto a genin team on the jōnin track, but only the minority managed that. And the academy prepared students for several other fields too.

Many civilians with lower aspirations graduated from the academy, though they usually ended up in positions where they worked closely with higher ranked ninjas. Then there were those who went into the police or the Genin corp. Both of those stations were more combat oriented than several other fields. Like those who went into intel, research, healing or cryptography, who with a few exceptions were rarely required to fight.

There were many in-village jobs that valued specialised fields of knowledge above combat capabilities, though almost everyone in these positions needed the title of "ninja" to be qualified.

Naruto listened with half an ear as the principal called forth the chūnin waiting in the back and gestured towards the one standing closest. He was the sensei for class 1A, and the one next to him represented 1B. So it continued up to 1F which was taught by a short woman with bright green hair at the far end of the row.

The principal indicated for the sensei of 1A to come forwards and told the students to come over once their name was called.

Naruto watched as nervous children let go of their parent's hand and hurried up to the sensei once their name was called. The sensei was on the chubby side with a small goatee and made sure to give a calm but reassuring smile to each and every kid that was placed in his class.

Naruto shifted when the boy in front of her was called, and she realized it had been none other than Hagane Kotetsu, who she recognized as the chūnin gate guard in her old time. A couple of names later his old partner in crime was called too, and she spotted a terrified Kamizuki Izumo stumble up to the group of kids.

As this was only the first of six classes, and there were still a lot of students left, Naruto was surprised when she was listed as the last student of class 1A. Happy to be sorted out so fast she hurried up to her new classmates, ending up at the back of the crowd next to a Yamanaka boy with long strawberry blonde hair.

Their sensei made sure all of his students were still present, and then led them towards the academy building while the principal started calling up names for class 1B.

Twenty three kids were led into their new classroom, all of them twisting and turning around to get a
proper look. Most had never been inside the academy building, and a thrilled whisper had started in the middle of the group. Naruto stayed at the back of the group, not able to muster up the same excitement at being inside the building. She was well acquainted with it already.

Their sensei was capable enough, because without much trouble he'd herded them into a classroom and had everyone seated without much delay. "Welcome to the academy, you've now taken the first step on the path to become a ninja of Konohagakure. My name is Daikoku Funeno, the sensei of class 1A, and I'm looking forwards to getting to know you all." He clapped his hands together, his eyes sweeping over the crowd of fresh and wide eyed students.

"You now know my name, but few of you know each other. So we'll start with some fun activities today. There's no better way to make new friends, is there?"

Though Naruto couldn't say she was surprised, she had still been a little disappointed when she returned home to the orphanage. The day had included a lot of games and activities, perfect for a bunch of children who didn't know one another. They had started with making name tags for themselves, which included too much glitter and brightly coloured crayons. As not everyone was able to read and write proficiently yet, it took a while.

Naruto had decided to make the most of it, and had been praised for her brightly coloured orange tag showcasing her name in blue and green glitter with smaller red swirls decorating the edges. It was a hit with the kids, and most of her new classmates knew Naruto's name by lunchtime thanks to her flashy name tag.

After this session Funeno-sensei had them tidy up and march outside to stand in neat rows. They were told to pay attention as this would be something they'd repeat every day for the next week.

Naruto ended up standing between Izumi and the strawberry blonde Yamanaka as the sensei started showing the class the "routine".

The routine was a series of stretches, movements and stances that went along with a song for the kids to learn.

"I can run over a meadow, a mountain or a hill,

Jump over a pole, a fence and a windmill!

A ninja can crouch or creep or crawl,

but enemies might see, then we brawl"

Izumo was getting caught up in the song on Naruto's left, shouting the lyrics loudly as they did a chopping movements with their left arm, while the Yamanaka was going through the motions with the same automatic reactions of someone who'd done it a million times. As he was a clan kid, he very well could have.

Naruto had nearly forgotten about this, but as she stood in the middle of the group, her arms waving over her head mimicking an angry elephant, she recalled how they did this routine each morning back in her old time too. They learned the song first, which had one verse and a series of movements to go along with it. After a few tries all the kids were able to sing along and mimic the movements in the right order by watching their sensei, and Naruto knew that with time the song would gain more verses and the whole routine would grow longer. It was an efficient and fun way for the kids to get used to morning stretches and had the added bonus of helping with finger dexterity and coordination.

It was juvenile, but the children seemed to enjoy it, so Naruto did the best she could and followed
During the exercise Naruto watched as the kids mingled and made new friends, and despite not making an effort to do so, she was no exception. A couple of the girls struggled with the hand movements, and Naruto helped them without much thought. Apparently that was enough to make friends this time around, and for the rest of the session the two girls kept close and even sat with her at lunch.

The rest of the day went by in the same fashion, with the biggest difference being the change of location. They spent it outside with class 1C. The students were made to play a game, where the two sensei pit class against class in a more intricate version of ninja vs samurai, though the grown ups called it "tracking, infiltration and capture".

Naruto would be lying if she claimed it hadn't been fun. Though most of the kids had just met hours before, there was already a clear line drawn between the two classes. Naruto was swept away in the competitive atmosphere, and ended up rallying her classmates for a charge when the other team nearly kidnapped their blue stick. The speech had involved the Will of Fire and the importance of winning eternal glory to class 1A. Naruto had spotted the sensei on the side lines giving each other some interesting looks, their smiles badly concealed. By the end of the session Naruto's classmates were preening after winning with 9 to 5 points.

All in all Naruto knew it would be a long and tiresome wait before she graduated, but she could still make the best of a bad situation.

It would seem the orphanage wasn't half bad as long as no one knew you were a jinchūriki.

Back at the orphanage, when the blonde was not studying to regain her ninja license, Anko and Naruto became thick as thieves. At least when the older wasn't on duty.

The two had a great deal in common, but they chose to express it differently. While both were loud and outspoken the Anko was more vengeful than Naruto had ever been.

No one dared tease the girl. She was a talented kunoichi who would give back twice the amount she'd received. Though it appeared that Naruto had calmed her down. After they started hanging out together she didn't lash out nearly as much.

Anko was excited that Naruto had started the academy too, and to the dismay of Madam May she took it upon herself to teach the student what was necessary to pass the Academy as quickly as possible.

Naruto was very skilled for a six year old, and after they tried sparring again Anko was furious when she'd been beaten. Though once she'd calmed down it only made her determined to train even harder, while insisting the win was only because of beginner's luck and some unpredictable moves. So whenever she had a spare moment Anko headed out to her personal training spot in the forest.

What she hadn't foreseen was that Naruto would tag along no matter what Anko said. Even when she'd threaten to slit her throat Naruto had still tagged along as if she'd been given an applauding acceptance. The eight year old would never admit it, but she really enjoyed her friend who seemed both completely fearless and kind. It was refreshing to have someone who accepted her without conditions.

While at the academy, Naruto was bored to death. At first she'd been excited to get a break from Akiko and the crew, but the kids in class weren't really that different from her roommates. After
introductions and going through the curriculum, she could only do her best not to fall asleep.

But her tiredness wasn't just because of her sensei's high friendly voice and never ending speeches on their curriculum book; Ninja A to Z. Anko had also found out Naruto was not one to follow rules that carefully, and took advantage of her adventurous personality.

It had started almost instantaneously, but had escalated about two weeks after Naruto had started the academy. Anko hadn't been able to sleep, so she decided that they should break curfew and sneak out instead. It wasn't their first time, so she felt it was a good way to kill some time.

"Wake up, idiot." Whispered Anko and shook the younger girl. She had sneaked in through the window and was being quiet in an attempt to not wake the other occupants of room.

But Naruto was a heavy sleeper, and everyone in the room was awake by the time Naruto was groggily putting her sandals on. "Why do I have to come with you to steal food from the kitchen, Anko? I was dreaming about delicious ramen, dattebayoo." Moaned the blond with sleep thick in her voice.

"Because I'm older and wiser." She answered with a smirk. Anko then sent a glare at the other girls, her brown eyes darkening with the intensity of her gaze. "A word about this and I'll put a tiger in your room while you're all asleep." She threatened with a sneer playing on her mouth. Naruto shook her head and sent her roommates an apologetic look.

"Don't mind Anko, girls. She's really just a sweet girl underneath a hard facade. I'd kill the tiger before it got to any of you, dattebayo." Naruto promised in an attempt to make them look a little less terrified.

It didn't really work. The thought of Naruto slaying a large predator inside their dormitory seemed to make them just as afraid as the idea of Anko putting one there in the first place.

"Is that h-how Emi-san d-disappeared?" Stuttered Akiko who slept in the bottom of the bunk bed she shared with Naruto.

"Who?" Asked Naruto confused, looking back at Anko. The older girl seemed pissed off at those words and pointed accusingly to Naruto's roommate.

"I had nothing to do with that brat's disappearance. She ran away because she couldn't deal with this place. She wouldn't be the first!" She growled while letting her hands fall to her hips. A scowl plastered to her face as she stared Akiko down.

"I'm sure Anko didn't let a tiger eat your friend Akiko. Anko isn't like that." Naruto tried to soothe the poor girls in the room with a soft gentle tone but without any luck. Probably because the only licensed ninja in the room was bristling with killing intent due to the accusation.

Anko rolled her eyes and muttered "Softy." before grabbing Naruto's hand and marching them out through the window.

Once they'd climbed down to the ground Naruto headed for the back door of the kitchen. She'd barely taken three steps before she was yanked back by Anko. "We are not sneaking into the kitchen tonight, Naru. We'll take a stroll around the village instead! I want to see the ANBU station. Earlier today sensei told me it was located on the east side by the Hokage mountain."

And without waiting for Naruto to give her opinion about the matter, the blond was dragged along for another night time outing.
At first they had a lot of fun exploring the streets while trying to stay hidden from the few late night wanderers. Mostly drunk civilians, and in one case Jiraiya who had his arms around the shoulders of two scandalized clad women on his way into a small darkly lit house.

Naruto's brow wrinkled and she muttered "That pervert." before sneaking after Anko who didn't seem to take notice.

They hurried into a side street mostly used for garbage cans while the two orphans tried to avoid being seen. It was while they climbed over one of the fences that Naruto thought back to what the girls in her dormitory had said, more specifically about the missing girl. "Who is Emi?" She asked curiously, looking at Anko who was a few steps ahead of her.

The girl tensed and looked uncertainly back at Naruto, a few wrinkles forming between her brows. "Oh, just another stray. She was decent though, and she and I used to train together sometimes. Not that she wanted to be a ninja, but she knew a little about chakra. Taught me how to use chakra better and stuff like that." Anko explained stiffly. Naruto could finally conclude why the older girl had gotten so angry with her roommates earlier. They must have been friends.

"What happened?" Naruto asked after a moment silence.

Anko shrugged and looked down at the ground. "Well… She left. Emi was about the same age as I am now when she ran away. We used to talk about leaving together, the orphanage is such a shitty place to live in and we'd get carried away dreaming about family coming to fetch us. I guess she didn't bother to wait for me... I understand though, I wanted to be a ninja and wouldn't have come with her. But she could at least have told me a proper goodbye." The dark haired girl said sourly and faced Naruto.

"Unlike you and me they don't understand how difficult it is to survive on their own. I didn't back then either, and I got really angry because she left. Now I realize she must have gone from bad to worse, but the kids you share a room with don't. They also thought I'd done something to scare Emi away. As if! She was the only decent one there to begin with. After that I really couldn't be bothered with those brats at the orphanage anymore." Muttered Anko heatedly and scowled at the brick wall next to her.

"I see..." Naruto replied uncertainly. This explained much more of Anko's rudeness to everyone. She probably got angry after Emi left, making the other kids exclude her. And no one knew better than Naruto how difficult it could be to get back into the warmth. Kids could be downright cruel.

And the orphanage apparently also had runaways. It shouldn't really surprise her, since in Naruto's original time that had happened too. It was usually the older kids though. Teenagers who were jealous of those who lived with families, and got fed up when they realized that coming from an orphanage meant you had small job opportunities in the world.

Most had eventually returned, a lot thinner and more shamed than when they left. But outside the village the landscape was much more dangerous now than in the future. If they weren't killed by ninjas or starved to death, they were most likely branded as traitors of Konoha and denied their return.

The thought depressed Naruto more than she could express.

"Maybe she'll come back. One day when there's less tension between the villages she might be allowed home." Said Naruto. She didn't really believe it but felt a need to cheer Anko up.

The dark haired girl snorted, seeing through the lie as if it was written over Naruto's face, but smiled
anyway. "If she does I'll kick her ass." She answered thoughtfully. Naruto chuckled and they soon started looking for the hideout again.

Though two hours later they had yet to find the ANBU headquarters. The village was similar to the one Naruto had grown up in, but still different. They often went into dead end streets and they both were starting to grow sleepy. Walking all the way back would take ages, and Naruto longed for the days she could just jump across the whole village in five minutes without looking suspicious.

"Let's go back, Anko. We'll get caught by Madam May if we come home after five; she's always up so early, dattebayo!" Moaned Naruto while they sat down on a park bench the blonde remembered from her own time as well.

"You're such a drag, Naru! We'll probably find it if we just look for a little longer, it has to be here somewhere!" Exclaimed Anko, getting to her feet at once.

Naruto sighed but got up as well. "Maybe it's hidden. I mean it is ANBU. Maybe it's like a secret passage somewhere..."

Anko looked intrigued by the idea, because her head snapped towards Naruto with a glowing gleam in her eyes. "Maybe the entrance is in the Hokage's office!"

"Or maybe it's down by the village gates; I don't think the old man would appreciate so many wandering through his office." Retorted Naruto while crossing her arms behind her head.

"Maybe it's hidden by some sort of seal? Making it invisible to everyone but those who already knows it!" Suggested the older girl, growing more excited than ever.

"Or maybe the entrance is up one of the stone Hokage's nose!"

"Or maybe it's not safe for two lonely girls to be wandering the streets at three o'clock at night." Said a new voice from behind them.

Anko wheeled around at once, while Naruto froze. She recognized that voice and felt nausea seeping up her throat as she understood who it was.

"Orochimaru-sensei!" Exclaimed Anko in surprise. Naruto turned slowly and fought with all her might to keep her face expressionless. Orochimaru was tall, pale and gangly. His white skin and narrow yellow eyes made her uneasy, he was just so incredibly creepy.

"Anko, maybe you should get your young friend back home? You don't want to run into anyone unsavory here in the dark." He said with that wicked tone. Naruto couldn't help but snort at the irony. They couldn't possibly have run into anyone worse than the snake Sannin.

His eyes travelled from Anko's nervous face to Naruto's blank and tense one. Orochimaru's head tilted to one side as he took in the state of the two girls. The blond was wearing the orphanage attire. "Or maybe the orphanage is where you came from too." He said as an afterthought. "Why are you out so late?"

Anko peeked over at Naruto and was puzzled by how withdrawn she looked. Was she afraid? She never would have thought Naruto would be afraid of anything, far less some punishment for sneaking out. "We… Um.. Got lost, Orochimaru-sensei." She said and bowed low.

Naruto didn't.

"Ku, ku, ku. You should train more in the arts of deception if you want to become a kunoichi little
girl, you are very bad at it." Answered Orochimaru with a grin that showed all his sharp, white teeth. Anko felt a shiver run up her spine and Naruto started frowning.

"We'll head back now then, come Anko." Said Naruto with a clipped tone. She grabbed the older girl's hand and turned to walk in the opposite direction of the Sannin.

"If you're going back to the orphanage you're taking the wrong direction little girl." Said Orochimaru, while he scanned Naruto's figure as if searching for something. Anko stopped and forced the blond to halt with her.

"Sensei is right, Naru. We're walking towards the east residents right now." She said, still trying to figure out what was going on with the sudden turn of Naruto's mood.

"Why don't I walk you two home? It would be irresponsible of me to let you roam around Konoha without supervision." Offered Orochimaru with a light tone.

Naruto felt every alarm bell in her body go off like sirens. "No. We'll be perfectly able to get back on our own."

Orochimaru's smile seemed to grow wider before he almost hissed with glee. "I insissssst."

No matter how reluctant Naruto acted, Anko still grabbed the girl by her shoulder and forced her to come along. For a moment Naruto considered bolting, but she couldn't stomach the idea of acting like a scared little girl because the big nasty snake was jeering with her. Anko decided to ignore the mystery of Naruto's behavior, and started chatting excitedly to Orochimaru. Asking him what sort of missions they'd be doing next and his latest technique developments.

Orochimaru went along with it for five minutes, before deciding the conversation was very boring and cut the girl off by asking who the blonde was.

The two looked at Naruto who remained silent. She slowly realized she would have to say something, and very reluctantly added, "Naruto."

Orochimaru seemed to realize something and looked at the girl closely. "You're the girl Jiraiya brought back with him from his trip." He stated with renewed interest.

Naruto felt her palms turn sweaty. The snake Sannin showing interest in you was never a good sign. "Yes."

"I didn't know that, Naru! You know Jiraiya-sama!?" Anko asked, looking very excited about the idea. Naruto only nodded without glancing at either of them. They had finally reached the main street and were heading for One Legged Parade which would take them straight to the orphanage.

"Jiraiya told me a bit about you. He said he found you half dead after falling down a waterfall outside the boarders of Fire Country. You must have a very good healing ability to survive such a deadly drop." Said Orochimaru, measuring her up and down. His voice was becoming more and more animated while he spoke, and Naruto felt goosebumps rise on her arms.

"I wouldn't know. I was saved by Ero-sennin and the toads in time." She answered quickly. The snake Sannin's eyes widened at the nickname she used, and started chuckling. It was a high, eerie sound that did not speak of mirth, as much as tainted amusement.

Anko looked like she was trying very hard not to laugh as well.

"Ku, ku ku. Fitting nickname indeed, Naruto-chan, but you should learn to respect your elders."
Especially since you arrived here while the village is tense about strangers." He insisted with a
dangerous glint in his eyes.

Naruto just gave a small grunt in reply without once actually looking at the Sannin. "He also told me
you have a lot of chakra. That you could run very fast because of it, so your chakra coils must be
very advanced. You're what? Five years old?" The Sannin was speaking more to himself then to the
girls, which made it easier for Naruto to pretend he wasn't with them at all. She didn't bother
correcting him, but the blond did feel an urge to tell him exactly what she knew of his experiments.

It was then they heard a shout from behind, and all three turned around to see a young man coming
jogging towards them. He had spiky yellow hair, was tall and clothed in Konoha gear.

Naruto shrank back behind Anko without anyone but Orochimaru taking notice. All the while
feeling a lump in her throat at the sight of the newcomer. Her eyes were carefully scanning each step
the man took as he came closer, feeling the need to register the details of seeing him so... alive. The
blond could simultaneously feel an incredible joy and a longing ache inside her that was difficult to
control on her external features.

"Orochimaru-sama! I was sent to get you. Hokage-sama called for you." He said once he got closer
and then turned to the two girls. "What's going on?" He asked puzzled at seeing them out of bed at
this hour.

"I'm escorting these two curfew breakers back to the orphanage after I caught them in the park."
Answered Orochimaru monotonously, now looking from the newcomer to Naruto. They both had
the same strange coloring, bright yellow hair and tanned skin.

"I'm happy to take over, Orochimaru-sama. Hokage-sama was in a bit of a hurry to talk to you."
Offered the young man with a polite smile. Naruto wondered what else she could get herself into
while she was at it. Was Kakashi-sensei going to pop out from the next corner? Maybe her mum?

Orochimaru hesitated, but after a moment's silence nodded. Without a word of goodbye he
disappeared in a whirl of leaves the same way Naruto had seen Kakashi-sensei do numerous times
before.

The moment he disappeared Minato smiled brightly. "Nice to meet you girls! We should start
walking so we can get you two to bed. It's bad to skip sleep. You need all your strength while you're
growing up. I'm Namikaze Minato, what's your name?" He said and the atmosphere shifted
dramatically. From looming and ominous to fresh and relaxing.

Naruto couldn't stop the smile that rose on her face. "I'm Naruto and this is Anko." She said while
pointing from herself to the dark haired girl looking affronted all of a sudden.

"I can introduce myself, brat!" Shouted Anko who also seemed affected by the change in
atmosphere, her shoulders had sagged and they no longer wore the tension which had been in them
earlier. Minato laughed and ruffled up both their hair. Anko blushed while Naruto smiled broadly.

For a moment Minato was struck by how much the blonde girl looked like his girlfriend Kushina.
She had the same wide smile and the shape of her face reminded him of how she had looked during
their academy days, before she lost the baby fat.

Minato had already realized Naruto was the girl Jiraiya had talked his ears off about a few weeks ago
from matching her description. But he was still shocked by how much they resembled each other.
Jiraiya seemed to think she resembled himself, but Minato didn't really agree. They had similar
coloring, but to him she looked a lot like his girlfriend more than him. Odd...
"Hurry up now girls. They won't be happy when they realize you're missing. Let's pick up the pace shall we?" He said and felt his own smile broaden. The girl had an energy that was infectious. Again, just like Kushina.

Predictably Naruto was extremely tired the following day. Her chin was propped on her hand while she tried to keep her eyes open. It didn't help that her classmates were unusually excited that morning since it was their first Ninjutsu class. Naruto was hoping it would be helpful; she needed to gain better control. But if her previous experiences were anything to go by then it would be a class about accessing chakra, not controlling it.

She was right, and an hour later everyone except Naruto looked like they were suffering from various degrees of constipation. They were trying desperately to press out as much chakra as possible, something almost everyone failed at.

It was very strange, since Naruto had managed it on the first try both here in the past and in her own time. But her first time around she'd barely gotten acknowledged for that feat, but this time their sensei had exclaimed her delighted surprise and bragged loudly about how talented she was. Afterwards she made Naruto do a demonstration for all the other kids before being told she could take it easy since she was so 'advanced'.

Naruto had almost gaped in shock.

The blonde had taken the time trying to attach a leaf to her forehead instead. It was very difficult, and Naruto was now wearing a similar expression to the rest while she tried to focus her chakra.

Why was this so difficult? Why couldn't she do this when it had been so easy back in her own time?

Going back to her younger body had messed up her chakra coils big time. Naruto could have sworn it was even more difficult now than it had been before. She sat silently and tried to do her best, her frustration pushing aside her exhaustion while she focused on the leaf she'd found on the window sill.

From the front of the room their sensei was sending her approving glances, but Naruto ignored it. She'd already done this before, if anything Naruto was the worst student ever for no longer being able to do these things.

By the end of class Naruto had yet to get the thing to stick, and while the bell rang out for lunch she started looking for a quiet corner with good access of leaves to sit and continue her exercise.

The next day was similar as the one before, though thankfully Naruto felt less tired. Whenever they went on a nightly excursion Anko was just as tired as she herself was, so naturally they'd both slept like a baby on cold medicines all night through.

The difference to the day though, was her visitor waiting for her at the orphanage.

"Ero-sennin!" Naruto cried the moment she spotted him. Heart filled with the strange feeling of safety, she ran up to him and hugged him around the waist. It was a childish act which made Madam May scold her for lack of manners, but the blonde couldn't care less.

"You're here! I hoped you would come and visit me sooner!" Exclaimed Naruto while stepping away from the white haired man who was chuckling heartedly.

"I'm here now, brat. I had important research to complete first, but I came as soon as I was free."
Answered Jiraiya without noticing the grimace Naruto made at the word 'research.'

"Liar! You went to a brothel with two girls you paid for, dattebayo!" Stated Naruto loudly, making everyone in the common room look up. Some were confused, while the rest blushed and looked quickly away. Jiraiya himself spluttered.

"Wh-what are you saying, gaki?! How did you kn- I mean, I never did something like that! Don't shout those sorts of things in front of other kids. Come with me, brat!" Bellowed Jiraiya and grabbed her by the collar of her red T-shirt. Madam May looked scornfully after the Sannin who tried to wave innocently back without success.

Naruto half stumbled after the Toad Sage, partly because the grip Jiraiya had on her top forced the fabric half over her head as she was dragged outside of the garden.

He let go and Naruto found herself by the empty playground. "You saw me when you and that Mitarashi girl sneaked out, didn't you?! What were you doing in that district anyway?!! It's no place for little girls!" Shouted Jiraiya, probably making everyone inside hear him. Naruto sighed and rolled her eyes.

"We got lost while we looked for the ANBU station. That's why we went out in the first place, but we never found it." Answered Naruto, a little exasperated with her perverted godfather. Or should-have-been godfather.

"Oh." Replied Jiraiya, and followed up with a few reprimands for roaming the streets at night but not for actually breaking out of the orphanage. "And if you do that again, I'll introduce you to my third teammate Tsunade, one of my fellow legendary Sannin!" He finished heatedly.

Naruto felt her eyebrow rise at the last threat. Tsunade lecturing people about staying up too late when she herself was currently drinking her way through the Five Great Nations was probably not the best example for a little girl to have as a voice of reason.

"I get it, I get it old man! I won't try to find the ANBU station after midnight again. So what are we doing today, Ero-sennin!?!" Naruto asked quickly, trying to change the subject. Jiraiya saw right through her, but complied with her wish.

"Nothing special, I'm just checking up on how you're doing. Having to meet so many new people and socialize after being a vagrant for so long can't be easy, kid." Explained Jiraiya while he sat down next to the slide. Naruto went over to the swing opposite him and fell into it. Pushing gently backwards from the ground she started swinging back and forth.

"It's fine. The kids here are a little weird though. My roommates always wanted me to join them in these odd games that I didn't like much. But then Anko showed up and I really like her." Explained Naruto in a bored voice before adding as an afterthought, "But her sensei is pretty freaky."

Jiraiya laughed at her description of Orochimaru but didn't question it further. It was his old teammate who had told him about Naruto's late night adventure, and he guessed the girl had a problem with his stern attitude more than anything else. "That's good. Sensei tells me you're doing well at school too. I'm not surprised though, while clumsy and a little rough around the edges you'll find that a few instructions go a long way when training."

Naruto smiled and nodded, she then asked him what he'd been up to himself and Jiraiya complied. "Mostly I've stayed close to the village while checking up on how things are progressing with the other nations through some trusted sources." Explained Jiraiya with a heavy sigh. He looked long at Naruto without specifying anything. The blond felt her face soften at what he most likely would have
heard out there.

"Did you find out anything?" She asked instead, swinging a little higher as the wind breezed through her hair. She closed her eyes as the sun warmed her face, knowing it was one of the few pleasures that could always be counted on to show up in the future.

"Hm… Yes, but I'm not sure if you're allowed to know." He said and took out his notepad and quill.

"I see." Was all the blonde replied as she swung backwards, getting a good view of the graveled ground the swings were cemented into.

"What did you see Naruto, while travelling through the wilderness? You were up in no man's land between Iwa and Kumo, was there ever anyone you met that stood out? Anything I should know about?" Asked Jiraiya without looking at her, his nose very close to whatever he was writing. Naruto continued swinging.

"… It was far between everyone and when I did meet people they were usually in a hurry. I was too, so I didn't think that was strange. There were many ninja though, like that one guy who thought he'd ease my suffering by killing me. But I managed to get away, I hid and the man was obviously not a tracker." Explained Naruto without missing a beat.

"There were many hungry civilians. The only place that could guarantee food was in the wilderness, because no humans would willingly share what they had themselves. So I just walked around, hoping to meet someone who'd help me in one way or another. But I never saw any real fights. Everyone was coming from somewhere I'd never heard of, or going somewhere I couldn't go. Until you." Naruto told him while thinking back to the months of wandering and wondering.

It was a very beautiful afternoon and the sun was lower on the sky now that dinner time was upon them. The leaves on the trees surrounding the orphanage grounds were playing with the wind while the grass rustled in tune with the drafts.

"You were right to stick to the wilderness, Naruto. You would have gotten killed on sight if you came close to a ninja village. Konoha included. You were allowed access only on my insistence, it's a good thing I have an in with the Hokage, or it would have been the prison cells for you as it has been with so many other refugees seeking our aid." Stated Jiraiya while leaning back against the side of the slide. "We're in tense times, and few of the hidden villages have any trust for others. It's a horrible truth that the innocent are always the first to suffer." He said with a rough and stern sort of voice. The gentleness was gone as he said his last words on this topic.

"Neh', Ero-sennin. Will there be another war?" Asked Naruto carefully, her hands clutching the ropes holding up the plank of wood she was currently swinging back and forth on. Her speed had decreased while Jiraiya was speaking, and by now she was just swaying.

The toad sage looked remorsefully at Naruto when she asked this, knowing she was probably one of the few civilians who could clearly see the picture. Understood how this could occur.

"Probably. There hasn't been an announcement, but war rarely has forewarnings. Suddenly we've fought so many battles before we truly realize we're already in the state of war. In a way, you could say the war has already started, but no one has put a label on it yet." Explained Jiraiya heavily.

"There haven't been any large scale battles yet. But it's only a matter of time. Iwa is being very up front with us. Suna is trying to remain neutral but in their location they won't be allowed that in the long run. Kiri has their own agenda, which honestly doesn't make much sense, but they're active on missions which usually conflict with those of Konoha. To be honest, Kumo is the only nation which
is still a wild card. Who knows what they are thinking." Muttered Jiraiya and folded his hands in the same fashion as his legs.

Naruto stopped the swing by planting her feet on the ground and stood up. The action drew Jiraiya's attention and Naruto held out her fist. "I won't run. I won't hide or let others take my fight." She said in a low voice, her eyes drawn up towards the cloudless sky.

"I will protect Konoha and my precious people no matter what happens to me. I know I just came to this village, and that to everyone else I'm just a stranger from nowhere. But this is already my home and I swear on my ninja way that I will help Konoha at any cost. The same way it has saved me. Who knows? If we work hard enough then maybe one day all the nations will be true allies. Even if it doesn't happen in my own life, that's a goal I would give everything to reach, dattebayo." Stated Naruto with absolute certainty and determination latched onto each word she spoke.

Jiraiya had gone very still. His chest was barely moving from his slow breathing. It was as if he was trying to place her in his own head. Who was she? Where did she come from? Naruto could only guess where he ended up, but it couldn't be too bad.

"My godfather once said he'd like to create a word of harmony and peace, and if he couldn't find the solution then he'd leave it to me. Well, he's not with me the way he was back then, so it's my task now. When I get older I'll make a change for the better, I'll find a solution no matter what. That's a promise of a lifetime." She promised with a burning conviction Jiraiya had only seen in the faces of seasoned ninjas. Her fist still outstretched towards the setting sun like she was fist bumping the burning star itself.

Who knew, maybe she was.

She was a strange mix, this girl. He had a habit of comparing her to his old students, but had yet to find out who she resembled more. She was a girl like Konan, she looked like Minato, and her personality reminded him of Yahiko while her conviction was very close to Nagato's. An odd mix indeed.

Jiraiya stood up too, blocking out the sun as his shadow was cast over Naruto's small figure. He was smiling warmly, all teeth showing in a very encouraging way. He raised his own fist and touched it with hers. "Then we understand each other perfectly, Naruto." Was the only thing he said while Naruto smiled brightly back.

He was still her same old Jiraiya, just a little less wise one.

"I thought I might find you here, what are you doing?"

Naruto opened one eye and glanced over to where Anko stood together with a boy looking at her curiously. It had to be an odd sight after all. Naruto was hanging from a branch like a monkey with her hands and feet.

It has been three months since she started the Academy. While she had an easy time with most of her lectures, mostly thanks to Anko's insistent tutoring/torturing, she still struggled with chakra control. It had become a habit to head to the forest after classes and continue practicing.

"What are you doing?" Anko repeated uncertainly with one eyebrow arched. Taking in how Naruto seemed to be using up a lot of chakra where she hung upside down by her hands and feet from the branch.

"Trying to work up my chakra control. I can't get it right in my feet alone, so I'm using both my
hands and feet to attach myself to the tree. Soon I'll be able to let my hands go and then I'll have it
down." She said and winked back at Anko who slowly nodded. The boy looked surprised from
Naruto to Anko and then back again.

"Who's that?" he asked and gestured towards the blond.

Anko looked over at the boy and rolled her eyes. "This is Naruto. She lives at the orphanage like I
do and started the academy a few months ago. But her chakra control is really bad." She said and
smiled back at Naruto. "Come down here and introduce yourself blondie, I brought us a training
partner."

While Naruto let go and fell down she twisted midair and landed softly on her feet. As the jinchūriki
straightened up she extended her hand with a wide grin. "Nice to meet yah'! I'm Naruto, who're
you?" She exclaimed and shook the boy's hand vigorously.

The familiar looking boy chuckled at her enthusiasm. "Nice to meet you Naruto-chan, I'm Aoba."

Naruto realized at once who this was and why he seemed so familiar. It was the kid version of the
man who'd accompanied her to Genbu with Captain Yamato and bushier brow sensei. Again she
was struck by how small everyone looked. Aoba still had the same dark glasses though.

"Nice to meet yah' Aoba, glad you could join us, dattebayo!" She said happily and abruptly turned
back to the tree and started climbing it on all four again.

"Um… She seems… dedicated." Aoba said sheepishly and looked back at Anko. The dark haired
girl shrugged and took out her kunai.

"Wanna spar? I haven't had any decent opponents since Hatake graduated. Oh, but I forget who I'm
talking to. You're what? Number seven on the ranking aren't you?" Taunted Anko and looked
haughtily at Aoba.

The boy bristled at once and pointed accusingly at her. "Hey I'm strong! I just get so bored in the
academy!"

"All the more reason to let your energy out during spars, I'd say. Come on little boy, are you less
bored now? Or do you need to play ninja before you can fight decently?"

Needless to say, the two Genin were full out fighting instead of sparring within a minute.

Naruto ignored them while she focused on her tree climbing. She'd already blown apart a few trees
because she pushed too much chakra through which tears up the bark. In one memorable
coincidence, she had actually cut through the tree completely.

The blond had to use so little chakra it was tiring. She had to hold back the rest and only let out a
little bit. It was the holding back that felt draining to her. Naruto suspected that she'd travelled back in
time with her old chakra reserves, but without her old body to control it.

She was still trying to forgive the fox for putting her in this mess, and wondered what had happened
to the rest of her friends. Maybe the future had simply been erased? Or maybe they had to face the
fourth ninja war without her... Both options made her depressed.

But at heart Naruto was still an optimist and believed she could make a difference now. Maybe she
could get rid of some Akatsuki members right away? Maybe she could convince Nagato to leave the
Akatsuki ahead of time, before he made all those mistakes? She wasn't sure where to start, but
Naruto wasn't going to let all those people die a second time. Especially not Jiraiya.
"Oh, Naru. I forgot, but Madam May was looking for you. She said something about an academy instructor. I didn't listen, but I was to tell you to come back to the orphanage right away." Anko said while keeping Aoba in a choke hold so tight the boy was turning blue. "You didn't set up a prank at the academy did you? I told you to not do that, you'll never be allowed to skip a year if you do! They'll see it as immaturity, so they'll keep you there so you can 'grow up.'" She added before releasing a gasping Aoba.

"I did no such thing, dattebayo!" Cried Naruto, and because of her sudden annoyance she lost control and fell abruptly down from her branch which exploded in the process.

"What else could it be? Maybe that boy Izumo framed you for something, I knew there was something off about him." Muttered Anko angrily while puffing out her chest.

Naruto rolled her eyes. She was certain the only problem with Izumo was that Naruto had talked about him to Anko. Something that had made the girl jealous because she was afraid Naruto would start hanging out with him instead of Anko. It had been easy to read Anko's very pissed off features.

"It probably isn't that, Anko. I'll go now, see you at dinner! And nice to meet you too Aoba. Next time you should go for Anko's stomach, she's really ticklish there."

At the sound of indignation from the older girl, Naruto laughed loudly before running back to the orphanage.

"Early graduation?" Asked Naruto surprised.

"Well, yes... In a way. You're allowed to jump up a year since you can already do the things they're teaching you. Although you cannot take the final exam yet since you have to be there for at least a year. You also need top grades in everything including history and writing, which you do not currently have. But they seem to think you're bored in class and will do better with children closer to your skill level, Naruto-chan." Madam May explained as she looked worriedly back at Naruto.

"Already? I mean, I had hoped I'll be able to skip second year or third, but most of my first year? That's... Unexpected." Naruto said while scratching her chin uncertainly.

It was indeed a little strange. The only ones who had ever been allowed to skip were those who exceeded in all fields. Including history and writing where Naruto only had average grades. She also knew for a fact that they usually waited longer than three months before allowing you to move up. At least a year of evaluating your skills, and then you can be moved up. That was what Naruto had been expecting but it seemed she was already moving forward.

Not that she was complaining, second year students did more chakra control and sparring then first years. In fact, the only physical activity they had during first year was working up stamina and learning the basic stands. There were no sparring or weapon practices at all. But instead they worked up your base physical condition to the level a ninja requires at an early age. Basically they were conditioning the young before starting the real stuff because of the possibility of war...

"That's great! How do I accept this?" Naruto asked while folding her arms behind her head and looking curiously up at Madam May. She really didn't need to think about it thoroughly before accepting.

"Normally you need a parent or guardian to sign an acceptance letter to move up, but since you have neither you fall under the civilian council who has already agreed to this. You also need the signature from a shinobi or kunoichi of chūnin or jōnin rank, which you also have, and then you yourself have
to sign together with your sensei and the Hokage. You have everything but your own signature
signed currently and ready to go, dear." She explained carefully and handed Naruto a couple of
documents titled: 'Application for Grade Transfer.'

She stared wide eyed down at the neatly written document quickly, swallowing thickly when she
saw all the signatures. She wasn't even sure who all these people were. She recognized 'Sarutobi
Hiruzen', and her sensei from the Academy, but who from the council and who the ninja's signature
was, she didn't know.

"So what? I just meet up and hand this in tomorrow morning?" Asked Naruto as she scratched her
chin confused.

"Hmm… It seems that way doesn't it? You just need to sign, dear." Answered Madam May with a
sad smile before she continued cleaning the table she'd been working on before Naruto came in.

"This is really odd, dattebayo." She stated and sat down on the couch in the corner of the room while
Madam May was cleaning up after a painting class since there were at least a dozen colorful new
stains on the floor and walls since this morning.

The old woman turned back towards Naruto and tilted her head with a kind smile on her wrinkly
features. "The ninja arts aren't for everyone, Naruto-chan. There is no shame in quitting, dear." She
told her soothingly, misinterpreting Naruto's frustration.

She shook her head furiously. "No, I don't mean it like that, it's just so… strange. I've got no idea
who some of the people who signed are. Don't they need to have seen you before agreeing to these
kinds of things? It's not like I've had the chance to really prove myself at the academy either, it's
really boring actually. All we did today was listen to history and play ninja. I hoped… I guess I
hoped it would be more challenging, but I guess I got my wish now, didn't I? Anko told me the
academy curriculum had been changed into war time level, which means more intense lectures. But I
could have slept all class and I wouldn't have missed anything I didn't already know. And now…
Suddenly I've done enough to skip a year?" Naruto replied and leaned back into the cushions.

The elderly woman smiled uncertainly. It was obvious that she disliked the occupation of being a
ninja for the village. While she had originally seemed to like Naruto, her friendship with Anko and
new education was making her keep her distance these days.

"Not all ninjas are bad, Madam May." Naruto said and smiled reassuringly. Madam May only
nodded and continued washing the table. "Ninjas are those who protect the village, they give their
time and lives to a greater cause." The blond explained while watching as the woman stiffened.

"I know there are decent ninjas around, Naruto-chan. I just don't like the fact that children who are
not even old enough to write properly are being sent to the front lines to die." She replied with a
worried glance her way.

The jinchūriki felt suddenly very foolish. She had always assumed Madam May didn't understand,
but obviously she knew more then she let show to the outside world. And what front lines?

"I've watched you and Mitarashi train the last few weeks, and now this happened. According to
everything I've heard so far you are a very gifted girl who will undoubtedly make a perfect kunoichi
with some time. But the talented ones are always the ones pushed too hard and too soon. You've
barely started the academy and are already moving up the ranks. And just a few hours ago the Third
Ninja War was announced. I'm not enjoying the odds Naruto-chan. Soon you and Mitarashi will be
out there too." With a sad sigh she continued working while Naruto pondered about her words.
The Third War had finally started? She had been expecting it, and she'd been waiting every day to hear it officially, but it was still a small shock to have it confirmed. That explained why their sensei was giving such an extensive lecture on the second war these days. Preparation for what they themselves would probably be doing soon.

It seemed Madam May understood very well the downside and risks of Naruto's occupation, and she was a very empathetic woman. The blond smiled weakly to the back of the woman cleaning the table with a bit more vigor than necessary. There was a feeling of thankfulness towards Madam May blooming inside Naruto.

The fact that the woman cared enough to speak her mind was encouraging and comforting. Because of those sentences Naruto felt like she mattered. It was more than enough to give the woman a place in her heart.

Anko was walking Naruto to her first day as a second year student at the academy. After hearing what had happened she'd been ecstatic before turning predictably jealous. In the end she'd settled on acceptance, and claimed it was all thanks to her own amazing skills as a sensei that Naruto was allowed to skip a year.

Reluctantly Naruto let Anko keep that opinion. It was easier to deal with that way.

Naruto was pretty excited to start, but still felt nervous about how it would turn out. "You'll kick their arse, Naru! I've been instructing you and I say you'll have a breeze with second year too. As long as you can refrain from pulling pranks on the sensei of course." Explained Anko.

For someone who was such a troublemaker at home, Anko was surprisingly strict when it came to anything involving the ninja arts. She was a goody two shoes both as a Genin and back when she'd been an academy student. The older girl only let her wild side out whenever she was at the orphanage instead.

"Of course I will, dattebayo!" Naruto exclaimed more of habit now.

Anko giggled as she saw though the girl's emotions. "You better, I'm going to kick your arse if you don't."

The Academy was buzzing with children walking towards their classes. The blond spotted a few of her old classmates chatting happily to one another. A few waved to her, so Naruto waved back but didn't follow. She wasn't going to join them anymore after all.

Anko turned to Naruto just as they reached the gates to the academy grounds and smiled brightly. "See yah' at home, brat. Give them hell from me." Naruto returned the smile before she waved the older girl off and headed for building 4. It was where her new classroom was located.

Naruto looked eagerly around, wondering if she would recognize someone in her new class. Coming into the new classroom a few people turned around curiously. None recognizing her, and quickly dismissing her as a stray on her way to class. They were all surprised when she walked further into the room and up to the sensei. "Hi, I'm Naruto and I've been allowed to transfer grade." She said uncertainly and gave her new sensei the documents clutched tightly in her hands.

The man smiled fleetingly and took the documents. "Ah, yes. They told me about this, welcome to class 2B, Naruto-chan. Please take a seat. There's one available on row three." He explained while still looking through the documents. He absently pointed Naruto in the direction of her seat.

While walking back up the isle most of the students had found their seat and was watching at her
questionably. Some whispering and a few girls snickering. Probably at her orphanage attire.

When she'd found her seat and waited for class to start, Naruto entertained herself by trying to recognize the kids. Glancing curiously around while ignoring the ones staring back.

So far this class had no one sticking out. That was until she noticed the boy on the front row to the far left. The blonde was disturbed when she recognized a very young Mizuki sitting on the front row.

He was tiny and his short white hair hang flat against his head because of a green bandanna.

That was the man who became her academy sensei before trying to set her up and kill her. Naruto pointedly turned in a different direction to avoid looking at him.

She took notice of a few people who had to belong to some of the clans. There was a Nara and Aburame sitting next to one another, both had their clan emblem sown onto their clothing and the blonde recognized them immediately. She also noticed a chubby girl that might belong to the Akimichi clan. She had those swirling markings on her cheeks and was eating cookies before class officially started.

Her gaze continued onwards. She saw a black haired boy before going to the row below and with a jolt recognized Umino Iruka. He was looking right back at her, but quickly turned away when he was discovered staring. He acted as if he was very interested in the cover of his text book instead.

It had to be Iruka, not many had such tanned skin, brown hair in a ponytail and a scar over their nose.

It was amazing how much his presence soothed her, she felt herself grow relaxed and she leaned back in her seat while wondering how best to befriend him.

Their sensei started calling out names, and Naruto found herself already losing interest, only noticing when Iruka and Mizuki was called up. Her new sensei had a very boring voice which she just knew would eventually annoy the hell out of her.

Naruto's excitement withered further once class actually started. While it was more advanced than the first year classes had been, it was still all stuff she already knew. As predicted the sensei was incredibly dull, and she barely managed to stay awake while he droned on.

The blonde used the time to stare out the window and was never called for doing so. The sensei probably wanted to be nice to her on the first day, but the truth was that this was one of those few topics she actually remembered. It was about the Second Hokage and how he died after all.

The next lesson before lunch was a group activity. The sensei seemed to think this was an excellent opportunity for a round of introductions so Naruto would have a chance to get to know people. Though the blond wasn't sure if it she appreciated having to give up practice time for that. It would've been better if they had missed a little of the history lesson instead.

They sat in a circle outside while their sensei taught them the importance of knowing your fellow comrades. He continued by telling in thorough detail how they would take this opportunity to introduce themselves to Naruto and at the same time work on goals and teamwork. What that meant Naruto wasn't sure, but she was starting to feel like a deer in the headlight from all the times her name had popped up in his speech.

"Remember everyone, that Konoha is built on the foundation of protection. When you become ninjas you will work alongside your comrades. Never forget that." He said sternly and gestured to Mizuki.
sitting next to him.

"You go first. Tell us who you are so Naruto-chan can learn who her classmate is. Afterwards I want you to tell me why you want to become a ninja too. First step to reaching your goal is acknowledging it." Their sensei said kindly.

The boy was sitting crossed legged and was fiddling with his green bandanna in his hand.

"My name is Mizuki, I want to become a shinobi so I'll be strong like the jōnin." He said with a big smile on his face. He looked so innocent, and Naruto was torn in two about snorting out loud at his explanation or just ignoring it.

Their sensei looked at the kid after Mizuki, the Akimichi girl Naruto had noticed earlier in class who was only half paying attention. "Your turn." He said pointedly. She looked up slowly and thought hard about what she was going to say. A small blush bloomed on her chubby cheeks while her brown spiky hair was caught in the gently breeze.

"My name is Akimichi Chou. I want to learn my clan techniques, and help my family. Em… That's why I want to become a kunoichi." She murmured with a shy smile. It seemed that was sufficient too, since they continued to the next person. Who happened to be Iruka. He grinned sheepishly while straightening out his T-shirt when he spoke.

"I'm Umino Iruka, I want to become a shinobi so I'll be as strong as my parents and be able to help them on missions." He said uncertainly, looking over at their sensei in case he had said something wrong. He only got a smile in return before the man looked at the student on his right so the introductions could continue.

The kids seemed to understand the drill by now, and each student introduced themselves and reasons for becoming a ninja. Naruto filed down their names until the introductions started coming close to her.

The one before herself was the Nara boy. He was the same height as Naruto with black hair tied in a limp ponytail at the back of his head. He wore dark green marks under his eyes, almost similar to the ones Gaara had except not as thick, maybe the Nara didn't sleep well either. Oh, the irony...

"I'm Nara Ensui… I'm becoming a shinobi because…?" He trailed off and scratched the back of his head, seemingly trying to think of a reason to become a shinobi while a few of the kids snickered.

"I guess… Since I have to learn the clan techniques…?" He said and shrugged. Naruto wanted to laugh herself, there was absolutely no doubt that he was related to Shikamaru, or would be at least.

Everyone looked to their newest classmate and Naruto filed down their names until the introductions started coming close to her.

"I'm Uchiha Shisui, and I want to become a shinobi so I can help my clan and Konoha in the war." He said and smiled genuinely.

She was surprised he was an Uchiha, but now that she knew Naruto thought she should have
realized that already. He had many of the Uchiha traits, even if a few of the details were off. His hair was more unruly than what she associated with the Uchiha clan, his eyes bigger but most of all the boy seemed approachable. So it was hard to put him in the same category to the likes of Itachi and Sasuke. Not to mention the masked man Madara.

The girl next to Shisui started talking the moment the Uchiha boy was finished. She was a girl named Hitomi with sandy brown hair and green eyes. Meanwhile Naruto was trying desperately to remember when and where she'd heard the name Uchiha Shisui, but came up blank.

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!

As I've mentioned before, there will be a little AU in this story. Like with ages. A few has pointed out that Minato is too old, and I thank you for that since I honestly didn't have any idea what Minato and Kushina's age was.

Kakashi look mostly the same when Naruto was twelve as he was in the epilogue, so telling how old someone is by the appearance of their character is simply impossible and after reading Naruto wiki I still had yet to find out their ages, so I just put in something that I thought was reasonable. Minato making Hokage at 22/23 seemed a little out there to be honest…. But I still won't change it back.

I'm pretty sure Shisui is too old in this story too, but it's needed for the plot. Not that we've ever heard exactly how old he is, all we know is that he's older than Itachi and
younger than Kakashi… Most likely? When Itachi is a first year academy student he calls Shisui a jōnin. So clearly there has to be a few years between them.

Until next time.
Chapter Four – Bark Like a Dog

_Uzumaki Naruto: "I bet you're dying to know my name!"
Gaara: "I couldn't care less."

With his hands firmly planted in his pockets, Shisui watched their academy sensei go through the basics of Shuriken throwing. It was a sunny day in early February, but the wind was so cold he was wearing gloves and a scarf to keep out the chill. Not that they were very effective against the wind, but every little layer helped.

He was not the best clad kid, but he hadn't expected to be outside for this long. Though he was far from the worst dressed child in his class, that was for sure.

Their sensei was a short man with retreating black hair. He was one of those people who talks slowly and clearly when trying to explain something to you. Making each and every sentence he uttered sound extremely dreary. It was always a feat to remember the start of his sentence by the time he came to the end of it. That was how much he dragged out the words. It was also why Shisui was currently finding the whole lecture to be extremely boring.

Next to him was Nara Ensui, his closest friend in the class. He looked close to dropping asleep where he stood, and was only paying a slither of attention because he'd get scolded if he didn't.

Shisui's eyes wandered over the group of children, his classmates, and rested a moment on Umino Iruka and Naruto who stood opposite him in the crowd. The sunny girl probably took the prize for worst clad kid in the class. She was only wearing her normal orphanage attire and a thin jacket. Shisui wondered how she wasn't shivering from the cold, or maybe she was freezing but hid it well.

Iruka and Naruto had been very good friends lately, and spent most of the time in class sending notes secretly. He was amazed they hadn't been caught yet, it was truly a testament to how sneaky they could be. As far as Shisui knew they had bonded over their love of ramen, at least that was the only subject he'd ever overheard them talk about. Every day.

Naruto sat on the same row as him in class, just on the other side of the classroom while Iruka sat on the row in front of him. It caused him to be the unwilling witness many of their more obvious attempts at conversing while their sensei talked about the five affinities.

Once, Naruto had used one of Ensui's senbons to send a message over to Iruka. Her aim had been off, and it had almost stabbed Shisui in the hand during its sail. He was pretty sure she'd been aiming at the wall, but senbon throwing was obviously not her strong suit. He'd told her as much too after class, and she'd bashfully apologized. It was the first time he realized just how difficult it was to stay mad at Naruto. She was just so sweet it felt like he was scolding a kitten.

Iruka could be just as mischievous as his blonde friend, but he was less of a risk taker. Shisui thought he was an alright guy. He was very normal, neither brilliant nor bad at anything. Naruto however... She was very good, beyond average strong. Had it not been for her complete lack of concentration in lectures she'd be top of the year. It was mysterious yet curiously understandable how she'd managed
to skip first year with such a short attention span.

"Shisui-kun, you'll go first." Said their sensei suddenly, and the dark haired boy looked away from the duo whispering on the other side of the ring.

"Okay, sensei." He replied and walked over to the Shuriken bag. It was the first time he'd ever been allowed to touch one of these. His father Kagami would never let him close to them so he was very excited to finally do this.

Shisui was excited but at the same time very nervous that he had to go first, what if he completely messed up? The Shuriken felt different in his hand, heavier and smoother, so his aim would probably be off since he was so used to the wooden Shuriken at home.

"Alright, just copy my wrist movement and try your best. No one expects you to be an expert at this yet." Their sensei said reassuringly. It helped... but still, Shisui felt a lot of pressure since he was the first to go.

Focusing on the poles they were supposed to hit and the circles painted on the bark, he tried to slow his pulse. It was drumming in his ears while he tried to get the feel of the Shuriken. It wasn't that heavy, but the steel was cold and felt very solid. Not at all like the wooden ones he had at home.

He shot forward and the Shuriken hit the ring furthest out. Their sensei clapped and smiled eagerly at him. "Good job, Shisui-kun! That was an excellent throw; did you see the way he held his hand? That is the correct way to aim everyone. Try to copy it, and soon you all will be able to hit the target." He told the class and let Shisui try two more times. He missed the second one, but not by much, and the third one landed on a circle closer to the middle than the first.

After him Ensui was called forwards. As they passed each other the Nara smiled at him and gave him the thumbs up while Shisui chuckled.

Ensui didn't get his first shot in the circle, and got two more tries without success. It continued like this for eight more students, and Shisui was feeling more and more confident about his results until it was Naruto's turn. The blonde jogged onto the stand and picked out two Shuriken and stood straight towards the poles. She raised a Shuriken with her right hand while twisting her torso slightly, her eyes fixed on the target.

Shisui was staring intently at her stance and technique. It looked right but the girl wasn't throwing, maybe she was nervous?

Their sensei was about to speak up when she threw the Shuriken quickly with precision. The metal twirled through the air and hit the second closest ring, one further in then Shisui had managed.

His fists clenched while Naruto looked very frustrated. She picked up a second one and threw this one even faster than the first. It landed almost on top of the first one and the third followed soon after, still in the same ring but higher up.

The girl looked hard at the post while Iruka cheered from the sideline. Shisui had the impression she was disappointed though. Her eyes were fixed on her work and her jaw was set. With a sigh and a frustrated grin she left the throwing spot so Iruka could have his turn.

Shisui met her eyes as she found her place back in the ring of children. Smiling he gave her a thumb up. She'd done a good job and really shouldn't be disappointed. He was also curious about how she'd learned it. Maybe he would ask her later.

It was also odd that she felt bad about her skills. She'd done better then everyone so far. Naruto
smiled back at him and gave him a thumb up in return.

Ensui grumbled and put his weight on one foot while folding his hands behind his head. "Naruto-chan is so talented. I heard she already had training." He whispered while Iruka failed to hit a single ring on all three attempts. His friend however was cheering loudly for him on the sideline. Naruto sure had volume when she wanted to.

"Well... Many have had training already. I mean, my clan has been training me for years already, and they expect me to work hard. Hasn't yours?" Shisui asked quizzically. Ensui shrugged and tilted his head while Mizuki was the third person to hit the pole. He hit the fifth ring just like Shisui had managed too in his first round, but missed the other two attempts.

"I guess they have." He said bored while Shisui chuckled at his friend.

A few days later Shisui was walking down the street alongside Mikoto who was carrying Itachi securely in her arms. He was four months old now and was already bigger than Shisui remembered him the last time he saw the baby.

Fugaku and his father were working at the police station today, so again the academy student was left with Mikoto for the afternoon. Not that he minded much, but the baby wasn't really much fun anymore. All he did was eat, sleep and poop as far as Shisui could see.

He had heard his aunt say that Itachi was a very good baby who hardly ever cried. But Shisui hadn't been around many babies, so he couldn't be sure if that was true.

"Kushina!" Cried Mikoto suddenly, and Shisui glanced up to see a woman with the longest and straightest hair he'd ever seen stop and look towards them. It was also very, very red. The woman grinned widely and started a quick pace towards them.

"Mikoto! Oh, my! Is this your baby?" Cooed 'Kushina' as she came up to them. Crouching slightly she stroked Itachi gently with the tip of her finger over his cheek. "I heard you had a boy, he is precious." Kushina added and beamed at Mikoto.

His aunt radiated a quiet pride and nodded. "We named him Itachi and he's four months now. It's good to see you around the village again, Kushina. You've been out of Konoha so much lately I hardly remember the last time I talked to you."

The red haired woman grinned sheepishly and waved her hand. "Oh, you know how busy everything is because of the war. They are slave drivers up in that office I swear. Still, I'm a Konoha kunoichi so it's my duty, I won't complain about being needed, dattebane."

Mikoto chuckled and she nodded with an amused smile. Shisui was getting very bored with their conversation so he found a stray cat to stare at while women did what women do. Why did all females have to be so chatty? And he was always being ignored while they talked about stuff he didn't know much about.

"There's nothing that frightens you is there, Kushina?" His aunt asked while Kushina straightened up proudly.

"Those Iwa ninja can just try it! And if Kumo gets involved as is rumored, I'll have a field day! I have some unfinished business with them, dattebane!" She exclaimed while still smiling. Shisui had never seen anyone smile with their teeth and still be able to talk. His aunt could be happy and laugh, but most of his family and cousins were more calm compared to this woman. In fact Shisui suspected most of the human race was more calm than this woman.
Well, his cousin Obito was one of the contenders, and maybe-

"NARUTO!" Cried suddenly a shrill voice from behind him. Shisui turned immediately with a start. Bursting out from a street corner came the blond girl from his class running past them, escaping from an older girl who threw a kunai after her.

"Oh, my!" Cried Mikoto scandalized by the violence.

"Naruto-chan?" Wondered Shisui aloud, and without a second thought he ran after them. He heard his aunt call after him but the young Uchiha was already on a mission. He'd once claimed he would protect the village, and that included his classmate.

"Oy! Stop it! Why are you attacking Naruto-chan?!" Shouted Shisui, running as hard as he could. The dark haired girl was definitely a kunoichi though. She was so fast Shisui couldn't dream of keeping up. Naruto however didn't show any sign of exhaustion, and though the scary girl was gaining on her while ignoring Shisui's question, she still managed to keep a distance.

He saw Naruto jump up onto the roof of a dango shop with her attacker right on her heel, but the Uchiha wasn't even going to attempt getting up there. So he ran around instead, but before he was half way around he heard a loud splash.

Coming around the corner he watched Naruto stand there, laughing her arse off at her pursuer who was neck deep in a barrel of water. At least Shisui hoped it was water… The consistence looked a bit off.

"You are so dead, Naru!" The girl screamed and struggled to get out. She slipped as she tried to get a hold of the edge, and fell down again. The barrel was taller than her.

"Are you alright, Naruto-chan?" Asked Shisui uncertainly, his classmate didn't appear very scared at all, more like she was having the time of her life.

"Shisui!" Exclaimed Naruto and ran up to him. "No worry, Anko is just being her stubborn self." She answered and grabbed his hand. "Quick! We need to leave before she gets out of there, dattebyo." And then she dragged him along with her.

It was the most absurd situation he'd ever been in, because the girl had finally managed to climb out of the barrel and they only a small head start. Naruto was chuckling while she ran, and by kami she could run. Shisui was gasping already and could barely keep breathing without straining himself, far less laugh. It was a little annoying too, since Shisui had always prided himself on his speed.

Naruto tugged him with her around a corner where she suddenly stopped and pushed them both flat against the wall of the building. The girl named Anko soon came rushing into view, dripping water everywhere and cursing Naruto's existence at the same time. She was rushing so fast that she didn't realize they had stopped before she was already far past them, and by then Naruto and Shisui were running in the opposite direction.

With a wide grin Naruto stuck her tongue out over her shoulder and Anko shouted in fury. Shisui didn't understand how the blond could be having fun. He could clearly feel the dark haired girl's killing intent even from a distance.

Naruto dragged him into the shopping street and soon he found himself crawling underneath the booth tables with edible merchandise. There was a food market today, so the street was littered with newly constructed booths which created a labyrinth of tables to get through.

It was amazing how she didn't get lost. As if she had mapped out their route from the beginning she
found her way through and Shisui followed her as she took a side street out of the busy crowd.

Heart hammering harder then he could remember, they came to the playground right on the outskirts of the market. It was a miracle he hadn't collapsed yet, and there in front of him stood Naruto. The girl was a little out of breath but still smiled from ear to ear. "That was so worth it, Shisui! I'll be in trouble later but did you see her face? I thought it would pop from the steam coming off her." She laughed while Shisui sat down panting. As he looked up at her beaming face he felt his own chuckle start, and before he knew why, he was laughing and catching his breath at the same time.

Maybe Naruto was laughing at him more than the situation, since he was making some odd choking sounds while he chuckled, but he couldn't find it in him to care.

After five minutes he sobered up enough to ask the question he wondered about. "Who was that? Why was she chasing you?" Asked Shisui and Naruto's mischievous smile grew slowly on her face.

"That was Mitarashi Anko, she lives with me at the orphanage. I sort of borrowed her genin photo earlier and made some improvements." Naruto explained innocently. The curious look Shisui was expressing was enough for the girl to reach into the pocket of her black pants and take out a small picture.

He looked curiously at it and felt a smile pressing at the corner of his lips. It was like those team photos every genin took with their teams. His dad had one too, but this one was of only two people. He recognized them both since one was the girl who'd been chasing them and the other was clearly Orochimaru of the Sannin.

He concluded that Naruto was not a very good artist. While the scribbled moustache and eyebrows added to the picture was funny, it was clumsily done. "You ruined her genin photo?" He asked, trying to sound serious, but failing miserably since he had started shaking with suppressed laughter.

"Anko has five. She can do without this one, dattebayo. I was thinking about nailing it to the entrance of the Hokage tower." She said, and this time Shisui didn't bother keeping his laughter in anymore. He would never have the guts to do something like that himself, but it was funny to imagine it.

It took Naruto half an hour to prove him wrong.

Shisui had no idea how she convinced him, but soon Naruto had dragged him with her to do just what he had been so certain he'd never do. The only problem was the ninja guards patrolling the entrance of the tower.

"Okay… Maybe not the front door then… Hey! I know where we can stick this. Do you know the jōnin have their own break room? It's on the third floor of that building." Naruto exclaimed and pointed to a smaller building next to the Hokage tower.

"Eh… I hope you're not thinking-" Started Shisui, but was rudely interrupted before he could finish.

"Of course that's what I'm thinking. Come on, Shisui." She retorted and grabbed his wrist again. For someone so small she had an unbelievably firm grip.

"We can't go in there! It's bound to be guarded." Hissed the Uchiha as she dragged him across the street. His head was going from side to side automatically, watching for ANBU, guards, some police relatives of his and Mitarashi Anko all at once. Anyone and anything that would see them commit this hilarious crime.
"We'll have to climb, baka." Replied the girl and Shisui looked up at the building.

"I can't get up there..." He muttered weakly, feeling his teeth grate at the idea of falling halfway up the exterior wall.

"Then you can look out for guards!" Naruto decided and walked him over to some trash cans by the building next to their targeted destination.

Shisui's eyes bulged out of their sockets. There was no way he could do that...

"What about the ninjas already inside? And how am I supposed to tell you if someone is coming? Shout?" He exclaimed exasperated but still followed as she pushed him behind the garbage. There was a heavy smell around him, and Shisui was hoping the odd substance he had trodden in was just a wet patch after the rainfall last week. Probably not.

"I'll know since you will warn me by barking like a dog, dattebyo." She answered reassuringly and then hurried over to the building. For a moment all he could wonder about was how to make that sound. No one in the Uchiha clan had dogs, plenty had cats though, but Shisui was unsure if he could imitate those sounds either.

Looking back towards Naruto his jaw slackened as he watched her make her way up the side of the building and disappeared through a window on the third story. She could climb up the walls with her hands and feet like some sort of monkey? It looked odd, but it was actually a little awesome.

While she was gone Shisui shot repeated glances around nervously, feeling like some sort of burglar as he spotted two men walk past a small distance away. Neither of them looked at him, and Shisui felt thankful for that. His face probably resembled a deer caught in the headlight, and he faintly noted that was something he should work on. There was no good in having a ninja who couldn't mask their emotions after all.

He scoped the street in a hurriedly matter until the sound of movement caught his attention. His head snapped up to the window where he knew Naruto disappeared to.

It had taken the girl exactly two minutes to appear again, rushing while holding in her contagious laughter. The Uchiha was extremely thankful for her quick efficiency and without a word he met her at the foot of the building. With a small nod to one another they ran as fast as they could away from the scene of the crime.

"I left a note on their window you know." Grinned Naruto while Shisui sat opposite her in the secluded cover of the forest.

"Oh? What did you write?" He asked eagerly. Shisui was still pumped up with adrenaline and their little adventure suddenly felt like a successful mission to him.

"I wrote; 'Maybe you should secure your building a little better. A six year old just broke in here."

They both started giggling and Naruto clapped Shisui's shoulder. "Are you sure you're an Uchiha? They are usually so serious, but you can actually have fun." Naruto wondered while Shisui sobered up.

"Of course I'm an Uchiha, Naruto-chan!" Exclaimed Shisui, but was still smiling. He sort of understood what she meant, many people were under the impression they all were snobs but it wasn't true. His father was the kindest person he knew, and also the most badass.
"Fine, fine. And don't call me Naruto-chan. Naruto is fine." Replied Naruto with a wave of her hand, Shisui raised an eyebrow, but decided he didn't know her well enough to stop using the honorific. It was than he remembered what he'd left behind.

"Oh no! My aunt is probably worried. I just bolted without saying anything! I'll be in so much trouble..." He moaned and his face fell into his hands.

Naruto got to her feet and reached out her hand to him, the boy was helped to his feet and looked miserably at the blond. He'd get grounded for sure. Maybe he would even be refused dessert after dinner!

"Come on you worry wart, let's get you home, dattebyo." She said, and together they trekked back to his house.

Shisui did get grounded, but his father wasn't strong enough to deny him dessert.

He told Naruto about the aftermath in great detail the next day at school while Iruka chuckled on the row in front. Hitomi who sat next to Shisui didn't look pleased about what Naruto had done though. "What if you'd been seen, Naruto-san? Seriously, you have no regards for the rules at all do you?" She huffed and continued reading her 400 page book on different herb types.

Naruto had often wondered if the green eyed girl might be in the wrong occupation. She'd make a killing if she'd been a botanist or a gardener. But no, Hitomi wanted to become a medic ninja who specialized in poison.

It was probably to compensate for the fact that she out of everyone in class had the least amount of chakra. That could still change though, most were only seven and no one had fully developed chakra coils. But no matter what Naruto said, Hitomi seemed to take it as an insult.

"But we weren't seen, Hitomi." Naruto argued, still chuckling from retelling the event to Iruka.

"Hitomi-san." Corrected the green eyed girl and frowned at Naruto.

Naruto shrugged and looked at Iruka. "I never use honorific. Not usually at least?" She said, feeling her good mood dwindle with Hitomi's stern attitude.

"That's because you're a hooligan who lived in the woods. You have no manners at all!" Bit Hitomi out and left her seat to go talk to one of her friends instead.

Naruto gaped after her, seeing red at the rudeness of her classmate. Shisui teeth grit in annoyance as Hitomi left, his eyes narrowed at her back. He was surprisingly angry at her obvious animosity towards his friend.

Iruka on the other hand sent a pencil flying towards the back of Hitomi's head, making the girl stumble and fall down the aisle and effectively getting himself detention for two days. Still, after their sensei finished scolding Iruka he proudly told them that it was all worth it. This made Naruto beam brilliantly.

It was a couple of weeks later something interesting started happening again. Namely the academy outing.

They were outside in the morning and were being given backpacks. Their parents had already been informed about what would be happening, and that none of them would be returning home before
the following day.

There was a good deal of confusion about exactly how this outing would go, and Naruto scratched the back of her head when she noticed the people coming towards them. They were on the academy grounds after all, and a troop of strangers were coming from the gates.

After a few moments of squinting in their direction, her heart suddenly skipped a beat. Amongst the people of different ages was none other than her former genin sensei, Hatake Kakashi. It was the first time she'd seen him since she fell back to the past, but there was no mistaking the boy.

He was small though. And clad in dark blue and loose clothes with a cross strapped sort of holster. Naruto preferred the jōnin attire he'd worn in the future. But one thing both outfits had in common was that blasted mask.

He looked much put out and was followed closely by Minato. Kakashi actually appeared pissed off about the whole situation as he stared pointedly at the ground while they came closer.

When the group was only a few steps away the blond spotted other familiar faces too. Some she'd already met and was happy to see, such as Anko. But there was some who made her almost tremble in excitement. Gai, Asuma and Kurenai were also amongst the group of people, and Naruto had a hard time not shouting in joy.

But she didn't have much time to dwell on these things. Their sensei shouted at them to pay attention so he could make sure everyone was gathered by calling their names, and Naruto's focus was drawn to him instead.

While she waited to hear her own name so she could prove she'd shown up, Naruto recalled her own genin days and how she'd done something similar to this. In her time she had Konohamaru corps as her own troop and it hadn't turned out too well.

While the sensei talked the older group came closer. Naruto heard a few girls sigh when Minato stopped in front of them. She almost giggled when she saw Kurenai blush scarlet and bash her eyelids in the direction of Kakashi. Apparently she wasn't in love with Asuma yet, he was standing next to her with a grumpy expression that could rival Kakashi's.

The blond skipped up to Anko who was distracted. "Anko! This is great! It'll be really fun to go on a trip instead of boring lectures." She said, ignoring how the academy sensei bristled and Kakashi, who was standing close by, rolled his eyes.

Anko however was still not paying attention to her, instead she was busy peeking at Minato, and to Naruto's disturbance the girl looked flustered.

"He is so dreamy." The older girl sighed, sounding a lot like one of Sasuke's fangirls from her own time than the brisk and headstrong person Naruto had gotten to know.

"Are you insane? He's like… old..." Muttered Naruto, and she was getting worked up at the possibility of Anko having a crush on her dad. Kakashi seemed determined not to be involved in this, and stood stonily with his hands folded in front of him.

"Oh, you just need to grow up a little, Naru. Namikaze-san is really handsome." Anko whispered back with a teasing grin. Naruto grimaced, feeling a slight impulse to hit Anko in the jaw for saying such a thing. Only her mum was allowed to think of her dad in that fashion. No one else should and that included Anko. At that moment Minato recognized them, since he suddenly waved and beamed in their direction.
Anko blushed scarlet while Naruto ignored her while waving enthusiastically back. "Hi Minato! Are you one of the ninjas we'll be going on survival training with? That would be awesome, dattebayo! I hope I'm on your team." Naruto babbled and left her classmates behind to go talk to him. Anko trailed after Naruto with an eager smile that sent shivers down Naruto's spine.

"Eh, no sorry, Naruto-chan. I'm just dragging my students in for today. They're the ones doing the survival training. Guys, be polite and say hi to Anko-chan and Naruto-chan." Ordered Minato and nudged Kakashi's shoulder. The boy mutely turned towards them, for the first time acknowledging that they were there at all. Next to him, a girl Naruto didn't recognize did the same, but with more interest than anything the silver haired boy could muster up.

Kakashi turned towards Naruto and nodded shortly, his eyes bored as he met her own. "Naruto, I'm Hatake Kakashi." He said evenly. Minato chuckled uneasily while the girl stepped up when it became apparent Kakashi wasn't going to elaborate any more.

"Hi Anko-chan! You look well." Said the cute girl with short brown hair and purple markings on her cheek. Naruto didn't know who she was, but apparently she was on the same team as Kakashi. She turned towards Naruto and smiled prettily. "I'm Rin. It's nice to meet you Naruto-chan."

Naruto grinned back, but didn't have time to reply before someone interrupted her.

"I'm here! I'm here!" Shouted a voice from the gates, and they turned towards a boy coming running bent forwards in his haste to reach the group. He was red in the face and when he came to a stop in front of Rin he bent down with his hands on his knees while breathing heavily.

"I'm so sorry! There was an old man who needed help with his dog. She was being really disobedient and he had problems holding on to the leash, so I had to help him back home." He straightened up and gave them all a brilliant smile, his black spiky hair blowing in the wind while he ran a hand through it. Kakashi was sending him a seething glare which effectively distracted the newcomer.

In the meanwhile Naruto was having a hard time controlling her features; the excuse sounded just like something the old Kakashi would have come up with whenever he was late. These two must be spending a lot of time together if the new boy had been affected by Kakashi's behavior to such an extend he was using the same lame excuses.

"You're late. Why can't you just show up on time for once?" Kakashi muttered scornfully. His eyes narrowed towards the black haired boy. Naruto furrowed her brows, not fully able to comprehend what Kakashi had meant.

The silver haired man, now turned boy, was always late too. With the rare exception of a missions here and there where Naruto never failed to be surprised on seeing him on time. Maybe the two boys had a fight earlier?

Her eyes drifted to Rin who was smiling warmly to the unknown boy. Clearly she hadn't been a part of the argument. It was a strange mix, and Naruto was having a very strong senses of deja vu while she observed the team. It was something in the air, something familiar with the atmosphere.

"I said I was sorry! And it's not like I'm really late. We haven't left yet so stop being a bastard, bastard!" Shouted the boy heatedly, and Anko rolled her eyes.

"This idiot is Obito." Stated Kakashi and looked fleetingly in Naruto's direction. She was probably the only one amongst them who didn't know who he was, and she nodded slowly while she took in his full appearance and not just his face. He was wearing a dark blue jumpsuit while smiling brightly
at her despite the fact he had been pissed at Kakashi just a moment ago. Obito was also wearing
orange goggles which he was straightening absentmindedly. Naruto already liked this guy.

"So typical, you haven't changed have you, Obito?" Muttered Anko and folded her arms. Naruto
watched as Obito stuttered and moved away from Anko. Like most he seemed to have a fear of
Anko, but he covered it up with a disarming smile. Though Naruto knew better. It was one of those
smiles you put on to fool your audience. For some reason the blond had a feeling she'd just met her
counterpart in the past.

Kakashi rolled his eyes and nodded at Anko. "Mah, you could safely say that. He's as hopeless as
always." He said matter of fact; making Obito grind his teeth and send death glares in Kakashi's
direction.

No more was said because at that moment her sensei barked at her to get back to her classmates, and
the other girls in her class seemed to take great offence that Naruto was already talking to the older
kids.

"Alright everyone, listen up because this is very important. You will be put into teams under one of
the Genin here. Some of them recently graduated the academy and you may know or recognize
Genins who have been on active duty longer. By now they have some experience to share with you,
and you better do well and listen to their instructions." Their sensei said sternly. He continued by
reading up the teams, and the blond used the time to examine the younger version of the people she'd
once called her comrades.

Naruto waited expectantly to hear who she would be teamed with, and felt a rush of emotions when
she was told to walk over to her former sensei together with Shisui and Ensui.

Iruka, to his dismay, was paired with Mizuki and Hitomi under none other than a very pumped up
Gai.

In predictable fashion, Gai gave Iruka a vigorous thumb up and a shiny smile. This caused more
people than just Iruka to take a step back.

Dragging Ensui and Shisui with her, Naruto met Kakashi who looked less than impressed with his
task. It was clear in his narrowed eyes and slight twitch of his eyebrow. The blond wondered what
the hell the big deal was, and if maybe her former sensei was having a bad day. He might be moody
because for once he was actually on time. Maybe he was used to sleeping in longer?

Minato came forward and pointed at Kakashi and the two teams standing next to them. "Come with
me. I'll be briefing you about what your mission will be." he said. The three leaders with their
respective teams followed him as he walked away from the mayhem of students trying to find out
who their genin leader was.

"Hello everyone. My name is Namikaze Minato. I'm the Jōnin in charge of these three here." He
explained with a smile and gestured to the dysfunctional team in front of Shisui.

"For those who don't know, this is Kakashi," He said and pointed to Naruto's old sensei that wasn't
so old anymore.

"Obito." He continued and pointed to a black haired boy giving them all an ear splitting grin.

"And Rin." He finished pleasantly. Rin waved and Naruto thought she looked like a really friendly
soul. She had instantly taken a liking to both Obito and Rin, and wondered how on earth she’d never
heard of these two before. It was then she recalled the bell test with team seven, and how their sensei
had told them his best friend died. Maybe they both had a premature death…

"When the test begin you will set out from different points that I have marked here on this map, and then your task is to make it to the end station." Minato explained and took out three scrolls and handed them to his students.

"There's a time limit and the quicker you get there the more points you gain. Everyone will end up in the same place, but you will reach there through different routes. On your route you will have to find a few objects to make sure you have actually done it correctly. It's a very large area, but we have good security covering the borders, so there is no need to be afraid of enemy ninjas. The start is in half an hour and you have until then to get to your assigned starting point. Understood?" He said while everyone nodded. Ensui for once was not looking the least bit bored.

"I'll beat you this time, Bakashi!" Cried Obito and pointed to the Hatake with a challenging smile. Naruto didn't have enough time to suppress the laugh bursting from her lip.

"You keep saying that, but the only thing you've bested me at is finding Tora the cat, and that was only because you know everyone over the age of sixty in this village." Kakashi answered exasperatedly.

Naruto felt her brow rise in surprise and peeked at Obito who looked ready to throw something at him. Naruto glanced over to where Anko was standing with her team, and the older girl waved at her when she noticed Naruto watching.

"So Naruto, you're the one who can deal with Mitarashi, eh?" Asked Obito and came closer. Naruto had been waving back, and turned to look at the boy in the blue and orange jumpsuit. Most of her life Naruto had been wearing a jumpsuit herself, but since she lived at the orphanage she was forced to wear the standard dress code. Obito's attire was pretty awesome though.

"Yes. Anko is my friend." She replied and folded her hands in front of her. The girl named Rin chuckled and glanced over at them while she talked to her own team of academy students.

"Obito, don't be so rude." Muttered Shisui pointedly at the taller boy. Obito grinned widely and roughed up the Uchiha's hair.

"Shisui! I heard from Kagami-san you are quite the criminal these days. Breaking into the jōnin's break room of all things." He said, but Shisui only chuckled and pushed Obito's hand away.

"Dad told you the story wrong then. I was only the lookout." He answered and grinned at Naruto.

"So you're the bad influence, eh? I already like you kid." Obito said while Naruto watched in confused at how Obito and Shisui interacted.

"You know each other?" Naruto asked Shisui.

The boy nodded and pointed to the genin. "He's one of my cousins. A bit remotely though. Something like my third cousin once removed, but we live close to one another." he answered and Naruto did a take back.

"You're an Uchiha?" She asked the boy in the awesome jumpsuit.

"Of course I am! I'm the Uchiha Obito! And soon I'll even awaken my Sharingan!" He explained proudly and straightened his goggles out of habit.

"I thought the Uchiha were less… energetic." Answered Naruto and glanced over to Shisui.
Apparently Naruto had only encountered the broodiest within the clan before. These two were nothing like Sasuke or Itachi.

"Obito is a loud mouth, Naruto-chan." Stated Shisui teasingly. Obito started denying it, but the effect was ruined by his female teammate giggling in the background.

Minato was smiling at them while Kakashi was already studying the map they would be following. Not paying either of his teams any attention. "I had no idea you were a second year, Naruto-chan. How old are you again?" Minato asked, looking curiously down at her.

"I'm six." She answered, grinning back. "I was so awesome they moved me up a year, dattebayo." Ensui rolled his eyes while Kakashi looked up slowly and glanced thoughtful down at the little girl.

"That's really amazing, Naruto-chan. Kakashi actually skipped a year too when he was around your age." He answered.

Said boy looked very skeptical as he sized up the girl. She was so small he had problems imagining her being able to take down as much as a toddler, but didn't comment anything about his internal thoughts.

"I want to graduate as soon as possible. Then I can go on missions and earn money to buy my own clothes! It would be great to get some ninja tools too. Maybe I'll look for a jumpsuit while I'm at it, where did you buy yours, Obito?" She asked hopefully to the older boy.

The Uchiha glowed at those words, but just as he was about to answer a snort escaped Kakashi.

"Wearing a jumpsuit like Obito's is too obvious. No ninja with any sense of self-preservation choose to wear that." Stated Kakashi ruthlessly, sending his teammate a very obnoxious glare.

"Why do you say that? Jumpsuits are awesome!" Naruto exclaimed while rapidly getting worked up. From behind them Anko turned around, curiously as to why Naruto was shouting so loudly.

"They really are not." Replied Kakashi rudely. The blond girl was a little put off about Kakashi's behavior, and was starting to have difficulties merging her old sensei with this rude little boy. Who incidentally was acting a lot more like Neji when he was young then the aloof person Naruto remembered.

"If you can wear a jumpsuit, even with the brightest colors, and still able to go undetected it's a testament to your stealth skills. It means you won't be caught no matter what, dattebayo!" retorted Naruto, gesturing with her arms while taking a step back.

"It means unnecessary risks. Why waste energy compensating for an unwise outfit when you can just dress more reasonably and spare your skills for better uses? It's dimwitted. There's a reason Konoha changed their uniform to a green vest from the old red armor. The metal shimmered in the light, giving away your position. It made noise, making it difficult to sneak up on your enemy. It was red which was a poor color choice for disguise. Especially in the forest and fields. They changed the dress code so that ninjas would be better disguised and have larger chances of success when on a mission. If you're going to wear a jumpsuit at least don't have one with orange highlights." Said Kakashi with an air of all knowing, making Naruto gape in response.

Kakashi gave her an icy glare as if she had fallen short of his expectation, or that she simply was an irritating fly he wished to swat away. Both alternatives made her blood boil.

"Then I won't get a jumpsuit with orange highlights." Explained Naruto slowly, her eyes narrowed and her mouth in a pout.
Kakashi nodded, satisfied his arguments had been accepted and deemed right. "Good."

Obito scowled at his teammate while Rin looked uncertainly at each of them in turn. The blond folded her arms and gave foxy smile, her blue orbs glinting as she grinned up to the silver haired boy. "Instead the jumpsuit will be all orange, dattebayo." retorted Naruto in earnest.

Obito barked a laugh while Kakashi grimaced and turned away. Shisui barely managed to not smack his forehead in exasperation. Because he was certain that Naruto would buy the blasted outfit just to make a point.

Shortly after the little scuffle in the academy grounds, they found themselves standing outside the borders surrounding Konoha. It had been the first time they had been outside the gates while still attending the academy.

The closest team to their starting point was team Gai. Iruka stood with Mizuki a little away with his backpack and warm clothing. It couldn't be clearer he was dreading this trip the most. Mostly because of the genin they'd been assigned.

Iruka kept looking nervously over to her team and back to the green clad nine year old who was talking animatedly with her own team captain. Or more like he was doing all the talking towards him; Kakashi wasn't answering.

A few of them had never seen the other side of the tall concrete boarders at all and was looking wide eyed around.

Kakashi was as annoyed as ever, and Naruto was taking comfort in the words Anko had whispered before they departed. "I'm sure you can sneak a snake in his sandals while he's asleep." At the thought Naruto giggled and cheered up again. The sound caused Shisui to look curiously at her, but she waved him off with a mischievous smile.

Ensui seemed indifferent, but gave Naruto a nod while she restlessly waited for the start signal.

Gai was chatting Kakashi's ear off while the Hatake was doing his utmost to ignore him. Noticing that the blond was looking at him, he gave Naruto a scowl before ignoring her completely as well. Naruto huffed back and looked pointedly away with her nose held high.

Kakashi was such a brat when he was a kid. Nothing at all like the cool sensei she had in the future.

"My eternal rival! We are now on the threshold of an adventure which will test our spring time of youth! We'll cross the dangers and find ourselves worthy to face the perils!" Shouted Gai, looking delighted at being able to talk to Kakashi. "If I lose, I will do five hundred laps around the village to improve my season of growth! And if I can't do five hundred laps I'll do eight hundred pushups." He continued while Kakashi looked painfully at him, clearly hoping Gai could go bother his own team instead of him.

The ninja tasked with signalling their start looked pointedly at Gai, motioning for him to return to his group of students. He responded with an energetic thumb up and a glinting smile, before flying over to his starting point.

The adult looked concerned after the green clad ninja. Shaking his head casually checked the time. He sighed and looked up. "You have until noon tomorrow to complete this mission, you may start now." He raised a flare gun towards the skies and pulled the trigger to start the mocked mission.

Gai gave a loud and happy; "YOUTH!", which probably exploded Iruka's eardrums, before taking
off in such a fast sprint he left the rest of his team in a cloud of dust. They looked shocked at the sheer speed before turning pleadingly to the Chunin that flared the time.

The ninja smirked. "You should probably follow him. He has the map after all." He said and Iruka shoulders sagged in defeat as they heard Gai shout from a far distance.

"Come my youthful team! We need to hurry so our springtime will flourish!"

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! Especially thank you to those who has left a comment, and I hope you all liked the chapter! I went back and fourth on this many times, and I'm still not sure about the Shisui and Naruto scene. But it falls well under Shisui's hero complex, and Naruto's prankster side. And in general I wanted a scene where they got to know each other.

And before I forget, Nara Ensui is a canon character. He barely shows up though. He's just a background character who shows up a few times during the fourth ninja war as part of the third division under Kakashi, and during the battle against Obito/Madara/ten tails. I looked long and hard to find a character that could be a classmate, and eventually I found this guy on Naruto wiki. I like him though. But I like all the Nara's, so it doesn't
really say much...

This chapter has been beta'd by AnjoRemix, thank you so much for great editing and inputs about the plot! It helps immensely.

Next week's chapter is 'Lost on the Road to Life'. Until next time!
Chapter Five – Lost on the Road to Life

"That's it, Lee! Run... run towards the setting sun!... But don't mess up your hair!" - Might Gai

The sun was shining high up in the sky, but the rays felt like nothing more than an illusion of warmth in the chill winter air. The leaves lay brown on the earth covered ground, and the bushes had turned thorny with branches instead of rich green. It made it uncomfortable to walk through them, but luckily they weren't supposed to leave the trail much during this outing.

Three hours into the race Kakashi was leading the team of three academy students through the woods with his nose in the map. He had refused to let the others see it, and his highest priority was to get the whole ordeal over and done with as soon as possible.

The time traveler was walking next to Ensui who was mostly a calm and aloof person, but today he entertained the younger girl by shooting down flies with his senbon. He had very good aim.

In the meanwhile Shisui walked next to their team leader, not minding the silence as much as Naruto did, but eventually he spoke up. "Kakashi-san, we should probably try to get some food for lunch and dinner, this area still has some nuts on the trees." Shisui suggested carefully after a few hours of silence between them.

Kakashi seemed reluctant to agree but Naruto nodded eagerly. "Yeah! We could also get some fish by the river! We'd have to gather a shit load of nuts to feed all of us!" She said while Shisui chuckled. He'd seen the girl devouring her lunch during breaks.

"Come on Naruto-chan, we'll get some food while they can get a fire running." Suggested Ensui and nodded towards the river not too far away from the path they were following.

"Excuse me, but I'm team leader here. You're supposed to learn how to do these things first, not just run into the river and be taken by the stream." Interrupted Kakashi while crossing his arms in front of him.

"Oh I'm so sorry Kakashi-sensei. What is your command?" Asked Naruto sarcastically. Ensui snorted and Shisui tried very hard not to smile.

"You little... I'm saying that I am in charge of this mission and you should wait to follow my orders." Taking up his kunai and looking towards the river they could hear not far away he said; "Ensui and I will get the fish, you two can sort out the fire. Take the signal flare with you in case something happens. And please do not fire it unless you absolutely have to. And if you do, point it downwards so we only hear the sound and not see the explosion. It's only supposed to be used in case of emergencies and the guards will show up if we fire it up towards the sky. It's the only signal flare they provided so use it with care." He explained while pointing his kunai towards the blond before turning to walk away. Naruto stuck out her tongue at the boy's back while Ensui sent her an apologetic smile before following.
Naruto turned to Shisui instead. "Want to beat them? If we can gather more food and logs than them, then Kakashi will lose!" She said excitedly.

Shisui grinned at Naruto's unconcealed desire to beat their team leader. "You have a bit of a competition streak don't you? Fine, I can start a fire any time with katon jutsu, so let's do something more productive. You should try looking for logs while I'll start on the food hunt." He instructed and then followed Naruto in the opposite direction the others had taken.

Naruto grinned and walked around searching for any dried wood they could use to light a fire. Considering it was winter it was harder than usual, but she still managed to find some logs dry enough.

After half an hour Naruto found herself alone back at the camp. She'd managed to get a bunch of good edible nuts, but had problems holding it all when she also had to carry the logs. So she sat alone while waiting for the return of her teammates. After ten minutes of listening to the sounds of the forest she got impatient and decided to be productive and do some chakra exercises.

Naruto couldn't use sage mode yet since her body was so young and her chakra coils wasn't mature enough. That didn't stop her from trying though.

The jinchūriki was careful not to gather anything. She just focused on her own chakra while moving it through her coils. Making it journey from her stomach, up to her shoulders, down to her feet and then to the tip of her fingers. It was getting easier since she'd been practicing it every night for the past two months, and the exercise gave her a very good grasp of how she could use it to improve her ninjutsu.

Forty five minutes after they'd split up, Ensui and Kakashi came back to see the girl sitting crossed legged while meditating. Shisui sat next to her, poking a crackling fire with a stick and about half a bucket full of nuts at his side.

They were both surprised to see the girl so still. Ensui had never seen her being anything but hyperactive, and chuckled at the surprised look on Hatake's face. "What are you doing, Naruto-chan?" The Nara asked while starting to prepare the three fish they had managed to catch.

Ensui had caught two while Kakashi had only managed to get one, which pleased the academy student greatly. It might be petty, but Ensui had an unusual amount of competition instincts. At least for a Nara. "I'm controlling my chakra." Naruto said calmly in response. Her tone of voice was so unlike her usual cheerful one it put Ensui off a little.

She sounded a lot older then her six years.

"Oh? Shouldn't you be using a leaf for that?" He asked while trying to see some sort of leaf on her. But there was none to be seen so he concluded this was some sort of exercise he hadn't come across yet.

"I could, but I'm trying to move my chakra in patterns, I could use a leaf to make sure it's moving in the accurate pattern, but I know it is. There is no need for it." She answered without opening her eyes.

When Naruto meditated her senses became very prominent. Which was why she could pin point with a good accuracy the exact location of the three boys around her without opening her eyes. She had realized months ago that she could sense people better than everyone else in class, even Anko and their class sensei. "That's cool, where are you focusing your chakra now?" Ensui asked.
curiously while laying the fish aside on a rock and stood up.

It sounded like an advanced chakra exercise. In the Academy they had only done the simple leaf exercise so far.

"Elbow." Naruto stated, still not opening her eyes.

Ensui lifted up one of the many fallen leaves from the ground and walked up to the blonde. He reached his hand out towards her right elbow but couldn't sense anything, he then moved it to hover above her left and instantly felt the difference. Her chakra was pulsing underneath the spot.

He smirked and put the brown and soggy leaf over the spot he assumed most of her chakra was gathered. The decomposing leaf stuck to her skin like glue. Ensui backed away towards Kakashi who was watching along curiously.

The silver haired boy was startled when after a couple of minutes the leaf started moving up her shoulder and across her neck to the other shoulder. Slowly it moved diagonally down to her left hip and then it moved out of sight towards her back.

At that moment they all heard Naruto's stomach grumble angrily. "Should we eat?" Kakashi asked, making the other two boys look up at him with appreciation.

Naruto finally opened her eyes and her face lit up eagerly, the calm demeanour vanishing without a trace. "Awesome! Though, these two didn't get enough at all, so we'll have to eat a lot of nuts." She stated and took a hold of a couple of the fish. Kakashi was insulted by that and grumbled while poking the fire with a stick along with Shisui.

The sun was situated low on the horizon, making it difficult to see since the final scroll to obtain was located in the direction that made them all blind while walking. The light from the sunset hit them directly in the eyes and was making all four of them to squint constantly.

Naruto was trotting after Kakashi while Shisui and Ensui were snacking on left over nuts from their meal. They were all starting to get tired after all the traps they sprung and had to find their way through and out of.

At first the blonde was sure it would be relatively harmless, but after the first shuriken - luckily a wooden one - hit her straight in the ear she had thought differently. But that had only been the first taste of the upcoming traps.

Next they'd ended up dangling in an elaborate net. Kakashi had managed to jump away just in time, but the rest had ended up entwined high up in a tree. Their limbs had gotten entangled and it was an awkward and uncomfortable position they were forced into while they swung lazily from side to side. For the first time since the outing started Kakashi had almost smiled. Though if Naruto was honest with herself it had seemed more like he was gleeful.

After a few complaints and a threat from Naruto which involved putting his mask on fire they were cut down by Kakashi.

Then there was the snake traps.

The blonde had no problem guessing who had come up with that idea, if not put it up himself. Naruto was convinced the Hokage would have a fit if any of the slimy things were poisonous, but it didn't stop them from being harmful in other ways.
Kakashi had been the first to go down, the snakes had taken out the strongest link first. They'd slithered up from the thick growing bushes in an ambush and wrapped themselves around his feet, making him stumble forwards. Next moment his arms and neck had been engulfed in slithering reptiles with white and brown markings.

The others had followed soon after. Except for Naruto.

She had taken one look at the snakes and instinctively cut off the head of three snakes that was about to bind her.

The action was followed by a full blown out fit which resulted in a mass snake carnage where even Naruto herself was surprised about how vengeful she could be towards the slimy things. It had been over in three minutes, and by then over twenty snakes lay dead and decapitated on the ground. The sight was enough to lift a satisfied smile on Naruto's mouth, which sent shivers down Shisui's spine.

This was a blow to Kakashi's pride though, as he was supposed to be the older and more experienced ninja of the group. To his credit he hid it well and continued leading the little group onwards with the map in his hands again.

Now they were closing in on the final test. According to Kakashi it should have been pretty close to their current location. But first they had to get to the other side of a river.

The river was cut into the ground, tall stone walls rose from the water and up to their current elevation, so if they jumped into the water they wouldn't be able to get up again. At least not Shisui and Ensui, who neither knew how to walk on walls yet. Naruto could probably climb up on all fours if she just got a hold of the rocky sides framing in the stream. But the water looked cold and she had no wish to catch influenza right now.

So they walked alongside the river bank, trying to find an area with short enough distance to jump or wade through. They had already been walking around for an hour, and it was getting very tiresome to keep looking for a passage.

"What about that!" Exclaimed Shisui at last, pointing to a fallen tree.

The tree lay horizontally, probably after being taken down in some sort of storm, and laid with its roots still partly connected to the earth on their side of the river while the rest formed a bridge over to the opposite side.

"Finally!" Shouted Naruto and smiled brightly now that they were finally making some headway.

Kakashi looked relieved and headed straight for the tree while the others followed closely behind.

"When we get to the other side we need to find our way back to where we first wanted to cross. The terrain can be a bit rocky over there. On the map the rocky area is marked out and it specifically notes we should stay away from it, so we'll have to take a detour. But we'll find our post faster if we follow the direction precisely." Explained Kakashi while the others nodded along.

Kakashi and Naruto were already up on the fallen tree while balancing their way across the trunk as Shisui followed after. The surface of the trunk was slippery and it made it hard for Naruto to get a grip. Luckily she knew enough by now to use chakra as a stabilizer.

"But it's getting dark soon. Can you find the way as easily in the dark? What if we get lost?" Naruto asked, looking up at the sky as it was going from rich pink and orange to dark blue.

"I won't get u-" But Kakashi couldn't get another word out, because while all four of them crossed
the span between the river, their passage broke in two.

Naruto lost her balance as the wooden trunk split in the middle, right under Shisui's feet. She heard him shout while grabbing for anything possible.

Ensui was right behind him and it was his arm Shisui found first, dragging the Nara hard down.

Just as Naruto's feet lost all contact with the tree and she was free falling, she felt someone grab her hand. The grip on her wrist made her halt violently. Her head snapped back painfully as she came to an abrupt stop.

She looked up in confusion only to find Kakashi holding on to the cliff edge with her suspended from his outstretched hand. They had been close to the edge before the tree collapsed, and the silver haired boy must have managed to get a hold of cliff as the trunk broke and saved her from the fall.

But her two teammates weren't as lucky. There was a large splash as the young boys and the the broken tree hit the water, and then they were gone from view.

Turning her head quickly while trying to find out exactly where they were, Naruto cried out for them, but the only thing she saw was the flowing water.

She tugged at her hand, attempting to break free from Kakashi's stone hard grip but was unsuccessful. "Let me go! I can't see them!" She shouted in fury and growing panic. They'd been under the water for too long.

"And what can you do?! You'll just end up the same way!" He snapped back but Naruto didn't listen. A little further down the river she could swear she saw something black which matched with Shisui's attire.

Her mind was set. With a harsh tug Naruto broke free from Kakashi who had been trying to drag her up over the edge, and fell into the water.

Immediately she was caught by the strong current and couldn't help but wonder how she yet again found herself in this situation.

But this time she had more time, and she was letting the stream help her move faster towards the dark blobs she suspected was her teammates. Breaking the surface after being too long underneath the water she gasped for air. Naruto looked wildly around and cried out when she found Shisui and Ensui drifting fast not far away from her.

"Naruto!" Shouted Shisui and tried to get closer to her by swimming against the rapid current. But he didn't want to leave Ensui and was holding onto him with one hand around the other boy's waist. Ensui seemed to be struggling badly and was wrestling to get rid of his backpack. It looked like it was weighing him down and Naruto was terrified at the possibility that the Nara couldn't swim with the added weight.

"Fucking hell, what is it about me and rivers! I swear they have it in for me!" The blonde yelled as she noticed the river had picked up speed. While Naruto tried to get closer to her friends the stream would suck her down, and it quickly became a struggle to fight through the icy water.

It was just as she reached the boys that Kakashi caught up to them. He was running on the water and hurriedly got to the three younger children. "Take Ensui and get him up! I don't think he can swim." Said Shisui, and without a word the team leader did as told.

The river still dragged them further down. By the time Kakashi had time to run up the steep rocky
sides of the river and lay Ensui down, the other two was barely in sight anymore. Both had been dragged further away.

"Hold on to me, Naruto!" Shouted Shisui as they both spotted the reason for the speed of the river. A waterfall. She didn't need to be told twice and grabbed the boy by the hand while they did their best to get a hold of anything that would stop them from toppling over.

Naruto attempted to move them closer to the rocky sides of the river, hoping to use chakra to secure them, but the stream was too vicious and instead she ended up under water.

Why did this keep happening to her?

When she came up for air she forced off her backpack and rummaged through it in record speed, finding what she was after almost instantly. A rope and a kunai. She blessed the academy sensei that'd packed them in there and quickly tied the rope to the edge of a kunai and threw the weapon up towards land. She hoped against all odds that it would catch and wrap around a tree. Anything that was strong enough to hold them.

It missed, and Shisui hurriedly roped it in and threw again, this time managing to swing it around a branch just as they reached the edge of the waterfall.

The rushing sound of water drummed their ears deaf. In the hurry to grab onto the rope Naruto had dropped her backpack, and it was long since lost to the river. They clutched desperately onto the the only life line keeping them safe from the fall, their legs helplessly dangling from the edge while feeling the rope cut into the palms of their hands. Neither let go though. Instead they grit their teeth and held on tighter. "Shit." Gurgled Shisui through a mouthful of water.

And then Kakashi was there again, grabbing the rope and pulling them backwards so their feet would no longer dangle over the edge. It would almost have been funny if it wasn't for the serious situation.

Because of the stream Kakashi had to constantly run backwards against the current. If he didn't the water would drag him towards the edge too. So while he held onto the rope, making it slacken behind him but tensing in front, he was forced to move backwards at a jogging pace. The fact that he also had to hold their weight while the stream pushed them in the opposite direction made him bite his teeth tightly together in strain. But he didn't let go.

Naruto used chakra to get a weak hold of the water's surface. Now that she wasn't being flung around it was easier to get a proper grip. Even if she at first had only succeeded in making a water bomb in the face on first attempt; she soon managed to have a better hold. She used it to help Kakashi move them sideways in the river, and slowly they made it to the side of the water next to the rocky wall leading up to safety.

"Take Shisui, I can climb up now." Shouted Naruto loudly over the roaring water the moment her body touched the rock wall of the river.

"Are you sure?" Asked Kakashi seriously, eyeing the waterfall quickly. Probably picturing how much damage she'd take if she failed at climbing up.

In answer she attached herself to the wall with both feet and the one arm not holding onto the rope while using chakra to secure herself. With some effort she was completely out of the water and dropped the rope. Her hands were shaking and bleeding badly. The skin in the palms of her hands were partly torn off after holding on to the rope.
Kakashi nodded and focused on getting Shisui out of the streaming water and into his arms so he could carry him up.

Naruto crawled up the side while Kakashi ran, he reached the top while she was halfway and came back down to help her the rest of the way.

Once safely over the edge, Naruto collapsed. Her heart hammered hard in her chest while she breathed in relief. For the moment all she could comprehend was safety. The current had been extremely strong and the effortlessness of just lying flat on the ground felt like heaven. Naruto vaguely registered that she really needed to work on strengthening her muscles.

"Well… That didn't go as planned." Muttered Shisui and looked at the other two. His usually curly hair lay glued around his face while he dripped water everywhere.

"Nope." Answered Naruto, pretty sure she must look similar to her friend. Kakashi was the only one dry and he still seemed high on alert.

"Come on, we need to get Ensui-san." He said and waited for the two academy students to get to their feet. They got a minute to catch their breath before he started pestering them again and they slowly staggered to an upright position.

Wordlessly they walked along the river bank. Luckily they were on the correct side of the water, but the bad news was that they no longer knew exactly where they were.

Not only was it now dusk, but the stream had taken them further away from where they were supposed to be, and Naruto got a bad feeling about the situation.

She was correct in that assumption, since when they found Ensui he was still sitting on the ground clutching his leg. He had not made any attempts to get up since Kakashi left him.

After Kakashi finished a basic examination of Ensui's leg he sighed and stood up. "I think your leg is broken, Ensui-san..." he said while folding his arms over his chest. He was looking around with narrowed eyes before settling on his three charges.

They were dripping wet and so were all their extra clothes in the remaining backpacks. They had gone down in the water with them and it would soon be dark and cold out in the winter wilderness. This really was turning out to be a mission from hell.

"We need to get Ensui to a doctor, but he can't walk on that leg now." Said Shisui, pointing out the obvious.

"We first need to brace his leg as best as we can. I have some bandages in my backpack. While I get it, Naruto can find the signal flare so we can call for help. This outing is over and we need a medic." Ordered Kakashi while he started rummaging through his backpack.

"Signal flare?" Naruto asked in confusion. She hadn't had that thing since she and Shisui walked into the woods earlier. Where did she put it again?

Kakashi looked sharply towards her. His eyes sparkled for a moment in annoyance. "Yes, the signal flare I gave you while Ensui and I went to find fish before our meal earlier today." He stated with a slight edgy tone at the lack of responsive acknowledgement about the item. Naruto wasn't paying attention to him anymore though. She was looking at Shisui who was not meeting her eyes.

"I…eh, took it from Naruto while we were in the woods looking for nuts. Then afterwards I gave it to Ensui while we ate…He wanted to see what it looked like…” Muttered the Uchiha. He glanced
worriedly down at his friend who was staring daggers at the ground.

"And I threw my backpack away since I was struggling to swim after my leg started hurting. It was weighing me down against the current of the stream..." Ensui answered in a hollow voice. His eyes quickly darted towards the stony edge that blocked the view of the river that was the cause of their current dilemma.

Kakashi slowly straightened up. The slow boiling frustration was visible in his black eyes as he got to his feet with the bandages clutched in his hand. "I see... Then we just have to make due. Let me see your leg. We need to get that leg supported and the bleeding to stop." He said in a forcefully calmed down tone. Naruto and Shisui looked nervously at one another. Both were uncertain about what would happen to them now.

As he worked, everyone stayed silent; taking in the fact that they no longer had any means of getting help. No way of signalling their location for the protectors to know that they were in big trouble.

Not long after, Kakashi helped Ensui to his feet. His eyes still mulled with a lot of negative emotions but were suppressing them for the sake of being the older and leader of the group. "I'll carry you. Get on my back Ensui. We'll try to find our way back." Kakashi finally spoke once Ensui was somewhat stable on his feet.

Deciding that his pride could take a backseat for now, Ensui did as he was told. Once the Nara was up on their team leader's back, they immediately started walking again.

Naruto sighed and followed Kakashi, sure this was going to end badly. "You know Shisui. I bet fifty that Kakashi will get lost." Whispered Naruto and looked at the boy walking next to her.

Shisui looked tiredly back at her, but a small smile played on his lips and he shook his head. "I'm not betting against you, Naruto-chan."

"You've gotten us lost Kakashi-sensei." Claimed Naruto in the pitch darkness.

"Stop calling me that! And I haven't gotten lost."

"Sorry Kakashi-sensei."

"You're such a brat."

"And proud of it Kakashi-sensei."

"ARGH! Shut up Naruto!"

They walked in a row on a small winding path that led them upwards towards a peak. They should have seen the final post and where the scroll was hours ago, but so far they hadn't even seen a trace of the right area. The earlier incident in the river had brought them surprisingly swiftly away from their path. And following the river back up hadn't worked either.

After ten minutes of trying to get back to the right spot they found out the river split up at a fork. Making it impossible to walk up the river to the path they were supposed to follow because of the massive gap separating their side of the river to the one they were supposed to be on. In other words, they couldn't get back the way they came from and they couldn't get to where they were heading.

"We're so lost." Moaned Naruto, voicing her inner thoughts perfectly with her exhausted and sarcastic tone.
With a twirl Kakashi turned and poked Naruto hard on the head.

"I said we're not lost! I can read a map, damn it. We should have been there hours ago! It's your fault for suggesting to 'scout' the area to find an alternative way to cross the river!"

"Language, Kakashi-sensei. You shouldn't say bad words in front of us youngsters."

Kakashi looked furious and very close to exploding. He had dealt with this brat for too long now! She was so annoying! Was she trying to piss him off?

"Deal with it shorty!"

"All right, sensei."

Ensui who was still getting a piggy back ride from Kakashi looked exhaustedly over at Shisui. Kakashi and Naruto had been bickering at each other for over an hour and it was starting to get annoying.

"I'm going to strangle Minato-sensei for getting me into this!" Growled Kakashi while walking swiftly ahead, he needed a moment to collect himself.

He'd never had to look after anyone before, but this was what this mission included. And out of everyone it had to be these guys! Shisui and Ensui weren't so bad, but Naruto was a pain in the arse. She was like a female version of Obito on too much sugar. He grumbled to himself as he walked straight ahead, trying to imagine he was back in his solitary apartment with a warm cup of tea.

"In two weeks I'll be taking the chūnin exam, and when I get promoted I'm never being roped into looking after brats like this ever again."

Naruto looked quickly up at Kakashi, and they all watched confused as the blonde started laughing hard, not understanding why she seemed to find Kakashi's comment hilarious.

The sun was hitting her eyes the moment Naruto's lids opened. She blinked furiously, squinting while she tried to figure out where she was, and with a groan yesterday's events came back to her.

The blonde was variably warm and cold at the same time. Warm in the face where the sun hit her, cold on her feet where the sleeping bag Kakashi had lend to the three wet academy students didn't reach. Slowly she sat up, looking curiously around to find out exactly where they were.

It didn't help much. A forest was a forest in daylight or not, she still didn't get any clues about their location.

Naruto had been sleeping on the edge, Shisui lying in the middle with Ensui at the other end. Next to him was Kakashi and all three boys were still asleep.

She took in their appearance and noted how the two younger boys looked quite bad. There was dried mud on their faces and in their hair. There were scratches on Shisui's pale skin and their clothes were stained. In Ensui's case, there was a long tear along the leg which was smeared in dried blood. Naruto idly wondered what she looked like herself, and combed a hand slowly though her hair and was met with a dozen knots. She figured it would be best to keep it tied up in a ponytail until she got back home.

Kakashi looked fine, he still had his mask in place, hair the same, and his clothes spotless. The only thing out of place was the small scratches to his skin from the sharp branches they'd walked through
the night before. Life was so unfair.

The jinchūriki tried to figure out what the time was but she didn't have a watch, didn't own one, and the only ones who did was Shisui and Kakashi. Naruto leaned over her teammate and tried to figure out which hand he had the watch on, and if it still worked after the bubble bath he had yesterday.

She was on his left side, so she had to sit on her knees while leaning over him to find his right arm. As she gently touched his hand the boy stirred, his brow furrowing as a small frown appeared, but she ignored it and lifted his hand further up. It was then she noticed that Shisui was warmer than her.

Her, the hot blooded jinchūriki who others always thought had a fever because her normal temperature was too high compared to everyone else.

Forgetting to check the time she let her hand fall to his forehead instead, feeling how clam and heated it was underneath her fingers. A deep sigh escaped, Shisui was without a doubt sick. "Naruto?" Shishui murmured hoarsely. When she removed her arm from his forehead she found coal black eyes looking painfully up at her. His eyes were half lidded and his cheeks flushed with the heat of his condition.

"You're sick, Shisui. How bad is it?" She asked and brushed away his curly hair from his forehead. Dragging along some of the dirt and made a smudge pattern on his sweaty brow.

The boy didn't answer at first, his eyes closed and for a moment Naruto thought he'd fallen back asleep. But after a few deep breaths his eyes opened again and he tried to smile. Needless to say it looked more like a grimace. "Fine, I just have a small fever."

"Small fever? You're burning up, Shisui. I'll get you some water and nuts if there is any. I'll be back soon, so try to go back to sleep, okay?" She said and let her hand leave his hair before getting up. Shisui didn't answer and closed his eyes again before he wordlessly tried to do as she'd told him.

When she stretched up she noted that her clothes were still damp but there wasn't much she could do about that at the moment. Walking silently where they'd dumped the remaining backpacks, Naruto bent down and started rummaging through Kakashi's.

She found the water container quickly and checked the inside. It was empty, so she threw it to the side and went for the next backpack. It was Shisui's this time and he had about a mouthful left in there. So corking it back to its normal state she walked back to him and placed it carefully next to his head. He'd find it if he woke up, and it would be close by if he needed any water for his sore throat.

Turning towards the forest she grumbled and wondered which direction she should take. It was crucial right now not to get lost. Again. So she decided to keep to one direction and pick up whatever she could find edible and then return the way she came from.

It was quite difficult to walk though. It had been like this the night before too, and they hadn't gotten to sleep before sometime after one. The team had stumbled through bushes and surprise craters all the way through the thick growing forest. The grass alone reached Naruto to her waist, and at one point it felt like she had been swimming in bushes, not walking in them.

Needless to say they'd gotten very dirty and scraped. Naruto's wounds were already healed but the others weren't that fortunate. Now that the sun was rising she had daylight, and it was a lot easier to make her way through the forest then the night before.

About an hour later Naruto came trotting back. She was met by the sight of Kakashi walking furiously in circles before he spotted her, and his face twisted in a scowl. "Where did you go?" He
hissed in a whisper. Trying not to wake the other two, but Naruto heard him just fine. Having the Kyūbi inside her had always made her hearing, sight and smell better than most.

She walked over to him and dumped the backpack full of nuts and berries she'd gathered on the ground. There was also a fish she'd found in a small river no wider than a meter. But the fish was very small and probably not enough to fill the stomach of a single child. Especially not a hungry one.

"I went to find food. Shisui is sick so I filled our water bottles and got something to eat. I hoped you guys would be sleeping a little longer." Muttered Naruto sourly. She hated how angry Kakashi was all the time. While she pretended she didn't care, that she enjoyed riling him up, it sort of hurt. It was Kakashi-sensei after all. One of the people Naruto had always looked up to as a role model. He was the best sensei she'd ever met who taught her the importance of teamwork and to never abandoning your comrades.

"Oh." Said Kakashi, for once not lashing out at her for not waiting to receive 'orders.' "Em, what did you find?" He asked and walked over to the fire he must have started while Naruto was away.

They'd lit the fire yesterday, a difficult task since they had to find dry logs and secure a camp fire. The last thing they wanted was to start a forest fire after all, yet the chances of that were slim since it was winter time. But they'd done a surprisingly good job for four children walking blindly around in the woods.

Naruto and Kakashi sat down around the dancing flames before she answered. "Just nuts and a small fish. There was a small stream, but there was very little fish there. I just got the first one I could manage." She answered and started unpacking her backpack while Kakashi was sharpening a branch with his kunai. Once it was sharp enough they could stick the fish at the edge and cook it over the fire.

"Okay, it'll do." He replied, and Naruto knew there was a frown on her face even though she was trying to hide it. Why couldn't he be more appreciative? Thank you. Thanks for the effort. Good job. Anything but this frustrating indifference.

"So both of them are down, huh?" Said Kakashi after half an hour silence. They hadn't cooked the fish yet. They were planning on giving it to either Shisui or Ensui and the boys hadn't woken up yet.

"Yeah. This has been really fun." Said Naruto sarcastically. Kakashi snorted and folded his arms tightly around himself. Maybe he was still cold.

The silence continued. It was still early and the sun was still rising upwards in the sky. The first to break the quiet atmosphere was again the oldest boy. "Why did you jump after them?" He asked slowly, almost reluctantly. "You could have drowned. Probably would have if I didn't come to get you." Kakashi said with a frown.

Naruto looked confused back at him. Her eyes narrowed as if the question he asked didn't make sense to her. "They're my comrades. My friends." She answered eventually. Why didn't Kakashi get this? He was the one who'd taught her this.

"But it wasn't your responsibility. You compromised the mission by going into the water. The mission was to get the scroll while my job was to make sure you got there." Explained Kakashi briskly.

"What? What the hell do I care about a mission if my friends are in trouble? I will never allow my comrades to die, Kakashi." Snapped Naruto angrily.
Was he really saying this? Was she also sick and was currently having a lucid dream?

Kakashi looked stonily at her, as if her words had somehow offended him. Was this really her Kakashi-sensei or a twin he hadn't told them about? "The mission always comes first." He stated simply. "Don't forget that. To protect Konoha and do your job, you always have to follow the rules, even if that means your teammates gets hurt."

Naruto started stuttering, her eyes went wide and her cheeks blushed scarlet in shock and anger.

"How can you say that? Friends and comrades are what make you who you are. If you don't take care of your comrades then we ninjas are nothing more than killing machines. What's the point of living if there's no one there to support you during hard times? Or laugh with you in good? Why is that so hard for you to understand? Konoha ninjas are guardians of the will of fire. The will to endure, but you endure so you can help the village. The village aren't just the buildings Kakashi. Neither the Hokage monument nor the secret clan ninjutsus in the village. They're the people. Konoha is nothing without the people. If you throw away a life to succeed a mission, you're spitting on the foundation that created our village." Ranted Naruto heatedly, her voice having turned loud by the end.

Kakashi didn't seem to have an answer, but he was fuming after her speech. After a minute he finally seemed to find his voice again. "By completing your mission you do in fact protect those people. We become stronger through our success, and scare away our enemies from attacking. If you follow the rules then less people die." He replied angrily.

"I'm not saying you shouldn't follow the rules, Kakashi. By all means always try to complete your mission and do it the best way possible. But faced with the decision between following protocol or saving my friends, I'll always choose my friend. Even you Kakashi, if you got injured in the middle of a battlefield and my mission was to retreat with everyone who could still walk, I'd do anything to save you if I could." Explained Naruto stubbornly.

It was such a stupid conversation. What the hell had happened to Kakashi? And how had he snapped out of it? This brat was nothing like her sensei.

"Em... Do you have some food here?" Asked a weak voice behind them and Naruto and Kakashi both jumped at the sudden interruption. Looking around they saw Ensui sitting up and looking sweaty and flushed.

Great, he was probably sick too.

"Yeah, we have a fish and nuts. Do you need water, Ensui? I filled a container." Said Naruto hurriedly, getting up and trying to get away from this poor imitation of miniature Kakashi-sensei.

"That would be great, thank you Naruto-chan." Answered Ensui and gratefully received his container and a handful of nuts that he placed on the ground to eat later. She started asking how he was doing, which he replied to as she had expected. He was just as sick as Shisui, but he also had a broken leg.

While they talked Kakashi turned and looked over his shoulder at them. His eyes soften a little at the sight of the two kids trying to figure out what to do next. Shisui woke a little bit after, and while the boys looked very ill, they both tried to be helpful. Kakashi turned quickly away again.

No. Complete the mission. His mission was to get these three home safely, not being relieved that they seemed to be holding on. Feelings had no place while on duty.
A little later they all stood ready to leave. Ensui was still being carried by Kakashi while Shisui was attempting his first few steps with Naruto hovering around him. "There's no need for you to help me, Naruto-chan. I can do this on my own. I'm starting to feel better." Lied Shisui as he walked forward, following Kakashi who was already far ahead.

His eyes were glossy and he was hunched forward. It couldn't be clearer that Shisui barely acknowledged where he was. Far less was he able to get around on his own in his current condition.

Naruto glared at him but let the boy walk. "You don't need to tire yourself out. Just lean on me. If I have to I'll carry you all the way home, dattebayo. And stop calling me Naruto-chan. Naruto is fine. I've told you this a hundred times." Answered Naruto while she followed every step Shisui took.

A small chuckle escaped Shisui. "Sorry, but I doubt you're that strong yet... Naruto-chan." He replied as his leg had started shaking slightly.

"Yeah?" Replied Naruto, stopping while Shisui took a couple more shaky steps. While watching his pathetic attempt at hiking through the forest Naruto noticed how the Uchiha was starting to sag lower and lower for each step. After six increasingly shaky strides he lost his footing and fell to the ground. Naruto didn't bother to catch him.

It was better he understood his own condition here where there was grass and bushes to catch him, instead of in some rocky hill where his head could be cracked open.

Shisui fell with a thunk and lay in a heap on the ground. Sweat poured from every pore while his breath was shaky. His eyes were open but unfocused.

"Come on, self-help guy. Today you're on my watch." The blonde said brightly. Walking up to him Naruto bent down, grabbed Shisui's arm and slung it around her shoulder before straightening them both up.

"Lean on me. I'll get us out of here." She added gently. Shisui looked weakly back at her. Their eyes meeting for a brief moment before he slowly nodded.

Anko stood with her team back at the academy while the second year sensei welcomed the students back home. They were currently giving everyone a debriefing and the students were allowed to share stories from their first experience with mission work outside of Konoha's wall.

It was boring as hell, but Anko wasn't paying attention anyway. For over an hour she'd been looking around for Naruto and her team, but so far she'd been out of luck.

At first she thought maybe Naruto was already home. She'd been on a team under Hatake after all. Maybe they broke some record and didn't bother to wait for the rest. But after noticing how nervous the academy sensei looked and the odd glances being passed between the adults in the group, Anko started to worry. It was all confirmed when she saw Minato's anxious expression and Anko immediately realized something wasn't right.

The genin sensei was watching the gates to the academy almost as intensely as she herself was. Obito on the other hand seemed to find the whole situation fantastic. The moron couldn't let the huge grin on his face fade and was looking very pleased over the fact that the only team not having returned yet was Hatake's.

As they were dismissed Anko steered straight for team Minato, her intent clear in her eyes. "Where are Hatake and his team?" She demanded, but couldn't fight the blush creeping up her cheeks. Namkaze Minato was just so handsome.
The blonde man with eyes so much like Naruto looked worryingly down at Anko. It was the first time she realized Naruto and Minato were actually quite similar. Blonde hair, blue eyes, tan skin. But other than that they were different. So she brushed it off as her imagination. "I'm not sure Anko-chan. Their team never made it to the final post. There are people out looking for them and I'll be joining them now that the debriefing is over." He answered apologetically.

"What do you mean 'never made it'?' Exclaimed Anko, feeling her anger boil now that she finally had it confirmed that the annoying little blonde was truly missing. This was just like the time with Emi, except Naruto would never run away.

"It means Bakashi probably got lost in the woods." Said Obito so delighted he looked like he would start dancing.

"Obito you shouldn't joke about this, it is serious this time. Kakashi-kun might be injured or maybe someone on his team is. Something probably happened and you'll regret acting like this if it turns out to be true." Said Rin sternly, meaning every word while her chocolate doe eyes narrowed dangerously at him. Her demeanor went from a curious kitten to a slightly more aggressive grown kitten. Rin had never really pulled off the whole intimidating act very well.

Anko wasn't one to sugarcoat her thoughts or think twice before voicing her opinion, and quickly she grabbed Obito by the neck of his jump suit jacket. "You fucking moron! They might be lying stone, cold dead at the bottom of an earth filled ditch! We just started a freaking war! What if some fucking Iwa trash came across them you big mouthed butter head?!" She shouted while shaking Obito back and forwards violently by his jumpsuit collar.

Minato tried to gently separate them while Obito looked nervously at the furious Anko. Her face had gone red and her brown eyes seemed to be lit with fire.

"Sorry! I'm sorry… eh." Obito trailed off. Anko was forced to let go when Minato slowly pried her fingers away from Obito's neck and stepped in between them for good measure.

"I guess… I just thought... it's Kakashi you know. I didn't realize it might be something else besides the possibility of getting lost in the woods. He's strong so I'm sure whatever happened he'll get them out." He muttered while blushing, clearly hating to admit that his teammate was anything other than a bastard.

"I'm sure we'll find Naruto-chan soon, Anko-chan. You don't need to worry. I'll do my best to find your friend." Said Minato kindly and Anko blushed while looking away.

"I'm not worried about her." She answered lamely, fooling no one.

Minato gave a warm smile to her, not helping her red face lose its color. He turned towards his two accounted for team members while his hands rested on his hips. "Well, I'll be off. You three go home and I'll inform you as soon as we find them."

With a flash he was gone and Anko gaped in shock, temporarily forgetting about her anger at the surprise vanishing act. Had he just evaporated into thin air?

To be continued…
Thank you so much for reading and I hope you enjoyed the chapter! This chapter has been beta'd by the lovely AnjoRemix! The main thing I wanted to show with the outing was how weak Naruto is compared to how she was in the past/future. I also wanted some interaction between Kakashi and Naruto.

On a different note, a few people might be wondering about pairing in his story, and I have to admit… That I've got no idea anymore…

When I first started writing After the Rain it was a KakashixNaruto story. But then I went over to ShisuixNaruto in February, and now I'm wondering if the story should have a pairing at all…. I'm not good with romance, and After the Rain is not really a romance story. I'm not sure romance will add anything since it won't help the plot much.

What do you guys think? This is not a vote, but I'm so unsure it's not even funny… I need some input you could say. Kakashi, Shisui or no pairing at all? If there is a pairing it will be stupidly late in the story, just a warning!

And I'm sorry for the long rant... It's finished now and I'll just end it with wishing everyone a great day!
Chapter six – Lost, Found and Returned

"There probably isn't any meaning in life. Perhaps you can find something interesting to do while you are alive. Like how you found that flower. Like how I found you." - Orochimaru

It had taken them many hours, but they finally found their way out of the woods. The sun had already set on the horizon, and dusk was merging into night when the squad of four finally broke through the forest to find wonderful open terrain. Treeless and flat smooth landscape without any bushes greeted them as far as they could see. It was such a huge relief to them that they were almost shaking in relief. Well, Naruto felt it that way at least, but Shisui who she was still supporting was too tired to do anything but give a shaky breath. The sigh spoke more than a thousand words could describe.

They had been travelling slowly, mostly because Naruto wasn't able to carry Shisui on her back all the time. She'd managed to convince him a few times though. At first his already flushed cheeks had gone ever redder. But in the end he was simply too exhausted to disagree, so swallowing his pride he'd gave in.

With his face burning he'd climbed up on her back and Naruto had been pleased with the opportunity to walk faster. Kakashi had been too, but didn't voice it out loud the way the blonde did. However, Naruto couldn't move as fast as she usually did with Shisui on her back, and after forty minutes her arms had gone numb and Shisui had to walk on his own again.

The jinchūriki had still kept supporting him though. So Shisui walked with his arm over her shoulder so he wouldn't strain himself. Once Naruto had rested her arms for a bit they'd repeat the piggy back ride, and with the constant switch they had progress at least a little faster than they would had. To say it had been slow going would be an understatement, but in the light of day it was easier to maneuver.

When they walked out onto the field they had spotted a village far away, but a village none the less. Kakashi was concerned about moving in an open area he wasn't familiar with. He felt exposed and Konoha was currently at war. Who knew what they could run into here? But looking at his charges he didn't see any other options but to get to the village and hope it was a civilian village with connections to Konoha. And not… well, for example Iwa.

Coming closer they realized it was a civilian village named Kimpo. While it wasn't very large, it had someone willing to help them out.

A woman owning an inn almost by the entrance spotted them and immediately came over to ask what had happened.

Naruto had taken on the role of telling the story, making her eyes wide and teary while explaining their predicament. Shisui, who was still hanging off her arm, helped their cause for a greater effect. The woman named Sayuri was immediately horrified and showed them the way to a common room of her little establishment.

Exhausted and quite hungry, they sat down in the common room of the inn where they were allowed
to stay the night. There were no rooms she could offer, and since they were penniless they didn't complain and eagerly sat down.

The room had no couches, only chairs, so Shisui and Ensui laid straight down on the wooden floor in the small darkly lit room. Both were out before Naruto could ask if sleeping on the floor was a little uncomfortable for them.

"This should at least help some, but we still need to contact Konoha." Stated Kakashi as Naruto found her way to a wooden chair and fell into it with exertion. The chair was quite uncomfortable, but to the blonde it could be passed off as the softest bed. Right now she wasn't being picky about her options.

"I'm going to ask Sayuri-san if we can borrow a messenger bird to send back to the village." Muttered Kakashi to himself, noticing how Naruto's eyes were drooping already. Her head started to slowly fall forwards before snapping back up, as if to pretend she was not just about to fall over in her tired condition.

"Yeah… bird message. Good idea… Kakashi-sensei..." She answered as her head fell sideways again, and this time it didn't snap up.

The silver haired boy snorted as he figured the girl was lost to the world and went in search for their host. By the time he returned to the common room to lay down, Naruto was still sitting awkwardly in the chair. Her feet were curled up and a little drool was escaping the corner of her mouth. Kakashi felt relieved to find out that even Naruto's stamina had its limits.

It had been a long day, and while Shisui was far from the heaviest person in class, Naruto's muscles probably weren't fully developed or strong enough to hold him up for as long as she did. Kakashi felt the soreness in his own arms while he took out his sleeping bag. Yeah, he had to train up some of his own strength and endurance too it seemed.

Naruto dreamed of a stretching wild forest where she ran around, trying to find the exit while Kakashi was the one getting a piggy ride from her. But not the child Kakashi. No, it was the fully grown thirty year old Kakashi while he told her over and over to look underneath the underneath.

Her small frail six year old body was overcome with his weight, and all she could do not to collapse was keep going. Naruto asked why she had to carry him, and he answered that she should already know that. What was his weight anyway to the weight of the world she was already carrying on her shoulders?

Then Jiraiya was the one on her back, telling her he'd left everything for her to fix. He still had a book to finish named Icha Icha orioke no jutsu. Soon she was carrying Orochimaru, and she told him to get off. Naruto didn't like him, and the snake protruding from his arm made her trip every time it sneaked around her legs. Instead he threaten he'd keep holding onto Sasuke if she didn't keep running.

She now knew where she was heading, and getting out of the forest was important.

Anko was waiting for her together with Shikamaru. They had fixed a new genin team with her where Gaara was her new sensei and she was teamed up with Guy and Kabuto. They were going to save killer Bee from the masked man since he had gotten a hold of him.

"Run faster, Naruto." Ordered Tsunade who had been exchanged from Orochimaru. And sitting on top of baa-chan's shoulders was Sai drawing the sunset. The weight was too much, but she kept
running, wanting to get to Anko and Shikamaru.

"If you don't run faster, ugly will get mad at you, dickless." Added Sai and Naruto suddenly felt scared.

"Yes, Naruto-chan! Run!" Shouted Guy who was keeping up with her all of a sudden, Lee and Sasuke were racing next to him. The sight of the Uchiha in green uniform felt completely normal, but his eyes were closed, and she wondered how he could run without seeing.

"Run, Naruto-chan!"

"Naruto-chan."

The blonde jolted awake, staring wide eyed into the face of Shikamaru.

For a moment she was convinced she'd reached the edge of the forest and found him and Anko, but slowly she realized it had been a dream. She shook her head trying to understand why Shikamaru was still in front of her.

"Naruto-chan, are you okay? We're going home to Konoha right away, these parts aren't safe." Said Shikamaru in a deep voice that didn't sound right.

For many moments she stared confused at him, but finally the sleep left her eyes and she realized it wasn't Shikamaru at all, but his father.

A young version of Nara Shikaku, looking startlingly similar to his son, was bending down to her, an arm still on her shoulder after shaking her gently awake.

"Oh..." Was all she could reply while she rubbed her eyes in an attempt to wake up and be aware of her surroundings. The Nara had no scars on his face and the goatee she remembered that he used to have has yet to be grown out. It made him look so much like her lazy friend she would have easily mistaken them even if she had been fully awake.

Behind Shikaku stood a plump man she could only guess was Choji's father Choza. He was looking down at the kids sleeping on the floor while Kakashi was next to him. "I'm going to give them one of my pills, it should help a little." Said Choza after bending down and putting a hand to Ensui's forehead. "They're both burning up, we really should get them to the hospital" He added with concern laced in his voice.

Naruto got out of the chair quickly, feeling pain shoot up her neck as she tried to move her head. Her hand shot to the aching spot, trying to make the stiffness loosen up again. "Are you alright, Naruto-chan?" Asked Shikaku, looking at the way she was trying to massage her muscles.

"Sure, I just slept funny." Naruto replied, earning a snort from Kakashi. She ignored him. "What's the time? When did you get here? Did you receive the letter to Ji- Hokage-sama?" The blonde asked, almost messing up and calling the old man "Jiji".

"It's four thirty in the morning, we got here about three minutes ago, and yes we did receive the letter, that's how we knew where to find you." Explained Shikaku with a small amused smile on his lips. "Can you walk though? You don't seem sick like the others, but Kakashi said you fell in the river too. You really should wear more clothing in winter."

Naruto felt her annoyance grow at the last sentence. How exactly was she supposed to wear more clothes? "I live in the orphanage. I couldn't wear more since this is all I could borrow for the outing." She replied stubbornly, knowing her frustration was misdirected, but she was still too grumpy from
"I see. Well, if you feel alright then we'll go right away." Replied Shikaku and turned towards their small audience. Sayuri had entered the room too, making it rather overfilled. "I'll carry Ensui, I know my cousin is worried sick for her son, and you can take Shisui. Is that okay, Choza?" Asked the Nara while walking towards the still sleeping boys on the floor.

They had to wake them up and fifteen minutes later they were on their way out. Ensui looking paler but just as sick as he'd been with a red face.

"Thank you for taking care of them and letting us know, Sayuri-san. I know many have been very worried about these kids. Me included. Ensui here is my nephew and I'm very thankful you found them." Said Shikaku earnestly as they were about to leave.

Sayuri blushed a little but waved her hand as if to say it was nothing. "Of course I had to help. They're just kids! And anyway, I think they found me more then I found them." She said chuckling and waved them off as they left. Naruto walked backwards and waved eagerly back, making Choza and the Sayuri smile at her antics.

"You had quite the adventure didn't you?" Said Choza while Shisui hang limp on his back, already asleep again but Naruto couldn't really blame him. Walking through a forest as sick as he was could not have been pleasant, no matter how many times he insisted he was 'fine.'

Kakashi seemed to find some insult in Choza's words, and his arms crossed while he walked before mutely nodding. "It could probably have gone better. But hey, at least we made it out. I had the weirdest dream where I was still running through the woods with Ero-sennin on my back." Shared Naruto, making the conscious men look confused back at her.

"Baka, You don't even make sense, who is Ero-sennin?" Asked Kakashi annoyed.

"Oh, Jiraiya of course. That pervert." Answered Naruto with a roll of her blue eyes. Shikaku barked a short laugh while Choza snickered, understanding well what she was referring to.

Minato sighed in relief when he spotted the wild silver hair of Kakashi walking next to Naruto and Nara Shikaku. The worry had been eating at him all day, and the sight of his socially inept student sent waves of relief through him.

"Thank kami you're alright. What happened?" Asked Minato the moment they were within hearing range.

"Minato-sensei!" Exclaimed Kakashi surprised while the blonde next to him smiled brightly. Minato couldn't help but notice the boy on Shikaku's back and how he seemed to be unconscious. He then looked over at Choza who was also carrying a boy. He was awake, but his cheeks were flushed red and he looked very ill.

"A lot. They ended up in the river, almost fell over the waterfall and Ensui here broke his leg. They lost their way after that and ended up in Kimpo village." Explained Shikaku with a worried look over his shoulder at the boy he was carrying.

"I'm so sorry, how is Ensui-kun doing?" He asked but it was obvious it wasn't good.

"We need to hurry, both Ensui and Shisui-kun is burning up with fever and they really need to see a medic." Explained Shikaku and adjusted the boy on his back so he had a better grip.
"I'm sorry for stalling you, let's go." Replied Minato and fell in step next to Naruto. Studying their appearance he concluded that the two of them had definitely gotten out of the events a lot better than the others.

"You two seems fine, I'm glad you're alright. Anko-chan is really worried about you Naruto-chan, you should probably let her know you're okay as soon as we get back to the village." He explained while looking at the little girl. Her clothes were dirty and ripped on her sleeve. It looked like she'd been crawling through something, since the thin jacket she wore had lost some of the buttons.

"Anko will deny everything you just said about worrying, but I'll still go and let her know. I'm sure she gonna' brag about how smoothly her own test went." Answered Naruto and snickered to herself.

Minato chuckled because he could easily picture that. He then looked to Kakashi who was walking with his hands in his pocket and his face tilted downwards. He probably felt bad about how the test had gone for him. The only reason Minato had been able to convince him was to say it was a good leadership lesson. If he ever wanted to be jōnin he need to be able to lead, and that's what this mission was meant to be like for him.

The blonde man now regretted those words.

The real reason he'd entered his team in this was to get them to interact with people, especially Kakashi. This mission was supposed to let Kakashi understand how having comrades affected you. Having subordinates was both a hard and enjoyable job. You start caring about the lives you are responsible for with your own judgements and decisions.

Never for a second did Minato believe Kakashi had made a wrong decision to land them in this state. Sometimes you are just extremely unlucky, and it was unfortunate that Kakashi's first try as a team leader had ended this badly. He, more than anyone on his team, needed this mission success.

"Good job Kakashi, this couldn't have been an easy mission for you, but you got everyone home and they will be alright." Minato said softly, making the young boy look quickly up before his cheek heated and he looked away.

Naruto smiled wickedly at Minato's words and clapped Kakashi on his shoulders. "I think you'll make a wonderful sensei, Kakashi-sensei." Said Naruto.

A shiver went down Kakashi as if he had been electrified. Slowly he met Naruto's eyes, burning annoyance clear in his eyes. "You little… Not that name again! Stop calling me that shorty! And I'll never do anything of this sort ever again." He snapped back, and a less brave soul than Naruto would have backed up from the heat in Kakashi's eyes.

"No I'm serious. You saved us. In fact you saved me twice. It was my own fault I ended up in the river. But I don't think clearly when it comes to comrades so I jumped in and I was of no help at all. Hadn't you come after us we would've fallen down that waterfall. Things could have turned out a lot worse than they did, Kakashi." She said with a gentle smile.

Kakashi didn't seem to know how to respond to that, and mumbled something incoherently before looking away.

"Exactly Kakashi. A leader is those who make sure their team does their best. You did just that in a very hard situation." Said Minato, trying to word it so Kakashi wouldn't associate it with his father's actions. The blonde man knew how closed off Kakashi could become if someone compared him to his father. A man who'd broken the rules to save his comrades, and paid a heavy price for it.
"So how exactly did Ensui-kun and Shisui-kun end up like this?" Asked Minato to steer the conversation a little differently, he was also curious as to how it had happened. He guessed it was the cold weather that had gotten both the boys sick. But Kakashi and Naruto looked fine, so he couldn't be sure.

"It was when they fell in the water. We were trying to cross a river in the forest. The stream was dangerous so we tried to cross it by walking over a fallen tree which lay across it. The tree trunk broke when we were all walking on it. I was close to the other side so I managed to hold on to Naruto while hanging from the side off the cliff. I think Ensui broke his leg when he fell, he was in an odd position and maybe he hit his leg on the trunk. I'm not sure, but he struggled to swim afterwards. Naruto threw herself after them, so I had to save all three." He said this last sentence with a pointed glare in the oblivious girl's direction.

"So everything was wet, and it became dark right afterwards. They got sick from being soaked and outside in winter." Summarized Kakashi with a deep sigh.

"But you seem fine, Naruto-chan. Did you not get wet?" Asked Minato confused.

"She was soaked through and had the least amount of clothing, I've got no idea how she didn't get sick." Answered Kakashi without letting Naruto reply. The blonde sent a frustrated look to her old sensei but nodded to confirm what he was said was correct.

"That was lucky, but maybe you should take it easy. And if you start feeling ill at all, go straight to the hospital alright?" Lectured Minato and ruffled her hair.

Naruto denied the fact that she would be sick, but eventually relented and promised to go to the hospital if she felt sick. It was impossible to resist the Namikaze for too long after all.

It was rare for Naruto to be this excited to see a simple stone wall. But there she was, walking next to Shikaku and was almost dancing with joy at the sight of the village borders fencing in Konoha.

The moment they crossed the borders to the village they headed for the hospital while one of the guards stationed by the entrance shot off towards the Hokage tower to let the Third know the missing children had been found.

Meanwhile the rescue party followed Naruto and Kakashi up to the hospital with Ensui and Shisui. The man at the entrance desk took one look at Ensui and Shisui before he called up to the nurses to come quickly.

The two boys were admitted immediately while Naruto had to wait for her own check up with Kakashi.

The older boy was annoyed he had to have a physical too, but Shikaku insisted that it was better to be on the safe side.

It was a very crowded room and Naruto used her time studying her fellow patients while she waited for her own appointment. A few were obviously injured while most looked fine. Maybe they were just sick or waiting for someone who was sick.

The Third Hokage came in after twenty minutes of them waiting and he had two people in tow. Naruto could tell by their appearance alone that they had to be the father of Shisui and the mother of Ensui.

They were heading straight for the small group sitting in a corner of the waiting room, people making
way for them as they spotted the Hokage.

"I'm glad to see you two are well Naruto-chan, Kakashi-kun. I hear Shisui-kun and Ensui-kun is currently being treated because of their high fevers." Said the Hokage to the group, not really telling them anything they didn't already know.

"Are you two waiting for news or have you not had your own checkup yet?" Asked the Third and studied the two youngest of them.

"We're waiting for our check-up, Hokage-sama." Stated Kakashi while folding his arms and looking impatiently towards the help desk. The Third studied both the kids with a calculating gaze to see if anything was out of place.

"I see. Then I hope you won't have to wait too long. You have to excuse me though, I'm quite busy and I have a few appointments to get to. I hope your appointments go well and that Shisui-kun and Ensui-kun will make a quick recovery." Said Hiruzen before he nodded to Shikaku and Choza before turning towards the service desk. Shikaku walked up to Ensui's mother while Shisui's father sat down next to Naruto in the Nara's empty seat.

After a quick introduction Naruto found out his name was Uchiha Kagami. They had to wait for a long time since the hospital was getting more people the longer they waited and a lot of the people being brought in looked horribly injured. Clearly they came from a battle that had taken place somewhere.

As Naruto took in the sight of a man missing his left arm Kagami suddenly started talking. Telling her all sorts of stories she hadn't asked for. The blonde suspected Kagami was trying to distract her from the injuries being strolled by one after the other.

He seemed to know the Third quite well since his father who Kagami had inherited his name from had been close friends with Hiruzen. He had also once babysat Asuma. An event which hadn't been repeated since Asuma had spent the whole four hours crying out for his dad. Shisui had just been born and Asuma was three, making the combination a nightmare with two crying kids. Naruto had giggled at the idea of the cool and collected Asuma crying like a baby. But then again, they had all been children at one point. Technically Naruto was a child again as they spoke.

While they exchanged stories, mostly entailing Shisui since he was the only one they had in common, the other two males stayed silent. Choza looked like he was dozing off and Kakashi was leaning back in his seat, staring up at the ceiling tiles. It was after two hours of waiting and five visits up to the help desk to ask about the status of Shisui and Ensui, that Naruto finally noticed that Kakashi looked weird.

Before anyone could have stopped her, Naruto's hand shot forwards and landed on Kakashi's forehead. The silver haired boy had not been paying attention to her, but his reflexes was quick and Naruto's arm was viciously smacked away before the blonde could be sure of her suspicion.

"Ouch! That hurt!" Snapped Naruto, feeling her hand sting and go red where Kakashi's hand had knocked hers away.

"Reflexes. What were you doing?" He answered monotonously, not bothering to move from his position and continued finding the lamp above his head very interesting.

"I think you're sick too, Kakashi-sensei." Answered Naruto concerned.

Kakashi grimaced and folded his hands in front of him. "I'm fine. And stop calling me sensei. It
wasn't funny to begin with and now it's downright frustrating."

Naruto pouted and looked up at Kagami with an unsatisfied expression. "I think he's sick, but he didn't fall in the water." Stated Naruto, feeling a little confused at the aspect.

"You do look pale Kakashi-kun." Added Choza who had leaned forwards when Naruto had said Kakashi looked unwell. "Maybe the other two boys gave you the illness. You did carry Ensui-kun for a very long time after all." He said while studying Kakashi's face. The boy being scrutinized huffed and looked away, clearly disagreeing.

"So? Naruto carried Shisui almost as much as I carried Ensui, and she's just as annoying as ever." Muttered Kakashi, having problems finding an argument against their claims.

The truth was that he was starting to feel unwell. But his physical condition was none of their business. If Kakashi was sick the only ones who had any right to pry into that was his superiors. Which meant the people at the mission desk and his teammates who would be affected.

Kakashi also couldn't stand showing weakness. In that sense he was a lot like a cat, and when he got sick or injured he liked to remove himself from other people, just like cats did. Licking his wounds in private. Though he considered himself a dog person in general, there was no denying he hated to be around people when he was at his most vulnerable. Most of all annoying people who drained him of energy just by looking at them. Like Obito.

Or worse, Naruto.

He was perfectly sure that if Naruto got sick she'd cling to anything breathing she could get a hold of. Moaning and wanting company while she was feeling unwell. It was also why he was quite certain that she was not feeling ill yet. While she was still calling him 'sensei' and being an attention craving annoyance, she wasn't any different than she'd been since the moment he met her the day before. Which also ticked him off a little.

Naruto had even fallen into the river. She'd been sharing a duvet with two sick boys and she had been in close proximity to Shisui for a whole day. Still, the only thing about the blonde that looked tired was her clothes, and they had been shabby to begin with.

Naruto had given a snarly reply to his words, but he hadn't caught them. "hmm… Did you say something?" He asked absent mindedly, starting to really feel unwell at this point and again ignoring the dumbfound look on Naruto's face.

Whatever it was Naruto was about to repeat Kakashi never got to know, because right then a nurse finally came over and told them that Kakashi could come in for a checkup. Which was a blessing in disguise really. With a polite farewell to Choza and Kagami and a nod to Naruto, he followed after the nurse while he wondered how to best get well before the chūnin exam in two weeks.

"Naru!"

"Naruto-chan!"

The shouts were exclaimed in unison the moment Naruto came in through the front door of the orphanage, Anko was right on front of her in a second, hugging her hard. Shocked, but a little pleased, Naruto smiled over Anko's shoulder to MadamMay.

"Hi guys, the trip lasted a little longer than we expected." Said Naruto sheepishly when Anko released her. Madam May smiled back while Anko ruffled her hair.
"What took you so long?" Asked Anko with a small frown and Madam May came up to them, embracing Naruto tightly before doing a quick examination of her condition with her eyes alone.

For the umpteenth time that day Naruto summarized what had happened. It was only one o'clock in the afternoon and the kids were still in class while Anko and Madam May had apparently found a temporary comradeship while waiting for her return. "And after finishing with my checkup I came back here." Finished Naruto smiling widely. "It was funny though, I think Kakashi caught the illness from Ensui, because he wasn't looking too good when he went in for his checkup. And you know he's taking the chūnin exam soon." Giggled Naruto before turning serious at that thought. "I do hope he'll get better though, he's just the type to wander into danger despite his condition being bad. He can be a bastard but I don't want him getting injured."

"Language, Naruto-chan." Said Madam May seriously, scolding Naruto for her bad words before sending Anko an angry glare. She probably thought Anko was giving the blonde a colorful vocabulary, but Naruto ignored it.

While Madam May went into the kitchen to make some food for Naruto, Anko and the blonde sat down in the food hall. The genin was off duty for the day because Orochimaru was on a mission. Normally she would be training, but she had waited for Naruto instead. After making sure her friend was alright she started talking about the chūnin exam instead.

"I can't wait! I'll make chūnin for sure!" Exclaimed Anko while Naruto stuffed her face with porridge that Madam May finished a bit ago.

"But how can you take the exam alone? I thought it was a team sort of thing." Asked Naruto off handily, sprouting a little food from her mouth since she hadn't swallowed yet.

"That's disgusting, Naru. But I can and I will. Orochimaru-sensei is setting me up with another team who is one member down. The last member made chūnin a year ago so I'll take his place." Explained Anko while the blonde nodded in understanding.

"That's awesome! I'll be cheering for you during the third round!" The blonde replied excitedly, but immediately regretted those words.

"What do you mean? Final round?" Asked Anko confused.

"Uh.. Well, there isn't just one test is there? I mean… they have to filter people out to find out who's the best option for chūnin promotions, right? I'm just guessing." She added quickly, not wanting to seem like she knew more than she did.

"Oh… You're probably right. I never thought about that." Answered Anko thoughtfully, sending Naruto a considering glance.

"Well, no matter if I get promoted or not I'll still move out soon. I've almost saved up enough money for a deposit on an apartment. I can't wait to get out of this place." Said Anko and gestured around the room.

Naruto looked up startled, missing when she tried to fill her mouth with porridge and smeared food on her chin instead. "What!? You're moving out?" She asked startled.

"Well, duh. I don't want to live here anymore. I'll do much better on my own, I hate living here." Stated Anko, folding her hands and leaning back in her chair.

"That's too bad. I'll miss you here and who's gonna' scare away Akiko and the girls when you're gone?" Naruto complained, feeling truly sorry for the loss of Anko at the orphanage. "Hey, can I
come visit you? Maybe I can crash on your couch too?" She asked eagerly, but Anko smacked her over the head in answer.

"You can't sleep away from the orphanage except when you have a leave of absent from the academy or someone higher up in the system. Like someone in the council. You're not legally an adult, and unless you graduate you won't be that until you're eighteen. Do you not think I've tried that already? Idiot. But you better come visit me during daytime, or I'll kick your ass."

Naruto smiled wistfully to her and then raised her bowl of porridge and emptied it into her mouth straight from the bowl. "Yeac'h, Naru you have no manners! If you eat like that in my new place I'll kill you, shorty!"

A month later Anko did indeed make chūnin, but Naruto didn't get to see the finals because of how the exams were arranged during war times.

There was no need for a tournament. After all there would be no one from other villages participating because of the war. No need to waste money and time when everyone who'd watch it was already inside the village. Instead, from what Anko told Naruto in great detail, it was held in the old fortress in the middle of the forest of death. The only ones allowed to watch were the participant's teammates and sensei plus all the exam proctors.

Anko spent a whole week away from the orphanage while doing her exam, and came home with ripped clothes, a few bruises, scrapes and her left wrist in bandages. It was just sprained, so luckily she'd be fine in no time.

The one big difference was her glowing smile on her usually scowling features when she showed every kid in the food hall her new chūnin vest and bellowed so loudly they could probably hear it all the way to the gates. "I MADE CHŪNIN!"

The dark haired chūnin had joined Naruto by her table. Making Akiko and her crew eat up in record speed and leave so fast you'd think Anko was a fire jutsu instead of an eight year old girl. She'd then told in rich description how the exam had been and what she'd been tested at. Naruto listened with rapt attention since the exam sounded different from the one she'd been in herself.

"And after Genma and Asuma had their final match we had a two hour break. It was so nerve wrecking! Then all the finalists were asked to come to the fighting arena, and Hokage-sama called up those who had earned a promotion. That was me, Kakashi, Raidō and Guy! Only four, and I was one of them!" Exclaimed Anko excitedly, clutching at the green vest she'd laid on the table when she sat down.

"That's awesome, dattebayo. So Kakashi and Guy made it too?" Wondered Naruto and smiled when Anko nodded absent mindedly.

"Mhm, they had their final match against one another, and Hatake actually won that one but not by much." Replied Anko and first now realized her lentil soup had gone cold with a thin layer starting to emerge on the surface. She hurriedly dug in, gulping down the plain food as quickly as she could.

Since the war started the quality of food had dropped considerably in the orphanage. It had never been high quality, but now it was downright depressing.

They used to get a glass of milk during breakfast with sugar and jam to make the porridge tastier. But that was long gone. They had water to every meal and the food usually consisted of soup or plain rise.
Konoha was cutting down on all expenses except warfare, resulting in the fact that the orphanage had recently had a few more runaways who believed they’d do better on their own.

Madam May had been asked to identify a thirteen year old girl only last week who’d been found a few kilometers outside Konoha. It was an orphan alright, but also a girl who died from a slit throat.

Since they saved up on hot water, washing of clothes were done more rarely. A few of the better teachers had quit because the pay the orphanage could offer had been reduced, and in general the standards had fallen.

Needless to say it was lucky the outing had gone as well as it did for Naruto and her team. All activity outside Konoha had been prohibited two weeks ago because of the rapid growing numbers of attacks close to the village. And a few days ago there had been an official instalment of food coupons instead of money to rationalize the food supply.

But that rule was only for the civilians.

While Naruto understood that ninjas usually ate more than civilians, they did a lot of physical exercise after all, she could also understand the jealousy civilians had towards the guards of Konoha. There was a big unbalance in the system now that the third war had officially started and the civilians were the ones who struggled the most.

Naruto was also nervous about her place in the academy, since it was rumored that they would start taking payment to be allowed in. She had no money what so ever, but Anko didn't believe they'd do that. Simply because the demand for ninja had gone up with about a hundred percent raised rate. If anything she believed it would be easier to get through it. This would result in more fighters on the battlefield, but also a higher death toll of kids.

"So do you get a pay rise now that you've made chūnin?" Wondered Naruto aloud, voicing the conclusion from her long string of thoughts.

"Oh yeah! I'll be doing more serious missions too, so no more D ranks. Not that I've done many of them... But they're actually talking about making the academy students do some of them now since everyone who's graduated is needed at higher ranked missions. And that reminds me, I've found an apartment." Said Anko in a long rant, again forgetting about her meal.

"Oh?" Answered Naruto surprised, feeling dread when she realized Anko would probably leave any day now.

"Yeah, it's not big, but it's really hard to find a place. Everything in my price range has been snatched up right away. I hate war time. It makes everything so much more expensive." Anko muttered and stirred her cold soup absent mindedly.

"I don't think it's more expensive, we're just poorer." Answered Naruto with a shrug.

"I actually accepted it before the exam started. I did it on my way to the forest of death." Replied Anko uncertainly, catching the sour mood Naruto had fallen into.

"That's great, Anko. I'll help you settle in, dattebayo. Maybe I can get some of my friends from the academy to help out too? Not Ensui though, he's still walking around with a cast." Replied Naruto and got up to put her dirty dishes on the rack next to the sink. There were two more days until it was her turn to be on wash up duty, it was one of the more boring tasks every kid took turn doing.

"He's still a cripple?" Asked Anko surprised. Naruto would have bet anything that the older girl would be out of the orphanage before it was her turn to do the washing. Which meant Naruto would
probably have to take her shift. Great.

"Yeah, but the cast will be off in two weeks. Though I still don't think he's up for moving stuff yet, dattebayo."

Naruto, Iruka and Shisui looked curiously and a little apprehensive around the bare room.

They were all holding one box each. Naruto's box contained everything Anko owned from the orphanage. Which was basically the stuff she'd bought since becoming a genin months ago. Iruka's box was a set of cutlery and pans Anko had managed to buy at a flee market very cheaply, and Shisui's contained her bowls, plates and cups gained from the same place as the rest of the kitchen equipment.

Anko herself was carrying a futon under one arm, her backpack filled with different sort of weapons and a bag in her remaining hand. The bag had toiletries and packages of rice and tea.

They stood in the entrance hall of her newly rented apartment. It was on basement level, so the windows were high up on the wall. Shaped as long narrow openings which lit up the ceiling efficiently, but not the floor area which were too far down for the light to reach.

The dark colors of the room absorbed the light and none of the surfaces reflected the sunbeams efficiently. It resulted in a stark contrast from outside to inside, making Naruto squint constantly for the first few minutes inside until her eyes had adjusted enough. You could also see the feet of people walking by on the street above, and Naruto wondered how the apartment would hold up if there was a flooding.

It was a bare studio apartment with a simple sink propped next to the doorway of Anko's tiny bathroom close to the hallway entrance. The main room itself was dark and clad with old wooden panels and bare concrete floor. It was a depressing place but Anko seemed to love it anyway.

If anything, Naruto was sure this must have been a butcher's workshop at some point, since there were some suspicious stains on the floors.

"Okay, you take the equipment to the sink, Iruka. I'll get a hold of a shelf to store them in later. Maybe I can even make one myself! You just leave my bag on the floor underneath the corner window Naruto. And Shisui, hmmm… Just put the towel in the bathroom and the leave the cups and plates in the box next to the sink. I'll figure out the rest later." Anko instructed and walked with Naruto to fold out her futon underneath one of the two windows in her apartment.

They all did as instructed. It wasn't a large place, so Naruto only had to take a few steps before she stood by the opposite wall.

"Gyah!" Came the scream from Iruka by the "kitchen", and everyone turned towards him. He was smacking vigorously at the wall with a wooden box containing forks.

"What?" Asked Naruto confused, coming up next to him. There was a dark smear of something gooey on the porcelain of the sink, and Naruto guessed it had not long ago been a very large cockroach. "Ugh… At least the orphanage isn't infested." Said Naruto sourly and turned towards Anko. "Are you sure about this Anko?" She wondered carefully, already knowing the answer but still felt the need to ask for the fifteenth time. Anko put on a defiant face and marched up to the sink.

"Of course I am, Naru. I'll research some poisons. I'm sure Orochimaru-sensei knows tons and I'll have this place insect free within two days. This is my new home, so be careful about what you're saying." She said threateningly and Iruka moved sideways away from the older girl. He was clearly
quite intimidated by her presence.

"It seems... Intimate." Said Shisui coming out of the bathroom. He was still carrying the box but it was now stained. "There's some sort of leakage in the shower though. You should tell your landlord."

Anko bristled, but Shisui hadn't said anything offensive so instead she went to check out the problem herself.

"This is a shit-hole." Stated Iruka in a whisper the moment Anko was out of view. Naruto shrugged, looking up around the dark room.

"It's her choice. It's not like I can help her out with finding a better place." Muttered Naruto dejectedly.

"It stinks in the bathroom and it's a lot of mold there. I hope Orochimaru-sama has a large enough repertoire of poisons for her to use." Muttered Shisui and looked carefully around.

"Don't worry. I'm sure he has more than enough, dattebayo." Naruto bit out in a whisper.

"Who lived here before? It's really filthy." Murmured Iruka and glanced skeptically towards the sink, but jumped at the sound of trampling feet coming towards them.

"He died. The landlord didn't know though, so he didn't notice the body until he came down to get the rent the dead guy hadn't paid. Found him stone cold on the couch where he'd probably been rotting for a month." Said Anko and came out from the bathroom with a stubborn expression, probably having overheard the comment about the state of her new home.

"Oh, maybe it's haunted too then!" Snickered Shisui, but it wasn't Anko who snapped at him.

"Gah! Don't say that, Shisui!" Cried Naruto and shivered. She hated ghost... The place wasn't haunted was it?

"It's not haunted, idiot!" Snapped Anko sourly and she put her hands on her hips. "But it became cheaper since no one wanted to live where someone has been lying dead for so long. It's been on the market for four months without anyone picking it up despite it's good location. It's actually less expensive than I'd been expecting, which means I can afford things like a table and a couch if I go to a yard sale." Anko told them seriously and then she turned towards the bathroom.

"I just hope I don't have to pay for that damage though, plumbing is really expensive." She added, sounding a little worried at the cost implication.

Iruka smiled and looked towards the bathroom. "I have a neighbor who might be able to help. He's a plumber." Suggested Iruka, trying to make up for the snide comment she'd overheard him say earlier.

While Iruka and Anko discussed the matter of fixing the pipes, Shisui turned towards Naruto. "We have an old dresser in the attic we're no longer using. Maybe Anko-san wants it?" He said thoughtfully, looking at the bare walls and concrete surfaces where the boxes and bags lay randomly on the floor. They didn't have anywhere to go.

"Yeah, she'd like that, Shisui. Anko probably don't want to mess up her new chūnin vest." Naruto replied and chuckled at the idea. "Let's go ask your dad right away. It sounds like Anko is bargaining with Iruka, so it'll probably be a while before they notice we're missing."
hank you so much for reading, I hope you liked this chapter which has been beta'd by the wonderful AnjoRemix, just like all the other ones.

Also, I want to say thank you to everyone who let me know what they thought about pairing in the last chapter!

I'm really happy so many of you took the time to let me know, and I can't thank you enough. Though peoples opinions were pretty wide spread. Fifteen would prefer Kakashi, nineteen would prefer Shisui, fourteen don't care either way or prefer no pairing at all and two would like Anko.

So… well… That is rather mixed in my opinion so I think instead of choosing right now, I'm going to wait and see where the story takes me. The characters are very young at the moment, and few have grown into the persons they'll become later on in life at this stage. When I see how the changes affects the characters interaction I'll have a clearer picture.

Part of the reason I introduced the subject in the last chapter was because I'm afraid someone will be disappointed. Many choose to read a story based on who the pairing will be, and gets very frustrated if they're introduced to another one, which they might not like at all, after reading through chapter after chapter. The same goes for those who don't want any pairing and suddenly gets one. And in After the Rain, if there is a pairing at all, it will be very late in the story. I think it's safe to say that we'll be well into the 100 000 word count before even hints of a romance will start appearing… So yeah, I'm still undecided, but the moment I know myself I'll let you guys know too.

If you really can't stand a story without the pairing you want I don't really recommend continuing to read After the Rain, since I can't guarantee anything. As I've said before this isn't a romance story, and a pairing doesn't add much and will not take up a lot of the story no matter what I choose to do.

But with that said I really appreciated all the feedback I got about the subject. Some people gave me a lot to consider which can help out the plot. Even if it made me more confused than I was originally. Seriously, I'm split three ways at the moment...
Chapter seven – Rookie Mistakes and Rookie of the Year

"In this world, whenever there is light, there are also shadows. As long as the concept of winners exist, there must also be losers. The selfish desire of wanting to maintain peace causes wars, and hatred is born to protect love." - Uchiha Madara

One year later...

Kakashi ran after his sensei, wondering if they were heading in the right direction. Around them explosions were going off in all possible directions. This had not been part of their plan. It had previously been an easy escort mission but now they were dealing with too many enemies to make sense of the situation.

"Kakashi! Behind you!" Shouted Obito just in time. The silver haired boy looked quickly over his shoulder and dodged just in time as an Iwa ninja slashed down his katana where he'd previously been standing.

Kakashi landed awkwardly, and let gravity pull his body down before rolling sideways and getting back up to his feet. By the time he was back on his feet he had his tanto out and readied himself for what came next.

His team was scattered around the field, Minato holding the corpse of the man they were supposed to have seen safely to his home. The mission had failed completely when he'd been hit by a Shuriken in the back and died from the impact.

"What do we do sensei?!" Shouted Rin who looked very out of place. She was constantly looking at the man she'd been talking to when he'd been shot down, her pupils dilated and her pulse escalated to the point you could actually see it hammering in her neck's vein.

"We're retreating. Take my hand, all of you." Minato shouted that ordered to Kakashi and Obito more than to Rin since they were further away.

Obito ducked behind a boulder as a sea of explosion tags were shot his way. The tips of his hair sticking up over the edge of the boulder were scorched away from the heat of the explosions.

He was in a similar state as Rin. It was the first time they'd ended up in the crossfire of the actual war, and it couldn't be more obvious that they were scared out of their minds. But strangely the others panic calmed Kakashi down. His head was working faster than usual and Kakashi felt more clear headed and in control of himself than ever before. Unlike the other two, the adrenaline rush was working for Kakashi instead of against him.

Kakashi clashed with an Iwa ninja who was trying to separate him from Minato while a horde of ninjas went for his sensei and Rin. Meanwhile Obito was terrified from behind his hiding place.

It was pandemonium, and while the attack had taken team Minato by surprise, it didn't look like the enemy was any better organized then themselves. While they outnumber them, they didn't work together and would approach solo, as if they'd heard the sounds and came to help out.
Kakashi decided it was better to get to Obito than to Minato. It was a good possibility that he himself would get slashed down by his sensei in the confusion of ninjutsu and explosions. Especially when Minato was doing his teleporting technique to flash in and out of substance.

The enemy he ran into on his way towards his teammate was a little older than himself, but was easily taken down once Kakashi noticed that the Iwa ninja wasn't covering his left side properly. One precise jab of his tanto into the kidney and the boy started bleeding so much it splashed over Kakashi.

While the boy was still falling to his knees and crying out in agony, Kakashi was running at full speed towards Obito who was now shakily getting out from his hiding place. "Be more useful, Obito!" Ordered Kakashi as a war cry came from a group of Iwa ninja a little further down the forest trail.

"Ah... Ye.. yeah!" Answered Obito while he tried to ready himself. Kakashi stepped in front of him, cursing that Obito seemed to be petrified by the whole situation.

"There's no room for hesitation now, Obito. Kill or be killed. That's all you have to do. Shut down your emotions and concentrate on surviving. There is no room for pity in this world." Kakashi stated in an unusually deep voice, his eyes narrowing in on the enemy closest to him.

Obito looked lost back to his teammate, wondering how on earth he'd ever be able to do such a thing.

The blonde seven year old jinchūriki, soon to be eight, sat in a mold eaten puffy chair in the small apartment belonging to Anko while the owner lay flat on the couch. The molds had been removed, but it didn't stop the chair from being previously damaged.

But the place had seen a real change, and while the light was still dimly lit and the furniture was all second or third hand stuff Anko had found randomly, it was still hundred times better than it had been originally.

Anko could be quite the nester, and had worked hard to get her new home into a comfortable and livable space. She was currently drinking her fifth cup of tea while giving Naruto a recap of her latest mission and why it had gone to hell.

"They came from nowhere. NO where, I tell you. Orochimaru-sensei just turned around and sliced the guy open without looking. And I stood there just wondering what I should do; it was ten to two after all. So I went for the closest, and I swear, he must have been jōnin, because he was fucking strong you know. But I held him off, so we won and they all died." Anko boasted while looking at the bandages on her wrist.

Her hand was healing slowly but surely and the chūnin didn't really think much about the gash she'd received during the battle.

"Sure, sure. Orochimaru is your prince in shining snake shelled armor. Why you find that freak so fascinating I'll never know. He's creepy, evil and dangerous." Answered Naruto without batting an eyelid when Anko glared at her.

It was hardly the first time the blonde voiced her opinion about Anko's sensei, and the older girl was used to it by now. Still, she often didn't let Naruto get away with her brash words.

This exact topic had once been the source to their most damaging fight to date. Unlike their usual banter where they both had a habit of ending up with various levels of cuts and bruises, this one had
just been words. A weapon both girls knew all too well that could hurt much more than any fist. They hadn't spoken for two months afterwards, but slowly they were patching things up again.

"He is a sage, a sannin, a jōnin, world famous and a damned good sensei. You're just jealous." Answered Anko with a scowl.

"All those things could be applied to ero sennin, yet I never bash Minato-san for liking his sensei." Replied Naruto with a huff, uncrossing and crossing her legs as she tried to get comfortable.

"Jiraiya is the man who saved you, of course you like him. And you wouldn't dare go against Minato-san since he's a jōnin and you worship the ground he walks on." Replied Anko with a snort.

"I think you mixed the two of us up there, Anko." Replied Naruto slyly.

Anko blushed and jolted up in a sitting position. "Naru!" She cried outraged, as if she hadn't been suggesting things first. The blonde smiled mischievously back, not caring anymore that Anko had a crush on her father. It wasn't like she stood a chance, and Anko was no older than nine, soon ten, and who ended up with the person they had a crush on as kids anyway?

At such a young age most were in love of the idea of being in love more than anything else.

Half an hour later Anko finished her now cold cup of tea while they switched subject to Naruto's graduation exam coming up in half a year.

"I'll make it, at least now that Ero-sennin taught me the Kage Bunshin. I can't make a normal Bunshin to save my life, and all they expect out of you is some sort of clone." Said Naruto, secretly thrilled Jiraiya had picked up her complete lack of genjutsu skills.

He had been very helpful the last time he came to visit her, telling her all he was allowed about the war and what she should expect when she became genin. The Kage Bunshin was a result of Naruto telling him exactly why she struggled with the technique.

"I use too much chakra. It's like stopping a river with one hand and expect only a few drops of water to escape. I just don't have that chakra control."

The result had been exactly what she had hoped for, and after Ero-senin returned from his 'research' she could again safely use her Kage Bunshin technique.

"You're lucky he bothers with your sorry ass, Naru. You'd be completely useless if he didn't find these solutions for you." Stated Anko haughtily.

"Without Ero-sennin I'd still be lost somewhere in Kumo, dattebayo. So yes, I do know how lucky I am to have him, Anko." Snapped Naruto and scowled at the dark haired girl.

"Well, you have now skipped both pre-academy and a year of the academy. There's not many who can manage that. Usually it's only clan kids who manages." Replied Anko thoughtfully as she was refilling her tea by her kitchen counter.

"Pre-academy?" Naruto wondered aloud.

"Seriously..." Muttered Anko and walked back to her seat with her sixth cup of the afternoon. "Pre-academy is basically the same as the orphanage school, except they don't skip out on ninja history and chakra practice. Many civilians go there too before regular education; it's just a preparation for the academy. You know, so you're actually accepted when the time comes." Explained Anko as she walked back and leaned into the cushions of her shabby couch.
She'd found it on a yard sale and eagerly bought it with the little money she'd saved up. Naruto and Iruka had been the ones to carry it back while Anko shouted instructions down the narrow staircase of her building.

"Why didn't I go there then?" Naruto asked in confused. She was happy she hadn't, but it was strange she'd ended up straight at the academy. When she thought about it like this though, it made more sense.

In her own time, the academy taught a class for at least six years. You started at six years old and graduated when you were twelve. It was the norm in her old time, but here it was common for everyone to graduate at nine, or if you failed the exam first time, at ten. If you had this pre-academy system you had a few more years of training.

"Because toddlers start the pre-academy. It's like pre-school. Mostly you just sit around painting flowers or play outside. They focus more on physical condition and helps children access their chakra, that way the academy has less to work on if you manage to get in. Of course don't forget the reading and writing portion as well." Explained Anko while she sipped at her steaming tea.

"Oh, and I had already found out about chakra, so I got to skip it. That makes sense." Said Naruto thoughtfully.

"It also helped you had managed to survive by yourself for months in the wild. How on earth an idiot like you managed that is beyond me, but maybe it's that ridiculous luck of yours that saw you through it." Added Anko with a sly grin. It was clear where Anko had picked that grin up. She spent way too much time around Orochimaru.

"Hah, as if. I'm just awesome. Deal with it." Replied Naruto and stuck her tongue out at her friend. It resulted in a sarcastic laugh and a long lecture about how Anko was so much better than her.

As Naruto left Anko's apartment that evening she decided to take the long route home this time. She enjoyed the calmness of the veining daylight and used the time to get a few more minutes of silence before she was back with her chatty roommates.

Not that they talked much with Naruto specifically anymore, the fact that she had chosen Anko over them was not forgotten. And probably never would.

The blonde didn't see a problem with that though. While she liked the girls in their own way they had nothing in common except a civil status as an orphan. Akiko was also growing into a social butterfly, and while the brunette was one of the few who tolerated Naruto more than most, she still kept her distance for the sake of her reputation.

Naruto took a short cut through a dark side-valley and her mind drifted to other trivial daily life things. She wondered idly what they would be having for supper, and if there would be any left by the time she returned. Food was definitely scarce, but by now Naruto took very little notice of it.

After a year of warfare with a lot of defeats on Konoha's side, the orphanage was becoming more depressing than ever. Anko wasn't there either, making sure that Naruto used most of her time there by herself in a corner while the rest of the children played with one another.

But she preferred it that way. It was difficult to play a young child all the time, and with Anko or Iruka she felt at easy and let the pretense go. While at the orphanage the solidarity she'd once despised was now used on plotting. Wondering how she could help. What she could change.

The thoughts had been occurring more frequently the closer she got to graduation. Because once she
had that headband she could much easier make changes that hadn't happened the first time around. Like hunting down Akatsuki members before they got too powerful. Like that masked man…

Naruto sighed as she crossed an open square next to one of the smaller parks in Konoha, noticing a boy sitting at the side of the road, staring off into nothing particular.

It took Naruto a long moment to realize who it was. Obito.

"Obito!" Shouted Naruto across the square, making him look up as she jogged over to say hello. The blonde had long ago decided to befriend this guy but she rarely ran into him, making it difficult to execute her intentions.

"Oh, Naruto. It's been a long time since I saw you last, what are you doing?" He asked just as Naruto came to a stop in front of him.

"I'm heading back to the orphanage. I have to be back by seven if I don't want to be given wash duty tomorrow." Answered Naruto.

"Seven is your curfew?" Replied Obito

"Yeah, Madam May isn't one to be fooled easily either. But I know a Bunshin technique that sometimes comes in handy if I run low on time." Stated Naruto sheepishly.

"Well that's good. I suck at the Bunshin technique. It's the reason I almost failed my genin exam." Obito said with a weak chuckle. Naruto had the impression Obito wasn't really with her. That his mind was far away, pondering some other aspect while he absentmindedly answered Naruto's questions.

"Huh… I sucked at the normal Bunshin technique too, but I've got an alternative that suits me better. I'm planning on using that during my exams since there's no way in hell I'll manage to do a normal non corporal one." Said Naruto and sat down next to Obito, wondering when he'd snap out of his mood. Not for a while it seemed.

"Good for you." He said and looked down at his hand folded in his lap. Naruto followed his line of sight and noted the bandages sticking out from underneath his sleeve.

"What happened? Are you alright?" Naruto asked out of concern.

"I'm fine, but that's not because of my own power… I..." He stopped and seemed to have gotten a better hold of himself before smiling disarmingly to Naruto.

"Heh, it's just a stupid scratch from my last mission. We got attacked unexpectedly and the battle was really wild. But no worries. I'll be fine in no time." He said and laughed warmly while he straightened his goggles with his uninjured hand.

Naruto raised an eyebrow. He was so similar to herself it was almost uncanny. The way he tried to fool her by putting on the cheery act, how he couldn't do a Bunshin very well for exam, the jumpsuit and the whole aura he emitted was so similar it could have been her own self she was looking at instead.

"So you messed up on your latest mission. What caused you to get this depressed? I doubt an injured arm would have you this sad. Was the mission unsuccessful?" Naruto asked brutally, cutting away his smile with a few short sentences.

As if on cue Naruto noticed his eyes growing wet, as if he was about to cry and Naruto felt her
stomach turn. Had something really happened? Something bad? Had anyone on his team gotten injured… Or killed? Had Naruto's presence in the past screwed up the time-line already?

"Um… It wasn't my fault! The man we were escorting was shot down out of nowhere by a shuriken. Don't blame me for that!" Shouted Obito in offence, shuffling sideways while keeping in the tears Naruto could see wanted to fall.

"What about your team? Is everyone alright? Minato, Kakashi and Rin? Are they alright?" Naruto asked urgently, closing in the space Obito had created between them.

"Wha- Yeah. They're fine. I'm the one who got hurt. Again." Said Obito hollowly, and before Naruto could do much more than open her mouth, the tears started falling. The blonde realized it wasn't sorrow Obito was feeling, but frustration. Those were angry tears.

"Gah!" Shouted Obito and looked away while he tried to dry away the wetness. Clearly uncomfortable that he'd started crying in front of a girl he barely knew.

"So you're disappointed you couldn't do more." Concluded Naruto and focused on a building in front of them, trying to give Obito some privacy.

"..." He didn't answer, but Naruto heard a short sniffle before he turned back towards her. Naruto continued staring straight forward.

"Sometimes your own strength doesn't measure up does it? I know how you feel. Before I came here to Konoha I experienced some shitty things too. The enemy strikes and you're left paralyzed. Not knowing what to do or how to do it." Said Naruto reminiscing back to her first C-rank mission and how she'd frozen when the demon brothers had attacked team seven. But Tazuna had survived and their mission had been successful. Obito's hadn't sadly.

"Yeah..." Answered Obito, still trying to find the right words.

"You know… I want to become Hokage one day, because if I can achieve that title it means I'm strong enough to protect everyone in Konoha." Said Naruto, changing the subject and looked teasingly back at Obito. The boy was still red in the eyes, but his cheeks puffed up slightly at her words.

"Well, you will be disappointed then, since I'll take that title." Argued Obito seriously, but the laugh in his eyes was impossible to miss.

"Hah! As if, I'm gonna' be Hoakge first, but you can probably take the title sometime later. First you'll have to catch up to my awesomeness, dattebayo!" Cried Naruto and jumped to her feet. Obito followed her example but folded his arms while grinning wickedly.

"I seriously doubt it. You're not even a proper ninja yet, Naruto. I'm already way ahead of you!" Replied the Uchiha with certainty.

The blonde turned properly towards Obito, her mind pondering what might have happened to Obito in the original time-line. Had Itachi killed him too during the Uchiha massacre? Him and Shisui... Or had he died during the war like so many others?

"Fine, bring it on. From now on I'm your rival, and one day we'll fight for the old man's hat." Challenged Naruto and raised her hand. Obito looked curiously down at it for a split second before taking it and shaking her hand firmly.

"Deal."
Some months later, when autumn was yet again hanging over Konoha, all the graduate students at the academy started getting excited.

You could feel the expectations in the air as their finals were coming closer. Shisui particularly was excited for graduation and spent all lectures in deep concentration and training with his father after school hours. With this change of routine made Iruka and Naruto to see less of him than usual, as he and Ensui had taken to join them a few times a week after school.

Jiraiya visited Naruto one evening to notify her of his stay and trained her for a few days to see if she was prepared. He was excited when she showed him everything she knew.

"This is great Naruto! You're more than ready, brat! I have to leave the village again soon unfortunately, but when I return I promise to teach you something cool okay?" He said with a broad grin. The promise of again being taught by Jiraiya was enough to make Naruto skip for two whole days.

Anko had asked if she'd accidentally fallen into her poison appliance bag, but Naruto had no idea what that meant but assumed she was being made fun of.

The exams came and went. Naruto still struggled with the Bunshin technique and did a Kage Bunshin instead. It made the exam proctor clap excitedly and give a warm smile before she exited together with her five clones. Yeah, she overdid it a little, but the satisfaction of doing her genin exam and actually excel at something felt really pleasing.

It still hadn't been enough to get to the top of the class though, instead the Rookie of the Year title had unsurprisingly gone to Shisui. His father Kagami had been waiting outside the building when the students came out, and the last Naruto saw of them before they were swept away in the crowd was of them hugging. Clearly Kagami was proud.

As soon as she could Naruto had proudly strolled back to Anko's apartment with Iruka being tugged along to show off their shiny new headbands. Iruka had been a little embarrassed to have been swept away from his parents before he could tell them he'd passed. Since they might think he was hiding because he had failed, which he hadn't, so he excused himself after only being at the apartment for two minutes.

Instead Anko and Naruto spent the day having a celebration dinner paid by Anko herself inside her apartment before sparring together late into the evening. The simple fact that as legally an adult the orphanage no longer could punish her for being late, making the training session all the more satisfying.

"Okay, remember. No matter which losers you team up with I'm still your number one rival alright? You will always be trying to catch up with me, and even if you end up with some pansy boy like Ensui I will always be the one you have to compete against. Got it?" Threatened Anko in a drawl while Naruto got ready to leave for the academy.

It was team division day and Naruto was feeling surprisingly nervous. The idea that she would be put on a team, a team other than team seven, didn't feel right.

This wouldn't be her real Genin team somehow, and the idea didn't sit well with her. Anko seemed to read off these emotions as nerves and Naruto was fine with letting her believe that. In a way it was true, but it wasn't the whole truth.
Anko also seemed hell bent on making sure Naruto didn't forget about her. It was proven when she'd offered to let Naruto sleep over after graduation. The blonde had eagerly agreed but had second thoughts once she lay down on the uncomfortable couch. The bed back at the orphanage was much more comfortable but Naruto decided not to comment on it. Anko had done very well considering the hardship it was to make due as a poor orphan on a Genin payroll. Truly she was doing admirably when comparing it to the situation she'd been in at first.

But now that Naruto was technically an adult legally, she wasn't restricted to sleep at the orphanage at night and to celebrate her graduation, and the second time around getting her forehead protector, she was happy to stay at Anko's for the night.

"Anko, I've beaten you plenty of times." Answered Naruto with a mischievous grin, already knowing how Anko would react.

The older girl seemed to have fallen into one of her moods where she was making sure Naruto wasn't replacing her with someone else. In a way Anko was oddly obsessive of Naruto's friendship, and while she tolerated that Naruto had some other friends and wasn't always this controlling, she was not afraid of letting the blonde know that she was not allowed to switch her out as best friend. Especially not with some clan kid.

Yeah, nothing had made Anko more jealous than the time they'd been invited to dinner at Ensui's house together with Iruka and Shisui. The older girl had looked longingly from the cozy living room to the more intimate kitchen where none of the furniture were showing signs of wear. The fact that Ensui used so much time bickering with his younger sister and telling his parents about his day had turned Anko into a silent shell of her normal self.

It was good Naruto was more used to these types of situations. She'd often been invited to Sakura's house for dinner, more so after she'd returned from her trip with Ero-sennin though. At least she was better prepared for the situation compared to Anko who looked like a deer in the headlights. Afterwards she'd turned very competitive towards Ensui, and it was obvious to Naruto that her friend had an inferior problem when it came to fellow ninjas.

Naruto found it quite funny though, but was also very happy to have someone who seemed to need her as much as Naruto needed them. Without Anko the blonde wondered how she would have dealt with being thrown back in time. The older girl was probably one of her closest friends ever at this point. Even when including all the ones from the future.

"Only at taijutsu! Your chakra control might be better than it was, but you're still shitty at it!" Anko retorted heatedly, her eyes narrowing and being her normal rude self. The older girl often offended Naruto, but it was her form of endearment so the blonde didn't take it as badly as when she'd been insulted in her original childhood. Back when people knew she was a jinchūriki the offending words had genuinely meant to hurt.

"One of these days I'll have it down, and then I'll completely humiliate you with my skills." Naruto replied with a wide smile, resulting in Anko rolling her eyes. "I have more chakra than you, so of course I struggle more. But once my body catches up to my chakra reserves you stand no chance An-ko." Naruto singed and jumped as Anko aimed a kick at her.

"Whatever." Huffed Anko as Naruto started heading for the hallway. She followed after while she folded her hands in front of her. "When you're finished at the academy you have to let me know who your teammates are. I have a week off before my next mission so I'll be at the training grounds until seven." Anko said while leaning against the door frame leading into the small hallway.

Naruto nodded and gave her the thumbs up. "Sure will, Anko. I'll see you later!" She shouted as she
started bouncing down the stairs. Taking four at a time which was quite a stretch considering how short her legs were.

Inside the classroom at the Academy, everyone who had passed the exam the day before were eager to know who their teammates would be and what sort of sensei they’d get. The moment Naruto stepped into the classroom she was caught around the wrist by a hyperactive Iruka and dragged further inside.

He had eagerly placed her in the seat next to his own. Usually they sat on opposite ends of the classroom, but today very few sat according to seat assignment. Only those who were by the book kept to the proper arrangements. Like Shisui.

It made Naruto reminisce back to when Sakura had threatened Naruto for sitting in the seat next to Sasuke. The blonde still shuddered at the result of that argument, and fought back a grimace at the memory of her first kiss. If it can even be called a kiss. It was more of a head smack with unfortunate parts coming into contact.

Instead she focused on the present. Iruka was visibly very nervous. His hands fumbled with the hem of his T-shirt and his eyes constantly looked in the direction of the door while he and everyone else waited for their sensei to come in.

Shisui was in a similar state, and since he was sitting right behind them Naruto got a good view of how the pale boy seemed to be a shade paler while he used the time to chat animatedly to Naruto.

The Uchiha was the kind of person who was calm and collected until something excited him. When he got very happy it was hard to shut him up, and he would ramble on until he was out of breath. It wasn't often the blonde had seen this side of him, but today was one of them.

"I'm curious about what we'll learn. It would be awesome if my new sensei took us out to fight in the war. I really want to help out since father is always out there. I also hope he has some cool ninjutsu to teach me. I've mastered my fire affinity but I would really like to experiment with some of the other elements too, you know? I hope I'm not put together with someone I can't cooperate with though, imagine being with Mizuki." He said this last word in a whisper in fear of the person in question overhearing him.

Naruto had been quite influential on her friends, and Shisui was one of the people who had picked up on Naruto's dislike of the white haired boy and been affected by it. It wasn't the best thing Naruto had done, but Mizuki really was dodgy.

He had gotten seriously offended when Naruto didn't want to eat lunch with him and some of his friends and turned rather nasty. Shisui took this as confirmation of Naruto's dislike and started finding faults with him. It was the result of an impressionable child who felt grateful to Naruto after the catastrophic outing, but Naruto couldn't find it in herself to feel bad about the outcome.

"... It would be really bad, and I don't want a bad Genin team. It's really important according to my father. It's just a shame I don't have a say in it. I wish I did. If we could just have been allowed to pick three and then they'd make sure you at least ended up with one of them. And what if the sensei isn't good? And we're sent out to the front lines and get hurt or killed? I don't want to die but I still want to help out too. And then..." It continued like this for a while, Shisui talked so fast it was hard for Naruto to get a word in other than the occasional 'mhm' and 'yeah'. Giving her plenty of time to mull over her own nerves privately while she pretended to listen.

While Shisui might have managed to become Rookie of the year with Mizuki as the close follow up,
Naruto herself had come in third. The reason she hadn't scored higher was because she still for the life of her found written exams to be a drag.

Instead she used most of her time drawing doodles rather than answering the stupid questions. What would genjutsu's third stage really help her with anyway? Naruto couldn't cast any sort of stage of genjutsu anyway, and all she had to train on was dispelling since the alternative was impossible for her. The letters just blended and she lost her concentration.

When their sensei finally entered the classroom, making Shisui shut up so quickly you'd think he'd been hit by Ino's mind switch technique. Everyone followed his footsteps as if he was a mouse in the middle of a falcon nest.

After finding some papers and swiftly glancing through them their sensei started his farewell speech and the anticipation rose to record heights. Even Naruto who'd been through this once before was getting rather impatient.

The blonde listened closely as their sensei finally started listing up names, his slow way of speaking making it drag on and heightening the nerves of the students. "Team Shibi will consist of Kavana Hachirou..." The sensei droned on while the students being called up stiffened before finding the eyes of their new teammates. A few smiled brightly when being placed with a friend, some looked surprised or uncertain while some looked downright displeased.

"Team Kushina will consist of Nara Ensui..." Started the sensei saying but had to pause and turn over a page to get to the rest of the team. Naruto tensed like a wire.

Could it be? Naruto had never known her mother had taken a genin team, but then again, she knew very little about what her mother had been up to. Now she was listening intently as none other than Nara Ensui was placed on her mother's team. "...Umino Iruka and Hitomi. Then we have team Sora which will consist of..."

The blonde was green with envy and her eyes shot sideways to stare daggers at Hitomi who as always sat in her assigned seat next to Shisui. The brunette was not paying attention to her though, and was instead looking towards Ensui who appeared like he was still calculating if his team placement was favorable or not. Iruka on the other hand was looking very excited.

Naruto had never talked about Kushina to him or anyone else. Mainly because in this time she had yet to meet the red head properly.

Naruto had no proper bonds with anyone from team Minato, and while her friendship with Jiraiya always made her father wave or greet her when they passed each other on the street, that was all there was. A polite, superficial friendship that bordered more on distant acquaintance than friendship or family. And Kushina was even worse.

While she might have heard of Naruto through Jiraiya, she had never as much as taken notice of Naruto when they were in the same area. Many times Naruto had been a few steps away from Kushina and the red head had barely looked up before continuing on her own agendas.

It was heartbreaking.

But Naruto understood. She was a stranger in this time. Just another orphan that did not have any connections with either Minato or Kushina except through Jiraiya. They were also busy with the war and Naruto had slowly come to accept the situation.

That was until Iruka, Ensui and Hitomi, that spoiled brat, was placed on the team her mother was
leading.

That could have been her. Naruto could have been on a team under her own mother, and it would have been the perfect way to build a bond with someone she was so immensely curious about. It could almost counter the guilt she'd been feeling about having another genin team than team seven. Why had it not been her? She had to stop herself from demanding to be placed on team Kushina but knew it would be a fruitless attempt and kept quiet while the list continued.

Mizuki ended up with Chou and a boy named Shiro under a Hyūga Naruto didn't know, and the blonde had yet to be placed. She wondered if she was on the last team and had also noted that Shisui was yet to be placed as well. She crossed her fingers under the table.

"Last up is Uchiha Shisui and Naruto, you two will join with a chūnin as your third member under Orochimaru. And that's everyone! Congratulations you-"

"NO!"

Everyone turned to see the short blonde girl standing thunderstruck on her chair. She had jumped up the moment the realization had hit in, which had taken about five heartbeats, but hadn't really registered that she was currently standing on her chair. Staring intently at her sensei as if she had been convicted and ordered to be executed for treason to Konoha. Which incidentally was something that should have happened to Orochimaru.

Orochimaru? Orochimaru? Could she have worse luck if she'd tried? "I can't be taught by him!"

Naruto exclaimed in growing panic. What had happened? What were the chances of her having that snake as a sensei?

To everyone in class the blonde seemed comically upset and a few snickered at her panicked expression.

"O-Orochimaru? I can't be on his team..." She mumbled still in shock.

Iruka sent a surprised look before he turned more sympathetic. "He might be scary, but I heard he's also very strong and a respected shinobi. I'm sure you'll learn a lot under him, Naruto. And Shisui and your friend Anko-san is there too, you're actually really lucky." He said comfortably, but his words of comfort fell on empty ears.

Naruto was nimbly finding her way back into her seat, clutching her head with both hands and staring at the table top without seeing. Imagining how this could possibly be a mistake.

"I don't want to learn his snake shit. Why can't I have Jiraiya instead? Or Kushina-san like you Iruka? Why me? Why now? What did I do to deserve this?!" She moaned and sagged in her seat.

From the other end of the room Shisui had been at first been really pleased, but Naruto's reaction hadn't been all that encouraging. So he silently celebrated the fact that he would have a sannin for sensei and, despite the look of horror on her face, Naruto as teammate.

During war time genin were always the easy pick, but with a sensei like Orochimaru the stacks against them had vastly dropped.

Naruto could only watch as the other kids went out for lunch. Iruka and Ensui met up and headed towards their third team member Hitomi to discuss their new situations as genin teammates before lunch was over. And when it was they would be meeting up with Uzumaki Kushina. Naruto was too jealous of their luck and too horrified at her own situation that she could do little more than wave
when they left her.

The blonde knew, but didn't really see as Shisui walked up to her. "Cool huh? We're teammates again! I'm sure Orochimaru isn't as bad as you seem to think." Said Shisui, not exactly sure how to talk to the blonde when she was this visibly upset.

She turned towards him, wide eyed and an ever growing paleness to her skin. "You're an Uchiha." Was all she replied, and Shisui started wondering if maybe Naruto wasn't coming down with something.

"Um… Yeah, we've been in class together for a year and a half now. We went on that outing together last year and I sit on the same row as you do just on the other side of the classroom. I'm pretty sure you do know my family name. Are you sure you're alright?" Asked Shisui while scratching the back of his head uncertainly.

"Shisui! You don't want Orochimaru as a sensei! You're an Uchiha for crying out loud." Exclaimed Naruto, still not clarifying what she meant.

"Wha-" He started saying but didn't get to finish.

"This is bad! You have to ask for a new sensei, if we both asked than maybe they'd listen. Kami, you're an Uchiha." She kept rambling under her breath, her eyes far away while Shisui for real placed his hand on her forehead, wondering if she might be running a fever. She was surprisingly warm.

"I think you have a fever, Naruto. Maybe you should take it easy." He told her with a small smile but Naruto swatted his hand away, meeting his eyes with worry filled blue orbs.

"I'm not sick. Orochimaru is sick. We're doomed, Shisui."

"Why don't we start with an introduction round?" Said Orochimaru as he looked down at his new two students and older apprentice while he leaned against the bark of a tree.

The leaves gave some shade from the blaring sun and Orochimaru preferred the cool draft of the shadows. Maybe it was because of his pale complexion which before his experiments had burned easily that he'd never liked sunshine very much. Now he never got sunburn anymore, but he still gravitated towards shadows and darkness.

His new team might be a challenge in this regard though. Since he was now in charge of a small beam of sunshine incarnated. Or well, usually a beam of sunshine, right now she resembled more of a rainy cloud with her unimpressed expression and slightly twitchy demeanor. As if she as expecting an attack at any moment. That was good, clearly she had good instincts, and no one was more dangerous than him in Konoha at the moment. Maybe his sensei but other than that there was no one who could challenge him. The snake sannin himself.

The thought reminded him of the struggles he'd taken on just to get his way with this. It had been a pain to convince Hiruzen to let him have Naruto on his team.

It had started with Anko; when after many years the Hokage had finally convinced him to take on a student the year his apprentice had graduated. But as usual Orochimaru had been stubborn and demanded to only take the Rookie of the Year, which resulted in an apprentice instead of a team.

There had been a genin test of course, but more of the kind the snake sanin preferred. Which wasn't up to team work and all that crap, but more about who was actually the most capable.
Predictably Anko had won and the other two kids he no longer remembered the name of were sent their merry way back to the school bench. He'd accepted Anko since she showed promise, but the other two interested him as much as gravel stuck to his sandals.

The reasoning Hiruzen had used back then was that he had so much knowledge and; ‘A lot to teach the next generation’. He’d been pushed to do as told, but not entirely, which suited Orochimaru a lot better.

It was therefore a huge surprise to the old man when Orochimaru came into his office and declared he wanted to complete his team. Again with the Rookie of the Year and another pupil to fill out the spots. He had presumed Naruto would take the title when he made the demand.

Truthfully; he wasn't really interested in having another student except for the blonde girl, but it had served as the proper excuse to be allowed to train her. Technically no one was allowed to have two apprentices at the same time. Anko was still his apprentice and would be for another year, so instead he used the team excuse.

This meant he either got both of them or none at all.

Orochimaru was fascinated by the girl who had been brought to Konoha by Jiraiya. After their first meeting he had looked into her profile and quickly realized Naruto was a very fascinating subject. As a result from this he had given her a small push in the right direction. Orochimaru had stayed behind the curtains while he had suggested to her academy sensei that she should be pushed up a year, and he had everyone within the civilian council in his pocket so they were not hard to convince in regards of letting Naruto move up a year.

He had been annoyed however when he realized he would be given Uchiha Shisui instead. Determined he had gone up to Hiruzen and demanded that he got to teach Naruto, and after a lot of bickering between sensei and student Hiruzen had agreed.

The Hokage had originally thought of putting Naruto on team Kushina, but now made it so Hitomi and Naruto exchanged places. So in the end he had the Rookie of the Year on his team, plus the one he originally wanted.

But fate had always been kind to him, and the Uchiha was definitely someone he also looked forwards to learn more about. Especially once he gained the Sharingan.

But right now they were going through introductions, and the younger boy was up first.

"Okay, my name is Uchiha Shisui, I like swimming, training and taking bets. My dream is to exceed my father in ninja skills." Said Shisui smiling broadly. Orochimaru didn't give any sign as to what he thought of that introduction, and instead looked to Anko so she would continue. His apprentice was more than familiar with him by now, so she got right to it.

"My name is Mitarashi Anko. I like dango, training and the forest of death. I want to become an ANBU or part of the jōnin guard." She explained quickly and efficiently. Just the way he'd instructed her countless times to do.

They all turned last to the furious girl who was looking stubbornly up at her sensei. "Naruto. I like a lot of things… Have no intention of telling you my hobbies, and I also have a few dreams for the future."

Anko rolled her eyes while Shisui snickered. Orochimaru didn't seem to take any offence to the killer intent Naruto was directing at him, but internally he was relishing in it. "Good, now that we all know
something about each other we can start with the real genin test." He said and pointed to the training
ground close to where they sat. "I want you to get one of these bells, whoever doesn't will be sent
back to the academy, or in Anko's case she will be demoted to genin." He lifted up two silver bells
and Naruto felt herself tremble in anger. He was such a hypocrite doing the comrade test when he
himself was a backstabbing bastard.

"But there are only two bells." Said Anko looking uncomfortable from Shisui to Naruto.

"Then you should try and get one before there's no one left." The snake said while walking towards
the middle of the training ground. "You'll have to come at me with the intention to kill. You stand no
chance at all if you don't."

Naruto perked up at this idea and grinned to herself. Shisui noticed and looked nervously back at
Orochimaru. "Eh… Isn't that a little dangerous Orochimaru-sensei?" He asked uncertainly. Thinking
more of the sadistic smile growing on Naruto's face more than the most lethal jutsu they could hit
their sensei with.

Orochimaru gave an unpleasant scowl in return. "You can call me sensei if you pass the test, Uchiha-
kun, and I doubt any of you stand a chance."

The three of them rose to their feet and followed after the sannin. Naruto trailing a little behind the
others. "Ready? You have one hour, one the count of three. One... two... three."

Anko and Shisui ran for cover while Naruto stayed in her track. "I give up. Send me back to the
academy, Orochimaru." She said with her hands crossed in front of her.

Orochimaru smiled widely. "Sorry little girl, but you'll have to do the test first I'm afraid."

She looked hard back at him without flinching at the sinister grin on his face.

"Then there will be no consequences for me if I end up killing you?" She asked with narrowed eyes.

"You won't be able to, Naruto-chan. Believe me, and it would take quite a bit to kill someone like
me." He answered her smoothly, dangling the bells in front of her like she was a dog being tempted
with snacks. Naruto rolled her eyes and snorted at the same time.

"Yes, I thought so too."

Without any indication at all she sprang at him, faster than what the sannin had ever expected her to
move. Orochimaru whirled sideways but was met by a clone he hadn't spotted, and jumping up he
felt the slash to his cheek the clone had inflected on him.

Amazing, she actually managed to get a hit in. Naruto was a lot faster than she'd been before, no
doubt about it. But now that he knew there wouldn't be a repeat of that incident.

The real Naruto landed after her jump and turned around while forming hand signs in a blur. The
wind jutsu flew at him before Naruto was properly facing him, the small but lethal knives of wind
soared through the air. But Orochimaru had always been limber and even here in the past he could
stretch oddly.

Orochimaru jumped backwards while dodging, slithering between the attacks while Naruto frowned.

All the while he was looking hungrily at what she was doing with a glint to his eyes. Next
Orochimaru whirled through hand signs and a Katon jutsu came blasting towards her. Naruto used
two clones to propel herself from the ground and away from danger into the air. It seemed
Orochimaru wasn't too scared about hurting his Genin as Kakashi had been. It was evident by the scorching craters left in the wake of his jutsu.

When she landed she felt his presence right underneath her and jumped just in time as his hands emerged from the soil underneath her feet.

No way was she going to get buried to the neck like Sasuke.

She took several back flips away as he continued to grasp after her from underneath the soil. She soon found herself in the bushes and swore when she realized she'd been backed straight into a dead end. Naruto ran up the large boulder and Orochimaru climbed out of the ground without taking his eyes off of her. Once she was well up on the boulder she ran into Shisui who looked panicked after watching the short scuffle between Naruto and Orochimaru.

"Whoa! How on earth are any of us going to get a bell from him? He's a sannin and he's a war hero! And we're just newly graduates… How are we expected to overthrow him on our own without help? This test is really unfair considering the other Genin teams don't have a sannin as their sensei." He said while looking down at Orochimaru who had not pursued her. He was walking slowly back to the starting point with his hands in his pocket.

"We'll cooperate. We need to find Anko, If we can distract him I could get at clean hit on him." Naruto replied thinking off different possibilities.

"But there's only two bells..." He answered in growing frustration while his mind worked furiously. Something wasn't adding up...

Naruto looked confused back. Oh, right. She'd forgotten that Shisui had no idea that she was actually trying to kill him, not get the bells.

"Oh, you and Anko can have them. I don't care." She said with a shrug. Shisui seemed dumbfounded when he looked back at her.

"Come on. We'll find Anko so she can help."

In the end her plan backfired badly. Not only was he still unharmed but they also didn't get a single bell. Instead by the end Orochimaru complimented them on being able to cooperate even when there was a conflict of interest. It was a sour and frustrated Naruto who listened as Orochimaru passed the two academy students as his new genin.

Naruto was gloriously pissed as she walked away with Shisui trailing after, followed by Anko who was skipping for a change.

Orochimaru was very pleased with how it had turned out. Both of the genin seemed reasonably skilled, especially Naruto, even if the girl seemingly hated him for some reason.

He had a theory to that. It was the same one which had first made him curious about the blonde.

Naruto had taken an instant disliking to him, like he'd insulted her gravely and she could only barely stand being in his presence. Orochimaru's theory was that the girl in some form or another was a sensor. She might have picked up on his chakra, realized on some primal level that his chakra was tainted and therefore disliked him. He was quite sure she wasn't aware of this consciously, at least there hadn't been any reports suggesting it.

After that he'd kept track on the girl from afar. He had to do it from a distance, since the girl had a
habit of doing a U-turn every time she noticed him.

During her early days at the academy he had noticed that while she was far from book smart, she was very intuitive. Naruto had a lot of chakra and she barely needed the time to practice something before she got it. At least that was the case for the things they taught in the academy.

She also trained on her own a lot harder then they made her do in the academy. This was very rare for an orphan to do without any guidance. He had often gotten report backs from some of his more trusted subordinates who'd been asked to keep an eye on her. They spoke of long and repetitive meditation and chakra exercises. A smart move, since those were the things she probably needed the most of with her chakra reserves. And also a little staggering, since normally the girl couldn't stand still for more than half a minute.

He was the one to suggest that she skipped a year, and the academy sensei agreed whole heartedly. Which resulted in that soon afterwards the incident in the forest occurred. Strengthening his conviction that the girl would make a perfect subject.

Not only had she been suspiciously good at fighting away his snakes in one of the traps laid out for them on the route, but Orochimaru had seen her after they came back.

The younger boys had been completely destroyed out there while Naruto and Kakashi seemed fine. In fact, except for how smudged in dirt and torn her clothes were her physical exam had come back spotless. The girl didn't have as much as sore skin.

No problems at all, it was like she'd never left her bed the morning of the outing.

Even the Hatake boy, who was already chūnin level back then, had a few cuts and scrapes from walking through bushes and trees. Not to mention the illness he picked up when he returned, but yet Naruto didn't. That suggested some sort of healing ability. Even the boy who hadn't fallen in the river had gotten sick, but Naruto had not.

And was there two things that often went hand in hand; then it was sensors and healers. Many people within one field was adapt at the second. The moment after reading her report was when he decided she would be his student. Orochimaru needed to figure the girl's ability out and maybe then he could then copy it for his research.

Of course, he knew she'd genuinely tried to kill him several times during the last hour, but he didn't see a problem with it.

He'd been worried the girl would be as soft as Jiraiya from the way the Toad Sannin spoke of her and it was a relief to see she wasn't. He traced the bloody wound that ran from his nose to his chin and licked the blood of his finger.

She really was a fascinating subject.

To be continued…
Chapter End Notes

Thank you so very much for reading, I'm really happy you've taken the time looking at this story!
Chapter eight – The Things Unsaid

"You said you want to became Hokage. I have become the Kazekage. If you are willing to bear the name Kage, you have to do what you must do." - Gaara

Team Orochimaru walked slowly down the street while Anko babbled about the bell test. The dark haired girl was clearly relieved she hadn't been demoted or thrown out of the ninja troops of Konoha. Apparently she was sure Orochimaru had been telling the truth, since both of the boys on her last team had been sent back to the academy when they failed to complete the task.

While Anko talked on, Naruto was pondering what the hell would happen now.

This had never been a part of her plans, and the possibility hadn't even been something she'd thought possible. Not once had she feared this. Orochimaru was Anko's sensei already, and the fact that he'd suddenly taken on two more students could not have been a coincidence.

"Hey, Naruto, you alright?" Wondered Shisui, nudging her shoulder gently. By now he had grown taller than her and was gaining in on Anko. He would probably be one of those tall ones when he grew up.

"I'm fine, dattebayo. I just don't like Orochimaru."

Anko stopped talking when hearing this and the happy expression on her face ebbed away. By raising her hand she stopped Naruto in her track while Shisui sighed and looked on in worry.

"Oy! Stop being such a baby! Orochimaru-sama is a great shinobi and a war hero you brat, treat him with more respect from now on." Anko ordered in her most serious tone to defend the snake while grabbing at Naruto's shoulder with a painful grip. The blonde looked hard back at her friend and snorted.

"He is strong, no doubt about it, but I don't like him. He's creepy and he feels evil, not to mention his looks. He just isn't normal." She argued back.

This only managed to anger Anko, who suddenly swung her fist at her best friend who ducked to avoid the hit right on time. The Uchiha reacted by running forward and restrained Anko by the shoulder while Naruto got out of the line of fire.

However, Shisui was far not enough to restrain Anko for long, and soon he'd been pushed aside and the two girls ended up in a fist fight. Again.

As Naruto trotted back to the orphanage Anko sat back in her couch. Looking emptily at the dishes the blonde had left behind after the tense dinner they had shared. She couldn't understand where Naruto's displeasure stems from. Orochimaru-sensei was an extremely gifted man, he was strong and wise and everything Anko had dreamed of having in a sensei. In fact, he had been everything and more. He was a well of information that never seemed to have a bottom. He had never failed in answering what she wondered about, and she was becoming so much stronger under him than she
could have become under anyone else.

When Naruto had returned after team assignment she'd looked close to tears, and it had been very
difficult for Anko to sympathize with Naruto's discomfort. Personally Anko had been thrilled.

Her best friend was her teammate now. If she had to share Orochimaru with anyone then Naruto was
the one she'd wish for. Shisui was a little annoying though, but he was far from the worst teammate
she could have gotten. But Naruto was ruining it.

Her constant complaining about her sensei had been annoying from the beginning, but Anko hadn't
truly realized just how deep it went until today during the bell test. Naruto had tried to kill their
sensei. Not that she had succeeded, but Anko had picked up Naruto's killing intent. It wasn't like
anything Anko had felt before. It wasn't the way Naruto would radiate negative energy when they
argued about mundane things or even when she was furious about one of her classmates.

It was genuine. Naruto wanted Orochimaru dead. And it was completely unacceptable.

Naruto was blessed to get him as a sensei. She'd been granted access to Konoha in strained times.
She'd surfed though the Academy and now been given the best ninja in the village as a sensei. But
she had the disgrace to be displeased.

It made Anko so angry she was unsure how to express it properly. But the blonde was still her best
friend. She knew Naruto thought her own way and saw the world differently. It was the reason
Anko had liked her to begin with. The blonde didn't give two dammed what anyone else thought and
because of that she had befriended Anko instead of the other orphanage girls. It was also why Anko
couldn't force Naruto to stop disliking Orochimaru. Her mind was set. Her decision made, and now
they all would have to pay for it.

Anko stretched her hands over her head, hearing a soft crack in her spine as some pressure released
from her shoulders.

Getting up to her feet Anko picked up the dishes from their meal. The dinner had been very
uncomfortable. Naruto was just as aware of their disagreement, but for once they weren't using their
fists to resolve the issue. They had tried, but the problem was still just as present as before. Instead of
shouting and arguments there was now only silence.

It was this that frightened Anko more than anything else.

"I won't be doing missions with you this week." Stated Orochimaru plainly for a second time,
looking bored when Anko asked when they'd start doing real ninja work. The lack of proper
missions was annoying her greatly.

"Why not?" Asked Shisui disappointed. Naruto didn't really mind not having to babysit or clean up
garbage from the park, but she was still curious as to what was going on.

"Because you need a lot of training and I'm not having second hand soldiers. Shisui, you need to get
better at more than genjutsu and breathing fire. Anko, you need better ninjutsu attacks and Naruto…
There's a lot to fix with you, but I guess I'll have to start somewhere... Your taijutsu is inefficient. If
you'd been ten years older then maybe it would be suitable, but as a child with no muscle strength it's
just idiotic of you to continue with it. It will be more efficient when I teach you a proper style of
fighting." He said standing in front of the kids on training ground four.

Naruto bristled, stopping her outburst in her throat and looked pointedly away. She was a lot older. It
wasn't her fault she'd been turned into a child, no the kyūbi could take that credit.
"But what about income? I have rent and food to pay! And Naru only has the orphanage clothes to wear. It isn't of a material made for fighting." Argued Anko looking over at Naruto who was wearing the same red T-shirt and black pants as she'd done the day they met.

Orochimaru continued to look unimpressed by the argument and folded his arms in front of him. "It's not my problem. You managed fine when you graduated Anko and I expect the same of Naruto. You should have saved more of your income if one week without payment is all it takes for you to go broke." Answered Orochimaru mercilessly.

"Uh…" Answered Anko, flushing and looking down at the ground.

"I expect you to have your equipment here by practice on Tuesday. Find a way to borrow some if it's impossible to get anything. I don't care. I'm just here to talk over your training for the next three months." Said Orochimaru and flipped his head sideways, his long black hair falling out of his eyes and behind his shoulder.

"I'll be entering you into the chūnin exam by the end of the three months. Which means that if you have a slither of talent I'll force it out of you. We'll have a normal training session where I want to see how you work as a team. When I've beaten some skills into you we will move on to individual training. I'll see what you are suited for and you will be having private lessons with me outside of team practice. On top of that we'll start missions from next week in between practice sessions. This way you will hopefully do respectfully during the chūnin exam." Orochimaru explained monotonously while studying each of his student's expression.

"So we'll be Rookie participants in the chūnin exam?" Asked Shisui looking excitedly to Naruto. The girl was frowning but gave a quick confirming glance back.

Orochimaru gave a humorless smirk. "Yes, I myself made Chūnin on my first try. Anko did the same because of my training program and I'm expecting the same of you two."

Naruto huffed and felt her already tightly folded fists tightening further. Of course he did, no sloppy seconds for the sannin was there?

"Now, you three are going to start sparring against me, I'll correct you while we progress."

Four hours later Naruto and Anko halted towards the latter's apartment. According to Anko, Orochimaru had been giving one of his harshest training lesson to date which left the trio feel like they weren't going to make it all the way home.

Shisui was the one who'd had the hardest time out of them.

While both he and Naruto had been pushed the same amount, he didn't have increased healing abilities like the blonde did.

The girls had helped him home seeing as he was limping, having problems with his left eye and looked delirious with exertion. Once Kagami had his son returned Naruto and Anko started the long way back to the apartment in the opposite direction.

It was a habit they had, and though the atmosphere between them had been tense as of late Naruto had no plans on sleeping at the orphanage tonight. Just the idea of Madam May's face if she returned in this state made her cringe. The kind woman was always fussing over her and was displeased about her occupation. Her appearance would be enough for Madam May to lose her remaining respect for ninjas.
The apartment was a far distance off, and the girls had to go back through the training grounds to reach it without having to do a large detour. This was also where they walked by training ground three where team Minato was practicing.

When Obito spotted them he burst out laughing at their pathetic, limping state and came running over. "What did you do? You both look like you've been hit by a fire jutsu head on!" He shouted when he was only halfway from reaching them. Naruto smiled despite the pain while Anko gave an insulted scowl.

"Orochimaru is a slave driver. I think he enjoys our pain." Answered Naruto with honesty. Rin, Kakashi and Minato had followed after Obito to see what was going on and came up next to the Uchiha.

"Orochimaru-sensei is great! He is harsh though, I can't feel two of my toes anymore and Shisui is having problems seeing with his left eye." Muttered Anko and became her shy counterpart since Minato was standing so close by.

Giving the girl an exasperated sigh, Naruto looked back to Obito. "What are you guys doing?"

"We've been doing battle formations against Minato-sensei." Answered Kakashi. Rin was smiling worriedly from Anko's foot to Naruto's much bruised neck. She was wondering exactly what sort of sensei Orochimaru was to injure his genin like that. To boot Rin was also pretty sure this was Naruto's first day as a genin.

"I have some numbing cream and it should help your bruises a little. I'm still learning so I'm not going to risk attempting to heal you completely on my own, but the combination will help with the swelling." She said helpfully.

Naruto grinned widely at her. Rin was just one of those genuinely nice people. The brunette smiled sweetly back before running to the other side of the field where their belongings had been dumped earlier.

"So how is Orochimaru-sama as a sensei? You probably already know this Naruto, but his teammate Jiraiya was my own sensei when I was genin." Smiled Minato while looking closely at their state. Jiraiya could be strict as well, but he couldn't remember coming home in such a state as these girls were.

"He's awesome!"

"He's evil."

Obito laughed at Naruto's scowl contrasting Anko's wide smiling and shining face. It was like they had temporarily changed personalities. Even Kakashi seemed to find them amusing.

"He has no comprehension of limits, Anko! He's treating us like a science project." Naruto stated with unconcealed venom in her voice. She continued by making an uncanny impression of her new sensei.

"Naruto, what if I put some weight seals on you? 'Naruto, since you use so much time meditating and have such large chakra reserves you might have the knack for senjutsu, maybe I'll try pushing some of my own into you next time and see how it goes.' 'What if we tried using a genjutsu while you fight so you have no idea where your opponents are.' Naruto tried with a horrible imitation of Orochimaru's earlier speeches during the training while the others watched in various degree of amusement.
"Seriously, I'm eight years old! I shouldn't be having weights on me, it can stunt my growth! I'm pretty sure senjutsu can turn you into a freaking stone and last time I checked throwing kunai around blindly can poke an eye out. Shisui pretty much proved that today." Exclaimed Naruto getting passionately into her own rant.

Minato looked worried while Kakashi seemed a little envious.

When Rin came back she gave the cream to Anko first who thanked her and started applying the cream on instantly as she sat down on the grass. "I'm sure Orochimaru-sama will make sure you won't get hurt… irrevocably." Minato said with a little uncertainly.

Naruto stared back with a pointed look before glancing quickly towards Anko's ankle that had blown up to twice its normal size as a result of the swelling.

"Riiight. What was the Hokage thinking making him interact with kids is beyond me." She said while rolling her eyes.

"You're being whiny, Naruto!" Laughed Obito. "Cheer up! You made genin and have a sannin as your sensei. I'm sure he'll make you strong and you'll need it for when we fight for the Hokage title!"

The blonde grinned back and giggled when Obito started shifting his goggles proudly. Anko who was now frowning handed her the cream while Rin bent down and started doing something to heal her foot. After the brunette was finished helping the two orphans, Minato called his team to resume training.

Anko and Naruto wordlessly decided to stay a little longer while the cream started numbing the throbbing pain. They watched while Minato went through another battle formation and how to work together for protection and attack.

After half an hour of tense silence they got up again and with a wave to team Minato, they walked back to the apartment.

Contrary to Naruto's belief, Orochimaru did have some comprehension of their limits. It was proven since none of his three students had any lasting excuse not to meet up for training. They were always sore and always had the longing for a sleep-in but were never too damaged to be allowed to skip practice.

When the sannin deemed her and Shisui's taijutsu plausible, which he did by the end of the week, he moved on to individual training. It was not really individual, since all three met up at the same time. But only one got the "real" Orochimaru to train with, the other two got a clone each.

"Take a paper." Said Orochimaru while holding up some familiar looking brown papers. Affinity paper. The ones telling you what main element you were more adapt at.

"I know what my affinity is, Orochimaru." Stated Naruto without bothering to pick a paper the way the other two had.

Her sensei looked uninterested and pushed the papers further into her face, making Naruto pick one just so she could step back without being followed by the sannin.

"Shisui knows his too." Naruto added while the boy in question looked a little nervous. Orochimaru had mostly the same effect on him as it did on Naruto. But he didn't hate his sensei the way the blonde did.
"I don't care. I want it confirmed and then I want to test just how adapt you are with them. Now push some chakra into those papers." Snapped Orochimaru and folded his arms in front of him, staring hard at Naruto until she stubbornly broke eye contact.

As predicted her paper split in two, confirming that while she might have become a time traveler, she still had a wind affinity.

Looking up she noticed the pile of ash in Shisui's hand proving that he had a fire affinity. While Anko's paper had crackled up. Meaning she had lightning affinity.

Looking back at their sensei she noticed he wasn't paying attention to them anymore. Instead he was looking through his weapon holster for something. Fishing out the item he had in there, he held up for all of them to see… a needle.

Instinctively Naruto had taken five steps backwards, her eyes narrowed in on the pointy tip.

Her two teammates looked confused over their shoulder to where the blonde was standing with her kunai ready in her hand.

Orochimaru ignored the ordeal.

"I'll take blood samples of you now. Or, more accurately I'll take a blood sample each of Shisui and Naruto since I've already done this with Anko. While the affinity paper is sufficient to find out your main affinity it doesn't help much with the other four or how compatible you are with those. This blood test will show just that." Explained Orochimaru, making Naruto even less agreeable. She just instinctively knew her sample would be used for something freaky.

"I'm not doing a blood test." Naruto argued back, her hand fisting tighter around the kunai in her hand. A loan from Anko's to-be-sharpened stack of weapons.

"Too bad, you don't really have a say in this Naruto-chan." Stated Orochimaru with a wicked smile.

"You can't seriously be afraid of needles, Naru?" Exclaimed Anko with furrowed brows, her hands on her hips and a disproving expression on her face.

"I'm not giving a blood sample to anyone but the blood bank. Far less an experimental researcher who is known for having used said experiments on himself. Just look at some of the techniques he's using! That's not normal!" Shouted Naruto and took a step further back. No way in hell was she letting this happen.

"I can use my wind affinity just fine. I'll pick a second element and practice it like everyone else. I don't need your experiments to learn a second affinity!" Shouted Naruto and now she folded her arms. Mimicking the stance of her sensei.

Orochimaru tilted his head, his eyes narrowing in slight annoyance at the determined conviction in Naruto's eyes. She wasn't going to budge on this.

While she was correct, he had been planning on sparing a little of her sample for personal research, this would hardly be the last chance he got at drawing a sample from her. They would go on missions and they were in the middle of a war. If Naruto managed to go unharmed throughout her first year as a ninja it would be a miracle. Orochimaru could wait until she was unconscious or bleeding from a wound. But still, he wasn't going to let her off that easily.

"Fine, you can choose your own way of learning a second affinity, but I can guarantee it will be less efficient if you choose the wrong element to study. With a blood sample I could tell you within a few
hours what you should focus on. Instead you'll probably spend months, if not years, on the wrong affinity." Said the sannin with a satisfied smirk.

"Oh yeah?" Said Naruto while returning the smile, delighted at Orochimaru's belief in his own words. It was time to prove him wrong.

"Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!" She shouted while doing her cross hand sign. Thirty clones popped up all around them. All of them staring daggers at Orochimaru.

"I will do this thirty times as quickly by the help of my clones, dattebayo. Their memories will return back to me the moment they're dispelled. In other words I'll be a hell of a more efficient when practicing than anyone else will be!" Explained the real Naruto slowly, or at least who her team assumed was the real Naruto.

Orochimaru's eyes had gone oval. The yellow orbs trailed over the thirty perfect shadow clones. Taking in everything he could before he took a step forwards. "Fassssscinating." He hissed out, sounding like the snake Naruto knew he was more than the collected front he used in front of most people. "Such large reserves. And you're only eight. Splendid Naruto-chan, just splendid. Now pick an element. We'll make this into a competition. If you can master your chosen affinity enough to use it in battle before the Chūnin exam then I will be proven wrong. If you can't then I'm proven right."

The challenge was not a very serious one, and had it been anyone else uttering it Naruto wouldn't have cared half as much. But as it was it was Orochimaru who was betting that Naruto would be wrong and he would be right. Something that was completely unacceptable.

"Okay. I'll choose…." Naruto stopped thinking for a long moment before she decided. "Suiton!" She cried out with determination. The reason she chose this element was because of the water puddle next to Shisui's feet, but she went with it anyway.

"Ah, well that's not an easy pick is it? Out of all the techniques Fire is perceived as the easiest one to learn while Wind is the most difficult. But Water is a close second to Wind." Orochimaru supplemented graciously. Taking a short step closer to Naruto who without thinking took another step back. She really couldn't stand this person.

"Then you'll have to find a river, Naruto-chan. I'll come by and demonstrate the exercise you'll have to complete before going to the next step. But first I need a blood sample from Shisui." He said in his slithery voice and turned like some sort of reptile. First his head, then shoulders and upper body before his hips and feet followed last. The movement was graceful but oddly… Inhuman. Snake like. Naruto shuddered and took a breath of relief she wasn't in focus anymore.

"Even if nature affinity is not what you want to specialize in it is always better to know your body's limitations and strength. Having a proper understanding of your chakra system is a very useful tool. I will have to keep track of you though Shisui. You're still young and growing quickly." Said Orochimaru and came to a stop in front of the Uchiha.

Shisui looked a little hesitant at first. But since he didn't have the same conviction as Naruto seemed to have in this case, not to mention that he couldn't muster up an army of clones, he did as told.

Orochimaru was surprisingly quick and the blood sample was filled and pocketed within a minute. Shisui looked curiously up at his sensei, wondering if his blood sample really would be used only for its intended purpose.

But even if it wasn't, what was the worst that could happen? Orochimaru was a Konoha ninja and he worked in their village best interest. Naruto really was being unfair when it came to their sensei.
Naruto frequently had a feeling of being constantly unlucky here in the past. Because of the orphanage, her poor finances, her lack of any useful possessions and last but not least her new sensei. But there was still a few things she was looking forwards to.

The missions were one of them. Because work meant money in her pocket, and Naruto badly needed that these days. Another thing was the opportunity to move out of the orphanage as soon as she’d saved up enough money, and third and last but very, very far from least; Ichiraku ramen stand had opened.

This had come to her attention after yet another gruesome practice session with her new team, when Iruka had come sprinting onto their training ground, his hair sweaty and a huge smile on his face. "Naruto! Me and Kushina-sensei just found the best ramen stand ever! It just opened and it's so good! We have to go there!" He'd cried out before catching the emotionless stare Orochimaru sent him.

It was the first time Iruka properly met Orochimaru, and safe to say he didn't impress the sannin.

"What? Ramen stand?" Exclaimed Naruto, not noticing how she abandoned Shisui who she was supposed to be sparring against.

"Y-yes..." Answered Iruka, his eyes still caught in the gaze of Orochimaru. It was not normal how his yellow eyes seemed to paralyze him in place. Sweat broke out on his brow while he fought the urge to flee.

"Oy!" Exclaimed Shisui and caught Naruto by the collar of her borrowed shirt. "We have team training right now. You can eat ramen later." Scolded Shisui. Anko sat a little further away, concentrating on a chakra exercise. The interruption from Iruka had shattered her concentration, and she was mimicking Orochimaru's stare where she sat glowering in his direction.

"But-" Naruto said and turned astonished towards Shisui who for safeties sake was still holding onto her. When ramen was involved he'd noticed how the whole girl lit up like it was Christmas. Orochimaru didn't seem happy either, and he was not going to antagonize his sensei this early.

"No but. You have practice right now. We were sparring, and technically you are dead. If all it takes to distract you is a bowl of ramen then we have some serious work to get through." Shisui mumbled and sent Iruka a friendly smile, but keeping Naruto in check all the same. He had the distinct impression she was waiting for him to let go just so she could bolt away.

Iruka wasn't paying attention to Shisui though. He was slowly backing away, his hands gesturing a sort of wave while he repeatedly apologized. "I'm so very sorry, Orochimaru-sama. I got excited… I didn't mean to disturb… I… eh… I'm so sorry. Please continue, I never would have come here if I realized you were still training…" Iruka continued in this fashion for quite some time. Orochimaru's eyes trailed after him like a hawk until the poor boy had backed a substantial length away.

When he was almost out of sight Naruto finally managed to get loose from Shisui, and she called after him. "What is the name!? I'll meet you there after training!" She shouted, her heart hammering wildly in her chest. She had waited so long for this, and Naruto needed the ramen stand Iruka was talking about to be the one.

Iruka didn't reply because Naruto's cry had drawn Orochimaru's attention, and free from his eyes Iruka turned tails and bolted as quickly as he could manage.

After a grueling training practice later, Naruto made her way alone to the ramen stand. She knew
where this was, and had never really needed Iruka's explanation or confirmation that what she hoped for was true.

What she hadn't expected though, was the cue.

At first she had lost hope, thinking she had been mistaken in thinking Ichiraku ramen stand was the one Iruka was referring to. There were just so many people around that she couldn't even see it at all. It took her a long moment to realize all these people were here for the same reason as she herself was.

The realization had made her gape openly. Never had she gone to Ichiraku and not been served right away. She herself had been their best customer, and at most there were three other people at the booth simultaneously.

Now there had to be at least twenty people just waiting to get a seat. At Ichiraku…

Naruto walked up to the end of the line just to make absolutely sure, and a wide smile grew on her face when she saw a brown haired man smiling and hurrying around. Making ramen and serving in hurried sessions. It was Ichiraku alright. The only one missing was Ayame, but she suspected she was too young to be helping out just yet. But with a line like this old man Teuchi could probably need the help more than anything in the future.

It was while complementing about asking Teuchi for a part time job that Naruto picked up on the voice calling her name.

"Naruto-chan! Over here!"

The blonde turned around and saw Rin waving to her from the line. She was standing with Obito and Kurenai in line and smiled brilliantly when their eyes met.

"Rin!" Naruto cried and jogged over to them, greeting Obito warmly and giving a polite hi to Kurenai. Naruto hadn't known her all too well in the future, and even less now in the past.

"Are you here to try the ramen, Naruto-chan? I heard from sensei that it's really good. His girlfriend has been dragging him here for the last two days." Rin said excitedly and stood on her toes, trying to peek over the shoulders of the people in front of them.

"I heard so too, so here I am!" Naruto said and looked back towards the end of the line again. Rin and the others had apparently already been waiting for a while, seeing as they were halfway.

"I think I'll try the eggplant." Mused Rin, and Obito gave her a dejected look.

"I heard the miso was good." He suggested and shifted from foot to foot. His hands were stuffed far into his pockets and his shoulders looked tense.

"Hmm.. Yeah, maybe another time. Kakashi-kun recommended the eggplant so I'll try that today." Rin replied without taking notice of the aura her teammate was giving out. Naruto raised an eyebrow, suddenly remember that in fact, Kakashi did eat a lot of eggplant. He usually ordered it whenever Naruto had dragged her sensei with her to eat ramen back in the future.

"Where is Kakashi exactly?" Asked Naruto off handedly, noticing neither he nor Minato was anywhere within sight.

"On a mission." Answered Obito at once, his already sullen face going even more displeased.
"Without you two?" Naruto asked confused. It was unusual, at least from when she was genin, for a team to leave anyone behind in the village. It was a team after all.

Rin stopped trying to get a better view of the booth and nodded to Naruto. "Yes, Kakashi-kun got special permission to go with Minato-sensei and some others on a secret mission. They should be back in a week."

"I could've done that mission. I'd probably have done a better job than Kakashi." Muttered Obito stubbornly, and Naruto finally realized why the Uchiha was in such a bad mood. He was jealous. A familiar feeling, seeing as Naruto had spent her early genin days constantly trying to catch up with Sasuke. At least Kakashi hadn't singled him out to go on a mission and left her and Sakura behind. That had only happened during the genin exams, and back then Sasuke had the very real possibility of getting killed during the first round because he was going up against Gaara who at the time was rather insane.

"Don't be silly, Obito." Said Kurenai with her hands folded in front of her. Her down to earth manners made the rude words sting less, but Obito still bristled at the offending words. "Kakashi-kun is the best in our age group and he was chosen for a reason. If you were the better option for this mission I'm sure Minato-sensei would have picked you." She explained and ignored the boiling of outrage in Obito's eyes.

"Does this happen often?" Wondered Naruto aloud, thinking that maybe her father should work more on not favoring one of his students over the others. She remembered Kakashi had done the same with Sasuke, but he'd paid for that later. Everyone had...

"No, this is the first time this has happened. But we're at war. They can't always follow protocol when a special circumstance shows up. Kakashi-kun is also very skilled for his age. He's even very skilled for just being a chūnin." Gushed Rin, her cheeks going slightly pink and a familiar glazed look came over her eyes while she talked. Naruto realized Rin had more feelings towards Kakashi than mere comradeship.

Without being able to stop it, Naruto burst out laughing. Immediate she tried to stifle the sound with her hand while she tried to get a grip on herself. But the idea of her sensei being in a similar role as Sasuke was just too much. Rin was more subtle then Sakura had ever been when it came to having a crush, but it was still rather obvious. Even Kurenai….

All three looked confused at her, but Naruto waved her hand from side to side while she tried to stop laughing. "I-I'm sorry… It's just… Kakashi doesn't seem like..." She trailed off, not sure how to say this without making them either mad, embarrassed or both.

"Doesn't seem what?" Asked Obito, for the first time not looking like a grumpy troll.

"Nothing… I just didn't know he was so… popular." Naruto explained vaguely. Rin seemed a little bemused, but let the matter drop. Kurenai on the other hand saw right through it, and a small frown appeared on her face. The Uchiha understood too, but instead of commenting, continued to shift from foot to foot. Clearly not interest in speaking about his teammate any more than he needed to.

The line moved forward and Naruto had her node held high while she breathed in the delicious smell of Ichiraku ramen. It had been so long… Way too long. Her mind went back to the countless hours she'd spent at this booth while growing up. The many conversations held while eating here.

Her day dreaming was interrupted by the conversation held between the two older girls. "I have just enough for two bowls, but I don't think I'll have more than one." Said Kurenai while looking inside a red wallet. She sipped it up and put it back into her pocket, not noticing how Naruto had stiffened.
Money…

Of course… Naruto couldn't afford this.

The blonde looked down at the ground, her stomach turning while she realized it might be a long while until she could start going here again.

Taking a deep breath she looked up at the three others and put on the brightest smile she could muster, but internally she was crying.

It was stupid really. She had been faced with far worse since coming back to the past. She had met Jiraiya, her Jiji and her parents who didn't seem to care much one way or another about her. And now was the time she wanted to start crying.

Maybe it had something to do with the familiarity of Ichiraku, or maybe this was just one thing too many. Either way Naruto knew this was just one more thing she couldn't have.

Out of everyone she'd lost in the future and found here in the past Jiraiya was the only one she felt she had a proper bond with again. She didn't have that with the others, because Naruto couldn't find an excuse to hover around them. Didn't have a reason for a random orphan to start nosing in their business. But she'd been so sure she at least could have a bowl of ramen from Ichiraku…

"I'm sorry! I just remembered I have to deliver back a kunai I borrowed from Anko. She wanted to hone them this evening. I'll have to get ramen another time it seems." Naruto said as an excuse, pulling out one of the kunai Anko had borrowed her. Rin and Kurenai nodded in understanding, but Obito looked at her with one eyebrow raised. If he believed her or not Naruto couldn't tell for sure.

"See you guys later!" She exclaimed and turned her backs to them, running away as fast as she could manage before the stupid tears started falling.

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To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, I'm really glad you've taken the time!

This chapter barely made it out on time. I usually try to update every Sunday, but things can get pushed back if daily life is intervening with my writing, and that happened the last couple of weeks.

I've been babysitting which resulted in me catching a cold from one of the kids I took care of, and then I had to sleep outside for three nights (on a trip where we didn't have a tent), which didn't help my illness. So I have to say a huge thank you to AnjoRemix who got this chapter very late and still was able to beta read it and deliver it back with a day to spare. Seriously, you are amazing! Since I'm still sick next chapter might be a little delayed but I'll do my best to avoid it.
Chapter nine – Missions

"Rejection is a part of any man's life. If you can't accept and move past rejection, or at least use it as writing material - you're not a real man." -Jiraya

The only good thing about being Genin during wartime was that none of the fresh graduates was being forced to do D-ranks. Instead Naruto and her classmates had gone through a fair load of them during their last year at the academy.

It had become part of the graduation demands that everyone had to at least fulfill ten D-ranks before being allowed to take the genin exam. It was up to themselves when they wanted to do them, since the missions were done after academy hours.

Naruto, true to her old unstructured habits, had completed them at the very last minute, and it had been a very close call.

One day in class Naruto overheard Mizuki talking about how he had already finished all his D-ranks. The boy had been rather smug about the whole ordeal, and that usually didn't bode well for anyone else. Her suspicion had been confirmed correct.

Because as every slacker in her year was demanding a D-rank at the same time, it had become difficult for the mission desk to find enough work for students before the graduation exam.

It was an ironic truth, seeing as early in the semester they had needed more people then they got, and now it was the opposite. The high demands of panicking graduates were taking every possible slot before the exam and it was hard for them to find enough work for the students to do.

The economy was worsening for every passing month, and by then most people didn't waste money on hiring a ninja to paint their walls or babysit their kid. Everyone was saving money, so the commissioned D-ranks that came in were far less than it had been a year ago.

So when Naruto, Ensui and Iruka met up to stand in line at the mission desk that same afternoon she overheard a couple of students in front of her panic about being given a D-rank that was after graduation. Meaning they only finished nine out of ten, and would therefore be denied doing their exam.

Iruka had looked horrified, Naruto had frozen and Ensui had sighed and looked up at the ceiling with the air of someone who just wanted to get the bad news over with.

Naruto had no plans of being held back half a year though, and as the line moved forward she told the two boys to play along with her. Iruka had started asking what she meant, but Ensui had stepped on his foot to stop him from asking more questions as the two chūnin behind the mission desk came into hearing range.

Naruto started talking in a normal voice, just loud enough for the two men she was targeting to hear, that how if she didn't graduate she might get so bored she started doing pranks to pass the time.
This didn't have the desired effect, and with an unpleasant realization she remembered that no one knew what a prankster she could be. Maybe they envisioned she would drop a spider underneath her sensei desk or equally harmless.

So she changed her tactic slightly instead.

She asked Ensui if he'd heard about the new paint down at the equipment shop. It was a paint that could color stone, and it *stuck so well* that you would have to *scrub for days on end* if you wanted to get it off.

Without missing a beat Ensui had answered that no, he hadn't heard of it, but he would check it out with her after they got their missions. And Maybe Iruka wanted to come along too?

Iruka had started answering, the confusion on his face so obvious Ensui had been forced to step on his foot for a second time. Naruto had said that yeah, that would be really good of him. It was just a shame she *wasn't sure what to paint yet.*

As the line moved one person forwards Naruto changed the topic to the Hokage Monument, fully aware that the chūnin closest to them were now eavesdropping. She mentioned casually how the fog surrounding the mountain that day made it hard to see the stone faces from down in the village. That the Hokage tower, which was red, was *so much more visible.* And that if the *faces on the mountain had been colored* when they had been sculptured it would have made a real difference in dreary weather like this.

At this moment Iruka looked beyond confused, but wisely kept his mouth shut. Ensui on the other hand was fighting hard to keep a straight face.

Naruto went for the final blow and said off handedly that the Second Hokage looked so stern all the time. And if it had been *painted with rosy cheeks, his proper white hair and skin color* it would make the face so much more visible and he'd looked more cheery to boot. The two chūnin at the mission desk had exchanged troubled looks and one of them had left the desk completely to rummage around in the storage room as the line moved forward.

Not surprised in the slightest, all three of them were given a set of slots that had all their D-ranks finished before graduation. Ensui barely managed to hold his face in check until they stood outside, but then he burst out chuckling and high-fived her for her unexpected brilliance.

That's how Naruto had managed to do her D-ranks over the last two weeks before graduating together with Iruka and Ensui. Squeezing them in just on time to graduate.

Shisui, the good little boy that he was, had done his own missions once a week the first ten weeks of his final year. But the Uchiha had curiously enough chosen to accompany them on some of their D-ranks anyway.

However, instead of helping out he sat on the sidelines and smiled widely while he watched his friends pick garbage from the park or washed the windows of the Hokage building.

Usually he made sure to have ice cream with him while he sat on a bench and watched them work. For the first time Naruto noticed the boy had a mean streak in him. Shisui had of course heard how Naruto had manipulated the chūnin at the mission desk to get their D-ranks, and maybe this was his way of showing disapproval.

Or he just liked to gloat. It was hard to tell the difference.

But still, Naruto couldn't remember the last time she had ice cream. It had been in the future. These
days the idea of beings served ice cream at the orphanage was laughable, and affording one was just a waste of none existence money. The fact that the chūnin at the mission desk had bought her paint story was only because they had no idea Naruto was a penniless orphan. She also doubted Shisui understood just how poor Naruto was though, and if it had been Anko he was gloating at he'd be far worse off than Naruto let him be.

To his defense, Shisui himself called it moral support, but that was a just a load of bullshit everyone could see through.

The D-rank missions were also done for free. They were considered volunteer work done to be allowed graduation. Which annoyed Naruto to no end.

In her own time she'd at least gotten paid to do these sorts of things, but no. Wartime meant different rules.

But as Naruto was now Genin she started on C-ranks right off the bat and after a week of Orochimaru's slave regime they finally started doing missions.

On the first C-rank, the blonde had been relieved when nothing went wrong.

It was a simple escort mission which took them outside of the village and it went just as planned.

The second was accomplished in the same fashion, and every single one until the tenth.

During the tenth mission Anko fell into an old trap right next to a lake they had been passing by. She plummeted underneath the water so fast Naruto still didn't understand properly what had happened. The only thing she knew was that Anko was going to drown if something wasn't done quickly.

Orochimaru had been surprisingly swift at acting though, and Anko had been saved before she swallowed too much water. It had been an enemy trap but they weren't attacked, so Orochimaru concluded it was a trap an enemy left behind before moving to a different location.

All in all Naruto was starting to grow more nervous for each new mission they went on.

Team Kushina had already run into enemies from Iwa twice, but it had gone well on both occasions thanks to the fact they were small scouting squads meant to spy on Konoha, and not a whole combat team that Kushina couldn't handle. Iruka had talked Naruto's ears off about it both times, but it never had the desired effect on Naruto. Instead of being impressed the blonde grew more troubled.

And just like Anko had been doing, Naruto too was saving up money for her own place to live now that she was legally allowed to leave the orphanage. She had also soon come to the harsh realization that it was truly mind bogglingly expensive.

In her own time she'd never dealt with rent herself. Naruto had just received an allowance and the apartment she'd rented had somehow paid itself. The monthly money hadn't been much, after all the reason she'd gotten such an addiction to ramen was because it was cheap. But if her rent had been as much as it was these days she could understand that there hadn't been much money left for food.

Now her first pay check had gone to weapons and the next one had been saved. Shisui had let her borrow some of his old clothes which he'd outgrown too. Since her orphanage shirt looked more like a sack with holes after only a week of training with Orochimaru.

That's how Naruto found herself wearing all black in the form of ninja pants and a wide collard plain T-shirt for every day at training and missions.
The clothes weren't really something she'd pick for herself, but they were for free so she wasn't complaining. At least there weren't any Uchiha fans printed on any of the surfaces.

"Are you sure it's alright?" Asked Naruto when Kagami had come down from the attic with the clothes.

"Of course, it's not doing any good gathering dust in the attic." Chuckled Shisui and shook his head.

"It's no problem Naruto, this way we get rid of some hooped up articles, and you can save your money for your new place." Added Kagami kindly, and afterwards invited her to stay for dinner. Naruto had gratefully accepted both clothes and the meal, but on the inside she felt like a loser. It was strange that kindness, almost as much as the old feeling of being ignored, could make her feel like such a nuisance. Because Naruto couldn't repay the kindness. She had nothing to give back, and it made her feel incredible bothered about accepting what she was offered. But it was the polite thing to do, and later on she made sure not to mention her short coming in front of Shisui.

Kakashi was not expecting to see Gai when he reached the top of the mountain he'd been climbing. He hadn't been using chakra, and instead of climbing like any reasonable sane person did, with both arms to make sure you had the correct gravitation point on the uphill battle, he used one. He found it an extremely draining exercise in itself, it also tested his bravery, as many would have swooned from the height itself, and the last he had energy left for was Gai.

"My eternal rival! I am delighted to see you here! Successful in your brave climb in the heat of the merciless sun!" Was the welcome he'd received the moment he reached the top. Kakashi had decided to keep to his original routine instead of replying to Gai, and lay down while panting heavily at the mountain top instead.

While Gai continued having a conversation with himself, Kakashi thought back to his latest, disastrous, mission. The whole of Rōran was reduced to a smoking ruin. He hadn't been allowed close to the battle, but the mission report spoke for itself. The Queen had died together with her village and the tyrant. Minato would probably always carry that hideous scar on his back, and Choza was still in the hospital.

They'd also lost a man. Aburame Shibi had gone down in the battle. He didn't know the insect summoner that well. This mission had been by far the most they'd ever interacted. He had liked him though. He understood privacy and had clearly been intelligent. Most of all he had followed all the rules to a T, just like Kakashi did, and yet he had died...

He felt sadness at his death. Not as much as his family of course, but it had still been horrible watching the man get killed by that monster.

He sighed heavily. This sound seemed to snap Gai out of his endless chatter, and instead he looked concerned to Kakashi, who was still laying spread eagle on the ground while he tried to get his heart back to its normal rhythm.

"Oy, Kakashi? Are you okay?" He asked concerned, and Kakashi felt the normal irritation at being perceived as weak flare up momentarily. It died quickly though, and wordlessly he nodded.

"I heard you had a rough mission..." Added Gai, tilting his head in the direction of the village.

"Yes." Supplemented Kakashi, realizing Gai was not going to stop pestering him. Coza was his sensei, so it was impossible for Gai not to learn the reason he was without a sensei at the moment.

"It's hard to watch a comrade die. I never want to experience such a thing. I've been lucky so far
though. Choza-sensei is still in the hospital, but he'll be out within the end of the week." He said and sat down at the edge of the mountainside. Kakashi didn't let his gaze leave the clouds above him, they were moving across the sky aimlessly. As if they were actually going somewhere.

"I'm glad he's making a speedy recovery." Kakashi replied out of politeness. He was glad, but again that was a personal thing. Gai who wore his heart on his sleeve in all matters of his life didn't understand the need for privacy. The need to dwell over things with only yourself.

"We're set for a mission in a little more than a week… I hope sincerely Choza-sensei will be healthy enough. Maybe he should sit it out."

For the first time Kakashi gazed in the green clad kid's direction. Fleetingly catching Gai's uncertainty. It was unusual for the boy to show anything but exuberant overconfidence, and it had to bother him a lot for him to look so sullen. Or as sullen as you could look in such a ridiculous outfit.

"Only Choza-sensei himself will know if he's ready. If he's not he won't go." Stated Kakashi in a matter of fact tone.

"Ah, haha… You're right Kakashi! As always… And we'll be going with team Orochimaru, so nothing too bad can happen when you have a sannin on your team. He has a springtime of blooming that has lasted him for many years! We should all strive for his example!" He said and started sounding more like himself again.

Kakashi snorted at the idea of Naruto and Gai on the same mission. It would be pandemonium. Maybe Choza really did need to get well and out of the hospital. If they decided to go ahead without him then there was a real possibility the two hyperactive ninjas would be a jeopardy to the mission out of sheer loudness. Orochimaru by himself could hardly be a strong enough counter force.

The wind had cooled him down by now, his forehead was less sweaty and according to his training schedule Kakashi should be heading down the mountainside again by now.

"I have to get back to training, Gai. But good luck on your mission." Kakashi said and moved swiftly to the mountainside and lowered himself over the edge.

"Thank you Kakashi! I will do my utmost to fulfil this new and challenging mission!" Gai said and waved down to him as Kakashi swiftly moved down the mountain. With one hand.

It surprised Kakashi that he didn't follow. Gai was usually hard to shake off when they first ran into each other. But taking a peek up he noticed Gai was simply gazing at the horizon. Already far away in his own thoughts. Kakashi felt a pang of guilt at how he'd handled the situation. But then again, what the hell did he know about lifting others' moral? He had enough with his own…

"I want you three to be as prepared as possible for our next mission." Said Orochimaru and looked down over his nose at his three students. Naruto and Shisui shared a confused glance in each other's direction, not having had this type of briefing before a mission before. While Anko had only focused more intensely at her sensei. Knowing the tone he used meant business and that he expected top performance from each of them for this new task.

"It will be a long one, at least a month. Probably more and it will include two stages. First we are to transport supplies to the front lines. They're suffering a shortage, and as most of you are tiny and two of you are good at hiding your chakra you'll be the ones to sneak into one of our hidden bases without drawing attention to our soldiers. This will be a good test to see how good you are in the field because we'll be passing through some dangerous territory to get to the bases. The second stage
will be explained once stage one is completed." Explained Orochimaru and nodded to Naruto who had raised her hand.

By now she'd learned the best way to get out of excruciating extra training was to not anger her sensei too much. He was being surprisingly tolerant with her, but he hated being interrupted. Naruto had received more bruises than she could count from some of the disciplinary punishments Orochimaru had given her.

"Why can't we know beforehand?" Asked Naruto.

"That should be obvious. Shisui explain." He said and gestured in the boy's direction. Shisui blushed slightly but started explaining.

"In case one of us are captured and the enemy extract information from us. If a situation like that occurred it could jeopardize the second stage." Shisui told Naruto quickly, earning himself an approving nod from Orochimaru.

"Good to see you at least can keep up, Shisui." The sannin added before turning to point towards the western gate. "We'll leave from that gate tomorrow at dawn. This is a joint mission together with team Choza. It's also classified as two B-ranks and I want you all to dress for camouflage and pack all the warm layers you can find. We'll be passing over some high altitudes that have little cover and I want us to blend in with the mountainside." Ordered Orochimaru.

Naruto scratched her upper arm uncertainly, a feeling of uneasiness taking root in her stomach as they were being allowed to leave early. Orochimaru exchanged a few words with Anko before he left in the direction of the Hokage tower. Anko nodded to Shisui and Naruto before she turned around and left. Not waiting for Naruto to join her.

Naruto took that as a sign that she would not be welcome to dinner that day.

She kept looking at Anko's back while the girl walked away briskly. Naruto felt guilty for not having patched things up with her yet. This argument was stupid and Orochimaru was not worth it. It was difficult to understand how Anko could stand their sensei, far less jump to his defense. Anyone who saw him had to notice his creepy nature. Naruto thought back to her chūnin exam in the forest of death. Even disguised and hiding his motives, team seven had still picked up on his horrible nature almost instantly. But she guessed Orochimaru reputation blinded people from seeing the truth. Even the Hokage….

Instead of catching up with Anko she fell in step with Shisui as they headed back towards One Legged Parade. "I think this mission will be one of those 'easy task, high risk' missions. It's a B rank, and most likely Orochimaru-sensei is the reason we're going on this mission in the first place." Said Shisui thoughtfully after a long silence.

"Oh?" Asked Naruto, but agreeing that it was likely.

"Yeah… we're just genin, but the other team we're going with are all more experienced. Maybe all of them are chūnin even." Said Shisui and shrugged. "Though I'm surprised Choza-san is already out of the hospital. I heard he got pretty badly injured at his last mission. An Aburame on his team even got killed. He was a friend of my dad… And I heard Namikaze-san is the only reason they got back and the mission was somewhat of a success." Explained Shisui as they entered the back ally of a housing district.

"Is he alright enough for a mission already?" Wondered Naruto aloud. Feeling like something was nagging at the back of her consciousness, but couldn't for the life of her understand exactly what.
"I guess so. Father says Choza-san is a very good shinobi. I also didn't get the feeling the times I've met him that he's one to jeopardize either his student or a mission because of his own health problems." Shisui said and looked sideways down at Naruto. She was walking with both arms crossed behind her head while One Legged Parade came into view between the buildings ahead of them.

"Isn't Gai on his team?" Naruto suddenly asked, getting distracted from the odd feeling she was having and stopped just as they reached the street.

"Gai? That green clad boy?" Asked Shisui and shrugged. "I don't know."

"I think he is..." Naruto muttered, and then looked in the direction of the orphanage. It was time to face her room-mates again. She had crashed at Anko's for a few nights after their wordless argument started, but after a week and a half Naruto couldn't stand the tension anymore and instead slept at the orphanage.

"We'll find out tomorrow who we'll be going with. Pack wisely Naruto. Is there something you need to borrow?" Asked Shisui kindly and smiled.

"No thanks, Shisui." Naruto answered a little too quickly. Shisui narrowed his eyes but let it drop. Instead he waved as he left while Naruto pondered where she could get a cloak for the next mission.

Winter was soon upon them, and even she wasn't completely immune to diseases. It would be best to start using some of her savings. She had a little saved up by now for her future apartment, but if she had to buy winter gear there would be pitifully little left.

It couldn't be helped though, and in any case she would be doing two B-ranks. They paid better than C-ranks and she would be supplied with food while they were on the road. That meant she would have no expenses while she was away and could save everything she earned once she returned.

As Naruto walked up the hallway of the orphanage she was deep in thoughts, wondering how she would use her spending and where she could get the best deals. There was no flee market before she left, but she knew of a new second hand store near the northern gate that might have something at the right price.

When she reached her door of her room Naruto suddenly stopped. She thought she heard a strange sound, and looking confused around Naruto tried to find out where the sound came from. With a furrowed brow she followed the sound. It was a stifled sort of hiccup, coming from somewhere further down the hallway. The sound led her to the storage shed, and confused she opened up the door. At first all she could see was the dark outlines of racks containing washing equipment, dust and a heavy sent of detergent. The room was so dark she couldn't see half a meter in front of her, and fumbling with her hand against the wall on the inside of the room she found a light switch and turned it on.

The light flashed a few times on and off before giving a steady dim red light that made her able to see better. The sound had stopped, but Naruto knew someone was in here. Walking carefully in she started looking between different shelves, and as she walked through the room she heard another sound. A small sob from somewhere further in.

Naruto felt a little nervous, no one came in here except Madam May, and that was only on Tuesdays and Fridays when she washed the orphanage. There was a smaller storage room next to the kitchen they used more regularly, and this room was used more to store the heavier things that didn't fit downstairs. Between two rows of shelves a small figure sat with their hands around their knees. The
person had their face pressed against their knees, trying to block out the light and get control of themselves before they were caught.

"Akiko?" Naruto asked concerned. The brunette didn't look up, and instead started sobbing so intensely she heaved for breath afterwards. Bending down Naruto reached out her hand, not sure if the girl wanted to be touched at all. Going for it she laid her hand on Akiko's shoulder and squeezed it gently. "What happened?" Naruto murmured gently.

Akiko was someone Naruto had never seen cry. She was usually one of the happier souls in the orphanage. She was popular amongst both the girls and boys and was somewhat of a queen bee amongst her peers. She complained about the orphanage, but was usually polite and kind to just about everyone. Though Naruto was far from her favorite person, she had never been outright cruel to her for sticking to Anko instead of her and her friends.

Akiko looked up, her eyes shining with tears that poured down her face and her lip quivering as she tried to hold in the sounds of her sobs. "Oh, Akiko..." Naruto said with empathy, and without asking what was wrong she engulfed her roommate in a tight hug. The brunette didn't push her away and instead hugged back with even more intensity.

It was a sad truth that in the orphanage you just didn't show weakness. No one cried in public, not even in front of Madam May, who was like a surrogate mother for everyone. With so many children that were used to never being shown mercy, they themselves showed little for others. Akiko probably didn't dare show how much of a wreck she was to even her closest friends. Naruto remembered she would go down to the basement and cry there in her own time. It was quiet and not once did anyone come down there. It was a free zone where she could go whenever life caught up with her and she just couldn't hold in her tears.

Naruto didn't know how long she held Akiko, but eventually the girl started calming down. "Do you want to talk about it?" Asked Naruto gently when the girl at last pulled away, drying her red eyes repeatedly even though tears were still falling, though with less intensity.

"H-Hana r-ran away." Akiko said in small gasps, still trying to control her voice.

"Oh..." Naruto replied, not sure what to say to that. Hana was one of their other roommates, and if possible, Naruto knew her even less than she knew Akiko.

"Are you sure?" Asked Naruto, looking down quickly at the glare Akiko sent her. Shortly after she heard a snort and peeked up through her bangs.

"Yeah I'm sure. Her things are gone and I heard sounds last night. She probably packed and left when no one was awake to see her leave." Akiko said bitterly and leaned her head against the wall behind her.

Hana and Akiko was very good friends. Amongst the gang they were usually always sitting together, and Naruto guessed that Akiko, just like Anko had done with Emi, felt betrayed that their closest friend had left without a goodbye.

"I should leave too." Muttered Akiko as an afterthought and Naruto straightened up like a wire.

"No." Naruto growled, her hostile tone drawing Akiko's attention and making the other girl grimace at the fiery look on Naruto's face.

"Why not?! You don't understand! You are a ninja! You have a career already! But me? My friends? Wherever we go we're nothing but orphans! Haven't you heard what happens when we come of
age? Our education is a joke! They call us not qualified, to them we're thieves and low class scum that just have to make due with whatever we can get. Most girls who stays in Konoha end up at the brothels!” Akiko said heatedly, but it was obvious she was just about to start crying again.

Naruto bit her lip, knowing perfectly well that what Akiko said was true. Most girls did end up as hookers. The guys had it easier when it came to jobs. There were always some jobs that included hard manual labor that was deemed unfit for women where they needed cheap labor. It was still a shitty job, but at least they were respected more than hookers were.

"You still shouldn't run away. It's not safe, you could-" Naruto started saying, but was cut off by Akiko.

"I don't care! At this rate all of my friends will leave me behind! I hate it here and I don't want to live here! It's grim and depressing and my future will be ruined if I stay in this place! I can't be a ninja, so my best shot is to leave Konoha and find a job somewhere else! Kami knows no one who'll hire me here with my background." Akiko shouted so loudly Naruto was certain they could hear it throughout the whole floor.

"Akiko!" Naruto said sternly back. "I've been out there, I've been out there all on my own and I know what I'm talking about. Do not leave Konoha! This orphanage might not be the best place to live but it's better than the alternative. You don't know how to hunt or what plants are edible and not. And since you don't know that you'll have to stick to populated places. We're at war, Akiko! You'll get killed! No one trusts outsiders anymore, civilian or not, it doesn't make a difference. And out there you'll have no protection at all! Here you get a roof over your head, food and while it's not much to brag about you do get an education. Pitiful as you seem to think it is it's a hell of a lot more than others get!" Naruto said, her voice growing in panic at the stubborn expression Akiko's face.

"Please… If you leave you won't be able to come back. All deserters are treated as enemies… Even if you leave and then change your mind… You'll be seen as an enemy of Konoha. You'll be thrown in jail if you return. Then you'll be both an orphan and a criminal.” Naruto said quietly, taking Akiko's hand and squeezing it in comfort.

Akiko pulled her hand quickly back and looked away, but couldn't hide the fresh tears.

"Hana… She…” Akiko said and tried to stifle a new set of sobs. "Won't be able to..."

She didn't need to finish the sentence. Naruto knew what it entailed. Hana would never come back. Akiko's only chance to see her now was to either wait years until Konoha was stable and started trusting strangers again, or leave and track her friend down. Naruto understand extremely well what Akiko was going through. Hadn't Naruto chased Sasuke in an attempt to get him back? Even when he was classified as a missing nin and an enemy of Konoha?

"Hey… Akiko." Naruto said, and tried to keep her voice friendly and nonjudgmental. The girl looked slowly back at Naruto, her swollen eyes looking glazed while she dried her red nose.

"Yeah?" Akiko breathed.

"I'm going on a mission tomorrow… I'll be gone for over a month." Naruto started, her resolve coming back to her as Akiko looked uninterested now that she understood this was just about ninja business. A topic the girl probably hated.

"Good for you." Akiko replied scornfully.

"No, I mean… Please don't leave while I'm away. Promise me that if you do leave, you'll wait and
tell me goodbye. I'll give you some tools that might make it easier to survive out in the wild. You also have to try to stay away from villages… And…" Naruto wasn't sure what else to say.

She couldn't force Akiko to do anything. She wouldn't even be in Konoha, and if the girl was leaving she'd do it soon. She was being reckless, and her childish thinking would make her do something stupid. It was hard to be a child where no one had your back. You weren't mature enough to understand, but yet felt things so much more intensely.

"And if you wait until I return before you leave… I promise you I'll try to find Hana while I'm away. I can't really go look for her, I have a mission I need to complete and I can't abandon my teammates, but I can try to keep my eyes and ears out. I'll even ask Anko to help. She understands, she lost Emi the same way. And hey, if I find her I promise you I'll do anything to help her out." Naruto offered kindly.

Akiko's eyes widened, her expression going from grumpy to startled. Slowly she nodded and wordlessly she took Naruto's hand tightly in both of hers, holding on as if her life depended on it.

Shisui looked from each of his new comrades in turn. There was Choza, the tall plump man that had carried him back to Konoha on the disastrous outing almost two years ago. Next to him stood a thin boy who was tall for his age, with chin length brown hair and blue bandanna tied around his forehead. He was dressed in a cloak that covered whatever he was wearing, so Shisui couldn't tell if he was a chūnin or not. Next to him stood Gai, similarly dressed and smiling good naturedly to them as the shortest member of his team. Next to the energetic ninja was a black haired boy with round black glasses and a haughty demeanor.

Orochimaru had just finished introducing himself and his team and Choza had taken over the introductions.

"… And these are my students." He explained and gestured to the three boys. "Shiranui Genma," He said and pointed to the tall boy with the bandanna. "Might Gai" He said and indicated to the surprisingly calm boy. "and Ebisu. I hope we'll work well with you." Choza finished and smiled proudly down at his students.

"I'm sure it will go well." Said Orochimaru more out of formality then having any genuine emotion behind the words. Shisui wondered if this behavior was what made Naruto dislike their sensei so much. Orochimaru was the opposite of Naruto in so many ways. He rarely showed any other emotion than excitement, and even that was a rarity. Naruto never hid anything. She was so easy to read it was almost a handicap for her. The only thing that had ever surprised him about her was her intense dislike for Orochimaru. Shisui had not seen that one coming.

"I'll be captain of this squad." Orochimaru explained and looked pointedly at Naruto when he said this. The blonde rolled her eyes but didn't say anything to start up an argument. "Everyone have their backpacks and war supplies all packed up?" He asked everyone in general. Again everyone nodded. Not only were they bringing supplies for themselves for this long mission, but also for the forces out on the front lines.

All eight of them were carrying a large backpack each. In Naruto's case it looked almost comical. The backpacks had clearly been designed for adults, and since she was the smallest the backpack looked to be drowning her. Shisui was surprised she wasn't already complaining about the heavy weight.

"Then let's go. We're heading out." Stated Orochimaru, and walking at a fast pace the two teams set
"Why won't you just tell me everything? This is all your fault!" Shouted Naruto furiously, looking up into the eyes of the kyūbi. His face lifted an inch from his paws which his head had been resting against. His right eye dimmed closed as if he was about to fall asleep.

"Your petty concerns aren't mine own." Said the nine tailed demon fox in his deep, booming voice that filled out the echo of the dark sewer like space that was Naruto's mindscape.

"You threw us back in time! What were you attempting to do? If you'd gone back on your own you would just have ended up inside my mother! And then you'd have been just as imprisoned as you are now! What the hell happened?" Demanded Naruto, leaning against the golden bars of the cage separating the two angry souls.

"Insolent little human..." Muttered the fix darkly, his remaining left eye closed like the right one had. "What I choose to do is my own business. I've already told you the gist of it. Figure out the rest on your own." The kyūbi said darkly, his shoulders starting to rise and fall as his breathing evened.

"Why won't you cooperate with me? Why can't we be a team like Killer Bee and octo-pops?" Asked Naruto tiredly and let her hands slide down the bars. "Why can't you just admit that you screwed up? I do it all the time and I don't try to hide that fact."

The fox's eyes opened slightly, becoming narrow slits of light where they glinted in the darkness. "Because I will not wag my tails to the command of my jailer. Hachibi is a fool for cooperating with despicable humans."

Naruto peeked up carefully, wondering about the current state of the kyūbi and its altered appearance. "Why do you look different? You're so thin..." Asked Naruto and took a step back. "Or well... You were extremely thin, but now you're just slightly less chubby then I remember you being."

"Don't call me chubby you brat!"

Naruto sighed and walked away from the cage, wondering if she'd ever get a word out of the fox.

Opening her eyes Naruto stared into the back of Anko's head. She was sitting cross legged while eating her bowl of soup next to Orochimaru a little ahead of where the blonde was sitting. Naruto turned her head sideways and stared right into Genma who hurriedly leaned backwards because of the close proximity between their faces had been.

"Oh, sorry. I thought you'd fallen asleep while sitting up." Genma blurted out while he grinned apologetically. Naruto smiled and let her hand drift to the back of her head, smiling sheepishly back.

"Nah, I was trying to meditate, but it didn't go very well." Naruto answered and looked around the camp. Shisui was talking with Choza while the latter was eating from a bag of chips. Gai was nowhere to be seen and Ebisu was doing some odd looking stretching poses.

Genma nodded before looking down at the ground which was littered with senbon.

"What are you doing?" Asked Naruto interested, taking a peek at the different sizes and designs of the needle formed weapons.

"Organizing." Answered Genma while he picked up a couple of senbons before placing them carefully back into the fabric of his pants right by the knee.
"Eh?"

"I'm spreading them out and pocketing them in useful locations. Making sure there's always a needle at hand." Supplemented Genma.

"So you have this many on you at all times? Not just the one in your mouth?" Asked Naruto and gestured to the senbon between Genma's teeth. The boy gave a crooked smile and nodded. Naruto remembered the ninja well enough from her own time. He was more awkward now then she remembered.

Genma had been her proctor during the final rounds of the chūnin exam, but after that she hadn't seen him much. He had been friends with Shikamaru though, so Naruto had always had the impression he'd been a smart man. Maybe it was just who she associated him with and his quiet demeanor, but so far she quite liked Genma. He seemed aloof and kind at the same time.

"Why senbon?" Wondered Naruto. She remembered Haku and his needle work. It was a dangerous tool when used by an expert but you got nothing for free. You had to train accuracy and strength to a tedious amount to get it down. Naruto had problems picturing anyone wanting to do such a monotonous job for so long to call themselves expert. At least if you jabbed with it you were sure to make damage if you were close enough.

Genma shrugged, as if saying 'I'm not sure' before continuing in silence. "Are we going soon? I thought we wanted to reach the mountain before dark." Added Naruto, feeling restless from the silence of their camp.

Genma nodded again, and when Naruto continued to stare him down he sighed and replied out loud. "We're leaving as soon as Orochimaru is finished with his work. I think he's planning on splitting us up into our respective teams. It makes for a smaller target if we're in two companies."

"Yeah, he's finished so pack up already." Said a voice from in front of them, and both Naruto and Genma looked up at Anko who was scowling at them.

"Sure." Replied Genma, raising an eyebrow at the angry expression on the dark haired girl.

Naruto rolled her eyes but did as instructed. Getting to her feet she packed up the bowl she'd used for the soup earlier and walked up to stand next to Anko afterwards. She was already ready, tapping her foot while she waited for the others to finish.

"You know, I think you should be a little less grumpy." Suggested Naruto to Anko.

The girl whirled on her foot scowling so badly Naruto wondered if Anko was about to hit her. "Well, I don't care what you think!" Retorted Anko heatedly and started walking head, making Ebisu, who was still packing, to start throwing in his equipment in fear of being left behind.

Naruto sighed as the others started following after Anko. From her left she could hear Shisui and Choza still conversing, and caught the last of Shisui's words. "I hope those two can make up soon." He said with exasperation, and Naruto fell a little further behind the others to where Gai was carrying some of Ebisu's equipment he hadn't had time to pack up properly.

As Gai started talking a waterfall of words Naruto tried to engage in the conversation. It was impossible to stay down while in the company of the green clad ninja. He was always so positive, and though he could creep her out sometimes - his antic was too eccentric even for her at times - she still appreciated the distraction. As they walked and talked Naruto comforted herself with the thought that Anko would have to come around eventually.
To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading and I hope you liked the chapter. This and all the other chapters has been beta'd by AnjoRemix who is amazing at beta reading.

I'm sorry for the long delay, I have some excuses but I wont go into detail, I'm just grateful you took the time to read. I'll try to get back on track with After the Rain, so you can count on the next chapter to be out a lot faster than this one was.

The story is taking a darker turn now, Naruto will start being a part of the war, and that means it's harder for me to keep the atmosphere light. I'm trying to keep out the angst as best I can, but there will of course be some. War is war.

Also... Do you understand what I implied in this chapter? The future has been changed but Naruto doesn't know it yet. Some of you can maybe understand what caused this change, but it requires that you've seen the Naruto movie named 'The Lost Tower.' It's average as far as I think. I'm not really a fan of anime movies, it feels like fillers most of the time, but The Lost Tower include time travel. So I thought it fitted with my story.
Chapter Ten – Trips, Traps and Tricks

"It's because we help out when they're in trouble that we can count on them to come running when we need it." - Nara Shikamaru

Naruto trotted after Shisui, feeling like a drowned dog where she sagged in her wet clothes. The rain was coming down in harsh puddles, and from time to time Naruto could swear it was hailing.

Her hair was plastered to her face even though she was wearing her hood up. Even the best raincoat wouldn't have kept this hammering rain out, and the one Naruto had borrowed from Akiko was far from top notch.

The inherited pants Naruto got from Shisui lay like glue against her legs and it was both uncomfortable and annoying. Naruto couldn't be even more soaked even if she jumped in a lake.

Looking up to the sky she saw lightning strike towards the ground from high up above them, followed instantly by the sound of rumbling thunder.

"Shit! It's right upon us!" Gritted Shisui out and took a step closer to Naruto as another flash went off.

"It's everywhere." Retorted Naruto loudly through the howling wind, knowing eighty percent of her volume was drowned by the music of Mother Nature herself was creating.

"No, it's right over us. You can tell by how long the span between the lightning strike and the sound of thunder is. The longer the break is between a lightning and thunder the further away it is. But there is no such space. The lightning and the thunder is simultaneously, which means we are right in the middle of the storm!" He shouted back, and as if nature was proving Shisui's point, a tree was struck by a white flash so bright Naruto went blind for a second. Next she heard a crash, and when her eyes finally adjusted it was to see a burning tree lying right by Orochimaru's feet in the pouring rain.

"Crap… If only the tree had fallen a bit more to the right." Muttered Naruto in a normal volume, but the storm didn't allow for anyone but herself to hear it.

Shisui was gripping her wrist, his eyes wide as he looked worriedly in every direction. "Shit, shit, shit, shit. We should get under shelter. This is suicide." He said and started dragging Naruto by her arm towards Orochimaru.

But their path was cut off by Gai who seemingly appeared out of thin air. It was hard to use their peripheral vision because it was cut off by the hoods of their cloaks.

"Come my youthful comrades. We are heading for shelter so we can have a meeting!" Gai exclaimed and had the energy to give them a shiny smile that reflected another lightning strike somewhere behind them.

Shisui was about to say something, but Naruto stopped him by stepping forwards and nodding to
Gai. "Where exactly?" She asked, they were on the top of a treeless and bare mountain. The best cover she could see was boulders that might screen them from some wind. But wind was coming from every direction and putting up a tent could be dangerous in this type of weather.

"Just follow Choza-sensei! I'll make sure your path is safe while we walk. No lightning can cut down Konoha's Green beast!" Gai shouted so loud neither Naruto or Shisui had problems hearing him.

"Lead the way!" Naruto shouted back, also having no problem getting heard by the two others. Gai turned and started leading them sideways towards the edge of the mountain they were crossing. The sides of the mountain had steep drop that could give anyone vertigo if they stared down for too long.

Naruto used chakra under her feet to make sure she didn't accidentally slipped and fall to her death, making sure to have a grip on Shisui's upper arm while they walked. The Uchiha had already made good progress on the wall walking exercise, but he hadn't mastered it completely yet. She was not about to let him fall.

The others were already far ahead of them, making their way over the diagonal parts of the mountain and Naruto was wondering where the hell they were heading. One thing was certain; this was not somewhere anyone would like to go if they had an alternative. The bad weather, the steep side they were clinging to and the slippery surface made sure no one would be tempted to take this route.

Gai offered to carry Shisui, but the boy declined. He even made Naruto let go of him so he could try and do it all by himself. Naruto stayed close though, watching every little slow step he took while he walked sideways along the steepest part of the mountain.

Suddenly Gai stopped and pointed upwards. They had been walking diagonally downwards from the mountain edge, and the mountain bulged slightly outwards at the top before cut in again many meters down. Here there was a small landing that lead inwards for quite a few meters. The place was very well camouflaged and sheltered anyone inside from the storming elements.

Happy by the promise of a break from the rain, Shisui and Naruto eagerly followed Gai as he climbed up on the landing which had been completely missed by Naruto until she was right underneath it. She wondered how anyone had found this place in to begin with. It wasn't really an obvious place to go look for a hiding spot. Maybe someone had fallen once, and on their way up they'd found this landing.

"This weather is abysmal. Can we stay here tonight Choza-sensei?" Naruto heard Ebisu complain to his sensei. It was much easier to hear in here than it had been outside. The sound echoed slightly on the walls and though Ebisu hadn't spoken loudly Naruto still caught every word. Choza was running a towel through his bushy red hair and smiled apologetically to his student.

"I'm sorry, Ebisu, but no. We have quite a bit more ground to cover before we reach the base." He replied before Naruto looked further in on the landing. It might be described more like a cave with a landing leading out.

"How on earth did anyone find this place?" Anko was asking Orochimaru, and Naruto hid the smile on her face by looking down towards the ground. Orochimaru answered her something unspecific before calling the two teams to him. Everyone gathered around.

"We'll stay here so we can get some food. From here on out I think it best if we split our teams in two, one who'll go before the second one and take a different route." Orochimaru explained and fished up a scroll from his pants and bent down to unfold it on the rocky ground. Everyone peeked down while a map was displayed. Orochimaru pointed to a location on the map and then looked up
"We're here at the moment. Because of the weather we're a little behind schedule, but if we press on into the night we should reach our next stop and won't lose any time. I have decided to divide our teams according to specialty, and the group I'll be leading will take the more dangerous route." Orochimaru explained while indicating what route his team would be taking. "This route is closer to where we expect the enemy bases are, at least it's an area we've lost many good shinobi and had more than a few ambushes. I'll be taking Anko, Genma and Gai. You three all are adequately skilled in stealth." Orochimaru said and looked at each child in turn as he said their names.

He then looked towards Naruto and Shisui who was standing the furthest away. "Naruto and Shisui will go with Choza and Ebisu by taking the north eastern route. It's a little longer, but it requires less sneaking. That doesn't mean you'll be taking any roads though. Everywhere is dangerous. Hopefully by keeping to smaller groups and spreading out we will be able to get to the base without confrontation. But if you do..." Orochimaru said and trailed off for a moment, his eyes narrowing. "Kill them." He said simply, a small smile tugging at the corners of his lips. Naruto rolled her eyes. Everyone nodded and started bustling around, trying to find the best possible spot to sit down and start eating. Orochimaru denied Gai to light a fire, saying that the light was too visible in weather like this, so instead they would be eating whatever they had cold.

Genma sat down with Naruto and Shisui, his bowl of cold soup he'd been keeping in a container already half empty because of the speed he was eating at. "I hear a civilian village not too far from the route you two are taking was raided not too long ago. Choza-sensei knows of course, but I'll just give you the heads up." He said between two spoons full.

Naruto nodded while she was trying to open her own container. It had been hanging off the side of her backpack by a strap, and the rain had made the lid slippery. Clumsily she got it off and poured herself some into a bowl. Half afraid she'd drop the container while she poured Naruto used both hands.

Straightening up she looked up as Shisui pulled out a cloak from his backpack. Turning towards her, he laid it in front of her. Naruto looked questioning down at it, one eyebrow raised. "Use that instead Naruto. What you're wearing isn't really good enough for this type of weather. Your lips are blue." He said with concern. Naruto's fingers flew to her mouth, but all she noticed was how pleasant it was when her warm breath hit her freezing fingertips.

"The orphanage isn't good at equipping anyone these days. I think it's a little strange Konoha can't offer us more than a summer uniform, and that's only if you're a chūnin or higher." Said Genma and pointed to the uniform that was now visible. He'd laid out his cloak to dry while they took a break, and the uniform he wore was proof that Genma had already passed the chūnin exam.

"Tell me about it." Muttered Naruto and thanked Shisui. She wasn't sure how Genma knew she was an orphan, maybe Anko had told him. Naruto didn't care to ask. Taking off her own soaked coat that seemed to have absorbed water rather than repel it, she laid it out next to Genma's before starting on her meal. She felt instantly cold and thought longingly back to Anko's warm apartment. It was dark and murky, but it was never cold for some reason.

After five cold, but still desired spoons of soup, Orochimaru's voice carried from his side of the cave. He was sitting with Choza, and the two men had been talking about different strategies in front of the map. "… don't you think so too, Naruto?"

Her head snapped up confused, not having caught the start of the sentence. "What did you say?" She asked. Her mood had lifted some now that she had cover and was relaxing, but talking to
Orochimaru could never leave Naruto with anything but frustration.

"I said..." Repeated Orochimaru, his tone void of hostility but his expression annoyed. "That this weather is a good opportunity for you to show me your progress with your suiton training. We didn't have time yesterday because I had to prepare for this mission." Said Orochimaru in his most silky voice. Naruto scowled.

Putting down her bowl hard, the soup spilling a little over the edge, Naruto got up and turned her back to the company.

Walking up so she stood further out on the landing, therefore again getting wet, Naruto placed her hands in the proper seal before concentrating. Orochimaru was correct in a way. This was a good opportunity to practice drawing moisture from the atmosphere. After all it was not often the air contained as much water as the sea.

With her eyes closed Naruto stretched out her chakra, attempting to grasp at all the small drops of rain her chakra could reach. It was difficult, a hell of a lot more so than fuuton had ever been. Back when training with Kakashi and Yamato she had worked herself into the ground, but the progress had been swifter and more natural. Suiton just wasn't an element that came naturally to her.

Her chakra was now gathering raindrops, creating first a small puddle that hung in midair. Furrowing her brow she concentrated harder. More raindrops were gathered, engulfing over and expanding the puddle she had created so far. Gathering and maintaining at the same time was extremely difficult, but Naruto wasn't known for being a quitter.

She was trying to distribute her chakra correctly too, not using too much as that could make her technique deflate.

Opening her eyes she looked at her handy work. This was the largest puddle she had made to date and it was hovering in front of her while growing every passing second. Naruto had one hand outstretched, and slowly she started moving it in circles.

The water followed along, and soon a rotating sphere of water was spinning madly in front of the palm of her hand. Orochimaru's voice piped up from behind her again, "Good Naruto. You've made very good progress. Can you move the water in multiple directions too? Now you're simply moving it in one specific direction." Orochimaru said. His tone was intrigued, but Naruto had actually had the same idea as Orochimaru, and was already attempting to do what he had just suggested.

Biting her lip she focused on keeping the water together and spinning at the same time. Inside her head she was back together with Ero-sennin, practicing the rasengan by the means of a balloon full of water. Endlessly spinning the water in a circle by her chakra alone.

This time she wasn't using chakra just to spin what was trapped inside a container though. "Use slightly more chakra. Try to split your mind in three. One focuses on keeping the water together. One focuses on rotating clock wise, while the third focuses on counter clock wise." Suggested Orochimaru calmly.

Naruto realized Orochimaru was thinking exactly the same as she herself was. It would be like her rasen shuriken, just simplified and at the same time a ton harder. It had been years since she last made a rasen shuriken.

It wasn't working at first. All she could manage was to slow down the rotation of the water. She was having the same problem again. She couldn't focus on splitting her mind in three though. One to focus the water in one direction and the other in the opposite. But maybe… Naruto closed her mind.
She had made kage bunshin so often it was like second nature. But creating one and still keep the water up was a new challenge. "Kage bunshin no jutsu." Naruto said in a low forced voice.

Next to her, her clone popped up, the water lost all rotation and started falling, but she was quick, and the water flew back up into its shape. The second clone started focusing on the direction Naruto couldn't manage herself. It was successful. And Naruto smiled triumphantly as the water started spinning wildly in no less than four different directions. Naruto was struck by the similarity of the rasengan and the large ball of water. Even the color was similar.

Shisui whooped and started clapping and cheering, Gai followed a heartbeat later.

Struck by an idea, she pressed more chakra into it, but her attempt at creating a suiton rasengan caused the ball to explode. Water flew in all possible directions. And the little Naruto had managed to dry up was again soaked to the bone.

Anko started laughing, rather nastily, but Naruto didn't let it get to her. She had made good process. That was an attack that could actually harm someone.

"Very good, Naruto. I'll admit defeat. Shisui hasn't gotten nearly as far with his doton affinity. You were right. The kage bunshin can give you a lot of things for free." Said Orochimaru. He didn't look sad about being proven wrong though, so the win wasn't as satisfying as she'd imagined.

Orochimaru got to his feet and walked up to her as Naruto turned towards the group sitting around watching her. "Put your hands like this, Naruto." He ordered. Naruto raised an eyebrow but did as instructed. Mimicking Orochimaru's hand position. He had had his hand fisted while his pointing fingers were touching one another, his elbows high.

"I want you to do exactly what I'm doing." He said, his eyes boring into hers. "This might help you with multitasking while doing ninjutsu. It's a mental practice that helps with coordination. Not much… But some." Orochimaru explained. He took his left hand and started moving it in an oval shape outwards from his body. It did a circle before touching the tip of his finger again. Naruto did the same.

"Good." He said and stopped the movement. Instead he started moving his other hand in the same formation but the opposite direction. Naruto again followed his lead. "Good, now you're going to do both actions at once. One hand will rotate in a clockwise direction, the other in a counter clockwise direction and for each round your pointy fingers will touch each other." He did the movement, but Naruto at once started messing up. Her right hand started mimicking her left hand, both rotating in the same direction. Orochimaru continued though, flawlessly keeping a steady rhythm as his hand rotated in opposite directions.

Naruto tried again, her rhythm out of place but clumsily doing the right directions. She continued, her rhythm getting better while she watched Orochimaru demonstrate in front of her. Slowly he stopped, and Naruto's hands started messing up. But biting her lip she continued while Orochimaru watched. It was working. Concentrating the rhythm slowly get better with the movements. It took effort though.

"You are now moving your hands in three directions. One is keeping them up. One is moving counter clockwise and the other clockwise. This is what you did with you suiton. Practice this and add new element to make it more complex. Flex your fingers in opposite directions for example. Try to envision this pattern and you might not have to waste chakra on a kage bunshin for your technique. That suiton ball could be really powerful if you practiced and polished it up." Said Orochimaru, and without another words he turned and went to sit down again. Naruto nodded and stopped herself from smiling towards Orochimaru.
Anko was minding her own business, cuddled into her blanket while she attempted to get some feeling back into her frozen legs. The squad was lively considering the conditions they were dealing with. Gai was chatting animatedly with Naruto about her new technique—whatever that had been. Anko frowned as she thought about what Naruto had displayed earlier.

That was a difficult piece of chakra exercise. Maybe the idiot had finally got a handle of her own chakra reserves. Before Anko would have clapped along with Shisui, but now she felt a spite inside her that wanted Naruto to fail. Fail at something. Anything, just so she could see that she wasn't always right.

Her teammate was always so certain about things. When she met someone she either immediately took to them or kept her distance. Like first impressions was all that mattered. It pissed Anko off. Especially since Orochimaru, despite Naruto's hostility, was intrigued by her.

He often asked Anko all types of questions considering Naruto. The brat was just as available to answer all his questions. But since Naruto was such a brat Orochimaru was going to Anko for information Naruto should be giving without their sensei having to ask. Like where she learned her futon affinity, who taught her meditation, what sort of exercises she did on her own, and what sort of people Naruto spent her days with outside of training.

Kami, Orochimaru had once asked Anko about Naruto's preferred beverage. Why couldn't that idiot answer him instead of Anko? And what about her? Was she suddenly not important enough anymore? Was Naruto the new apprentice suddenly?

Anko huffed out loud, drawing the source of her annoyance attention to her. Blue bright eyes that shone even in this murky weather turned towards Anko and for a moment they stared at one another. Anko put on her best scowl before pointedly looking away.

But the idiot didn't get the point and instead stood and came over. Annoyed, but secretly also curious as to what Naruto wanted, Anko didn't object when Naruto sat down next to her.

"Um… Anko?" Naruto said hesitantly. The dark haired girl gave a sound that indicated she was listening.

"So… I talked with Akiko the other day." Naruto muttered uncertainly. Anko felt confused, that was not at all what she had expected her to talk about. She had expected something about borrowing a brush, Naruto had forgotten hers, something that was becoming more and more obvious for each passing day, but not Akiko.

"What did that brat say?" Anko asked, putting on her most spiteful tone. It usually worked wonders on most people, but Naruto was not most people. She just didn't make sense most of the time.

"Well… It's Hana really. She ran away. Akiko was upset about it." Naruto continued, fidgeting with the hem of her borrowed raincoat.

Anko huffed. That was hardly news. Though she didn't know Naruto's roommate was the latest runaway, it happened so often these days it should be seen as the new trend.

"Good for, Hana. Why are you bringing this up to me? Did I ever give you the impression I'd miss that brat?" Anko spat and shuffled away from Naruto. The blonde sighed and rolled her eyes.

"No, I just thought… I promised Akiko I would look out for Hana while we were on this mission,
"I don't give a rat's arse what happened to that brat. For all I care she can go kill herself for all she wants. I hate those girls and their fucking "problems". Hana can go starve herself and even if I ran into her I wouldn't give two damns what she choose to do with her pitiful life! It's their own fault for being idiots!" Anko shouted, making sure absolutely everyone heard her. Everyone looked nervously in Anko's direction. Even Naruto seemed to think she'd gone too far. But she didn't care anymore.

If Naruto wanted to make that pathetic civilian girl her new best friend then she could go ahead. Anko certainly wouldn't stop that brat. Getting to her feet she looked at her sensei. "Are we leaving soon? I thought we were behind schedule." She asked in a growl.

Orochimaru raised an eyebrow, but smiled knowingly and nodded. "Yes, let's pack up and get back on the road."

The day after the worst storm of the year Naruto was following Choza together with Shisui and Ebisu. Shisui had told her in a whisper that the reason they split up was probably because they were the ones worst at infiltration. Naruto had been offended at first, but Shisui had corrected her and said it was only natural that they weren't in the other team. Seeing as they had barely become genin and if anyone was going to be offended it would be Ebisu. Which he was.

Ebisu was in a terrible mood and he regularly sent scornful looks to his two new comrades, as if this was their fault he wasn't good enough to go with the others. Choza didn't seem to care either way. Maybe his stay in the hospital made him careful on this mission, and that's why he didn't seem to have anything against being debunked to the "bad team" but he wasn't as positive as Naruto remembered him to be.

As the father of Choji, one of the kindest and most polite men she'd ever met, she expected Choza to be similar. In a way they were. He was just as kind but rougher. Naruto guessed Choza had less problems killing people than Choji did.

In general Naruto was getting a bit bored, she wanted to practice her suiton technique, but since they were attempting to stay low she couldn't start using large amount of chakra. If she did a mediocre chakra sensor would be able to pick up on her signature from miles away.

Instead she told jokes with Shisui, questioned Choza about the situation on the front lines, and wondered if she should prank Ebisu. But she wasn't sure if she'd be reproached or not for doing that.

Instead she decided to try and talk to the man she knew would grow up to be Konohamaru's sensei. "Are you chūnin?" Naruto asked eagerly, gesturing to his cloak that hid whatever clothes he wore underneath.

Ebisu sent the girl a scowl, but nodded importantly at the same time. "Yes. I made chūnin on my second attempt. To pass the chūnin exam you need a great deal of power and stealth, and Hokage-sama only promotes the best." He answered her stiffly.

"I see, and Genma? He's a chūnin too right?" Naruto asked curiously, ignoring the biting tone Ebisu was using.

"Yes. We made chūnin at the same time." Ebisu clarified, straightening his black glasses slightly before letting his hand drop to his side.
"So why didn't you get promoted when Gai did? He made chūnin on his first try right? When Anko and Kakashi did?" Naruto asked just for the hell of it. She knew it was rude, but Ebisu had a stick up his arse that needed to be taken out.

Ebisu bristled, and while he frowned she noticed that his hands were fisted. "He got lucky. He got easy matches before the final round. He went up against that idiot Obito twice, he had plenty of energy left for his final round against Kakashi, so of course he had an easier time than me and Genma who had harder opponents from the start." Muttered Ebisu with his nose in the air.

"Obito isn't an idiot." Growled suddenly Shisui from next to Naruto. She hadn't realized the boy had come up to them, but he was now sending reproachful looks in Ebisu's direction. "He made chūnin when you did. So if he's an idiot then you're one just as much. In fact I regularly spar with him. He's gotten really good the last year, and he's well into chūnin level by now. At least that's what father says." Shisui explained heatedly. Ebisu didn't have a comeback to that, instead his ears started going red and he increased his pace.

"There's a difference between physical mayhem and calm collected tactic. Obito is good with the first but not the second, which I believe is required to be a chūnin. I'm not sure what Hokage-sama thought when he promoted Obito, but I at least don't believe the promotion was earned." Ebisu answered haughtily. Naruto rolled her eyes.

"You just said the Hokage only took the best. Apparently Obito was one of the best since he made chūnin. Tell me, have you ever actually fought Obito since the academy? Can you brag about actually having defeated him in a proper fight?" Naruto asked heatedly, pissed off that Ebisu was being such a jerk towards his comrades. They had even been classmates. If anything Ebisu should be happy on Obito's account that he managed to grow stronger.

"No I didn't fight against Obito, but I did observe his matches. He was defeated in the end, but he did win two matches first. His fighting style was also extremely unconventional. He got lucky." Ebisu snapped back. His voice raised and drawing Choza's attention for the first time.

"How do you know he got lucky? Maybe he just has a different fighting style that works better for him?! I can beat you with a single technique myself! I don't even have to touch you for you to lose." Naruto snapped just as heatedly back, pointing dangerously at Ebisu with an unsteady hand.

Naruto wasn't sure why she was getting so upset on Obito's behalf. But in a way she felt like she was being criticized herself, it sounded just like something the older Ebisu would have said about her.

"Hah! You're barely a genin, while I'm a chūnin of Kono-" Started Ebisu saying, but the next moment he was interrupted as Naruto said in a growl.

"Orioke no jutsu."

In her place was the henge she had created. Where her formless child body took the appearance of a bombshell of a blonde girl who stared cutely at Ebisu with such a wanton look it was shameless.

As a child Naruto hadn't thought twice about using this technique, but she had to admit it made her a little uncomfortable to use it now. It wasn't like she was displaying her real future body. No way did her breast grow as large as this, and her hair was far from that straight. But it had the desired effect on her target.

All three of her comrades froze in shock. Shisui's eyes popped out of his head and a blush so deep they could match the color of the sharingan flashed over his pale skin. Predictably Ebisu dropped to the ground with a nosebleed, but what surprised her more was that Choza was almost completely
unaffected. Only a red tinge to his cheek gave away some discomfort, before he started bellowing in
laugher.

Shisui had turned his back to her at lightning speed, his shoulder tense and his head down while he
spluttered incoherent words to the ground. Ebisu had yet to wake up.

"Hahaha… ah… Transform back… haha… Naruto-chan." Choza said while drying one of his eyes. Naruto
did as told and smiled cheapish to her team captain.

"You have spent too much time around Jiraiya-sama." Chuckled Choza and shook his head from
side to side. "Good strategy though. You never know when unconventional measures are needed to
take down your opponent. You're unpredictable. I always like that in a ninja." Choza said and patted
her on the back, a smile still adorning his lips and laugher evident in his eyes.

"Why didn't it affect you then? That's never happened before..." Muttered Naruto dejectedly.

"What?! How often do you use that technique?!!" Exclaimed Shisui and turned around to face her
again. His cheek was still tinted red but now he was also furious. "You can't go around… doing…
That! Where did you learn that thing? It's…just...!" Shisui was at a loss for words, and Naruto
couldn't help but laugh. She quickly regained herself though, since her laugher wasn't helping the
situation much.

Instead Choza answered her. "The reason it didn't affect me is because… Well, you know how
people like different things? Like some like fish while others prefer meat?" Asked Choza carefully,
trying to thread carefully about this subject when surrounded by such young children.

"Yeah, I know. So she wasn't your type of girl then?" Naruto concluded, starting to think up
different possibilities. Choza couldn't be the only one who wasn't affected then. When she came to
think about it more carefully, she realized that the technique usually worked best with bachelors
anyway. Like the Hokage who lost his wife during the kyūbi attack, Iruka who was single, Kakashi
who Naruto wasn't sure had ever had a girlfriend, and Gai who also seemed to be an eternal
bachelor. Maybe Gai and Kakashi were secretly dating one another, but that didn't fit since they both
were affected so much by the orioke no jutsu….

"Exactly." Answered Choza, wanting to change the subject. But Shisui wasn't completely ready to
let it drop just yet.

"Don't you ever do that again, Naruto! What were you thinking?" He muttered and snapped a finger
to her forehead and pushed her back with the tip of his finger.

"Wha-?" Naruto said as she stumbled back while touching her forehead. "I taught myself that
technique, and I'm gonna' use it to win against Ero-sennin next time I see him, dattebayo. And from
experience I know that usually the more powerful you are, the more of an affect it has. I think it's
because people who train all the time don't take time to get themselves a partner though." She
explains. “Hmm... It might be interesting to see how Orochimaru reacts to it."

"No!" Shisui hissed and grabbed her shoulders, panic glowing in his eyes while he shook his head
furiously. "You can never use that technique in front of sensei! He'll fry you! Do you hear me?
Never use that thing ever again!"

At that moment Ebisu came around, wondering what had happened and noticing for the first time
that he had a bad nosebleed.

They were almost at the base when they ran into problems. A small scouting group of five Iwa ninja
intersected them while they were making their way across a clearing in the forest, and took Naruto completely by surprise.

She immediately had to make sure she didn't know any of these people before she acted, because while Naruto knew Konoha was at war against Iwa, she still couldn't bear the thought of having to attack a friend. If Killer Bee ever showed up she wouldn't know what to do.

Choza was fast though, and before they had managed to throw a single Shuriken he had expanded in size and was attacking at full speed. Shisui had jumped next to Naruto while Ebisu had moved closer to his sensei. Naruto looked bewildered around, wondering who to attack first.

"Come on, we'll take the one with brown hair out together, okay?" Shisui whispered to Naruto. The blonde nodded, and together they attacked a man standing a little away from the others. He smiled evilly when he saw who his opponents were. He had good reason to of course. Two eight year old kids were hardly the most threatening sight.

While Naruto jumped up in the air Shisui went down low. Slashing out with his tanto while Naruto threw two kunai at their opponents. He twisted through the air, avoiding both Shisui's slash and the kunai. Shisui retreated immediately, and just on time as the explosion tags Naruto had attached to the kunai exploded. Their opponent had avoided it too. And still didn't have a single scratch on him. Naruto frowned.

Shisui started going through hand signs Naruto didn't recognize, and next moment a spinning spear of fire shot from his mouth. Naruto used the opportunity to help him out, adding her wind element to the fire and blowing up the fire to three times it original size.

The man wasn't smiling anymore when the fire subsided, he had gotten hit on his left side, and he'd gotten rid of his vest. "Insolent little children shouldn't play with fire." He barked back before throwing his hands down to the ground, already having done some hand signs Naruto hadn't caught.

Shisui had mirrored his moves, but he wasn't as adapt at doton techniques as the Iwa ninja was. And though he managed to reduce some of the effect of the attack, it still wasn't enough.

The ground erupted in spikes, shooting up under Naruto's feet. Shisui had stopped the ones that would have pierced himself, but he looked alarmed when Naruto's leg got hit by one of the rock spears. She fell to the ground, her leg not able to take the hit and collapsed sideways when her feet hit the earth. Her leg had been ripped open around her shin, blood oozing out from where the spear had hit it.

Luckily it could have gone a lot worse. The spear hadn't pierced through her leg, it had only grazed it. Still… It hurt.

"Son of a bitch!" Naruto swore, cradling her leg while she tried to get back on her feet. She was furious now. She was angry at herself for not being able to dodge the attack. This body had too many limitations. She didn't like her own restrictions, and now this happened.

"Naruto!" Shisui shouted in worry, torn between going to her aid and keeping his focus on the Iwa ninja.

"Concentrate, Shisui! I'm fine." Growled Naruto and got to her feet. Willing herself to ignore the stabbing pain in her leg while she stared furiously at their enemy.

"Too much for you? What are you? Academy students?" The Iwa taunted while spinning a kunai around his finger. "I'll make it quick and painless. Just stand still and it will be over soon." He
shouted and smacked his hands together. Two huge boulders erupted up from the ground on each side of Naruto and Shisui, coming at such speed they were both taken off guard. The stones came colliding towards them, intent on squeezing them both between the two rocks. Naruto wasn't sure how to get out of this one, her body wanted to jump, but her head was screaming at her to get Shisui out too.

She threw herself forwards, hitting Shisui hard in the back and pushed him out danger. She fell to the ground just as the stone closed in on her, and realizing it was too late for her Naruto closed her eyes. She waited for the stones to crush her between them, and waited… and waited. But the stones never made contact. Naruto opened her eyes confused, and gaped as she noticed the giant hands stopping the stones from crushing her.

Choza had saved her.

Naruto got to her feet and pelted out of there just as Choza smashed the boulders to gravel before descending on the now deathly pale Iwa ninja. Getting a better view of the situation Naruto realized all the other Iwa ninjas were dead. There was just one guy who Ebisu was tying up who seemed to still be breathing, and Naruto looked in awe towards Choza. He made quick progress of the Iwa ninja, who was at a disadvantage against Choza's techniques. His stone element just didn't work properly against someone at Choza's size, and he was soon dead.

Shisui ran over to Naruto. "Are you okay? I can't believe you pushed me! You could have died! Never do that again, alright? I can take care of myself! Please stop doing that!" Shisui rambled on with wide frightened eyes. Naruto patted his shoulder and smiled.

"I won't stop helping my friends, Shisui. I'm glad you're okay." Naruto said and smiled weakly. Her leg was still hurting, but looking down she knew that the wound was already healing.

"And your leg! Sit down, we'll get something to wrap it up in. How deep did it go? It didn't go through the bone did it? There's a lot of blood here..." He whispered the last words when he saw how bloody her pants and leg had gotten.

He closed his eyes and swallowed, but when he opened his eyes again he had turned into serious Shisui. Breathing calmly he stopped himself from talking, and reaching into his pouch he took out a water bottle, some tape, bandages and a bottle of something Naruto didn't know what contained.

He forced Naruto to sit down before taking her leg out and pushed the hem of her pants up some so he had a better view of the wound. Taking the water bottle he started rinsing away the blood while keeping some pressure on the leg with his left hand.

Once he had a clearer picture of the wound he grimaced, but didn't stop working. It went up her whole shin, as if someone had taken a rough bread knife to it and cut. It was hard to stop it from bleeding but because of Naruto's healing it was already less bloody then it had been.

Naruto hissed when Shisui started using whatever was in the bottle over the skin of her leg - it stung. Shisui told her to stay still so he could make sure he didn't do anything wrong. So Naruto bit her tongue and kept her foot from twitching. Next he took out his bandages and the tape that would keep it under pressure. Expertly he applied the bandages up her whole shin while Naruto watched in interest. She had not known Shisui was so handy with first aid. It was just basic stuff, nothing at all like what Sakura could do, but he was only eight. She was impressed.

"Good job, Shisui-kun." Said Choza once Shisui was finished. The Uchiha smiled weakly up at Choza before ducking his head again.
"Thanks. Father taught me this before starting my ninja training. He says someone who wields a kunai should also know how to patch up the wounds inflicted by it." Shisui explained and let Naruto's leg go.

Gently Naruto tried to put some pressure on it, and though it still stung it was already healing too rapidly for Naruto to be worried. Shisui probably didn't have to go out of his way like that, but she wasn't sure how to explain her healing ability. To do so was just asking for trouble with Orochimaru if he ever found out how quickly she healed. But Shisui had just wasted a lot of bandage on her, and she wondered how to make it up to him while she started walking on her leg.

"Should you be walking on that leg?" Asked Ebisu and came over to where they were gathered. Looking less haughty then Naruto had expected.

"It's fine. I'll tell you if it gets worse. Shisui did a great job." Naruto answered and nodded to her teammate. Shisui still looked worried down at her foot.

"Should she still come? One thing is the first stage, but with a leg like that… Maybe she has to drop the second stage? Whatever that is?" Shisui asked Choza who nodded in agreement.

"I think you're right, Shisui-kun. Naruto-chan can stay at the base until she's well enough to go home. We can pick her up on the way back from the second stage. But there are medic-nins at the base. We can have one of them look it over." Choza answered while Naruto started scowling.

"I'm coming with you! This isn't too bad. Give me a day and I'll be as good as new, dattebayo." Naruto said exasperatedly.

Choza was already disagreeing, but Naruto held up a finger. "Just let the medics decide okay? Don't leave without hearing what they have to say at least." Naruto said urgently. She didn't want to leave Anko and Shisui out on a mission like this without her. If anything happened to them….

Choza seemed skeptical, but nodded reluctantly. "Alright… We'll see what they say at the base. Now we should get going. It's still a far distance left and we now have one more person to get there." Choza said and pointed in the direction of the tied up Iwa ninja who was still unconscious.

"Where are we taking him?" Asked Naruto puzzled while Choza started sealing up the dead bodies into scrolls together with Ebisu.

"Interrogation." Choza replied easily. A little too easily.

Naruto frowned.

Half a day later they made it to the secret base. It was hidden within a mountain through a long and winding tunnel to somewhere Naruto suspected was underneath a lake. At least the steady dripping of water that went into an underground pool indicated at least something wet was above them.

At first Shisui had insisted Naruto got a piggyback ride from him. To return the favor, as he himself called it. Reluctantly Naruto had agreed, simply for the pleasure of getting him to shut up. Shisui could be very pushy, and after fussing for an hour, constantly asking if she was okay or if they should slow down, Naruto gave in and allowed the Uchiha to carry her.

They made quicker progress though. While Naruto's leg was healing quicker than most, it was still injured.

Choza was carrying their hostage in a similar matter, but he had his legs and arms bound while
Choza had him slung over his shoulder. Choza was also carrying Shisui's backpack. Seeing as Naruto was currently occupying the pot where the backpack had been previously.

When they finally made it to the base Shisui was still carrying her, and Naruto found that her leg had healed a lot faster because she hadn't been using it. Apparently there was something in that advice Sakura had kept giving her back in her own time; giving wounds a little rest did speed up the healing progress. Maybe Naruto should have listened more…

Though she felt bad about Shisui carrying her for so long. Not only did he carry her, but also the heavy backpack Naruto had on her back. It probably weighted more than she did. Luckily Ebisu had offered to take the backpack from time to time, lightening Shisui’s load and making sure they could keep some speed up.

The first who greeted them was a man who asked for a bunch of passwords from Choza. He and four others were stationed far into the hidden cave, and Naruto suspected a lot more was hiding around there too.

The guards had taken the hostage from Choza before they were escorted in further. Naruto was put down to walk on her own when the cave got so low the adults had to bend down to get in. Luckily for Naruto and the other two, she was still so small she didn't have to do anything but walk normally.

Inside there was a lot of activity going on. It looked more like an underground field hospital than a base. Not that Naruto was sure how a base was supposed to look like. It just wasn't this.

Tents had been put up where people were being treated for different injuries. Small shouts and grunts of pain could be heard from covered areas, and further in was a food hall where people were sitting in quiet groups eating. There was people sleeping on the floor in sleeping bags, and in general it a little overfilled compared to what Naruto had been expecting.

Instead she looked eagerly around for Anko and her team, but couldn't see a hint of them anywhere. She didn't get to look long though, because Shisui grabbed her wrist and together with Choza and Ebisu was dragged over to the medic station.

"She got pierced in the leg on her way here. Can you check her condition?" Asked Shisui while gesturing to a moping Naruto next to him.

The medic smiled warmly and nodded at once. Taking out her hand, indicating that Naruto was to hold onto it, she looked searchingly at Naruto. The woman was a Hyūga Naruto didn't recognize, and reluctantly she took the woman's hand. She felt like such a child. Hand holding and all that shit... She followed the woman to an examination table placed against one of the tents while the others stayed behind. Just as she was about to jump up, the woman took a hold of Naruto's waist and lifted her up. Naruto's cheek burned in embarrassment, but let it drop. The Hyūga didn't know that Naruto wasn't actually eight. She just looked it.

"Now dear, let's see what happened to you. Don't worry though, it will be alright. What's your name?" Asked the Hyūga and smiled warmly, at the same time activating her eyes and stretched out Naruto's leg to look closely underneath the bandages. Having the byakugan had to make things so much easier if you were a medic.

"I'm Naruto." Answered Naruto while the woman worked. She was efficient and scribbled down a few notes while she bent and stretched her leg all the while having her white eyes activated. In the end she placed Naruto's leg carefully down and looked questionably up at Naruto.
"Um… Your leg..." The woman said, peeping back down at Naruto's shin. "There's hardly a scratch on it. Just a fresh scar. When exactly did this injury occur?" Asked the woman, a trace of annoyance in her voice. Naruto sighed exasperatedly.

"Today, but I knew this would happen. I tried to tell them this wasn't necessary, but I had to get your permission to continue with the mission. Will you tell them everything is fine?"

The Hyūga nodded, now sending the group by the front an annoyed look instead of Naruto. "Friends can get a little hysterical at times. Since you're so young they might have overreacted. I'll talk to them dear. You're more than fit to continue with your mission." She said and stepped back. Naruto jumped down from the bed and smiled triumphantly while she walked back to her team. The medic right behind her.

"Naruto-chan is completely fine. There's no internal bleeding. There are no broken bones and no muscle tears. She's fit to continue on her mission." The Hyūga told Choza and the rest with a slightly exasperated tone. She probably had more than enough to do than check over none existent injuries.

"What?" Said Choza confused. "How's that possible? I saw the wound earlier. Half your leg was ripped open, Naruto-chan."

Naruto shifted from foot to foot uncomfortably, not sure how to answer. The Hyūga on the other hand seemed to think Choza was exaggerating. "There's just a bit of scarring on her leg, there might have been blood earlier but she was never in any danger. She's fine. Now please excuse me, I have some urgent patients waiting for me." She said sternly to Choza, and with a nod to Naruto she walked off.

Shisui was the first to speak. "No way. Show me your leg. Her byakugan must be malfunctioning." He said stubbornly and pointed to Naruto's leg. She shook her head.

"What does it matter? It looked more serious than it was. I feel fine now. I got to rest the leg while you carried me too, so I'm ready to go. But where's Anko and the rest of them?" Naruto asked, trying to change the topic.

Shisui was about to argue back, but at that moment a new figure caught Naruto's attention. "Minato!" She shouted and walked away from the group.

The blonde man looked confused around for a moment, before looking down and noticing Naruto on the level below where he was standing.

"Hello there, Naruto-chan. What are you doing here?" He asked, a slight strain to his voice while he looked at the group she was standing with. His eyes rested on Shisui, and they narrowed even further.

Naruto gestured to her backpack and smiled widely. "We come bearing gifts. We hear you guys need some supplies." Naruto answered cheekily back. Minato nodded and jumped down to where she was standing.

"Let me show you where we store them, they look heavy and I'm guessing you're eager to get rid of some of these things." He said and smiled more relaxed. Naruto noticed he had lines underneath his eyes and seemed tired. She wondered how long he'd been out on the base.

Grateful to get rid of the backpacks they followed Minato deeper into the cave. He gave them a short tour of the place, mentioning where they could find the bathroom and a place to sleep for the night, before entering a low ceiling area where he crouched down. "For now we'll leave them here.
Someone will come and sort out the content later. If you have personal belongings you take those out first.” He explained while the others did as instructed.

"How many bases are there?” Asked Shisui while he took out a sleeping bag from his backpack.

"I can't tell you that.” Minato answered with an apologetic smile. "You shouldn't really know where this one is either.” He said and looked pointedly at Choza. "Why is Shisui-kun and Naruto-chan here again?” He asked pointedly. Choza shrugged and gestured to the two youngest in the group.

"Orochimaru-sama vouched for them. Told us they could handle it. I think they did well on the mission so far.” Choza said with a relaxed smile.

"They've been genin for less than two months.” Pressed Minato on with a forced smile, peeking down at Naruto while his brow furrowed even more.

"Why is it bad that we came along?” Asked Shisui confused.

"Because you're genin, and on top of that you're inexperienced… This place is for chūnin rank and up. Genin aren't supposed to be close to the front lines at all. In emergencies we take in wounded people, but we don't want you to know of this place in case you're captured.” Explained Minato and looked worried at Choza. "And why aren't they with Orochimaru? He came in yesterday with Anko-chan and the rest of your students.” Minato asked confused.

"Anko is here?” Naruto asked relieved, looking immediately around the dark tunnel.

Minato sent her a small smile and nodded. "Yeah, they're eating... I think? That's the last place I saw them.”

"Good to hear they made it here on schedule. We separated to have two smaller companies coming in from different sides. We took the longer but safer route because Shisui and Naruto have never done this type of mission before. But we still ran into some problems.” He said and trailed off, his eyes furrowing when he again looked towards Naruto.

"I see. Well, what's done is done. Let's get you guys some food and a place to relax. I'm sure the others will be glad to see you all made it with your health intact.” Minato said and the group followed him out back towards the noisy hall.

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To be continued...
Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, really happy you're taking the time! And thank you so very much to AnjoRemix who keeps beta reading each chapter of After the Rain.

Also, otakusaz made this fanart based on the scene in this chapter! Check out the link below:
otakusaz.deviantart.com/art/After-the-Rain-Naruto-x-Shisui-709044075

I'm struggling a little with the plot right now. Earlier I thought it was fine, but I just realized how long this thing is going to be… I have a short summary of everything I want included which is around 3000 words (in the summary). To compare, what I've written until now covers just the first 250 words of the summary…. And I have used 80,000 words just to get past those first couple of paragraphs of the summary. I seriously need to find a way to explain things in shorter sentences…

So I'm considering to just split this story in two. One of when Naruto is young and one when she's older... Not sure though.
It was nightfall, but no one inside the base would know the difference. Within the cave it was always dark, the only light they had was from torches giving off a red tinted glow, stationed around the base.

After Minato followed them to the food area, Naruto had met with the rest of her team. Greeting Anko with relief and happiness, but was only met with a grunt and a nod. She made it obvious for everyone that her opinion hadn't changed while they were apart. So Naruto guessed they still weren't on friendly terms.

Minato had instructed them where they could go get food and where the sleeping quarters was located before he went back to whatever he'd been doing before. Disappearing into the continually busy crowd in the direction of the medic station.

After a short recap of their mission so far, where Naruto's miraculously healed shin was focused on a little too long for the blonde's liking, Orochimaru started telling them about the next stage of their mission.

From the maps on the table Naruto quickly found out that she was currently in what in the future would be known as Otogakure. Feeling a sense of irony Naruto had snorted and peeked up at her sensei, but Orochimaru had pretended not to notice the girl's reaction.

From here they would go a little further north, up to the sea, and then walk east towards the Land of Hot Water. That land was dangerous these days, and Naruto wasn't looking forwards to this stage of the mission. But once they got through the land they would get to the Land of Frost and here they would find Shimogakure, their destination. The main task of the mission was to deliver a scroll to someone in Shimo which Orochimaru was keeping safe for the duration of the mission.

What it entailed was all hush, hush, and when Naruto had asked she'd received a biting reply.

If everything went as planned, this would simply be a tracking mission, but because of the many risks two teams had been assigned to go. This hadn't been about reaching the front line base at all, but about getting to Shimo.

The Hokage probably loaded them with supplies to be useful since they were heading in that direction. At least that's what Naruto had concluded. Hiding a yawn behind her hand Naruto listened on while Orochimaru went through the finer details. They wouldn't split up as they had done before, but they would walk in two groups, one before the other with about half an hour space in between them.

Orochimaru and Choza knew how to contact one another on short notice in case backup was needed. Naruto guessed it would involve snake summons.

After the details of the mission were clarified, and that they wouldn't be leaving the base for a few more days, everyone started eating dinner with renewed vigor. Though Naruto had barely returned to the table with a bowl of rice before Orochimaru spoke up again.

"I have a new exercise for you Naruto." Said Orochimaru from his corner of the table. Naruto was
situated in the middle and she looked blankly back at her sensei. What was it this time?

He threw two round things at her, and on instinct she caught them both before they could drill holes in her head. The palms of her hands stung and she looked at the objects she'd caught with curiosity.

Two white balls.

She looked confused back up at Orochimaru. Not able to guess what the hell this meant.

"You're going to learn how to juggle. Once you can manage those two, I'll give you a third. Then a fourth. You need to train your mind to multi task and juggling is an art in controlling patterns. Controlling patterns in time and space. An exercise you are pitiful at. So eat up and go learn how to juggle." Orochimaru told her in a bored voice before grabbing at his chopstick and continued with his meal.

Naruto looked shocked back at the snake sannin, not sure if he was messing with her or just gone more insane than he already was. Her eyes trailed over the other people around the table, most of them seemed confused, but didn't say anything. Though Anko was grinning into her bowl of rice.

Quickly Naruto put down the balls next to her plate before reaching for her chopsticks. What the sannin was playing at she couldn't guess, but Naruto still had some left over stubbornness in her.

She would show that snake. She was going to learn how to juggle in record time, and then she was going to put the balls on fire and throw them at him. She'd come up with something more elaborate later, but for now that's where her main thoughts lingered by.

So once the party split up Naruto went to a more quiet part of the cave, the rocky shore closest to the underground lake where people didn't venture too close to, and started. It was surprisingly hard. Naruto had once seen a performer do it with five, and they had been kunais instead of balls, but Naruto had more than enough trouble with two.

Shisui was a patient audience, though he looked like he was sleeping more than watching for the first hour. Anko was training with Orochimaru a little ahead of them. He was drilling her on some of his nastier kinjutsu. Some reptile thing Naruto had no interest in learning herself.

It took her two hours before Orochimaru threw the next ball to her. Or at her. Naruto barely caught it, and the two balls she'd been juggling crashed to the ground and rolled away.

"Next time I throw a ball you'll catch it and still keep the three balls juggling." Orochimaru stated with a creepy smile. Naruto shuddered but nodded mutely.

If Naruto had thought two was difficult, it was nothing compared to three. Genma came over and gave her a few pointers about timing, but didn't seem to be any better at it himself when she asked him to demonstrate.

In the end she felt a good night sleep was the best way to progress with this. It was impossible to know what the time was, she didn't own a watch, but Shisui had long since fallen asleep against the wall of the cave.

After waking Shisui up and half dragging him to their sleeping area, she started preparing for bed herself.

Sleepy, but hardly as exhausted as Shisui was, Naruto went to bed. They had a corner where their sleeping bags and a couple of borrowed futons had been placed out for them. Naruto lay down in between Shisui and Genma who was already fast asleep.
The surface was hard and uneven. Not caring, and rolling onto her side she stared into the back of Shisui's head while she tried to fall asleep.

Her mind drifted randomly to when she would have enough money to go to Ichiraku ramen stand, to how to patch thing up with Anko, and over to trivial things such as where she'd put her hairbrush before she left for this mission. It was not with her, and she doubted Anko would let her borrow hers.

Shisui's hair wasn't very interesting though, so she tried to sleep on her back. Around the hall people were still buzzing around, and she found it difficult to sleep in such an active room. There were also people sleeping in random places around the corners of the cave. Freeing up the middle ground for those still working.

While waiting for sleep she overheard a few conversations of people passing by.

"…and the eastern route is completely inaccessible, Boa never..."

"…so sick of plain rice..."

"...the village is now occupied by Iwa ninja..."

"…let's just say I made it worth her while, if you know what I mean."

"…missed Shibi's funeral, but I'll go lay down flowers when I return to Konoha. His brother was…"

The last comment made Naruto look up. Her mind spinning with some sort of recollection at the name 'Shibi'. Was that someone she'd heard of? But whatever Naruto was attempting to remember wasn't coming back to her.

The stone ground was uncomfortable so she turned to the other side. And was met by the sight of Genma who was drooling a little. Naruto stifled a snicker.

She was tired, but sleep still wasn't easy to achieve. It was hours later, after Shisui had rolled over and was now occupying half of Naruto's spot, that the blonde fell asleep. She had just made sure to kick the Uchiha a few times beforehand, so he drowsily managed to get back to his spot.

Naruto had no idea what time it was when she was shaken awake by Genma. She was confused at first because there was a weight on her neck that wasn't caused by Genma's shake.

Pushing the uncomfortable thing away, only to realize it was a hand, she looked sideways to find Shisui splayed out as if he was sleeping in a king sized bed instead of a narrow futon.

It was his arm that'd been lying across her neck, but not in some sort of hold. He was laying on his back, his arm pin straight to each side, one across Naruto, as if he was dreaming about greeting a long lost friend.

Genma looked like he had just woken up himself. His hair was without the bandanna and it was sticking out in every possible direction. Naruto noted that her hair looked like that too when she had her hair short. As a child the first time around everyone had thought she was a boy because of her short hair.

Naruto sat clumsily up, feeling like she hadn't slept at all while she looked groggily around. Anko was already walking about, packing up her things and fully dressed. Gai was nowhere in sight but Ebisu was having a conversation with someone Naruto didn't know.
Shisui on the other hand was still deeply asleep and showing no signs of waking up anytime soon. Naruto kicked him.

"Bwah!" The Uchiha cried and shot up, his arms still outstretched on each side. Naruto raised an eyebrow.

"What the hell? You're horrible to sleep next to Shisui. I don't remember you being this restless before." Naruto muttered and dragged a hand though her hair. "Thinking back to the mission they'd been on so far and the outing with Kakashi. But the latter didn't count that much. He'd been fever ridden then. But the other times? Well, they hadn't slept next to one another then. Maybe he always was like that normally. Shisui lowered his arms and looked confused around.

"What?" Muttered Shisui, one hand trying to force sleep from his eyes while the other pushed down his sleeping bag to his waist. Shisui looked up at her and then suddenly grinned.

"You have sleeping marks on your face, Naruto. And what happened to your hair?" He said half asleep, half chuckling. "Naruto touched her cheek, and felt texture where there normally wasn't. She must have slept with her cheek against a rock before she woke up. Naruto pouted back at Shisui.

"Hey, at least I don't sleep like I'm a bird in flight. I woke up with your hand in my face. And yesterday you rolled around so much I had to kick you to get you to lay on your side." Naruto shot back.

"Hey, I can't control how I sleep." Muttered Shisui and blushed.

"Neither can I." Naruto replied and pointed to her face.

"Seriously… I don't think I've ever seen hair stick up like that." Genma said, a little more awake now and chuckled when Naruto turned on him.

Automatically she let her hand run through the strands. Grimacing when she realized it was standing more upwards than downwards. Looking at her wrist she found the two hair bands she used to put them into piggy tails, but was too lazy to attempt at that hairdo now.

Instead she put it up into a high ponytail and flattened it out as much as possible. Her bangs fell out almost immediately, but Naruto couldn't find it in her to care today. Over a week had gone by without a hairbrush, and there would be weeks until she had one again, so this was the best she'd be able to do.

After getting dressed in the locker room, more like locker cave, Naruto walked alone over to the food section on the upper landing of the main hall, where most of her comrades was already sitting and eating breakfast.

They had three days to rest before they set out for the second stage of the mission. Orochimaru was constantly meeting with people at the base. Delivering messages and planning things his students wasn't allowed to know.

And since none of them were allowed outside it meant they had a lot of spare time to just sit around and be bored. But in between meetings Orochimaru made sure to give them tasks, mostly exercises to work on while they were in the hideout.

Naruto used her time to continue learning juggling. While Orochimaru was freaky and evil and cruel and disgusting, he was also smart.
Naruto had concluded that there might be things she could pick up from him that would later be to her advantage the day she killed him. She looked forward to that day, but in the mean time she needed to play along.

Killing Orochimaru now was the same as getting herself executed for treason. Konoha didn't know what the freak was capable of doing and that Naruto would be doing the village a great service. Which was truly something that frustrated her.

This play pretense was getting old very fast, not that she struggled hard to keep her emotions in check. Orochimaru knew fully well how she felt about him. What she didn't know was what he wanted.

The first thing she did when tackling juggling was making around fifteen kage bunshin, and all sixteen Narutos started attempting to juggle with three balls. This was about technique, and while clones were less effective with muscle memory than it was with chakra exercises, she still counted on the bunshin to speed up the process some.

It must have been quite a sight for the rest. Multiple Narutos dropping balls every other moment and strolling aimlessly around without paying attention to where they were walking as they juggled.

One walked straight into the underground lake and popped into smoke. Another clone found itself inside a fully active operation without having noticed it was even in the medic area, and another managed to get in the line of fire of Anko's new technique.

Naruto was just grateful it hadn't been the real her that had taken that hit. The clone's last memory was of an intense itching that had made her want to tear her own skin off because it was so irritating.

After four hours she dispelled all the clones and used their gathered memories to juggle. It worked, and Naruto found herself able to juggle both faster and without mistake with the three balls. The victory was short lived though, because Orochimaru threw another ball to her.

Naruto didn't manage to keep juggling while he threw, but she did stop them from falling before catching the ball. Scowling to her sensei she wordlessly did what he wanted. But not before wolfing down a bowl of rice for lunch and catching up with Shisui and the rest.

Ebisu was helping out at the medic station together with Gai. Carrying equipment to different stations, or assisting with getting patients drinks and food.

Shisui was working on his kenjutsu with Genma. The two boys were getting along great, and both loved to use blades in battle. While Genma favored his senbon, he also specialized in other weapons. He had a katana while Shisui preferred his tantō, and during lunch he eagerly tried to gesture about something that had happened in the last few hours while Naruto had been juggling. He was so excited it was hard for him to stop talking.

"... and then Genma came at me. His katana has a much longer reach than my tantō, his arms too since he's taller, and it forces me to think differently. I tell you it is great practice for when battling enemies. The situation is always the same for us because we're young, but Genma-san showed me some really cool techniques. When you're finished juggling I'll show you! And then there was this side step trick, what you do is..." And so forth, and so forth. Naruto nodded along, trying but failing to catch everything because of the speed the Uchiha was talking at.

After lunch Naruto went back to her training spot by the lake in a bad mood since both her teammates were doing cooler things than she was.
Juggling… She was almost certain by now that Orochimaru was playing a prank on her.

It was late into the afternoon that Minato came up to her, his face curious and amused as he watched her attempt and fail to juggle with four balls.

"Is this a hobby of yours?" He asked teasingly, Naruto didn't have time to look back at him, her eyes were strained towards the clumsily moving balls in front of her.

"No. Apparently it…." Naruto trailed off when one of the balls was thrown with too much force, making the whole thing collapse for the thousand time that day. Two of her clones did the same.

"Gah!" Naruto growled and bent down to pick up the balls before they had time to roll away again. She wasn't going into that lake for a fifth time.

Minato chuckled and picked up one of the balls that had rolled over to his feet and handed it to the clone that'd dropped it. "You have a lot of chakra. You've kept fifteen clones up for the whole day. Just having fifteen clones on its own is impressive, but your method is really unique. Not to mention you're eight… That's unheard of really." Minato said, badly disguised curiosity lazed into his voice while Naruto started to juggle again.

"Really?" Naruto muttered, pretending that this was news for her. She wasn't sure what to say to him.

Naruto had always had large reserves. But more so now than she had originally when she was eight because her old reserves had come back with her though her body had de-aged. It was a bad combination, but Naruto was slowly learning to control it for every passing week.

She just wished she could use her clones for this sort of thing. But even a thousand clones couldn't speed up the development of her chakra coils.

"Yes. Jiraiya-sensei has told me a lot about you of course, but it's a different thing to hear it then to see it. I half thought he was exaggerating." Minato shared with her and sat down on a rock a little behind where Naruto stood.

"He does that a lot. I don't blame you for being skeptical." Naruto replied and smiled to herself. She felt a growing urge to succeed all of a sudden. To prove herself in front of her father. It was a stupid technique, juggling of all things, but it was at least something.

None of her sensei in the past had spent much time observing. Out of all of them Orochimaru was actually the most attentive. Kakashi and Jiraiya was more the type to explain and then go do something else. It forced her to think for herself, but it also made the progress slower.

She had been forced to find her own answers, and maybe that was the most important lesson they had ever taught her.

"Still…" Minato said with a fond smile Naruto couldn't see. He got to his feet and studied her technique. "I'm guessing Orochimaru is making you work on coordination and multitasking. I admit I heard a funny story just now. Something about a spinning water sphere?" Minato asked and tilted his head.

Naruto was too concentrated though, her lip was sticking a little out and her brow was furrowed while she tried to get the rhythm right. She had a habit of using too much force when she threw a ball up, messing up the regular speed needed to keep all four balls moving in the same rhythm.

"Uhu..." Naruto answered as the balls started flowing better. A more fluid speed was in her wrist
movements, and instead of tensing up she felt her shoulders relax. Naruto almost closed her eyes, wanting to relax even more, but quickly realized that would be a huge mistake. She wasn't that good yet.

While she worked Naruto was counting how many times she could juggle before it all fell. If she could keep it up for two more minutes this would be her personal best.

"That's interesting. It's actually similar to something I'm working on." Minato said off handedly. Following her movement with interest.

"Oh?" Naruto squeaked. One of the balls lost its rhythm, and she passed on the weird sound for her trying to correct her mistake instead of her nerves about the fact that Minato had already drawn that conclusion.

"Yeah. It's called rasengan. It's a powerful attack already. An A rank attack but it's not completed. You used suiton to create a spinning water sphere according to Orochimaru-sama. He described it as low D rank at its current level, but that it had potential to become a lot more powerful. How fast was it spinning? And he said you used a clone to focus on spinning it in the opposite direction? That's why you are training on juggling according to him. So your brain will grasp different actions simultaneously."

All the balls fell into a heap. Naruto sighed as they rolled away for the umpteenth time.

Instead of collecting them she looked back at Minato still sitting behind her. "It didn't spin very fast, but if it hit hard enough into something it would probably do some damage. I used a clone because I can't think opposite things at once. Like looking left and right at the same time. But a clone can do that job for me. I didn't know that was why I was juggling though. I thought Orochimaru wanted me to look like a fool all day for being so rude. He does like his little revenges." Muttered Naruto and bent down to pick up the ball closest to her.

"You're not the most conventional student either, Naruto-chan. But he seems genuinely interested in your development. He thinks that attack could become very powerful. He is tinkering with something similar, but he's in a foul mood because it isn't working that great for him." Minato chuckled at the end and gave a wry smile to Naruto.

It was impossible for her not to return it, and she chuckled at the idea of the great Orochimaru sitting in a corner trying to do what Naruto had done a week ago. Maybe he'd take up juggling too. That would be priceless to see.

"So you made a clone to do the things you couldn't..." Said Minato thoughtfully. "That… is interesting." He said to himself, he seemed to be growing more and more cheery for every passing moment and suddenly he rose to his feet.

"I'll show you my technique and I want to hear your thoughts about something." Minato said and raised his arms. Naruto froze, not believing she was in this situation in the first place.

Mutely she nodded and took a step closer. Now clutching all the wayward balls in her arms.

The ball of chakra fired up and started rotating intensely. The blueish-white light illuminated their corner of the cave while Naruto watched without held breath. Her throat had closed off while Minato smiled gently over the rasengan. "This is my technique, the rasengan. It's pure chakra that's spinning rapidly in many directions simultaneously, creating a chakra orb so intense it can drill holes in just about anything. But it's not complete. I want to add my nature affinity to it, but haven't succeeded with that yet. Do you think a clone could solve the issue for me? The problem I have is concentrating
on so many things at once, just creating the rasengan is taxing."

Naruto took a step closer, her eyes fixed on the rasengan. Yes, he was correct. Naruto had used two clones to make the rasen shuriken, but Minato would probably only use one.

What made her so emotional though was that Naruto was giving something back. This was her father's technique. The one he'd struggled so badly with and never seen completed. She wanted to give him that joy, but she was also afraid he'd get hurt in the process. Naruto could only use the rasen shuriken while in sage mode. She needed the accelerated healing to not rip her own arm off. Could her father use sage mode too?

"I think that would work." Naruto said enthralled by Minato's rasengan.

She missed using the rasengan, and she realized she was looking at it like it was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. "But I think it would be very dangerous. This is almost touching your hand. The chakra burns… You'd rip your arm off. Maybe if you could throw it? Or could continuously heal yourself somehow while adding the nature affinity?" Naruto bit her bottom lip to stop herself from explaining everything you had to do to add nature affinity to the rasengan. Technically she shouldn't know the technique at all, but it just drew her to it.

"Throw it?" Minato asked surprised. Naruto nodded and turned towards the underground lake. Concentrating on the water she started concentrating. Using all her willpower to do what she'd done the week before.

Soon the sphere was again rotating in front of her, but a lot slower than what Minato's rasengan had. Naruto wondered if she should get one of her still juggling working clones to come out and help with the rotation, but instead she attempted to improve the attack on her own. Concentrate on multiple things at once. Make it flow. Give it a rhythm.

She smiled satisfied when the sphere started twisting in multiple directions, losing its form slightly, but not by much. It was also spinning a lot faster than it had last week. Maybe Orochimaru's exercises weren't that stupid after all.

Minato looked startled at what she was doing. Naruto was close to the water edge but she wasn't touching it. Making it safer but more difficult. She was focusing her chakra at a singular point in the air. Not the palm of her hand which had a better reference and closer to her chakra coils.

"This is what I was doing last week. Orochimaru suggested I'd try mixing up the directions but it's difficult. Just the amount of chakra alone would tear open my hands if I was too close. At least that's what I fear, dattebayo." Naruto said carefully. Thinking through her words before she said them aloud.

It was easy to forget herself in front of Minato. The fact that he was so clever didn't help the matter either. If she messed up in front of him he was not going to miss it.

It became too much for her, her head was boiling over and the water splashed back into the lake. A few clones popped behind her and Naruto turned around to see nine Narutos stare back at her. All of them on the verge of popping.

So her chakra was that unbalanced. She couldn't even keep up fifteen clones while she was doing techniques like the suiton rasengan. Or a toned down version of the attack at least.

Naruto didn't realize she was frowning until a hand touched her shoulder. Looking up she stared right into Minato's blue eyes. The exact same shade as her own. Like usual he was smiling, but he
looked appreciatively down at her, and almost proud.

It made Naruto want to cry and hide in a corner.

"You've done a great job, Naruto-chan. But I think you're reaching your limit. Maybe you should take it easy for the rest of the day. It might be difficult for you, seeing as you're no doubt a hard worker by nature. But sometimes resting is the best way for your mind to process all the information it receives. And you've practiced for fifteen people already today." He said and pointed to the clones.

The blonde nodded, a shy smile adorning her lips. With her stomach full of butterflies she dispelled her clones. Nothing could have made her day better because her father had just praised her. Even Orochimaru's constant presence and a grim war couldn't down this feeling.

Naruto had trained all evening anyway, but she hadn't used clones. By the end of the day she could juggle four balls pretty well, but it wasn't to the standard Orochimaru was expecting of her just yet.

Still, Minato's encouraging words kept her in a great mood for the rest of the day.

The following days went in a similar fashion. Juggling with clones and helping out around the base. Naruto was put on kitchen duty one afternoon. Which was basically to pour rice into bowls for hours and hand them out to hungry ninjas.

It was entertaining for her though, because every now and then she'd meet ninjas she recognized from her own time.

She saw Shikaku again, who shared a short conversation with her before leaving to eat together with Inoichi, Ino's dad, at their table together with Chōza. Then she saw Kiba's mum. She was a lot younger and was talking excitedly with her dog alone at a table. Naruto guessed Kiba's odd habits came from his mum.

She saw Shizune too. The girl looked almost just like she remembered only shorter. She smiled politely without speaking to her before taking her meal back to the medic area in the back. Naruto staring wide eyed after her and wondered where Tsunade was at the moment. It was just absurd to see Shizune without Tsunade around the corner.

By the time she went back to train she had served rice to Hinata's father and who could be no other than Neji's dad. They looked identical, so who was who was a mystery to Naruto. They were talking pleasantly with the Hyūga woman that had looked over Naruto when she'd first arrived to the base.

There had been a lot of Uchihas at the base, most of who greeted Shisui while they came and went from the base. And at one point she was shocked because Danzo, the old war hawk, came to get a bowl too. What he was doing there she couldn't guess, she couldn't imagine him out on the battlefield for some reason, and had mutely served him and the two ninjas escorting him.

On the fourth and last day of their stay at the base Naruto could juggle like a pro. She had no less than seven balls flying high in the air while she walked and talked with Shisui.

He was having a hard time taking her exercise seriously, and had taken to tease her. "So you think you're going to join the circus now? Ninjutsu probably isn't as exciting now that you have found your calling in life, huh?"

Naruto had thrown a ball straight at his face, shutting Shisui up for about five minutes before he continued with his puns.
Anko was still giving her the cold shoulder, and if Shisui’s teasing was annoying it was nothing to the smirks she received from her other teammate. She didn't say anything, which was probably what bugged Naruto the most, but the snorts Anko had a habit of releasing in Naruto's presence spoke more volumes than anything Shisui had said.

She was seriously considering challenging Anko to a battle, because they had always sorted out their differences with spars in the past. Unlike with Sasuke, where she understood him better when they fought, with Anko it was just a way to release some tension. Some frustration and a way to get so tired they would be too exhausted to continue arguing.

Anko was too similar to Naruto for her not to understand the older girl. She knew that Anko was angry at Naruto for not respecting the man she looked up to, and for having gained too much attention from Orochimaru as of late.

No matter what Naruto said, it was hard to justify her opinion without revealing what she knew about Orochimaru, and it was making things worse for every passing day without clearing the air between them. Except for the sneers Anko was barely acknowledging her at meal times anymore.

On the last day at the base Naruto was distracted from Anko's hostility though. By their sensei that was, again, giving out new tasks to his students before rushing off to do whatever it was that was taking up his time here at the base. After sending Shisui to train with a woman who specialized in doton techniques, and Anko was told the third stage to a jutsu called; 'Reptile venom technique' he turned towards his youngest student.

"Now that you've more or less mastered juggling, I want you to start a new exercise." He said in his normal unnerving voice. Naruto only nodded.

"Have you ever seen puppeteers before? Or more accurately, have you seen puppets being used in battle?" Orochimaru continued, and Naruto raised an eyebrow. Was that her new task? That sounded… A little cool actually.

"Um… Yeah. Long ago." Naruto answered truthfully, her mind going back to the sand siblings and Kankuro with his many puppets.

"Good, I want you to do some basic exercises that are used by puppeteers. Namely chakra strings. It's a very fine practice that will take you a long time to master, but it's useful for chakra coordination. A puppeteer has extremely good control of their chakra and they move it in patterns over fine chakra strands that have to be kept under control at all times. If you can just get to the first stage of that, then I think it'll help you greatly in the long run. Though you'll only be able to practice this today and maybe the first day back on the road. Later we will not risk using chakra unless we're certain there are no enemies around. I'll demonstrate what you should be doing." Orochimaru said and went straight into a thorough and intricate explanation of how to create chakra strings.

He even stayed with her for over an hour, sending away five people who came up to him to talk about "important matters". Orochimaru wanted to be sure Naruto was working correctly before he started his day's agenda. Though the blonde hated having him linger around, his yellow eyes focused on her and correcting her every movement while she worked, she had to admit it sped up the process to get down the exercise.

The moment he left Naruto made her normal amount of fifteen clones, all focusing on the tasks at hand. All of them immensely pleased they didn't have to juggle anymore.

The morning of their departure started similar to the other days at the base. With Naruto's back
aching from an uncomfortable night sleep, and kicking away Shisui who was using her stomach as place to rest his feet. The boy was a really restless sleeper and Naruto was amazed he hadn’t rolled across the entire hall during the night.

Naruto wasn’t sure what the time was when Ebisu woke her up. The cave had the same light as it did when she fell asleep, but she was guessing it was early. Only the medic station was still active, and even that area was calmer than normal.

"Come on. We're leaving in an hour. You should get some breakfast and pack up your stuff so you're ready on time." Ebisu said before moving to Shisui next. He had more problems waking the Uchiha up though, as Shisui was as good as dead when he fell asleep. An earthquake probably wouldn’t be enough to wake the boy up.

An hour later, almost on the dot, everyone stood outside the hidden base. Naruto blinked rapidly when her eyes met the bright morning sun, standing low over the horizon in the far distance and making her unable to look at anything without screening her eyes.

Orochimaru split them up into normal teams this time. So Naruto was again reunited with Anko, but disappointingly also Orochimaru. "Why did we carry those bags all the way up here, if we could just seal them into scrolls like we're doing with our supplies now?" Asked Naruto confused while looking up at Choza who smiled mischievously. It was her sensei that answered though.

"Though we're not in Konoha you are still my students. I'm making sure you're not completely useless. Physical strength is only achieved through hard work. I don't approve of short cuts." The sannin said with a challenging glint in his eyes.

"What?! We carried those things just to work on our physical strength? I do my fair share of strength training on my spare time, 'tebayo!" Said Naruto outraged. She found it very unfair. As the smallest of the team she hadn't been loaded any less than the older ones.

"Yes. Now I know that if any of your teammates collapsed on a mission, you'd be able to carry them back." Orochimaru said off handedly.

"Yeah? That's what you would do if a comrade collapsed? Really?" Naruto shot back, her eyes flaring dangerously.

"Yes." Orochimaru snapped. But the glance she received was far from reproaching, it was loathsome.

"I won't believe that until I see it." Naruto muttered under her breath, feeling as if Anko was attempting to burn a hole in her head with the glare she was sending her.

The argument was avoided though, because soon after they headed out, leaving behind team Choza after agreeing on when and where to meet up for dinner. They were leaving half an hour later than them. Seeing as they were now heading for the land of hot water and a large group was not the best way to get through the country unnoticed. But splitting up in the same fashion as they had during stage one was not an option either. If there was an attack it was better to have the possibility of backup.

While they walked through the forest Naruto continued with what little progress she'd made on the chakra string exercise. She had been allowed to practice until Orochimaru said otherwise. The atmosphere in the team was damped by Anko, so Naruto found the distractions a welcome. The
other two were taking her example, and soon all three was working on improving some sort of

It was the oddest chakra exercise Naruto had ever encountered. She was walking with a string in her
hand while shooting a small and continuous amount of chakra down the rope. It was all about
fluidity. Apparently. But Naruto found it hard to know when she was messing up and when she
wasn't. As Orochimaru said, it was an intricate thing.

Next to her Shisui was walking with a rock in his hand while his face was twisted in a grimace. His
face was steadily growing redder. Naruto had to stop herself from laughing out loud because of his
constipated expression whenever she spotted him in her peripheral vision.

He was trying to crumble the rock into tiny pieces with chakra alone. He'd made some progress in
the last month, and a defined crack was visible. But splitting it in two wasn't really the point of the
exercise. It was crumbling, not cutting.

On Shisui's other side was Anko, clutching her wrist while muttering under her breath. Naruto wasn't
sure what she was working on, but guessed it was some kinjutsu thing Orochimaru was teaching her.

Their sensei was keeping a lookout, and Naruto had enough knowledge of Orochimaru's skills to
know he was good enough for that job.

They had to look very strange if someone was to walk by and see them. Naruto staring like
possessed at a string, Shisui trying to break a solid rock with sheer frustration alone, and Anko
looking like she was trying to curse off her hand. And Orochimaru, well, he looked odd no matter
what context you put him in, so he was the icing of the cake.

But the further they got into the land of hot water, the less Orochimaru allowed them to use chakra.
Only during breaks spent together with team Choza was when any chakra exercise allowed. And
that was only on the days Orochimaru did a check of the area beforehand. He sent out snakes for a
far distance and when they came back and told him what the situation was he would tell them if it
would be safe to use chakra that day.

In general the mission was easy. Choza and Orochimaru had done a through search before entering
the Land of Hot Water, but the closer they got to the Land of Frost, the colder it got. Not to mention
all the detours they had to take prolonged the trip by days.

The close proximity to the Land of Lightning was the main reason two teams had been sent in the
first place, and after a week back on the road, and about twenty detours of various length,
Orochimaru was getting snappy from how slow their progress was becoming. Naruto was now
wearing her newly purchased winter coat. She had used more on it than she had planned, but with
the dropping temperatures she couldn't find it in her to regret the decision.

Land of Frost was always cold, but especially during winter. They never lit a fire either. The area
was teeming with Kumo ninjas. On the borders of the Land of Lightning Orochimaru was so fed up
with the situation he called for a team meeting for the first time since leaving the base.

"I'm going the last distance alone." He said in matter of fact tone during dinner. Choza looked
startled, but nodded after a beats silence.


"Because our group is too large, and I'll be able to move quicker on my own. There are more patrols
here than we knew of and we simply can't spend more time taking detours. I'm needed back in
Konoha.” Said Orochimaru while strolling back and forth. He was creating a path in the thin layer of snow underneath their feet. Naruto could guess the traces of a group of eight ninjas walking through snow were also a factor in Orochimaru's decision. Still, she would rather be moving than sit and do nothing.

"But alone? What if something happens?” Asked Choza seriously. He looked uncertainly back at the six children in front of him and back to Orochimaru.

"I can deal with it. The concern is the young ones here. You'll need to look after them while I'm away, Choza-san. I'll return in four days. It should be enough time to deliver the scroll and return, but I'll leave behind one of my snake summons. They'll reverse summon to me in case you guys end up in a tight situation or have to relocate. Anko has started training in summoning snakes too. If she gets her wits together she should be able to send me a message if all else fails.” Orochimaru instructed, his words causing a blush to appear on Anko's cheek.

"So we'll just sit here in the snow and twiddle our thumbs while you go do the mission for us? Seriously? After coming all this way?” Naruto muttered and sat down in the snow to sulk. Ebisu seemed to think similarly, but he had more tact and instead released a deep breath for everyone to hear.

"Yes. You'll stay here and wait because this mission was only given to you because your lack of experience in the field. Also a month without me would slow down your training, and I'm still expecting you to do well during your exams. You're not ready for B rank missions yet, and the only reason you're here in the first place is because of me.” Orochimaru stated, stopping his restless walking and looking up at the sky. It was cloudy just as it usually was in this area of the world. Snow was falling gently from the sky, but luckily there wasn't much wind.

"I'll leave as soon as we've found a decent spot for you to wait… We should set up the traps quickly too.” He said to himself and turned on the spot and started marching into the mountainside. Naruto sighed and got to her feet again.

"Just great… Can we at least train while you're away?” Naruto asked, her tone bordering on whining.

"No! Now keep up.” Barked Orochimaru.

To be continued...
Chapter Twelve – Falling Snow

Sasuke: "Snakes can sense things through temperature, and they can also do it with their sense of smell by passing the smell through their mouth."

Itachi: "You've learnt a lot... Dr. Snakes."

Orochimaru had left them after all the traps had been put up and partially tested out.

After fifteen minutes of observing their senseis make a secure camp at the foot of the mountain, Naruto had been inspired to do one of her own. The experiment had ended in a complicated wire trap that would cause an avalanche to fall down from the mountain. Shisui had acted as her eager assistant along with Gai, and together the three had managed to get up one of Naruto's more brilliant inventions. At least one of her more destructive ones. The new type of territory acted as a sea of inspiration for her, and it was fun working with snow instead of water, wood and earth.

Shisui also had to be given some credit. The boy was very good with ninja wire, and if the trap went off the unlucky target would end up with both snow and rocks over them thanks to the Uchiha's fine tuning. Gai had done a lot of the testing. Checking it if a wire was invisible enough for him to miss it or had the accurate tension to it. They didn't want an animal or the wind to set it off.

It took them two hours to get everything set up. Climbing up the mountainside had been difficult too, seeing as they were trying to put up the trap without being discovered by their sensei. Or more accurately Orochimaru. They all knew Choza wouldn't be too harsh on them for helping out.

Naruto was therefore surprised when she found out that Orochimaru had indeed spotted them up on the mountain, and they had forced him to be delayed by over an hour, and yet he wasn't angry. A little impatient sure, but not angry.

He was too impatient to start lecturing them too badly, and maybe even a little impressed by their handy work, to go all snake creepy on them. Instead he gave a few snappy words before heading out.

Left at their new camp was seven people and a snake summon of Orochimaru named Hebime. The snake wasn't large and was currently tightly wrapped around Anko's neck, shivering in the cold winter chill of Frost Country.

While Naruto was keeping her distance from both Anko and the snake, she couldn't help overhearing some of the words from Hebime anyhow. "Ssst stupid ssssnow... Orochimaru-sama jussst had to pick me for this... I never should have left the hot sssspringssss... So warm... And here there's jussst icky frozen water everywhere... I wissssh Hebishin had to do this mission. He'd have hissss shellssss frozen off in a minute... And he calls me ssssoft skinned... Stupid twat..."

Even though Naruto had a deeply engraved dislike for snakes in her mind, she still found the low whispered dialogue pretty funny.

Anko seemed to be very familiar with the snake, and let the reptile twist around her neck and down
into her jacket for warmth. She didn't heed her dialogue in the slightest, and instead had her own conversation with Genma.

The boy was distracted by the snake though - who wouldn't? The snake was muttering darkly under her breath about the lack of mice to eat in the district- and was looking oddly from Anko to the snake.

And while Naruto eavesdropped on Anko, Genma and Hebimei, the rest trotted around and got tents set up and discussed the best time of day to light a fire. They would be here for a few days, and the better they hid, the safer they would be until Orochimaru returned.

The stay went relatively peaceful the first day at camp. Naruto even came to appreciate Hebimeis's presence amongst them. The female snake was very sarcastic and kept up a long, biting monologue about the happenings amongst the snakes in her clan. Young as she was, the snake was currently being tasked with all the boring missions and was not pleased about it.

Anko had heard it all before, but the rest of the group listened amused on while the snake bad mouthed everyone from the head snake Manda, to her father Hebichi for sending her on this specific mission. Snakes preferred warmer habitats, and Hebimei eyed the snow as if it was liquid poison.

All the while Naruto was growing deadly bored. Not surprising, seeing as they had done nothing for the last twenty four hours. Even the snake wasn't that entertaining anymore.

"I'm bored..." Naruto complained for the seventh time in under an hour. Shisui's eyebrow twitched while he slowly turned towards his teammate.

"What do you expect us to do? We're all bored." He muttered under his breath. Shisui was as fed up with staying in this cold place as much as everyone was.

"Can't I practice at least?" Naruto moaned and fell back flat on the ground, arms outstretched on each side. Slowly she started moving the arms and legs up and down, creating a snow angel where she lay trying to procrastinate time. Hebimei sent her a disgusted look, as if she couldn't believe anyone would willingly grind themselves into snow the way Naruto did.

"You can juggle to pass the time." Genma suggested cockily, receiving an angry glance from Naruto.

"Why don't we spar, Narumi-chan?" Gai suggested.

"It's Naruto, not Narumi." Naruto shot back immediately. Feeling outraged that Gai still couldn't remember her name. This had never been a problem in her original timeline. Gai had known who she was from the beginning, this time it was taking a lot longer for the guy to remember who she was between each short meeting between them.

"Oh, sorry, Naruto-chan. I'm not good with faces... or names." Gai replied a little embarrassed and turned to go up to his backpack further in on their camp.

Naruto shot up from where she lay in a sudden hurry. "Hey, wait, don't go! I do want to spar!"

"Keep your volume down, Naruto-chan." Choza scolded her, and she clapped her mouth shut.

"Sorry..." Naruto muttered and looked embarrassed away before hurrying after Gai.
Naruto sat guard when something finally happened. The others were asleep, and to Naruto's discomfort she was sitting guard together with Anko and Hebime. The older girl wasn't speaking, so instead Naruto found herself chatting animatedly with the snake.

"… and that's how the toad saved me up from the water." Naruto explained to the snake that was nodding along while she went through the details around her meeting with Jiraiya and his toad summons.

"You're a recklessssss one aren't you?" Hebime answered with a roll of her eyes. "Water iss cold during that sssseason. You shouldn't have gone into it."

"It wasn't on purpose, dattebayo. I fell." Naruto retaliated.

"Sssshouldn't risk it. I can sssswim fine on water, but it's uncomfortable when it's cold." Hebime replied with a shake of her head and long upper body. It was odd seeing a snake this friendly. Naruto had never really been around a snake that wasn't attacking her.

"I slipped and the toad saved me before I ended up in a worse condition." Naruto answered, a little offended at the flippant tone Hebime used.

"Don't sssstart with toadssss. They're only good for one thing, and that'ssss eating. They tasssstee deliciousssss." Hebime said with a faraway look on her scaled face. Naruto blanched.

"What?! They are not for eati-" Naruto started, but the rest of her sentence was drowned when a bang went off from high up in the mountain. An explosion tag.

Naruto stared up in shock and surprise as one of her traps went off. Anko was on her feet in no time and Hebime came slithering further out from underneath Anko's jacket. No longer shivering, but in deep concentration while they tried to squint up to the mountain.

"sssnow… Sssso much sssnow..." Hebime hissed in disgust, her eyes widening and her teeth flaring. Finally acting how Naruto was used to seeing snakes.

"Fuck..." Anko muttered, her hand clutching around the hem of a kunai. "Make sure everyone is awake, Naru. I'll look out here." Anko said in a low and controlled voice.

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Naruto was so surprised from hearing her old nickname that she halted for a moment, but then she nodded and turned on her heel. Sprinting back to the camp which was in full motion. Ebisu was jumping out of his tent with his sleeping bag still around his legs, Genma was pulling a sweater over his head while kicking away his backpack and Choza was coming hurriedly towards her with Ebisu clumsily scrambling after. Still trying to get the sleeping bag off one of his feet.

"Enemies?" Choza asked without preamble. Naruto nodded uncertainly.

"I think so. The trap shouldn't go off because of an animal, and I think I saw something. It's hard to tell though." Naruto replied hurriedly and gestured towards the mountain top far above them. The avalanche had started, and whatever Naruto thought she'd seen before was now lost in the falling snow and darkness of night.

"Where's Shisui-kun?" Asked Ebisu and looked worriedly around.

Naruto swore and ran over to the tent she knew Shisui would be sleeping in. What surprised her though was that Shisui was awake. He looked a little confused, but it seemed the explosion had been enough to even wake him.
"Get up, there are enemies around." Naruto barked before leaving again to go check on Anko.

She found the girl where she'd left her, still watching the avalanche fall towards them. They were placed out of the direct path of the tumbling snow, but Naruto wasn't sure if they would get out of this scotch free. If worst came to worst they would have to jump and try to run on top of the avalanche.

"Oh no, oh no, oh no… I knew I ssssshould never have ssssigned the summoning contract… what wassss I thinking? Cold weather and avalanchesssss? What happened to the good, old and bloody battlessss? This is the lasssst time I'm letting Hebishin talk me into sssshit like this..." Muttered Hebimei in growing fright.

"Calm down, Hebimei-chan. I won't let you fall in the snow." Anko answered drily.

It came at a surprising speed. At first it had looked like it fell at a slow, manageable speed, but the more snow got tangled into the avalanche, the faster it came hurtling down. Naruto bit her lip as she saw that their camp would be buried in this too, and glanced quickly at Anko. She was looking back with a fierce expression. "Keep close okay? We'll jump." Anko said before turning back towards the incoming snow.

It was coming at an alarming speed now. Roaring with its power and intensity. Naruto still couldn't fathom the efficiency of her trap. Whoever had set it off was probably beyond help at this point.

"Oh no! I'm going to die! I'm going to become a ssssnake flavored ice cream! I'm never joining a mission with you again, Anko!"

As the crushing wave of snow came upon them they jumped in unison, pushing chakra through their feet and propelling themselves up into the air.

Naruto kept her eyes on the white powdery death trap, trying to figure out how best to distribute her chakra so not to get swallowed in the snow when she landed. As she fell back on the snow Naruto felt Anko's hand wrap around her wrist. Forcing Naruto closer as they landed shakily on the rapid moving surface. Naruto almost toppled over, and only stood as long as she did thanks to Anko's steadying grip.

Naruto felt her feet getting dragged violently backwards, making her lose her center of gravity and fly forwards. She ripped her hand out of Anko's grip and did a front flip to get back to her feet.

She found it easier to run forwards and jump than to stand still. The snow gave way under her feet and did its best to swallow her, but thanks to her chakra and fast movements the snow wasn't victorious.

Anko was moving in a similar fashion to her left, and Naruto could hear Hebimei scream in panic from around her summoner's neck. Her head moving oddly up and down out of tune with Anko's jumping. It was actually comical and Naruto grinned. Anko smiled back.

In the middle of the commotion it was as if they both forgot their argument. Instead Anko did an impressive back flip and landed further behind Naruto. Making Hebimei wail like a baby. The older girl was grinning evilly to herself, pleased with Hebimei's reaction. Naruto chuckled under her breath and focused back on the task at hand.

The avalanche didn't last long, but while it passed over their camp Naruto and Anko danced and played around while they could. The adrenaline of running over an avalanche and the threat of enemies was enough for both of them to ignore their differences, and Hebimei's discomfort was
highly entertaining to listen to.

As the avalanche finally calmed down, leaving behind a thick layer of soft snow that they both pummeled through once they stopped their chakra, they were both left laughing. Hebimei was cursing them and their ancestress to the seven pits of hell while they tried to get a grip on themselves.

Anko was the first to get back up from the snow, the reason was obvious. "You promised! You said you wouldn't fall in the snow! You liar! My scales are cracking from the cold! I'll get a fever for sure!" Hebimei hissed and spit furiously.

Naruto scrambled up after them, still chuckling and found Anko trying to look abashed.

"I'm so sorry, Hebimei-chan. I didn't alter my chakra when the snow slowed down and I fell through. So, so sorry. I'll heat you up." She said with a huge grin on her face. Completely failing at being genuine with her words.

Naruto was making her way over when a noise made all three look to the side. Shisui was coming towards them with a relieved look on his face. "You're alright..." He said in a breathy tone, stopping when he reached Naruto.

"Of course, this is hardly enough to take us down, dattebayo." Naruto replied happily.

Shisui smiled weakly and then peeked nervously back over his shoulder. "We should get back to camp. Ebisu and I managed to save a couple of tents, but we lost a lot of our provision. Choza-sensei also managed to get someone from the snow. He had a Kumo headband." Shisui told them seriously, making both girls sober up at record speed.

"How did he do that?" Asked Anko surprised.

"He was trying to get out of the snow during the avalanche. Choza saw him falling straight past our camp and simply snapped him out of the snow and restrained him. He was being tied up when I went to look for you two." Shisui explained while Anko came closer to where they stood.

When the team of three joined their comrades it was a rather unpleasant sight that met them. The man had been tied up from shoulders to feet. The trees they had only fifteen minutes ago been covering underneath, was now underneath them. Swallowed up by the snow and only the upper tips stuck up.

The man was roughed up by the avalanche, and had cut on his face with a few blooming bruises on his forehead. Naruto suspected the darker marks had been inflicted by human force.

"Good to see you are alright. My team is already out scouting for any remaining survivors. You should meet up and then divide into groups of two to cover more ground." Choza told them hurriedly, efficiently cutting their view of the man by standing in front of him. "Anko, you're in charge since I need to question this man. Can you handle it?" Choza asked with one eyebrow raised.

"Sure. Leave it to me, Choza-sensei." The older girl answered with a satisfied smile on her lips.

They were successful in finding two bodies. It was difficult and without Ebisu and Anko they would never have found anyone at all.

The darkness of night and the white endless landscape suggested there was not a living soul except for themselves. As far as they knew there weren't. The two ninjas they dug up were dead. A woman and a man with blue lips and glazed eyes. Shisui shared with everyone that they had choked to death underneath the snow.
"How? Didn't the snow just crush them?" Asked Naruto and looked sadly at the Kumo woman. Anko was sealing up in a body scroll.

"No. When taken by an avalanche it becomes almost impossible to know what is up and what's down." Shisui explained in a serious voice, drawing the attention of Gai and the others standing close by.

"Being crushed underneath snow and tumbling down a mountainside... Even the best of ninjas would get confused about where they were. You don't know how thin or thick the layer of snow is, and you don't know which direction to escape to." Shisui continued, kicking lightly at the snow underneath his feet. "If you're deep enough inside the snow then you have limited amount of oxygen to use before you die, and if you didn't get out you would choke to death. It can take no more than minutes before you're dead."

Everyone was paying attention while Shisui continued explaining the danger of being caught in an avalanche. "There are also many who started digging wildly in the wrong direction, moving further down or sideways instead of up. The best way to find out is to spit and see which direction the drool rolls. Gravity works on drool after all. And if you are packed in with snow very little else is as effective. That way you would at least start moving in the right direction." Shisui said and crossed his arms in front of him.

"You can also hit things on your way down the mountain, knocking yourself unconscious, which naturally would increase your chances of dying." He finished with a shrug of his shoulders. "I guess that's what happened to at least one of these two."

Anko straightened up with the scroll in her hand and looked sideways at Naruto. She felt very guilty about her trap. Naruto hadn't known just how efficient it would be, and at least two people had been killed in a very cowardly way.

"You might have considered telling us this when you put up the trap with Naruto and Gai, Shisui. Not everyone has read; 'what to do if you're caught in an avalanche'." Anko said sarcastically, causing the Uchiha to go red around the ears. "But let's return to camp. We've been out here for hours." Anko added in a commanding voice, her eyes on Genma instead of any of her teammates.

The morning sun was blinking towards them through a layer of misty fog and clouds, and they mutely agreed and followed the girl at a fast pace back down the mountain. They had to climb high to cover enough area, and they were almost certain there were places they could have done a better job searching through. But everyone was exhausted, especially Naruto and Anko who hadn't slept in twenty four hours.

Back at camp Choza was waiting for them with boiling hot tea for everyone, curtesy of a small fire he'd gotten up while they were out scouting. Each of them accepted gratefully while Anko explained the result of their search. Choza seemed on edge and he started thinking hard once Anko was finished.

"You found everyone then... He said there were only three of them in total." Choza said slowly while he fiddled with a scroll in his hand. With a jolt Naruto realized it was a body scroll, and not one of two Anko had given him earlier. Choza had killed their hostage.

"What did you learn, Choza-sensei?" Asked Genma between sips of tea.

"I learned some discomfort news. Orochimaru-sama is currently moving into a territory brimmed with enemies. There was only three out here on the mountain, they were passing through on because they were on a mission and accidentally set off the trap even though they didn't know we were here.
But I found out Kumo has a base further into the country. Which means… that Orochimaru-sama is in great danger and has no idea." Choza said with worry written on his face, his arms fisted at his side while he looked down into the snow.

Everyone turned quiet. A pin dropping into the snow would have been heard if anyone had cared to test out the silence.

Chozas turned from his students and back in the direction they all knew Orochimaru had gone the previous day. "I think… I think I have to go after him." He said defeated. "With that many opponents even someone of Orochimaru-sama calibre will be in mortal danger." He said in the end, his eyes hardening before getting to his feet.

"I'll go with you. If sensei is in danger then I want to help! I can help find him with my snake summons." Anko said, a note of anxiety slipping through her voice.

"No, Anko. You'll be in charge here. You have already proven you can handle the situation from what happened and if someone attacks the camp you'll send Orochimaru-sama's snake summon ahead to us. But if you can summon another snake that can help me lead the way to him, that would be appreciated."

"I know who you should ask; my cousin Hebishin. He's quite good." Hebimei said while nodding to herself. "Let's see how perfect Hebishin deals with this weather." She added with glee in her voice. Naruto rolled her eyes and Shisui snickered under his breath.

Anko put up a fight, wanting to go with Choza but was quickly put in her place. "No, you're not going with me. I don't want to leave you alone, but at the moment Orochimaru needs me. If the battle is of the scale that Kumo ninja said than he's in serious trouble, and you arguing with me is just delaying my departure." Choza said with his most serious tone, straightening up to his full height and towering over Anko.

Naruto was surprised to see an Akimichi look intimidating. She was so used to Choji's gentleness she wasn't aware Choza had it in him to look so scary.

"Fine… But let me know when you find him." Anko replied dejectedly and went to summon Hebishin. Hebimei followed at slither behind Anko, her tail wagging slightly with glee.

It was late midday when Naruto woke up. She was confused. Because her mind was so foggy she had problems remembering where she was and how she'd gotten there. It took her a moment to realize she was in a tent, and another to find out Anko was the one sleeping like the dead next to her.

What puzzled her the most was that something had woken her up, but she couldn't understand what it had been. It was quiet all around her, only Anko's soft breathing breaking the utter silence. They were off duty at the moment, and the boys were doing the lookout while they caught up on some sleep.

The small tent they had put up that morning stood intact and just like she remembered it when she'd gone to sleep after Choza had left. Her backpack was propped behind her head as pillow, and she was wrapped snugly inside Ebisu's sleeping bag since her own had disappeared in the avalanche.

"Good afternoon, Naruto-cccchan." Said a slithery voice close to her ear.

"GYAAAAH!" Naruto bolted up in fright with a shriek so loud it could have caused a second avalanche.
Hebimei was wrapped tightly around her waist, slithering up underneath her shirt towards her neck. Naruto was so freaked she barely remembered to breathe as four guys came storming into their small tent.

"What happened!?" Asked Genma with two senbon ready in his hand, before he tumbled forwards to the ground. Gai had come barking in straight behind him, causing Genma to fall into Naruto, and both of them went down together on top of Anko and rolled sideways from the impact.

"Where's the enemy!" Exclaimed Gai with fire alight in his eyes.

"What the hell! Who the fuck is making so much noise! Shut up!" Huffed Anko and looked displeased up at Ebisu who was standing over her with a kunai in his hand. Even though Shisui was the smallest of the boys, there was no more room inside the tent for him. Instead he had his head peeking in through the open curtain. His tantō clutched in his hand and a growing smile on his face.

"This is like a heat ssssandwich… Hebimei likessss." the snake said in pleasure as she was squeezed in between Genma and Naruto. Genma turned red and tried to get back on his feet while Naruto started pushing at the snake's iron body grip in an attempt to make her let go.

"What are you doing! Why aren't you wrapped around Anko!?" Naruto squealed in a faint voice.

"Naruto-chan is sssso much warmer. Hebimei likessss it." The snake said in utter euphoria. Naruto's face twisted in disgust as the snake tightened its grip around her, the scales slithering over her bare skin. It was impossible to get her off and Naruto was close to start hyperventilating.

"I don't care! Anko is the one who summoned you! I don't want you lurking underneath my clothes!" Naruto said heatedly while doing her best to loosen up Hebimei's tail that was dangerously close to cutting off the blood circulation in her left arm.

"Calm the fuck down, Naru. Hebimei likes the heat so let her stay for kami's sake. It will stop some her whining at least, and she's such a bitch when she doesn't get her way." Anko muttered while looking blearily at the panicking blonde and the snake sticking up from Naruto's shirt neck.

"What? I don't want to sleep with her! It's gross! It tickles!" Naruto exclaimed frustrated as Hebimei's grip wasn't slackening in the slightest. A shiver went up her spine as Naruto realized just how easy it would be for the snake to strangle or simply squeeze her to death. The snake was strong.

"Hebimei issssn't going anywhere." The snake said in content, slowly wrapping its upper body around Naruto's shoulders and laying its head in the nape of her neck. Naruto stared horror struck at the boys. To their credit it looked like they sympathized with her.

"Um… Good luck with that." Genma said and hid his smirk behind his hand while he pretended to touch his cheek.

"Please keep it down, Naruto-chan. We're still in a very dangerous place. We're trying to stay hidden." Ebisu scolded her with his hands on his hip. Gai was fascinated by the snake's movement, and for once didn't have a comment to the situation.

Shisui waved cheekily from the entrance. "While you guys peek at the girls, I'll go back to guard duty." He said teasingly, and all three boys hurried out after him. Anko rolled her eyes, and in record speed she was back asleep. Naruto admired her ability to sleep on command.

"Get off!" Naruto hissed under her breath, sounding just like the snake using her for her heat.

"No." Answered Hebimei, sounding as if she was about to fall asleep as well.
"Go sleep with Anko." Naruto insisted, her voice pleading.

"Don't want to. You're ssso much warmer. How can that be? You're the warmesssst human I've ever been wrapped around. It's so pleassssssant."

"Please?" Naruto begged weakly.

"Go to ss sleep. I'm tired, and I'm finally comfortable on thissss kami awful mission." Hebimei answered, her eyes still open, but they were turning more glossed over.

"Why aren't you closing your eyes then? If you're going to sleep?" Asked Naruto in discomfort.

"Ssssnakes don't have eyelids, idiot." Hebimei retorted offended. Naruto gulped. Wonderful…. An ever watchful reptile wrapped around her neck who had signed a contract with Orochimaru. This wouldn't be uncomfortable at all.

The next day was just as uneventful as the first up until the sudden avalanche, except now Naruto heard Hebimei's complaining from up close. The snake refused to leave Naruto and was wrapped around her like a wise.

Dejectedly Naruto came to realize the only thing that would cause Hebimei to let go was being summoned away, which wasn't happening unless they were attacked or they were reunited with Orochimaru and Choza.

The snake had no understanding of privacy either, and the second time Naruto woke up she was wrapped around her thigh instead of her neck. It put a new meaning to the saying; having a snake down your trousers.

Naruto was furious, and Anko's badly hidden glee about this development wasn't helping. Now that the adrenaline of a fight and something to do was over, the two girls were back to not speaking. As if they both had come down to earth again only to realize they had both acted without thinking. The atmosphere between them wasn't as bad as it had been before, but was still far from resolved.

Anko wasn't interested in making up though, at least not right now. Her new role as leader of the two teams had given her a new professional drive where personal matters had no place. Instead she ordered people around, making sure they had enough wood for a fire and that people was keeping proper watch over their new camp.

They had been left with the two remaining tents, and Shisui was now sleeping in theirs. There was just no way four people would fit inside one, and since he was on the "girl team" he'd been kicked out from the boy's tent.

He didn't seem to like that very much, and fumed for over an hour while they were making supper. Genma, Gai and Anko were keeping watch, while Naruto and Shisui dealt with food. Ebisu was sleeping, seeing as they tried to let at least one person sleep whenever possible. Which was all the time to be honest. Nothing was happening, and if anything, that made things worse.

Their low conversations and the growing worry that something was happening to their sensei was giving the camp a glum atmosphere. Well, Naruto wasn't too worried about Orochimaru, but she did feel nervous about Choza.

There was less complaining too. Naruto had finally settled herself for suffering in silence, and was surprised when Hebimei took a note out of her book and did the same. Or maybe she was generally less whiny when she was warm. The snake certainly liked lapping up all the remaining body heat
Naruto had to spare. No one felt like sparring to pass the time, and the camp fire stories were growing shorter. It resulted in a camp that went silent for hours, not a word being uttered except for the occasional blowing of noses or a small cough.

They all cheered up during meal time. Their hunger and coldness wasn't helping the mood, but with some warm food everyone's spirit lifted.

The clock ticked on, and dawn of the third day slowly emerged with a new round of softly falling snow. By now Naruto was more used to the constant pressure of Hebimei around her, and didn't even try to strangle the snake when she woke up to find her with her head between her undeveloped breasts. Maybe Hebimei liked her heartbeat.

Shisui was next to her, and had been the one to wake her up. Above them stood Ebisu with two mugs of tea for each of them. Naruto couldn't help the ear splitting smile on her face when they were offered to them. "You two and Genma are next on guard duty. You have fifteen minutes." Ebisu said in his normal uptight voice. Naruto thanked him and welcomed the hot liquid that slid down her throat. Because of the low temperature the tea cooled quickly, and they hurriedly took advantage of keeping their hands warm around the heated porcelain of the mug.

Even in sleep Hebimei kept herself tightly wrapped around Naruto, and she peeked into her sweater to see exactly how she was wrapped today. The snake looked unblinkingly back, but without reacting. Naruto guessed she was asleep.

It was seriously creepy that those yellow, slit eyes were constantly staring into space. Always on guard in some way. It made bathroom breaks very uncomfortable for her and very amusing for the rest of the camp.

Because of the silence, Naruto's voice carried. And even when she had a whispered argument with Hebimei to look away while Naruto did her business, the others still heard bits of their conversation.

But the third day was turning out to be the gloomiest of all. The sky was covered in grey clouds that showed no sign of letting up, snow falling in lazy but thick patches of snowflakes. Naruto was covering the west side, Genma to the south and Shisui to the east. Hebimei was huddled so far into her jacket that she was of little entertainment, and Naruto spent her time trying to keep her wits with her.

She had realized that looking at snow for too long made her see stars afterwards. Shisui – the walking encyclopedia that he was – explained this was called Photo keratitis, or the more memorable term; snow blindness.

Naruto was staring at snow for too long, and because the snow reflected so much sunlight into her eyes it was damaging her sight. It was like staring at the sun; not good for your eyes apparently.

But it was impossible not looking at the snow. There was snow everywhere, all possible surfaces was covered by the cold powdery substance, and Naruto had never for a second thought of bringing sunglasses to a snowy mountain. In her head it was like bringing a woolen cap to the beach.

She guessed it was better today though, the clouds didn't let any sun through, which was admittedly a blessing for Naruto's tired eyes.

The time ticked by at snail pace, and after jostling herself after hours of sitting and staring at nothing, Naruto wondered if maybe she'd picked up Hebimei's ability to sleep with her eyes open.

Around late afternoon, and about an hour before Ebisu was to take over her shift, something moved
from the corner of her eye.

Naruto turned to her right. Her eyes squinting towards the rocky area Genma was keeping guard. She got to her feet slowly, stretching out her frozen limbs and attempting to force some heat back into her joints by restlessly moving her feet.

The movement came again, and Naruto hunched down and started making her way forwards. There was without a doubt a figure moving suspiciously over there. A person. Not an animal.

Crouching even lower and peeking behind her towards the camp, Naruto tried to figure out what the best course of action would be. Genma was over there, but he hadn't raised the alarm. If he was in trouble she should back him up, but she also needed to warn the others.

Hoping beyond hope that her kage bunshin wouldn't make too much noise, she created a clone to go back to camp and inform Anko and the others.

As the clone walked away silently Naruto did the same in the direction of the rocky area. She cursed her dark jacket and how visible she was here in the open. At her lookout spot they had made sure there was cover. They used branches and anything they could find to cover up their dark clothes, but out on an open mountainside it was impossible to stay hidden.

Naruto figured speed was better in this scenario. She'd be visible no matter what. The only thing in her favor was silence. If she was silent enough they might not react before it was too late. Hebimei was moving underneath her jacket, having noticed Naruto's increasing pulse.

From up ahead the shape was making a slow steady pace towards their camp, crouching low so not to be detected. Naruto's eyes narrowed while she blessed the wind current. She was up wind, so smells and noises had more problems carrying in the unknown person's scent in her direction. She was almost crawling on all four when the person slipped out of sight behind a large snow covered boulder, Naruto decided to come from up behind, and leapt lightly further back while keeping a lookout for Genma and more unwanted people.

She got on top of the boulder, flattening herself on the top and crawled towards the edge that allowed her to peek down. Hebimei stuck her head out as well, opening her mouth to taste the air and looking curiously at their target. The person was covered in clothes, making it impossible to see if it was a man or a woman, and Naruto readied herself to leap.

With one quick motion she was off the boulder and flying through the air, colliding hard with the person and restraining their arms in one fluid motion. Hebimei shot out too, twisting and turning while she tried to get a grip of the person they were attacking. Instead she restrained Naruto's arm in the chaos that occurred.

The person struggled furiously, and for a moment arms, legs and a tail kicked out violently in every direction. It stopped abruptly once the person felt the cold steel of Naruto's kunai against their throat. He looked up shocked.

"Genma?"

"Naruto?" Hissed Genma back in confusion. "What are you doing?" He whispered, a note of panic in his voice while he stared back at her. Hebimei had finally gotten a hold of the right person, and looked downright pleased with herself. But also quite hungry...

"Why are you sneaking around? I thought you were an enemy." Naruto whispered back, not sure exactly why she was still on guard.
"There's someone back there. I went back to alert you guys." He hissed, still being restrained by Hebimei's grip around his arms and the kunai to his throat.

Naruto concentrated on Genma, finding nothing that seemed out of character. What little she could feel of his chakra also felt right. She was quite sure this was the real Genma. He had a lot of clothes on, and nothing seemed out of place now that she could see him this close. She sent Hebimei a pointed look, her fangs were dangerously close to his neck now, and the snake rolled her eyes and slithered back up Naruto's jacket through the hem of her arm. Naruto withdrew the kunai and helped Genma to his feet just as Anko, Ebisu and Shisui came into view behind them.

"What's going on?" Asked Anko in a whisper once both Genma and Naruto told her their individual password. The safe word that was used to make sure they were who they claimed to be. Naruto had been given an easy one, seeing as she sucked at memorizing words.

"There's someone back there. I heard them. So I was going back to alert you guys, but Naruto intersected me thinking I was the enemy." Genma summarized quickly.

"You got beat by a girl three years younger and hardly out of the academy?" Snorted Anko and rolled her eyes.

"She took me by surprise, alright? And Hebimei was helping her." Genma retorted sullenly.

"Still..." Anko whispered back while grinning to herself.

Naruto fell in step with Shisui while Anko, Ebisu and Genma walked ahead. Falling silent again now that the short tension free moment had passed.

Anko gestured for them to go to the left while she, Ebisu and Genma took the right. Naruto took the lead, Shisui right on her heel while the stooped as low in the snow as possible.

It wasn't until they were almost at Genma's assigned guard spot that Naruto heard something too. An almost intangible rustle came from some bushes which a few days ago had been the top of trees up ahead. There were a lot of boulders in the area, which made for excellent hiding spaces. Both for them and their enemies.

From the other's hiding spot Naruto noticed Anko signaling them. Ordering them to wait. Anko walked expectedly forwards. Alone.

Naruto bit her tongue and her fist tightened while she watched Anko make her way the best she could. Ducking in and out from between boulders. And then she was out of sight.

Naruto sucked in a calming breath. Her eyes strained for any sign of movement. Now that the sound had stopped abruptly. Maybe they had been noticed? But they would hear it if Anko made the wrong type of movement. Like fighting. Or falling.

Shisui had his hand on her shoulder, a precaution to stop her from bursting after Anko to back her up prematurely. Shisui had no trust in her at all. As if Naruto would ever jeopardize Anko's safety like that. Maybe when she'd been that young the first time around, but she knew better now.

"Kya!"

A violent shiver went up all four of them at the sound of Anko's voice. Naruto had to stop Shisui from moving this time, her hand on his shoulder as he stepped forwards. He froze and together they listened. There were movements now, a lot of them. And just as Naruto couldn't take it anymore all three sprang forwards.
Only to find Anko smiling exasperated. Quite alone.

"It was a hare." Said Anko in a mocking tone, holding up the fighting creature in her hand. Genma seemed to have realized the same thing, but couldn't hide the sigh of relief that left him. Naruto was hiding a wolfish grin behind her hand. "You are such a scardy cat sometimes, Genma." Muttered Anko under her breath, but the wide grin showed that the comment was meant to be overheard.

"I didn't know that… It could have been an enemy." Genma defended himself, his arms flapping up and down at his side.

"I'm sure the hare would have put up quite the fight. It's good you got us to back you up for this." Anko replied drily.

"Oh shut up." Genma said and turned on his heel to walk away from the embarrassing situation. Naruto and Anko's eyes met, both of them smiling. But remembering that they were still having a fight, the smile disappeared. Anko hurriedly followed after Genma quickly.

"You two should stop this argument. Whatever it is can't you just apologize?" Asked Shisui and sighed.

"I'm not apologizing. I'm right. Anko is just exaggerating. It's my problem anyway, it has little to do with her, but she keeps taking it as if I'm insulting her."

"What are you arguing about?" Asked Ebisu curiously.

"Orochimaru." Answered Naruto darkly.

Both boys turned silent, sharing a look before quickly turning their attention back to Naruto. Shisui was the first to speak up.

"You two… have been arguing for ages… over sensei?" Shisui asked exasperated.

Naruto nodded.

"Kami, Naruto. I don't get you. Why do you dislike Orochimaru-sensei so much? I get you find him creepy, but to take it this far? He's done nothing to warrant this sort of behavior from you." He said smacked her head lightly.

"How would you know? He's foul. Whatever those experiments he likes tinkering with does I'm pretty sure he can't be following protocol to create them." Naruto retorted with ire.

"He wouldn't do that. Orochimaru is a war hero, a sannin and the student of the Hoka-" Ebisu started listing with scorn on his face. It seemed Naruto's comment about Orochimaru not following the rules had offended Ebisu personally too. So Naruto interrupted him.

"Do you even know what you're talking about? Have you seen how Orochimaru fight? Most of his techniques are banned. Banned Ebisu, and the ones he creates are put right there in the same category. Kinjutsu is created through dangerous experiments. Like the edo tensei where you have to kill someone to succeed." Naruto snapped, remember the Konoha invasion during the chūnin exam.

"But Anko likes the power. She keeps thinking Orochimaru is this harmless father figure that is passing on his knowledge to the next generation. When he doesn't hide at all that his goal in life is to live forever. He has no interest in us except the potential we have to help his experiments along." Naruto barked. Her arms folding in front of her while she readied herself for Ebisu's comeback, but it was Shisui who replied.
"Even if that's true, and I don't believe it is, he is a Konoha shinobi. He is on our side. He is powerful, just like he craves, but he is working for Konoha's good." Shisui said quietly. "In war time it is normal that human rights are lowered, Orochimaru has seen a lot of suffering, and I believe he is using his experiments to help people in the long run."

"Exactly. We have plenty of people on death row. It's not illegal in Konoha to use prisoners who is already sentenced to die for experimental purpose. As long as the rules aren't breeched of course." Ebisu said, jumping at Shisui's words to defend Orochimaru.

"What? It's allowed to torture prisoners of war for that sort of thing?" Naruto asked shocked.

"Who said it was torture?" Asked Shisui and sighed. "It's experiments. If they start feeling pain they are killed, stopping their suffering and for filling their sentence." Shisui said uncomfortably.

"You know a lot about this topic Shisui. Something you want to tell me?" Naruto asked while folding her arms in front of her.

"Father works in the police force. Of course I know some of what happens to the prisoners." He answered with rising temper.

"But the thing is, I do not believe that's enough for Orochimaru. With his thirst for knowledge I have problems seeing him satisfied with the prisoners he's given access to. It's not healthy. He's too extreme to be content with what he has."

"Naruto… Do you think he's the only one? That Konoha is the only village that does that type of experiments? A lot of the ones captured during the war are used for this type of purpose. Prisoners of war are treated horribly no matter what village it is. They use the knowledge they gain to protect their own people. Refine it for a greater purpose. Do you not believe that sometimes sacrifices have to be made for the greater good? I know personally that I'd die for my clan, my friends and my village. You can condone the methods, but we are ninjas. What are we but hired help to do the things others can't or won't?" Shisui said so low they had problems overhearing him. Naruto stared as if she didn't recognize him anymore.

"So you think it's alright? To continue the hatred? Continue the revenge? You did research on my friend so now I'll do research on yours? You killed my brother so I'll kill yours? Where would that lead us? There would never be anything but war."

"And if we stopped? What then? We'd all be killed. Is that something you'd be fine with? Konoha burning to the ground and every one of us dead? Aren't you the one who promote the will of fire all the time? To pass on what we know to the next generation. Who exactly would come later in that scenario?" Shisui asked calmly back.

Naruto was startled at his tone. It wasn't exactly cold, but more neutral. As if it was a case of hopeless truth he had accepted as reality. "It's wrong… I don't know how it can change, but someone has to try. If you follow rules without question… If you never… I wouldn't want to be a puppet that silently follows orders without thinking of the consequences. I don't want to act out of revenge."

Naruto muttered and looked away.

"Neither do I. But there are many who do. Sometimes life can damage you so much it's easier to just let others decide. And that's what creates this animosity. But if we are to ever achieve anything, we have to keep up. That's the sort of work Orochimaru-sensei does. He's trying to get us out of the war the way he knows best. People do just as bad things without reason at all. People kill and rape just because they are in a bad mood sometimes. Can you fault Orochimaru-sensei, a man who has seen much more than us three combined, for wanting it to stop? For using the means he has to create a
"You don't know that. Orochimaru is doing it for his own pleasure."

"You don't know that either. You have never given him the chance to explain himself. I'm not sure why you think scientists are such bad people, but you don't know Orochimaru's reasons for doing what he does. And he's not breaking any rules. He is a crucial asset in the war and works day and night tirelessly. If he feels good about his work, how is that any different from you liking to be a ninja? What's the difference between killing an enemy ninja during research that later will benefit the village than killing an enemy out on the field? It's happening all the time these days. Ever since the war started people has been dying pointless. At least Orochimaru can claim he's achieving something and finds opportunities in death. It's morbid and you can call it inhuman. But we're not that much better. I knew what I signed up for when I became a ninja. It's not about who throws the best or who can do the coolest jutsu. It's about sacrifice. We maim and harm people too. It's not pleasant and it's not desired, but we do it to keep our friends and family safe." Shisui said with rapidly heated words.

Ebisu was looking very uncomfortable at the end of Shisui's speech, but the Uchiha was completely calm. His stare intent on Naruto.

When Shisui explained it like that it made sort of sense, but she couldn't find any justice in Orochimaru's twisted ways. But it did get her thinking. Orochimaru had hated Konoha... He’d killed his sensei, found pleasure in chaos and attacked the village he'd once called home. Was that revenge? Was Orochimaru at the moment under the belief he was acting for the greater good of the village? Could it be that being scorned for all his work and effort was what caused his hate? His need for revenge.

Naruto didn't answer, instead her eyes fixed on a snow covered branch, only able to feel the cold seep into her bones. Wondering what really was the difference between Sasuke and Orochimaru was. Except that one of them was older and had more time to dwell on their revenge. And her own animosity... Wasn't that born out of what had happened to Sasuke?

She was also wondering who Shisui had met for him to be have that sort of insight. If anything it sounded like he was talking from experience.

To be continued...
Thank you once again for reading! Sorry for the long wait, my laptop was out of function after skidding across a parking lot. And then I was out of town without internet. I've tried to respond to comments whenever I had the opportunity (borrowed my mum's phone) but it was a bit difficult and downright tedious without a proper keyboard.

I pushed in a lot of trivia facts in this chapter. Snakes don’t have eyelids. You should spit to find out which way is up if you ever find yourself in an avalanche, and a lot of medical and industrial breakthrough is results of war. The last one is not pleasant but none the less true. Not that being stuck in an avalanche is pleasant either though… There's more in there, but I can't remember from the top of my head at the moment.

And don't worry, this mission is (finally) coming to an end in the next chapter, and for those of you missing team Minato they'll show up soon enough! I have this mission included in the story for a reason, it just won't be obvious just yet. It probably could've been shortened, but I've already established I have problems keeping things in shorter sentences…

Next chapter might be a little late too, I'm trying to catch up the best I can but I'm still behind, and a lot is happening the next couple of weeks.
Warning! This chapter includes detailed death, blood and violence. I already warned you that these things would be included in the story at the start of After the Rain, and I wasn't kidding. Please do not continue reading if this upset you. The story is rated M because of the violence, not because of a lemon… I haven't even decided on a pairing so I hoped that was obvious.

Chapter Thirteen – Kunai and Chains

"I don't know if there is justice in the Ninja world. We fight believing in our own justice. But if the enemy is doing the same, who is right?" - Uchiha Shisui

Naruto thought long and hard over Shisui’s arguments for the rest of the day while considering if his words had some merit. She noted that Anko was trying to be civil, maybe it was for the sake of the mission, but some of the tension had finally been resolved too.

As she went to sleep Naruto realized she might be a little bias when it came to Orochimaru. He was her first true enemy. The first one who had posed a real threat and had continued to get the better of her since their first meeting. Never had a word Naruto said affected him, unlike with most people there was just no middle ground between them.

It was frustrating to listen to her teammates sleeping while her head was spinning with possibilities. What if she could get through to him after all? She was trying to stop a lot of different conflicts from occurring but had no idea how to proceed. Why not start with the one right in front of her? Orochimaru was the one available to her, and so far she’d simply been plotting his murder, but there was another possibility; Give him a chance. An opportunity to explain himself.

Naruto grimaced at the mere thought, but the idea stuck with her. She had somehow understood Nagato even though he'd been the one to murder Jiraiya. Orochimaru had killed her Jiji, he'd taken away Sasuke and when she'd seen him again he was barely recognizable.

A person who could spread so much evil was unredeemable in Naruto's mind. But maybe that was her own subjective view on things. Hadn't Zabuza killed a whole classroom of children? Hadn't Pein evened Konoha with the ground? Hadn't she forgiven so many people for their past crimes? Could she try to do that with Orochimaru?

No immediate answer came to her. Naruto was still troubled, but she swore she would test out the waters with Orochimaru. Try to hold less of a grudge from now on, no matter how hard it would be. She'd never been the vindictive type. Not for anyone except him.

It was curious why that was, and she was quite certain the answer was Sasuke. What had happened to him was inexcusable on so many levels, but if you looked at the whole picture Orochimaru played a very small part. Still, she couldn't help but blame him… The fact he oozed of "bad guy" didn't help either.
Naruto kicked impatiently at Hebimei's tail. The snake was tickling her foot and she was having enough trouble sleeping as it was. The snake was indifferent to Naruto's opinion about Orochimaru. In fact she had some bad words for the man herself. But apparently most snakes had problems with their summoners. Hebimei called it a way of showing affection, which meant she probably was under the illusion Naruto cared deeply for Orochimaru.

She cared deeply alright. She cared deeply about her utter contempt for him.

Naruto groaned and turned to her other side in an attempt at getting some sleep before it was her turn to sit guard again. Hebimei hissed as her head was squeezed into the futon and hit her ankle with the tip of her tail.

Only two hours until it was time to get up. Great…

The fourth day, the day of Choza's and Orochimaru's estimated return, saw no change in the weather, and as the morning passed into afternoon the two teams were growing restless. They hadn't heard anything at all. The summon hadn't returned, which in itself was concerning, though no one dared say it out loud.

Naruto found herself sitting with Anko during dinner time. Their food supply was dangerously low and all they had enough for was half a bowl of watery soup. They had boiled snow and used the water to thin out the soup. It didn't really fill their stomach, but it was the illusion of food.

They were nervous about tracking back to the wooded area where they could hunt something. There could be enemies around, and if they all went and their sensei came back it would be bad.

Anko didn't dare send a summon to them either. If a snake suddenly popped up in a wrong situation it could give away their position. Only in emergencies would they send Hebimei for help.

Ebisu was restless, walking in circles and peeking up every other minute in the direction they all assumed their sensei would arrive from. But as the sky slowly started darkening their spirit fell further. They had run into trouble or they were attempting to avoid trouble.

A discussion broke out that night, different ideas being shared around the six children without a clue what to do.

"We should go after them. If they're in trouble we have to help." Gai said seriously, his eyes intent on the extinct fire. They never burned a fire during night in fear of being spotted.

"No. We'll get attacked or lost. We don't know which route they took, and what if they return here only to find us missing? I say we send Hebimei." Countered a red nosed Shisui and shivered slightly from the cold wind.

"I don't think so. It might endanger them. Hebimei is only for emergencies." Anko told them sternly.

"Then we should at least get some more food. Most of our rations disappeared in the avalanche, and we barely have enough for breakfast for two people tomorrow. If we're just going to sit and wait we'll need more provision." Genma said dejectedly while shooting uncertain glances down into the valley stretching down from the mountain.

"It's too dangerous." Answered Ebisu and straightened his black glasses. They had been over these arguments before, and Naruto had no new idea for their current situation.

"You're in charge Anko… In the end you should make the call. What do you think is the best
option?" Naruto said eventually.

"We'll... I think we'll have to do without food tomorrow... We'll stay until tomorrow evening before we go look for food as a whole group. Nightfall will give us better cover than daylight, and it'll give sensei more time to return. After we have everything we need we'll return here and wait. But protocol states that after five days..." She trailed off and sighed heavily. "After four more days we are to abandon mission and return to Konoha. The countdown started this morning." She finished in a heavy tone.

"What?" Gai asked aghast.

"We're no higher ranked than Chūnin here. As leader I can't lead you into a territory with a suspected enemy base. There's also two genin amongst us who shouldn't even be this close to Kumo without supervision of a jōnin in the first place." Anko explained while massaging her temple in an attempt to think clearly.

"So we are to just abandon sensei?" Asked Genma disgusted. "Not even to check if there's something we can do? We have to go after them if they don't return in four days then."

"No." Anko replied coldly, her head snapping to the side and giving Genma the most intense look Naruto had ever seen on her face. "If sensei isn't back in four days then there's nothing we can do. All it would result in is everyone getting killed. Orochimaru-sensei is the strongest ninja I have ever met, and if he can't make it out than no one here will either. If they haven't returned in four days it's because they are already dead." Anko said harshly.

"Then let's go now." Gai said urgently, already looking as if he was about to start running. Shisui was nodding in agreement next to Gai, but Anko held up a hand to stop them.

"They might still return, and we're not splitting up. My task is to keep you five alive until they return, which I believe they will. I'm not letting you wander into a pointless death." Anko snapped exasperatedly.

"But-" Ebisu objected, also looking onto the path they suspected their sensei had taken.

"No but. Choza-sensei put me in charge, and a good thing too seeing as you guys are overemotional pussies with no belief in your sensei. I believe whole heartedly that Orochimaru will return, and if Choza went with him than he'll come back too. I believe even if they were attacked just like Choza-sensei feared, that they'll still make it back alive. And when they do we're going to be here and not over complicate the mission further with lost or dead members." Anko said with such authority Naruto barely recognized her.

Naruto wasn't sure. She actually agreed with Anko and believed Orochimaru would come back any moment now, but she was worried about Choza. He had to be alright. He just had to...

After that no one had anything to add. Instead they went to pass the time in their own way. Shisui and Gai went with Genma to stand guard, while the rest busied themselves with different activities.

"That couldn't have been easy..." Said Naruto after half an hour of silence between the three.

Anko looked up and nodded mutely.

"If it means anything to you I believe you're right. Orochimaru is one tough cookie to crack. He'll probably be back any moment." Naruto said genuinely and a little sourly, causing Anko to crack a small smile.
For a moment they looked at one another before Naruto decided to be the mature one for once. "I'm sorry alright? I know I'm being harsh on Orochimaru, but it's hard to fight my instincts… I've never been one to follow pure logic you know? I'm one to follow my gut, and something has always told me strongly to stay away from Orochimaru… But..." Naruto trailed off while Anko stayed silent, her mouth half open in surprise. "But I can see it's… somewhat… unfair. So I'll give him a chance… okay? I won't promise anything, but I'll try." Naruto muttered under her breath. Anko lit up like a candle in the cold winter night.

"That's all I'm asking. Thanks. And I'm sorry for… yah' know." Anko replied and waved her hand carelessly in front of her. Naruto grinned, this was as close to a sincere apology she'd ever get from Anko. Ebisu was visibly uncomfortable about overheard their heart to heart and pretended to be very interested in sharpening his kunai.

"Good." Naruto said uncertainly and pushed her hands further into the pockets of her jacket, not sure what to say now. This counted right? They were friends again, right? It felt like it. Anko looked less stressed than earlier and her shoulders had sagged slightly.

"I heard Shisui-kun was top of his class." Said Ebisu abruptly after a long and awkward silence, making both girls look up with an eyebrow raised. "He seems well informed." Ebisu continued and nodded to himself. Naruto smiled wolfishly, realizing he was trying to break the tension in his own awkward way.

"Sure is that little Uchiha. I have no idea how he hides it so well. He's so normal most of the time. I never guessed he was hiding such a large brain. But then again his head is a bit large isn't it? Or maybe it's just those curls of his that make his head look too big for his body." Anko replied flippantly, Naruto chuckled and shook her head.

"I thought all Uchiha were pretty brainy." Naruto said and shrugged.

"Most Uchiha are. But you've clearly not spent much time around Obito." Anko retorted with a roll of her eyes. "I swear he's just as stupid as you are Naru. If you didn't look so different I'd swear you had the same parents. Both of you are orphans and all that, and you act so similar at times. Hyper energetic fools both of yah'."

Naruto laughed a little too loud, and hurriedly covered her mouth to stifle the sound. "We're not that bad." Naruto argued back.

"Not bad specifically, just highly annoying at times." Anko answered without missing a beat.

"Am not."

"Are too."

"Am so not."

"You so are too."

They continued for more than ten minutes, which was about the time they realized Ebisu had gotten up and flew long ago.

Shisui woke up early on the fifth day of waiting for Orochimaru. He sprang out of bed to see if their sensei had returned sometime in the night, though he couldn't shake the feeling he'd be disappointed.

Outside Naruto looked cold but pleased where she stood and gave a short summary of the night's
event to Ebisu. Her chapped lips were formed in a wide smile, making her red cheeks puff out in pride. She’d caught a rabbit and was proudly showing it to Ebisu who was too hungry to scold her for leaving her post for five minutes.

They had split the shifts into six hour periods so no one would stay out too long and get too cold. Three people were constantly on the lookout at all times, but Naruto had this shift all on her own. Her shadow clones were truly a blessing at times like this.

Shisui wondered briefly how many animals lay dead underneath the snow after the avalanche and which ones would be the tastiest. But forced his mind quickly onto something else because he knew that thinking about food would only make him hungrier. There were no signs of Orochimaru or Choza anywhere, and the fact that they were in no hurry to leave meant that their sensei had not returned.

It would be a sparse day, but he agreed that Anko had the most level headed plan out of the various options.

Anko would be joining him for the next guard shift together with Gai, and the three dropped breakfast all together to save their meagre portions for later. Naruto was over eager to start cooking the rabbit but Ebisu was putting on the breaks in an attempt to show her the correct way to skin the animal. All the while telling her there wouldn’t be much food on the little creature. Not nearly enough for the six of them.

Shisui let them be and went to the east lookout. It had become his assigned spot whenever he was on guard duty. By now he knew the terrain so well it was easier to see if anything was out of place. Naruto had left behind a cracker where they usually sat, and Shisui smiled to himself as he picked it up.

He presumed Naruto had a few left and hidden one in her jacket and had saved it for him. While his spirit rose rapidly he sat down and ate as silently as he could. Sound moved faster than wildfire on a grassy field up here on the mountain. Especially if someone was downwind from him.

Noon went slowly with a constant tension drifting on the cold wind. The uneasy atmosphere had become so constant it felt familiar by now, and Shisui couldn’t help but feel bored despite his worry for their two still missing members. Naruto and Anko were certain Orochimaru would return, but they weren’t sure about Choza.

Shisui cherished the cracker. Slowly. Taking tiny bites to make it last as long as possible. He finished the last crumbles almost two hours after he started his duty, and was about to stretch his legs when a shiver ran up his spine.

Curiously he turned around to see what caused the reaction, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. A bird was placed higher up on the mountain, above Anko’s station on the rocky terrain. Maybe the animals were finally braving to check out the mountain again after the natural disaster they activated.

Thinking he’d been mistaken Shisui turned back. Before he understood what he was seeing he was shouteing on top of his lungs. Something was coming at him, and it was coming at him fast.

The shurikens came straight at him from right ahead. Exactly where he’d been staring for the last couple of hours. With a wild sideways roll he managed to retreat behind the cover of his guard spot. The small rocks giving him some shelter but hardly enough.

He was sure everyone must have heard his shout, and now all he could do was try and get himself
out of there. A group larger than he'd had time to count was running towards him, and he could feel a sting in his shin where he must have gotten grazed.

From up ahead he heard a girl scream, and the sound of blade against blade followed soon after. Cold horror seeped into his veins as he realized they were being attacked from more than one side.

He spun out of line of two shuriken that would've cut his leg off, and turned midair to send two of his own straight back at his attacker. The ninja jumped effortlessly out of danger, but Shisui continued on running. Now towards Anko. He was sprinting in zigzag, attempting to sidestep any flying shuriken or kunai.

Not a moment later he spotted her, Anko was hurrying away from her post. She halted when she spotted Shisui and her eyes widened comically at his pursuers.

Shisui had been able to count them when he'd thrown his shuriken, and knew he had no less than eight ninjas hot on his heel.

But Shisui was fast, truly fast, and not just for his age either. They were not gaining on him, and as Shisui forced chakra into every step he felt adrenaline pumping in his ears.

Anko stopped in her tracks while going through a series of speedy hand signs and shouted loud enough for Shisui to overhear her. "Kinjutsu: Hidden Shadow Snake Hand."

Out of her arm sleeve came a swarm of snakes bursting out. All of them moving fast in Shisui's direction. The Uchiha felt relieved when they completely ignored him, understanding who the true enemy was. He caught up with Anko just as he felt his eyes readying to cast his own jutsu.

His arms formed the proper seal, and with deep concentration he stared into the eyes of their closest attacker. The man froze up, his mouth half open and his hand outstretched in an attack that had been halted in its track. Anko flew forward and slit his throat and the man fell with a gurgle. One of his comrades shouted in shock and fury.

Where exactly were the others? Snowy boulders obscured their view of their camp, but they could still hear sounds coming from the area. Shisui hoped desperately that everyone was alright. He had no idea who was at camp and who had been outside. Why had they separated so far? Had any of their enemies gotten caught in one of their traps? How many were they up against? And how the hell would they make it out alive from this?

These guys were for real. These guys wanted them dead and Shisui believed they could manage it. Crushing killing intent seeped into his skin from the captain, and he had never felt such fear. Their intent to kill them was as clear as if it was written on the wind around him.

At least Anko had his back, and it made him feel a little less hopeless. The snakes had halted his pursuers, but he could easily see that their attackers were at least Chūnin. If not higher ranked.

Their Kumo headband glinted in the winter sun and their garment looked new. They had not struggled as much as them to get here, which meant that most likely the base rumors were correct.

"They're just kids. All of them, captain. I don't think the Sannin came here." Said a voice to their left. Shisui's head involuntarily snapped to the side, spotting a tall slender woman holding a chokutō in her hand. He didn't see any blood on the shiny metal, which was a small relief in all the chaos.

"Finish up quickly here and help me out would yah'? There's a brat who can make way too many shadow clones over there. It's hard to find out which is the real one. Annoying child." She said and nudged her head in the direction of the camp. She then spotted her dead teammate in the snow, and
her eyebrows furrowed in question.

"I'll be with you in a second." One of the ninjas answered in a deep voice. Probably the captain.

"We need to get to the others." Whispered Anko so close to his ear it was impossible to miss. Shisui nodded.

The snakes had been killed one by one, and Anko looked distraught at the bodies of two lying close to them. Shisui couldn't find it in him to have much sympathy. He was plenty thankful though. They had been given a moment to clear their heads and understand the situation better.

With renewed concentration Shisui readied another genjutsu. He needed to immobilize one of them long enough to get close. They probably wouldn't make the mistake of breaking up again though. The dead man had been too far away from the others to be saved when he'd been hit by Shisui's genjutsu.

An explosion from the camp shook his concentration, and they all saw a sea of Narutos get thrown up into the air along with rubble, snow and the corpse of half skinned rabbit. At least this meant Naruto was still able to fight back.

But they'd been distracted for too long, two of the ninjas flew forwards, one of them slashed his blade at him and Shisui barely ducked in time, the blade taking a few snippets of hair in the process.

The attack caused his concentration to flare and pummel. He held in the urge to curse as the chakra gathered in his eyes dispelled violently while he avoided the ninjas attack.

His eyes stung in irritation while he rolled sideways to avoid another slash that would've taken his head off. The discomfort in his pupils didn't pass and he felt the urge to blink repeatedly, but that would be suicidal in a situation like this. Unexpectedly the world around him blurred out in a sea of spinning colours, it was like he his eyes were rotating, making the world turn around on its head. It lasted only a moment before it snapped back in to vivid clarity. And suddenly he could see clearer than ever, and it felt as if the world was moving slower than before.

The ninja's arm was still outstretched, trying to withdraw his arm after slashing out at Shisui. For some unexplainable reason he knew how his arm would move, and also where his open weak spot was.

It was as if eyes could track his enemy's movement before he'd done them.

Aiming fast Shisui struck out his fist, hitting the ninja right into his ribcage. Shisui free arm was already fishing up a kunai from his back pouch, and while the ninja crumbled together in pain he cruelly lodged it into the ninjas shoulder.

Shisui didn't get a break though. He was about to help Anko when two ninjas were upon him again. Thinking fast he jumped and twisted through the air, tracking the movement of their swinging kunai. Landing softly just far enough away for them to reach.

Everything was so clear. It was like a fog had been clouding his vision his entire life, but now it had finally lifted.

"A little Uchiha, heh?" Said one of them with badly hidden fury in her voice.

The words mad him halt. Shisui realized suddenly what was making him see so well. His eyes... **His Sharingan must have activated.**
Fighting down a bubbling sense of joy he tried to rile himself in again. This wasn't the time to get distracted. He had to keep his head in the game.

He knew this was both good and bad. Good because it made fighting easier. He had a new weapon to use to his advantage. But it was also bad because of the risk of using them. They would drain him of chakra, and Shisui had no idea what his limit was. This was the first time he had used them and he did not know the proper way of using them in battle.

Shisui saw Anko stumble backwards while clutching her bleeding arm. Her attacker was still alive, but was holding his arm in a similar fashion she was. What had gone down had been lost on Shisui in the middle of his own fight.

"Let us see how well your clan trained you, eh?" The captain said to Shisui, his voice curious as he started going through hand signs. Shisui could see them as if they were in slight slow motion, and was immediately counter attacking. He'd seen Naruto use similar signs only a week before.

"Suiton: Great Waterfall Technique!" The captain shouted.

"Katon: Great Fire Annihilation!" Shisui cried out a second before his attacker. His flame thrower burst from his mouth, colliding so hard with the water technique steam erupted from the collision, clouding the area in mist while snow and water evaporated from the heat.

He kept it strong though he knew he was at a disadvantage. Water beat Fire. But while he sucked at Doton techniques, Katon was a different story.

Shisui had known them for years, and with the Sharingan it became easier than ever. He focused on his chakra amount, feeling his eyes burn brighter at the feel of fire blowing continuously from his mouth.

"Keep it up, Shisui!" Anko shouted encouragingly next to him, seeing much more from her angle than what Shisui did from the middle of the inferno. But the water jutsu was still pressing against his fire. It wasn't getting through.

Forcing more chakra into his mouth and brain he swung the fire from side to side, melting more snow on the sides. A new layer of thick steam clouded their view when Shisui finally stopped.

Not waiting to catch his breath, he spun around and gripped Anko's wrist. "Now is our chance." He whispered as loudly as he dared before tugging her after him. Anko nodded and quickly set out more snakes to intersect anyone chasing them.

Together they sprinted towards the camp while the fog masked their movement.

Naruto was doing her best, she really was, but it wasn't enough. Whoever she was up against had her cornered, and Ebisu was of no help. He was a short range fighter, and there was no way she'd allow him anywhere near these guys.

They were far from the most dangerous opponents of her life, but her form wasn't optimal yet. Her limited amount of attacks was not ideal for the situation.

Two of her clones had joined Genma as he caught up with Gai. Eventually one had been dispelled by an enemy ninja, but not before she knew they had found each other in the middle of the battle.

Now she prayed to kami that Anko and Shisui had found each other too. Two was better than one in this situation, and right now she didn't have time to go look for them.
There had been ten opponents but four had pursued Gai and Genma. Leaving six for Naruto and Ebisu. Naruto had hoped it would be easy, but these guys were mostly ninjutsu specialists. Her wind chakra was regularly dispelled, so she suspected one of them could absorb chakra too.

She looked worriedly over her shoulder to where Ebisu had finally found his courage. He had been shaking from head to toe for a while now. "I'm s-sorry, Naruto-chan. I'll help from n-now on. I-I can use some genjutsu." He said hurriedly and looked up at the commotion in front of them.

To keep them at a distance Naruto was pouring out clones. Her current skill set was far from adequate for this type of battle, and she knew she might have to use some of the techniques she technically shouldn't know.

"I'll go for the lady over there. You make a genjutsu so she'll aim that chokutō in the wrong direction." Naruto whispered back to him. Ebisu nodded, his face serious as Naruto readied herself. Creating a clone she immediately started working on the rasengan.

This would not be easy to explain when this was over…

Shisui and Anko broke into the camp just as a flash went off. The woman who'd asked for help earlier came flying straight at them. It looked like Naruto had attached an explosion tag to her stomach, and the woman had been propelled backwards by the force.

All they could do was sidestep so the woman wouldn't collide straight into them.

Ebisu shouted in relief at the sight of them, and Naruto smiled widely. "Guys! You're alright!" Naruto shouted, but was distracted as a kunai flew straight at her head. She ducked just on time and focused back on the battle. They were separated by five ninja blocking their path, and Shisui hoped Naruto and Ebisu would be able to distract them for now.

Their own group was keeping up with them, and had already made their way through Anko's snakes. This would either be a long and tiresome battle, or it would end painfully quickly.

Naruto's clones were a great distraction, but she had been correct in assuming one of them was absorbing chakra. A short, blonde man used blades to suck up chakra, and whenever he threw one close to any of them they would get their chakra seeping out. Whenever Naruto tried making clones the man threw a new weapon, causing the chakra she was going to use on a clone to be forced out of her.

Two were adapt at lightning ninjutsu, and three favored water. The rest used weapons, but they were older and stronger than any of them were.

Gai and Genma managed to fight their way back to the camp, taking some of the pressure off Shisui and Anko who hadn't been able to take anyone down after the fog disappeared. The boys had killed three of the four ninjas who'd pursued them, but looked close to exhaustion.

A group of Kumo ninja was targeting Naruto and Ebisu. Six ninjas that were more than Naruto could handle. Especially the one throwing chakra draining knifes of various shapes and length. He was a step above the rest, his precision uncanny and could rival any of Haku's best shot.

If there hadn't been so many Narutos running around already there was no doubt in her mind that they would've been hit already. Ebisu was doing a great job reflecting them though. He was a lot better at blocking and dodging than offence.
A woman used her katana to strike down three clones with one swift swipe. The frequent pops echoed through the mountain like popping popcorn.

Shisui and Anko had their backs to one another, stopping anyone from coming too close by the use of ninja wire and shuriken throwing. Naruto feared they were already running out of chakra. There was still too many left for them to go empty now.

Genma managed to strike down another ninja. A well-aimed senbon hit a Kumo ninja in the eye, making him keel forward in pain.

The shout distracted one of the ninjas attacking Anko, and Shisui took the opportunity. With lightning speed he threw himself forward and cut her down. He had ventured too far away from Anko though, because the ninjas closed in on them. Taking advantage of their separation from one another.

One of Naruto's clones forced her way through the ninjas. At one point sliding straight between a man's legs to get to her teammates. The clone picked up its remaining shuriken and threw them hard at their opponent's backs. Hitting one square in the neck.

Naruto smiled when her clone popped two minutes later. Knowing at least some of the pressure around Shisui and Anko had been lightened. The Kumo ninjas didn't seem to share her mood though.

"You little brats. Who do you think you are? I'll fucking decapitate you." Shouted the chakra absorbing guy. He came sprinting towards Naruto. Now holding an odd looking knife in his hand while he went for the real Naruto. She dodged the attack, but felt an enormous pull on her chakra, larger than any of his smaller knife had caused so far.

Around her popped fifteen clones at once. All of them affected by what was happening to the real Naruto. Her attacker hummed in approval.

Naruto managed to get away by rolling to the side. But found her way blocked by a large boulder. They had camped by it to shelter the tents from the Northern wind. Now she swore aloud because it was blocking her path. "I got you now." Said her enemy and came at her faster than Naruto could react.

She'd barely gotten to her feet when she felt his fist connect with her cheek. The force smashed her head hard into the boulder. Disorientating her and causing her to see stars from the impact.

With her vision spinning, Naruto ducked when the knife came and tried to move away further. But before she could do much the knife guy was gone as quickly as he had appeared.

Looking confused up she saw Ebisu with his hand outstretched. Her eyes followed his line of sight, and found the knife guy looking wearily at Ebisu's katana. It was lodged into the boulder. Ebisu must have thrown it to save her.

She smiled gratefully, wordlessly thanking him for his quick action, and was about to run back to Ebisu when she felt a stabbing pain in her foot. Looking down she found a kunai pierced straight through it.

It hurt like a bitch, and she gritted her teeth to stop the moan of pain about to break out.

"Naruto!" Shouted Ebisu and ran for her, but his path was quickly blocked off. The woman with the katana was hindering his path.
And Ebisu no longer had his blade.

Naruto bent down and wrenched out the kunai from her foot, groaning at the stabbing pain that ran up her entire leg. "Hold on, Ebisu. I'll-" Naruto shouted, but her words cut off as she straightened up again and stared right into the face of the knife guy. He was smiling.

For half a second she realized what was about to happen before it had, but she was not fast enough to prevent most of the damage.

At close hold he struck her with a blade. Naruto had raised her arm on instinct, to block any incoming blow and prevent it from hitting her straight through the head. Naruto screamed when the knife went straight through her arm and into the boulder behind her. Pinning her arm at an awkward angle while shocks of pain shuddered through her.

Looking at the damage she saw that the blade was long, and it was absorbing her chakra. Her foot hurt, and now this too.

The knife guy jumped backwards. Gaining a safe distance between them. And while he jumped another knife flew at her. Naruto was still in too much pain to dodge properly. And this time it went clean through her knee. The new stab of pain drowned the crushing sound of her knee cap being split apart.

She was screwed. Naruto couldn't feel anything but pain, and when she tried to use her free hand she felt as if it was numb. In a desperate attempt at loosening the knives she tried to lean forward. To use her weight to push the knives out from the boulder she was pinned to.

But it was so painful. Her chakra was seeping out of her and she was losing too much blood. Her knee had given out completely. Her leg entirely useless.

She hadn't even noticed that there were no more clones running about.

Grunting in pain she followed her attacker's movement with furious eyes. Her fear and frustration was winning over, and she could feel the first signs of the kyūbi coming over her. It made everything slow down.

Her enemy was standing a few meters away. Smiling a smile so creepy it could rival Orochimaru's. He was holding up a set of blades of a design Naruto didn't recognize. And Naruto knew who they would be aimed at.

But she couldn't lose focus on the Kyūbi. She could feel him trying to break free but for the moment Naruto was still in control. No matter what happened, she could not for anything allow the nine tailed demon fox to go berserk. She had to keep it in check. There was no other option.

The duel focus - the attempt to keep track on both her attacker and the fox at the same time - gave Naruto an idea. It reminded her of the multitasking exercises she had been working on this mission. Her eyes narrowed in on the knife guy and her good arm stretched out while she focused on the man's hand.

It was a thousand times more difficult to make chakra threads when your chakra was being sucked out of you, and Naruto learned that the brutal way while she tried to think of the exercise Orochimaru had taught her.

Naruto could actually make a weak chakra thread already. Not nearly enough to control something as intricate as a puppet, but enough to make one single thread that could do simple shapes. A line or a circle, and Naruto needed the latter right now.
The knife guy aimed his knife. His eyes dancing while he made a show of figuring out which part of her body would be pierced next. He said something to a comrade to drag out the whole event, but Naruto was using most of her concentration on the only thing she could do. The chakra string.

The man suddenly jolted backwards. "Fuck!" He screamed before a furious sound escaped his mouth. He was bleeding around his right wrist.

Naruto had used the chakra string to wrap around his wrist. Tightening it as much as she could to draw blood. Naruto had hoped she could cut his artery, or at the very least make it harder for him to throw a knife. But it hadn't been good enough. Her chakra was shaky at best, and she could feel it slipping away at an alarming pace.

The man stopped his jibes, and before Naruto could think up of a new strategy her other leg was hit. This time her thigh. "Ngh!" Naruto groaned. The blades were long, and this too had run straight through her leg.

In the agonizing pain she realized she wouldn't get away from this on her own, and her eyes flew desperately around. Trying to find her friends in the chaos on all sides. Anko and Shisui were the closest, but they were being pressed to the edge of their capabilities.

Gai and Genma were faring better, but they had fewer opponents than anyone else. Only two after they’d taken on two of the ones Shisui and Anko had dealt with earlier.

Naruto found Ebisu last.

Her throat closed up tightly and before she could control her reaction she screamed.

He was on the ground and the woman he'd been fighting was walking away, no longer holding her own Katana, but Ebisu's.

Naruto jerked sideways, trying to break free but the blades didn't budge an inch. And next moment Naruto was struck again, this time in her upper abdomen. It was drilling into her ribcage. When she attempted to move the blade gnawed into her bones, making a grunt of pain escape her.

Finally she froze. The pain forced her to stay immobile.

Looking shakily down she saw her arm had been pierced by one blade, her ribcage was also bolted to the rock behind her, along with both her legs. Her right knee felt like it had exploded, and from the gushing blood and the kunai sticking out of her knee cap it wasn't looking good.

The pain was unreal. She'd had worse injuries in the past, but back then her mind had shut down, her body unable to take in the excruciating pain of having bones and muscles ripped apart. Nothing like that happened this time.

Naruto could feel everything.

While heaving after her breath, trying to calm down her racing heart, Naruto stared furiously at her attacker. The guy who just didn't seem to want to fucking die.

Ebisu lay unmoving on the ground not far to her side. She could see blood slowly oozing out from underneath him. Something pointy was protruded out from his back, forcing his vest to bulge out but the garment hid exactly where the damage was. All she knew was that the mat green vest was seeped in blood.

"Ebisu..." Naruto whispered in horror. But he didn't move, he stayed limp like a doll on his stomach.
"Fucking brats." Muttered her attacker. Naruto barely managed to rip her eyes away from Ebisu, noting the team he'd been with was still watching her, but now there was amusement in their eyes. The woman that had struck down Ebisu twirled her stolen katana playfully, before putting it back in its holster.

The man using her as a dartboard threw another kunai. Naruto tried desperately to move free, but was not successful. Instead she felt a searing pain in her throat. So intense it was as if her neck was on fire. Blood splashed onto her face, and she felt a horrible rush inside her head.

Her eyes bulged outwards and suddenly the Kyūbi was right underneath her skin. Her vision blurred and she almost welcomed the blackness. But some part of her was still conscious and fighting. Because she knew her neck had just been partly cut. That her lungs were being filled with blood, and most likely her voice cord had taken some damage too, because the only sound she could make was a gurgling wheezing.

But her struggle to get away, while having done a great deal more damage to her ribs and chest, she had at least avoided the kunai from cutting her head off her shoulders.

Naruto knew she was dying, and at the same time she also knew the Kyūbi could not be allowed out. She felt him work furiously, his roaring so loud though everything else had grown eerily silent.

Though Naruto thought she could hear screaming. Someone screaming her name. Who it was Naruto couldn't guess.

She felt lighter then, and looking around there was nothing. A strange sort of blackness was everywhere, but she could still feel an immense amount of pain. While Naruto was bolted to something she no longer could recollect what was, she looked around. It was as if she wasn't alone.

Closing her eyes, or maybe they had been closed the whole time, she tried to open them again. Hoping things would be clearer. But what met her sight made her want to gasp if it hadn't been so painful.

Her mother was standing there. Kushina's long red hair was floating around her head as if she was under water, floating along in this emptiness together with her. She didn't say anything, didn't even blink while she looked back at Naruto. Kushina stretched out her arm, but she was just too far away to reach her, and her outstretched fingers lingered in front of Naruto's heart.

Her chest was burning fiercely now. Her chakra was going haywire and the emptiness was growing deeper. Something was breaking free inside her, and all Naruto could do was mentally repeat over and over again to keep the Kyūbi with her.

That if she died now, he would come along too!

Anko had problems seeing. Dirt mixed with tears clouded her vision. Shisui was attacking in front of her, covering her while she stood momentarily stunned. Anko was too distraught to do anything but watch in horror as Naruto was being bolted to a boulder.

There was so much blood.

Gai was furious too, moving so fast he was difficult to spot as he tried to get to Ebisu and Naruto. But was there even a point anymore? Who could survive something like that?

Without her consent Anko gasped. A sob bursting from her as Naruto's head suddenly slackened. No… no, no, no… This wasn't happening. It couldn't be.
Shisui suddenly shook her shoulder, his red eyes spinning rapidly. "Shake out of it, Anko! Fight!" He shouted too loudly, her ears started ringing from the volume, but she didn't mind. The distraction was welcome. Watching what had happened to Naruto - to her best friend - had completely immobilized her for too long. Shisui shouldn't fight on his own. She could still help, still survive. If they could just get together all of them, they could have each other's back.

Gai broke free from the group that had been pressing him and Genma away from the area, a green light covering his body while he kicked an enemy so hard in the neck she could see from a distance how his head snapped sideways and broke like a twig.

Anko nodded to Shisui, but the boy had already turned back to the battle. Stopping an incoming sea of shuriken with the kunai he had in his hand. He was shaking all over, but his head was still on the battle, still level headed though Naruto had just… Anko couldn't even think it.

She screamed in fury, going from shocked and panicked to an inferno in less than a millisecond. All she wanted was to rip apart the people in front of her. The fuckers who'd taken Naruto away from her. She wanted them to scream in pain and beg for mercy. To suffer just as much as she was in that moment.

She flew at the closest attacker, all thoughts of tactics and care for her well being wiped clean out of her head.

She got lucky, the Kumo ninja hadn't expected her to be so reckless, and in an attempt to stop her he slashed out too quickly with his kunai, leaving his right ribcage exposed as Anko hit him. She drilled her blade deep into him, feeling some sort of relief when blood gushed out and the man twice her size screamed. He collapsed instantly, and Anko got away just as two ninjas came upon her. She back flipped and was again back to back with Shisui.

The two Kumo ninjas came at the same time, splitting up slightly to take her from two sides. She readied herself for the impact, trying to figure out how to hurt both of them with only one kunai. They would hit simultaneously.

Suddenly a clang rang out through the air. Anko didn't even have time to blink before something shiny shot past. The enemy in front of her was violently stabbed by something and thrown away from her, and the one who'd been up against Shisui was knocked to the ground by a grazing blow.

Shisui shouted something, but Anko was too stunned to catch exactly what he said. She followed the shiny metal thing that had just saved her life to where one of her attackers lay pierced at the end. It took Anko a moment to realize it was a chain.

Slowly Anko followed the large chain back to its source, and hadn't she already been a complete emotional mess she would have been shocked by the sight in front of her.

The chains were coming from Naruto.

She still looked unconscious, but her arm were moving again. Her left arm which hadn't been pierced was swinging limply from side to side while the one bolted to the rock was trying to make a fist around the blade keeping it in place.

For a moment all Anko could take in was that Naruto was still hanging on, still alive somehow. And then she finally registered what exactly the blonde had done.

There were multiple chains protruding from her chest. Long thick glowing chains that had just pierced to death the five ninjas who'd been using her as a pin board not a minute ago. Including the
one who'd almost taken down Anko herself, two other Kumo ninja lay bloody and most likely dead on the ground.

"What… what… what is that?" Anko barely registered Shisui's words. Somewhere in her subconscious Anko wondered that too, but right now it had dawned on her there were only three ninjas left to defeat. They were just four still able to fight, but the situation had changed drastically in their favor now.

Shisui dragged out the kunai from the last Kumo ninja's chest. Gore and blood followed along, but there was blood everywhere, it was hardly bothering him at this point. His left arm ached and his body felt like lead. He was on the verge of chakra exhaustion, and though he'd only read about it in books so far, he wasn't doubting the explanation of his state.

He stumbled past Anko who was sitting on her knees in front of another Kumo ninja. She and Genma had taken her out while Shisui and Gai had focused on the last male enemy. But Shisui had only one destination and one thought. Naruto.

He dreaded what he'd see when he reached her, knowing, but not wanting to believe what he'd find. She had been moving earlier, but unable to get free she had stayed bolted to the boulder for the remains of the battle. The blonde was now still as a stone. Only the wind was moving her loose messy strands to give off some illusion of activity.

He came up in front of her while Gai bent down and turned Ebisu around. The small whimper from Gai confirmed Shisui's fear.

Shisui forced his limbs to move more fluidly, and with fierce concentration he made himself run the last distance up to Naruto. He was glad he'd deactivated his Sharingan, because the sight in front of him was not something he wanted to see in perfect clarity.

Naruto's head was tilted forwards. She was leaning limply to one side, her black clothes where drenched, most likely in her own blood, making the sand attached to her skin look like bloody mud puddles. It was amazing that such a small person had so much liquid in them. The boulder behind her had red stains that went far up the ice covered surface. "Naruto..." He begged, wanting her to raise her head and tell him it was a prank. That this was a joke.

Driven by his slowly growing after shock he hurriedly reached for the kunai sticking out of Naruto's chest. Pulling it out desperately, and forgetting everything he had been taught by his father about field care. Supporting her limp weight against his chest he loosened the kunai that stuck through her upper arm, then the one in her right thigh, before roughly taking out the one that had gone straight through her knee.

As Naruto was completely released she was only standing up because Shisui was clutching her to him. His vision was blurry, and he was shaking too much to do more. Now that she was free he wasn't sure what to do anymore. He felt sobs threatening to escape, but he bit his lips together and focused on slowly hoisting Naruto to the ground.

With trembling hands he got her in a laying position. It was awkward because her limbs was not reacting, making it difficult to not twist anything when he put her down.

When he leaned away he noticed Anko had come up next to them. She didn't speak. The silence was inexpresible. Genma was sitting next to Gai now. And the first sound to cut through the pressing quietness was the strangled sob that finally emerged from Gai.
Anko slowly lowered herself on Naruto's other side. With a good deal of effort Shisui looked up at Naruto's face. It was no longer hidden behind her hair, making it worse. Her face was grimy and unrecognizable because of the blood. Her hair lay sprawled around her head, making it look like a golden and red halo circling her face. Though it was the worst thing he'd ever seen, Shisui couldn't look away.

Anko stretched out her hand and it was surprisingly steady. Searchingly they found their way to Naruto's neck, and a new layer of blood smeared over Anko's fingers.

There was a silence while Shisui held his breath. He still hoped. Still dared to believe. The gasp that escaped Anko was enough to make Shisui jump where he sat. "Naruto!" Anko hissed in a muffled sob, before she extracted her hand as if it had been bitten.

"Is she...?" Shisui asked in a strangled voice.

Anko was crying too hard, her face covered in her bloody hands and unable to respond. Instead she was shaking her head from side to side repeatedly. Shisui's heart sank in his chest and he closed his eyes.

"...I've... She..." Said Anko between gasps. Shisui looked sideways at her, keeping his head down while he tried to stop tears from coming to his eyes.

"What?" Asked Genma and turned towards them.

"Naruto... alive." Sobbed Anko and finally looked up from between her hands. Her face had a grotesque new face paint, but the shine to her eyes lit up her face as if had just been given renewed energy.

Shisui quickly turned back to Naruto, focusing on her chest, waiting for it to show any signs of breathing. His hands were still shaking too much for him to get a grasp of her pulse. His breath shuddered when he saw her chest expand before lowering again. "Oh, thank kami..." Shisui breathed.

And without having a chance at stopping it, tears started pouring down his face. He gladly let them.

Naruto wasn't happy about waking up. Everything felt painful, especially her chest, but groggily she opened her eyes. She stared up into a cloudy sky, grey and boring but moving quickly high above her. It looked like it was the middle of the day...

She tried to move her head to the side, but groaned in pain at the action. Her hand shot up to grasp around her neck, but that hurt too. So to prevent the pain she stayed still, only her breath quickening in response to the stabbing hurts everywhere inside her.

"Naruto?" Whispered a voice right next to her. Using only her eyes she tried to look sideways, but she still couldn't spot the person who'd called her.

Anko came into view, her eyes large and red around the corners. She looked absolutely morbid, and panic rose to the forefront of Naruto's mind. What had happened? It was just then it all came back to her. The ambush, the battle. The fucking pain! And then she remembered Ebisu. Still and pierced through somewhere in his chest.

Naruto opened her mouth, a searing pain shooting down her spine as she did. "Ehhh..." She started saying, having problems forming the words because of the rasping heat that was now making her feel light headed.
"Don't speak! Your throat..." Said Anko and sat down quickly beside her head. She ran a hand softly through Naruto's hair, her eyes looking intent at her face.

"You're alive..." Anko breathed. Her eyes shone and she bent her head down, touching it against the ground next to Naruto. "Thank you. Don't... Don't die." Anko muttered into the gravel.

Naruto tried to use her fingers when realizing that her left hand still felt somewhat okay. Slowly she raised it and tried to touch Anko in an attempt to calm her down. Naruto had never seen that expression on her friend's face before. She hadn't imagined Anko could make such a face. It looked like pure agony.

"Ebisu..." Wheezed Naruto, wincing as a new wave of pain filtered through her throat.

"He died." Anko whispered and raised her head again. Staring sadly down at Naruto. She noticed that the blonde had lifted her left hand, and gently Anko reached out and clutched it in her own.

"I'm sorry. You almost died... I was certain you were dead. If you had died... I'll never... I'm so sorry, Naru." Anko said in a low voice.

Naruto didn't want to use her voice, so instead she nodded as little as she could while still getting the message across. She was already feeling like she was about to pass out again, and the last thing she saw before she fainted again was Anko's miserable face. Her voice was far away but Naruto still caught the words. "Thank you..."

The day was mild and unusually warm for the time of the year. The sun was peeking out, filtering through the leaves and hit Shisui in the face. He was blinded slightly and moved so he wouldn't have the sun straight in his eyes.

He was exhausted, but someone needed to keep guard while everyone else got some rest. They had all more or less fainted after carrying Naruto and Ebisu away from the battlefield and down from the mountain. They needed more coverage, and they had been going on pure paranoia and survival instinct the last distance.

They were in a tree filled area that left them well covered, and as soon as Naruto had been bandaged up and laid inside a sleeping bag they had all slowly started calming down. The exhaustion that had been forced away by the battle returned, and the aftermath of what had gone down finally hit them.

Shisui had woken up hours later with a jolt, only to be told by Anko that Naruto had woken earlier but was now back asleep.

Shisui was worried though. Her knee had been crushed by the attack, and her throat looked like it had been slit over. He was surprised she hadn't drowned on her own blood from such a cut. And even if she survived her extensive injuries until they were back at the base there were slim chances Naruto would be able to continue as a ninja.

He fisted his hands and put his head between his knees. Forcing the picture of a dead Naruto, just like the one he'd freed from the boulder, out of his head for the umpteenth time.

At least she was still alive. They needed to keep her that way until their sensei returned. Where the hell were they? Why hadn't they come when Anko sent the signal? Where they dead too? What the hell were they to do now? How were they going to transport Naruto in her condition?

The fact that she hadn't bled out was a miracle, especially considering what Shisui so stupidly had done. He hadn't been in a right state of mind when he ripped out the kunai from Naruto's body. It
had probably caused unnecessary harm to her, making her lose more blood. He gritted his teeth in fury at his own stupidity. His own panic and weakness.

Shisui peeked from the corner of his eye to where Naruto was laying tucked into Genma's sleeping bag. She looked peaceful now. Anko must have woken sometime while the others were asleep and washed Naruto's face more thoroughly. The only blood stains he could see were where the ones dried up on the sleeping bag.

And poor Ebisu… What would Choza say? This was the second mission in a row he'd lost a team member, and this time it was his own student. And Ebisu's family… They would be devastated. Gai looked broken and Genma had been sobbing quietly until he fell asleep. At least Naruto was, for the time being, alive.

Again he reached out and put his finger underneath her nose, feeling a small puff of air touch his finger. He'd been doing it every third minute since his watch started. Just to make sure she was still breathing.

As he turned back to stare ahead, wondering how long it was until he could wake Gai for his turn to keep watch, Shisui caught a movement to his right. He was standing before he'd fully registered that he had moved at all. His tanto ready in his hand while his Sharingan flared back to life. He didn't know exactly what activated it yet, there was a burning in his eyes whenever they did, and he guessed adrenaline played some part of it. At least in his current state.

He waited for a new movement, but everything was still and calm again. Maybe it was just the wind… He shouted when the next sound was heard, making the three still functional children jump as if they'd been awake the whole time. Quickly they were all on their feet, their eyes staring wildly in the direction Shisui was standing towards.

"A dog got into the bath house, but the owner didn't want to get wet." The slithery voice of Shisui's sensei drifted up to them. It was the password they had discussed before parting ways. Shisui was still on high alert, though some of the tension in his shoulders slowly ebbed out.

"Sensei..." Anko said in pure relief. Her arms falling to her side while she sagged where she stood.

Orochimaru came into view. His eyes narrowed and consented as he took in their location. Choza was right on his heel, limping slightly while he walked. It took Shisui less than a second to see the two men had been in a battle of their own.

Orochimaru's usually spotless appearance was now muddied and scratched. Choza had dropped the vest he usually wore, and had wrapped his right arm in tight bandages.

"What happened?" Asked Orochimaru harshly and looked down to the ground. Shisui followed his gaze and first now spotted the snake slithering around Orochimaru's feet. It was Hebimei. They must have been far away for them to take a whole day to reach them.

Anko explained what had happened. Once she finished speaking Orochimaru bent down next to Naruto, opening the sleeping bag to check her over. They had wrapped her up in bandages the best they could, but Shisui still had grimaced when he spotted the blue and yellow bruises visible without the cover of her sleeping bag.

Choza had his face in his hands. The news of Ebisu was hitting him hard.

Not sure what he could do, seeing as Anko was standing for the explanations, Shisui sat back down. Without his consent he drifted off, the sound of low murmurs on all sides as sleep took him.
The second time Naruto woke up it was dark. She remembered more quickly what had happened this time. Slowly she raised her arm, testing out how well it had healed while she had been asleep. It hurt, but she was pretty sure the bone had regrown at least. She tried to turn her head, and was pleased when there was less pain then before.

Holding her breath Naruto sat up, hissing as her ribs stung in protest. So that injury wasn't all that great yet.

By the time she was sitting she was biting her lip so hard it bled, but once she could lean her weight slightly forward, the stinging subsided and she gulped air as if she'd ran ten miles in under a second. It was so dark Naruto wasn't able to see much, but she could see the outline of two people sleeping on each side of her. Taking a closer look she found out it was Anko and Shisui, and she couldn't help but smile in gratitude that they had survived.

"Your healing ability is truly remarkable… I'm not sure even Kushina would have survived that."

Said a low voice from the darkness in front of her. Naruto raised her head slowly, not wanting to strain anything unnecessarily, and saw Orochimaru step closer.

"What?" Naruto asked confused.

"I've been monitoring the speed of your healing. Remarkable… I've never seen anything like it. It's as if your skin is regenerating itself." Orochimaru explained further and sat down on a rock close to where Naruto was. She preferred that he'd stayed further away.

"So you're an Uzumaki." He continued casually.

"What?" Naruto asked surprised, her eyes bulging as the words Orochimaru spoke started making more sense in her head. What had happened after she blacked out? She couldn't remember properly. For a moment Naruto had seen her mother, but now she realized that must have been a dream. Maybe the Kyūbi…?

"What happened? I don't remember what happened after my throat got hurt." Naruto said in a low voice. She grimaced at the memory and guessed her vocal cord had been slit. It would be a few more days until Naruto would attempt raising her volume. Still, hadn't it been for the kyūbi she'd be mute for the rest of her life. Or more likely dead.

"Well… That's the question of the day isn't it? According to Anko you used a technique she hadn't seen before. A technique that shot copper like chains from your chest. I've only seen one other person do that, and her name is Uzumaki Kushina and she lives in Konoha." Orochimaru explained while Naruto's eyes widened in shock.

"I did what?" She whispered confused. What was going on? She had used her mother's chains right before she went back in time. During the fight for the Kyūbi's chakra Naruto had with the help of her mother's chakra used the chains. But she had been under the impression she'd used up all of Kushina's chakra. That there was too little left to use. And anyway, the chains had only been created deep within her seal, not a physical manifestation in the real world.

"I see you're confused… So you didn't know then. What did your parents look like Naruto? Was either of them a red head?" Orochimaru asked curiously, leaning forwards while Naruto tried to wrap her head around what had happened.

"My mum..." Naruto trailed off, not really registered that she'd answered Orochimaru without a second thought.
"And your father was blonde I take it?" Orochimaru added.

Naruto nodded.

"Hmmm… Well, your mother must have been an Uzumaki. I guess your father could have been one too, though it's unusual to find blonde Uzumaki. You being the only example I've met so far. They scattered around the world after Uzushiogakure fell. There's hardly anyone who knows where they all are anymore. Most had to change their family name since they are still being hunted down."

Explained Orochimaru more to himself than to Naruto.

"You don't have a family name, correct?" Orochimaru asked her briskly. Naruto nodded again.

"So your parent was probably still afraid of being captured. It might have been why your family was attacked in the first place. People with Uzumaki genes are quite popular on the black market." He stated with a confirming nod. Naruto guessed he'd just clarified something to himself more than her. Still, the information was making her feel nauseous.

"And how would you know that?" She whispered accusingly, still not daring to raise her volume.

"Because I've checked it out. I've done more S-rank missions than I can keep count on. Do you believe I have never encountered the black market while on duty, Naruto?" Snapped Orochimaru back. He was the worst nurse Naruto could imagine. His bedside manners were just awful.

"So the Uzumaki chains… That explains a lot really. I already suspected you had healing abilities. Maybe some sensor skills too, though not nearly as potent as the healing. Especially after the report about your leg during stage one and also some earlier reports told me you were not entirely what you appeared to be." Orochimaru mused, falling back into his habit of talking to himself.

"How long have you kept track of me, Orochimaru?" Asked Naruto coldly. His words had sent a chill down her spine, and she was now furious.

"Oh… Since Jiraiya took you into the village. I was curious. You survived a very large waterfall, seemingly without much injury either." Orochimaru replied with a wicked grin. Naruto wondered if the sannin was trying to be freaky, or if he honestly had no idea just how unsettling his smile made him appear.

"So Shisui and I are on your team because of your curiosity then." Hissed Naruto, the pieces finally falling into place. "I guess that's what you would have used my blood sample for as well? To satisfy your curiosity." Naruto muttered angrily.

"Of course. But you intrigue me too, Naruto. Not often have I seen such a dimwitted person grow so rapidly in strength. Your intuitive, and have unheard of chakra reserves for an eight year old. Of course I had to have you on my team." Orochimaru confessed without showing any remorse. If anything he looked to be enjoying their conversation more for every passing minute.

"That explains it. I was wondering what the chances of me ending up with you as a sensei was and realized it wasn't a coincidence. I wish you hadn't." Naruto said stonily back to him, confirming everything she said with her serious tone.

"I know. I'm not a fan of your personality either, but I'm compromising for the sake of research. As you've already noticed; I do like my experiments." He said and laughed low in the back of his throat. Naruto shivered at the sound. Shisui turned in his sleep, but she noted he was a lot calmer then he usually was when dreaming.

She wasn't sure what to say to that reply, and instead she fell silent.
Orochimaru chuckled again at Naruto's reluctance to speak. "This certainly was a profitable mission for my students wasn't it? Shisui activated his Sharingan, Anko mastered direct summoning and you gained your chakra chains." He said tauntingly.

"Can you leave me be? I want to sleep some more, and your presence keeps me on edge." Naruto muttered and looked away from the snake sannin. Orochimaru nodded and got back up to his feet.

"Sure, you should gather up as much strength as you can. Though with this speed of recovery I'd be surprised if you couldn't walk on your own by tomorrow morning. So as soon as possible you will try to recollect what happened when you released the chakra chains. They are a powerful weapon that's been sought after for a very long time, it would be a waste if you didn't learn how to use them properly." Orochimaru told her in a matter of fact tone.

The blonde rolled her eyes. No way in hell was she revisiting that scenario anytime soon. For all she knew it was her mother's chakra releasing again. At least that would explain the strange image she'd seen before blacking out.

"No way. This is just not possible..." Muttered Anko, staring bewildered at Naruto who was bending her knee with some trepidation.

"Your knee was crushed… I bandaged it up myself." Added Shisui in disbelief. Naruto was standing and walking, though a little clumsily, but she already looked close to healed. That wasn't completely true though, Naruto still had problems with her ribs, and the knee was very sore and stiff. She wouldn't be doing a lot of jumping today that was for sure.

"I heal quickly." Naruto muttered and waved her hand as if that explained everything.

"Uh..." Genma stuttered, if anything looking more shocked than anyone else.

"What the hell? You shouldn't be able to walk. Or talk. What the hell are you?" Anko cried, her expression telling Naruto she was freaking out at this turn of event.

"My body heals fast, dattebayo…Things sort of just works out like that. K- My body tries to repair itself whenever I'm injured. It went into overdrive so the worse parts were healed right away."

Naruto tried to explain while covering up 'Kyuubi' with 'My body' instead.

"So… What? Is it a bloodline?" Asked Genma, a hint of interest seeping into his sceptic tone.

"Uh..."

"Yes." Answered Orochimaru. "Those chains is a manifestation of a very rare type of chakra that can be classified as a kekai genkai. It has only ever occurred in a few Uzumaki. Not everyone inherits it, but Naruto has. Which makes her an Uzumaki."

"Uzumaki? Like Kushina-sensei?" Asked Shisui surprised. He hadn't met Ensui's sensei much, but according to his friend she was a capable ninja who had a dangerous addiction to ramen.

"Yes. Incidentally she's the only other Uzumaki known to currently possess chakra chains." Orochimaru supplied while Naruto was trying to bend down. But winced and quickly straightened up again.

"So you're a Uzumaki then? Uzumaki Naruto?" Asked Anko with some amusement in her voice.
"Did you even know what the hell you were doing?" She added as an afterthought.
Naruto shook her head from side to side. "I have no idea. I don't even remember that it happened, dattebayo." She answered with a slight annoyance in her voice.

"You took out six of the remaining nine ninjas with one blow. It was terrifying. Especially now that I know that it was only pure luck that you didn't pierce through us with those chains." Interjected Genma. He had his right arm in a cast and was forced to use his left arm to get his vest on. It was going slowly, but he clumsily managed in the end.

"Well… Yeah. It was lucky." Naruto muttered and frowned. It could have ended a lot worse. If Naruto had killed any of her friends…

"We'll discuss how to train your chains with Uzumaki-san once we get back to Konoha. For now I just want you to try to recollect as much as possible. Your life was on the line, so it must have been something there that triggered the chains." Orochimaru said.

"Kushina?" Asked Naruto, her interest peeked at the aspect of training with her mother.

"Who else? She's been able to use them since she was a little girl. But from what I've seen her chains has a different appearance than yours. Shisui saw yours with his sharingan and I trust he got it down accurately. He says yours looked like copper while Kushina's chains are golden. What sort of difference that makes I'm not sure, but I'll be checking the moment we return to Konoha."

Naruto nodded, growing more and more excited at the aspect of having an excuse to talk with Kushina.

Though she was nervous about what Orochimaru would do next, she wasn't sure if there was anything that could prove who she was related to, but if he found something odd she doubted he'd stay silent about it.

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*To be continued...*

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!

Violent chapter, sorry about that, and I hope you didn't get too bored with the fight scene… But Shisui activated his sharingan, Naruto used the rasengan and also chakra chains! I find it an interesting bloodline, and I really wanted to try writing a Naruto who could use them. So here I go, attempting to write Naruto with a different bloodline than in canon.
It took them a little over a week to return to Konoha's base, which was overrun to the brim when the exhausted teams arrived. They would not have stopped by the base at all if it wasn't for the others continued insistence that Naruto needed proper medical care as quickly as possible. Naruto didn't like it much, but found it easier to comply with their wishes than to keep arguing. That was until they actually got there though.

It had been busy the first time around, but nothing like now. Naruto could swear it was twice as many people inside the cave, but unlike during before they were all hurrying around.

It was a miracle that the line to the hospital station wasn't longer than it was. Next to the help desk two ninjas were waiting when they arrived, and luckily the line was moving along quickly.

While they waited Naruto wondered if the people in the base were preparing for something that was about to happen. Orochimaru had been bombarded with questions the moment they walked in, and despite the many requests he insisted on going with his students instead of following up on the many demands.

Naruto was given a physical exam by the same Hyūga woman as last time, who didn't dare reproach Orochimaru for wasting her time, but still scowled whenever her back was turned to him.

"As expected... you're fit as a fiddle. No wounds. No tearing. No bleeding. No breaks. You're fine... Again. The scars on your stomach, knee, thigh, upper arm and throat are already mostly healed. The head wound is fine too." She explained with forced calmness. She looked more tired than she'd been three weeks ago, a clear indication of the high pressure this place was being put under.

"Thank you." Naruto apologized, and the woman only smiled hurriedly before marching away.

After telling the others the medic's verdict there was a round of protest. Mostly from Shisui and Anko. "I still think her Byakugan must be faulty... There's no way you're completely healed already. Damn..." Muttered Shisui and shook his head from side to side.

Their journey to return home had much better weather. Naruto found herself back to normal by the time they entered the gates of Konoha, much to Shisui's charging. It didn't seem like he'd let the matter drop no matter how much Naruto twisted away from his thousands of questions.

He had never seen anything like it, and it didn't go amiss that Orochimaru was always conveniently around each time Shisui started another question round. But Naruto thought she did relatively well. To be honest the questioning and result of this mission could have had much more severe consequences for her. The reason they let her off so easy was mainly their most prominent distraction; the absence of Ebisu amongst their rank.

Once they returned to Konoha his funeral would be right around the corner. Orochimaru had sent a
raven ahead of them to inform the Hokage about his passing. In turn he would inform his parents. But they were the ones still carrying Ebisu's body, and the funeral couldn't be held before they returned to Konoha.

Naruto couldn't get it out of her head either. In the confusion of the intense battle and aching pain Naruto hadn't caught exactly how it had happened, and neither had any of the others. Just like no one had noticed Naruto creating a rasengan in the middle of the chaos, no one had seen Ebisu's last stand.

But Ebisu had died from a deep chest wound caused by the Kumo ninja's katana. They didn't know more than that. The woman had been killed by Naruto's chain soon after, and they all were left with an empty feeling of guilt and anger at what had occurred.

Especially Naruto. She had never been exactly close to Ebisu - not here in the past nor in her original time line - but his death had been an awful wakeup call for her.

She had never believed in fate, didn't believe that the future was set in stone, and held firmly to the belief that anyone could do anything if they truly worked for it. But yet she had somehow deluded herself into believing that those who'd survived the Third War originally would automatically do so again.

Naruto hadn't accounted for the messiness of war, how much luck played out, nor timing. For some reason she had naively thought that changing the past would result in more people surviving. Without once realizing it could be the opposite.

Naruto had been proven correct in one thing though. There was no such thing as fate.

If there was then Ebisu wouldn't have died. She had already experienced how it would be if he'd lived, but thanks to her own time travel that was no longer the case. Everything was up in the air, and Naruto needed to start figuring out how to proceed.

First of all she needed to find a way to leave Konoha more often. Which meant she needed to be promoted. More freedom was required to travel around and track down numerous people who at the moment remained lost like a needle in a haystack. Naruto had already asked if they would get back to Konoha in time for the Chūnin exam, and Orochimaru had responded positively. But only barely.

Shisui had thrown a fit when he heard Naruto still wanted to enter, attempting to convince her otherwise so she'd have time to heal up.

But Naruto had made it clear she would do it with or without him. According to Orochimaru that was possible, especially for a team where one was already promoted. That didn't sit well with him either, and the two spent an afternoon shouting their heads off at each other.

But all disagreement and annoyance had left them when they came back to Konoha. Some unpleasantness had to be dealt with before any exam could be entered.

"I see..." Said the Hokage and looked grimly from Choza to his two students. Pity glinted in his dark eyes while he watched Ebisu's teammates.

"It was a very difficult mission. Considering the odds… Most of you are lucky to be alive. You should never have been so close to Kumogakure. As the one delegating out missions I'm responsible for sending out two such inexperienced teams to an area we had too little information about, and I can only offer my deepest apologies. Pointless though it will seem after the hardship you've faced. I still want to express how well I think of you though. I had not believed six children of Chūnin and lower rank could've dealt with a situation such as this." Hiruzen continued saying, his eyes now
travelling to Anko, Shisui and Naruto. A small, sad smile on his lips when his eyes landed on the blonde.

"Team Choza is dismissed. Team Orochimaru – could you please stay? There are a few things we need to discuss." Hiruzen said. The three remaining members of team Choza bowed and silently left the Hokage's office. Naruto watched Choza's back until he was out the door. A knot in her stomach and guilt burning through her at how distraught he looked.

"First off, Shisui-kun and Naruto-chan, you should know the Chūnin exam is in two days. Are you feeling healthy enough to enter such an event?" Asked Hiruzen and looked at the two youngest people in the room. Shisui glanced at Naruto from the corner of his eye with displeasure and worry. He sighed when Naruto answered that she was entering the exam, and agreed reluctantly a moment later.

The exchange had been obvious, but the Hokage was visibly curious what it had been about. Especially seeing Anko had been nervous about what their answer would've been too.

"Then you have a problem… The first round of the Chūnin exam crashes with Ebisu's funeral." Explained Hiruen.

"What?" snapped Orochimaru. "When during the day is it? Can they do both?" He inquired with a non-nonsense tone.

"It's in the afternoon. Potentially you could manage both if you hurried through the first stage. If you pass, there is a time gap between the first and second exam." Explained Hiruzen and leaned back in his chair.

"Then we'll do that." Naruto answered with a determined look on her face. Shisui only nodded.

"It's your own choice. But you should know you need to keep your focus on the exam. It's very demanding and being distracted will not do you any good." The Hokage advised while lighting up his pipe. He was looking thinner than Naruto remembered. He had never been a big man, neither horizontally or vertically, but these days he looked... weaker compared to how she'd gotten used to seeing him. Like he'd been stretched thin.

"They'll manage." Orochimaru said confidently. His expression annoyed at the new information, and Naruto couldn't help the anger she felt towards the sannin. He was annoyed Ebisu's funeral was interfering with an exam. If Naruto had to, she would skip the exam and go to the funeral instead. But since she had a shot she'd do both. Right now all she could really think about was how careless Orochimaru was about Ebisu's death though.

"Then we'll move on the next matter at hand. Orochimaru didn't want to go into details in the letter, but apparently a few things occurred that I was to be informed about upon your return?" Asked Hiruzen with a raised eyebrow. "Should I dismiss your students as well, Orochimaru?" He asked while raising the pipe to his mouth. Orochimaru shook his head in the negative.

"No. It's about Naruto. She at least needs to be here for this." He answered briskly.

"I see. Then Shisui-kun and Anko-chan; you are dismissed. You've done a good job and should return home to get some rest." Hiruzen said with a small smile and nod. After her teammates had left, Anko with a small wave, Naruto turned back to the Hokage.

"What's this about then?" He asked curiously, his eyes shifting between Orochimaru's emotionless face to the nervous one of Naruto.
Orochimaru explained.

It was late in the afternoon that Naruto made it back to the orphanage. The familiar sound of hundreds of children talking and laughing met her when she entered the hallway. The sound making its way from the food hall where everyone was eating dinner.

Naruto decided to unpack first. Dinner would last for an hour, and she had about forty five minutes left.

It felt strange walking back up the narrow stairs. After everything that'd happened she felt as if things should have changed. So much had occurred on her last mission, and yet here everyone seemed to think nothing had changed. No one cared that Ebisu had died, and they continued their dreary routines as if not a day had passed since Naruto left a month ago.

She unpacked messily, emptying her backpack on her bed and looked over her possessions. Naruto picked out Akiko's jacket. The one she'd borrowed for the mission. Thanks to Shisui letting her borrow his jacket instead, it wasn't destroyed by bloodstains and holes where Naruto had been stabbed. She felt thankful for that, Shisui was better off financially than Akiko was, and he hadn't even seemed to remember that his jacket was in tatters after Naruto had woken up.

Naruto folded the jacket carefully before laying it on Akiko's bed. What made her spirit improve a notch was the unkempt state of Akiko's bed. It looked like someone had been lying on it recently, which meant she was still in the orphanage.

Going through her drawer Naruto found her orphanage attire. Undressing her ruined pieces of clothing – again inherited from Shisui's pile of outgrown clothes – she changed to the red T-shirt and dark pants.

With fifteen minutes to spare Naruto walked into the meal hall. The moment she did she spotted Madam May sitting in the corner together with a few of the other orphanage workers. When she saw Naruto she smiled warmly and waved. Naruto waved sheepishly back.

Taking something to eat from the food station – boring, plain rice as always - Naruto went to find her usual seat empty. It was the one Anko had occupied alone before Naruto had started joining her. No one was sitting there, and from the clean state of the table no one had in her absence either.

While she ate Naruto spotted Akiko sitting with her friends. She was laughing and joking as always, nothing indicating she was unhappy. Her brown hair had grown long and pin straight since Naruto first met her, and she was twirling it around her finger while she talked to a boy. Their group was getting up, already finished with their meal and was about to dump their empty dishes by the counter.

Naruto smiled into her rice bowl and continued eating in silence. There was something comforting about knowing there was somewhere normal to return to, even in times such as these. In her own time Naruto had felt nothing but contempt for this place, never feeling an inkling to ever set foot here again once she moved out. Yet this time around she could find some good points. Madam May was a true everyday hero. Though her resources were extremely limited, she tirelessly worked to give the children the best home she could manage. Naruto could think of worse places to grow up than the orphanage. The bad part about living here was mostly the stigma everyone on the outside put on you. They automatically assumed you were uneducated, a criminal and a waste of space. It was unfair to the extreme, but yet Madam May and her small staff selflessly tried to make a difference.

"Naruto?" Asked a high voice. Naruto looked up slowly up. She hadn't been interrupted while she ate since Anko had lived in the orphanage. Everyone treated Naruto similar to the way they had
Anko, though they all knew Naruto was not as vindictive as the older girl. They also knew Naruto was a ninja, which saved her from bullies trying to put her down a peg for being a loner.

Akiko was standing in front of her. Her friends had already left the food hall, and Akiko was looking nervously around. Probably to make sure no one saw her talking to Naruto.

"Hi Akiko. I'm glad you came to talk to me. I'm so sorry, but… I didn't see Hana. We weren't around a lot of inhabited places, but I haven't given up just yet. I promise you that I'll keep looking out for her." Naruto told her sincerely, not being able to overlook how Akiko deflated at her news.

The girl looked down at the floor for a moment. Probably to come to terms with her disappointment. She'd hoped for very different news.

Again Naruto felt guilty. It was as if she could do nothing right. She had travelled back in time, and yet she only made things worse.

"That's okay. I appreciate that you tried, Naruto." Akiko said quietly, her hands fiddling in front of her while she shifted from foot to foot.

"I promise you. I'll look for her whenever I'm outside Konoha. I'll be taking the Chūnin exam soon, which means I'll get higher ranking missions and will probably leave the village much more than I am now." Naruto promised her. Etching the promise into her heart while Akiko's face lightened up slightly.

"Thank you…" She answered simply, and then she started rummaging through the large trouser pockets of her orphanage attire. Finding something she handed it over to Naruto. It was a wrinkled piece of paper, and Naruto accepted it with some confusion.

"I'm sorry about how I behaved last time, and I truly appreciate that you're willing to look for Hana even though you weren't friends. I found this on the street a few days ago… I heard you say once to Anko-san that you liked ramen… and well… that's a coupon that gives you two bowls worth at this new stand in the village." Akiko said a little embarrassed, but smiling crookedly anyway.

Naruto however was having an out of body experience. Because the piece of paper in front of her had a large headline scribbled into it saying; Ichiraku ramen stand. 2 free bowls of miso, pork or vegetable ramen.

Naruto stared up at Akiko with stars in her eyes, and the girl couldn't help but laugh at the expression she was making. "T-Thank… you… Thank you so much, Akiko… I… I have nothing to give you." Naruto said with trepidation. Her eyes still latching back onto the coupon as if it was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen.

"Do you want to go with me? It says we can get two bowls of ramen." Naruto said with a breathy voice. Akiko smiled warmly but shook her head.

"No, thank you. I can see you really like ramen, and it's a gift. They're yours to use whenever you want to." Akiko answered while playing with her hair again. It was long and shiny. A lot like her mother's hair, Naruto thought, except it was almost black instead of red. A sound came from the entrance, and they both looked up when one of Akiko's girlfriends come back into the food hall.

"Akiko, what are you doing?" She asked skeptically. The girl eyed Naruto as if she was a disease, but at the moment she didn't care. Naruto could now eat ramen. All thanks to Akiko.

"Nothing. I'm coming right now." Akiko answered hurriedly.
Naruto decided to save her the trouble of explaining, and kept her eyes on the coupon while Akiko left to meet up with her friends.

As they disappeared Naruto caught the other girl start inquiring Akiko without hesitating. "Why were you talking to her? Why?"

Naruto didn't let it get to her. Instead she hurriedly ate up the little rice left in her bowl with a smile on her face. All the while she fantasied about her upcoming meal at Ichiraku.

"One bowl of miso ramen, please!" Naruto ordered with a wide smile. She was standing in front of Ichiraku and couldn't contain her own excitement. It was late, so Naruto hadn't needed to stand in line, and at the moment she was bubbling with anticipation. Despite everything that had happened lately, the promise of the best ramen in the world could still cheer her up.

"Coming right up!" Said Teuchi and mirrored her expression. His young wrinkle-free face lighting up at Naruto's infectious happiness.

Naruto sat down on the stool and breathed in the delicious smell. Her hands were twisting in front of her, and after a minute of waiting she had them clasped together so she would have some control over them. It was all she could do to not start bouncing up and down.

Naruto still had problems seeing Teuchi with rich brown hair instead of white though, and used the time to take notice of other changes. The stand was a tad smaller than the one she remembered, and the signs on the side had a different design. But in general Teuchi still made ramen with the same expertise Naruto remembered.

"Here you go. Enjoy." He said soon after, sliding the bowl over to her with his normal fatherly smile. Naruto almost started crying. The sight, the smell, the location. It was so familiar it caused a lump to grow in her throat. Even the solitude of not having company was familiar. It was just like when she'd come here as a young girl and Teuchi would be one of the few people to be kind to her.

"Itadakimasu!" Naruto said with fake bravado, but with genuine feeling behind the word.

Then she was lost to the world. Eating as if it was her first meal in years. Each precious noodle was like drops of heaven on her tongue, and Naruto actually felt a few tears slid down her face at the taste.

"So good." She muttered to herself between bites, and barely stopped to breathe in between mouthfuls.

As she lowered her bowl down to the counter again she was close to feeling euphoric. "Kami… I don't think I've ever seen anyone eat ramen like that." Said Teuchi with a grin on his face. Naruto smiled sheepishly back.

"It's been years since I ate ramen last… And it is so good! This is the best ramen I've ever had, dattebayo!" Naruto replied happily, wondering if it would be too rude if she stared licking up the remaining liquid inside the bowl.

"Years without ramen? Now we can't have that." Answered Teuchi with a fond smile.

Naruto handed him the coupon gingerly, trying to restrain herself from using up the second bowl of ramen right away. She had no idea when the next time would be. Her savings had grown considerably, but after the last mission she would have to invest in some clothes. Shisui's demolished hand-me-downs were hardly usable anymore. It was good she'd stopped wearing her orphanage
attire on missions, or she'd have to walk around half naked.

"Ah, you have a coupon! Do you want to get the second bowl right away?" Asked Teuchi eagerly, straightening up while Naruto went through the pros and cons of eating a second bowl right away, or wait and have something to look forward to later.

"No.. yes… No! I mean yes! No…. Yes!" Naruto said at last, sticking out the coupon to Teuchi and drooling when another waft of ramen hit her nose.

"Gahaha. Look at you. You know, since you appreciate my ramen so much I'll give you a better deal. This coupon only covers three types of ramen, but for your second bowl you can choose whichever one you want from the menu. The coupon will cover the one you choose." He offered her graciously. Naruto was momentarily stunned.

A few minutes later Naruto was in ramen heaven. And was now taking her time with each bite instead of inhaling it.

"You look like you're enjoying that a little too much..." Said a voice next to her. Naruto looked up from her bowl. First now noticing that the remaining seats at the stand had been taken by four new people.

No one else but team Kushina had joined her at the stand.

"It's the food of the Gods. How can I not enjoy it?" Answered Naruto and smiled broadly at the sight of Ensui, Iruka and Kushina. She didn't care much about Hitomi, but didn't mind her presence as long as she stayed quiet and refrained from bad mouthing Naruto.

"So you found the ramen stand I talked about, Naruto! I told you it was good. Kushina-sensei comes here all the time, and guess what? Kushina-sensei is paying for us today!" Iruka exclaimed happily. Rubbing his hands together while he eyed the menu.

Naruto nodded with her mouth full ramen.

"I didn't know you were back. When did you guys return? I haven't heard anything from Shisui." Said Ensui and looked curiously at the menu as well. Picking out beef ramen while Iruka ordered a bowl of pork ramen.

"Oh… We came back today. I got a coupon from one of my roommates and came straight here afterwards. I've barely been in Konoha for a few hours. Shisui is probably asleep at home." Naruto answered, a little distraught she had to take a break from eating ramen to answer Ensui's question.

"Did it go well?" Asked Iruka curiously while they waited for ramen.

"ghu..." Naruto choked on her ramen a little. She'd just taken a bite and wasn't sure how to answer the question.

Swallowing painfully she looked up at her friends. She noted that Kushina was looking sadly at her, and found herself unable to look away for a long moment.

"No..." Naruto said silently, playing with her chopstick for a moment. And putting the wooden tools down on the counter she raised her bowl to her mouth and downed the rest in one go.

It never failed to cheer her up.

"Oh no... What happened?" Asked Iruka concerned. He was sitting between Ensui and Hitomi, and
had to lean past Ensui to see Naruto properly. Kushina sat on the far side away from Naruto.

She took a deep breath and told them before she could chicken out. "Ebisu got killed." Naruto answered.

The statement was met by silence, and first now Naruto realized that with the exception of Kushina, the others probably had no idea who Ebisu was. "He is in Anko's year. Was… I mean. He was Choza-sensei's student." Naruto explained and looked at Ensui at the end. He at least knew who Choza was.

"I'm so sorry." Ensui told her earnestly.

"Are you alright, Naruto?" Asked Iruka concerned, his brow furrowed. He didn't even notice as Teuchi put his bowl of pork ramen down in front of him.

"I've been better…" Naruto answered honestly, looking down into her bowl for any trace of left over ramen, but predictably finding nothing.

"I heard your team fought hard despite being overpowered, Naruto-chan. I am sure Ebisu-kun is happy that his comrades managed to survive thanks to his efforts." Kushina said kindly.

Naruto was uncertain if that was correct. Ebisu should have been alive. That would have made him a lot happier than he was now. But yet there was some truth in what Kushina was saying, Ebisu was a brave soul. He might be easily scared, but despite that he had always faced his fears head on. Even during the battle, when everything had been chaos and they all felt like they would die, Ebisu had come through for her. He had given up his strongest weapon to give Naruto time. And she'd failed. She'd been overpowered by that Kumo ninja despite Ebisu's help.

"He should have… lived." Naruto told them plainly, her hand fisted around a chopstick and looking down into the table counter.

"A lot of people should have lived, Naruto. But war is unpredictable and brutal. Don't blame yourself. I'm sure you did everything you could. I know you would never let a comrade die." Ensui told her kindly.

Naruto smiled weakly, feeling the last of her good mood drain out of her again. "Hey, let's talk about something different shall we?" Suggested Kushina as her own bowl of ramen was put down in front of her.

She seemed torn for a moment about which she would do first. Talk or eat? Naruto understood her dilemma. But in the end Kushina's sense of compassion won out, and bravely she refrained from inhaling her food and turned towards Naruto.

"I hear you met Minato on your mission, Naruto-chan. He told me you were working on a technique similar to his own. He talked about you for ages and was quite impressed with you, Naruto-chan."

She told her in a matter of fact tone, eyeing her ramen every few seconds. Maybe making sure nothing happened to it during the small delay.

"Yes I heard, dattebane! He said you used shadow clones to help out. You know Minato never thought about that before? He was so miffed when he came home! But he has made so much..."
progress thanks to your tips, dattebane. I think he wants to talk to you again just to show you how much you helped him! And you know… Since you helped him out so much he might be willing to teach you his technique. I know he wants to repay you somehow.” She said excitedly, and turned towards her bowl of ramen. The fight to stay away from it was lost, and she started eating quickly in a very familiar fashion to how Naruto ate.

Naruto on the other hand was distracted by Kushina's comment, and felt some of her energy come back to her. "You think so?" She asked hopefully, looking nervously towards Kushina who was emptying the last of her ramen. Wow. That was up to speed with one of Naruto's strongest records in ramen inhalation.

"Oh absolutely. And if not I could teach you. I know how to use the rasengan too." Kushina told her after a big swallow.

"But… Isn't it Minat's technique? Wouldn't that be..." Naruto trailed off.

"Who do you think helped him create it? You know it was one of my techniques that gave him the inspiration for the rasengan in the first place." Kushina said and waved her hand aimlessly.

"Really? Which one?" Asked Ensui curiously.

"Oh, something a little dangerous from a long time ago. You won't ever see it, dattebane. It's deadly to get caught up in it, but Minato saw it as a gold mine of inspiration and used the concept for the rasengan. It's not complete yet though." Kushina told him matter of factly.

Naruto knew Kushina was talking about the bijū bomb. That was most likely what gave Minato the inspiration for the rasengan. "It would be really awesome to learn that. It looks so awesome, dattebayo."

"But it took years for Minato to develop it, and it's an A rank technique. You probably won't be able to control it for years, so don't get too excited alright?" Kushina told Naruto with a pointed look, before ordering a new bowl from Teuchi.

"Why haven't you taught that to us yet?" Asked Hitomi miffed. Looking betrayed towards her sensei.

"Because it doesn't fit your style. Minato told me that Naruto has an absurd amount of chakra, and you need a hell of a lot of chakra to use that technique. You guys need to use your chakra more wisely during a battle, so I won't teach you anything as chakra draining as the rasengan before you're at least sixteen. Then we can see if you have the reserves enough to hold one up." Kushina told them teasingly.

Hitomi looked stumped, and scowled into her barely touched bowl of miso ramen. Not pleased about that answer. She also sent a nasty glare towards Naruto. The envy obvious in her eyes.

Naruto couldn't help but smile innocently back, causing Ensui to snicker into his almost finished bowl of ramen. "I'll be heading back to the orphanage now. I'm actually really tired and I should get to bed." Naruto told them after a little while of pleasant chit chat.

She thanked Teuchi for the ramen and Kushina for her offer. Before long she was waving goodbye to the rest of her friends. Finding her heart lighter than it had been for a month.

The next day Orochimaru called them in for a team meeting. They should have had the day off since they had just returned from a month long mission and they had the Chūnin exam the next day, but
Orochimaru felt they needed to meet anyway.

The first thing he did was give a paper slip to Naruto and Shisui each. "You need to hand these in at the front door tomorrow at the Chūnin exam. If not you won't be allowed in. This proves I've entered you into the exam." He told them evenly before looking at Anko.

"You've been signed up as a proctor, Anko. We're short on staff and I was to ask you if you could be a proctor during the second round. Just as a guard. The one who should have been there was Ebisu's mum." Orochimaru said and looked evenly at Anko.

The girl nodded hurriedly, her eyes widening slightly at the information. "Of course. No problem." She told him genuinely.

"And you two need a third member on your team." He said and looked back to Naruto and Shisui. They both raised an eyebrow and looked pointedly at Anko.

"I'm the third remember of their team!" Anko shot up at once, her voice taking on a tone of panic.

"Just for the exam. I don't think you're ready to face this with a two man cell up against a bunch of three man cells. And I have already made arrangements a couple of months ago. I'm going to introduce you soon, and I advise you to spend the day together and learn about each other. Having a stand-in is never ideal, but it's better than the two of you going in alone." Orochimaru continued and looked to his left.

"Oh..." Anko was embarrassed to not have drawn the conclusion on her own, and was tugging at the strands of her ponytail.

"So who will we be teamed with then?" Asked Shisui curiously.

"Follow me. We'll go to the training grounds. He said he'd be training with his team this morning." Orochimaru said and gestured for them to follow after them. Naruto had the feeling he was a little annoyed about whoever it was he was referring to. And it also sounded like whoever it was they were going with had a team. Which was strange, seeing as only Chūnin and jōnin had teams to lead.

They followed in silence, Anko tagging along out of curiosity more than actually having to be there. Naruto felt herself smile when she saw who they were heading for though.

Team Minato turned when they heard them approach, and Minato and Obito waved as they came closer. "I was wondering when you guys would be showing up. We were just about to start working on formations, but we'll have to do that another day now." Minato said with a shrug, looking over at his three students.

"This is your third member for the exam." Orochimaru said and pointed to the group. Naruto was still unsure which one specifically he was talking about. Weren't all of them already Chūnin?

"Hi, I'll be joining you. I hope we'll work well together." Said Rin and stepped forwards. Naruto smiled widely.

"Rin! I didn't know you were genin. This will be awesome!" Naruto cried and bounced forwards. Rin laughed while Shisui followed after Naruto.

"Hello Rin-san. I'm glad you'll be on our team. Naruto has a bad habit of getting hurt, and I'm feeling easier about this exam knowing we'll have a medic amongst us." Shisui told her while grinning widely.
"Hey!" Naruto shouted indignantly.

"You got pierced though multiple parts of your body on two occasions on our last mission Naruto. Admit it. You're reckless." He said with a roll of his eyes.

"I'm not reckless!"

"You so are." Anko butted in, nodding mutely to Rin with a small smile. She too looked relieved about who their member would be for the exam.

"You should listen to what Rin has to say guys. She's gotten us out of a lot of tight situations. It's just bad luck that has stopped her from getting a promotion yet." Obito said and came forwards, smiling fondly towards Rin with obvious infatuation.

"Now that you've been introduced I'll take my leave. I'm needed at the lab in five minutes. And Naruto - Kushina is being informed about what happened on the mission as we speak. You'll meet with her after the exams are over." Orochimaru said before popping. Revealing himself to have been a clone the entire time.

Team Minato looked confused towards Naruto after the smoke went out. "Why are you going to talk to Kushina?" Asked Minato.

"Um..." Naruto said a little unsure.

"She's an Uzumaki." Said Anko without preamble. Blushing when Minato shifted his gaze from the squirming blonde and directly at her instead. "She created some really freaky chains during our last mission, and Orochimaru-sensei thinks that proves she's an Uzumaki. He says Kushina-sensei can do something similar so he wants her to talk to Naruto." She summarized quickly.

"What?" Asked Kakashi, breaking the silence that had followed Anko's proclamation and looked strangely at Naruto. "How on earth did that happen?"

"Well you see, Kakashi. When a man and a woman likes each other-" Started Obito saying, but was whacked on the head with the hilt of Kakashi's tantō.

"Ouch… That hurt." Obito whined, massaging his head gingerly.

"That's amazing, Naruto-chan. Kushina hasn't seen another Uzumaki in years. And to think you have that special bloodline too." Minato mused in fascination.

"I don't really know what happened… Um..."

"She was unconscious and doesn't remember what happened exactly. So reckless..." Explained Shisui, again starting to scowl at the reminder.

"Well it's great even if you don't find out what happened with the chains. The Uzumaki clan is considered to be extinct, and I know Kushina will be very happy to get to know another member of her clan." Minato told her, his eyes glinting with warmth and causing Naruto smile just as brilliantly back.

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After a lot of catching up, basically Obito telling everyone how wonderful Rin was with medical ninjutsu and her upcoming promotion which to him was a sure thing, they started discussing what to do about the exam.
"Should we try sparring or something? Just to get a clear picture of one another's abilities?" Suggested Shisui thoughtfully.

"I think that's a good idea." Rin was on board with the suggestion. She had already taken out all her medical equipment and shown it to the others. Explaining why everyone out in the field should have the minimum requirement of field aid equipment on them at all times, and that you were an idiot if you didn't. In a nice way though. Naruto couldn't picture Rin to be anything but a gentle and kind person at all times. A lot like Hinata had been, but less shy.

"But I already know how you fight Shisui." Naruto interjected.

"You did, but now that I've awaken my Sharingan it might make some difference."

Naruto was about to answer, but never got the chance to because of the commotion Shisui's words caused.

"You what?!" Bellowed Obito from behind them. All three looked up to see Obito stand red faced with a shocked expression on his face. Kakashi tilted his head to the side, before nodding approvingly to Shisui.

"Shisui-kun seems to be ahead of you already, Obito. Maybe if you put some more effort into-"

"Shut up, Bakashi! When did that happen? How can you have gotten the Sharingann before me? I'm older! And you're eight years old!" Obito said in growing temper. Naruto thought the vein on his forehead would pop from the pressure it was being put through.

"It was during the last mission. I'm not sure entirely what caused it, but everyone was under a lot of pressure and I was trying to cast a genjutsu when it happen."

"Genjutsu? Without the Sharingan?" Asked Obito a little confused.

"It's good to be able to cast genjutsu without the Sharingan. Dad has been teaching me how to do it."

"But I heard its better with the Sharingan."

"Not necessarily. It's certainly easier with the Sharingan, but if you suck... you suck." Shisui explained with a small smirk.

Kakashi snickered and looked pointedly at Obito. "See. Even Shisui thinks you should train more."

"If you say one more word I'll fireball your ass!"

"You could try."

"Bakashi!"

"You're eight years old?" Asked Naruto, a little delayed in her thought process. "But you were a year ahead of me... Iruka is nine." Naruto mused aloud, looking with scrutiny at Shisui.

"How can you not know how old I am? We've known each other for years..." Shisui said exasperated.

"How was I to know when you've never told me? But seriously. Shouldn't you be nine?"

"No. I started the academy early because I passed the entrance exam. Simple as that. Mizuki is eight years old too. And Anko did the same." Shisui responded with a shrug of his shoulders.
"But Anko said she got in early because she was an orphan, and they want orphans to start being able to earn money and stuff. Something about pushing them out into work to lessen the expenses of fostering orphans?"

"Even if you're an orphan you have to pass the exam. And anyone can take them. You just need the permission of a parent or a guardian." Shisui retorted. Naruto was about to ask another question, but was again interrupted by Obito.

"Hey! Back to the Sharingan! It's so unfair! How come you get it when you're just a kid?" Obito complained and huffed at the distraction of Shisui's attention.

"I'm not sure, Obito. You know people activate their Sharingan at different ages. Dad activated his when he was thirteen, but he also said some people can activate it through traumatic events. And mine isn't even properly developed yet. It only has one tomoe." Shisui explained and sighed when his explanation didn't seem to do much for Obito's temper.

"It's still not fair! How do you find out stuff like that?"

"Yeah! How do you find out someone's age without them telling you?" Naruto butted in. Shisui looked uncertain back and forth between Obito and Naruto. Similar annoyance with him written on both their faces.

"We're talking about the Sharingan now, Naruto."

"I think we're talking about stuff Shisui doesn't tell us."

"Okay enough. You three," Said Kakashi and pointed to Rin, Naruto and Shisui. "Need to start preparing for tomorrow. I have a training schedule I want completed, and Obito can go sulk somewhere else."

"I'm not sulking!"

"You are. Stop pestering your clan member because of your own shortcomings."

"I'm not shortcoming! And I'm not pestering him!"

"Maybe you should talk to him about it another time, Obito. Kakashi-kun is right. We really need to prepare right now." Rin told him with a small smile on her lips. Obito deflated immediately, his shoulders sagging as he looked down.

"Yeah... Sure. Of course! I'm sorry Rin. You need to teach these two how to do alright on the exams. I don't want them to drag you down."

"What?"

"Hey!"

Naruto and Shisui's protest was drowned by Anko however, who had enough of being ignored.

"Enough everyone! Let's see some fighting instead!" Said Anko excitedly, and then turned to Kakashi. "Want to make a bet? I bet that Shisui and Rin will make Chūnin."

"I'm not taking that bet. I believe so too."

"Damn...."
"Hey! What about me?" Asked Naruto sounding hurt.

Anko looked skeptically at her before she nodded hesitantly. "Okay… Fine… I say Naruto make Chūnin too."

"Oh, sound a little more confident will yah? Have some faith in me, Anko!"

"I'll take that bet." Kakashi responded at once. Expertly ignoring Naruto who was fuming with annoyance.

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To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! The chapter has been beta'd by AnjoRemix! Just like the thirteen others before this one.

For those of you wondering about the rasengan from the last chapter; Ebisu was the only one from Konoha who saw it. But he's dead now, so you could describe it as
"lucky", seeing as Naruto no longer has to explain herself. The fight was chaos, and they kept their eyes on the opponents. Ebisu and Naruto was fighting together, so they noticed more of each other than the rest.

And chūnin exam is coming up next. Kushina will have to wait until after, seeing as Naruto has her hands full with the funeral, her own situation and exam. But Kushina will have a larger role from now on! I always wanted Naruto and Kushina to meet over ramen, and I fitted it in here. Seeing as soon they will meet with one another out of "obligation" (not really, they’ll both be really excited about getting to know each other. Kushina since she has doesn't have any family, and Naruto for obvious reasons)

Thanks for still keeping with After the Rain! Until next time!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Fifteen – Treasure Chest

"My motto is to be stronger than yesterday, if I have to I'll be stronger than half a day ago, even a minute ago!" - Rock Lee

Naruto was sweating, biting her nails frantically and tugging at her hair while she attempted to figure out what the hell she was supposed to do now.

These questions made no sense.

Naruto had no idea what the difference between external and internal chakra was, and definitely couldn't give examples on how it could be utilized. And the other questions were just as bad.

Looking nervously around for the umpteenth time she noted the time. Forty minutes had passed already, which meant she had only fifty minutes left before she needed to leave. It was good that Anko had insisted Naruto changed before the exam started, seeing as she didn't have a second to spare between the exam and the funeral.

Ebisu's funeral was at three; an hour before the time was up and everyone who hadn't finished the exam would have to hand in their papers. But Naruto had to go to the funeral. A lot of the people in the room were attending too, but unlike her they all looked well on their way to finishing.

Her head hit the table top. There was no way Naruto could remember so many boring facts. She was doomed. It seemed she would never become Chūnin.

Why was this even part of the exam? They were even more blunt with the exam now than in her own time. Back with Sakura and Sasuke the trick had been to cheat - not that Naruto had. She'd handed in an empty paper at the end, but she doubted that would be enough this time around. Anko said her exam had been a written exam where the people with the highest scores got through. It looked like it was the same this time.

In front of her Shisui was shifting in his chair. His pencil hadn't left the paper since the proctor allowed them to turn over their papers and begin. He had already filled out several pages and looked nowhere near done. Naruto didn't dare turn all the way around to look at Rin, but she was a medic student, they were always the brainy type. Which Naruto wasn't.

Shisui seemed to feel her gaze, and his head tilted slightly in her direction. He didn't turn all the way, but Naruto had the distinct impression he was looking at her. His free hand fell down from the table top, and his fingers twirled in an odd but familiar way. She'd seen that before. She'd seen Uchiha Itachi do that wrist movement and next second she'd been inside his illusion.

Suddenly the room became quiet. As if she had dots in her ears which muffled the sounds of everyone scribbling away. But what got her attention was the second Shisui abruptly standing in front of her desk.

Naruto gaped.
"Don't say anything and look busy. Don't look directly at me either. I've cast a genjutsu on you, and only you are seeing and hearing this. But if you start babbling everyone will hear you. This is really difficult for me since my control on this genjutsu is still really bad. Please don't try to dispel it. I don't think I'll be as successful with this a second time." The Shisui in front of her said urgently.

Naruto peeked quickly at the Shisui sitting by his desk. He was still scribbling along, but Naruto noticed that his shoulders had stiffened. Turning back to the speaking Shisui Naruto noticed the small mistakes with him. He wasn't as defined around the edges, and when he talked it sounded like he was closer to her than he looked.

Naruto couldn't believe it. Was Shisui seriously doing this? He didn't even want her to take the exam!

"Okay, write exactly what I say. Question one; Formation Dive is when a group of six or less ninja uses a water source in their formation. One has to be adapt and the member placement is diagonally one, three two. When..." Shisui continued, and Naruto scribbled as quickly as she could. Sending the fake Shisui a glare every time he was going too fast.

Three minutes to three, and with fifteen out of sixteen questions filled out, Naruto put her paper down. They had to leave this instance. If not they would get there after the ceremony started, and that was just not acceptable.

Rin had already left fifteen minutes ago. Sending a small smile in Naruto's direction which she barely caught in her hurry to write everything. Shisui was already at the front of the room, handing in his own paper while Naruto got to her feet.

Naruto didn't dare speak before they were jumping from rooftop to rooftop a minute later. "I can't believe you did that, Shisui! Thank you so much! I didn't think you would help me out like that. You didn't even want me to enter the exam." Naruto told him earnestly, smiling to Shisui while they ran.

"You're my teammate, Naruto. If I make Chūnin and you don't I can't help you when you enter the next time. And I know how sad you'd get if you didn't get to proceed in the exam because of some questions. Your strength isn't in technical facts, but you have plenty of others."

"Thank you. I owe you big time, dattebayo."

"That you do."

They didn't get to exchange anymore words since they had arrived at the graveyard. A crowd of people were present, and Naruto and Shisui slipped in between the masses to stand next to Anko and Orochimaru. Both trying to readjust to their new setting as the ceremony started a moment later.

Kakashi wasn't sure how he felt.

He was watching one of his old classmates being buried, and he wasn't sure if he was sadder than he was unnerved. The reminder of their mortality was slowly coming back to him. The proof of the risk they took was written on the memorial stone everyone was gathered around.

The Hokage was speaking with a deep and grave voice. Telling them of Ebisu in his own way. Kakashi hadn't been close with Ebisu, but had like him well enough. Ebisu had been careful about following protocols too, though he wasn't the most skilled ninja. In a way Kakashi wasn't that surprised this could have happened to him.

From what he'd heard the rest of the group who'd been close to Kumo had been incredibly lucky to
get out of there with their lives. Strictly speaking their odds had been harshly against them.

He looked sideways to see Genma, Gai and Choza standing to the side. All three of them with downcast faces. Genma was crying, but the other two just looked like they were deeply depressed.

He heard Rin snuffle next to him. And looking to his right he found her drying her eyes. Her mouth quivering while she tried to stay quiet. To his left Obito was in the exact similar state, and had the urge to scold him for not being able to control his emotions.

Kakashi wasn't sure why he had the constant need to nag at Oito. The boy just annoyed him to no end. But today, and especially in this moment, he let him be. This was one of the few occasions when tears and overwhelming emotions were allowed. Even expected.

It was a beautiful day. Truly. The weather hadn't been so warm in a long time. Birds were talking to one another in the forest around them. The wind was rustling the leaves, and not a cloud was visible on the wide blue sky. But yet here they were, burying a boy who hadn't even seen his eleventh birthday.

Kakashi hoped he wouldn't have to attend such an event ever again.

People were standing in small groups around the cemetery. Talking in low voices while they gradually made their way towards the exit. Naruto had especially noticed two of the people who'd left already, though they had been the ones to cry the most. Two woman Naruto guessed to be Ebisu's close relatives. Maybe his mother and aunt.

She had just laid down a flower on the casket. The whole experience had been very unreal. Especially since she knew the boy just on the other side of the timber lid was a child, but Naruto still couldn't stop picturing him as a grown man in his twenties.

Shisui was standing close to her while Orochimaru had disappeared already. Anko was talking silently with Asuma and Kurenai, who had both been in the exam earlier too.

"I feel really bad… I'm sad Ebisu died. It shouldn't have happened and I wish it hadn't, but… at the same time I can't deny that… I'm relived it wasn't you." Shisui admitted so quietly Naruto barely heard him speak.

"I..." Naruto tried to come up with a proper reply, but wasn't sure what she could say. Was she glad she hadn't died? Yes she was. That would have sucked. But Ebisu shouldn't have died either. She was having problems dealing with her own guilt and sorrow.

Naruto also couldn't picture who else would chase Konohamaru around in about ten years. Ebisu was supposed to grow up to be a haughty but good natured guy with an authority complex. Just as Naruto remembered him.

"Should we find Rin? I think they'll post the results of the exam in an hour. I also feel like doing something. Anything really." Shisui said dejectedly, looking around for the brunette in a sea of people crying or talking in low voices. Ebisu wasn't the only one who'd been buried today.

Five people were talked about during the ceremony. And Naruto wondered how busy this place must be compared to her own time.

Naruto had first come to this place by accident, and hadn't really taken notice of the area and its use before the Hokage had died during the invasion in her time's Chūnin exam. A shudder went down her spine at the reminder. And she hoped she wouldn't have to return here after the exams was over
Shaking the ominous thought away she turned to Shisui. "Yeah… I think she's talking to Gai and Genma. I saw her there earlier."

It was a very good possibility that this was one of the worst days of her life. She had experienced harder days, even more painful days, but never one entirely like this one.

Naruto had never had to sit through a written exam which she cheated on, before going to a funeral all in the same day. There was little that could be worse on your day agenda than that. She just hoped Shisui's quick thinking would at least allow her something to focus on in the days to come.

She was standing with Shisui and Rin in the hallway while waiting for a proctor to come out with the result sheet. Ennui and Hitomi were sitting on the floor. They had already been present when Naruto and her team arrived, seeing as they hadn't attended Ebisu's funeral.

Iruka was pacing up and down the corridor in a similar fashion as a few others. All of them were impatient to see who would get through to the next round.

"I hope it was enough… I really hope it was enough…" Iruka muttered repeatedly under his breath. His nerves were affecting Naruto greatly, though she was starting to feel guilty about cheating on an exam where they hadn't been encouraging to. Shisui was fine with it though. He seemed to have no problems bending the rules despite being a little know-it-all.

"Are they expecting us to wait here all evening? This is such a drag." Complained Ennui and tilted his head to the side, stretching out his neck.

Hitomi was only too eager to agree with him. "Gah! I want to know! Why can't they hurry up?" She asked and leaned her head against the wall in frustration. The three teams that had passed their genin test were all present at this exam. Mizuki was imitating Iruka's pacing around the corridor, and his two teammates were sitting with Ennui and Hitomi.

"I just ran out of chips..." Muttered Chou and looked startled into the empty bag. She'd been calm until now, but it seemed it wouldn't last much longer.

"This is always so nerve wrecking. I remember Obito during our first exam. He was so nervous but he scraped into the second round." Rin shared with everyone and smiled wistfully.

Ennui turned his attention to her, his curiosity getting the better of him. "You've taken this exam once already?"

"Yes. Twice actually. This is my third time, and I hope my last." Rin told them embarrassed.

"The exams are that hard?" Asked Hitomi. She pushed herself away from the wall and turned towards Rin, her expression showing doubt but also some trepidation.

"They look for various things. It's not all about winning battles. They look at your reactions under pressure. Decision making, planning, strength and willingness to act. At least that's what I've figured out so far. As a medic I've fallen behind on strength and action, which has counted against me in my last two exams. But I've worked hard the last year and I'm a lot stronger going in this time." Rin told Ennui and Hitomi kindly.

Naruto wondered how a ninja could have so little competition instinct in them. Rin was a little uncomfortable, but not too much while she listed off her weaknesses to their competition.
"How do they test all that?" Asked Ensui, leaning forward while seeing his chance to get some more information from a willing source. But luckily for Rin and her team the door at the end of the corridor made a sound, and everyone turned to see the proctor enter the hallway.

All the genin who'd been pacing back and forth made way for the man holding a large paper scroll. He stopped a little away from where Naruto and her team stood, and rolled out the scroll on the message board before nailing it in with pins.

"Those of you who have passed, please meet outside in the academy courtyard in fifteen minutes. There you'll be informed of the next round." The proctor told them before leaving them to fight over who would get to see the results first.

It was difficult to get a proper look at the result list, at least for those who weren't at the top of the page. Naruto spotted Shisui's name at the very top though, and clapped him on the back impressed.

"Shit Shisui! You're top in the exam!" She shouted loudly, causing a few of the people to look curiously in their direction. Probably checking out the competition. But seeing the small Uchiha standing next to Naruto most scoffed or smirked. Ah, good old underestimating.

In the group of genin pressing in to find their name, it took Naruto some time to find her own name, but it was there. It was about in the middle of the list, while Rin was three spots above her.

The guilt washed over her, but she quickly shoved it away. Naruto needed to gain the rank of Chūnin, and she had already decided that the cheat had been worth it to gain access to the next round. Naruto used her instincts more than her head, and she believed she was Chūnin material already. She just needed the chance to prove it.

"This is great! We all made it to the next round!" Rin exclaimed relieved.

Naruto was still looking down the list though, catching the remaining names of those who'd made it into the second round.

Iruka was at the very bottom. He had scraped through by an inch. The placement made her smile in relief. Despite the fact he'd gone on to be a teacher later in life, written tests wasn't really Iruka's strength.

Naruto turned towards her teammates and stretched one arm over each of their shoulders. Hugging them tightly with a wide smile. "Let's kick some ass in the next round, alright?" she told them with renewed energy.

It was two hours since they had been given their results. It was close to eleven at night, and Naruto and her team stood in front of the forbidden forest.

Naruto had expected to get a good night sleep, but this time around it looked like they were going straight from round one to round two without a break.

Rin was keeping herself busy by going through her equipment pouch. She'd had time to do a quick run home before coming back, and had grabbed anything she'd thought might come in handy. Naruto hadn't bothered to go home. She had changed and picked up her normal gear before coming out to find out the result of the first exam, and was now waiting impatiently for the clock to strike eleven. Their entrance time.

Shisui was probably the one fidgeting the most. He was eyeing the tall dark forest, which coincidentally was named Forest of Death, with some trepidation.
They would have to start this exercise in the dead of night. Shisui believed this was to bewilder people who entered the forest. Without daylight it was harder to keep track of your surroundings, and in a forest as tall as this it was impossible to keep an overview of where they'd been or if they started walking in circles.

Personally Naruto agreed. Without Sasuke and Sakura, Naruto would never have understood how to get to the fortress in the middle of the forest, and she was thankful to have Shisui and Rin on her team this time around.

Shisui and Rin were discussing different strategy possibilities. They were deciding which route to take to get to the closest treasure chest.

The second round of the Chūnin exam was keeping to a point score system. To qualify to round three you had to get a hold of stones with different values. Blue stones were worth ten points, yellow stones were worth twenty points, and green stones were worth thirty.

Their beginning task was to find the treasure chests that contain a random colored stone but if another team beats them there, they will have to engage the team to obtain the stone.

In five days they had to gather as many points as possible and by the end, the four teams with the highest scores were allowed to proceed to the third round.

The treasure chests were crossed out on the map. The problem was that the map had only been shown during orientation back at the academy ground. Thankfully Shisui had activated his Sharingan, burning the map to memory with the eyes that could copy almost anything.

Though his eyes were not fully developed yet, Shisui could still recall the map with clarity.

The map had made it possible to find out where the chests were, and also which ones were closer to their entrance gate. In total there were fourteen teams still participating, and all of the rookies were amongst that tally, but Naruto wasn't too worried.

Shisui was an excellent tracker. In fact he had showed the same potential as team eight from her own time when it came to this type of tasks.

Naruto preferred combat, but they would most likely see plenty of that once people started attacking one another for the other team's stones.

"One minute to start." Said Kakashi, looking bored up from his watch. He was stationed as their gate proctor, making sure they didn't enter before the start signal.

"Finally! Any tips for us before we enter, Kakashi?" Asked Naruto and straightened up. The last half hour she'd busied herself doing stretches. Getting ready to enter the forest while at the same time dealing with her own restless impatience.

"No." He replied with a stern voice.

That wasn't the reaction she was going for. "Oh, come on! How can you leave Rin to face that dark, deep forest without some healthy advice, eh?" Naruto pushed relentlessly.

"Try not to jump into any waterfalls, and I think you should do alright." Kakashi stated with a roll of his eyes. He looked down at his watch again and put his hand to the fenced gate. Readyng himself to open it up on the exact second so he could get rid of them.

"You are just hilarious, aren't you?" Muttered Naruto with a huff.
Kakashi just looked bored. "Ten seconds." He stated and peeked down at his watch without a word in response to her comment. Kakashi’s flippant nature was still as cunning as it had been in her own time.

Shisui and Rin walked up next to her, all three were postured ready to head for the closest treasure chest.

"… 3, 2, 1, Go." Kakashi said and pushed the gate open.

"Alright, follow me." Shisui told his two teammates.

They had immediately taken to the trees, gaining some sense of safety high above the ground while they headed north. From a far distance they could hear the faint cry of an owl hoot inside the forest.

Rin was not sure how she felt about her two temporary teammates. She was discovering a few things she hadn't really seen before.

First off, Shisui was very different from Obito. The few times she'd met the young Uchiha he usually showed off some similar personality traits as Obito, though he was less exuberant. But Shisui was actually starting to remind her of her sensei more than Obito.

He was fast, quick thinking, and his gentle nature was comforting to be around. He joked a lot more than Minato, but kids were usually a little more energetic than grown ups in general.

Naruto on the other hand wasn’t showing a side she hadn't expected so far. The only real shock had been how well she did on the written exam.

Rin had been worried during the test. Sitting in the back had given her a clear view of how stressed Naruto had become. The similarity between her and Obito had been staggering, but Rin had no idea how to help her out. If one of their teammates didn't pass the first round, all of them got disqualified.

But with a good margin she had somehow pulled through.

She suspected Shisui had something to do with Naruto’s good score, but so far she'd been unable to ask anything. They were constantly around examination proctors, and asking about how they cheated right in front of them would be unwise. Not that she condemned it. She'd helped Obito cheat too many times to be having any moral high ground.

They sped up more, Shisui leading the way since he knew the location of the first treasure chest.

The dark forest loomed around them, pressing in and filtering faint moonlight through the leaves. Rin could barely see anything, but followed Shisui closely. Using the sound of his footsteps and the slight outline of his body as a guide.

Naruto was running at their side, and Rin wondered how well the girl could see in this blackness. She showed no sign of stumbling, but unlike Shisui, Naruto didn't have the Sharingan.

"Stop." The small command was barely heard, but they all stopped on a lower branch. Leaning around the tree trunk Shisui did something Rin couldn't see. But whatever it was Shisui seemed to make sense of it.

"Someone has been running here recently. Using chakra. They have scraped the surface of the bark… Someone small." Shisui muttered to himself. "They're heading in the wrong direction though. I think it's safe to continue, but stay silent and alert for sounds."
They had been in the forest for over a day, but had yet to meet anyone. So far they had managed to hunt down four treasure chests in total. A solid start, and mostly thanks to Shisui's dōjutsu. Distributed evenly between them they carried nine blue stones, two green ones and a yellow.

Their tally was a total of a hundred and seventy. Thanks to Shisui's excellent tracking abilities they had managed to avoid running into two other teams, but they were now facing a different dilemma. The last two treasure chests they'd tracked down had been emptied already, and it was very possible there were no more unopened chests left in the forest.

"We need to challenge a team... But how do we find a team? Or do we just let one find us?" Naruto asked bluntly.

There was uncertainty running between them at Naruto's question, and Rin was the one who answered. "The first... I think? Teams that actively try to fight others are probably those with less stones."

"But we're trying to fight other teams. Do we have too few stones?" Asked Naruto concerned. She thought they'd done pretty well.

"Average I'd say. We covered a lot of ground and found the chests easily enough. The problem was the empty ones. I don't expect another team can have been that much more efficient. The distance itself should slow people down and hinder them from gaining points too quickly." Answered Shisui and leaned back against a tree. He was staring down at the soil while he tried to think up a solution.

"Well... I can find us a team to catch. I'll just send out clones in a few directions." Naruto suggested with some bravado. Rin and Shisui looked uncertainly at each other.

"I know you guys think I'm lousy at infiltration because I'm usually so loud. But in truth I'm a loud fighter, not a loud tracker. There's a difference." Naruto grumbled, earning a small smile from Shisui.

"The problem would be if your clone was discovered, Naruto-chan. What if it popped before we got news of their location? It would backfire on us if the other team dissolved your clone before it could return to us. Then they would know there was a team close by while we wouldn't. It would give them the upper hand." Rin explained thoughtfully.

"But when my clones pop I receive their memory. I would know instantly if that happened." Naruto argued, it was a well known fact that shadow clones returned their memories to the original body upon dispelling.

Shisui head snapped up surprised. "Really? I didn't know that."

"What? You didn't know something I did?" Naruto asked jokingly.

"There's a first time for everything I guess." Shisui said with a shrug of his shoulders. "But this is good. How many clones can you send out without tiring yourself out too much?"

"How many do you want?" Asked Naruto and put her hands in the familiar cross sign.

Shisui used a moment to think, his eyes trailing around the trees engulfing them in their shadows. "Nine."

Clone Naruto number five was having a very boring but easy time running through the Forest of Death. The clone, just like Naruto, wasn't a fan of scouting. Especially when she wasn't nervous
about the consequences of her actions.

Being a clone just wasn't as exciting as being human. If she was killed she'd just erupt into smoke at
the worst. This knowledge - that no matter what, the clone couldn't actually die - was taking away a
lot of the instinctual limits a normal human being had.

There simply wasn't a self-preservation instinct in her. It wasn't necessary.

Of course the real Naruto was constantly receiving the clones thoughts and memories when they
popped, and clone five wondered if maybe their lack of fear was influencing the boss a little too
much.

Maybe Shisui had a point when he called her reckless. But if she was it was due to the thousands of
memories of being hit with mortal blows, only to go up in smoke. That sort of association couldn't be
good for anyone in the long haul. Maybe on some unconscious level the boss kept thinking she too
would go up in smoke if she was hit.

The clone shook her head.

That sort of thinking wasn't really her strength. It was proof of how bored the clone was, that she
was letting her mind run in such ridiculous directions. Luckily it didn't last long. The clone had just
heard something interesting.

Her head turned towards the sound, she wondered if she'd heard a shriek of some sort.

Changing direction at once, clone five made its way forward much more carefully. After ten minutes
of searching for the source of the voice, the clone found her target.

"I hate this! I want to go home! My last bag of chips! Destroyed!" Wailed Chou from next to a small
running river. Her teammates were standing around her, looking frantically from side to side.

"Shut up, Chou! Keep your voice down." Mizuki barked, his shoulder tense while he tried to find
out if anyone was going to show up any moment.

"You can do without the chips for a few days, okay? Think if this was out on the field, with enemy
ninjas in all around us. Would you just sit down and cry because your chips fell in a river?" Shiro
asked with a forced calm about him.

"But this isn't the war. This is a crappy exam and I want my chips." Chou muttered sourly.

Mizuki had enough of her complaining, and pointed accusingly at her. "If we fail this exam it will be
your entire fault Chou."

"We should get going. There's nothing that can be done now, and you don't need to hold a funeral
for the drowned bag of chips, do you?" Shiro asked in annoyance.

Chou scowled in frustration and kicked up some dirt from the ground. "No..."

Clone five smiled from behind the tree she was hiding.

Chou was a kind girl as long as nothing happened to her chips. It seemed the loss of her calories was
causing her to revert back into a standard brat. Choji had always been protective of his food too, but
never to this extent.

She considered if she should attack or not, but quickly decided it was safer to inform the boss.
"Ah!" Naruto exclaimed and straightened up from where she'd been leaning against a tree trunk. Rin was sitting next to her while Shisui was perched high up on the tree behind them.

"I found a team. Chou, Mizuki and Shiro aren't too far away." Naruto told them and got to her feet.

"Really?" Rin asked, her words hopeful rather than confident.

Shisui had heard Naruto's words, and abandoned his lookout post to join them. He fell through the air and landed in front of the girls. "Good work, Naruto. How far out are they and which direction?"

"Chou lost her chips in a river. It's one of the forest rivers higher up in the terrain. They left right before my clone dispelled though, and they headed in our direction, dattebayo." Naruto explained. "Hey guys? Do you think that I'm too influenced by my clones? That since they pop all the time I sort of start assuming I can do the same?" Naruto mused while she examined the clone's memories a little deeper.

"Without a doubt." Shisui answered with a grin.

"Okay. Naruto, just remember to go for Chou first. She is the best fighter down there, and if you can get her out of action right away the other two will probably go for the easy attack. Namely charging in without thinking. Mizuki is book smart, but he gets hot headed under pressure. Shiro is calmer, but while he's good at offence, he sucks at defence. That might have changed since we graduated of course, but you never know." Shisui explained while Rin and Naruto listened with rapt attention.

Rin had no idea why Shisui was sending Naruto out alone, but the blonde was more than willing to face three of her old classmates on her own. It didn't make sense to Rin. Naruto acted very similar to Obito, and she and Kakashi would never have sent him out alone.

Rin was going to work as Naruto's backup - which also didn't make much sense. Out of the three of them Rin was the one with more combat experience but it wasn't her speciality. But Shisui wanted the element of surprise if Naruto couldn't deal with the rookie team on her own.

Naruto nodded to Shisui, letting him know she'd heard what he'd said.

They were whispering a safe distance away from where the others were currently strolling unaware through the forest.

Rin looked skeptically at Shisui when Naruto turned her back to them. She started moving carefully forward, and Rin had to follow without being able to ask Shisui if this was wise.

Shisui only smirked. Confident this would work.

While the girls moved higher up, Rin noticed Shisui jumped down to the ground. Probably to come from a different direction.

Though Rin had her worries about Naruto, the girl was displaying some solid skills. Orochimaru must have trained her very well. Rin would never have guessed someone as energetic and hyperactive as Naruto could be this stealthy.

"See, someone has been here. I think this is a footprint right there,"

The sound of a boy's voice carried up to Rin. She couldn't see anything – the branches and leaves obscured her line of sight – but she knew this had to be their target. Naruto was already ducking, making herself as small as possible to crawl through the thickly growing leaves up in the tree without
Rustling them.

Because Rin was not as small as Naruto, she looked for an alternative way. She backtracked. Being careful about her footing, the last thing she wished was someone to hear her footsteps.

"Nah’… I think this is too old for anyone to have been here recently."

She could no longer see either Naruto nor their target. So she stressed to gain a better view.

Finally she found an opening and moved slowly through the leaves. After finding a proper view that kept her well-hidden, Rin searched for Naruto's whereabouts. But she was nowhere in sight.

"How the hell can you tell how old or new it is?"

"By touching it. It's still a little wet. It rained the night before the exam started, but this is a secluded area. The leaves cover the fire from most of the rain, but also sunlight. Which means someone most likely used water to put out the fire. Since its cold and there was no direct sunlight, it would take long for the logs to dry up to this extent. This is just leftovers from some Chūnin putting out a treasure chest and decided to make dinner here."

"Who would have a picnic in he-" She didn't finish her sentence thanks to Naruto's fast and scarily efficient kick to her stomach.

Rin was staring wide eyed as Naruto alone confronted team Hikari. The Akimichi girl was out before the other two had realized what was going on, and by then it was too late.

Rin had no idea Naruto was an army on her own. Sure, she knew she could use shadow clones, but Naruto had only created one extra clone to take out the team of rookie contestants.

It was quick though, and the short boy was out before he could do much more than stare widely at Naruto. The taller, white haired boy had time to reach for his kunai, but Naruto easily sidestepped his attack and knocked him out like the two others. This time with a hit to his neck.

"Aha! Look! They have a green stone! Oooh! And a yellow one as well! But I don't think Mizuki is carrying much else." Naruto exclaimed happily and held up two gems she'd just plucked out of Mizuki's pockets.

Rin got the impression there was some bad blood between the two. The satisfied smile on Naruto's face as Mizuki dropped like a stone was a little disconcerting.

"You enjoyed that too much..." Muttered Shisui, coming towards them from the dark trees. He smiled when Naruto threw the green stone to him. His assistance had not been needed, and Rin could understand now why the boy had such confident in his teammate's skill.

Rin had been underestimating her all along. The guilt settled in her stomach, but she didn't let it show.

"I got the job done with and they'll wake up soon enough." Naruto replied while poking the boy they called Mizuki with her toe.

"Good job, Naruto-chan. That was impressive." Rin said honestly, but still feeling uneasy about the revelation.

Naruto turned happy at once. "Thank you, Rin!" She answered with a glowing smile before turning
with a pointed look towards Shisui. The boy grinned.

"Fine. Good job, Naruto. Real proud of you for not getting injured this time." He offered teasingly.

Naruto huffed and pocketed the yellow stone in her pouch. Luckily the gems were not large and didn't take up much space. They were oval shaped with a diameter slightly larger than a coin. The smoothness of the surface made them slippery, so pocketing them quickly was a better solution than dropping them on accident.

Shisui was rummaging through Shiro's pockets and came out empty handed. Rin checked Chou for any gems, but couldn't find any. "Check less obvious places. Like the sole of their sandals or underneath their headband." Shisui advices while unfastening Shiro's left sandal. Rin's eyebrow rose, not having thought to check that.

"Um… Well… There's one place there could be more. But I'm not sure I want to look in that area." Naruto muttered with a grimace.

Rin looked confused over, but Shisui seemed to have gotten the point already. "I'll check the boys then. You help Rin search Chou."

It was only then she got what Naruto was hinting at, and she felt her cheek heat up. Instead of watching Shisui look underneath the boy's clothes, Rin continued checking Chou for any hidden stones. She was pleased when she found four blue stones in her headband, but other than that there didn't seem the team had gathered anymore stones.

Just as sunset painted the sky yellow and pink Rin and her teammates finished up.

They were in good spirit when they left the rookies to wake up, though Rin wondered what Mizuki would say once he woke up. Naruto had taken one of his sandals with her.

"Okay… So far we have two hundred and sixty points. But in total there was over thirty treasure chest crossed out on the map. Ninety stones have been distributed between these thirty chests, and we can assume there are three stones in each chest." Rin explained. Her legs were crossed while she was drawing numbers in the sand with her fingertip.

Shisui and Naruto were leaning forward, following the explanation with various degree of success.

"The Chūnin exam proctor said one thousand and five hundred is the total sum of points to gather if one team was to get all the stones to themselves. Sixteen teams made it to the second round, and if all the teams managed to gather stones worth around ninety points, then it would be too even for four teams to be picked for the final." While she explained – mostly to Naruto – she was doing diagrams to explain the situation.

It helped, but Naruto still couldn't follow the math. Shisui on the other hand was nodding his head. Already knowing what and where the explanation was going.

"However, some teams might have no stones at all. Like Mizuki's team. That results in other teams gathering more stones. So to be on the safe side we should try for three hundred and ten points worth of stones. That way we would be secure no matter what." Rin explained slowly, noticing the confused frown Naruto was sporting.

"That would mean that even if three other teams or less gathered everything else in the forest, we'd still be guaranteed a spot in the final. Since the point sum in itself isn't important. It's all about having more points than twelve other teams." Shisui finished for her.
"Huh? I don't understand the maths here, but I get that we need three hundred and ten points, which is more stones than we have now." Naruto muttered dejectedly.

"To be guaranteed a spot. Yes." Rin said with a confirming nod.

"The problem is those who end the second round quickly by entering the fortress. Whoever enters the fortress is not allowed out again, and their points will be counted up and unusable to us. Which means there will be fewer points for everyone else to fight over." Shisui muttered and dragged a hand through his unruly hair.

"Exactly..." Rin sighed and stretched her hands over her head, loosening the muscles in her back.

"So... we need three hundred and ten points quickly, before all the stones are gone?" Naruto summarized, trying to make sense of the essential parts of Rin's explanation. The older girl nodded.

Shisui looked around. It was nightfall, and they were hiding in a cave for the night. Scouting during the night was a lot more difficult than during the day. They were tired from a day of running, and welcomed the chance to rest up for the night.

"Then I'll send out more clones in the morning. Everyone needs to fill up their water bottle, so I'll have a few clones go up and down the river." Naruto muttered to herself.

"Wouldn't that be a waste of chakra?" Asked Rin.

"Well... Yes, but I have a lot of chakra, dattebayo. Keeping them intact is always draining in the long run, especially for many hours, but I should have enough." Naruto explained.

"But will you have enough to battle too?" Rin wondered.

"We'll find out. But right now we need to quickly gather as many stones as we can. I'd rather take out teams that are unaware. It usually means less chakra use, and I'd have time to replenish my reserves once we get to the fortress."

"Just tell us when you're starting to feel the strain. We have other ways of scouting." Shisui told her with some concern.

Naruto rolled her eyes. "Less effective ways."

"Maybe, but we're a team. We're doing this together, and it's unfair that you're dragging the heavy weight at the moment."

"We're keeping to one another's strengths. When we find another team you can take it easy. Keep out of the battle unless you're needed." Rin added, twiddling with her fingers but smiled when Naruto and Shisui nodded.

In the end Naruto never had the need to send clones up and down the river in search of other teams. Because a team of genin walked straight past their cave during the night.

Unlike them, they preferred night scouting, and Naruto realized why when she noted the Hyūga amongst them. The three boys were in their teens, maybe fourteen or fifteen, and looked very pleased with their prey.

"You're barely old enough to go to the store without getting lost. Why don't you hand over the stones in your pocket? That way we don't have to fight babies." One of the boys asked while looking them
up and down in turn.

Rin took offence at his words, but used that to ready herself and show it with retaliation. Naruto did not.

"Who are you calling kids? Which one of us has to sneak around in the middle of the night to steal stones from unguarded teams, instead of challenging opponents face to face? Cowards!" Naruto exclaimed with ire. Rin stepped forward, her hand wrapped around her kunai.

"You want our stones? That's okay. You have a Hyūga amongst you, and you must have seen we've gathered a decent amount to bother coming here. Or maybe you assumed because of our younger age it would be easy? But if you stopped to think about it for a moment, you'd realize we have skills enough to gather this amount of stones in such a short time span." Rin replied calmly with a mocking smile.

"Hah! You must have lucked out on finding treasure chests. They were probably all in the same spot! But we'll remedy that. This will be like stealing candy from a baby." The speaker of the team jeered.

Shisui acted first. Flying forward and colliding with the Hyūga mid distance. Naruto saw this as an invitation to start fighting too, and soon an all-out brawl started up in the forest.

"Three hundred and fifty..." Rin said with satisfaction, unable to keep the smile away from her face. Naruto walked next to her, equally happy about how things had turned out.

The only one still on guard was Shisui, who was looking out for any new challengers.

She was proud she'd held up well against their attackers. Shisui and Naruto had not needed to come to her aid, and she couldn't help feel smug.

Obito and Kakashi always made sure they did the heavy fighting, and since she wasn't comfortable with harming people she usually felt that was okay. But it had resulted in Rin not developing her physical skills. She hadn't trained half as hard with her taijutsu as she had her medical ones.

But now she knew she had something to offer. The boys had been a lot older than them, and yet Rin had stood her ground.

"Okay. There's the fortress. Keep low. Someone is bound to be keeping track of the entrances." Shisui whispered as the towering concrete building loomed up ahead.

The girls nodded. Rin felt her nerves growing to high alert again. She'd been ambushed in this area last year when she took the exam with Obito, and Shisui was right to be on guard this time around.

But they were lucky - or the detours Shisui made them walk paid off - because the fortress grew larger the closer they got. Soon they stood by the doorway, ready to enter without anyone having intersected them.

Naruto grinned brilliantly as she turned the handle, and together they walked in.

The room was just as Naruto remembered it. The tall hall all made out of concrete. Two galleries followed the long sides of the room with stairs leading down to the arena with a statue of a pair of hands forming the Ram seal at the end of the room as she remembered. It was just like falling back in time to the first time she'd been in here. Except this was the past, so technically it would be falling
forward in time.

"Hmm…"

Naruto looked up at the voice, spotting another team already standing in the middle of the arena, checking out who had just entered. Naruto grinned when she saw Hayate Gekkō, Morino Ibiki and a boy with brown hair she didn't recognize.

She had noticed them during the written exam, but the idea of fighting them in this part of the exam excited her. Especially Ibiki and Hayate, seeing as they both had been exam proctors the first time she'd entered this exam.

"There are a few people here already." Muttered Rin and waved to Hayate, who lazily waved back.

"Yeah… Do you think they just gave up, or do you believe they have enough points to go on to the next round?" Shisui asked, looking at Rin for an answer.

Rin thought for a moment before turning towards Shisui. "They have the points. Hayate and Ibiki are good at strategy and fighting. I'd be surprised if anyone got the better of them. And Tokara is good at tracking." She summarized quickly.

Naruto looked at the boy standing with Ibiki and Hayate. Tokara… She had no recollection of him. Maybe she just hadn't come in contact with him before, but she found herself curious as to who he was anyway. Especially since he was teammate with two guys Naruto knew would grow up to be elites.

A Chūnin suddenly appeared in front of them. He looked them up and down, before smiling relaxed. "Congratulations. You've made it to the fortress. I'll escort you over to the examination proctor who'll count your stones. Please follow me." He said like it was a rehearsed line for a performance, but Naruto smiled anyway.

They followed him out of the main arena and into a corridor. At the very end he opened a door which revealed an office with two people sitting behind the desk. The woman looked up briskly, while the guy seemed to have fallen asleep in his seat.

"Just put the stones on the table." Their escort told them and gestured to the desk, his smile humorous while he looked at the guy sleeping soundly.

All three put their share of stones on the table, and the woman started organizing them at once. Not bothering to wake her colleague up. "Three hundred and fifty… In three days. You've qualified for the third round. Congratulations." She said with a polite, white smile, though her eyes gave away some surprise when she looked at Shisui and Naruto.

"They're Orochimaru-sama's students." The proctor who'd guided them explained.

"Oh!" She responded, as if that explained everything.

"So what do we do now?" Asked Naruto, feeling let down at the mellow reception to the fortress. Last time Iruka had popped out of the scroll and told a heartfelt lesson to team seven. This time it was more… anticlimactic.

"Nothing to do really. You've got the second highest score of this round, the team already here managed to get three hundred and seventy points, so it was very close. But you have enough to be guaranteed a spot no matter what the other teams in the forest do. So all you can do now is save up your stamina and chakra and wait a couple of days. The third round starts Friday at eleven at night,
exactly five days after the second round started. There will be three meals served a day here, and
you're welcome to walk around the fortress. Just don't leave it. If you do you'll be disqualified.” The
woman told them with an easy smile.

Naruto and Shisui exchanged a glance, before they both shrugged and accepted the explanation.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! This chapter was beta'd by AnjoRemix!

To everyone who has commented: Thank you so very much! I'm having a drop in
motivation, and your comments really helped me! I can't thank you enough for that.

As requested, here's a list of the characters current ages, but in a couple of chapters there will be a time skip, so it's changing soon:

Shisui/Naruto: 8

Anko: 10

Kakashi/Obito/Rin: 11

Minato/Kushina: 25
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Sixteen – Uzumaki Naruto

"Give up on me giving up." - Uzumaki Naruto

Naruto was warming up together with Rin. It was half an hour or so until the third round started, and they were simply too bored to wait.

Both were doing slow laps in a circle around the room, while Shisui was warming up together with Ensui, Iruka and Hitomi.

To Naruto and Shisui's delight the other rookie team had managed to get through to the third round, but they had stumbled in half a day ago, barely getting through to the next round with a point score of two hundred and ninety.

The team that came in third was Sarutobi Asuma, Kurenai and Aoba. They had arrived on the fourth day with three hundred points, but looked dead tired and was probably afraid of getting ambushed with so many points on them in the middle of the Forest of Death.

The remaining points had been distributed over the remaining teams. They had entered the fortress and been told either their tally either wasn't good enough, or they would have to wait and see if anyone beat them.

Mizuki, Chou and Shiro came in with only twenty points at the end, and looked furious at Naruto when they were told that unfortunately, that wasn't enough. Their sensei was already there though, and tried to cheer them up for getting out of the forest alive. Though he wondered aloud why Mizuki was only wearing one sandal.

"RIN!"

Naruto turned at the sound of the unmistakable voice, and found Obito coming towards them with a huge smile on his face. He waved eagerly before halting in front of them. "We've been watching the second round on the screens in the back room, you did really great out there!" He exclaimed.

"What are you doing here? Isn't this just for the teams and proctors? Are you a proctor? And what screen?" Asked Naruto confused.

"Nooo. Only Kakashi is a proctor for the exam. I'm here to watch Rin! As her teammate I'm allowed to watch the final round and cheer her on. Sensei and Kakashi is here too!" He explained and pointed to the door behind him. It remained closed.

"Uh… They were right behind me… But they'll be here any moment!"

"What screens?" Naruto repeated the question while looking confused around the fortress.

Obito finally managed to look away from Rin and smiled sheepishly to Naruto. "The Forest of Death is full of recording cameras, and you showed up a few times on the screens! By the way, nice fighting Naruto. I can't believe you took the guy's sandal!" He chuckled to himself while Naruto felt
her cheeks heat up. That had been recorded? Would the proctor find her petty for doing that? It had been really childish of her...

"Thank you, Obito! I'm so glad you came." Rin told him genuinely, smiling sweetly before her attention was brought to the door when it suddenly opened again.

Naruto smiled widely when she saw Anko trail in together with Kakashi and Minato. "Anko! You came!" Naruto cried so everyone overheard her.

"I had nothing better to do." The older girl replied with a casual shrug.

"You wouldn't miss this for anything, Anko! Stop pretending to be cool. You're not cool, so deal with it!" Naruto retorted.

"I can be cool..." Anko muttered, her eyes flickering briefly in Minato's direction while her face went a shade redder. But Minato had his head turned away, not seeing anything but the red headed woman who was talking with her three excited students.

When she saw Naruto and Minato looking in her direction Kushina smiled widely and waved energetically. Causing Orochimaru who was walking past her to duck so not to get slapped in the face.

Naruto waved back, because the wave had been to her, not Minato. Which she knew was odd, but couldn't help feel very happy about it. Orochimaru sent Kushina an annoyed look and she smiled sheepishly back, lowering her hand while saying something to him.

"Great job, Rin. I was watching a few of the records. You worked well with your new teammates and showed good thinking and strategy skills. I think this might be your year." Minato said with a gentle smile and squeezed Rin's shoulder. The girl beamed up to her sensei, really happy about his words.

Naruto felt a pang of envy when Minato looked around the room instead of offering her some sort of compliment as well. But Rin was his student, and Naruto was... no one really. Not to him anyway. Just someone he'd met a handful of times.

"Hey Minato!" Naruto said, gaining his attention away from Kushina who he'd been eyeing again.

"Yeah?"

"You should watch me during the finals. I'll make Chūnin and win this for sure." She told him with a glinting eyes.

His hand stretched out, landing softly on the top of her head. "That wouldn't surprise me, Naruto. Only an idiot would underestimate an Uzumaki."

Naruto didn't have time to ask Minato about the use of her family name, because the Hokage stepped into the room and everyone's attention was drawn to him. Minato's included.

After a long speech Naruto was almost bouncing off the walls from boredom. Only Shisui's whispered reminders to stay in line, and the occasional glare from Anko on the sideline kept her from shouting for the old man to hurry up.

After he finished - twenty minutes later - everyone were asked to go up on the stands, to clear up space for the third round.
The final round was exactly how the preliminaries had been in Naruto's first Chūnin exam. Except this time you wouldn't necessary battle only once. If you won, you proceeded to the next round and would again have to fight a new opponent. This would continue until only one was victorious. Just like the tournament, but a lot more low key than last time.

A lot of people had shown up to watch the battles though. Mostly people Naruto didn't know, and while she gazed from face to face, a black haired woman stepped into the arena.

Everyone's attention was drawn to her. The woman was the only one down there and she looked emotionlessly around at the contestants scattered around on the gallery. Naruto was suddenly struck by how familiar she looked.

Her hair, her face, her eyes. She had seen her before. She already knew who she was before she said a word.

"I didn't know aunt Mikoto was a proctor during the exam." Whispered Shisui surprised.

"Aunt?" Asked Naruto, but didn't get an answer because Mikoto started talking.

"My name is Uchiha Mikoto. I'm the referee for the third round of the Chūnin exam. My word is law, and don't forget about it unless you want to get disqualified. A match is over when I say so, and it can happen if one of the contestants forfeits, faints or is unable to continue." Mikoto explained with a kind but firm voice. Naruto was too distracted by the woman to hear half the words, but she guessed they were similar to the first time around. At least she hoped.

"The first battle of the third round is about to start, and contestants should be ready at all times. Please turn your attention towards the screen. The match ups will be picked at random, and winners are the only ones allowed to move up throughout the tournament.” Mikoto explained, just in time for the screen to light up.

Everyone watched the screen as names started flashing too quickly for anyone to catch them. Naruto almost whooped loudly when she saw the screen stop on two names, one which was her own and the other none other than Hitomi.

"Don't go too hard on her." Shisui said with a mischievous grin and patted Naruto on the back.

"I won't make any promises!" Naruto replied and jumped over the railing.

Hitomi took the stairs, using a little more time to get to her place while Naruto looked expectantly from the proctor to her opponent.

Naruto was gathering herself at the same time, trying not to let her confidence get the better of her. It would be very humiliating if she lost to Hitomi. But she was confident she could do this without too much trouble.

Hitomi had never shown much skill in fighting, but Naruto didn't know what she had learned since they became genin. She also had none other than Kushina as her sensei. And Naruto was not about to underestimate Hitomi the same way people had underestimated Naruto during her first time in the Chūnin exam.

Mikoto held up the flag, looking pointedly from each contestant in turn. The flag fell towards the ground, and Mikoto said steadily; "Hajime." before jumping back to a safe distance.

The two girls stood locked in place, both waiting for the other to act first. Hitomi was the one to lose her patience first, and she went through a series of hand signs before taking a deep breath, puffing
out her chest. Next moment a haze of dark smoke came shooting towards Naruto.

She jumped backwards and attached herself to the wall with chakra to gain some time before the gas was around her.

Next moment a flash of wind countered what Naruto believed to be poison, and forced it back at Hitomi with much greater speed. For a moment the dark gas engulfed Hitomi, making it difficult to see what was happening. Slowly it cleared.

Naruto was almost surprised to find Hitomi on the floor unconscious. Knocked out from her own attack. But the gashes from Naruto’s wind ninjutsu might also had something to do with it. She had several cuts up her arms, exactly what Naruto had been going for, and on the floor a number of pills had spilled out.

Mikoto raised the flag, indicating that the match was over. "Hitomi is unconscious. The winner of this first match is Naruto."

"That was pathetic!" Shouted Anko from the stadium, Shisui smacked his forehead at her proclamation, but didn't seem to disagree. Naruto on the other hand made her way casually up the stairs. Not in a hurry and feeling quite happy with how efficient she'd taken down Hitomi.

On the arena the medics had hurried over to Hitomi, already using poison extraction techniques to get out the poison she'd probably inhaled.

"Good counter attack, Naruto. I told Hitomi not to go for such a risky move. The poison creates a fog which doesn't only hinder her opponent's sight, but her own as well. And you tore her antidote pouch off her belt. She probably didn't find out which one was the right pill in all that smoke..." Ensui muttered dejectedly.

Kushina smacked Ensui on the head. "Show your teammate more faith, Ensui. She was up against someone with unknown skills, and she made a simple mistake. Sometime a small blunder is all that's needed to turn a battle from favorable to unfavorable. Naruto was a bad match up too." She explained, but sent a nod to Naruto when she caught her looking at them.

"Great wind ninjutsu, Naruto. There was a lot of punch in that technique." Kushina said kindly. Naruto felt a little bad. She'd just taken out one of Kushina's pupils, which probably displeased her, but the red head was already gone to check up on her student when Naruto was about to speak up.

High up on the wall the screen was in full roll again, and Naruto turned just in time to see names flash up in yellow letters. Uchiha Shisui vs. Yūhi Kurenai.

"Good luck, Shisui!" Naruto said as she passed him on her way to team Minato, Anko and Orochimaru. She was very curious how that would go and hurried to get to her spot so she could catch the match.

"Good counter attack, Naruto-chan." Minato said as she took a place next to Anko.

"Thanks, Minato!" Naruto looked expectantly at Anko and Orochimaru. Waiting to gain some kind words from them, but both rolled their eyes in sync.

"That was not very impressive. You had it way too easy." Anko replied drily.

"You did a little too much. I think you could have saved more energy if you'd used less chakra on the wind technique, and then taken her out with taijutsu once the smoke had cleared. You have good stamina, and it builds up faster than chakra does in the long run. From her physical looks Hitomi
doesn't have the muscles for any great speed or strength. There was numerous ways to win, but I guess yours was the second to quickest one. You could have attacked first after all." Orochimaru said without batting an eye. Naruto sighed.

It wasn't like she cared if Orochimaru approved or not, but it would've been more encouraging if her teammates had some positive feedback for her.

Rin looked like she agreed with Naruto, because she glanced uncomfortable from Orochimaru to Naruto, biting her lip as if she was about to say something.

"I think you did well, Naruto." Said Obito reassuringly from behind her, just as Mikoto lowered the flag, and Shisui and Kurenai started their battle.

Shisui attacked first, testing out his opponents by using his tantō instead of any jutsu.

Kurenai was slower than Shisui, but good at dodging attacks. She preferred kunai, and used it to keep Shisui at a distance. Shisui dodged as Kurenai threw several kunai, attempting to force him away, but with minimal luck.

"Take him down, Kurenai!" Shouted Asuma from the sideline. Hiashi, their sensei, was standing behind Asuma, his brow furrowed while he watched the match. He didn't look pleased.

"You better win, Shisui!" Shouted Naruto, just to drown down some of Asuma's shouts. It worked. Naruto had a lot more volume than Asuma could ever hope for.

Shisui dodged them with simple sidestep, while Kurenai was using the time to go through hand signs. She finished the row of signs and her chakra activated.

But nothing happened.

"Activate your Sharingan, Shisui." Anko whispered quietly so no one but Naruto and Orochimaru overheard it.

For over thirty second nothing happened. At all.

Naruto was growing restless at the unusual long break in the battle, and looked curiously over to Kurenai's teammates. Wondering if she could learn anything from how they were reacting to this sudden stop.

Asuma was worried. He was frowning while he shifted from foot to foot. Aoba was impossible to read at all. His black glasses and impassive face made it seem he was simply waiting for the ball to drop.

Suddenly Kurenai stumbled backwards.

Shisui shot forwards, Kurenai got her footing back just in time and tried to punch him. But her aim was off and Shisui managed to kick her hard in the stomach. A clean hit. The girl flew backwards, her eyes wide as she hit the wall and slid down like a rag doll.

Naruto stood tense while Kurenai moved shakily to her feet. She was looking widely at Shisui with worry in her eyes, and Naruto didn't think it was from being kicked into a wall either. Slowly she closed her eyes and shook her head. "I forfeit." She muttered dejectedly.

"Yūhi Kurenai forfeit. Uchiha Shisui wins this first round match." Mikoto proclaimed, a slight smile on her face while she shot the flag into the air. The winner turned and smiled brightly up to his team,
sending them all the thumbs up before walking over to the staircase.

"What happened?" Asked Naruto confused.

"Kurenai lost in a genjutsu battle." It was Kakashi who'd replied. He looked impressed where he stood cross armed while looking down at the arena.

"Oh..." Naruto nodded slowly, understanding why the two had suddenly frozen in place.

"Hmmm... Shisui is really something when it comes to genjutsu... Kurenai is good, but he still won. And he didn't even use his trump card." Anko said and smirked to Naruto. "That was a better battle than yours."

"How was that better? They were just staring at each other for ages!" Naruto pouted while shaking her head. "Shisui can do a lot more than that."

"He's keeping his cards close to his chest, Naruto. There are more matches to follow, and the less you reveal the better chances he has of succeeding in the later rounds. And unlike you he doesn't have an endless amount of chakra. He's fighting smart." Orochimaru explained.

That moment Shisui reached them, taking a place next to Naruto who gave him a high five. "Good job, Shisui!" Naruto exclaimed while Shisui waved his hand as if to say it was nothing.

"Good job as well, Naruto. Hitomi will probably think twice about bad mouthing you again." He answered and patted Naruto on the shoulder.

"Hey, next round is Ensui-kun against Tokara-kun!" Exclaimed Rin, drawing all of their attention back to the screen.

Naruto immediately started shouting encouraging words. She had no idea who this Tokara was, but knew she wanted Ensui to win.

The fight between Ensui and Tokara was a long one compared to Naruto and Shisui's matches. Technically Ensui was at a disadvantage.

He didn't know how Tokara fought. But Shikakau was Tokara's sensei, meaning he knew everything about the shadow possession technique.

Ensui also fought differently to the Nara Naruto was most familiar with. His style of battle was more physical than Shikamaru had ever preferred to be and Ensui used shadows to a lesser extent. Which in this instance was to his advantage.

Iruka and Naruto were having a match themselves – seeing who could shout the loudest – while they cheered the Nara on.

In the end Tokara lost.

He made a blunder and got caught by Ensui's well aimed senbon. That in itself wasn't enough to stop him, but the shadow that bound him a second later was. The Nara had a bunch of senbon in his hand, while Tokara had none. "Forfeit or I'll bolt these senbon into you." Ensui said confidently. His throwing arm ready while he looked steadily at Tokara's blustering face.

Ensui and Shikamaru had the same calm about them though. Ensui had complete control of the situation. He'd made his move, and had already won the game.
Tokara forfeited, leaving the arena together with Ensui, neither of them talking.

Next up was Iruka against Asuma.

Naruto was almost standing on the railing during the battle. The only thing restraining her from falling over was Anko's grip on her jacket, preventing her from tumbling over. "GO IRUKA! Hit him where the sun don't shine!" Naruto cried, earning herself some annoyed looks. Not just from her fellow spectators, but from a few down in the arena too.

But Iruka didn't win.

Asuma was good with his blades, and fought Iruka into a corner. For a horrifying moment Naruto thought Asuma was about to cut Iruka's head off. But instead Asuma's commanding voice carried up to them from down in the arena. "Forfeit."

And Iruka did.

After them followed the flashiest fight so far. Ibiki and Aoba were both ninjutsu users. They were also close to one another in skill. Naruto followed the battle with interest, half listening while Anko kept a steady commentary about what she thought of their ninjutsu.

"Ibiki is being too sloppy. He knows Aoba is good at long range, and Ibiki is better at taijutsu than Aoba…. There! What did I tell you? Now Ibiki's pants are half burned off. I swear Aoba has some Sarutobi blood in him. His fire ninjutsu are really dangerous…. That idiot! Aoba just need a clear hit in with his genjutsu and Ibiki will halter. Ibiki is good with genjutsu, but not at Aoba's standard…. That must have hurt!…. Hahaha! Ibiki doesn't have any pants!"

This last comment was a result of Aoba's kunai flying across the room and catching the remainder of the waist band keeping Ibiki's trousers up. It didn't seem to faze Ibiki much though. He just looked annoyed he had to continue the battle in his underwear.

After a fifteen minute battle Ibiki came out victorious. But only barely. He managed to summon up some type of prison, catching Aoba after backing him slowly into a corner of the arena. They received the loudest applause so far. After releasing Aoba, Ibiki's first agenda was to run over to his backpack and retrieve some new pants to wear for the second round.

So the last battle of the first round was Rin against Hayate. Naruto was biting her fingernails as Rin took her place down in the arena. Kicking away some burned garments before pinning her opponents with all the determination she could muster.

"Go Rin!" Shouted Obito and leaned over the railing.

"Do your best, Rin!" Shouted Naruto nervously. She had no idea how Hayate fought, but he'd been a proctor during her own exam, and this time he wasn't coughing every other minute. Mikoto gave them to start signal.

Naruto quickly found out that Hayate was fast. One moment he was on his side of the arena, and next a clang rang out in the arena as his katana clashed with Rin's kunai. Rin had only had time to draw her blade, while Hayate had covered the entire floor in the same amount of time.

His face was unreadable while he fought, while Rin was gritting her teeth from the force Hayate was putting into his katana. "Get away! Attack from a different angle!" Naruto shouted. Already knowing Hayate was far above Rin in close range just by how little strain he was showing. If Rin wanted to win this, she would have to get creative.
"Rin is going to lose." Kakashi stated with a sigh. Obito and Naruto rounded on him immediate, both furious at Kakashi's comment.

"She can win!" Naruto exclaimed.

"No. Hayate is a much more advanced fighter. Kenjutsu is his specialty. She simply doesn't stand a chance." He retorted as if it should be obvious.

Naruto gritted her teeth, but before she could reply Obito got ahead of her. "Rin can win this, and we should encourage her to win. She has grown a lot this last year, and I believe she can do this. If you'd stopped to look properly you'd notice Rin has grown exceptionally, and without either of our help. Show your teammate more faith, Kakashi." He looked like he wanted to say more, but instead turned his back to Kakashi and continued watching the match.

Naruto cheered and patted Obito on the back, also focusing on the match instead of Kakashi fuming in the back.

Rin had gotten away during the small conversation, and was good at keeping her distance from Hayate now.

She threw a series of kunai, but Hayate ducked past them. Rin then did an enormous jump, getting high up on the wall while Hayate looked confused behind him. The kunai she'd thrown had explosive tags on them, and next moment an ear numbing explosion went off from multiple directions all around Hayate.

The whole building shook with the explosion, and Naruto peeked nervously up, not sure if the construction could take this sort of damage without falling on top of them.

The smoke was everywhere, and Naruto squinted to see anything. A series of clangs ran out from the smoke, which meant at least the contestants had found each other within the mess.

Finally things cleared up.

"GO RIN! You have him now!" Shouted Naruto excitedly. Because she did.

Hayate looked really banged up from the explosion. He was bloody and bruised, while Rin barely had a scratch. She smiled brilliantly while Obito and Naruto continued cheering her on. Even Shisui came with some encouragement.

"Darn… Rin got better." Anko muttered next to them, but smiled despite her biting tone.

Rin attacked, but again Hayate had his katana up, meeting Rin's kunai with force. But he was too slow to stop Rin's leg hitting him in the side. The boy stumbled sideways, having to catch himself with the hand holding his katana, and Rin saw her opening.

Her kunai shot forwards, aiming for his neck while Hayate was on the floor. Naruto was wide eyed and gleeful whiles she shouted excitedly.

But Hayate kicked up so fast Naruto didn't see it coming. Rin was right over him, and his foot hit the hand holding her kunai. She cried in pain as a faint crack indicated her hand had broken. Hayate jumped to his feet while Rin tried to heal it quickly, but the boy wasn't giving her time to rest.

And before Naruto had time to realize how it had happened, Rin was forced to the ground. Her good hand bent awkwardly behind her back, while her injured one was lying limply at her side. Hayate's katana pressed to her neck while he used his weight to force Rin forward.
Rin had lost.

"Congratulation to those who's won their first round. We'll resume battles in fifteen minutes." Mikoto told the audience in the hall while a couple of ninjas were running around the arena, cleaning up and fixing some of the damages that had been inflicted to the building during the battles.

"Ah… It sucks that you had to fight Hayate… He was a tough one." Naruto said comfortably when Rin made her way disappointingly up to the stadium.

She had tears in her eyes and Obito ran over to her at once.

"You did great, Rin. You just got unlucky." Obito explained gently, his face worried while he checked out the bandage on her arm. "Are you well enough to see the rest of the battles? Maybe you should sit down?" He asked concerned.

"I'm fine, Obito… I just… I trained so hard for this. It was my turn this time. I wasn't supposed to go out in the first round. Again! It's so frustrating." Rin muttered and burrowed her face in her good hand.

"Hayate was a bad opponent for you. You're both close range fighters, but unlike you he specializes in it." Kakashi told her reassuringly. "I think you actually have a shot at making Chūnin. A lot more than Naruto does at this point." He added and pointed at the blonde standing right next to him.

"Thank you, Kakashi-kun..."

"Hey!"

"It's true. Rin showed much more than you got to, Naruto. Winning isn't everything in the Chūnin exam, and if all the matches was over this instance very few of you have shown enough skill to get promoted. Rin and Hayate are probably high up on the list at the moment. The fact that Rin held out so long and nearly won against someone who's a front line battler is remarkable on its own." Anko told her with a smile to Rin.

"I'll show everyone in the next round! Whomever I'm against will get pulverized, dattebayo!" Naruto exclaimed heatedly.

"No. You'll do what's required." Orochimaru interjected with exasperation.

For the first time in a long while Kakashi was feeling entertained. The Chūnin exam was a lot more fun to watch than it had been participating in. It was a great way to gather some inspiration too. To see what other people used their time on and how they fought.

He felt bad Rin had gone out so early. He'd seen her during training and believed she was good enough to make Chūnin. He just hoped the judges had seen that as well.

He'd been surprised a few times too. Ibiki and Aoba's battle had been entertaining, if not a little wasteful when it came to chakra. Shisui and Kurenai's battle had also been an eye opener.

He'd never actually seen a genjutsu battle in action before now, and he was speculating on asking Shisui for the details. It was boring watching a genjutsu battle, they just stood there and stared after all. But it was a lot different being one of the participants. Kurenai also specialized in genjutsu, which he suspected Shisui wasn't. His movements told more of stealth and combat than illusion work.
Kakashi also had to admit to himself that he was curious about what Naruto could do.

Hitomi hadn't been a very good opponent, and the battle had been the quickest and the most anticlimactic. But judging from the many rumours he'd heard lately concerning Naruto, she had a lot more hidden up her sleeve than he'd been previously aware of. And though the girl was annoying he always appreciated seeing a good brawl. Even Kakashi could admit that.

Kakashi’s attention was drawn to the arena when Uchiha Mikoto walked back in, drawing everyone's attention though she had yet to speak.

"Next round is about to begin. Contestant - stand at the ready." Mikoto told them before shifting her gaze to the screen. Everyone in the arena did the same.

The rapid sound of names switching out was heard when the screen started picking the next set of opponents.

_Uchiha Shisui vs. Naruto._

The names blinked out like a fire alarm, and Kakashi looked curiously at the two kids in front of him. They were staring mutely at one another. Neither seemed to have anticipated this specific match up.

"Um..." Anko said dumbstruck next to them.

Rin seemed to have gotten distracted from wallowing in self-pity too, since she was now looking nervous instead of bitter.

"What are you two waiting for? Get down there." Orochimaru snapped after they showed no inkling to move. Wordlessly they headed for the stairs, neither looking at one another while they descended down to the arena.

"Woha... I'm lucky I never got in that position. It would have been hard fighting one of my teammates." Obito muttered while leaning over the railing. Following their movements closely as they found their spots.

"Not even Kakashi?" Asked Anko with a smirk. But her eyes looked worried while she observed her two teammates.

"No! I mean Rin and Minato-sensei! I'd fight Bakashi gladly!" Obito exclaimed while his cheeks heated up.

"Hah! As if you would have a chance against Minato-sensei." Chuckled Anko and cracked a genuine smile.

"First battle of the second round is Uchiha Shisui vs Naruto." Said Mikoto from down in the arena, and everyone's attention zoomed back to the battle about to begin.

"Hajime!"

At lightning speed Naruto and Shisui clashed. Kakashi blinked in surprise. He hadn't expected the quick opening, and was confused by the speed the two genin were displaying. It was difficult to see which one was faster.

"Kick his arse, Naru!" Shouted Anko, slightly uncomfortable after the exclamation but far from guilty.
The sound of metal hitting metal rang out through the stadium. Naruto had a kunai up against Shisui’s tantō. Their hands shaking from the force they were putting into the attacks.

Suddenly Shisui ducked. Naruto lost her balance when the weight she was pressing against was removed, and Shisui did a low sweep with his foot, kicking Naruto’s feet from under her.

"AH!" Naruto cried, but somehow – Kakashi had no idea how – rolled away before Shisui could get another hit in. She retreated a safe distance. Shisui letting her while he trailed her movements with red eyes.

No one had registered Shisui's Sharingan before now, the close battle and fast movements had taken the focus away from their faces. And a round of gasps echoed around the room from the sight of them.

"That's the Sharingan!"

"Shisui has the Sharingan?"

"Oh wow! And he's so young!"

"Heh, I guess this battle is already decided then."

Anko sent Asuma a dirty glare at his last comment, but didn't seem able to tear her attention away from the match for long. Orochimaru had stepped up to the railing, his hands resting on the surface while he watched his student's battle. He didn't appear to like what he was seeing though.

"You should get serious. Stop holding back." He said in a normal indoor voice, but the words carried around the room as if he'd shouted it.

Neither of the fighters looked up at him, but Kakashi could see they had both heard.

Shisui's shoulders relaxed. His posture lowering while his eyes spun in their sockets. Kakashi had to give credit to Naruto for not falling into his genjutsu yet. He'd been quick with Kuernai, but for all he knew Shisui had tried genjutsu on Naruto before.

These two knew each other's fighting style, and was probably going to attack accordingly. Though Orochimaru's words indicated they were going easy on each other.

"Kage bunshin no jutsu!" Naruto shouted and ten clones appeared around her. Creating a clone shield. Three of the clones sprang forward, and Shisui went through hand signs faster than Kakashi could read them.

"Katon: Great Fireball Technique!" Shisui shouted, creating a huge fireball. One that was many times his own size that rushed towards the clones. They popped instantly, and the fire continued towards the real Naruto and her backup clones.

The sound of popping clones filled the arena in the confusion of fiery hot flames, and Kakashi was wondering if the match was over. The only reason he didn't know was how tense Shisui had become.

A tearing sound rang through the arena half a second after Shisui threw himself into the air. The reason was obvious when suddenly the ground underneath him cracked, and Naruto came rushing up from it.

His eyes widened further as Naruto's bellowed for anyone in a ten mile radius to overhear. "Futon:
Shisui was probably one of the fastest kids he'd ever seen.

Somehow, in midair, he was already counter attacking. What the fire technique was called Kakashi didn't hear in the roar of Naruto's wind technique, but the fire colliding with the wind which sent a heat wave throughout the room.

Kakashi hurried up to the railing. Attempting to see through the smoke that was covering the whole arena. But another gush of wind appeared soon after, and the smoke was forced away just like Hitomi's gas had during Naruto's first battle.

Shisui was on the offensive, in the smoke he'd gotten very close to winning, but Naruto must have sidestepped him somehow. They were again in a kenjutsu battle. Shisui was forcing Naruto up the wall. Literally. They were now fighting vertically.

Shisui's left hand was getting something from his weapon pouch, while Naruto was distracted dodging and countering his tantō. She was being slightly impressive when she stopped Shisui's tantō mid slice by trapping the blade between the palms of her hands. She was forced to let go though when Shisui finally fished out what he was looking for and shuriken came flying towards Naruto.

"Get out of the way!" Cried Anko in panic. Now more in front of the railing then behind it because of how far she was leaning.

Naruto did an extensive front flip from the wall. Flying over Shisui's head and spinning until she hit the hard concrete floor. Another series of shuriken followed her, and Naruto rolled sideways to dodge. The shuriken were just missing her wherever she tried to move.

It was first then Kakashi noticed the wire attached to the shuriken Shisui had thrown, and so it seemed Naruto had. From up on the wall Shisui jabbed at the wires end. The shuriken closest to Naruto followed his movement perfectly, jabbed in her direction while he jumped down to join her.

He used the wires as a slide for his feet, following its descend while throwing more in Naruto's direction. Kakashi realized he was preventing Naruto from doing any ninjutsu. He was keeping her on the defence with every move he made, while at the same time tripping up the entire arena with ninja wire.

One wrong move and Naruto would get caught. And the small halt would be all Shisui needed to win the match.

Kakashi didn't realize he had joined the rest of the spectators in leaning over the rail. Following the match with rapt attention.

Naruto finally made the mistake Shisui had been waiting for. Her foot caught on a wire, she fell forward, and Shisui took his chance. Leaping over ten meters in one jump he put his tantō against the girl's neck.

He'd won!

"Forfeit Naruto." He said calmly. He was poised to strike at any moment, while Naruto had frozen in shock.

"Damn..." Anko muttered.

"Nope." Naruto replied. And then the clone popped.
Everyone felt a moment of dread as they watched Shisui stand alone down in the arena.

Where was Naruto?

Kakashi was combing the arena with his eyes for an answer, but had as much luck finding her as Shisui seemed to have. He had frozen where he stood, but was now turning his head rapidly from side to side. Trying to relocate Naruto along with the rest of the spectators.

For no apparent reason, Shisui threw himself backwards and cast away his tantō hard towards the opposite wall.

There was no one bursting out from the ground underneath him like last time, and Kakashi wondered if the nerves was getting the better of Shisui, making him imagining things.

While Shisui was falling backwards, the tantō popped. A cloud of smoke appeared and Naruto was the one being thrown backwards instead. She threw three kunai at Shisui while they both were falling. Shisui was not able to move quickly this time. The kunai hit his arm and grazed his stomach, before he landed painfully on his back.

"Holy crap. When did Naruto switch with Shisui's tantō? How the hell didn't he notice the weight difference?" Asked Obito next to him. Kakashi couldn't answer that either, but he guessed Naruto had a very clever trick to fool Shisui to that extent.

"Ah… You managed to dodge that one too?" Asked Naruto while getting to her feet. Shisui was doing the same, looking a lot less composed with his hair wildly to every side and bleeding from his arm. The worst of the damage to his stomach was the torn T-shirt.

"Nah'." Shisui answered, a small smile on his lips while he shook his head.

"Want to forfeit yet? I'm just getting warmed up over here." Naruto said cockily, her sharp teeth displaying while she smiled innocently to Shisui. The Uchiha returned the smile, but it was not as confident as Naruto's.

"Not yet." He stated calmly.

"Good." Naruto retorted, and stretched out her arm. In it was Shisui's tantō. She twirled it once – cutting over numerous tightly stretched wires – before pointing it at its owner. Shisui scowled.

"You're holding it wrong! If you're going to attack me with my own tantō then at least have the decency to use it with some professionalism!" He shouted indignant.

"Eh' I prefer kunai to be honest." Naruto replied unaffected by the disgruntled Uchiha. They ran at each other. Shisui bent down as he ran past one of Naruto's fallen kunai, and they clashed again. This time with their weapon of choice switched.

Naruto was the one with the upper hand this time though. The wound on Shisui's arm was slowing him down, and it was showing against someone with Naruto's stamina and speed.

Naruto was clumsy with the tantō, so to gain the advantage again she jumped up in a pirouette kick that was worthy of Gai's praise and kicked Shisui square in the face.

The boy still looked dazed from the hit as Naruto put the tantō against his head.

It was a ringing silence that followed the action. Kakashi was counting in his head, and came to five before Shisui lowered his head. Careful not to get slit by his own tantō. "I forfeit." He declared in
frustration.

"Uchiha Shisui forfeit. Naruto is the winner." Mikoto said, her expression impassive while she raised the flag.

"Whoa!"

"No way!"

"Go Naruto!"

"YES!"

The last one was Anko. She was jumping up and down with a huge smile on her face. Kakashi straightened up and looked baffled at his sensei. "I didn't see that one coming." He told Minato honestly. His sensei glanced sideways, Kakashi following his gaze over to Kushina.

"Hmm… Well, you shouldn't underestimate an opponent Kakashi. Shisui didn't, and yet he lost. Uzumaki women seem to have the gift of being unpredictable." He said casually, before looking back down at the stadium where Naruto was helping Shisui back to his feet. Fuzzing over his arm and asking if he was okay. A medic had joined them and was asking Shisui to follow him to the sideline.

"I guess I couldn't expect much better of them… I didn't want them to kill each other out there either. They did plausible, but they're still too soft though. I thought they both were too competitive to let their friendship get in the way of a match..." Orochimaru muttered to himself. He then shrugged and looked down at his oldest student. "From now on I'll start putting you three up against one another more often."

Anko nodded in understanding, but clapped her hands together when Naruto joined them. "Great job! That was a lot more entertaining than your match with Hitomi! When the hell did you switch with Shisui's tantō? And how did he not notice it?" She asked at once. Naruto grinned proudly and started explaining at once.

"Wind chakra of course! I was running it constantly through my weapons, which Shisui picked up on, so he got used to the constant chakra from the beginning. When the smoke erupted I managed to loosen his grip on his tantō for a moment, which was when I switched. I used futon to keep me levitated, easing the weight enough for Shisui not to take notice. I'm also really awesome at transformation, and the weight wasn't that much off! He understood what was happening after I popped though, and he realized my wind chakra was still around him and coming from his own tantō. It's annoying, because I was just about to end the battle when he threw me at the wall."

Kakashi was baffled that Naruto had thought so far ahead, he didn't think the girl was able to. "Great job, Naruto-chan! That was a great match!" Rin said and looked her up and down. "Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm fine! Thanks though, Rin!" Naruto replied.

The rest was still talking about the battle when the next match up was announced.

Ibiki vs. Asuma was up, and the conversation died down while the two boys made their way down to the arena.

The day had been long. Naruto was exhausted when the final battle was over.
After her battle with Shisui, Ibiki had won over Asuma, followed by Hayate who won against Ensui. And the conclusive battle of the tournament was between the three winners of the second round. All three up against one another simultaneously.

Ibiki and Hayate were teammates, but the injuries they had sustained through the tournament were substantial enough for Naruto to take them on though they had teamed up against her.

Her clones were a blessing too.

And as promised, Naruto went the whole way.

She won the Chūnin exam.

The victory came as a great surprise to most. Kakashi's face had been highly amusing. Ibiki was out of chakra but Hayate had been the one to crack first. His injuries after the battle with Rin was still bugging him, and afterwards he'd barely scraped a victory over Ensui, leading him to be dead on his feet in the final battle.

No one was underestimating her anytime soon though. Naruto was just glad it was over, though her confidence had grown considerably in the last few hours. It was now well into the early morning hours and it was very difficult to keep her eyes open.

Luckily the adrenaline had kept Naruto aware and energetic during the matches. But now all she could focus on was her bed back at the orphanage, and the injustice of keeping tired and wounded children waiting in a hallway for the old guys to discuss who would be promoted. They had comfortable chairs in there, while in the hallway they had to settle for the floor.

Naruto was sitting with the other contestants of the third round in a half lit corridor. They had made their way out of the Forest of Death and into the Hokage's building after the matches were over, and was asked to wait for an unknown amount of time.

Shisui had fallen asleep next to her. At first he'd been sitting with his head resting against the wall behind him, but as he fell into a deep sleep his head had tilted sideways onto Naruto's shoulder. Before she knew it Shisui was sleeping with his head in her lap - and looked quite comfortable too.

Naruto was annoyed but she couldn't push him away either. She still felt guilty about beating him in their match after Shisui had helped her through the first round.

The door to the Hokage's office opened, and Hiruzen looked in a sweeping motion over the kids sitting in a silent row on the floor.

"Good job everyone. It was a tough competition this year, and you all did admirable to get as far as you did." He explained.

Naruto shook Shisui, trying to wake him up, but the boy only groaned and swatted at her hand away. "Get up." Naruto hissed, to no avail trying to keep her voice down.

"Get up." She said again, and tried to shake him more. Shisui only turned in her lap. Now sleeping with his face turned in towards her stomach, Naruto felt herself blush slightly at the intimate position.

"WAKE UP SHISUI!" Naruto shouted and pushed him so hard Shisui was swept out of her lap and collided with the opposite wall. That at least did the trick, and groggily Shisui sat up and looked confused around.

Hiruzen was the only one to laugh outright at the display.
"Now that everyone is awake and aware I am going to thank you all for waiting patiently, but I'm afraid not everyone made Chūnin this time around. Your efforts during the exam were admirable, though, and everyone in this final round was very young. There will be many opportunities to redo the exam in the future." The Hokage told them all warmly.

The finalists were getting to their feet now, waiting to hear who got promoted and who would have to go home disappointed.

Hiruzen looked down at a scroll in his hand and started calling out names as he read them.

"Gekkō Hayate, Morino Ibiki, Nara Ensui, Nohara Rin, Sarutobi Asuma, Uchiha Shisui and Naruto – could you please come into my office. The rest of you can return home and get some well-earned sleep." Hiruzen explained.

A wave of excitement and disappointment ran through the hallway. The ones who hadn't been called into the office were disappointed, and were already turning towards the staircase. Iruka waved to Ensui, Naruto and Shisui with a small smile, but his eyes looked sad as he followed Hitomi to the staircase with the rest.

Once inside the office Naruto and Shisui knelt on each side of Rin, the rest in the same position while they waited for the Hokage's verdict.

"Congratulations. I'm happy to declare that you all have passed the Chūnin exam." He told them with a fond smile.

His eyes moved over each and every face with interest. Naruto's hand grasped around Rin's arm and she yanked it lightly in excitement. Rin looked emotionally back at her, her relieved expression so genuine Naruto felt she could read the girl's thoughts.

Ensui and Shisui were grinning to one another next to Rin, while the rest were still focused on the Hokage. The energy in the room had gone up a few notches in the last few seconds.

"I'm proud of you all. But before I can give you your new Chūnin vest and exam report I have a few more words to say. You have all proved yourself skilled and talented enough for the rank of Chūnin. But you've done so in times of war. Your new positions will put you into increasingly more challenging and dangerous situations. As your leader and fellow shinobi, I wish you all good and successful missions. But the risks are high. When you now take this step, I want you to remember your time as a genin. I want you to remember your time as an academy student. I want you to take everything you've experienced and learned to get where you are now and cherish it. Keep it in mind when you're out in the field and danger is close. Remember our village and the bonds you've made, and use it to become better and succeed your missions." The Hokage said seriously. Naruto had problems keeping her face turned down. She wanted to see his face while he spoke. See the warmth and his gentility while he spoke.

For a moment she dearly missed the Hiruzen she knew. The one she was allowed to joke with and who genuinely cared for her. This Hiruzen cared for her too, but not the same way he had back then.

"Please step forward, Gekkō Hayate-kun." Hiruzen said, and from the other end of the row Hayate stood up and stepped up to the Hokage's desk. He was handed a piece of paper and a green vest.

"Congratulations on becoming Chūnin, Hayate-kun. Konoha will benefit from your kenjutsu expertise and observation skills. You revealed a keen intellect and highly effective plotting through your exam. You'll have bright future if you keep that up." The Hokage told the young boy with a small smile.
He continued calling the next person in alphabetic order. Mentioning a few traits which were unique to the specific person. Naruto was peeking through her hair when Asuma was called up. It was by far the most awkward exchange, but both looked very happy about the promotion.

"Uchiha Shisui-kun, you're unique even amongst your clansmen. You fight as someone with more expertise and maturity than your age calls for. You remind me of my old friend Kagami, and I have great faith in you." Hiruzen said when Shisui got his promotion.

Shisui blushed scarlet at the praise, and ducked his head with a sheepish smile. "Thank you… But I am nowhere near his caliber." He said so low everyone had problems overhearing him.

At the very end was Naruto.

She didn't have a last name, so she was always last. "Naruto-chan. Please step up." Hiruzen said, and while Naruto got to her feet the Hokage was turned towards his desk as he picked up her piece of paper and her Chūnin vest.

"You might not have been born in this village, but your spirit and charisma shows what it is to be a true ninja of the Village Hidden in Leaf. The will of fire is already burning at full force in every step you take. Go out and spread the will of fire to those you come across, Uzumaki Naruto-chan." Hiruzen said with a glint to his eyes.

Naruto stiffened at his use of her real name. "What…?" Naruto asked breathlessly.

"You're of Uzumaki decent. It's only fitting you use the name now that you know. As long as you're not opposed to it of course?" Hiruzen said with a good natured smile while he stretched for his pipe and tobacco.

Naruto wasn't sure how to respond. She barely registered as Hiruzen had to push the vest into her hand. She had forgotten to receive it.

"Please rise everyone. You've had a long week and you need to rest. Tomorrow you'll all be Chūnin and I want you fresh for duty." He called to the rest.

Anko had lost faith that they were ever going to come out.

She was sitting on a bench outside the Hokage office together with Kakashi, Obito, Minato, Kushina, Iruka, Hitomi, Kurenai, Tokara and a bunch of others. All of them wondering when the hell the finalists of the Chūnin exam would be finished in the office.

Kakashi had the foresight to bring a book, and was reading it as if it was the most awe inspiring thing he'd ever come across. The title was; 'Knots and their Properties.' Anko was just impressed he'd gotten through the first page without falling asleep. Far less being half way through the book already.

Anko was stretching her legs when the door – at last - opened. Everyone looked up to see Rin flustered face with a green vest clutched in front of her. Her smile was reaching from ear to ear. Obito sprang up from where he'd been lying on the ground.

"YES! I knew it! Congratulations, Rin!" Obito shouted and engulfed the girl in a hug. Behind her more people emerged, and Anko gave a shout of excitement at the sight of both Shisui and Naruto clutching a package each.

"You made it! We're all Chūnin now!" Anko shouted while people where exclaiming congratulations on top of each other.
"I know! Finally, dattebayo!" Naruto answered so excited she had problems keeping a straight face.

"Finally? This was your first try, Naruto!" Shisui chuckled and accepted Anko who uncharacteristically reached out and hugged them both.

"This needs to be celebrated!" Anko said excitedly while releasing her teammates.

"Thanks Anko, I'm glad you're happy for us, but can it wait a day? I'm about to fall asleep on my feet." Shisui said and dragged a hand through his messy hair.

"Sure, sure. But tomorrow we'll hold the celebration alright?" Anko said and looked from one to the other.

"Guess what Anko! I got something else in there too! I'm now officially named Uzumaki Naruto!"

"What?!" Anko called shocked, causing a few to turn their heads in their direction. They quickly lost interest though, and instead went back to their previous chats.

"Yes! I have a family name now!"

"You have the best damn family name in the world, Naruto-chan!" Said a voice behind them. And the three turned to find Kushina and her team standing there.

"I know, dattebayo!"

"I'm so glad to find a new family member, dattebane!"

"I haven't met another family member since forever, dattebayo!"

"But now you have me! And I'll take you out to ramen to celebrate, dattebane!"

"Really?! I think I love you, dattebayo!"

"You are just precious, dattebane!"

Anko looked shocked back and forth between Naruto and Kushina, a shiver running up her spine at how frighteningly similar the two were. She had never seen it before. But with them both in ramen heaven and crying their similar verbal ticks at the top of their lungs Anko was shocked she hadn't seen it before.

"I always thought Naruto looked a lot like Kushina. I just now realized I didn't notice half of it." Mused Minato and came up to stand next to Shisui and Anko. He was smiling fondly while Naruto and Kushina were talking a mile a minute.

"Huh… I always thought she looked like you, sensei." Kakashi said with a shrug of his shoulders. Minato tilted his head, trying to see what everyone else had pointed out too. But despite Naruto's coloring being entirely wrong, and he understood why people joked he had a long lost little sister, all he really noticed was how much she looked like Kushina.

"Maybe sensei and Kushina had a love child they haven't told us about?" Obito suggested and laughed out loud at his own joke.

"Stop joking around, Obito. That's not possible." Rin said but was chuckling behind her hand.

"Hey Naru!" Anko cried and interrupted the two Uzumaki before they went skipping together into the sunrise. Without her.
Naruto looked around, her smile still beaming. "You can catch up with long lost family members later, okay? Orochimaru-sensei wants us up early tomorrow for training, and I'm supposed to make sure you don't forget to go to sleep because of your new promotion."

It took Anko some time to detach Naruto and Kushina from one another. But with the help of Shisui, Ensui and Minato they managed eventually.

What had her upset though was how Minato distracted Kushina. He leaned into her, his mouth close to her ear and whispered something that made the red head blush.

Anko felt her whole face heat up at the sight, and sadness filled her at the display. They were together?

Though she knew it was a long shot, she couldn't completely lose hope that Minato one day would notice her. When she was older. But Kushina, Naruto's clan member, had apparently gotten ahead of her.

Privately she mourned the loss, but felt it would be unfair to drag down everyone's excitement by showing how upset she was, and instead put on a smile.

They waved goodbye to Shisui together. He resembled a ghost with rings around his big, dark eyes, paler than normal skin and black attire. It was almost as if he was detached from his body when he waved groggily back with a silly smile before starting on his way home.

Anko and Naruto talked excitedly for five minutes while they walked towards Anko's apartment. Naruto telling her all the details the cameras hadn't picked up inside the Forest of Death. She also heard how Shisui had helped her through the first round of the exam, and had to laugh.

At their destination the chatter didn't stop. While she found the sheets Naruto always borrowed when she slept over, Anko tried to figure out how to word the question on the tip of her tongue.

Naruto was not looking tired anymore, so she wasn't afraid she'd fall asleep for a while. Giving Anko time to find a good way to ask.

But in the end she was Anko, so she asked quite directly without preamble while Naruto was searching for a pillow in different drawers. Not guessing that Anko had been using two pillows to sleep with instead of one. The pillow she was looking for was out in the open on Anko's bed. They were both old and really flat so using two was just so much more comfortable.

"Hey Naru. Since my lease here expires in a month, and you're still looking for a place to live, do you want to become roommates? We could find a place and split the rent. It would be cheaper than living alone anyway." Anko blurted out.

Naruto looked startled up from the drawer. It didn't take long for her to come to come up with an answer though.

"Hell yes, dattebayo!"

To be continued...
Thank you so much for reading! This chapter (like all the others) has been beta'd by AnjoRemix!

So a lot happened in this chapter. At least it included way too many characters, a few fights, Kushina and Minato interacting (a little) with Naruto, and Anko asking Naruto to become roommates. (This has been long coming, if they hadn't been fighting for so long they would already be sharing an apartment)

I'm nursing a headache after writing so many fighting scenes in the last few chapters. I'm now entirely out of combat ideas. I hate writing battle scenes, they are just so confusing and hard to keep track of. They are interesting though, and I want to have them included, but they're just a bitch to plan and type down. Not to mention having a running dialogue in the middle. Argh! I need a break from battle scenes now. Which there will be, seeing as the next few chapters will not have any combat. Thank God...
Chapter Seventeen – The Apartment on the Top Floor

"Since I don't like to wait or make people wait… I'll end this quickly." - Sasori

Naruto was waiting patiently on a bench on One Legged Parade. She had been asked to wait there for Kushina, but so far she had not shown up. Naruto had been eager to meet her, and had showed up half an hour early though she could just as well waited inside the orphanage. Their meeting place was visible from her room window.

Still, she wasn't complaining. Naruto was too busy being nervous about what would happen next to dwell on if's and how's.

She would be talking with Kushina. Her mother. Someone who had no idea who she was, and never would.

It was taking everything in her to keep thinking that way. To maintain calm despite feeling like her insides were tearing apart. But she had years of experience. Naruto had decided early on that no one could know who she was.

If she ever started babbling about being from the future, she would receive a one way ticket to the mental ward at Konoha hospital. And the staff there had their hands full with war victims at the moment. Plenty of people couldn't take the pressure of war, it had little to do with physical strength and more to do with how good you were at repressing what you'd done and experienced.

The second- and slightly less likely option to telling the truth- was that she'd be branded a traitor. An enemy ninja who'd been sent to infiltrate Konoha disguised as a confused and lonely girl with a wild story. The reason she'd been accepted into Konoha was because she'd been alone, had a believable story, and last but far from least; Jiraiya had vouched for her. When she had arrived Naruto had stayed away from anyone of importance. Naruto had not tried to get to know Kushina and Minato, because why would she? Why would a random stranger go up to two prominent ninjas of Konoha just by accident? Especially after already being publicly accepted by none other than Jiraiya of the Sannin? There could only be so much done by coincidence before people started asking questions. So she had stayed away. Especially from Kushina, because she'd been afraid what would happen if an outsider started conversing with the current jinchūriki of Konoha.

But now she had an excuse. At last Naruto had a plausible reason to interact and get to know Kushina just like she had wanted to do for two long years already. And that meant she probably would get to talk to her father as well.

But all this depended on Naruto staying quiet about her origins. Not telling anyone who she truly was and where she came from. People knew her quite well by now, so she thought it was more likely she'd be branded insane instead of a traitor, but both options were highly unwanted. So she kept her mouth shut. Even if it meant she had to lie straight to her mother's face.

"Hello Naruto-chan!"

Her mother was waving to Naruto from down the street. Her long red hair tied into a high ponytail.
while wearing the standard Konoha uniform. Naruto grinned nervously back and got up from the bench.

"Hi, Kushina… -sensei."

"Call me Kushina-nee! We're family! Clan members! We need to stick together!" Kushina replied and hugged her tightly when she reached Naruto.

Naruto hugged Kushina back, feeling as if she was having an out of body experience while in the embrace of her mother.

"What are we doing today?" Asked Naruto, still feeling uncharacteristically shy. Kushina winked and pointed towards the Hokage Mountain.

"Have you ever been up there, Naruto-chan?" She asked curiously and Naruto nodded. She'd been up there a lot before, but her normal hangout face was currently missing. Minato was yet to have his head carved out, so she hadn't been there as much since falling back in time.

"We'll go up on the mountain. A little behind it there's a great place to do some training. It's also a lot calmer than the training grounds where people come and go all the time. It's not like we'll be doing any explosive jutsu or something. We just need a place to start up and talk, dattebane." Kushina explained.

Naruto nodded again. Not sure why she was tongue tied, and followed mutely while Kushina led the way.

"So… Tell me exactly what happened. I have heard the summary from Hokage-sama, but I want your side of the story too. Yours is the most important one." Kushina said while sitting next to Naruto.

They were in the forest behind the Hokage Mountain. The wind was blowing more hectically up there, since they were higher up than down in Konoha and there were no mountains to screen them from the wind. Naruto wasn't sure how to reply and took her time to find the right words.

"I'm not… sure. It was very chaotic. Everyone was battling and I was scared. I was looking for the others, wondering if any of them could help me, and then I saw Ebisu… dead." Naruto explained, not sure how this would help any with chakra chains.

Naruto was still unsure if she even possessed the bloodline. When she blacked out she'd seen Kushina. Maybe the chains had been hers- not Naruto's- and she was wasting her mother's time doing this.

"Was this before or after you were attacked?" Asked Kushina gently.

"I was already hit. I couldn't move. I was sort of bolted in place and it hurt. I remember that it hurt a lot." Naruto muttered, scratching her cheek in discomfort.

Kushina remained silent, but her expression had grown more serious. "Did you try to do anything? Use your chakra maybe?"

"Um… Yeah! I did… But it didn't work, because the blades were sucking out my chakra. The guy I was fighting could absorb chakra through his weapons, and they made it difficult to do any jutsu. But I tried this exercise Orochimaru had taught me, because it doesn't require much chakra, just… good control. Which I don't really have, so it failed."
"What was it?"

"Chakra strings. I tried to create a loop around my attacker's wrist to cut his artery and throw off his aim."

Kushina's eyes widened and she nodded to herself. "Chakra strings… Interesting. That might have had something to do with it… But not everything. Did anything else happen?"

Naruto bit her lip, not sure if she should continue. "I blacked out… But… I saw my mum. She was floating around in the blackness with me." Naruto said, a tad embarrassed.

"Your mum? She was most likely the one with Uzumaki genes, right? She had red hair?" Kushina asked, suddenly a lot more eager than she'd been the moment before. Naruto nodded, not able to look away from Kushina when she did.

"She looks… just like you actually." Naruto muttered. Kushina's face softened gradually, she reached out a hand and squeezed Naruto's shoulder.

"I lost my family when I was around your age, Naruto-chan. I won't say that it's easy and that you'll one day stop hurting at the memory of them, but I can say there's much to look forward to. That you can find more family. Not a new one, but you can add people to your family. Like me. Even if we weren't related, I'd still have liked to be part of your family as your friend." She told Naruto gently.

"Ah… Yeah, I think so too. Anko, Iruka, Shisui, Ensui and all the others- they're family." Naruto answered and grinned.

"And me, dattebane! Don't forget me!" Kushina said and laughed when Naruto cracked a smile.

"I won't forget." She said earnestly. Never having been as genuine in anything since first arriving to this world.

"Okay, let's see if I can help you understand a bit about the chakra chains before we continue, alright?" Kushina inquired and straightened up, her hand falling from Naruto's shoulder.

"Chakra chains is something you're born with, it's always been there, you just don't know how to access them. They are also unique. No two Uzumaki has identical chains, though they might look the same, and has some common basics to them. All chains can be used for physical attacks. All chains take the form of chains when they are shaped. And all chains can be manipulated by the user." Kushina started telling her with exuberantly.

"It's also rare - even rarer than having chains in the first place - that the chains take on a different appearance. Yours are copper colored, which I have to admit I don't know the meaning of. I know my great, great grandfather had white chains, though they called it platinum chains. They had the affinity for Yang chakra. He could use his chains to draw vitality out of almost anything. And use it against an opponent or draw upon the energy into himself. It was a very powerful combat chain. And he used it mostly for that purpose."

Naruto was hanging on to every word, feeling strange and excited hearing about her family. Her ancestors. But at the same time there was sadness in her chest while listening to Kushina explain about their clan.

"My chains are good for sealing, which is a type of fuinjutsu. My chakra chains has the ability to immobilize others chakra when they come in contact. It doesn't drain or even harm other chakra types, it simply freeze chakra. Stopping it from reacting when the one I'm holding down tries to draw upon their chakra. It's impossible for anyone to break the chains unless they strike me down, because
if anyone touches the chains they'll get stuck too. If they try ninjutsu - which of course is chakra -
they will not be able too. The only thing that might work would be taijutsu, but even that would be
extremely difficult. I have never had problems keeping anyone down when I use my chains." Kushina explained further.

"Do you use them much?" Asked Naruto curiously.

"Not a lot. They're chakra draining, and well… I have other attacks that work better in most
situations. My chains are large. And when I say large I mean… Large. They come in various sizes,
and mine are definitely at the top range of the scale. Since they’re so large it takes more chakra to
keep them activated, and it's not always wise to drain yourself of chakra during a battle."

"Huh…" Naruto muttered, nodding to herself while she thought over that.

"Okay, enough about my chains, let's get back to yours. From Shisui's description yours are on the
smaller side of medium, which is a good size if you use them more frequently in battle. He said they
exited from the sides of your ribcage" She said further, and Naruto looked confused up.

"What do you mean?"

"They have different exit points. Mine exits from the middle of my chest and the middle of my back.
But the only other Uzumaki I've met that had chains could exit her chains through her hands. They
were small though, almost the size of a normal chain." Kushina explained while pointing at her own
hand, specifying where they had shot out.

"Really?" Naruto asked surprised. "Where did mine come from?"

"Here." Kushina explained and touched the side of her ribs. Almost underneath her arm, but a little
more forwards. "Shisui said you had two exit points, and they were both from each side of your
chest." She looked thoughtful for a moment.

"Maybe where they come out have something to do with their size. Mine are large, and come very
close to the heart, yours are smaller, but comes from the side of your ribs, and my aunt got them
through her hands, and they were very small… Huh… I think I heard something like that a long time
ago, but I can't remember exactly what it was now."

"What about the old guy? The one with white chains?" Asked Naruto, but Kushina shrugged.

"I have no idea. I never met him, I just heard about him when I was little."

"Okay… So what now? How do you access your chains? Can I see yours?" Asked Naruto hopeful.

Kushina grinned, and started getting to her feet at once. "I was waiting for you to ask! Look and be
amazed at my awesomeness, dattebane!"

Kushina closed her eyes and concentrated, her hands limp at her side as the wind blew her ponytail
to the side. Slowly her chest started glowing, and Naruto looked wide eyed as a chakra chain
emerged from the light directly over her heart. It didn't shoot, didn't do anything special, and it was
huge.

It was as wide as Kushina's torso, and Naruto could only marvel how much chakra it took to
maintain only one of those, not to mention numerous. Naruto hardly believe she could have used
them herself.

Kushina opened one eye, and peeked mischievously down at Naruto. The blonde was too busy
admiring the chain to notice. The chain slowly evaporated and Naruto pouted. It earned her a heartfelt laugh from Kushina who plopped down on the ground again.

"That was one of my chains. It can do more than just hang around in the air though. I can control the speed, the strength and direction. It took me a while though, so don't expect this to be easy." Kushina said and flicked Naruto's nose affectionately.

"That is so cool!" Naruto exclaimed with undisguised awe.

"I know, and soon I'll have you be as cool as I am, dattebane! But let's get to work. I'm sorry, but we'll be doing a lot of boring stuff to begin with. Namely chakra exercises!" Kushina declared happily. Naruto sagged where she sat and groaned. More chakra exercises?

Kushina chuckled behind her hand at Naruto's expression. "Don't you start complaining. Only a master can create chakra chains, and we know you have it in you. So first lesson will be internal chakra use. Before we move over to chakra transformation. It's a slippery mix that takes a lot of training to get down. I hope you're prepared to put in some effort, Naruto-chan."

Naruto got to her feet quickly, looking down at Kushina who was following her movements closely. "I am. I'll get this down. And just call me Naruto, Kushina-nee."

Anko peeked up from the newspaper she was reading as Naruto entered her apartment. She was sweaty and greasy, but in high spirit.

It was a week since she started afternoon training sessions with Kushina, and the lessons always caused Naruto to come home in a great mood. "Good session?" Asked Anko with a raised eyebrow. Naruto barely registered her words because she headed straight for the bathroom, closing the door quickly behind her before bothering to answer.

"It was great! I think I finally get this internal chakra thing-y! Finally!" A moment later Anko heard the sound of the shower running.

"Hey Naru! I found an apartment we should look at." Anko shouted, her voice carrying all the way from the couch and into the bathroom where Naruto was showering.

"Yeah? Where?" Naruto answered just as loudly. This was hardly the first time they had conversation while in separate rooms.

"It's a little out of town, but it's cheaper that way! Two bedrooms and a bathroom. No living room though, but that's fine. It's cheap. That's really what counts and I've managed fine with just one room so far. I think it's exactly what we are looking for."

Naruto used some time to answer. Anko thought she heard something being shifted around. Maybe Naruto was looking through a drawer or something. Soaking wet and probably getting water everywhere. "Sounds great! Let's go check it out!"

The shower was turned off, and Naruto stepped out. A towel covered her while water dripped all over the floor.

"Dry up! How many times have I told you to not drench my apartment after you take a shower!" Anko snapped and closed the newspaper. Scowling at Naruto for forgetting again. This might be a problem when they moved in together…

"You should get a second towel, Anko! It's cold to dry my hair without a towel to cover myself with.
And my clothes get all wet if I dress before drying up." Naruto whined, but stepped back into the bathroom.

"Get a towel yourself! You are such a leech! Borrowing my stuff without asking." Anko muttered.

"Hey, you know what?" Naruto asked and changed the subject, Anko just waited for her to continue without responding.

"I trained with Iruka, Ensui and Hitomi today too. Kushina-nee had me train with them." She explained and came back into the room a second time. This time with clothes on and her head wrapped in Anko's towel.

"Really? Learned anything?" Anko asked uninterested.

"Yeah, Hitomi hold grudges. She refused to even look at me all throughout training. I do not want to meet her in a dark alley, she seems really angry at me. I also think she dropped something in my water container, so I am not drinking anything from that can before I rinse it out. Which means I need water. I'm so thirsty I feel like I can swallow a lake right now, dattebayo."

Next to team practice, training with Kushina, missions and looking for an apartment, Naruto didn't have much spare time. It was just enough to get a few hours of sleep and fill her stomach with food before she again was heading somewhere in a hurry.

The housing market was very competitive, and the first eight apartments they looked at got snapped up by other people. It was increasingly frustrating, since each home they'd looked at always created a desire to live there. Or maybe it was living somewhere else than the orphanage that was so tempting. But they didn't give up, and on the ninth apartment they finally got lucky.

It was a small apartment on the top floor of an old and tired building. They had to go up five flights of stairs to get to their home, or just run up the wall and through the window.

When entering the dwelling they were met by a slim corridor with three doors, before it widened out into a shared kitchen and lounge.

Two of the three doors led to bedrooms. The rooms were long but narrow with a small window at the end. If you put down a futon, it used up most of the floor space.

Luckily there were hanging cabinets high up on the wall, so while there weren't any space for storage furniture, at least they had somewhere to put their clothes. They just had to climb up the wall to get there.

Between the two bedrooms was a private bathroom that needed a desperate clean, but looked more than sufficient for the two young girls.

It also had a combined living room and kitchen with two decent sized windows and nice overview of Konoha. This room was the reason Anko loved the place, because the shared living room was larger than the whole of her old apartment.

The building was a little outside of the village center, almost by the southern borders, which was why the price was reduced. It was also a couple of streets behind the Uchiha district, but neither saw a problem with that. It just meant they had a shorter trip to get a free meal from Kagami and Shisui when they ran low on money.

To afford the deposit Anko had to give up her place and use her old deposit to pay for the new one,
while at the same time she used some of her savings to book the apartment.

Naruto didn't have the right amount yet, but it wasn't far off, so she'd promised Anko to pay her a share from her future mission checks until she'd caught up. It helped that Anko had already most of the furniture they'd need, at least that was one expense Naruto didn't have to worry about right away.

All in all things were steadily falling into place.

On moving day, Anko was kind enough to join Naruto when she went to get her last bag at the orphanage. Anko was curious if anything had changed, and enjoyed the look of fright on the children's face when they recognized her in the hallway. Naruto only rolled her eyes at her antics.

Naruto wanted to say goodbye to a few people too. Few, being the keyword.

Her room was empty when she entered it, and Naruto made quick progress packing up her stuff. Naruto didn't own much, but she felt she needed to do a thorough job. So after packing up they got out the mop and duster and cleaned the whole room.

A parting present to the other girls and to Madam May.

They had fun reminiscing about all the things they'd done when they had both lived there – short though it had been - but they both had memories from this place that no one could take away. Good and bad.

Anko shared a story from before Naruto had moved in, how she and Emi had practiced in the garden while Akiko and the girls had been so young they still needed help going to the toilet, and Naruto shared more recent stories. How Akiko had given her a coupon to Ichiraku ramen and how everyone was now terrified of Naruto because of her association with Anko.

An hour later they went downstairs, Anko taking her bag of stuff outside while Naruto went looking for Madam May in the common room. The woman was cleaning. Like always.

This time she was sweeping the floor while some of the children were playing a board game by the table. "Hey… Madam May." Naruto said and walked up to the old woman. She looked up and smiled warmly when Naruto stopped in front of her.

"I wanted to say… bye. I'm moving out today. And I was looking for Akiko too, but I haven't seen her." Naruto said a little awkwardly.

"Yes, I know. I hope you'll have a good home where you're moving. And that you and Mitarashi get along. But you'll have to look for Akiko in the village. I think she and her friend went to the market earlier." Madam May answered while putting away the broom. "I'm really glad I got to know you, Naruto-chan. The orphanage will not be the same without you."

Naruto felt herself blush, and she smiled sheepishly up to Madam May. Stepping forward, she hugged the woman tightly. "Thank you… For being so good to everyone. You do so much, every day, and you have so much to deal with. I wish things were better out in the world, because you don't deserve to be pushed this hard. At least now there's one person less you have to make sure goes to bed on time." Naruto said jokingly.

Madam May hugged her a little tighter, giving a warm squeeze before releasing Naruto. The woman looked a little red at the corner of her eyes, but kept smiling.

"I'll see you soon, Madam May. I won't forget all you've done just because I'm not living here anymore."
"You're such a darling, Naruto-chan. Take care of yourself okay? And Mitarashi too. You're both hot headed, and though you're younger I still feel you're the more mature one. It would break my heart if I heard something happened to you out on the battlefield. Be safe okay?" She said and stroked Naruto over the cheek with one swift movement.

Naruto nodded, trying to reassure Madam May with her expression.

"Are you ready, Naru?" Asked Anko from the hallway, peeking into the common room from the doorway.

The children in the corner tensed up, the boys were Naruto's age and they knew perfectly well who Anko was. Naruto couldn't contain the grin that split her face. "Sure. I'm coming right away." She told Anko who shrugged.

Anko looked uncertainly at Madam May, but with a nod she left the doorway and walked outside again.

"I'll see you around?" Asked Naruto and turned back to Madam May.

"Yes. And you're welcome to stop by anytime, Naruto-chan."

Outside Anko was waiting with two small boxes of Naruto's possessions. Some of it was actually Anko's stuff which Naruto had borrowed, but was now being returned to their owner.

Anko bent down and handed Naruto one of the boxes before picking the other up herself.

Naruto looked back at the orphanage. Feeling a strange mix of nostalgia come over her at the idea of leaving the place for good.

The first time around she hadn't cared. It had been completely fine and she hadn't given it a second thought. In fact she couldn't even remember the day she had left the building. She only remembered entering her new home. Happy to be away from this place.

This time around it was different.

It hadn't been a dream home, maybe not even a good home, but it had been home. There were two people in there Naruto would genuinely miss not seeing, and her occupation would most likely make sure she saw them a lot less than she'd prefer.

Naruto wondered how and when she was going to contact Akiko. She needed to give Akiko her new address and invite her over for dinner sometime.

She would like to keep contact, just to make sure everything went okay for the girl. And make sure she didn't bolt from the village...

"Can we go now?" Anko asked impatiently, and with a last look over her shoulder Naruto followed Anko.

"I would really like to look for Akiko later. Tell her my new address so she knows where she can find me." Naruto told Anko who sent a skeptical look in Naruto's direction.

"Why? I know you talked like… once every month, but do you seriously think she'll come by our apartment?" Anko asked.

"We didn't talk because Akiko didn't want to be seen speaking to me. You know how her friends
are, and they're children. Children are cruel, but Akiko isn't cruel. She just tries to fit in. I understand that. If things were different I'm sure we'd be better friends. And if she knows where we live she can come by without her friends, and you'd be able to see that she's alright too."

"You and Akiko are the same age, Naru. By that definition you're a cruel child too."

"Maybe I am?" Naruto retorted and smiled mischievously.

"Fine. We can look for her after we get your boxes back to the apartment, but don't expect me to like Akiko anytime soon. She's such a crybaby, and she's *civilian.*" Anko replied and whispered the last word like it was a curse word. Naruto scowled disapprovingly to Anko who just grinned teasingly back.

"Not so long ago I was a civilian too. It's only months since I graduated from the academy." Naruto answered and stuck out her tongue at Anko.

"But *now* you're a Chūnin, and you were never as lame as the rest of the children. That's how I can overlook the fact that you're just a little brat." Anko answered.

Naruto chuckled and shook her head. "A lot of people got promoted this time… Shisui, Rin, Ensui, Ibiki, Hayate and Asuma also got promoted. That's like..."

"Seven people,"

"Right, seven people got promoted. When you got promoted there was only four."

"Yes, but the criteria is lowering these days. Too many people are dying and we need people constantly out on the field. More promotions and younger soldiers means more security for the village. In fact I thought more people would be promoted. During the last Chūnin exam there were nine promotions." Anko said casually.

Naruto looked startled up at Anko. "Nine?"

"Yeah, Genma, Obito, Ebisu and a bunch of older ninjas made Chūnin that time. Ibiki's team wasn't participating that time, and neither was Kurenai's team."

"I see..."

"Ebisu wasn't Chūnin level in my opinion. But Konoha needed ninjas, and he did good during the exam. He worked very well with his team and that was his downfall out on the field. He got separated from everyone, and alone he wasn't much of a challenge." Anko mused while looking at the cover of the box she was carrying.

Naruto didn't know what to say. Ebisu hadn't been the best combat ninja even in her own time, but he had been far from useless. Anko was right though, he had been a good teammate. A good comrade. It had been the separation from everyone that had killed him. If they had stuck together better he could have survived.

"Yeah... Ebisu would have lived if I had stayed with him."

Anko looked sharply down at Naruto, her eyes narrowing. "That's not what I meant. Don't blame yourself. You did more than anyone that day! I meant that Ebisu was unlucky to get into that situation in the first place. Our attackers were constantly trying to split everyone up, and you and Ebisu have never really battled together. It was that he was separated from his real team that killed him. Genma and Gai knows him in and out, and his best chance laid with them. But even then..."
They both got lost in thoughts after that, strolling calmly through One Legged Parade while their thoughts lingered on a tomb at Konoha cemetery.

Kakashi made his way slowly down the stairs of his apartment complex.

The hallway was lit up by the sun streaming in through the glass door, and blinded him slightly when he stopped in front of his mail box. He hadn't checked it in over two weeks. Or was it three? It was hard to keep track of something he cared so little about. As long as his bills were paid no one cared if Kakashi checked his mail regularly or not.

He was cutting it close this time, the Chūnin exam had distracted him and kept him away from the apartment more than usual. He never used the entrance hall anyway, and that's where the mailbox was located. When you could just walk up the wall, what was the point of taking the stairs?

But he had a couple of days to chase down the landlord to pay his rent. If not Kakashi was sure he'd stop by, and he hated having strangers inside his home.

Opening the mailbox and taking his hand inside, he felt around for any paper. The box was one of the highest ones up on the wall, and Kakashi couldn't actually see inside without having to jump. So his hand groped around for a moment while he stood on his toes. At the very back he felt an edge connect with the tip of his fingers, and efficiently he slid the letter out.

Looking at the front he saw it was addressed from the Hokage office, and his curiosity got the better of him. It wasn't often he got a letter from the Hokage, they were usually oral reports or handed to him directly, and he was curious what this could be.

Usually he would have taken the letter with him upstairs, opening it in the privacy of his home. But he found himself opening the edge with a kunai from his pocket. Peeling out the folded letter inside the envelope Kakashi read the title. 'Yearly mission summary'

His curiosity dwindled, but he kept reading. He had received these before and found them useful to have. It was a list of all the missions he'd done over the span of a year, how long they took and what rank they had been classified as. When he went upstairs he had to archive them properly in his folder. The one with all his pay slips.

He should also double check it to make sure it was accurate.

He didn't want the Hokage office to make a blunder. That a C-rank was suddenly D-rank, or a nine day mission had been rounded down to a week. He hated sloppiness, and though he knew the people up at the Hokage office dealing with paper reports and filing was both overworked and understaffed, he still didn't appreciate blunders such as that.

There was a change in the report compared to the ones he'd received the previous years. Kakashi noted that at the end of the letter there was no longer a paragraph stating how many vacation days he'd worked up. War apparently didn't allow for vacation days, but Kakashi couldn't say it surprised him much. In fact he found his spirit lifting slightly. He had nothing to do at home anyway, and training was part of their days off, not vacation time.

Kakashi was too engrossed reading through the report to pay attention to the sounds coming from the entrance door. It wasn't before an echo bounced through the room that Kakashi looked up.

"That's why the building looked so familiar, dattebayo!"
Naruto and Anko were standing at the opposite end of the room. Both holding a box each and staring wide eyed at Kakashi.

Though the answer to what they were doing there was obvious, Kakashi still felt the question slip through his lips. "What the hell are you doing in my apartment building?"

"Kakashi lives here too?" Asked Anko with a tilt of her head, ignoring Kakashi completely and directing the question to her blonde best friend. Kakashi cringed at the word 'too'.

"I knew this building looked familiar! I must have seen Kakashi go in here! Of course! It was that time I followed him." Naruto said while slapping her forehead.

"You've stalked me?" Asked Kakashi.

"That's just great. We'll have this moper in the same building." Anko muttered, again ignoring Kakashi's question. He was growing annoyed. Neither of the girls felt inclined to answer him properly.

"Hey! This will be fun! Maybe we can have dinner together!" Naruto exclaimed happily.

Kakashi felt his eyebrow twitch.

"No!" Anko responded at once. "You didn't go to the academy with this guy, Naru. He's such a downer it's contagious. And anyway; I'm not wasting food to feed that guy."

Kakashi knew he should feel insulted, but somehow didn't. Anko had never walked around the bush and was always up front with everyone. It could be a hassle, but usually he appreciated the efficiency of her way of speaking. Except when she wasn't answering a direct question. But he had no wish to have dinner with them, so she was doing him a favor.

"Don't be mean, Anko. Kakashi is cool. And he's now our neighbor, we should be polite to our neighbors! Hey Kakashi! Which floor do you live on? We're on the top floor!" Naruto said and walked up to him.

Kakashi felt his teeth grit. He was on the second highest floor. He just hoped it wasn't the one directly underneath theirs. "I'm-"

"You're on the second highest up aren't you? I think I saw you jump in through the window there!" Naruto interrupted him, and looked like she'd solved the mystery of life at the exclamation.

"When the hell was this?!" He snapped back angrily. The letter in his hand completely forgotten while he thought of ways to remedy this catastrophe.

"Uh..." Naruto's eyes suddenly widened, and she slumped back a little. Kakashi wasn't sure what that was about. "A while ago..." She said with a slightly panicked look. Kakashi raised an eyebrow.

"Were you trying to sneak into the ANBU station again? Without me? That's what we do together, Naru! We had a pact!" Anko moped displeased.

"Um... I was just looking around." Naruto fumbled with her words, but Kakashi gathered she genuinely hadn't known Kakashi lived in this building before renting the apartment on the top floor.

"You have a pact? To look for the ANBU station together?" Kakashi asked disbelievingly. What an odd and unnecessary pact to make. Anko sent him a dirty glare, and again his question was left unanswered.
"We're in 5C, which room is yours?" Asked Anko instead, still annoyed, but not at Kakashi in particular.

"..." Kakashi felt his temper rise again. This was just perfect… Just fucking perfect. Though he didn't want to answer, old habits were hard to ignore. He always wanted to have the answer at hand, but also make sure everyone knew he had the answer, and the instinct to show how much he knew won over even in a setting such as this. "4C..."

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! The chapter was beta'd by the wonderful AnjoRemix!

Finally there will be a time skip! I realized while writing this story that I do not like writing kids as main characters. I'm having problems keeping them young, and I'm itching to have them enter their teens. It just so happens they won't until the war is over, and that's not quite yet. (Still have bit to cover before that time comes) But they will be older in the next chapter. Just not as old as I'm looking forwards to having them...
Kakashi was busying himself making dinner. Chopping up vegetables for a large pot of stew brewing on the stove. It was one of the easiest dishes he could think of, but he was creating a lot of food considering he had no one to share it with.

But Kakashi liked making food in large batches. Sometimes, especially as of late, cooking single meals left him depressed. It reminded him that there was no one to share it with. No family to chat with about his day or comment on the food, and it had made him lazy in the long run.

He had then found out that larger meals meant more leftovers, and after adjusting up the ingredient quantities he had eventually started putting more effort into what he was making. The leftovers, which was the majority of the meal, was frozen down to be saved for later. That meant less cooking, and Kakashi wasn't opposed to that concept either.

That way it looked a little less pathetic when he went grocery shopping and no longer needed to pick out all those single items that screamed; "loner."

Kakashi wasn't sure why he had started caring so much about being a loner. He'd never really been bothered by being alone before, but in the last few years that had changed.

It had started with his team. They had somehow managed - in their own annoying way - to remind him that not everything had to be done alone. Which somehow made him very aware of how secluded he was. By choice.

Rin, Obito and Minato were becoming people he could count on. Two of them more than the last, but yet he was starting to grow attached. Which couldn't be good.

Kakashi contemplated if maybe he really should start making single meals again. It might be worth eating sandwiches for dinner again if that odd sense of loneliness would leave him. And it would clear up some space in the freezer too.

Though he also had someone else to blame for his growing awareness of his lack of social life; his upstairs neighbors. Which he was rudely reminded of just a moment later.

"Kakashi!"

The boy froze mid stir, and slowly his eyes rose up. One of his two upstairs neighbors was sitting on his window frame. A bowl in her hand a wide grin on her face.

"Something smells good, dattebayo! Want to invite us to dinner today?" Naruto asked. Kakashi wasn't sure why she did. She already knew the answer to that. Two years of being asked to eat at his place, and he had yet to comply.
"No. Stop trying to leech off me. I'm making a batch to last a few days. If you ate it all there would be nothing to leave in the freezer, and I would have to make the meal all over again." Kakashi replied, continuing his stir while Naruto jumped into his kitchen.

"Why don't you come up to us then? We were going to make Tonkatsu, but if you can join us, and act as something else but the pain in the butt that you are we'll make eggplant soup, dattebayo!" She announced happily.

Kakashi ignored the insult, but couldn't deny that Naruto had hit below the belt. He loved anything involving eggplant.

He thought about it for a moment. Considering the pros and cons of joining Naruto and Anko, his upstairs neighbors, the bane of his existence for the last two years.

It would mean his stew would last a day longer. And it was a free meal. He could suffer through Naruto and Anko's bickering for an hour. They were like an old married couple.

Still, he had to check if she was serious with her offer. "Eggplant?"

"Yes! And I promise I'll have nothing to do with the heating or stirring. I'll just cut up vegetables while Anko does the fancy cooking part. After the stove fire last month Anko won't even let me close to that side of the kitchen. Which is annoying, since the fridge is there. I still have to sneak out my breakfast before she gets up in the morning."

Kakashi remembered the evacuation after the fire alarm went off about four weeks ago, and thought silently that Anko had good reason for making the call to keep Naruto away from the stove. "Fine. When should I come up?" He asked while looking at the consistency of his stew. It had turned out well, and it would be great for dinner the next day.

But he would have something even more appealing today, which was exciting him more than it should. Kakashi was again reminded of how boring his life was outside of missions if free eggplant soup could make him this excited.

"Yay! Dinner is in two hours. Can you wait that long?" Asked Naruto with a toothy smile.

Kakashi rolled his eyes. "I've gone three days without food before. I think I'll manage a couple of hours."

Naruto jumped back onto the window frame, waving as she ran up the wall and into the window directly above his. Sometimes he really hated that Anko and Naruto had picked the apartment above his own to move into.

It had been quite the shock for all three of them when they'd run into each other the day they moved in, and afterwards he'd been annoyed for a month.

The girls were always so loud.

Their indoor voices were more fitting in a crowded sports arena than in a quiet apartment block. They bickered about once a day over stupid stuff, and Naruto had no idea what the recycling bin was for.

But he'd slowly grown used to it. They were sometimes on missions for a long stretch of time, and if Kakashi was home those days he would appreciate the quiet all the more for it.

The sounds also gave an illusion of company. He had learned quite a bit about them simply through
eavesdropping.

Naruto had started training with Kushina years ago, and still met up two times a week. Whenever Kushina and her genin team came over for dinner it was pure pandemonium up there. He had even learned their names. Shisui and Ensui he already knew, but through Naruto's carrying voice he'd learned that Kushina's two other students were named Iruka and Hitomi… The most annoying part was that Kushina always felt the need to invite Kakashi along too. Which meant he had found himself in the middle of a dinner party on multiple occasions.

He also heard it each time Naruto was reading up on something Kushina or Orochimaru had instructed her to. Her complaining was very vocal, and Anko's replies just as loudly.

But next to the constant footsteps, arguments and unexpected visitors through his kitchen window Anko also had a constant stream of reptiles coming and going. Kakashi hadn't been the only one to complain about those. The old woman living next door to him had a heart attack only two months ago, and Kakashi had seen a snake slithering up the wall about that time of the day. Luckily the woman survived.

Kakashi himself also had some unpleasant encounters with Anko's summons. He'd once woken up with a snake calling herself Hebimei wrapped around his leg - and freaked out.

Anko had been laughing for an entire week afterwards while blaming Naruto for the incident. Naruto was Hebimei's usual source of warmth, but after she threw the snake out the window and bolted it shut, the snake had crawled in his own window instead.

Apparently he made a good heating mat.

To this day Kakashi could still wake up feeling nervous. Especially if the wind from the window made his sheets move. He always started wondering if the snake was in his bed again. After that incident he had considered getting a dog. A ninken to be more accurate. One with sharp fangs. Kakashi had gone as far as talking to Inuzuka Tsume just two weeks ago about adopting one of the puppies being born soon.

But most noticeable, above all those annoying traits, was the laugh. Naruto and Anko was often laughing and joking. Since the apartment block was not properly sound insulated, Kakashi sometimes found himself chuckling along to one of their conversations.

He appreciated that he could just lock all windows and doors, that way they couldn't come barging into his home, but he also had to admit their presence upstairs was not solely bad.

Kakashi took the casserole off the pan, putting it on the side to cool off before he would pack it into boxes. Not noticing he was humming while he continued working.

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Shisui was almost late. He was rummaging through the kitchen cupboard for the paper plates he knew should be there somewhere.

He knew perfectly well Naruto and Anko would not have enough plates for the dinner. And unexpected people had a habit of showing up, so he wanted to make sure there was enough this time. Finally he found them inside a Tupperware box, and while wondering what they had been doing in there Shisui hurried into the living room to say goodbye to his father.

He was surprised by the sight that met him. His dad was sitting in his favorite chair, fast asleep.

He had a glass of water still propped in his hand, leaning against the arm rest. The fact that the water
hadn't spilled over was a testament to how tired Kagami was. Shisui got his restless sleeping habits from his father, and right now Kagami was as still as brick wall.

Quietly he tip toed across the room and loosened the glass from his dad's grip. With some effort on Shisui's part Kagami released the glass, his eyelids flickering slightly at the disturbance.

Shisui was already on his way back to the kitchen when Kagami woke up. "Shisui?" He asked confused, his eyes drowsy and far away while he massaged his temple with his fingers.

"Hi dad, I just wanted to tell you I'm leaving for dinner at Naruto's and Anko's place. Will you be alright by yourself? I can stay if you want to? Or you could come along too. I think we're having Tonkatsu, and they usually make a lot." Shisui said and smiled when his father seemed to realize where he was.

"No… I'll be fine. I think I'll have the leftovers from yesterday… What time is it?" He asked confused and looked towards the windows. The sun was low on the sky, filtering through the window glass and heating up half of Kagami's face.

"Six. How long have you been asleep in that chair?" Asked Shisui and grinned when Kagami's eyes widened in surprise. His eyebrows raised and his mouth opening in an O.

"It's that late? Kami... I should get down to the station then, I promised I'd be there for a report. I've slept for hours."

Kagami got up from his chair and straightened out his black sweater. He stretched his hands over his head, loosening up the kink in his back while moaning in discomfort.

"You should ask for some time off, dad. You've been awfully busy lately..." Shisui muttered and dragged a hand through his unruly hair, wondering if his father was reaching his limit. He was thinner and more haggard looking than he'd ever seen him. Most people did these days.

"No time for that, son. Everyone needs to lend a hand in the war, now more than ever." Kagami muttered and looked down at a photography standing on the book shelf. It was of Shisui's mum and grandfather. Neither were alive anymore and hadn't been for years. Shisui couldn't even remember his grandfather, not outside the random pictures his dad had shown him. But his mum had been around just long enough for Shisui to have memories of her.

"You're of no help if you fall asleep during guard duty." Shisui replied and walked with his dad out to the main entrance. Both sat down and put on their sandals. His father still looked like he was trying to fight his sleepiness.

"I don't fall asleep when I don't feel safe." Kagami explained with a small smile in his son's direction. Shisui peeked sideways, one eyebrow raising at the comment.

"So... you feel safe in Konoha?"

Kagami thought about it for a moment, using his time while he got the strap on his left sandal secured. "Konoha has good security, and we haven't been breached yet. I relax better at home than anywhere else."

"You didn't really answer that question, dad." Shisui answered and grinned when his father ruffled up his hair.

"Konoha is safe. But you're smart enough to know nowhere is perfect and you know what you should do if anything ever happens." Kagami was serious, but Shisui had heard this mantra so many
times he knew the words by heart.

"Sure, you've told me about a thousand times. Makes me very optimistic about the security in Konoha with your constant safety drills."

Kagami opened the front door for them and walked out. "Better to be safe than sorry, son."

Shisui stepped outside after his father and locked up the house. His father waited until Shisui joined him. "I know."

The police station and the girl's apartment were in opposite directions, so Shisui halted when they came to the end of the street where they'd part ways. He was about to tell him to have a good evening, when his father got ahead of him. "Oh, and before I forget – Fugaku asked if you could come by and train with Itachi-kun tomorrow."

"Really? I'm not sure… uncle Fugaku training methods is… advanced." Shisui muttered and stuffed his hands into his pockets.

"I know, but that's why you should show Itachi-kun how it's supposed to be. Come on Shisui, the boy likes you a lot and you have the day off don't you?"

"Yes…" Shisui answered dejectedly.

He liked the kid, he really did. Itachi was a kind and quiet boy, and frightfully skilled for someone so young, but he could imagine more productive ways to spend his day than following Fugaku's strict training regime for his way too young son.

On his day off all he really wanted to do was eat an ice cream, go swimming and sleep. Or a sleepy swim while eating ice cream. Something along those lines.

"Should I tell him you have time?" Asked Kagami.

Shisui didn't see a way out of it, so reluctantly he agreed. "Sure, why not? If they have time I could invite my team along too. I'd like to see how Itachi-kun reacts to someone outside the Uchiha clan anyway."

"Good idea. The girls will love Itachi-kun. He's such a polite kid."

"I'm more afraid what he'll think of them, and what he might say to his father. Uncle Fugaku is one tough guy."

"I'm sure he's heard plenty about your teammates already. Mikoto was your exam proctor, and she went on and on about Naruto-chan for months after the Chūnin exam." Kagami chuckled. "Just like you really. You never shut up about her. Sure she's not your girlfriend?" He asked teasingly, causing Shisui's eyes to widen in outrage.

"She's just my friend! Why do you always ask that?!"

"Anko then? She has a colorful language, but quite charismatic. And she's pretty too." Kagami said while Shisui huffed indignantly.

"Neither of them is my girlfriend! I don't want a girlfriend! And if I did it wouldn't be any of those two."

"If you say so." Kagami hummed when his son stomped his foot, not sure if his dad really believed
him or not. Kagami was doubtlessly teasing him, but Shisui got so many comments his fuse was growing dangerously short these days.

Since his teammates were both girls – a very rare occurrence, since most times there were either all boy's teams or at most one girl – he was often teased about it. Especially from his old classmates.

Of course Mizuki was constantly throwing comments in his direction, mostly because of the bad blood between him and Naruto, where Shisui had somehow gotten caught in the crossfire. Iruka would also tease Shisui for being teamed up with two girls, and about how one is more than enough. Even Chou, who was a girl, liked to mock him.

Shisui never talked back though. He happened to like his teammates. They were the best teammates in the world, and no one badmouthed any of them in front of him.

That included whenever Naruto would burst and start cursing Orochimaru's existence. Shisui could be quite harsh with her for being rude. It didn't happen as often these days, but he could read his friend like an open book. She loathed their sensei.

Therefore he hated it when his dad would start teasing him about Naruto or Anko being his girlfriend. Girls were strange, silly and argued a lot. Especially Naruto and Anko. But his teammates were strong and capable too, in fact they were by far the strongest team out of their graduation class.

"I'm going now dad. You can tell uncle Fugaku I'll come by in the morning to train with Itachi-kun. I need to go buy some ice cream to bring to the dinner now."

"Dinner and desert with your girlfriends?"

"Shut up!" Shisui exclaimed and turned on his heel. Marching down the street and leaving his father chuckling behind.

The tapping on the door was consistent, and Anko threw her tea towel over her shoulder to get to the door. "I told you to get the door, Naru!" Anko shouted. Her roommate was standing by the window, the designated place she'd ordered Naruto to stay until their guests arrived.

A normal Monday dinner had turned into a full blown out dinner party for twelve. And they really didn't have space for such a crowd. So Naruto had been sent out an hour ago to gather anything that could be used as a chair or a table.

"You also told me not to move an inch!" Naruto shouted angrily back from the window frame.

The girl was dangerous in the kitchen, so Anko had ordered her to stay by the window to minimize any upcoming damage. It was strange, since Naruto was quite skilled at making camp fire meals during missions, but when it came to a normal kitchen stove she was a catastrophe waiting to happen.

Anko jumped over a few boxes Naruto had found in a container by the equipment store to get to the door, and opened it with a bang while someone was still knocking on the other side. "You little shit!" Anko pointed furiously at Obito.

The boy paled, if his expression was any indication he had expected Naruto to open the door and not Anko.

"Uh..." Obito answered, his hand still raised after consistently knocking on their door without pause.
"Get your ass inside, and take one of these boxes with you into the living room. We don't have enough chairs so we're using some boxes and other crap Naruto found to sit on." Anko snapped and turned on her heel, deliberately not picking up a box herself.

Obito, Rin and Genma shared a look of sudden regret.

After half a moment hesitation Genma took the lead, and took his sandals off before picking up the box looking the most clean and carried it into the flat.

Naruto had constructed the seating area. Their normal dinner table, which could fit four people if you didn't mind sitting closely, had been elongated with boxes on each side that didn't fit in height or width with the main table. Still, it made sure everyone had a place to put their plates.

It caused the room to look unusually small, since the table used up most of the floor space, and it would get a lot worse when they placed their chair boxes around.

Anko returned to the stove to check the food one more time. It was mostly finished already, though some of it was quickly going cold. The stove didn't have more than two heating plates, and the tiny oven was also cramped with food. The blaring heat radiating from the kitchen was making the apartment feel like a thousand degrees.

"It smells great here. How many are coming to dinner?" Rin asked politely and put down a box, Obito and Genma followed suit while keeping as much distance as they could manage from Anko.

"You three, Gai, Kakashi, Shisui, Ensui, Iruka, Hitomi, Akiko and Aoba. We're having-" But another knock on the door interrupted Anko, and they all turned towards the door. "I have to deal with dinner, you open the door Naru, but don't you dare touch anything!" Anko threatened while pointing at her with a wooden spoon dripping with eggplant soup.

"Fine." Naruto answered and carefully danced around the crowd to get to the hallway.

"Hey! Come in, come in! I can take your jacket Akiko, I'll just put it in my room since there's no space here in the hallway. And thank you! You didn't have to bring anything Shisui, but this ice cream will be really great for dessert! Would you put it in the fridge so it doesn't melt? It's pretty hot in here because the stove is on, and Anko has banned me from going anywhere near her kitchen today." They heard from the hallway, but Anko was too focused on the thousand things she needed to finish to look up and see who had arrived this time.

"That's how you're supposed to greet a guest." Obito whispered. Anko still overheard it, and threw a dirty glare over her shoulder. Obito shrunk nervously behind a giggling Rin.

Naruto, Shisui and Akiko soon entered the room, but Anko stopped Naruto before she could return to the window. "You can stand in the hallway and greet the rest of our guests. The less you move the less chances there are you'll break anything." She said sweetly, the threat clear for anyone in the room to hear.

"You're not the boss of me. I live here as much as you do, dattebayo!" Naruto complained and threw her hands up in the air.

One of her arms knocked the spoon out of Anko's hand, and it did a wide summersault through the room before it landed on the couch. Everyone following it's descent with wide eyes as sauce splashed out on the fabric and wall. Some eggplant soup even got attached to the ceiling.

Anko's eyes closed, and she breathed deeply before her eyes opened again. They were murderous.
"Uh… sorry… I'll clean that up…" Anko's eyes shot lightning at those words, and Naruto backtracked. "Or… I'll just… stay here… hehe…"

Half an hour later everyone except two had arrived, and Naruto was sitting in the hallway while everyone else had seated themselves around the make shift table. It was easier if everyone were just sitting down instead of walking around. There just wasn't enough space.

Rin had luckily cleaned up the eggplant spill without any incident, and was now sitting together with Obito, Genma and Shisui squeezed together on the couch.

Gai, Akiko, Ensui and Hitomi sat opposite them on cardboard boxes. Anko had grabbed a proper chair, and so had Shisui, the last one they owned was occupied by Iruka. Which meant the only remaining seats where the ones hardest to get to, on boxes in the corners.

A knock was heard throughout the room and Naruto sprang up to open it. "Hey! You came!" Naruto exclaimed and smiled brightly to Aoba. The boy smiled apologetic back.

"Thanks for inviting me. Anko said there would be many here today and I'm sorry I'm late. I was on border patrol and I just got back half an hour ago." Aoba answered sheepishly.

"No worries, Kakashi isn't here yet either, but he'll be here in a minute so we'll start eating soon. Just grab a seat." Naruto said brightly.

Aoba followed her through the hallway and looked startled at the overcrowded room with dishes put on cardboard boxes and people sitting in different levels of heights. "um..."

"There's a seat here." Anko said and pointed to the box squeezed between the couch, the wall and box-table. Aoba had to do the wall walking exercise to access it.

"Kakashi-kun isn't here yet either, but he'll be here in a minute so we'll start eating soon. Just grab a seat." Naruto said brightly.

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"Kakashi-kun isn't here yet, we shouldn't start without him." Rin said carefully when Aoba shifted his way into a somewhat comfortable position.

"I'm on it!" Naruto said and jumped across the room and out the window.

A minute later she was back, pushing Kakashi through the window with very little grace.

"Found him! He tried to run for it, but I caught him before he could get out the front door!" Naruto said grinning widely. "We even made eggplant soup, Kakashi! For you! The least you can do is show up for dinner." Naruto scolded and forced Kakashi into the seat furthest away from the window.

"Ehem." Anko made an angry sound in the back of her throat. "I think you mean to say I made eggplant soup, Naru. You had nothing to do with it except inviting too many guests than we can cater."

Kakashi ignored Anko and instead complained to the room in general. "I would have heard everything from my own apartment. It would be as good as being here since this apartment is about as soundproof as a paper sheet. Mah, when you said dinner I wasn't signing up for whatever camping trip you girls have cooked up this time." Kakashi muttered but sat down in defeat on a box between Anko and Iruka.

The box was pretty low, and both Anko and Iruka would have to look down to see him.

Naruto sat down on a box in the corner closest to the hallway. "Well, everyone is here now, so stop
complaining and let's start eating!"

Dinner was a little awkward to begin with, not everyone knew each other and the conversation was scattered for most of the first half hour. Kakashi only answered to direct questions, and never engaged anyone in a lengthy conversation.

No one dared speak to Anko at all. The girl was too stressed making sure everyone could reach the dish they wanted. She walked back and forth to the counter to bring the things that couldn't fit on the table, and used the rest of the time fuming on her food.

But with some effort Naruto managed to not knock anything over again, which made Anko relax more as time went on.

While they ate Naruto and Akiko was catching up. The civilian girl was the most skittish out of everyone. She had never been in a context where ninjas outnumbered civilians, and in this instance it was eleven to one. "So what's going on? I stopped by last month and brought Madam May some cake we got from our last mission. The lady we escorted was really pleased with our service and we got like five cakes to bring back home. But Madam May looked really tired. Is everything alright at the orphanage?" Asked Naruto while leaning across the table to speak with Akiko.

The girl sighed and shook her head. "Not really. There are too many new kids. A lot of war orphans are being put into the orphanage these days. There's way too many, and Madam May's assistant quit about two months ago, so they're more short staffed than ever." Akiko answered with a frown.

Anko looked sideways at Akiko, a somewhat sympathetic look on her face. "The older children are being asked to leave before they turn eighteen. Anyone who can provide for themselves is being kicked out or asked to leave to clear up space for the youngers who is most in need."

"That's horrible…" Answered Rin and peeked over Obito's shoulder to look at Akiko.

"It's okay. Normally we are not allowed independence before we turn eighteen. Sixteen if you apply to the council and get a job. Now anyone who can state a new address is getting their stuff packed up for them." Akiko answered with a casual shrug.

"You're thinking of moving out, aren't you?" Asked Anko knowingly.

Akiko shifted a little on her cardboard box before nodding. "Yeah, I think I will. I found someone who said they're hiring, and if I'm lucky I could lodge in their attic for six months while my trial period is going. Until now a girl a couple of years older than me did the work there, but she just got promoted." Akiko explained.

"What will you be doing?" Asked Naruto curious.

Akiko finished chewing and swallow before answering. "Cleaning mostly, and helping out with stocking shelves. But if I get a permanent position there I could eventually become a waitress. That's what the girl before me is doing now."

"What about school? Will you still go to the orphanage classes or switch to one of the communal ones?" Asked Anko with surprising amount of interest considering the topic.

"Oh, no. I wouldn't have time for school. I'd be working from eight in the morning to six in the evening, so I'm dropping out if I get this job." Akiko answered in a quiet voice, her cheeks heating up. Anko frowned and turned back to her dish, using her spoon to move around a bean in her eggplant soup.
"Is that... the best option?" Asked Gai carefully, also taking interest in the topic and looking from Naruto to Akiko to Anko.

Akiko blushed slightly at being addressed by Gai, but answered anyway. Though a little more quiet than normal. "It's not like finishing my education will get me a better job. This is kind of a trial run to see if I can keep up, and I would also get paid. I don't really see the point of finishing school at the orphanage. The ones that do usually have the same jobs as those who don't." Akiko muttered so low Naruto had problems hearing her words.

"Well, if it doesn't work out you can always come here and crash on our couch until you find something else." Suggested Anko and peeked sideways at Akiko. The girl blushed scarlet at Anko's surprising friendliness, and nodded with a faint smile.

Soon everyone had eaten up, and the first thing they did was clean up and throw all the boxes into the hallway so people could sit on the floor. Anko handed out ice cream in paper bowls which Shisui had the foresight to bring with him.

Akiko stayed close to Naruto for most of the evening, but dared to speak with Rin and Obito on a few occasions.

"So you don't have any training in school? Just... gym? Where you are forced to play volleyball?" Asked Obito astonished to a shy looking Akiko.

"Um... Today we actually had ping pong." She answered while fidgeting with the hem of her orphanage T-shirt. That answer seemed even more foreign to Obito, who at once wanted to know the point of doing ping pong for a lesson.

"It's more about staying active. Training is good for you, and I'm a civilian. Our classes are more about learning language, math, history and geography than being taught how to fight." Akiko explained, surprised at Obito's puzzled expression.

"And you still have to go to those kinds of classes? We didn't have to continue them after we graduated the academy. How much is there really to learn about that stuff? And it's so boring! Why didn't you just become a ninja, then you wouldn't have to continue that stuff." Obito answered fascinated by their conversation. Rin was hiding a smile behind her hand while she watched her friend and Akiko try to get a grip on each other's occupation.

By the window Naruto was again sitting in the frame. One leg dangling outside and one inside the living room. She was making sure Kakashi didn't bolt too early by guarding the windows, which he had noticed almost immediately.

Anko was strategically hanging out by the hallway, so both sides were covered while Kakashi was sitting on the floor together with Genma and Gai. Trapped in the middle and highly annoyed about it from the glances he was sending the girls every now and then.

While keeping an eye on Kakashi, Naruto was chatting animatedly with Ensui. "It's just not fair. I am so close, Ensui! So close. I have the three first steps down, but the fourth is kicking my ass. Kushina says it's my internal chakra control that still needs work and that I'm using a pace that's too slow for the chains, but I don't get what she means!" Naruto complained while spooning up soggy ice cream stains left in her bowl.

"You just have to keep at it. Kushina-sensei is sure you can do it. I think you'll do it too, you just haven't figured out the right combination yet. When you get it right once, I'm sure you'll remember how to do it again."
"But that's just it! What if I never get the combination right? And I don't get that knowledge of how to do it? Two years Ensui! Two years! I have never trained on a single technique for so long in my entire life, dattebayo!"

"You're not that old, Naruto. You're doing pretty well for your age I'd say." Iruka muttered grumpily from next to Ensui.

"Well… It's twenty percent of her life." Ensui added with a tilt of his head.

"Exactly! Twenty percent! That's ages!" Naruto agreed while gesturing towards Ensui with the hand still holding her bowl.

"Hey, she's been trying her whole life to be less of a klutz, and she has yet to master that. I'll call twenty percent a small number compared to the success rate you have at some of your other skills." Shisui muttered from behind Iruka, having overheard their conversation.

Naruto narrowed her eyes at him.

"Well, you've been a… a…" She struggled to find a fitting insult. "…an ice cream addict your whole life…" Shisui grinned and spooned up the last of his ice cream from his own bowl.

"And proud of it! I eat way less ice cream than you eat ramen. At least there's milk in ice cream. Ramen is just salt."

Naruto rolled her eyes and pouted. "You're a know it all."

"You're reckless."

"You're painfully obedient."

"You're messy."

"You need a whole floor to sleep on so you don't fall off the bed!"

"You have no self-preservation instincts."

"You don't like orange."

"You like orange."

"Okay, okay, break it up you two before you start a battle. I don't want you to flatten our apartment. It's already under serious strain with how many people we've pushed into it." Anko shouted from across the room.

"Hey! Guess what I got. Just wait a second." Naruto said suddenly, jumping to her feet and looking wildly around the room. Forgetting their argument completely.

Shisui just went with it and shook his head. "She also has a short attention span." He muttered with a grin towards Ensui and Iruka.

Naruto half walked and half jumped to get through the room and into her bedroom. Once inside she found what she was looking for and hid it behind her back.

Proudly she walked out again with a wide smile. Everyone noticed her beaming grin when she returned, and just like she wanted, people stopped their talk to see what was going on. Anko was the only one who was in the known, and she was quickly returning to the mood she'd been in upon their
"You know. I'm not sure any of the people who were there remember this. It was before the outing during the academy that I and Kakashi had a discussion… Or argument really. I promised something that day, and I never go back on my words! So I want you all to see my awesome new jumpsuit!" Naruto said and revealed her newly purchased jumpsuit for everyone in the living room.

The silence was so deep you could have heard a pin drop.

Kakashi looked horror struck, and so did Shisui and Ensui. All three were having flashbacks to a conversation many years before which they had all mostly forgotten because of the aftermath. Obito on the other hand was shining with excitement.

The jumpsuit was orange. Very orange. But a few black details were on the shoulder and sleeves of the jacket. And the trousers were just all orange. Neon orange.

"Sweet!" Exclaimed Obito with a wide smile.

"Uh..." Said Rin with her head tilted to one side.

"Youthful, Naruto-chan!" Gai said and gave her the thumbs up.

"Do you have a death wish?!" Shouted Shisui and jumped to his feet. Kakashi looked like he wanted to yell too, but was too proud to lose his composure the way Shisui had just done. Ensui palmed his face in both hands while taking a calming breath.

"I've inherited your old clothes for years now, Shisui, but now I can wear my very own jumpsuit! Your clothes are all black and it makes me look like I'm going to a funeral all the time. So with that line of thinking it would be you who had a death wish." Naruto replied, a little miffed Shisui seemed to dislike it so much. She knew Kakashi would be annoyed by the colors, but she didn't expect Shisui to react like that too.

"It's dreadful… I can't believe my roommate wants to be seen in public wearing something like that. The inherited boy clothes were so much better. You could go for a tomboy style thing, but this is just tasteless." Anko muttered while shaking her head from side to side.

"It's better to attend a funeral, than being the main event during a funeral." Added Ensui while his eyes stayed narrowed on the orange garments.

"I think it looks awesome, Naruto! Where did you get it?" Asked Obito and got up from the floor.

"I went to the store you recommended, Obito. The second hand store down by the library! It has good fabric and everything. They had more too, but this was the only thing with orange. It was half price too! Can you believe it?"

"Yes, I can." Muttered Shisui under his breath and sat down again.

The day after dinner Shisui was early out of bed and at his uncle's place, just as promised.

He wondered if Naruto and Anko would be at the training ground like they had talked about, but with the mess left in their apartment he wouldn't be surprised if they were cleaning all morning.

He knocked on the door and waited for the sound of footsteps on the other side. Not half a minute later the door opened, and Fugaku looked down at him from the doorway. "Shisui-kun, thanks for
"No problem, uncle Fugaku. You trained me when I was younger. It's the least I can do to repay the favor." Shisui answered. Faking an energy he wasn't feeling. It was a trick he'd picked up from Naruto and Anko.

"You're family, we help each other." Fugaku replied and stepped aside, revealing Itachi standing at the ready to leave.

"Is it okay if I take him to the training ground? I'll follow the training schedule, but I think Itachi-kun will benefit from seeing how someone from outside the clan fights. My teammates will be training there too." Shisui asked in his most respectful tone.

Fugaku glanced back at his son and then to Shisui. "That's a good idea, but have him back by two o'clock though. Itachi has lessons." When Fugaku referred to lessons, it meant the curriculum he and Mikoto instructed him in. Basically history, language, math, geography, and all the other things he would learn when he was old enough to start the academy.

"Of course. Are you ready, Itachi-kun?"

Itachi stepped past his father, "Goodbye, father." he said quietly, nodding to his dad in the passing.

Shisui said goodbye to the Uchiha clan head, and followed after his cousin.

Itachi and Shisui were related on their mother's side. Mikoto was his biological aunt through his mother, which was why Fugaku had taken the time to train Shisui when he was younger. It was not all about honor and strength though, but Fugaku was a difficult man to get to know.

"I'll meet your teammates today, Shisui-san?" Asked Itachi curiously, looking up at him through his straight bangs.

"I think so. They might be late though." Shisui shrugged casually.

"Late?" Asked Itachi, a hint of confusion in his voice. Shisui doubted Itachi had ever been late in his life. He was always kept busy by his parents. If it wasn't training or lessons, he was doing chores. He had been since he was strong enough to carry a broom.

"They might be delayed, since they're cleaning their apartment." Shisui replied kindly.

Itachi nodded again. "They live together?"

"They are roommates."

Itachi didn't find that an adequate answer. "Are they older than you?"

Shisui realized why Itachi found the girls living arrangement curious, and decided to just explain the situation as a whole. "Naruto is my age and Anko is two years older. They're both orphans though, that's why they don't live with their families. It's cheaper for them to share a place then to live on their own."

Itachi understood. "I see."

"So what are we working on today, Itachi-kun? It's Tuesday, which means you had shuriken throwing yesterday, and have poses today." Shisui summarized without letting Itachi answer. "I think we'll do some combat training. That's okay right? You're good with combat positions. You know the theory, and you know how it's supposed to be performed. Today I think it'd be good to put them to
"Practice. See if you can keep them all in mind while sparring."

"That's a good plan. Father has already sparred with me a few times, and I would appreciate more practice."

"I might set you up against Naruto. She's so unpredictable you'll be forced to think outside the norm." Shisui suggested while tilting his head.

They talked calmly back and forth while they headed for the training ground. Shisui always forgot Itachi was six years younger than him when they talked like this.

Fugaku had been adamant that Itachi had to mature quickly, especially considering the war they were fighting. His current maturity and outlook had a lot to do with how he was raised, but Shisui also believed Itachi was naturally a very clever kid. He took to things quickly, anyone rarely had to repeat something and he always paid attention. Those upbringing traits could only affect to a certain degree.

They entered the training ground, and Shisui was not surprised to find it empty. Hopefully they wouldn't be too late. He didn't want Itachi to get the impression they were sloppy or lazy.

Naruto looked back and forth between the two black haired boys. Not believing what she was seeing.

Uchiha Itachi.

As a little more than a toddler…

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Naruto-san." Itachi said and reached a hand out to greet her.

Naruto almost didn't take the hand. Partly because she couldn't fathom how such a young kid could be so painfully proper, or because it was Uchiha Itachi presenting himself to her.

"Nice to meet you too." Naruto said and took his hand. She had to bend down to be eye level with the boy, and looked questionably up at Shisui. He was grinning widely at Naruto's discomfort.

"I hope it's alright Itachi-kun trains with me today? We usually practice in the forest. There's a place there we use but I thought a change of location was for the better." Shisui explained while gesturing to the training ground around them.

"It's no problem. Glad to have you join us, Itachi-kun." Anko said and tried to smile friendly. She partly succeeding. Being around Orochimaru for so long had made Anko adopt Orochimaru's creepy smile as her own.

"We have a program for the day, but I was wondering if one of you could try sparring with him later? It's always good to change who you're fighting. More unpredictability." Shisui asked hopefully, looking at Naruto in particular.

But Anko was the one who volunteered, "I don't mind." Shisui nodded in thanks.

Shisui and Itachi went back to sparring, while Anko sat down on the ground to work on her latest jutsu. Leaving Naruto to find something to do on her own.

Today that was trying to wrap her head around the idea of Uchiha Itachi as a young child.

Naruto was remembering her last encounter with Sasuke before falling back in time. On the river during the Hokage summit and his complete madness after he'd killed his brother, only to hear that
Itachi had done it as a loyal Konoha shinobi.

If it was true Naruto had never found out. But Sasuke had believed it. He had vouched to destroy Konoha because of what they'd done to his brother.

Naruto watched as Shisui blocked a precise kick from Itachi, before rounding the tables on him. Shisui was better than Itachi at his current level. He was also twice his size, so he was mostly just dancing around Itachi. But for someone so young Itachi was exceptional.

They looked to be having a good time. Shisui was chuckling whenever Itachi got frustrated, and Itachi was growing more and more energetic while they battled.

A feeling of nausea seeped into her stomach the longer Naruto watched. Had Itachi killed Shisui?

How had Shisui died in her original time line? He was an Uchiha, and everyone in that clan with the exception of Sasuke, Itachi and Madara had died when Naruto was around seven or eight. She couldn't remember exactly how old she had been when Sasuke had been orphaned. She just remembered how he'd changed from it.

Itachi had killed his clansmen. All of them with the exception of Sasuke.

Shisui sidestepped an incoming punch from Itachi, causing the boy to stumble. He let Itachi gain his balance again before continuing. But Itachi had noticed that he had screwed up, and his eyes grew determined. His cheeks were growing red from the exercise, and his clothes were becoming disheveled from battling.

Was this how a homicidal murderer looked like? Or a human sacrifice?

Only Kakashi-sensei and captain Yamato had overheard Madara's story along with her that day, and they had never gotten it confirmed from another source. But at the time, her gut had told Naruto it was true. That the Uchiha had planned a coup d'etat which resulted in that horrible night. That Itachi truly had acted in Konoha's best interest at the dispense of his own family.

But had he killed Shisui to achieve that? Had Shisui been one of the people plotting to overthrow the Third? And Obito... Had they both been killed by Itachi? Betrayed and cut down in their own homes by someone they considered a friend. Their family?

The nausea intensified, and Naruto truly started feeling sick.

Itachi laughed. The sound was high and carefree, and so full of life she wasn't sure she was hearing correctly.

She tried to picture her version of Uchiha Itachi. Tall, thin, pale and cloaked in black robes. His red eyes glaring down at her through emotionless eyes.

Naruto then remembered the last time she'd seen and spoken to Uchiha Itachi. Alone in the woods just hours before he had been killed by Sasuke. While they frantically searched the countryside for Itachi before his younger brother could reach him. To get Sasuke back to the village.

He had asked about Sasuke. Asked her how far she was willing to get him back to Konoha. He had asked if she would still continue even if Sasuke didn't want to go back. Even if he turned against the village.

Then that odd thing had happened. With the crow forcing itself down her throat. What that had been about Naruto still couldn't fathom, but it was clearly impregnated in her mind. Everything about that
meeting was clear as day, though much else had faded with the years.

Maybe it was the genjutsu. Genjutsu was a technique to implant pictures into someone else's mind, and make them feel imagined pain and fear. Maybe it could also make it unforgettable, because she could even recall the eyes of the odd crow. One black, the other a Mangekyō Sharingan similar but not the same as Itachi's.

Even though she recollected it so clearly, Naruto had never really thought over Itachi's words much. She had right after the encounter. But her head had been filled with so much else at the same time. Sasuke had slipped out from between their fingers, Itachi had been killed, and then she'd received news that Jiraiya had been killed by Pein.

It had made Itachi's message dim in importance. Grief and fury over the continuous failures had been eating at her. And then she had started training with the toads.

His words hadn't really come back to her before the Kage summit. When Madara had been speaking of what really happened that day. But even then her thoughts hadn't really connected the two incidents. Because everything was always about Sasuke. To save Sasuke. To stop Sasuke. To bring Sasuke home.

Itachi had suspected… He had asked her straight out if she would still fight for Sasuke even if he tried to destroy Konoha. Who she would choose. The village or the one she considered her brother?

If what Madara said was true - then Itachi had chosen his brother.

Naruto looked away from the boys. Not able to stand looking at them anymore.

Inside her mind she was picturing a thousand different ways Shisui had been killed the first time. For all she knew Shisui had died during the war, and not as a result of the massacre. But the idea was now firmly embedded in her head, and she couldn't help hating Itachi despite her better judgement.

Even if he had done it on the orders of the council, he had still gone through with it. He had killed his mother and father. He had killed his aunts and uncles. He had killed them, so why wouldn't he have killed Shisui too?

And that thought made Naruto see red.

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To be continued...
Thank you for reading! Chapter was beta'd by the wonderful AnjoRemix!

Also, LoliConArtist made this image/comic strip based on the scene in this chapter!
Check out the link below:
imgur.com/a/NviSA1r

Simple reminder, since this story is already so long and most of you have probably forgotten this by now; Naruto fell back in time before the fourth shinobi war!

It's explained in chapter two, but I haven't repeated the fact much. Naruto never met edo tensei Itachi. She never knew who "Madara" was. She never befriended Kurama. She has never even used bijū mode. Which is why Kurama hasn't had much story time yet. (He will, but I'm keeping him in the background for a little while longer) She has also only met Minato in her mindscape (during Pein's attack on Konoha) and Kushina while training on turtle island. (When she fell back in time)

I hope that clears up things for those of you who were confused.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Nineteen – Crash Landing

"Neither of us have any sort of luck, do we? You keep the world at bay... but I keep you at bay. - Uzumaki Kushina

Naruto was visibly uncomfortable. Orochimaru was leaning over while examining her closely, and with Shisui and Anko so close by Naruto couldn't ask Orochimaru to leave her alone. It would be the rude thing to do when her sensei was showing "concern".

Orochimaru was studying her arm, lifting it up and down while checking her range of mobility. "I think... That from now on you should always keep your hands up in the air when you use chakra chains. You're very lucky the chain didn't blast straight through your arm. It looks like you only got a nasty cut, but this was a close call."

Naruto nodded, not able to let Orochimaru's close proximity get her mood down at a moment like this.

In the middle of team practice she'd finally managed to make her chains appear. The downside was that she'd almost blasted her arm off at the same time.

The chains appeared from right underneath her arm, and Naruto had her arms half up when she'd succeeded in making two chains explode from her ribs. One on each side, and her left arm got scratched by the chain, splashing blood all over her new jumpsuit.

"But I did it! I can make chains! It was so cool!" Naruto exclaimed deliriously happy. Or maybe it was the blood loss that was making her delirious.

"Keep your hands up from now and not straight down. If not; one of these days you'll accidentally amputate your own arms." Orochimaru explained and put Naruto's arm down surprisingly gently. He had medical experience, but Orochimaru being careful with his students was not an everyday occurrence.

It didn't hurt much though. The wound was slowly healing inside the bandages Orochimaru had wrapped around it.

"I made chakra chains!" Naruto answered with a huge grin.

Anko quickly nicked the back of her head. "Focus, Naruto. Your arm was bleeding everywhere! If you can't do as Orochimaru-sensei says I'm going to ban you from using that technique ever again!"

"Fine! I'll keep my hands up in the air from now on." Naruto answered sourly, not sure why they were being safety crazy all of a sudden. It wasn't like Naruto didn't agree. She was just focusing on what was really important. Which was that she had finally – after two years of vigorous training – made chakra chains appear on command.

Orochimaru stepped back so Naruto could get to her feet, Anko and Shisui came forward to check for themselves that Naruto was indeed okay. "Good work though. That was fascinating to watch."
I've only seen Kushina-san use her chains once at the start of the war, but now I got to see it up close too." Orochimaru said casually, and Naruto felt unpleasant shivers run up her spine when he patted her shoulder.

"I have to tell her." Naruto said and looked from side to side, as if Kushina would pop up randomly at the training ground.

Orochimaru shook his head. "After training. For now you can try and make the chains again. Just make sure your arms stay free of the collision path of the chains. We should also try to figure out if they have any unique properties."

"Maybe they can freeze chakra like Kushina-sensei!?" Suggested Shisui eagerly.

"How are we supposed to find that out? Let her hit us with her chain and see if our chakra network stops?" Anko asked skeptically. Eyeing Naruto's bloody jumpsuit jacket on the ground.

It would need patching and a thorough wash to get the blood out. For the moment Naruto would have to move around in her black T-shirt instead.

"I'm sure Naruto will have someone to test it out on sooner rather than later. We're leaving on mission in the morning." Orochimaru said casually.

"Of course… Where are we going this time?" Shisui asked.

Orochimaru had to be in a good mood, because for once he actually shared mission details ahead of time. Vague though they were. "We're gathering information."

"We've never done that before." Mused Anko, her hands rubbing together excitedly.

Orochimaru raised an eyebrow, thinking Anko was stating the obvious. "I know, which is why I thought it was about time you got some experience."

"Chains? You managed?! And I wasn't there to see them?!!" Exclaimed Kushina both frustrated and excited at the same time.

"Yeah, it was so awesome too! I was doing like you instructed. I was standing still while calming myself down. It was difficult because I had to slow down my whole chakra network, which isn't the easiest thing to do for me. Then I used the built up pressure to release chakra while doing the transformation! It was wild!" Naruto babbled eagerly.

"And then it worked? This is great, dattebane! Another bowl of ramen, Teuchi-san! This is a cause for celebration and I'm paying! But just for one bowl, I'm sorry but you eat as much as I do." Kushina said with a broad grin, addressing Teuchi who was listening casually to their conversation. A very young Ayame was doing her school homework on the counter next to them.

"Thank you, Kushina-nee!" Naruto replied, pushing away her already empty bowl to make way for the next one.

"You know, I've heard you two talk about this technique for years, and you two are by far my best costumers, so this bowl will be on me." Said Teuchi and turned towards the frying pan. "I'll make something worthy of the occasion for the both of you."

Naruto broke into a wide smile almost identical to Kushina's, and they both started unknowingly drooling. "Do you think you can do it again? On command?" Asked Kushina curiously, turning to
Naruto while they waited.

"I managed two times. Then Orochimaru banned me from doing anymore before I learned to keep my hands out of the way of the chains. I almost took both of them off while making the chains… It sucks! Why can’t my chains come from chest and back too? They exit a little underneath my armpits, so it’s hard to keep my arms away while I’m concentrating on making them. Not to mention I almost fainted after I made just two sets…” Naruto added, slightly less excited when she remembered her fatigue after two sets of chains in a row.

"Why can the chains even hurt me? I mean… they sprout straight out of my chest without problem, but somehow hurt my arms? Shouldn’t they pass straight through? Like it does with my ribs and skin on my chest?"

Kushina shook her head. "When the chakra chains exits your body they are physical, so no. The moment they're out the chains are as dangerous as any other object, especially if you used full speed. I do see your dilemma though… We have to figure out a comfortable way for you to use them."

Kushina said thoughtful, a show of concern on her expression when her eyes narrowed in on Naruto's arm. She was wearing a jacket, so the bandages on each arm were out of sight.

"I think I already know how to do it. If I just do this," Naruto said and held her elbows up to each side while her hands pressed together in a fist. It was how captain Yamato had used wood style most of the time. Her elbows were then on the same heights as her shoulders, but at least she had something to do with them, and the pose was good to channel chakra. "It's a lot easier to do then with my hands up in the air like someone who is being arrested by the Uchiha police force." Naruto said and lifted her hands in the air. Doing a good impression of a thief shivering in fear.

Kushina laughed while nodding in agreement. "That could work. You just have to remember it when it counts. The chains have no hand signs to help along the extraction, but it gets easier the more you practice. So from now on you’ll always do that pose. Hopefully it will become an automatic movement for you."

"Here you go." Said Teuchi and put down a bowl for both girls. Naruto and Kushina stared big eyes at the delicious ramen.

"Ah! You're the best Teuchi-san!" Naruto proclaimed whole heartedly.

Teuchi chuckled low under his breath. "If I understand correctly you should eat ramen while you still have arms, so it’s the least I can do." He said and shook his head.

"I figured out how to do it right! I'm not going to blow my arms off!" Naruto defended herself.

At that moment team Minato came to the ramen stand, catching Naruto's words. "Blowing your arms off? What on earth are you up to now, Naruto?" Asked Obito incredulously and pulled a barstool up next to Naruto.

Ayame quickly gathered up her homework to make space for them, and went behind the counter with her stuff. Teuchi pulled out a small box for her, and the girl sat down on her knees on the ground while using the box as a desk. Naruto had never figured that Ayame did everything at the ramen stand. She basically spent all her time in the kitchen except when she was at school.

"Naruto managed to create chakra chains!" Kushina told them proudly, already half finished with her ramen. Naruto was deeply impressed by Kushina’s eating skills. She was quicker than even Naruto was.
"That's what's threatening her limbs?" Asked Kakashi curiously, looking Naruto up and down for any sign of injury.

"Well yes, their exit points aren't ideal, since it's right underneath her arms, but she has a plan to make it work. But the important part is that she finally did it! Two years as my student and she's already awesome!"

"She's technically Orochimaru-sama's student, Kushina." Minato said and snickered when Kushina waved her hand dismissively.

"No, no, Naruto much prefer me to that old snake." She said reassuringly.

Naruto nodded while slurping up ramen. "I do." She agreed after swallowing audibly. The others quickly ordered their meal before asking to hear the whole story.

Naruto explained between bites of ramen, going into detail about what she suspected she'd done wrong before and why it worked this time. Rin wanted to see her arms, but Naruto dodged all attempts the medic ninja made to examine her. Luckily Rin was far from as terrifying as Sakura had been, and respected Naruto's claims when she said she was fine. But only after Naruto admitted Orochimaru had looked it over.

"But I only created two… One on each side. Isn't there supposed to be many?" Asked Naruto at the end, looking at Kushina for an answer.

"There should be. You have at least ten chains. That's how many you created the first time. I have nine chains in total myself, but the number varies from person to person. But we have it confirmed by Shisui that you once used ten chains." She answered.

"I still can't believe that… It's weird isn't it? Because I'm exhausted right now. I feel like I can sleep for days, and that was only after creating two chains two times." Naruto said and held up two fingers on each hand. "But back then I used ten chakra chains without even knowing it."

"If Shisui's description was right you also slipped into a temporary coma. He said you were a bloodbath afterwards." Obito piped up with one eyebrow raised.

Naruto waved the comment away. "But is that normal?" She asked Kushina.

"Well… The first time I made chains all nine came out. I have never really struggled with it… It was a very natural process for me." Kushina said apologetically while Naruto moped. So she was not doing as well as her mother had. Well, at least she had inherited the chains from her mother's genetics.

"You have no reason to be disappointed, Naruto. I think it's incredible that you managed to make chakra chains." Minato said kindly.

"Thank you!" Naruto replied, her mood growing increasingly better at Minato's praise.

"How's the rasengan coming along?" He asked, changing the topic while smiling knowingly at Naruto's triumphant grin.

Kushina had taken the time to "teach" Naruto how to do it in between lessons. After Naruto had bugged her constantly for a year.

At first Kushina had claimed Naruto had too much to deal with to learn the rasengan too. It was too time consuming and intricate for her on top of missions, training and lessons.
But since Naruto was not allowed to practice the chains without some sort of supervision, either from Kushina, Orochimaru or on very rare occasions Minato, Naruto had managed to convince Kushina to let her practice on her own.

The first time around she'd basically been standing alone with a water balloon for weeks, and she didn't see the point of not being allowed to do that.

In the end Kushina had caved in, and Naruto had been shown the different steps. She had used two weeks before she asked for a new step, and then one week to ask for the second step, and now it was three weeks since she had been shown the third step.

Naruto had practiced it at odd times of the night, making sure everything was okay, but she was far from tiring herself out with the extra curriculum training. She felt bad for deceiving them, but what other option did she have?

Naruto created a clone and hopped off the barstool. Everyone looked confused.

"Uh… why did you make a clone?" Asked Kushina confused, but Minato seemed to get it after a second thought.

"That… was smart. A little wasteful of chakra, but very efficient." He muttered and smiled brightly when Naruto started making the rasengan.

"Whoa!" Ayame exclaimed, jumping up from the ground and running around the counter to watch the technique. "So pretty!"

Naruto held up the rasengan, not noticing the odd look that passed between Kushina and Minato. "No way! No way!" Cried Obito and jumped off his chair too. "That is freaking awesome, Naruto!"

He turned back towards Minato and scowled. "Why won't you teach me that technique, Minato-sensei? I want to learn it too!"

"Well… you never asked." Minato teased him in a good natural way.

"What? But you're our sensei! You should think of that on your own!" Obito complained.

"You know why already, Minato has been waiting until you were older, Obito. You need developed chakra coils to make a technique such as the rasengan to work. Naruto is an exception and could start early. You might have more trouble though." Kushina answered for Minato, more or less scolding Obito for acting up.

Naruto dispersed the rasengan and grinned mischievously to Obito. "You're falling behind, Obito! I'll so win the Hokage hat before you do."

His eyes went round, and he stuttered incoherently. "I'll beat you! I'll learn the rasengan in just a week! Without making a stupid clone! Sensei, we need to go train now." Obito exclaimed and turned towards his sensei.

Minato laughed and shook his head. "I can show you the steps tomorrow when we go on our mission." He said and nodded. "Until then you should rest and get some sleep. You'll need all the energy you can get if you are serious about learning the rasengan in a week."

"He will not manage that." Kakashi said bluntly.

"I can do it!" Obito snapped annoyed, his cheeks heating up.
Kakashi was visibly skeptical. "Are you now delusional on top of being an idiot? It takes way longer to learn the rasengan. I'm not even sure you can learn such an intricate technique."

"I will do it, just watch me! And when I do I'll kick your ass with it!" Obito proclaimed proudly while pointing at his teammate. Kakashi just looked back indifferent. He was a master of cold shoulders.

Rin was about to say something, but was cut off by Naruto before she'd done much more than open her mouth. "You can't do that, Obito!"

Both boys turned surprised towards her; Naruto was usually not the voice of reason.

"I can do it, Naruto!" Obito protested in frustration. "I bet you that I can make the rasengan in a week."

"I didn't say you couldn't. I believe you. I think you can learn the rasengan in a week, dattebayo!" Naruto answered annoyed. "I'm just saying you should never point it at Kakashi!" She snapped angrily.

Obito turned from angry to comprehending, before he grinned sheepishly. He looked very pleased with Naruto's confidence in him.

"Naruto is correct. It's a deadly technique and should never be used against comrades. It's an A rank for a reason." Minato agreed, talking to all of them in his calm and earnest voice. He looked last at Naruto. "I'm glad Kushina taught it to you, Naruto. You did well. Just remember that despite its power I created that technique to protect. Like every other jutsu. In the end you fight to protect and preserve our comrades, not to harm and destroy."

Since they lived in the same building Kakashi and Naruto walked together back from dinner. Naruto talked about her mission in the morning and how she hadn't even started packing. Kakashi just listened, and for a while that worked well. It was how they usually communicated unless Kakashi was in a particular good mood and offered some help in the conversation.

Therefore Naruto was very surprised when Kakashi actually started a subject all on his own. "I'm thinking of getting a ninken..." Kakashi answered after Naruto asked what he was doing these days.

"A ninken?" Her eyes widened as Naruto remembered Kakashi's ninken squad from her own time. "That's a great idea Kakashi! When are you getting them?" She asked excitedly.

"Them? No I think one is enough... A ninken need a lot of training, and because of the war I don't think I have much time for more than one." Kakashi replied with a shrug.

"I still think it's a good idea. Em.. Where do you get a ninken?" Asked Naruto curiously.

"Around. The Inuzuka have a few breeds. I'm thinking of taking a puppy from one of their litters. They were actually born last night." Kakashi answered, sticking his hands into his pockets and sighing thoughtfully.

"Last night?" Naruto halted and turned towards the direction she knew the Inuzuka lived. "Why don't we go visit then?"

Kakashi froze, looking alarmingly like he was about to say something sarcastic, but riled himself in. "Mah, why not? Okay, let's go."
Naruto furrowed her brows, wondering why Kakashi was being so cooperative for once. "Did you hit your head on a stone or something? You're acting unusually compliant."

"I'm curious about the ninken too. And I'm fully booked for missions the next month, so why not go now? I can't take one home before they're at least two months old, but I'm curious anyway." Kakashi answered casually.

"Huh, I didn't know you had to wait so long." Naruto replied.

"They're dependent on their mother's milk for now. They're basically like human infants. They can't walk, can't see and they can't manage without their mum before they're older. But in two months they won't be depending on their mother anymore. They will be able to eat solid food, drink water, walk and ready to start some easy training."

Naruto just nodded. She guessed Kakashi had a point. "If you say so. I had no idea how ninken are raised or how they develop. But let's go then. I want to see some ninken!"

Kakashi knocked quickly three times on the front door of the Inuzuka home. Listening as a bunch of ninken started barking from the backyard and inside the house.

A man opened the door. He was tall and on the chubby side with curly, dirty-blonde hair. On his arm sat a child no older than a toddler half asleep.

"Hello, sir. I'm sorry to arrive unannounced so late in the evening, but is Inuzuka Tsume-san home?" He asked with spotless politeness. Naruto decided to stay quiet.

"Sure. Wait a moment," The man replied and shut the door again. His footsteps led away and everything turned silent. Even the dogs stopped barking.

Kakashi and Naruto looked uncertain at one another. Not sure if the man had just gone to sit down again instead of informing Tsume. He had looked really tired.

But then the door flew open again, and a slim woman with spiky, wild hair and markings on her cheek appeared in the doorway.

"Kakashi-kun! I was wondering how long you'd wait until you decided to see the pups. Come with me!" Tsume exclaimed without preamble. "You came at a good time. The puppies are asleep right now, which means you can have a good look at them. Well, to be honest they sleep most of the day, so it would be surprising if you saw them awake. They're still blind as a bat." Tsume rambled while leading the two kids around the house and into a shed in the garden.

She stopped outside and her eyes narrowed at Naruto. "Who're you supposed to be? His girlfriend or something?"

Naruto's eyes widened comically. "Naruto is my neighbor. She wanted to see the puppies too."

Kakashi replied without any sign of annoyance. Maybe his words were a little sharper than normal, but otherwise he didn't seem to care.

Tsume nodded in understanding. "Ah, that makes more sense. The girl looked like she's six years old. What's your name? And does your parent know where you are this late? Don't kids have a curfew these days? I think kids your age usually aren't allowed outside on their own after dark."

"I'm ten." Naruto fumed, while Kakashi was growing increasingly entertained.
"What? Did you have a growth stunt or something? You're a shrimp." Tsume answered genuinely surprised.

"I'm the perfect height to stay out of sight during missions." Naruto replied heatedly through gritted teeth. Tsume was just like Naruto remembered her. Crass and rude. Just like her son.

"You're a ninja? Well this speaks of how desperate we are for more men these days. Children who are completely unprepared are being sent out in the field. It's a shame really." Tsume replied, a face of concern on her face while she looked at Naruto.

"I'm not some defenseless, little girl. I've been Chūnin since I was eight." Naruto bit out, trying hard not to explode on Tsume. She had the same annoying manners as Kiba. There was no doubt where he got his rude bluntness from.

"Hah, I think that proves my point. When I was eight I hadn't been in the academy for more than a year." Tsume laughed and finally found the right key. "What's your name though, blondie?"

"Uzumaki Naruto."

Tsume stopped for a moment and looked surprised back at Naruto. Something clicking in place. "Oh… You're Orochimaru-sama students. I've heard about you from Kushina since she won't shut up about you. Nice to have a face to put with the name. Now Naruto; have you ever been around ninken before?"

"Uh… It was a while ago." Naruto replied.

"Well, my ninken Fuyu is a little more cranky than usual. It's normal though, any woman would be cranky after twenty four hours of birthing. So don't do anything unless I tell yah to, understood?"

Naruto looked at Kakashi who simply nodded. "Of course."

Tsume opened the door and led them inside. It smelled strange in there. Not necessarily unpleasant, but definitely not what Naruto called normal. Naruto guessed it was the puppies. They had a more prominent and distinct smell unlike normal grown ninken. Grown ninken just smelled like… dogs. Unless they got wet, and then they stank.

"Why does the puppies smell different than the mother?" She asked confused, and both Kakashi and Tsume turned towards her.

"That was quick… You have a good sense of smell to realize that without having to pick the puppies up. It's obvious then, but at the moment it could be anything as far as you know. But you're right. I just call it puppy smell. Puppies smell like puppies. Fresh meat."

Both Kakashi and Naruto's eyes widened while Tsume laughed evilly at her own joke. "I'm kidding. Now here is Fuyu and her puppies. Let her smell you, and if she accepts you she'll let you pat the puppies, but don't go pick them up. I'm the only human who's allowed to do that right now." Tsume said and gestured towards a big ninken looking at them with tired and weary eyes.

Naruto realized suddenly this was not right. This ninken looked nothing at all like Pakkun, and though her puppies were extremely indistinct, more like pig babies than anything resembling a dog, none of them were Pakkun.

"What sort of ninken are they?" Asked Naruto and tilted her head to the side.

"They're one of my breeds. I've bred a few typed of ninken over the years, and with this litter I've
been going for combat. I think I'm on to a very bad-ass breed. I think I'll even keep one of them for myself." She stated proudly and walked up to the mother. Patting her affectionate on the head.

"What about tracking? Isn't that what they're usually for?" Asked Naruto.

"Well, that's the genius with this breed. They're both trackers and fighters. They have chakra, and will most likely turn into something close to wolves when they grow up." She explained further.

"They must be hard to raise. Are you sure you have enough time for a ninken such as this, Kakashi?" Asked Naruto. Trying to figure out quickly how to get Kakashi to buy a pug over an awesome looking wolf. Even Naruto wanted one of the wolf cubs.

"They are, and Kakashi and I have had a long discussion about this already. He has to take the ninken with him on missions, or leave him with someone for the first few months. The ninken can't be alone much in the beginning, at least not if you want to have a well behaved one."

Naruto swallowed and looked down. Kakashi took a step closer and bent down. Letting Fuyu smell his hand. She smelled skin suspiciously before nodding shortly. She lay her head down on her paws while keeping her eyes on Naruto. Watchful. Tsume nodded to Kakashi, and he carefully patted one of the "piglets" on the carpet.

"I already have an agreement with a few people who has said they were willing to look after the puppy when I'm not home." Kakashi replied and smiled while the puppy tried to turn its head towards Kakashi's touch.

"What about-"

"Tsu- tsu- Tsu!" All three of them turned towards the sound. And Naruto's eyes widened at the sight of a mini pug standing in the doorway to the shed, looking curiously at them with big brown eyes.

"No Pakkun, I told you to stay away from Fuyu right now. She just had a litter and she doesn't want other ninken close to her pups." Tsume said exasperated and pushed herself from the wall. Naruto on the other hand bent down in front of Pakkun.

"Hi Pakkun! I'm Naruto, nice to meet yah!" She said with a toothy grin.

Pakkun tilted his head, and his tongue suddenly fell out from the side of his mouth. "Na… Na!" He answered in a high voice. Naruto was so used to the dark voice of Pakkun it didn't fit somehow.

"I didn't know you had a breed like that..." Kakashi said curiously and looked at the pug Naruto was currently scratching behind the ear.

"Oh, he's not really one of mine. We had a litter dumped on us because the owner died recently. You know old man Osamu? He was a good ninken breeder, though he didn't use his ninken for fighting. He died just a month ago during mission... Poor man." Tsume sighed and shook her head sadly.

"I know who he is. I actually spoke to him about getting a ninken from him. But at the time the puppies were too young, and after he died I heard all of them were given to other people." Kakashi answered.

Tsume shook her head. "That's only partly true. Some got picked up by new owners, but we also had to take in some of his puppies since they didn't all have anywhere to go. Pakkun is a little more than two months old now, but he shows good potential. Osamu focused on tracking, scouting, speed and communication. Pakkun is small, but I don't think that will be a hindrance for him." Tsume said and smiled when Pakkun lay down on his back, letting Naruto pat his stomach.
"Are you after a ninken too, Naruto? Pakkun doesn't have a partner yet." Tsume hinted and wagged her eyebrows.

Naruto looked startled up. No, Pakkun was Kakashi's ninken. Not hers. "Uh... I don't know anything about ninken. And Kakashi is the one looking. But why not take Pakkun then? He's two months old so you could take him right away. Look at those eyes!" Naruto exclaimed and patted Pakkun more affectionate on the stomach. She chuckled when Pakkun started making grunting sounds.

"I'm more interested in a ninken who can be used in comb-." Kakashi started, but Naruto picked up Pakkun and dumped him in Kakashi's lap. Efficiently cutting his counter argument short.

Pakkun stared curiously up at Kakashi with big brown eyes. So adorable Naruto had hard time picturing him in his older years. Tsume rolled her eyes. Seeing straight through Naruto's tactic to get Kakashi to take Pakkun instead of one of Fuyu's puppies.

"Uh... Hello Pakkun." Kakashi said and picked the puppy up. Pakkun wagged his tail eagerly.

"This is Kakashi." Naruto continued, talking to Pakkun instead of Kakashi. Pakkun nodded in understanding and Kakashi's eyes widened slightly.

"A-ash... Ka..." Pakkun still had problems with words, and only managed parts of the sounds.

"He understands everything, doesn't he?" Mused Kakashi and looked at Pakkun curiously.

"Mostly... He is still young and has a lot to learn, but he is a rare breed. His mum could talk, which none of my dogs can, at least not in our language." Tsume said with a wry smile. "But he's not a battle ninken. He can harm a bunny I'm sure, but if you want someone in battle with Pakkun is not the way to go."

Kakashi was getting smitten though, and Naruto smiled triumphantly to Tsume. She rolled her eyes but grinned back.

"Kashi?" Pakkun tried again, and Kakashi looked up at Tsume.

"How much is Pakkun?" He asked defeated.

Tsume laughed loudly, and listed off the price from the top of her head.

Next day Naruto had to get up early, though she was reluctant to leave the flat now that Kakashi had a new roommate. She was curious how his first day with Pakkun went, but she would have to find out later. Team Orochimaru left the village at dawn, Anko and Naruto barely getting to the gates on time.

They were so used to each other by now, even Naruto felt somewhat relaxed with her position in team Orochimaru. She had never in her wildest dreams thought she'd have a full night's sleep while in the presence of the snake sannin, but thanks to constant work fatigue and long hours she, on most nights, slept like a baby.

She was also a little surprised by how impassive Orochimaru behaved most of the time. Sometimes – usually during fights or if something he deemed interesting happened – he'd be more recognizable. Becoming the overly intense persona who Naruto had first known in the future.

They walked in silence at first. Walking at a comfortable pace through the forest while listening to
the animals waking up. That was until Anko started complaining. "We're on our seventh mission this month, and we're not even halfway. And that's not counting the normal guard duty by the gates."

"We need all hands on deck to protect the village. Out in the field and back at home." Answered Orochimaru without sparing her a glance.

"We'd be more helpful if we had time to rest." Anko mumbled frustrated.

"You had three days off. It's your own fault if you didn't rest in that time."

Anko didn't let Orochimaru's comment get to her, and instead defended herself. "We had three days off in three weeks. And now we started another three week marathon, but oh wait... we'll only have one day off next time before we start the other round."

"Which mean you should be well rested for the next six weeks by now. A good ninja use downtime on missions as a way to retain their energy. You three are too hyperactive to remember that fact though."

"We had training and missions simultaneously. Someone is always on lookout. We always need to find a place to camp, food for our next meal, and on top of that we're doing our duty. When exactly are we going to rest?" Asked Anko.

"When you're not moving. Learn to multi task. Lookout and relaxing can easily be combined if you just don't fall asleep. The few times we have to find food or whenever we have to prepare a meal is hardly hard work, and the training is a necessity you should be grateful to receive. It's hardly my favorite pass time to train you brats, and I have many more pressing issues to deal with throughout my days." Orochimaru said, using a tone that indicated clearly that this should be obvious, and anyone who didn't see this was less than hopeless.

"And just for your information, I haven't had a day off in over a year. The higher your rank is, the more demanding your schedule will become. Surely you've realized that by now, Anko. You're usually not this dimwitted. That's Naruto."

"Hey!" Naruto exclaimed indignantly. She stopped abruptly and put her hands on her hips. The others halted. "You're the one who always need a second explanation, Naruto. You're definitely the black sheep in this litter." Orochimaru stated rudely without irony.

"Out of all of us; I'm the only one not with black hair!" Naruto argued back, pointing to each of her dark haired teammates in turn.

It was the first time Naruto realized how different their dark hair texture was though. Shisui had curls, Anko had spikes and Orochimaru's straight, silky strands could be used in a shampoo commercial if he wanted to. Naruto somehow doubted he would.

"My hair isn't technically black, it might look that way sometimes, but in daylight-" Anko started explaining, but was interrupted by Orochimmaru who held up a dismissive hand.

"It's an expression. Which just proves my point that you need a second explanation to everything." Orochimaru huffed and started to walk again, the others hurrying to keep up with his increased pace.

Naruto felt she hadn't gotten her feelings across, and continued speaking even though Orochimaru looked very finished with the conversation. "I'm an intuitive learner. I learn better through experience, dattebayo."
"You're a moron. But fortunately an interesting moron, which is why I continue bothering with you. If you're going to be an idiot it's better to be a unique one."

Naruto nodded. "I am pretty special."

Orochimaru looked exasperated over his shoulder, disbelieving that she'd found a compliment in that sentence. Shisui just shook his head.

They had made their way out of the forest, and had now reached a steep canyon. At the bottom a fast flowing river roared past. And both Naruto and Shisui were having flashbacks to the outing from a few years ago. "We could walk around?" Suggested Shisui, his voice a little higher than normal.

"That's a waste of time." Anko disagreed and peeked over the edge, her eyes widening slightly at how far down it was to the bottom. "But sometimes it's good to appreciate the old fashioned way of crossing canyons. Civilians always have to take the long way around." Anko added and straightened up quickly.

"I can get us over… I think." Naruto volunteered.

"How?" Asked Orochimaru curiously.

"Chains." Naruto said and pointed at herself. "We have ropes right? You hold one end, I hold the other, and then I use my chains to shoot over the canyon and into the rock wall on the other side. I can then rile myself across and tie the rope to something secure, while you do the same thing here. And tadaaa! You have a rope bridge." Naruto finished with her hands in the air.

The others had to think a moment. "That could work… Except you have no idea how good control you have over your chains yet. What if they just evaporate?" Shisui said pointedly. "Then you'll be crawling in the water. Again."

"This is a good opportunity to check, isn't it?" Countered Naruto stubbornly.

Shisui's lips tightened. "It's a reckless method. Why don't we just walk? Walk down the side, over the river, and then up on the other side? At least that way we don't have to walk around the whole canyon, and at the same time you won't end up like a squashed sushi down there."

"What do you think, sensei?" Asked Anko as she looked up at Orochimaru for his opinion on the matter.

"I think Naruto can have a go. She's survived worse if it doesn't work." He answered and started rummaging through his weapon pouch.

Naruto's eyes narrowed, but she was pleased he backed her up for once.

"What? That makes no sense. We're on a mission and should prevent injuries." Shisui argued while gesturing to the cliff edge.

"Have some faith in your teammate, Shisui. As Naruto recently explained; she learns better through experience." Orochimaru answered calmly and looked passively down at him. Shisui frowned and turned towards Anko for backup instead.

"Do you think this is a good idea?"

"It doesn't matter. I want to give it a go, so leave it be." Naruto cut in, annoyed at Shisui's constant
fussing.

He took offence, and folded his arms in front of his chest. They stared each other down, but Naruto was the master of staring contests, so reluctantly he sighed in defeat. "Don't fall."

Naruto grinned. "Never."

Orochimaru took out a rope and handed one end to Naruto. She tied it tightly around her waist while the others tied the opposite end around a tree.

Naruto walked to the edge and studied the rocky wall on the opposite side of the river. Wondering where would be best to secure her chain. Maybe it was better to use both of them? Though it would make reeling herself in more difficult. She still thought it was better though. She wasn't sure if she could control only one just yet.

It was actually really risky what she was about to do, because she didn't really have a grasp or an understanding of her own technique. She wasn't sure how it worked properly, only a vague outline.

For all she knew her chains made stone into water. But she guessed now was a good time to find out.

The others backed away to give her space while Naruto clamped her hands together, her elbows high while closing her eyes. Focusing on the chains. Naruto compared it a lot to nature chakra. Except there was no outward chakra to be pulled into her core. It was the opposite. It was a hard to reach, dormant chakra inside her. She had to blend it with her normal chakra, and transform it into the chains.

Three chains shot out at lightning speed. Flying across the canyon and bolting themselves into the opposite wall with such force the sound rang up and down the river. Stones crumbled around one of the chains, rendering it useless.

Naruto scowled, and hoped the other two was secure. Keeping her concentration in tact Naruto looked down at herself. Seeing the glowing, copper chains exit from under her arms.

Curious she laid her hand on them. Resting her arms against the metal. It was warm. Pleasant.

She wrapped her hands around a chain each, her grip barely made it around the girth, and she pulled hard on them. Checking if she could drag the chains out with her strength alone.

It stuck.

She looked at the others with excitement. Anko was studying the chains with interest. Shisui was shifting from foot to foot, holding in his protest by a thread while Orochimaru smiled approvingly.

"Go ahead." He said casually.

Naruto looked ahead, focusing on the chains with all her might. She didn't want to jump, instead she wanted the chains to pull her across just by reeling them in.

Thoughts of doubt were pushed away. The ones of cold water and crumbling stone. Fear was a jutsu's bane. Keep a clear head. That was the rule to all techniques. Nothing was better done halfway.

Roughly Naruto was pulled forward. Her feet lifting off the ground while she flew through the air. Her hands were still resting on the chain, and while the wall grew closer she felt the chains force their way back into her quicker and quicker. It was far from pleasant, but not painful.
Wind hit into her face as the canyon wall rushed closer too quickly. She was going to collide with it full force. And if she stopped reeling she'd fall and hit the wall just as hard with no control.

Naruto lifted her hands off the chains, readying herself for the impact. Her legs shot out in front of her too, so she'd hit the wall on all four instead of her face.

It hurt like a bitch, and she gritted her teeth as feet and arms braced against the rocky wall. Pain shot through her body, and she fell before she could attach herself to the wall with chakra.

She heard both Anko and Shisui shout. One whooping in encouragement and the other asking if she was alright. Naruto didn't feel like replying. If she opened her mouth she would most likely start cursing because of the electric pain shooting up her legs and arms.

Naruto started climbing, her footing shaky from nearly being crushed into soft noodles by the crash impact.

Finally up over the edge she took a moment to catch her breath. Ignoring the pain Naruto straightening up and turned towards her teammates far off on the other side of the canyon. Anko was jumping while Shisui waved eagerly. Naruto fisted the air with both hands.

Success!

They had camped by the ocean, on a rocky beach where the sea stretched out before them. The night was warm so they hadn't bothered with tents since a simple sleeping bag would do.

While the others used their evening to sort out their packages and relax – Naruto took the time to take a walk. She wanted some privacy, and tonight was as good as any.

With the constant missions Naruto was rarely alone anymore and living with Anko didn't help much either. But Naruto had something that needed to be dealt with which was way overdue.

She'd walked far enough away on the winding beach to be alone. The others were out of hearing range and could no longer see her in the darkness.

Naruto found a large boulder, one with a smooth, comfortable surface and sat down. She watched the ocean for a moment. The waves hit the shore in a slow, lazy rhythm, and the wind rustled her hair. After a few minutes she laid down flat on the boulder. Her legs dangled off the edge since it wasn't large enough to cover her whole body, and closed her eyes.

When she opened them, she was inside her mindscape.

The Kyūbi looked up when Naruto appeared, his eyes narrowing at her sudden entrance. His teeth flared and behind him his nine tails swished in annoyance. "What did you come for this time?" He asked, his voice echoing off the walls in the sewer like structure.

"I wanted to talk with you." Naruto replied, and without hesitation she walked up to the cage, stopping just short of it.

The Kyūbi lifted his head off his paws, his mouth twisting into a sneer. "Now that's old news. When do you not talk? You never shut up."

Naruto sighed and looked searchingly at him. "I forgive you." She said eventually. The tails stopped moving, and the foxes ears twisted forward. Naruto guessed it was to hear better, though she was certain he had heard her just fine.
Naruto had been thinking about it ever since she met Itachi in this time. Her own mixed emotion after seeing him had made her think. To wonder what she could do this time to prevent the massacre and so many other deaths.

But in the end the Kyūbi was her first priority. She had almost gained his chakra when she'd been blasted back in time, and though their relationship had never been good, it had never been as quiet as it had been the last few years. Naruto needed to change that. She had let go of her hate for what hadn't even happened yet. And if she could forgive the Kyūbi for throwing them back in time and for killing her parents, she could forgive Itachi for killing his. In the end, the end result had been similar in a way. Itachi had no family to speak of, and exiled from his normal life to act from the shadows. Though the cause and result was different, Naruto still found their situations similar.

"I didn't ask for any forgiveness. I don't owe you anything human." The Kyūbi answered, his eyes narrowing into slits.

"I forgive you for doing this to me. For throwing me back in time." Naruto explained and exhaled deeply. "I've been so angry with you for what happened, and I've been trying to get you to explain what really happened because I needed some sort of reason for all of this." Naruto gestured vaguely around, but really meant the fact that she was in the past.

"I know it can't be easy… being inside that cage day in and day out. I understand that you tried to escape. I would have done the same in your situation." Naruto continued, and started walking back and forth. The fox followed her movement with cautious skepticism.

"I have been in the past for years, and at first I hoped that I would be able to go back. Escape. Just like you've been trying to do. But… it seems I'm stuck here, and I'm starting to see that doesn't have to be a bad thing. I've decided to stop thinking of it as a loss, and instead see it as a new beginning. For both of us." Naruto finished and looked at the Kyūbi. Not blinking or showing fear at standing so close.

"What on earth makes you think I care about anything you feel? I'm here because I'm trapped. I loathe everything human, and if I was outside I'd kill you and all your friends in an instant. I'd kill them first and make you watch! I would make you feel what it truly is to be trapped with no escape."

Naruto swallowed, but didn't grow angry or upset. Instead her eyes hardened. "I would never allow you to harm them. You know how I am…. But I'm sorry you're in so much pain… I want to do something about it. So throw it at me, okay? I can take your hate." Naruto finished, her arms folding in front of her, and a crooked smile formed on her lips. The Kyūbi's eyes widened the tiniest amount.

"We're all we got, Kyūbi. You're the only one who knows me, and I believe I know a little about you too by now."

The fox snorted, a mad laugh escaping him while he rose to his feet. Towering over her while he looked down at her through red, poisonous eyes. "Hahaha! You believe there's a way to quench my hate? I'm hate incarnated! You believe you can stand up against me? You're an idiot. A weak human who has never been able to do anything on her own. You always rely on me to heal you or borrow my strength. You take, and take, and then claim my powers are yours. You stupid, insignificant, little girl. I am the reason you're still breathing."

"You are… You've saved my life so many times, and I have never thanked you for it." Naruto tilted her head to the side. "But I know it. I'm not that ignorant, and it's time I told you; thank you so very much for keeping me alive so far."

The fox's ears tilted backwards, his brow furrowed and he flared his teeth threateningly. "I'm the curse of your being. I'm not one of your pathetic friends. I'll get out one day, and when I do I will..."
dance on your lonely and forgotten grave."

"Well… if you're dancing on my grave I won't be alone or forgotten, will I? You're my partner, dattebayo. You'd be there." Naruto said, stunning the fox with her words.

"Shut up! Stop with the fairytale, brat! Life is dark! Life will eat you alive, change your spirit and decay your body. It will tear your mind down until there's nothing but misery left. You will die alone. Just like you've always been. You make friends just for them to be torn away. Either by casting you aside like Sasuke, dying on you like Jiraiya or being ripped away through time and space. Your fate has always been solitude. What makes you think this time will be any different?" Asked the fox, a feral grin widening, showing off his huge, sharp teeth.

Naruto smiled wistfully. "Being in the past and a jinchūriki isn't necessary a bad thing, Kyūbi. I'm never alone. I have you. Until the day I die, be it today or in fifty years, I will always have you."

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! The chapter was beta'd by the wonderful AnjoRemix!
Chapter Twenty – Waking Dream

"You may think you're all healed, you may even look all healed, but you're NOT all healed!" - Shizune

Naruto wasn't sure when missions had gone from being exciting new experiences to the same old repetitive actions. Go out. Find and do what you left for. Return.

Having Orochimaru as your team leader usually meant less trouble for his students, and for that Naruto was grateful. She hated when they stumbled upon trouble, mostly because of Anko and Shisui.

Both were skilled ninjas, but age was a very important factor in their occupation. And though her two teammates could hold their own weight plus a little extra, it wasn't always enough. Therefore having Orochimaru on your side of the battle line was an uncomfortable, but none the less unexpected bonus.

People were terrified of him, much like Naruto had been in her younger years, and when he'd swoop in to help it almost always guaranteed they'd get out with their limbs intact. In fact, on a few occasions their enemy had turned tail and ran for their life just at the sight of Orochimaru.

Naruto peeked out from her hiding place, but one insistent tug on her jacket made her duck down again.

She glared back at Shisui who was standing hunched in the bushes together with her. His attention was elsewhere so he didn't see her annoyance. Instead he was continuously tugging at her jacket and pointing towards the ground a little distance away.

Naruto looked, but couldn't say she saw anything of interest. Her opinion must have shown on her face, because Shisui rolled his eyes at her lack of reaction. He instantly got a hold of Anko instead, using their signal to wordlessly call both her and Orochimaru to them.

In a minute all four were hunched together in the bushes while making it more difficult to keep hidden from the potential target they were tracking. No one was allowed to speak, so Naruto was forced to keep her opinion to herself though.

Shisui pointed again to the area, and Orochimaru sneaked up to get a better look. He held his thumb up, indicating the coast was clear, and the three students followed him carefully. Shisui must have picked up on a trace, and considering the nod of approval Orochimaru sent him it was one that was easily missed.

"We're on the right track now. I even suspect I know where the target is heading." Orochimaru signed to them.

As of yesterday sign language was a constant rule for this mission. Orochimaru was using the mission to train them in tracking and scouting, and had forbidden them to speak until he said it was okay. After keeping them quiet for twenty four hours, Naruto suspected he was enjoying her silence.
in particular. It was growing very taxing for Naruto, but it had improved Orochimaru's mood considerably. He was almost smiling.

"Does that mean we can speak soon?" Asked Naruto, her sign language much slower than Orochimaru's, but still readable.

In answer he shot her a pointed look, one that made his message much more clear than if he'd screamed the word; no.

"This is it. The target is in there." Orochimaru signed quickly to his students, pointing to a snapped twig on the ground. Even Naruto had been able to follow the trail the longer they'd been scouting. Either she was getting better at this tracking and scouting thing, or their target was growing sloppier.

"Are you ever going to tell us who we're following?" Naruto signed back.

Orochimaru shook his head, and Naruto pouted.

Shisui seemed to agree with Naruto though. "Is it not dangerous to send us in blind?"

Orochimaru simply shook his head again, and his students glanced sceptically at one another. Their sensei idea of danger and their own did not always correspond.

"The target isn't dangerous. I'll tell you one detail to ease your mind. This is a missing person case." Orochimaru signed back and pointed towards the bath house they all suspected their target had taken refuge in for the night.

Naruto perked up. Okay, that was better than many of the scenarios she'd been expecting.

"But we need to lure our target out. The target is a flight risk, and will try to escape if I'm seen. So it falls to you three to get the target out and to a meeting spot. Don't try fighting. We don't want to aggravate the target further." Orochimaru signed hurriedly.

"You said the target wasn't dangerous. That sounds like if they are provoked they might start fighting." Anko pointed out.

Orochimaru thought for a moment, before shrugging. "Maybe. It depends on how badly you provoke the target. But I wish to see how you three deal with a situation like this. If you want to become jōnin or ANBU you'll be put in situations like this. Following an unknown target with very little information about their skills and identity. We're gathering information on this mission. The target has this information, and to make the target speak I have to get them alone somewhere people won't overhear us. I'm also more or less testing your capabilities. I know perfectly well who the target is, and most of their skills. You don't, so I'm making sure you get as much practice before we return to Konoha."

Naruto barely managed to follow along with Orochimaru's hurried sign language, but got the gist of what he was saying. So basically he was making this more difficult than it had to be. Which was probably a good thing. If the target was that dangerous he wouldn't risk it. Would he?

They got up and discussed a meeting point higher up in the mountain. Orochimaru was coming back down to the small village with them to make sure they didn't mess up, but had no plans to show himself until they arrived at the meeting point with their target.

Naruto was a little annoyed he wouldn't even give the identity of their target. It felt like an
unnecessary risk.

Shisui and Anko were excited though. This was their first tracking and scouting mission and Shisui looked like he was having the time of his life. Even without the Sharingan his eyes were sharp and he never missed the trail.

Their plan was first to gather information from a distance. Potential escape routes, potential hiding places and potential dangers that could occur without having to enter the bath house their target was within. It was a bath house though, and parts of the construction lacked windows for the customer's privacy.

They had been given enough money to check themselves in, pretending to be customers if they couldn't find an alternative way to get closer to the target, but was attempting to find another solution.

They did a lot of sneaking in the windows. One keeping watch of the street while the other two looked through the windows for signs of anything suspicious.

They came up with very little information of who they were looking for, but luckily got a good idea of potential routes the target would take if they attempted to flee.

So with only one option left they entered the bath house. Naruto and Anko went in alone, feeling it was more plausible that they as friends had decided to go for a bath, than to have Shisui join them as the lone male. Instead Shisui stood watch outside.

It was not a luxurious bath house by any means, and it looked completely empty at a first glance. There weren't even a clerk to greet them upon their entry, which made it very easy for them to take a look around.

The lack of people would make it difficult to go unnoticed if they were caught, but on the other hand there was no one to demand money just so they could take a quick look around in the common areas.

The small common room was empty, and so was the toilets close to the reception, even what Naruto suspected was the office was empty of people. So they walked further in, intending to check out the locker rooms.

Anko put on a henge to take on the appearance of a random man and headed for the male lockers while Naruto decided to go undisguised into the female locker rooms.

It was empty there too.

Frowning, Naruto walked into the showers, but found them just as empty. There was only one place left to check before they had to start going from door to door, and this one was difficult to enter without getting noticed.

Naruto then got a brilliant idea. She knew exactly how to find out if anyone was in the bath.

She'd watched Jiraiya spy on the women bath for years. This shouldn't be that difficult. The fences always had a peek hole. Naruto suspected Jiraiya himself had created peek holes in every single bath house from Fire Country to the ocean in Kumogakure.

Quickly she made it outside through one of the hallway windows. She ran around the building, waving lazily over her shoulder in Shisui's direction, before skidding to a halt when she found the fence separating the street and the women bath. Without any preamble she started looking for irregularities in the timber.
After a few minutes of searching she found one. Putting her eye to the crack she tried to keep as quiet as she'd seen Jiraiya be when he was on these types of "researches".

At first glance it was hard to see anything at all, but from the little she could see it looked empty. Adjusting her position Naruto got a better visual, and froze when she saw a tuft of hair at one of the pool edges.

Someone was there!

Naruto tried to get a better view, but it was hopeless. Instead she decided to head back to the lockers, keeping an ear out for any noises from the bath.

She had no idea who the person was, but her belongings had to be in one of the lockers. Few people left lockers half opened when they stored possessions in them, so Naruto quietly opened the ones that had been shut completely.

While she worked Naruto grew increasingly nervous, and cringed every time a locker made a sound, while hoping desperately it didn't carry out to whoever was outside in the bath.

Naruto had lost count of how many lockers she'd opened when she finally had a result.

She took out the garments, noticing the fabric was of ninja standards. She checked the pockets of the pants first, making sure there was nothing to be discovered there before holding it up for inspection. There was nothing special about them at all.

Naruto held up the green haori next, and was struck with how familiar it looked.

With dawning realization she understood who it was they were tracking.

Crap. Not dangerous? Orochimaru was trying to get every single one of them killed. Himself included.

Naruto sat down. Taking a deep breath while trying to figure out how to go about this. Granted, the person wasn't an enemy, but she was far from harmless.

Tsunade. They had been tracking Tsunade of all people.

She bit her lip and looked out towards the sliding doors separating the showers and the bath. Knowing at any second she could come back to get dressed again.

Naruto had already stuffed her belongings back in the locker and closed it, but she wasn't sure how to make Tsunade come with them.

No wonder Orochimaru was trying to stay clear. Tsunade would know what was up if she even felt a hint of his chakra. But Naruto, Anko and Shisui were unknown to her. Tsunade had no idea who they were, and they had an advantage there.

Naruto should be discussing this with the others. She really should have. But there was simply only one way to go about this. It might get her killed, but it would be for the best.

Anko and Shisui would see when she made her move, and hopefully they'd hurry after her. They had agreed to meet outside unless they were detained. No one would come to her aid unless she gave the signal for backup, or more than an hour had gone by. Anko was probably with Shisui already.

Naruto tip-toed silently out of the locker room, and quickly measured the hallway leading to the
reception area.

She would have to be extremely quick. Tsunade couldn't be given the opportunity to even notice her presence in the building, which incidently would be very difficult.

Naruto sighed but rigged up her plan in a hurry, she couldn't afford go out and potentially loose this opportunity.

Half way through strapping up her trap she heard movements from the locker room, and knew time was running out.

"Where is she?" Signed Anko anxiously. Peeking over the bushes towards the bath house.

"She must have found something. All is quiet though. Naruto still have thirty five minutes." Shisui signed back impatiently.

They noticed a woman come walking towards the inn. She was carrying a bag of groceries, and Anko and Shisui both watched her in worry.

This was probably the missing receptionist. She'd run out to take care of an errand. It had been lucky for them so far, but Naruto was still inside. Hopefully she'd get out through a window before she was spotted.

The woman walked up to the narrow staircase in front of the entrance door, shifting her bag on her hip while she climbed the stairs. But she suddenly halted, and next moment the door crashed open.

Shisui and Anko jolted up when they saw Naruto came hurtling out the door with panic written all over her face. On her heel was a tall blonde woman with a look of pure fury on her heel.

Naruto didn't bother to come to them. Instead she was heading straight in the direction of their meeting point.

"What the hell?" Snapped Anko, not bothering with sign language anymore. They both sprang after them. But Naruto and the woman had a good head start. Shisui doubted they'd be able to catch up.

"You thieving little brat! I'll crush you like a bug with my finger alone! Come back!"

Anko and Shisui looked worried between them. Wondering what on earth Naruto had done this time.

Naruto was running for her life. She was deadly afraid of what Tsunade might do. She was not the Tsunade she remembered from her own time, but the alcoholic, gambling and traumatized Tsunade with no one to stand in as the voice of reason. Shizune was still working with her team back in Konoha.

She peeked quickly over her shoulder, just in time to see Tsunade hit the ground hard with her fist. Naruto shouted and jumped as high in the air she could manage to not get caught in the implosion.

The earth cracked underneath her, and she almost lost her balance before she got up in the air. The rumbling thunder of the cracking earth spurred Naruto on. Tsunade had to halt to hit the ground, giving Naruto the tiniest opportunity to get further ahead.

Naruto sent a quick thanks to Orochimaru for having focused so much of their training on speed with
her and Shisui. If he hadn't Tsunade would have caught up long ago and she'd be a blood spatter on the forest floor.

She was trusting that the sight of Orochimaru would be enough to make Tsunade hesitant. Orochimaru hadn't said anything about keeping the target at their meeting point, just to get her there. Naruto was doing her job alright. Maybe not as sneaky as Orochimaru would have preferred, but it was getting done.

Naruto could see the meeting point up ahead, but no sign of Orochimaru. Crap… Was he behind her? What was she supposed to do if Orochimaru wasn't here?

Tsunade wasn't the fastest, but she had longer legs than Naruto, and she was eating up the distance with fewer steps. She was also furious, which helped a lot on keeping her speed up. Naruto was terrified, which came very handy at the moment since she probably broke one of her personal records trying to stay ahead of Tsunade.

Naruto was almost by the rock - their meeting point - when she finally noticed Orochimaru. He was coming quickly in from the side. And Naruto never thought she'd ever be in a situation where Orochimaru was defending her from Tsunade, but there had to be a first for everything, right?

Orochimaru intercepted Tsunade with such force it made the earth rumble. Tsunade had noticed him at the last possible moment, and blocked whatever it was he had attempted to do.

The result was that both of them were thrown backwards by the shock of their attacks. Naruto only saw the end result, and stopped in her track and stared wide eyed as Tsunade and Orochimaru hurriedly got to their feet.

Tsunade looked suspiciously at her old teammate and then to Naruto. Her eyes darkening as she seemed to understand what was happening. Behind Tsunade, far away in the distance, she could see Anko and Shisui trying to come to her rescue.

"What sort of prank is this? What is going on Orochimaru?" Asked Tsunade angrily and looked hard at the snake sannin.

"I couldn't let you harm my student, Tsunade-hime. Though I'm not sure what she did to get you so furious. I told my students to get you here. Pardon Naruto's lack of class and stealth. She doesn't seem to know how to do anything without making a spectacle."

"Hey! I got the job done, Orochimaru! "Not dangerous" my ass. You put us up to tracking and luring one of the sannin! She can squash any of us like a bug, and she's stubborn too! What was we supposed to do? Lure her out with a trail of sake bottles?" Naruto shouted furiously.

Orochimaru found Naruto's speech highly amusing, and even Tsunade didn't have an immediate come back. Shisui and Anko finally caught up with them, curiously taking in the situation.

"Wait… aren't you…?" Asked Shisui staring at Tsunade in surprise.

Tsunade looked skeptically from Anko to Shisui. "And I suppose these are your other two students?"

"Yes they are. Anko, Naruto and Shisui, this is my old genin teammate Tsunade-hime." Orochimaru explained.

"Whoa… You're one of the sannin!" Anko shouted astonished. She'd been poised to strike at a moment's notice, but her back straightened up and a wide, excited smile was blooming on her face.
"I am. Now give me back my pendant you brat!" Tsunade said and rounded on Naruto.

Naruto smiled sheepishly and put her hand in her pocket, sliding out the green crystal she'd barely managed to steal from around Tsunade's neck.

Tsunade would never have left her pendant in her locker, so Naruto had used her trap to steal the pendant from her. Snapping it straight from her neck. Just like Naruto had predicted, Tsunade had efficiently broken out of the trap Naruto had set up, and pursued her with vengeance.

"No wait." Orochimaru interfered. Both Tsunade and Naruto looked startled up at him. "Hold on to that a little longer, Naruto. I want to have a chat with Tsunade, and she'll run off the moment you hand the pendant back to her."

"You stole her pendant?" Asked Shisui exasperated. "You should clear your crazy plans with us ahead of time, Naruto! We've talked about this before."

"There wasn't time. I had no idea how long I had, and I didn't want to miss the opportunity. And hey, it worked!" Naruto said in defense.

"She's like a cat. It's like the girl has nine lives..." Muttered Anko and rolled her eyes.

Tsunade looked from Anko and Shisui and back to Naruto. "Fine. I'll listen. Not that it matters. What does sensei want this time? I'm not coming back. I'm not helping in the war. He should know that already." She huffed.

Naruto stiffened. Tsunade had been this way the first time too, but she had forgotten how cold she'd been in the beginning. "We have already heard your arguments, Tsunade-hime. No, I was sent here for three reasons. The first one was to find out if you were alive, which you are, so that's something I guess." Orochimaru said and rolled his eyes at Tsunade's antics.

Naruto looked from one sannin to the other. Finding their dynamic strangely playful. When they were not being nemesis it seemed the two got along quite well.

"Why don't we make some dinner? My students have had little rest today, and I think Naruto is in desperate need of some water after the marathon sprint you two had up the mountain. Care to join us, Tsunade-hime?" Orochimaru asked and gestured towards a camp fire already set up to be lit.

So that's what he'd been doing while they did the dirty work. Orochimaru could be infuriating at times.

"I never imagined you'd ever take on students, Orochimaru." Muttered Tsunade and looked at each of the children in turn.

"Me neither. Things change though. They're a fascinating team." Orochimaru answered and looked at each of them in turn. "Their dynamic is quite different than ours was. All three has great potential, it's just a hassle to get it out of them."

Naruto glared at Orochimaru while Anko and Shisui shifted awkwardly.

"Your personality has potential too, Orochimaru, but it sure is a hassle dragging it out of you." Naruto snapped back.

Orochimaru shook his head. "I guess you can imagine which one Naruto is closest to if we compare them to our genin team, Tsunade-hime." Orochimaru said in a drawl, hardly bothered by Naruto's
"You should feel lucky anyone bothers to train you brat." Tsunade said and sent Naruto a glare.

Naruto had yet to give back the pendant, but Tsunade hadn't asked for it either. The sannin probably knew she wouldn't get rid of them before Orochimaru had said whatever he came to say.

"So why did you really become a sensei, Orochimaru? I thought that was more Jiraiya's style." Tsunade asked conversationally.

"Sensei wouldn't stop bothering me about it. So I took an apprentice. Anko here." He explained and gestured to Anko who was eating quietly next to him.

"How did the other two get dumped in your lap?" Asked Tsunade curiously. She was slowly growing more relaxed, the previous tension and the bad confrontation with Naruto had her in a very bad mood to begin with.

"I decided to fulfil the team." Orochimaru replied casually, and Tsunade barked out laughing.

"That is complete bullshit. Honesty this time please." She demanded between chuckles of laughter.

Orochimaru's eyes narrowed and then he looked at Naruto and Shisui in turn. "I gave it a shot to have Naruto on my team. The girl was a mystery when Jiraiya brought her to the village. But today I think I'd choose having Shisui on my team rather than Naruto."

Tsunade looked curiously at Naruto. "Jiraiya brought you to Konoha?"

Before Naruto could respond Orochimaru clarified the situation. "A few years back. Right after you last saw him. Jiraiya fished her out of the river and brought the stray to Konoha. She showed potential."

"Wait… You completed the team to have Naruto as your student?" Asked Anko, a trace of hurt audible to all of them.

Naruto frowned and stared daggers at Orochimaru. "Of course. It was too much of a coincidence. The one guy I didn't want as a sensei happened to become my sensei. Why do you think I was so against this in the beginning?"


"I thought we were getting along, Naruto." Orochimaru said in his most sickly sweet voice.

"We are." Naruto answered and rolled her eyes. "I accepted my fate years ago."

Orochimaru felt the need to explain the situation further, and turned towards Tsunade again. "I was curious about her healing abilities. First the she fell down a waterfall, and then there was an outing where Naruto was the only one who didn't get injured or sick." Orochimaru explained. "Shisui ended up with me too, but he's probably the biggest surprise of my students so far. He's intelligent, well mannered, very talented and great at strategy. A prodigy actually. Just like Anko. I guess Naruto is a prodigy in her own way… If you look away from the fact she's rude and not very smart."

Naruto clenched her teeth together and took a calming breath. She was surprised he admitted this in front of everyone, but then he'd already told her this before. It didn't really matter how he'd become her sensei, it wouldn't change that he was.
Naruto kept her mouth busy by stuffing it with food. Not happy at all about how she was being discussed between the two. She sounded like a dog being put in the rescue shelter.

"I see. Since she's still on your team I guess she must be showing some potential." Tsunade guessed, still talking as if none of the three students were there. Naruto had the urge to splatter some soup in her face.

"Right before this mission she activated her chakra chains. Naruto is an Uzumaki." Orochimaru explained, which instantly peeked Tsunade's interest. She looked Naruto up and down.

"She does look like Kushina actually."

Naruto scowled back "Hey! I'm right here, old hag. Stop talking like I'm a display in a shop window, dattebayo!"

"What did you call me?" Shouted Tsunade furiously.

"You're-" Naruto started saying, but both Anko and Shisui put a hand each over her mouth before she could get the sentence out.

Orochimaru sighed. "Enough about my students. Let's get to why I'm here in the first place."

"Finally!" Tsunade said exasperatedly and looked back at Orochimaru.

Naruto sourly followed Anko and Shisui away from camp. Orochimaru had ordered them away because what he and Tsunade were about to discuss was confidential.

Instead they were put to the task of getting up tents in a camouflaged area. They quickly got up three tents, one for Orochimaru, one for the girls and one for Shisui.

"I'm not even sure this is necessary." Muttered Naruto and looked up at the sky. It was a little cloudy, but that didn't mean there would be rain.

"We've already put them up. You can sleep outside if you want, but I'm taking the tent." Anko answered and pointed to the one man tent they usually shared on missions. Naruto never bothered to bring her own anymore. Anko had no problem sharing hers, and Naruto preferred not bringing unnecessary gear.

Naruto was in a bad mood. At first she thought it would be great to see Tsunade, and in a way it was, but not when Tsunade was being her old bitchy self.

"So how long have you known, Naruto?" Asked Shisui and came trotting over to her. His hands in his pocket and an unreadable expression on his face.

"Known what?"

He sighed and looked over to Anko who was watching them with a similar expression as Shisui. "That Orochimaru handpicked you for the team?"

Naruto huffed. Of course… She hoped this didn't cause trouble for them. She'd already fought with Anko enough about Orochimaru as it was. "I've known since… the mission where Ebisu died."

Naruto answered and sat down on the grass.

"He admitted it right after he and Choza returned. I asked and he admitted it. Apparently I'm a lab rat for him to research. I guess he found out the mystery though. Since I'm an Uzumaki and all that."
Naruto said grumpily and ripped some grass from the ground, twirling the strands tightly around her fingers.

Shisui sat down next to her. "Well, at least you're not the left over." He said with a humorless chuckle.

"Or the cast off." Anko huffed and came over to join her. Naruto couldn't help but snort.

"I think we're all his lab rats. Orochimaru doesn't care about passing on his skills. He's more interested in discoveries," Naruto muttered. "We must be showing results for him to still keep bothering with us."

"Do you honestly believe that?" Anko asked seriously. "He's our sensei. Maybe he picked us because he found us curious in the beginning, but personally… I don't care what he's done before. I'm just glad Orochimaru is our sensei. Not because he's a sannin, or a war hero, or might become Hokage someday, but because he's him."

"Really?" Naruto asked with one eyebrow left.

"Well… I think his past does play a big part of who Orochimaru is, but I trust him. I trust he wants what's best for our team, and I value him as a sensei. He's not really… um… he can be scary at times, sure, but you need to harden up to do stuff like he does. All jōnin has their quirks. It's almost a rule." Shisui explained nervously, peeking over his shoulder in fear of being overheard.

"I don't trust him… I'm fine with his personality, many ninjas develop some level of insanity because of all the shit we go through, and I respect his skills. But my problem with him is that I can't shake this uneasiness when I'm with him." Naruto admitted quietly.

"You let your first impression of people get the better of you, Naruto. You first met Orochimaru when we were caught red handed sneaking out after curfew, and you've never allowed yourself to forget it." Anko snapped annoyed.

"Then why am I friends with you, Anko? The first time we met you pulled my hair and called me a crybaby because I happened to walk past your table. You were a bully and a brat." Naruto pointed out.

Anko opened her mouth to defend herself, and then slowly closed it. Looking thoughtful. "Yeah… How on earth did we become friends?"

Naruto shrugged her shoulders, a small smile on her lips. Shisui chuckled at their antics.

"I want to be wrong though. I want to be wrong about Orochimaru." Naruto said slowly. It was painful to admit, but she genuinely hoped she was wrong.

"What do you expect to happen?" Asked Shisui curiously.

"Not sure… Just…" Naruto trailed off. Not sure how to explain the possibility of Orochimaru harming thousands of people to use them for lab research, go completely insane and attempt to destroy Konoha. To Anko and Shisui it would probably come off as quite farfetched.

"But you're giving him a chance right? He hasn't let you down yet has he?" Asked Anko smugly.

"That's true..." Naruto murmured and closed her eyes. In truth she'd thought a lot about this subject recently. It had been constantly at the back of her mind, but somehow overlooked because of the many distractions of being sent back in time.
It was this thought process which eventually had made her confront the Kyūbi just a few days ago.

It had been an unpleasant conversation, but afterwards she'd felt a sense of peace. She had tried to wait out the demon fox, hoping he'd crack first and start talking to her, but to no avail. And Naruto wasn't known for her patience.

A lot had factored into her decision to square things up with the fox.

Before falling back in time she had started wondering if it was possible to be civil with the Kyūbi. The eight tails and Killer Bee had managed to form a partnership, so that meant there was a possibility to at least cooperate. Maybe.

But falling back in time had made their progress falter and crash completely.

At first Naruto had been so furious she didn't want anything to do with the fox again. Just the thought of the demon had made her blood boil.

It was his fault she was in the past all alone. It was his fault she was forced to lie to the people she loved. It was his fault things would never be the same. It was his fault! All of it.

But they say time heals all wounds, and Naruto had come to realize there might be something in that saying. As time passed Naruto had started feeling less lost. Less alone. And her memories and frustration had dimmed. The feeling of being out of time and place had slowly ebbed away and she had started seeing her new situation as a new beginning, instead of a horrible end.

In a way she had gotten so many people back. She had Ero-sennin, Sarutobi-jiji, her mum and dad… They were all alive again. How could she feel horrible about that?

Leaving everything she'd known back in the future had been the prize for getting back the people who died prematurely. It had been crushing at first. Especially the first few months, but Naruto had never been one to let grief break her.

So instead she had learned to deal the only way she knew how. She had put on a smile. And after a while that smile had become genuine. It was thanks to all her new friends. Some days she wasn't even sure which reality she would prefer. The one at the brink of the Fourth Shinobi war, or the Third war which she was currently a part of.

It had taken time. Too much time really, for her to come to terms with it fully. And along the way Ebisu had died. Which was shamefully also something Naruto had blamed on the Kyūbi. It wouldn't have happened unless Naruto had been in the past.

And then Naruto had met Itachi.

Maybe it was just the tip of the iceberg. The drop that made the water flood over the glass edge. So many conflicting emotions had erupted in her at the sight of the little boy playing with his older cousin. The thought of Itachi killing Shisui had been completely surreal. It was sick to think two people who had been so close could end up in such a situation.

Naruto could finally understand what had made Sasuke go so insane. To think you knew someone, loved them like a brother, just to come home and have it all turn into a nightmare.

Naruto had therefore spent her time up to this mission half concentrating on chakra chains, and the other half thinking about Itachi. Going from ways to keep Itachi away from Shisui, to wondering if Itachi could be saved, to who else could be saved in case Itachi went down the same route as before.
Naruto had driven herself mad with worry at the idea of Shisui so close to both Itachi and Orochimaru at the same time. Two people who both had a habit of making the life of the Uchiha hell on earth.

Then, like every normal day, she had seen Orochimaru helping Shisui with his latest technique. The sunshin.

Naruto had seen this scenario many times before. Despite his many flaws Orochimaru was actually quite a good teacher. He was being patient but strict. Like always. But he had looked genuinely pleased when Shisui had done something correct. And a foreign thought had entered her head.

Was Orochimaru the same person as she'd first known?

She had stared at them for a long time during training. Pretending to be concentrating on her own chain training while she spied on their progress.

Orochimaru never showed his usual creepiness. Not once in the years he had acted as their sensei. Sure, he was unsettling from time to time, but so were a lot of people. Gaara had scared the living daylight out of Naruto when they had first met, but as they had become friends Naruto had come to see him as one of her most precious people.

Could Orochimaru be redeemed? Jiraiya had thought so at first. Could Naruto help that happen? Was it already happening?

Then she'd thought about Itachi, and the same question had applied to him. But more along the lines of keeping him the way he was now. He was just a child. His future sins didn't apply to him right now, despite Naruto's habit of forgetting that.

And when she had finally realized she could do something. Make a difference. The chains had erupted from her on training ground three.

It had been a sense of peace. A sense that she could truly and genuinely help that had somehow activated the chains.

Maybe it was getting rid of her doubt that was what hindered her. Letting go of the past completely, and try to see everyone the way they were now, instead of how they had been then.

It was hours later that Orochimaru and Tsunade returned. "Tsunade-hime has agreed to come back to Konoha for a few days." Orochimaru explained the moment his three students looked up.

Naruto's eyes widened. She hadn't seen that one coming.

"Well, I have one more demand before I do such a thing. Give me back my pendant." Tsunade demanded and looked hard at Naruto.

She grinned widely back, feeling truly happy for the first time today as she jumped to her feet.

For old times' sake, Naruto had tried on Tsunade's pendant. As she retrieved the pendant from around her neck, Tsunade stared with fearful, wide eyes. "Here you go! It's a really cool pendant." Naruto said as Tsunade snatched it out of her hand.

"It's not a toy! Why did you put it on? This thing is cursed." Tsunade said with fear and clipped the pendant back around her neck. It glinted faintly even in the dusk.
Shisui and Anko looked confused at her words, while Naruto simply tilted her head. "If you say so."

Tsunade was annoyed at her reply. "Why did you steal the pendant? I believe you went through my locker before you attempted a more direct form of thievery. Why not just take my clothes? Much less risky." Tsunade asked her thoughtfully.

"Because it was in your locker. You kept the pendant on you. Few people wear jewellery when they take a bath, but you did. Which means it was too valuable to be left anywhere else. So I took the pendant since you'd do much more to get that back than if I'd taken your sandals, dattebayo." Naruto answered cheekily, quite proud of herself for thinking up such a good explanation.

"That is surprisingly insightful for someone of your intelligence, Naruto." Said Orochimaru, a look of surprise on his face.

"I have my moments." Naruto smiled smugly back.

Tsunade chuckled and shook her head. "This pendant belonged to my grandfather, Senju Hashirama."

"The First Hokage?" Asked Anko amazed. Staring at the pendant with wide eyes.

"Yes. It's also cursed. Everyone who wears it but me ends up dead." She said and shook her head.

"Really?" Asked Shisui skeptically, but cast a slightly worried look at Naruto.

"Really." Confirmed Tsunade with a deep frown, her eyes also on Naruto.

"It's just a pendant. It looks cool and all, but it can't be that special." Naruto muttered and looked at the pendant again. It was weird seeing it on Tsunade. Naruto had gotten so used to see it around her own neck.

"Tsunade-hime has her reasons to believe so, and even I wonder sometimes." Orochimaru admitted and looked meaningfully at Tsunade. She sighed and shook her head.

"Hey! I tried the pendant on, but I'm not going to fall over dead anytime soon. I have a lot to do before I die dattebayo." Naruto muttered annoyed, folding her hands in front of her and staring hard back at Tsunade.

"Naruto isn't in danger is she?" Asked Anko, looking at Tsunade with a mix of uncertainty and worry.

"It wasn't a gift..." Tsunade said thoughtfully. "Only the people who I've given this to have died shortly after." She said and shook her head. "She stole it, so let's hope the curse hasn't grown stronger."

Shisui bent forward, his curiosity about the subject was obvious on his face. "Why did you give it away?"

Tsunade took a moment to reply, brushing away some hair from her face and efficiently drawing everyone's attention to her. "I gave it away for some sappy, naive reason before I knew better. Both had the same dream of becoming Hokage. Ridiculous really. And I gave it to them as a show of faith. Since it belonged to the First Hokage. Both died right after."

Anko and Shisui both stiffened and looked at Naruto. Both knowing very well about Naruto's future dreams.
"What?" Asked Tsunade and looked between them.

"They are reacting because my dream is to become Hokage." Naruto explained slowly.

For a moment a look of concern flashed on Tsunade's face, before it was replaced with contempt. "You truly are an idiot then. Only naive, fools become Hokage. Grow up brat, and get over your delusions. Dreams never come true." Tsunade snapped.

Naruto gritted her teeth. She'd been through this discussion, but for some reason Tsunade was hitting a nerve this time. It had the first time too, but this time it was more potent. "Shut up." She said so low in the back of her throat it reverberated through the air.

All four looked startled at almost animalistic sound. "I never go back on my word. I will become Hokage one day, that is my dream, and just because you've given up doesn't mean the rest of us have."

Tsunade looked at her with a sneer. Her eyes hard and taunting before replying. "You're young. I get it. This is just some healthy advice from someone who's already been through a war. Sometime, maybe tomorrow or in a few years, if you're still alive, you'll see my point. When you lose those you love then you'll see that dreams are just for those who doesn't know what pain feels like. You can only dream as long as you're asleep, come back and talk to me again when you've woken up, brat."

Naruto bit her lip. Her anger so potent it was palpable in the air. She had lost everyone. She had lost her own time, damn it! How could Tsunade talk about loss when she had no idea what the word even meant? It wasn't an excuse to give up! It was a reason to continue!

"Actually, Tsunade-hime... " Orochimaru said slowly, drawing all of their attention to him. "Naruto-chan knows pain. She lost her whole family and her home four years ago. That's how she ended up in Konoha."

"Exactly." Naruto hissed back at Tsunade. "Before I came to Konoha... I had friends. I had... I had everything. And then suddenly there was nothing. No one who knew me, no one even noticed me. But it's not a reason to give up like you have... When you lose someone you train harder. You work more so it doesn't happen again. You make sure you don't make that mistake so that the next time the situation comes up you know what to do. And you do it better. I want to become Hokage, because when I take the title I can protect people from the pain I felt. I don't wish that on anybody! Not even my worst enemy! And I certainly will never use the death of my own comrades as an excuse to give up, and turn my backs on the ones who still needs me."

There was a ringing silence when Naruto finished speaking. Even Orochimaru was at lost for words.

"You're too young. Just wait and you'll see, as long as you stay alive, life will always turn out for the worst." Tsunade said in defense and shook her head. As if age was all that mattered here.

"Then I guess you're too old to remember what it was like to be young, because if you did you'd never use that as an excuse."

"I think... Naruto has a point." Orochimaru said eventually. Naruto looked startled at him. He'd been backing her up more than usual these days. "In fact... Naruto has a habit of ending up in bad situations, but till now she has always come out on the other side stronger."

Naruto was happy when they came back to Konoha. It was a relief to see the gates grow larger for every few steps.
Naruto, Shisui and Anko had been forced to share a one man tent for the last part of the mission. Tsunade had kicked Shisui out of his own to use for herself, and the three students had squeezed into Anko's tent to keep out of the rapidly worsening weather. Naruto had to start remembering to bring her own tent one of these days, but she'd gotten used to relying on Anko for everything she forgot.

It looked like the weather was turning again though, since the sun was peeking out for the first time in days.

Tsunade had very little interaction with Naruto. Wordlessly they had agreed to disagree, at least for now.

Naruto was not sure how to convince Tsunade this time around. Last time their circumstances had forced them on the same side in a violent battle, and somehow everything had turned for the better at the end of the whole ordeal. Tsunade had overcome her own blood phobia, Konoha had gotten their next Hokage, and Naruto had gotten a friend she cared deeply for. This time around it had turned awkward.

Naruto hadn't given up though. Tsunade had agreed to return to Konoha with them for a short time before she left again. What and why was confidential, and Naruto had no idea what Orochimaru had said to make the slug sannin agree to return to her home village.

Naruto walked with her two teammates in the front while the sannin were following little behind. Talking casually back and forth the way only old friends could. It was unsettling how well the two got along. Naruto still found it absurd.

"I'm hoping you're willing to go see sensei first, Tsunade-hime." Orochimaru said when they arrived at the gate.

"Only after I've had a visit to the closest bar." Tsunade snapped back. Her temper had grown shorter the closer they had gotten to Konoha.

"Actually, we'd all prefer for you to be sober for this conversation. Believe it or not, but you'll have to keep your wits intact for this meeting."

"How much?"

"How much what?"

"How much wits? Full on concentrated, slightly stumbling, or partly conscious? You should remember that I'm usually more compliant after a few glasses. Right now the only thing I want is to break something, and I think sensei would get annoyed if I took it out on his desk again."

Shisui peeked worriedly over his shoulder. Like most people he was not sure of how to act around Tsunade. Her open alcoholism, gambling and lack of grace were putting him off his first admiration for her.

"Fine. One glass." Orochimaru answered pointedly.

"One? I've worked up my tolerance considerably since we last met. I'll take three. That way I can calm down enough before we start this farce of a meeting."

"Two." Orochimaru negotiated.

"We'll see." Tsunade answered and took off at a street corner. Leaving team Orochimaru to stare after her in various degrees of annoyance.
Orochimaru looked worriedly after her for a moment and then turned towards his students. "I need to follow her. You three report to the mission desk and sort out the report. I don't have time right now." And then he was gone in a whirlwind of leaves.

Naruto groaned. "If I didn't know better, I'd say Orochimaru planned this. Everything to get out of paperwork, right?"

"That's you, Naruto." Shisui pointed out unhelpfully.

"I'm more up for paperwork than having to part Tsunade from her sake bottle. Lives will be at stake." Anko said drily and shook her head.

"Hey, at least we'd actually be doing something productive. Mission reports just feel like a way to fill out shelves in the archive. Are they ever used for anything other than dust gathers?" Naruto mused aloud.

Shisui thought for a moment before answering. "Well, filling up shelves in the archive with reports is quite similar to Tsunade drinking sake. You can make them skip one, but you know there'll be more later."

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They ran into team Minato at the mission desk, where they too were being handed papers to fill out before their verbal report with the Hokage.

They all greeted one another, sharing a few details from their latest mission. Kakashi had brought Pakkun with him, and Naruto was distracted by the puppy who was attempting to pronounce her name.

"Shisui, I need to speak with you." Minato said and stepped carefully around the ninken to not thread on him. Shisui looked curiously up while receiving his own form.

"I have a proposition for you, but we'll discuss the specifics later." He said and then smiled disarmingly at everyone who was looking curiously at him.

"What do you need to speak to Shisui about?" Asked Obito and came up next to them. Minato roughed up Obito's hair and chuckled.

"It's confidential. And it might be nothing." Minato explained before heading for the table people could use to fill out the report.

"We're your team! We're not supposed to have secrets!" Obito moaned and hurried after Minato.

"Give it up, Obito. Confidential is confidential." Said Anko dismissively.

"Still..." He huffed and took a seat next to Naruto.

"Neh, how's the rasengan coming along?" Asked Naruto excitedly.

Obito instantly turned flustered, and fiddled with the pencil in his hand. "Oh... um... I haven't actually had any time... We're always on missions, you know. Minato-sensei showed me the beginning steps... But I only had an hour to actually work on it." He muttered ashamed.

"Hey, I get it." Naruto said in understanding. "We're constantly on missions too. So I'll give you a month instead, dattebayo. One month, and then you have to show me your rasengan."

Obito grinned appreciatively at her, while Kakashi sat down on Naruto's other side, Pakkun hanging
over his head. "You can give him a year, and I'd still bet he'd not be past the second step."

"Really? Why don't you show me your rasengan, Kakashi?" Naruto answered annoyed.

Kakashi shook his head, not bothering to reply before he started writing efficiently on his report. Ignoring Rin and Pakkun stifled chuckles in the background.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the long wait, but thank you so much for reading! The chapter was beta'd by the wonderful AnjoRemix!

To those of you who's asked or was wondering about this; I've decided on a pairing.

It was a tough call, but in the end I decided on Shisui. There's already many really good stories with Kakashi and Naruto as a pairing, and I don't feel I can add anything new. I also really like Shisui, and don't see him much in other stories, which gives me a lot of playroom with his character. I'm so sorry to those of you who don't like that or was hoping for Kakashi, Anko or someone else. But as I've said before; this isn't a love story, and a pairing is simply a way to give a new layer to the plot. Naruto and Shisui won't be the only pairing either. I'm having way too much fun plotting out teenage drama as a background plot for this story… I think I need to reel myself in slightly.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Warning: There's detailed violence and death in this chapter.

Chapter Twenty One – Fields of Blood

"We were alone and starved for love. Kids that lived in a world full of hate." - Uchiha Sasuke

Anko and Naruto woke up early to a clear, sun filled morning and had a quick but entertaining breakfast. Naruto juggled the cereal box, their bowls and spoons in a circus number while Anko laughed at the silliness.

This was what Orochimaru's training tips had ended up used for most of the time; Quick entertainment in social settings. As far as Naruto was concerned, their sensei should just be happy she didn't let her training go to waste.

After the successful but harsh training session last evening Naruto felt full of energy despite getting very little sleep. These days it was difficult to find time for training, and it meant eating into their meal time and sleep if they wanted to practise outside of missions.

But in a surprisingly refreshed mood the girls left the apartment to meet Orochimaru and Shisui by the gate.

After a quick briefing together they set out. They were meeting a client who needed security to deliver rations to Konoha. It was one of their more regular missions, and they had even met this particular client once before. It would take them a day to get there, but there was always the possibility of running into enemies.

Team Orochimaru wasn't too worried though. Much of the heat had been concentrated on the western border as of late, while they were heading northward. Hopefully they'd have a smooth mission without any unnecessary battles.

A little past noon they stopped for lunch by a lake. Even taking the time to light a fire to heat up their food. Naruto tried to pry information from Orochimaru regarding Tsunade, but all she got was that the slug sannin was staying in Konoha for a few weeks.

Half an hour later they were packing up and getting ready to leave. However their activity was disturbed when a puff of smoke erupted a few feet from Orochimaru. All four were surprised to see a monkey summon appear.

From there things went quickly downhill.

"Orochimaru-kun, I have an urgent message for you." The monkey said in a deep voice considering its size. It wasn't much larger than a house cat.

It was hard for Naruto to keep a straight face after hearing anyone address Orochimaru with '-kun' and she immediately liked the funky looking monkey.
Wordlessly Orochimaru walked up to the monkey and bent down to hear what was going on. Meanwhile his students dealt with the rest of the cleanup, and waited curiously to hear what was happening.

The monkey went up in smoke after five minutes, and Orochimaru turned back towards his students with an abnormally blank expression.

"There's a change of plans. We're abandoning this mission. We're heading for the Midori fields instead." Orochimaru told them while brushing a calm, white hand through his hair.

"What? Why?" Naruto asked. For the last couple of weeks warnings about Iwa and Kumo activity had made Konoha stop doing regular missions in that area. It was extremely dangerous there, and it almost guaranteed they'd run into trouble.

"That was a call for backup from the Hokage. An army of Kumo ninjas has been reported heading for our base there, and Iwa is moving from east. There will be a battle soon, and if the number of the army was counted correctly then they are badly outnumbered."

"W-what?" Anko asked breathlessly.

The smile on Naruto's lips was wiped away as she understood what was being said. They were being sent to the battlefield? As in… the front lines?

"We're going now." Orochimaru stated calmly, as if this was a perfectly normal occurrence. "Get ready, you all are to dress in standard Konoha uniform."

The three students shared a frightened glance with each other, but did as instructed without preamble. Naruto and Anko found a bush to change behind, trying to be efficient while they changed into the standard dark sweater and pants with the forest green flak jacket. It was Naruto's first time wearing the uniform outside her apartment bedroom, where she'd tried it on just to see what it looked like.

On the front line it could get messy. If they didn't dress in the uniform they didn't know who all their allies were, even if it meant the enemies found out too.

Soon all three had changed from their normal clothes and into the standard battle attire. All four standing in Konoha green and equipped for easy access to their weapons.

Orochimaru was already impatient, and they hurried after him as he set off at a sprint's pace.

Naruto's head was filled with worse case scenarios during the first part of their travel. She couldn't make herself word any of her worries, and neither could any of her teammates. But after fifteen minutes of silence Shisui finally broke it. His voice taking on a hectic tone while they jumped from branch to branch. "What's our plan?"

Orochimaru answered without missing a beat. He was the picture of control. "We're backup, Shisui. There's hundreds out there already. There's no way for us to know what's happening, so we read the situation and act accordingly."

Shisui's eyes widened while Naruto felt her stomach turn uneasily. "It sounds like… you expect a blood bath." Anko said with a quiver in her voice.

"I am. Worst case scenario we arrive after the battle has started. If we do there's not much we can plan out. We'll have to see once we get there. If we get separated somehow the memo is to just stay alive. Kill as many enemies as you can see, and don't harm any allies."
Naruto swallowed, feeling sick imagining what was ahead of them.

"Why are we coming?" Asked Shisui, the question was one both Anko and Naruto wondered too, but hadn't dared speak aloud.

"Because of me. I'm needed there, and though you're young you are still Chūnin of Konoha. We are also a front line offensive team, though admittedly still in training. You have already proved you can deal with situations like these, so I'm bringing you with me to support the front line."

Shisui nodded wordlessly, knowing what wasn't being said.

They needed everyone close enough to fight. They were six hours out of Konoha, and though they had walked in the wrong direction for most of the day they were still three hours closer than anyone in Konoha. There wasn't many to call for backup either, since most teams were swamped with missions, meaning well suited ninjas for this type of battle were too far away to reach back on time.

They were the last resort. And it would be on their own expense if they messed up.

They could hear it before they saw it. The explosions were audible first, and then came the shouts. It had taken them five hours to get to the Midori fields, and from the sound of things they arrived after the battle had already started.

It was a wide spread battle field. Not a large groups on one field as Naruto had first imagined, but people scattered around the woods and fields for miles. It didn't make it less horrifying though.

The screams echoed oddly, and the clink of metal meeting metal hummed through the air like a constant tune. It made everywhere feel unsafe.

"Stay close, but don't get in my way. You follow my orders, no exceptions." Orochimaru ordered them. His composure less calm in the face of the oncoming danger.

"What do we do first?" Asked Anko. At first she had been silent while they ran, but she had grown increasingly impatient the closer they got.

"We're going to create a distraction. We're reinforcement, and there are many of our comrades who're currently under huge amount of pressure or exhausted. We'll basically lure the heat towards us."

Naruto's eyes widened and she looked from Anko to Shisui and back up at Orochimaru. "We can't deal with everyone on our own. And how will we lure anyone? You sound like we came here to act as decoys!"

"Sssshhh!" Anko and Shisui hissed in unison, and Naruto smacked a hand over her mouth while looking alarmed around. Praying that no one had overheard her.

"You're actually right, Naruto."

All of them stared disbelievingly up at him. "It's time to show your true potential. I have a plan though, so listen up."

They huddled closer, though they'd already been standing as near as possible. "I am the decoy. A lot of ninjas will see me as a big threat – which I am. I'm going to summon a lot of snakes, and Anko will help me here." He looked pointedly at Anko, who nodded mutely.
"Next is Naruto. You'll use your clones, but I don't want you going all out, you need to use your chakra wisely today if you wish to see tomorrow." Orochimaru explained hurriedly before turning last to Shisui.

"Shisui; you'll stay close to Anko. If Naruto runs into trouble you'll use the Zanzo bunshin. But only if something happens to Naruto, first and foremost you are to read the situation with your Sharingan and report on the go. You have the best eyes out of all of us."

They didn't get much time to fine comb their plan before they were discovered. A couple of Iwa ninjas stumbled upon them, shouting their lunges off about Orochimaru while they charged ahead.

Orochimaru summoned two great snakes in a flash. Naruto was hoisted up in the air on the head of a snake together with Orochimaru. The same happened to Anko and Shisui, but they were standing on the snake next to them.

The Iwa ninjas were crushed in an instant. The crash of the serpent's tail drowned out their panicked shout before they died. They gained the expected attention though.

This high in the air Naruto could see much further than down on the ground, and the sight was alarming. People started throwing weapons at them, while others were running to attack at a closer range.

Naruto fastened herself to the shells of the snake with chakra, while Orochimaru gestured for Anko to get in position.

"Manda no jin." Orochimaru hissed, and a sea of snakes escaped through his mouth. Naruto flinched in disgust, but held her mask in place, her eyes on their attackers instead of her ally.

Next to them Anko was summoning a group of large snakes. Not nearly as large as the ones they were standing on, but substantially larger than the hundreds of snakes Orochimaru had just spit out through his mouth.

People screamed in panic as the snakes slithered onto the battle field. They crawled into bushed and disappeared out of sight, but the screams indicated they had found prey.

Orochimaru spoke high and cold. "Forwards!"

The large snakes shot forward. Naruto bent down on all fours to gain more balance as they slithered into battle. Her eyes wide while the snake crushed anyone who was unlucky enough to get in their way. Shuriken was flying at them, but so far all had missed. They clang against the tough snake shells and bounced off like insignificant gravel. Not nearly enough to stop the serpent's advance.

"Look to the left!" Shouted Shisui, and all of them watched three fiery objects come hurling at them.

Naruto was ready, and next moment three clones threw themselves into the air, colliding with the objects and setting them off prematurely. It had been aiming at Orochimaru and Naruto, and they crouched down to avoid the explosions above them.

"There's another one!" Cried Shisui through the dust and sooth that rained over them.

Orochimaru was on it this time. "Shuriken Kage Bunshin no Jutsu." He muttered calmly and threw a shuriken into the air. It was a blind throw because of the smoke from the explosion, but the shuriken multiplied in ten folds. Another explosion was heard somewhere above the smoke, but the snake was speeding so fast they were soon out of the dust.
When they finally gained a clear view again they saw the commotion Orochimaru's presence on the battlefield had created.

A larger group had gathered, about twenty to thirty ninjas was running towards them, their intent clear.

"Your turn, Naruto. Don't let them come close." Orochimaru ordered quietly.

Naruto nodded and made the clone seal. "Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!"

They held off for half an hour, but then the snake summoning contract with the two snakes went out, and they returned back to the Ryūchi Cave. It became a mess afterwards.

Orochimaru fought them out of the worst heat, Naruto as his second in command.

It was just a fact that Shisui and Anko didn't have the chakra reserves to get them through the hordes of opponents they faced. Instead they aided through taijutsu and kenjutsu. Shisui used ninja wire while Anko used her smaller size to fly between their enemies' feet and stab wildly.

For the time it looked dark. There was no getting out and more kept coming.

Again Orochimaru had come to the rescue. "Stay together, I'll gain their attention. But I'll disappear for a couple of minutes, so keep Anko and Shisui alive, Naruto. Two minutes." Orochimaru hissed while they were standing back to back while doing little more than deflecting and parrying attacks.

"I will." Naruto replied shakily, her hands going back into the clone seal. A hundred clones popped up, all of them going berserk on the bewildered crowd. Until now she'd kept the number to no more than fifteen, and it was quite a surprise for her opponents. Orochimaru disappeared behind her, and Naruto had no idea where he went.

She grabbed Shisui and Anko, making sure not to lose them in the throng, and together they forced their way as far out of the crowd as possible. Shisui hissed as he got a cut from a flying kunai, but kept running.

An explosion went off not far away from them, people screamed and shouted.

"The sannin is over there!"

"He's trying to flee!"

"Kill Orochimaru, this way!"

Naruto watched astonished as most of their opponents changed their objective, moving towards Orochimaru instead of pressing in on them.

They were far from safe though. Plenty wanted to finish them just for fighting alongside Orochimaru and being Konoha ninjas in a sea of Iwa and Kumo ninjas.

The only thing they had to their advantage was that Iwa and Kumo weren't allies. They were fighting each other as well as them.

Another explosion went off, this time from the opposite direction, and Naruto felt her heart skip a beat as numerous Konoha ninja came running into their area. Their comrades. They were finally getting some help.
Naruto stumbled backwards, staring up at the furious man in front of her.

It was like a fog was clouding her vision. Naruto wasn't sure when she'd last seen Orochimaru, but none of them had been allowed a break since their dramatic entry into the battle. By now Naruto only acted, but didn't really register her own movements.

Everything was done more on instinct than conscious thought as one opponent was switched with the next one. Their bodies a trail of death by Naruto's own hands.

There was only one moment of perfect clarity throughout the battle, it was when she had her arm through the chest of a man who'd been about to kill Anko.

She was struck with the familiarity of the situation. Once it was Sasuke who had his hand through her chest. Now it was Naruto who was on the giving end. This man wouldn't survive it though. He didn't have the Kyūbi to heal him.

When the man slid down in a heap, it revealed Anko behind him. Her eyes were wide and hard with fresh bruises and blood dripping down her face. But she was still – thankfully - alive.

Naruto couldn't guess what she herself looked like. The rasengan had drilled into his abdomen and exploded halfway through his body, making Naruto drenched in the man's blood and probably more.

A sound of anger came from behind her, and turning around Naruto watched as a shuriken came hurtling towards her. Naruto didn't have the time or energy to dodge, and felt it cut into her stomach while her hands covered her face.

Next moment the ninja appeared in front of her. Ready to strike the finishing blow, but was intersected by snakes shooting at him. They bit into his neck and face, making him scream and twist while he tried to fight them off.

When Anko's hand closed around Naruto's elbow she let her herself be dragged away without objections. Knowing instinctively that they were running, but not sure exactly where. Only that it was not to safety.

The battle was a whirlwind of movement and disorganization. Shisui had found them again - after being lost for over an hour in the chaos - and looked intact considering their situation.

Orochimaru was completely gone though.

Naruto wasn't sure what had happened to him since their parting hours earlier, but it felt like days ago.

"Are you alright?" Asked Shisui aghast when he saw Naruto. She didn't want to know what Shisui saw to make him look that worried, and Naruto simply nodded.

"I'm fine. It's not my blood."

"And you Anko?" He inquired and turned towards Anko. She was massaging her wrist painfully, and gave a short jerk of her head in answer. She had a constant wide eyed expression on her face. It would have freaked Naruto out if she had been of a saner mind.

"You three, we need help over here."

They looked around in unison and saw Shikaku staring back at them. His eyes raked over them for a
moment, halting longer on Naruto than the others.

They wordlessly followed the command, and were led to a larger group of Konoha ninjas standing in wait behind a cover of boulders. Naruto couldn't recognize anyone except Shikaku. "We're going to move further into the dale. A large group of Iwa ninja are coming in from the east. More backup." Shikaku explained hurriedly.

Naruto gritted her teeth. They just never stopped coming.

"You two." Shikaku said and addressed Naruto and Shisui. "You both use a type of clone technique. We need as many bodies as possible, seeing as we're badly outnumbered. Do you have enough chakra?" He asked while rummaging through his pockets.

"I'm low." Sighed Shisui frustrated and dragged a hand through his hair.

"Some." Naruto replied vaguely. "Maybe fifty?"

Shikaku stopped his movements for a moment, peeking curiously up before fishing up a box of soldier pills. He handed one to each of them. "These will help your reserves build up faster. Eat up." He commanded while they moved into the crowd.

"Do we have any backup coming?" Asked Shisui.

Shikaku sighed and looked in the direction of the main battle. "Some." He replied, repeating Naruto's word back at her.

After hours on end of fighting Naruto only managed to make two clones. She was running dangerously low on chakra, and knew this battle wasn't ending in their favor.

There were bodies everywhere, and Naruto was covering Shisui and Anko the best she could. They were both out of chakra and needed a break from the heat.

A couple of men were focusing on them. They had just taken down two Konoha ninjas before they spotted them, and was walking slowly in their direction. Knowing they had them cornered.

"Say your prayers." The tall one said quietly.

Naruto held out her hand to the clone on her right. She had only one rasengan left in her, but damn it if she wasn't going to use it efficiently. She couldn't let them get to Anko or Shisui. "Stay back." She told her teammates sternly, knowing they were watching her from behind.

Her enemies halted when they saw the technique. Their eyes narrowing.

Naruto and the two clones ran forwards, meeting their opponents mid distance. The two clones jumped sideways while Naruto ducked two katanas at the same time. She had singled out which one she would take down ahead of time, and the clones managed to get a hold of him.

One jumped up on his back, getting him in a tight arm grip, while the other took a hold of his feet and efficiently restraining him. Naruto twisted out of reach of the other tall man, before burrowing her rasengan into his chest.

He made that odd shout. As if a drill was being bored into him while he screamed. He fell dead to the ground with Naruto on top of him.

She barely had time to take a breath when one of her clones popped by the still living opponent, the
short one, and Naruto rolled away as he slashed for her again.

Her one remaining clone attacked from behind, slashing with a kunai, but the man sidestepped the clone and kicked it hard in the stomach.

Naruto was shakily getting to her feet, grabbing for her kunai too while she tried to figure out what to do next.

The man was keeping his distance now. Looking her up and down with bloodshot eyes.

Naruto swallowed, knowing the only thing she could do was pretend she was in better shape than she actually was. She would strike first. Try and use her drastically smaller size to avoid being hit.

Naruto sprang forwards just as the man did the same. She tried to read his next moment, know when to duck so she could get beneath him and attack upwards. It was risky, because it exposed her back, but it was the only way she knew to get a clear shot.

Just before they collided a kunai flew past Naruto's eyes. She saw it for just a split second, and then there was a bright flash. Minato appeared right in the middle, blocking out Naruto's view. The man was killed so quickly Naruto had barely stopped from colliding into Minato before he fell dead to the ground. A kunai stuck in his throat.

For a moment Naruto didn't understand. Her mind hadn't caught up with the events yet, and just to make sure she hadn't been the one to kill the dead man she looked down at her hand still clutching a kunai.

"Are you okay?" Minato turned towards her, his expression cold but not aggressive. Watchful and on alert for enemies.

The sky was starting to light up behind him, indicating that the morning sunrise was not far away. He looked fresh for battle, not a single stain on his clothes. He must have arrived on the field recently.

She silently nodded, and Minato put a hand to her shoulder and squeezed it gently. Studying her closely with a hard expression.

"You've done well, Naruto. Now retreat. That's an order."

Naruto swallowed and numbly nodded again.

Shisui came up next to her and took a hold of her hand. "Thanks for saving her, Minato-sensei." He said quietly to Minato, but his eyes stayed on Naruto's dazed expression.

"Shisui, get everyone you find in this area to retreat, I'll deal with the enemy. I have a plan." Minato ordered hurriedly. "And make sure she's alright." He added and glanced down at Naruto.

"I'm fine..." Naruto murmured hoarsely. "I just need... a break."

But next thing she knew Shisui was dragging her after him, catching up with Anko who was hiding behind a boulder. Together they stumbled away from the field, trying their best to stay alive while the battle continued around them.

Shisui pushed Naruto into the grass while Anko rummaged through her pouch, retrieving a storage scroll which she unsealed with shaky hands.

Naruto was finally getting her senses back, and was not sure if that was a bad thing or not. Things
were coming back to her quickly while the sounds of screams echoed through the air in the background.

"We need to go back." Naruto whispered hoarsely and swallowed to clear her throat.

"No. Minato-sensei ordered us to retreat. You're a mess Naruto. You've completely drained yourself of chakra. I think you created a thousand clones out there, not to mention how many rasengan you used. You're resting. You're of no help in this condition." Anko said, leaving no room for discussion, and put a bottle of water in Naruto's hand.

Anko pointed to the bottle. "Drink."

Naruto did, and felt great relief as the water trickled down her paper dry throat.

Shisui had his own water bottle out, while Anko was unsealing Naruto's bottle to drink for herself.

"This is insane..." Muttered Shisui while pinching the bridge of his nose. Breathing quickly between quick sips of water.

"I'm fine. I feel better." Naruto said and got back to her feet, only for Shisui to place two hands on her shoulders and forcibly push her down into the grass again.

"Damn it, Naruto! Stay down! I'll fight you if I have to." Shisui snapped furiously.

"Do you think Minato-sensei was telling the truth? Do you really think he had a plan?" Anko asked nervously. She was sitting on her knees next to Naruto, looking worriedly in the direction of the battlefield not far away.

"Probably." Answered Shisui simply.

"We should help." Naruto insisted.

"We will. But you need half an hour break, Naruto. You need a medic too." Shisui said and looked around. There was a group of them there. About twenty Konoha ninjas was either sitting or lying in the grass around them. Hidden from the view of the battlefield.

Naruto recognized Inoichi who was bandaging up his leg.

"What's the time?" Asked Anko.

Shisui quickly checked his watch. "It's... six o'clock."

"We've been out there for... twelve hours?" Asked Anko bewildered.

"Yes." Shisui slowly sat down in front of them, hissing in pain at the movement.

Naruto looked worried at him. Shisui was bloody, but so were all of them. The right side of his face was bruised, and blood which had trailed down from a head wound had dried around his swollen eye. His trousers were cut on his left hip, and there were dark stains there, probably some more dried blood.

He unsealed his medical supplies and threw them in the middle. "Fix up the best you can."

Naruto was reluctant, but knew Shisui wouldn't let her go back again without bandages the worst of her wounds. They would be healed completely within a couple of days, but Naruto guessed this was about short term solutions, not long terms.
Naruto was calming down and felt sleepiness wash over her. The wounds she had been ignoring were throbbing, and she felt dizzy.

Never had Naruto been more aware of how young her body was. There was just no escaping the fact that a ten year old body was not ideal for this type of battle. She had lasted longer than she ever had in the past, but she knew if she was the right age she could have performed so much better. She could have used senjutsu. But right now her own limitations were her worst enemy.

She picked up her pouch and found a small case before popping it open. Inside was the soldier pills she had miraculously packed that morning, and she laid the tray out for all of them. "Take one." Naruto said while pointing to the tray.

There were eight pills in the tray, but she knew Shisui and Anko had their own soldier pills too. They could share those later.

Naruto wasn't sure how long they sat there. Time went quickly, but it couldn't have been more than half an hour.

The sun had just peeked over the horizon when they finally decided to get up again. Naruto felt slightly better but far from refreshed. She could feel her chakra slowly building up again, but knew it was hardly enough for more than a clone.

But there weren't any alternatives. They were at war, and their comrades needed them. Even Shisui didn't object this time, and together they made their way through the woods.

They half jogged for fifteen minutes before the woods thinned out. Blown to pieces by explosive tags and ninjutsu.

The field opened up drastically then, and all three stopped in their track.

It was calm.

Naruto looked confused at her teammates, but they were just as stunned as she felt.

There were people walking around unhurried on the field, meeting up or bending down over dark shapes too far away too make out, but were probably bodies.

Naruto moved first, taking a shaky step forwards, and then another. She was jogging before she was consciously aware of it. The sun cast long shadows in the morning light, obscuring the people in abstract shapes of light and dark. But the closer she got the better she could see.

The first person she recognized was Shikaku, and she headed for him.

He heard her footsteps and turned quickly, but relaxed his stance when he recognized her. "What happened?" Naruto asked confused. "It was completely insane earlier, but now..." Naruto trailed off and looked around. She had no idea how many bodies she'd jumped over on her way to Shikaku, but it was in the double digit.

"Minato-san. He truly saved us this time." Shikaku answered with a comforting smile.

Naruto felt her shoulders sag in relief, and she looked quickly around, trying to find him on the wide field.

"How did he do that?" Asked Anko shakily.
"The Hiraishin." Shikaku explained. "He made very quick and efficient work of most of the army. The ones that was alive anyway. He ordered most of our ninja off the field to minimize the risk of someone getting in the crossfire, and then he teleported all over the field while taking down opponents. I've never seen anything like it."

"What can we do now?" Asked Naruto, not sure what she felt anymore.

There was relief, but the other emotions were messy and ugly, and she pushed them away for the time being.

"Well..." Shikaku looked worriedly at each of them. There was pity in his eyes before he sighed. "We're short on men right now, and we could use help... sorting out the bodies."

"We'll do it." Anko replied at once, ready for action again, while Naruto only felt numb.

"Stay together. You never know... Some of them might just be unconscious." Shikaku muttered, they all knew he was referring to enemy ninjas. "Gather up anyone of our own." He then handed them a number of scrolls.

Body scrolls.

"Take care of each other, and meet back here in two hours."

Naruto shifted through bodies, pushing away corpses wearing the wrong type of uniform. They were to reclaim those who'd fought for Konoha so they could have a proper burial, the rest... well; Naruto wasn't sure what would happen to them.

They labored without rest, and Naruto wished she had more chakra, because then this would have been sorted out much quicker.

None of them spoke, and Naruto preferred it that way. There was no word that could describe the sight either. It was simply unspeakable.

Naruto finally got a good hold of the person she'd been trying to dig out. A young man, maybe fifteen years old, and used all her strength to drag him out.

Panting she lay him down on the ground and looked at his face. Pale. Almost bluish. Just to be sure she checked his pulse. Finding nothing. She listened to his chest, hoping to hear a heartbeat, but all was quiet. The coldness of his skin should have been proof enough, but Naruto couldn't help having to make sure.

With tired movement she readied the scroll again. There were ten people inside the scroll already, this would be the eleventh. The man disappeared in a poof of smoke, while Naruto got to her feet again and looked around for her team.

Shisui had just finished helping Anko with a body too, and they worked together to see if they'd missed anyone in this pile.

Naruto kept her eyes cast low. It was like a perverse dream to move through the bodies, seeing their faces reflect back at her. Enemy or not. They were all people, and she didn't recognize any of them.

She couldn't recall clearly who she had killed that night, and while they pushed away bodies Naruto couldn't help wonder if any of them were her own kills.
The sound of hurried footsteps made Naruto look up, and was surprised to see Shisui running away. Without preamble she hurried after him, Anko following her closely to see what had made Shisui run so fast.

He was sprinting against the sun, which made it hard to see anything in the blaring light.

She heard him before she understood what was going on. "What are you doing here? What were you thinking?" Shisui's voice was shaky, and Naruto sprinted the last distance.

Naruto had not expected to find Itachi. Shisui had his hands gripping the boy's arms, and was bent down to his height to stare him straight in the eyes.

"I..." Itachi answered, and looked up at Naruto and Anko when they came up next to Shisui. He froze when he saw Naruto, which yet again made Naruto wonder what she looked like.

Shisui wrapped his hands around Itachi and hugged him tightly. "You shouldn't see this Itachi. Close your eyes." He whispered quietly.

The boy did as instructed. His eyes closed while Shisui held him protectively against him. Naruto didn't know how it was possible, but the sight made her feel even worse.

"Climb up on my back. I'm taking you out of here." Shisui muttered and released Itachi. The boy just nodded again, while Shisui turned around so Itachi could climb up.

When he was up Shisui told him to close his eyes again, before starting to walk.

Naruto and Anko followed him. They were to report back to Shikaku soon anyway. "How did you even get here Itachi?" Asked Shisui quietly, a hint of anger in his voice. Naruto got the impression Shisui already knew, but wanted Itachi to confirm it.

"Father... He told me to keep out of sight though. And I didn't come down before the battle was over."

Shisui exhaled deeply, and sidestepped over a body before he answered. "How long... have you been here?"

"I'm not sure... We got here when it was dark."

"I see... Have you slept? Have you had anything to drink?"

"I haven't slept, but I have had something to drink. I brought my water bottle."

"Good Itachi. Just... We'll be out of here soon, and then you can open your eyes again."

"Why do you not want me to see?" Itachi carefully asked.

Naruto and Anko looked worried between them.

"This... You shouldn't have seen this Itachi... You're too young. I know you don't act like it but this isn't something a child should see. Heck, I shouldn't have seen this either, but I'm a ninja, and it was my duty to respond when I was called for. But you weren't. You're a civilian. You have no business in this place, and would be much better off at home. Asleep."

They saw a man up ahead, coming straight towards them.
"Fugaku-sama." Shisui said shortly.

"You found Itachi. Thank you, Shisui-kun, I lost track of him for a moment but I can take him from here." Fugaku said and gestured towards his son.

Naruto answered for them though. "We don't mind taking him. We're supposed to report to Shikaku soon. We'll keep an eye on him."

Fugaku stopped and looked from Shisui's downcast face to the girls. "Well… Okay." He said with a curt nod. "I have a lot of work ahead of me."

"If you don't mind, Fugaku-sama, I'd like to take Itachi back to Konoha." Shisui said with forced calmness.

Fugaku was quiet for a moment, before he nodded. "It would be for the best. I'm needed here for a while longer. Thank you, Shisui-kun."

They stayed quiet while Fugaku left them. No one daring to speak. Naruto noticed her hands were shaking again.

"Your father…." Started Shisui saying, before he took a deep breath. "He means well, Itachi. But… this wasn't right. He should not have brought you out here."

"He said this was not a war between people… but nations. It's why strangers kill each other without meaning. This is what war is."

"There's other ways to resolve conflicts than this Itachi. This is the last option - an extreme. You shouldn't have to even think about this."

They found Shikaku after half an hour. He had gathered up a large group of ninjas. Minato was one of them. Shisui had asked Itachi to wait for him a small distance away, Naruto's clone keeping him company until they came back to fetch him.

"Thank you so much for your effort. This has been… a truly dark night. I'm not going to keep you long. Just that you keep the body scrolls, and the ones who have agreed to stay should go to the food station we put up. We'll start dealing with the rest of the bodies next." Shikaku explained and gestured to the field.

People nodded and murmured silently between one another, while Naruto stood on her toes and looked at the people. She found Orochimaru not far away from Shikaku, bandaging his arm while talking with someone Naruto didn't know. A strange sense of relief filled her, but she pushed it away as quickly as the feeling had come over her.

"Should we stay?" Anko asked uncertainly. Naruto did not feel like staying, but on the other hand it was the right thing to do. Even their enemies deserved a better burial than being left to rot on the battlefield.

"I'll stay. You go home. You know how I heal fast, so I'm good for another day, dattebayo." Naruto said quietly.

Shisui looked disapprovingly at her. "I need to get Itachi home so I have to go, but I think both of you should come with me. There are enough people to help out here." Shisui argued.

"Every hand helps Shisui. But you're right. You should take Itachi home. I'll go with the rest"
whenever they return."

"No."

All three looked up and saw Minato standing next to them. His hands were folded in front of him and he looked almost angry. "You're going home. All of you are."

Naruto didn't have much fight in her, and sighed in resignation.

"I'll tell your sensei I sent you home. I need to have a quick word with Orochimaru-sama anyway." He mused, his eyes narrowing in the sannin's direction before he walked away. Naruto looked after him as he left.

"See. Now you're ordered home. I could have told you already that you'd be sent home. Minato-sensei was not pleased we took part in this fight." Shisui muttered and shook his head.

"Why do you say that?" Asked Naruto confused.

"For the same reason I'm angry at Itachi for being here tonight. We're young. Can you see anyone here, dead or alive, as young as we are Naruto?" Shisui said and gestured to the field.

When she came to think about it Shisui was right. No one had looked younger than the last boy she'd sealed away. He'd been in his teens. "Oh..."

"Exactly. Let's go home. And when I've taken Itachi home we're all going to the hospital and getting a checkup."

"I thought you wanted us to rest, Shisui." Muttered Anko.

"We'll rest on the road. I doubt I can make the return journey without a break." Shisui argued.

They used over half a day getting back to Konoha, and it was dark by the time they delivered Itachi home to Mikoto.

Itachi had stayed quiet for most of the return journey, being more comfortable with observing them than taking part in their conversations.

The only time he talked was when someone addressed him directly, asking if he needed a break from the walking or something to fill his stomach.

Itachi acted as if he was already a ninja though, and thanks to their injuries and exhaustion Itachi was the quickest one in the small group.

Naruto even gathered up the courage to speak with him. It was ridiculous that she was so nervous around the child – he wasn't really the one she was afraid of – but it was hard to quench her own instincts. "Are you okay?" She asked quietly when they took their second break.

Itachi looked at her and nodded quietly. "Shisui is worried about you." Naruto told him, making patterns in the dirt with her finger while avoiding looking directly at Itachi. "I am too."

"Why?" Asked Itachi. The question bursting from his lips with more urgency than he'd intended.

Naruto finally looked up, meeting his eyes and holding them. "Why what?"

"Why... do you do it? What is the point? Why do people hurt one another that way? So many died
pointlessly. Is it pointless... to be a ninja?" He asked quietly, his eyes intense on Naruto's face. He was impossible to read, and Naruto found her throat closing up at his insistent questions. He really wanted to know.

"It's different for everyone, Itachi." Naruto replied quietly. "You have to find your own answers, because no one can tell you what to feel or what you fight for. But the reason I do it... is to protect. I'm part of this war to protect my friends." She answered and gestured towards Anko and Shisui sitting not far away from them.

Her teammates smiled weakly at her answer, but continued being disengaged in their conversation when Naruto turned back to Itachi.

"To protect?" Asked Itachi thoughtful "But it's at the expense of others. You hurt people to save your friends."

"I know." Naruto ducked her head. "As I said; you have to find your own reasons to be a ninja. Personally... I hope I can protect my friends long enough that the nations can one day come to an agreement, and that they will be alive and well to see that day."

Itachi was still looking at her when Naruto raised her head, working through her arguments in his own head. "What's the meaning of life then?"

Naruto frowned. That was a big question. How could anyone know the meaning of life? Wasn't that an age long question? And Itachi wasn't very old. How could he be contemplating these sorts of things already? If Naruto had ever doubted that this boy was a genius, they were gone in that instant. He was nothing like any child she'd ever met.

"Why do you ask that, Itachi?" She replied.

Itachi shrugged, and finally he looked away. Turning towards Shisui instead. "If all we do is fight... I don't see much hope. There was so much hate last night. How can anyone overcome such hate? How does it not consume you? What's the point of living in a world like that?"

Naruto swallowed, and shifted closer to Itachi. "Hey Itachi." The boy looked up. A small blush on his cheeks at his forward questions. He seemed almost insecure.

"You can only find the meaning to life by living it. Every day. Every day has a new meaning to me. To be faced down with a challenge so difficult and impossible it doesn't have a right answer, only various wrong ones. Like this war. You find meaning in the lives you protect. You find meaning in the people you love. And you find meaning when you learn to move on despite making a mistake. The meaning always varies, but you can't find them without looking for them yourself."

Itachi nodded when she finished, though he seemed confused as to what she was getting at. "Do you know what the meaning of today was?" Asked Naruto, tilting her head inquiringly.

"No."

"It was to talk to you, Itachi. I find no silver lining in war, but talking to you is something I find meaning in. War is when no one wants to listen anymore, and people resort to violence to resolve issues that hurt them in the past. Today's meaning of life was talking to you, dattebayo. Yesterday it was to save my comrades. I don't know what tomorrow will be, but I hope it's something as pleasant as speaking with you." Naruto said and grinned at the young Uchiha.

He ducked his head and a small smile lifted the corners of his mouth.
After they had returned to Konoha and delivered Itachi to his home, they headed for the hospital, where Naruto for the first time got a clear view of herself.

Her skin looked even tanner than usual because of the grime and dirt, and her hair was stained dark brown all the way through. Dried blood. There were so many knots, probably containing intestates and other bodily parts, and Naruto swore to take an hour long shower as quickly as possible. Even her flak jacket wasn't green anymore. A lot of people had bled on her. Naruto wasn't even sure how many.

The nurse who'd met them had looked horrified at the sight of Naruto, and it had helped them get ahead of the que and in for a check-up within ten minutes.

But everything was okay. Or would be given time. There was a lot of bruising, but nothing that wouldn't take care of itself. The wounds running up her right arm was cleaned and bandaged again, and the cuts on her thigh and shins got the same treatment.

She waited patiently for Anko and Shisui's check-up, and left with them after only half an hour in the hospital. But by that time Naruto was so tired she barely knew where she was going.

But they had one more stop to make before they called it a night.

They entered the Hokage office, which was active even this late. They had been disagreeing until team Orochimaru entered.

The talk stopped abruptly, and four eyes looked up when they entered the room. The Third stood up at once, while Tsunade backed away from the desk. Her eyes zooming in on Naruto with growing panic. Blood phobia… of course. Naruto had quite forgotten about that after the last day's event.

"I'm glad to see you returned intact. But my…" Hiruzen said and stepped around his desk to get a closer look at them.

"We're sorry to disturb you at this time, Hokage-sama, but we thought it best to deliver these as soon as possible." Anko explained and rummaged through her pockets. She got her body scroll out and held it up for the Hokage, who sighed and closed his eyes.

"I see. Thank you. I appreciate the efficiency." Hiruzen replied and received each of their scrolls before heading back behind his desk and sitting down. "I've already received news of what went down on the battlefield from some of our informants. I hear you three did admirably."

Tsunade sucked in a deep breath and for a moment Naruto was sure she would start shouting. But instead she just exhaled and looked pointedly away. Probably so she wouldn't have to see Naruto.

"Thank you, Hokage-sama." Shisui said quietly, shifting from one foot to the other.

"But I apologize… for putting you in that situation. I didn't expect you to be as involved in the battle as you turned out. For that I can only be grateful that all three of you made it out alive. And thank you for the bravery you showed for the sake of Konoha." He said while studying each of them in turn. "Go home and get some well-earned sleep. Your report can be submitted later. You're dismissed."

Anko handed Naruto her cup. The murky brown tea emitted a nice, warm fog against her chin when Naruto held it close to her face, and couldn't help but relax.

It was just past noon, and they were taking their time lazing around in their flat. Naruto was leaning
against the armrest of the couch, while Anko kept herself busy cleaning. She had been cleaning consistently since they woke up.

They hadn't spoken about the previous two days, and Naruto found herself reluctant to do so anytime soon. Anko too was dodging the subject, though they walked on the edge of the topic a few times.

"We'll get a notice when we're due for our next mission. We'll probably have a couple of days off." Anko said quietly while scrubbing the cupboard door, answering Naruto's question regarding when they most likely would have to get dressed. They were still in their pajamas.

"You're probably right. But I'll still check in tomorrow to be on the safe side." Naruto answered. Distracted, her eyes were drawn to the window. A group of birds were talking to one another on the rooftop of the building opposite their own. Their shrieks gave off an intense and distracting background noise.

There was a knock on the door, and Anko stood up and headed into the hallway.

Naruto leaned back on the couch, feeling a sense of calm wash over her while the tea warmed her insides. She needed to get dressed soon, since Naruto had promised to do the shopping this week. She just prolonged the inevitable for a little while longer.

The sound of footsteps made Naruto look up, and then she sat up at once.

Shisui was looking down, his hands in his pockets while he followed Anko into the room.

The girls eyes met, but only confusion was to be read from Anko's expression.

"What's wrong?" Asked Naruto, trying to read Shisui's expression, but already fearing the answer.

You always knew. It was something about their posture, their expression or just their whole aura. You felt it when someone was about to give you these types of news. Had someone else been there? Everyone she knew personally had survived the battle as far as Naruto knew. But everything had been a mess. In fact, it was highly likely she had missed someone.

Shisui shifted uneasily and raised his head slowly. Looking from Anko before turning towards Naruto.

"Obito is dead."

He said it directly, almost emotionless, and Naruto felt as if the air had been knocked out of her. She didn't react at first. In fact she sagged deeper into the cushions.

"What? How..." Asked Anko, dragging a hand through her hair and looking between her teammates.

"By Kannabi bridge. They... Kakashi and Rin survived, but Obito... He was crushed underneath some boulders." Shisui explained, his hands coming out of his pocket to cross in front of him tightly.

"I heard it from Minato-sensei. He was by the office when I went there just now. I don't know where Rin is but Kakashi is in the hospital because of some complications."

"Kakashi was hurt too?" Naruto asked and finally got some feeling back in her body. She jumped up from the couch and started pacing back and forth.

"Yeah... " Shisui answered.

"Obito..." Anko muttered and shook her head. "That idiot... how could he die?"
Naruto sent Anko a furious glare. Now was not the time to throw jokes around.

"Hey… It's… They say he died admirably." Shisui explained and reached out a hand. Stopping Naruto's pacing by grabbing her shoulder. "He died saving Rin and Kakashi."

Naruto felt tears whelm up in her eyes, but furiously shook them away. Instead she headed for the hallway, grabbing her sandals and put them on quickly. She was out the door before the others realized she was leaving.

After jumping over half a dozen roofs Anko and Shisui caught up with her. Neither speaking but keeping her company wherever it was she was going.

Without a words Naruto led them to the hospital. She landed in front of the entrance door and hurried inside. "Hatake Kakashi." Was all Naruto said as she reached the reception. The woman behind the desk looked slowly up, coked an eyebrow when noticing Naruto's attire, before picking up a list. Her eyes following her fingers while it slid down the paper.

"Kakashi..."

Naruto turned around at the name Shisui had spoken, and found Kakashi and Rin standing behind them. Clearly about to leave the hospital.

Both had stopped walking, Rin with her hands hugging herself and Kakashi silently next to her.

Naruto wasn't sure what she had expected. Maybe a broken leg or that Kakashi was so injured he was hanging on by a thread.

Maybe bruises and bleeding wounds, but not this.

Naruto's heart pounded hard against her ribs. Because this wasn't right, but at the same time it was.

For the last four years Naruto had slowly grown used to Kakashi's younger appearance. That he had two dark eyes, and always had a tuft of white, spiky hair hanging down from his forehead protector. He wore different clothes. He even had a different posture. Always so stiff and proper.

Now it was all different. He wore his usual clothes. He hadn't really changed anything except his way of standing. But it made all the difference, and in that moment Kakashi had never looked more like himself.

He was slightly hunched forward. More like his usual relaxed self, except there was nothing relaxed about him. This wasn't about being relaxed, because he only looked smaller.

A scar ran over his left eye and down his cheek, it was pink and swollen. Fresh…

Naruto didn't know she was crying before she felt a tear slide past her upper lip and into her mouth. It tasted salty.

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To be continued...
Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! The chapter was beta'd by the wonderful AnjoRemix!
Chapter Twenty Two – The Memorial Stone

"It's not good to hide your wounds, you know. I'm looking after you." - Nohara Rin

The week after the great battle by the Midori fields was hard for Naruto think about. The whole village was in a collected mourning. So many had died in one day it was absurd.

Iwa had lost over one thousand six hundred of their ninjas, Kumo had lost around eight hundred, and Konoha had lost six hundred and eighty five. All in one day… In the same place. Not counting Obito or people fighting in other places.

The number was surreal to others, but not to Naruto. She had been there. She'd seen it. She'd contributed to the tally.

The memories were constantly in the back of her mind, making Naruto have long and restless nightmares and waking up sweaty and clammy in the early morning hours. The dreams didn't contain any people, and it was all the more horrid for it. It was just her alone in vast, green fields while she walked down a river filled with scarlet blood. Alone. She was so alone that the absence of people felt claustrophobic.

It took time getting the funerals arranged. With so many killed, the rescheduling of their military forces and the autopsies took up all the time of both the Hospital and the Hokage office.

It was two weeks later the memorial services started. About seventy five were remembered each day over nine days. Naruto had managed to show at five of the funerals in between her duties. Obito's memorial service being on the very last day.

It was a typical autumn day. The sky comfortably overcast but not too cold as they came to pay their respect to those who'd given their life for Konoha.

Anko and Naruto stood with Orochimaru in the middle of the large crowd as the funeral ceremony came to an end. Shisui was standing with his clan today, next to his father at the front of the crowd.

Akiko came up behind them, and squeezed Naruto's shoulder in comfort. She had come here to pay respect to Obito, standing alone all the way in the back. She was still nervous being around ninjas, but she had still showed up to honor the fallen protectors of Konoha. "I'm so sorry." She said quietly.

"Thanks, Akiko. I'm glad you came." Naruto mumbled back.

"Me too. Obito-kun was great and I'll really miss him. Dinners at your apartment won't be the same without him." Akiko replied sadly.
"Heh… You're right."

"How are his teammates doing? Rin-chan and Kakashi-kun?"

Anko turned towards them, slipping on her "tough girl" mask despite having red, puffy eyes to give her away. "As well as you can expect." Anko answered casually, and fidgeted with the sleeve of her black shirt.

"I'm glad you're okay though. All three of you." Akiko said carefully and looked at Anko. "I heard you took part in that battle."

"Thanks..." Anko mumbled and studied her feet.

"Is there anything I can do?"

Naruto smiled thankfully, but shook her head. "Not really, the fact that you care is enough."

"I feel bad for Kakashi-kun though. Doesn't he live alone?" Akiko replied and looked in his direction. He was talking with Kushina, Minato and Rin by the picture of Obito, all of them looking down at him while they murmured quietly to one another.

"He does..." Naruto answered and thought it over in her head. "Maybe we should invite him to dinner tonight, Anko? So he won't be alone? Rin has her parents and Minato has Kushina, but he doesn't really have anyone like that right now."

Anko nodded at once in agreement. "Yeah, that's a good idea. Want to join us, Akiko?"

Akiko was startled at the invitation, but was happy all the same. "Yeah, that would be nice."

Naruto looked curiously around at the people standing in their flat. Many of them had been there plenty of times before, but not once had it been like this.

Everyone was in black, and Naruto wasn't sure how it had happened, but Naruto and Anko had somehow ended up throwing Obito's wake in their own home.

At first they had talked Kakashi into eating dinner with them. They didn't want him to be alone, and to get him to agree they'd made Rin join too. Her parents hadn't been all that happy their daughter skipped family dinner after a day like she'd had, but understood she wanted to spend time with her friends. Kakashi felt less of a charity case when Rin had asked him instead of Anko and Naruto.

Then Kurenai had insisted she came along too. She'd overheard Anko and Naruto discuss inviting Rin and Kakashi for dinner because it would cheer Kakashi up to have company, and told them she could bring some cookies for them to snack on while they cooked. Somehow Asuma thought that meant he was invited too, and he insisted he'd bring a type of tea that went well with the cookies. Neither Anko or Naruto was sure how to tell him it wasn't like that, everyone was so sad, so they'd said the more the better.

Which Genma and Gai had overheard. So they offered to bring something for dessert.

And before either Anko or Naruto was sure what had happened, there were seventeen people in total - all dressed in black – squeezed into their modest flat. Sitting on the floor or on the couch in their living room.

To make more space, most sat on the floor, the chairs and table were stuffed into Naruto's bedroom.
to make room, and people ate off paper plates and cups which Shisui again had the foresight to bring along.

Naruto had put out some blankets on the floor for people to sit on instead of the cold timber. Anko was making sure the water was constantly boiling so there would be enough tea to go around, while their guests talked quietly amongst each other after dinner.

"I remember when we started the academy, and Obito and I stole our sensei forehead protector and tried it on in the hallway." Muttered Genma with a faraway expression and a small smile.

"Or the time when he was sure his Sharingan had activated? Since he heard that when they activated it could feel like they were burning. But it turned out he'd just gotten chili in his eyes after making dinner?" Chuckled Asuma.

There were many of those stories. All of them fond memories from his classmates perspective. Naruto smiled and shared some of her own too.

It was good to smile. It felt like a relief after such a horrible day. After such horrible weeks.

While team Minato had been at Kannabi bridge, blowing it up to stop Iwa from receiving supplies, another battle had taken place simultaneously many miles away. The one team Orochimaru had participated in.

They said Minato had killed over a thousand ninjas single handedly that day. Naruto wasn't sure if that strictly speaking was true. But maybe the tally wasn't that far off. A lot of people had helped along though, Orochimaru had probably killed a couple of hundreds single handedly, but Minato had certainly taken a very large portion on his own.

Konoha had been badly outnumbered, but thanks to his efforts many had come home with their life intact, and the battle had been victorious.

Memories from the battle had a habit of popping up when Naruto least expected them to. Like at right now. The sudden memory would shoot up as if one of her clones had just popped, and it always resulted in the same. She momentarily shut down. The image appearing so vividly it felt like she was back there for the second the memory held.

When it was over her chest would constrict, leaving a heavy pressure that would stay for hours until she found something to distract her.

Another person came through the open entrance door, carrying a box under his arm. "Sorry I'm a little late. I had to eat dinner with my parents instead, but I ran by the store and brought dango. Not sure if there's enough though. I didn't know there would be so many people here." Genma muttered and held up the box.

"Dango?" Asked Anko and wandered over. "I've never had dango."

Genma didn't look like he believed her. "How can you not have eaten dango before? You should try some. They're really good. Do you have a plate though? It's easier for people to take it from a plate instead of this box."

Anko nodded and went over to the counter. She found her plate and had to jump over people to place the plate in the middle of the crowd.

Naruto had long since given up on moving around in the room. Instead she sat in the window frame. She'd opened the window to air out the increasingly heating room, and even with the low
temperatures outside it was appreciated.

Smiling to herself Naruto watched Genma attempt to find somewhere to sit when Rin came up to sit in the other window, her arms resting in her lap while she looked at her classmates talking quietly amongst each other.

"Rin..." Naruto said quietly, bending forwards to see the girl clearer.

"Obito would have liked this." Rin said and smiled weakly to Naruto. She was all dried out of tears now. She'd cried constantly since Obito had died, but there were no tears left in her now.

"I'm not sure... Maybe if we'd served chocolate cookies. He hated the vanilla ones." Naruto murmured and gestured to the mostly empty tray next to the plate Genma was placing dango on.

Rin's smile widened for a moment, before she ducked her head. Her hair falling like a dark curtain between them.

"I still don't..." Rin said quietly. Trailing off and taking a deep breath before she continued. "I still think he's around. I expect him to knock on my door and ask me to hang out... That I'll see him at team meeting tomorrow... That..." She stopped and combed her hair behind her ear. "It's surreal. Obito was so alive. The fact that he is somehow dead is the most absurd joke I've ever heard."

Naruto couldn't quite find the words to reply. She knew exactly what she was saying. It really didn't make sense. Nothing really did these days.

"I... I wanted to say thank you." Rin admitted, her voice going up an octave at the end.

"For what?" Asked Naruto, not sure what she could have done to earn thanks in this situation.

"For looking after Kakashi and me. Especially Kakashi... I have my parents, but he... we're all he has." Rin muttered.

"You two will be okay someday, Rin." Naruto said. "I promise you. Obito is with you in your heart. Keep his memory alive, and he'll never be gone. Live your life as if he's always watching."

Rin finally looked up and met Naruto's eyes. For a moment they just stared at one another, before Rin nodded slowly. An uneasy smile on her lips.

Their attention was brought back to the other occupants of the flat though, because Anko had just tried the dango. "Oh Kami! These are delicious! Where did you buy these?" Asked Anko astonished, chewing dango with a look of pure ecstasy on her face and slapping away Kurenai's hand from taking a piece.

Shisui was hurrying through the streets of Konoha. He was running late, but it really wasn't his fault this time. Naruto and Anko had kept him longer than expected at training, and he desperately needed a shower before it started. But when he hurried out of his home his dad had needed Shisui to deliver a message.

So now Shisui was rushing after delivering a message to the Aburame clan, who lived on the opposite side of town to where he needed to be.

The only upside to the situation was how wonderfully distracting it was. Ever since the battle, Shisui had struggled with painful memories. Knowing what he had done that day. Running was one of the few ways he could free his mind and gain some control over his thoughts. It was liberating to escape
the constant mingling of dark images that had occupied his consciousness for the last few weeks.

It was tempting to just run from the truth. Run even if it was just for a short while, and then he'd be back to reality again.

From a narrow street corner he saw Genma come running too. Shisui wasn't the only one late. "Genma!" He shouted, his voice carrying in the quiet street. No one just hung out in this part of the village. It was the industrial part and working hours were over.

Genma halted, his head whipping around at the sound of his voice. "Shisui! Come on, we need to hurry."

"I'm coming!" Shisui huffed and hurried his steps, slowly gaining space between him and Genma.

Shisui had used up more chakra during training than he was comfortable with, seeing as he was not finished for the day, and would undoubtedly be asked to use more before nightfall.

They finally arrived at the warehouse. The façade was run down and tired, but the inside was in better shape. This was their fourth meeting here.

Genma opened the door and stepped in, with Shisui following quickly after. The narrow corridor was weakly illuminated. The paint was peeling off the wall revealing a partly crumbling brick structure underneath.

Genma sighed when he saw the watch right over the entrance door. They still had two minutes; they'd made it just on time.

"I hope he's not too strict on us today, I just came back from a mission." Genma muttered and brushed away a few strands of hair from his eyes, walking quickly to cross the long corridor.

Shisui nodded in agreement. "Yeah… I had a long training today. Anko had me work on my defensive training, and you know my teammates. It's a full time job to try and get them to stay back."

"Heh, I think I can relate. My teammate is Gai." Genma winked and chuckled at Shisui's sympathetic look.

They entered into a wide empty hall. The ceiling was covered in metal plate cladding, the walls of scarred concrete and with each footstep they took echoed heavily through the room. It was used for heavy machinery and storage during the day, but the council had borrowed it to them for their meetings. They had met up in an office before, but there just wasn't enough space there.

Three people were already there when Genma and Shisui showed up. They mingled and talked for a while, all of them not mentioning the ones who were yet to arrive. Shisui was annoyed though. He'd hurried to get here on time, and now the others were late?

Fifteen minutes later the door opened again, and Kakashi came in, looking refreshed as ever. He didn't even seem ashamed that he'd been late.

"You're late, Kakashi." Muttered Genma and rolled his eyes when all Kakashi did was shrug.

"You're always a little late these days." Shisui added when Kakashi came to stand next to him.

"I was visiting, Obito," Kakashi answered. "And I'm not really late am I?"

Kakashi gestured to the doorway, all of them understanding what he was referring to. Their reason
for being here was yet to show up.

"There was a council meeting. I was asked to wait to deliver my report because they were busy. I think I saw him there..." Genma said thoughtfully.

"Exactly, Minato-sensei won't come until they're finished in there." Kakashi answered. "I was asked to tell you guys about that, but don't worry, it won't be long."

As if Kakashi's word had been a summon, the door opened again.

"I apologize. The meeting ran long." Minato walked up to them with deliberate steps, his face downcast. "Let's get started."

Naruto sat quietly outside the cage of the Kyūbi, having a silent staring match with the demon.

"You can stare all you want, brat. It won't change anything."

"Just tell me already! Did this happen the first time around? It must have right? Kakashi's Sharingan is Obito's, right? It was then and it is now."

The Kyūbi shifted, his shoulders lowering and his tails swishing annoyed. "I prefer watching you live in uncertainty. And how would I know anyway? The most time I've spent around your old sensei was when he was – in fact – your sensei."

"You know! You were inside Kushina, and Kushina was around Minato. He knows what happened. They probably talked, because Kushina cares a lot about Obito. So you know, and that's why you won't tell me, dattebayo."

The Kyūbi closed his eyes, his head turning away. "Maybe..."

"Please..." Naruto muttered, her head ducking. "Please just... can't you tell me? What does it matter anyway? Obito is dead, and Kakashi has his eye."

"Fine..." Grumbled the fox. "If it means you'll stop bothering me... Yes. Obito died like this the first time around too. Crushed by boulders and gave his eye to Kakashi. Kushina was a mess for a month afterwards, she was more unbearable than normal to be inside back then."

Naruto exhaled, her shoulders sagged while she took in that information. This had happened before. Obito had died exactly how he had the first time around, which was why Naruto had never met him in the future. Itachi hadn't killed him after all. The war had.

But what about Rin? Naruto had to keep a close eye on her. She had probably died too, and Naruto had to make sure she didn't die this time around. Kakashi had never mentioned Rin to them when they were under his care. He had only mentioned his best friend dying in the war.

Which one was it? Rin or Obito? Naruto suspected he had been referring to Obito, but there was no way of knowing.

"Thank you." Naruto said earnestly, meeting the Kyūbi's eyes and smiled. "Thank you for telling me."

The Kyūbi huffed, quickly looking pointedly away with his snout in the air.

"Can you... help me again? Can you please tell me... what happened to Rin? Do you know how she died?"
The tails waved quicker than before, and a wide ominous smile appeared on his face. Naruto already knew what the answer would be.

"Of course not. She'll die, and you won't be able to save her. Like Obito. Like Ebisu. Like all your friends. They'll all die one after the other, exactly the way I want them to, so why should I help you prevent that?"

Naruto frowned, her eyes darkening and her fist clenched.

"I'll tell you one thing though… She died a horrid death. I look forwards to see the aftermath again. So much hate… I'll relish in it once again."

"Oy! Brat!"

Naruto turned around at the familiar voice, surprised she'd even been noticed. Tsunade was sitting on a bench, her legs crossed while her arms lay resting against the back support on each side. Naruto had been too deep in her own thoughts to spot her while she strolled down the street on her way home from guard duty.

"Hey… You're still around." Naruto voice was audibly surprised. She hadn't seen Tsunade since the day they'd returned from the battle in the Hokage office.

"Yeah, and you're still alive." Tsunade replied. "Sit down."

She slid her hands down to rest against the seat, making space for Naruto next to her on the bench. Not having anything urgent on her agenda Naruto took the offered seat.

"I heard you were good friends with Minato's student. I'm sorry for your loss." Tsunade said conversationally, watching the people on the street pass by on their daily chores. Naruto joined her; the activity was as good as any.

"Yes. Obito was a good friend." Naruto replied. Keeping her tone as light as Tsunade's, but her mind flickered back to her previous thoughts. "What are you still doing in Konoha? I thought you were going to crawl over the wall the first chance you got with how claustrophobic you were acting when we arrived."

Tsunade chuckled and peeked sideways down at Naruto. "I honestly thought so too, but I have a few things to finish up before I leave."

Naruto pursed her lips, wondering if she would have any luck if she asked. "What things?"

Tsunade shrugged. "Sell the apartment. Withdraw money from my account. Stuff like that. Those things takes time."

So she wasn't staying. Naruto felt the flicker of hope wash away with Tsunade's words. She noticed. "That's too bad. I wish you'd stay." Naruto told her earnestly. She really did. It was painful to see Tsunade so different, but at least she was around.

"That's sweet of you to say. I was under the impression you didn't like me very much." Tsunade told her curiously. Naruto shrugged, watching a little boy being scolded by his parents for putting his hands in mud and then tugging at his mother's skirt.

"I don't like some of your choices, but it doesn't mean I don't like you as a person." Naruto answered casually.
Tsunade didn't reply to that. Instead they sat for minutes just watching people.

Eventually Naruto spoke up. "Today it's been a month..."

Tsunade looked confused. "Since what?"

"Since I put my bet on Obito." Naruto answered quietly, looking at her hands. "We had a discussion about the rasengan, Minato's technique, and Obito was supposed to show me he could do it today. He died though... Just a week after the agreement. I'm wondering if he would have managed. He was good you know, but not always very structured."

Tsunade's eyes softened, and a sad smile was on her lips when she replied. "That was a hefty bet. I'm not sure he could have managed that."

"I believe he could've done it. If he'd been given the time."

"That's always the problem, isn't it? There's never enough time. Not to spend with the ones you care about." Tsunade hummed under her breath.

"Then why are you leaving again?" Asked Naruto confused. "If all you have is time, why are you leaving the ones who care about you? The ones who're left?"

It was a question Naruto had once wanted to ask Sasuke, but it fitted Tsunade too.

Tsunade arched an eyebrow, she turned to face Naruto and leaned back. "You're a strange kid... Have you ever been told that before?"

"All the time, dattebayo."

Tsunade laughed. "No, I mean... You're very naive, and at the same time... not."

"You can describe yourself similarly." Naruto said and pointed at Tsunade. "You're here, and at the same time... not."

Tsunade looked like she wanted to argue, but instead she shook her head and stood up. Brushing off her pants while she thought. "I'll be in the area for a while. Maybe a few months, but not inside Konoha. Take care of yourself, Naruto."

"I can feed myself. In fact; I've done so for years." Kakashi muttered when Naruto climbed through his window with a basket in her right hand. It was a month since Obito's death, and Anko and Naruto had started taking turns showing up in his apartment with breakfast.

"I know." Naruto answered while putting the basket on the table. "But we had leftovers. Better that you eat them than throwing it away."

"Curious... You've had a lot of leftovers lately." Kakashi pointed out but walked over to his table and peeked curiously down into the basket. It looked quite good. There was toast.

"We've had a lot of guests lately. We never know when there will be people over, so we stay prepared." Naruto told him while nodding seriously to herself. Not convincing either of them.

She was already on her way out again when Kakashi sat down. Right before she was out of view he stopped her. "Wait... have you had any breakfast?"

Naruto appeared back in the window and shook her head. "Um... No, but we have more upstairs."
"Then sit down. We can share this." Kakashi replied and pointed to timber chair next to him.

Naruto came over and sat down, looking out of place and a little spooked. "Are you alright, Kakashi?"

Kakashi slid over the basket to her end of the small table with an easy smile. "I'm okay."

"You're..." Naruto said and drifted off while she tried to find the right words. "different." she ended up with.

Kakashi smiled brighter while he picked up a toast. Yes. He was different. He was trying out a new life motto, and so far he found it suited him well. The downside was that it had made his friends question his mental health from time to time.

To freak Naruto out even more he lowered his mask, revealing his face while in front of her. He bit into the cheesy toast and hummed appreciatively before catching Naruto's reaction. Her expression wouldn't look out of place if she'd caught him dancing around naked.

"Why do you say that?" He asked casually, pretending this was perfectly normal behavior and took another bite of his toast. Chewing demonstratively while leaving his mask down.

Naruto didn't seem able to answer. Her mouth opened, then closed, then opened again. She shook her head and her mouth shut close with clattering teeth.

"Are you sure the medics didn't overlook something when you were at the hospital, Kakashi? I don't know... maybe you hit your head really hard? Or that cut over your eye hit some sort of crazy nerve in your head? Because you seem nothing like the Kakashi I've known for four years, dattebayo."

Naruto stuttered eventually, still staring at Kakashi with a mix of worry and awe.

Kakashi chuckled weakly and shook his head.

He was okay. Or he would be okay. Eventually.

Obito had finally shown him the way. He had shown him what was important in life, and it was long overdue that he started righting his many wrongs. "I'm trying to be a better friend." Kakashi admitted, finally sharing some of the many thoughts that had been swirling around in his head for weeks. "Obito... he always had it right, and I didn't see that before. A lot happened on that mission, not just..."

Again Kakashi trailed off, he wasn't quite ready to say the words yet. That Obito died on that mission. "Anyway, Obito knocked some sense into me. It was time that I listened... I wish I'd done so sooner. Maybe it would have changed everything."

Naruto swallowed and leaned back in her chair, studying Kakashi closely. "What did he say?"

"He said... that those who break the rules are trash, but those who abandon their comrades are worse than trash." Kakashi was studying his toast while he said it, and only vaguely noticed how Naruto shifted in her chair.

She didn't reply. When he eventually looked up she had tears in her eyes and was smiling. "Obito said that to you?"

Kakashi nodded.

"I agree full heartedly with Obito."
Kakashi chuckled and lowered the toast to the table. "I know. You always have."

Naruto stood on training ground three with Kushina. It was eight o'clock in the evening, and the area was almost abandoned. She had demonstrated her chakra chains for Kushina for the first time, which had turned out to be one of Naruto's proudest moments in her life.

It was a little weird, because it wasn't like it was the first time Naruto used her chains, but she was demonstrating them for Kushina. Her mother. Even if Kushina didn't know that herself.

Anko was watching them practice together with Ensui and Iruka, who had come simply to watch Naruto's new technique. Shisui had disappeared early. He had chores to do and had skipped on dinner tonight too.

Kushina had been ecstatic when Naruto made four chains without too much trouble, and talked their ears off for the better part of half an hour before they continued training. Both teams were scheduled for missions in the morning, and meetings had to be squeezed into their time schedule.

"Next I want to try a chain fight." Kushina said in a matter of fact way.

"A chain fight?" Asked Naruto confused.

"Yes, I want to see how my chains react to yours. My chains freeze chakra flow, so there's a possibility they'll cancel out your chains, but it's still worth trying. Best case scenario I might be able to figure out what your chains can do." Kushina explained more in depth.

Naruto thought about it for half a second. "Alright! Let's do it!"

With renewed energy she got in position, but Kushina stopped her with a hand on her shoulder.

"Wait a moment, we can't be so close. You stand on that edge of the field, and I'll stay on the other side. That way we won't accidentally spear each other when the chains emerge." Kushina said teasingly while pointing out her position.

Naruto felt her cheeks heat up. "Of course... Sorry."

Kushina grinned and winked at her, before running to her end of the training ground.

"Okay? Set, ready, go!"

Large golden chains shot out from Kushina, towering over the training ground like strangely shaped kite dragons. "Whoooa." Anko said in awe from the sideline, while Ensui and Iruka nodded in approval.

It took more time for Naruto, she still needed time to gather herself, but after a few moments they finally shoot two chains out with a bit of trouble.

Her chains had very little direction, and nearly flew past the entire training field, past Kushina and into the forest behind her before she got control over them and reeled them in slightly.

Naruto bit her lip as she got them in position, her eyes trailing from the chains to Kushina studying her from across the field. Kushina gave her the thumbs up.

"Great, Naruto! Now I'll attack you. You'll try and get your chains free." Kushina shouted.

Naruto barely had time to nod before Kushina's chains started moving. They acted so swiftly Naruto could barely follow their movement as they circled around both her chains and wrapped around them
Naruto instantly felt it.

A chill accessed her through the exit point of her chains. Running through her ribs and outwards into her whole body. The chakra circulating through Kushina's chains felt like lead. Naruto knew her own chakra system was shot to hell, but through her chains she could read everything about Kushina's chakra.

It was like a deep ocean, heavy and filled with pressure. Crushing pressure. Much heavier and denser than Naruto's chakra. It was why her chakra system was stopping. Kushina's chakra was completely outweighing it with the use of her chains.

Naruto's chains burst. They no longer received chakra from Naruto, and as a result they evaporated into thin air.

Naruto swayed as her chakra system started up again, a rushing sensation bursting through her ears and making her light headed.

"Hmmm…" Kushina mused, walking slowly towards Naruto. "You react the same way most people do, but you lasted longer. Your chains must have some sort of defense to last for almost a minute without evaporating. Or maybe it's an Uzumaki thing."

"I… I could feel you." Naruto said astonished, staring at Kushina.

"Feel me?" Asked Kushina confused.

"Through your chains… I could… taste… feel… understand your chakra. It's so heavy…" Naruto muttered, not making much sense to herself or anyone else.

"You got a taste of my chakra through your chains?" Kushina's eyes widened, a smile growing on her face. "Interesting. Truly interesting. Tell me what you experienced."

"It was consuming. At first I felt really cold, because my chakra system was slowing down, but I could also feel - from your chains - how you… crushed...? My own chakra flow. How your chakra was weighing down my own. I didn't just feel my chakra stop, I understood why it was stopping."

"Are you saying you could read my chakra with your chains? You understood what they were doing? Why your own chakra system froze up?" Asked Kushina, clear excitement radiating from her while she spoke.

"I… think so?"

"Holy crap! Let's try again, dattebane! This is so exciting!"

Two hours later Naruto was in serious pain. Having her chakra system blocked and opened repeatedly was not a pleasant experience, and for each time it left her more and more exhausted. Her whole body felt sore.

"Come on, if you manage to walk to Ichiraku ramen stand on your own I'll treat you to a bowl." Ensui said encouragingly, smirking secretly while Anko repeatedly pushed Naruto forward for being so slow.

"I'm in pain, dattebayo." Naruto moaned, hissing when Anko forced her to take another step by
"You did great, Naruto! This is the well-earned pain of training. It means you're doing it right." Iruka preached unhelpfully.

"I can't feel my fingers. I think Kushina-nee stopped my chakra circulation permanently in my left thumb!"

"Give it a night. Your chakra system just needs a little recovery time." Ensui promised and patted her shoulder.

"At least you found out what your chains do." Anko added, forcing Naruto onwards.

"A little too well. I think half the reason I'm so tired is because the chains intensify the experience. I both felt and understood how Kushina froze my chakra. It's not a walk in the park yah' know... It's like... being stabbed, and knowing exactly what muscles is being torn, how much blood you're losing, what the future damage is, and how exactly screwed you are. And you know it all the time, from the moment the kunai meets the skin until it's firmly embedded in your chest. You're constantly being bombarded with the information."

"That's... unusually morbid of you, Naruto." Ensui muttered and arched an eyebrow.

"It felt morbid." Naruto replied sourly.

"But this is a good thing, Naruto. Your chains are both offensive and defensive. All you really need to do is graze your chains against someone, and you'll have an understanding of how they work. You know how much chakra they have, what type of affinity they have, and that way you can plan how to react. You basically find out which way is most efficient to take down your opponent!" Ensui suggested happily.

"I know." Naruto huffed. Kushina had been just as eager about this ability, and was the main reason she kept Naruto at it for so long.

Kushina believed her chains was a type of sensors. They read everything about a person, in a parallel way to how the Hyūga could see chakra with their Byakugan. "I just wish Kushina-nee didn't have to push for so many test runs, it's not like she feels how her chains affect others, dattebayo."

"By the end of your training you managed to keep your chains activated for five minutes against Kushina sensei's chains. That means you were countering their effect." Iruka told Naruto and poked her arm. "You were reading sensei's chakra, and instinctively tried to break down what's attacked you with your chains. You'd be amazed how much simpler life is when you can counter and not just duck."

"It's been a while since we had a training session as a whole team, and not just going on mission." Anko said and looked around at her team. They'd just finished up training, where Orochimaru had drilled them with a new formation.

"It is. Missions have been taking up all our time these days." Naruto grumbled while putting on her jacket. It had been a warm day, and she'd abandoned it on the side of the field for the last couple of hours.

"I wish to show you something before you go." Orochimaru said and took out a book. The bingo book.
He turned the book open and started browsing through the pages. "This is Iwa's bingo book. Not long ago I acquired it during a mission. It's been updated recently."

He stopped at a page and turned it around to show his students. Naruto's eyes widened. It was her.

She read quickly the first few lines.

**Village: Konoha**

**Name:** Uzumaki Naruto.

**Rank:** Chūnin.

**Threat level:** B

She swallowed and stared up at Orochimaru. "That's a result of the battle two months ago. Many saw you in action, and you received a page in the book for it. You're not the only one either." He turned back a few pages, and Anko showed up.

**Village: Konoha**

**Name:** Mitarashi Anko

**Rank:** Chūnin.

**Threat level:** C+

"I'm less of a threat than Naruto?" She asked sourly, insulted by her listing.

"It's a good thing, Anko. You have a lower bounty on your head compared to Naruto. That means less people will try and hunt you down for a pay off." Shisui muttered while shallowly reading the page. "Of course… we're on her team, which means we'll probably be around if she's hunted down."

"We have Orochimaru as our sensei. He probably has a decent bounty on him already, and we've been fine so far." Naruto exclaimed and pointed to their sensei. Orochimaru frowned and ignored her comment.

"Another Konoha ninja was listed too." Orochimaru turned the book back even further, ending on the H-listing.

**Village: Konoha**

**Name:** Hatake Kakashi

**Rank:** Jōnin

**Threat level:** B-

"Naruto has a bigger bounty than both me and Kakashi?" Anko exclaimed furiously, snapping the book out of Orochimaru's hand while browsing the pages quickly.

"Naruto is very visible when she fights. Her attacks make a lot of noise and are extremely destructive. This doesn't surprise me at all. She uses B and A rank techniques like they're a supply of kunai." Shisui muttered while reading over Anko's shoulder.

"Why isn't Shisui in the bingo book?" Asked Naruto curiously. "Or is he?"
"No. Shisui fights smart. He doesn't gather attention with flashy attacks. He could teach you both about how to keep a low profile during battle." Orochimaru answered with a nod towards the Uchiha. Shisui grinned smartly to Naruto, who stuck her tongue back childishly.

"Wow... Your bounty is ridiculous sensei!" Anko exclaimed when she found Orochimaru's page. The sannin smirked satisfied. "I've built quite a reputation over the years."

Shisui took the book from Anko and started browsing too. His eyes flying down page after page with his sharingan activated. "Huh..." Shisui looked up, biting his lip.

"What?" Asked Naruto curious, wondering what he'd read.

"Minato-sensei has a larger bounty than Orochimaru-sensei." Shisui told them quietly without looking up.

"What?" Anko and snapped the book back from Shisui. She whistled impressed. "He has the same threat level though. S+ threat. Why is his bounty larger when you have the same threat level?"

"Minato-san made a big dent in Iwa's army two months ago. This bingo book takes that into account." Orochimaru answered stiffly. "A year ago he was an S-.

It was obvious he didn't like being outdone by Minato. Even in something like this.

"Is that why Naruto's bounty is lower than other B rank threats?" Asked Anko while turning over a few pages, finding Naruto's listing again.

"Yes. She's young and hasn't done much yet. She was part of a large scale battle and took down many seasoned ninjas, which unluckily was noticed. All of you did, but Naruto does have a habit of making a spectacle of herself. The fact that you're my students doesn't do you any favors either." Orochimaru sighed and shook his head.

"Wait... look at that." Shisui said and pointed at Naruto's profile.

"What about it?" Asked Anko confused.

Shisui grinned and looked up at them. "That's kind of weird. All four of us are born in October." He told them vaguely.

"We are?" Asked Anko surprised. Looking at Shisui and Orochimaru in particular. She knew Naruto's birthday, but hadn't been informed of the others.

"Yeah... It says here Naruto is the tenth. I'm the nineteenth, Anko is the twenty fourth, and sensei is twenty seventh." He answered while turning the pages of the bingo book while Anko held it.

"So you're the youngest, Shisui. Nine days younger than Naruto. What a pity it is to be the baby of the team. And you're not even seen as a threat by Iwa..." Anko taunted him, Shisui's eyes narrowed but he didn't take the bait.

They weren't big on celebrating birthdays. Maybe before the war, but for the last few years it was regularly a private affair, and Naruto had never heard mention of when Shisui's or Orochimaru's birthday was. She hadn't asked either, but then Shisui hadn't asked any of them either.

"Hey!" Anko exclaimed suddenly, looking between them with a mischievous grin. "We can celebrate our birthday together. Have a shared party."
Orochimaru narrowed his eyes at Anko's sarcastic comment. "You don't have time for parties, Anko. Try to focus on what's important. You two have bounties on your head now. That's not a good thing. It means you lack discretion. From now on you're to train stealth, Shisui can give you some pointers and I hope you'll take them to heart. Iwa hates protégées. Your age makes them eager to take you out before you gain experience."

"Telling Naruto to keep low is like asking the sun to not rise." Shisui muttered while reading Naruto's profile by prying the book out of Anko's hands.

"I can be sneaky, dattebayo."

Anko snorted and shook her head.

"They don't have a complete list of your abilities..." Shisui mumbled under his breath, quickly checking out of their conversation while he read.

"You're as discrete as an explosion tag, Naruto. You need more training in stealth. Remember Tsunade's Retrieval mission?" Orochimaru commented while putting his weight on his right foot.

"...Wind release - C and B rank ninjutsu. Unknown jutsu (signature technique of Namikaze Minato) – A rank ninjutsu." Shisui continued listing up in the background.

"Hey! I got the job done. Sometimes stealth isn't the solution, dattebayo." Naruto replied, her cheeks heating up in tune with her temper. She'd done a really good job on Tsunade's Retrieval mission. She'd gotten the job done quickly and efficiently. Why would he bring that up? He hadn't commented about it before.

"… why do they believe you can do fire release? They must have mixed us up, Naruto. We used a combination attack with wind and fire, and they seem to think it was your technique. It's listed as an A rank..." Shisui murmured to himself.

Anko stood amused next to him, her eyes dancing between her teammates.

Orochimaru was chuckling at Naruto's argument. "There's a risk factor involved, Naruto. Doing a mission quickly isn't the same as doing it safely."

"… there's a mention of you chakra chains. Unranked though. How do they know about that? You didn't use them during the battle..."

Naruto waved her hands wildly up and down frustrated. "I had complete control!"

"… and the picture of you. Where did they get a picture of you?" Finished Shisui, looking up from the bingo book to see Orochimaru and Naruto staring daggers at one another.

Going home from training Shisui was deep in thoughts, not unusual, but still annoying when Naruto was trying to talk to him. "Shisui!"

"Huh?" He mumbled absent mindedly, his thoughts still a mile away.

"You're not listening to a word I say." Naruto complained and pushed his shoulder to show how distracted he was.

Shisui smiled fleetingly. "I was. You were talking about dinner, but I'm sorry. I can't join you today."

"Why not?" Asked Anko and folded her hands. "You've bailed on dinner a lot these days, and last
You weren't home when we stopped by your house. Have you found some new friends that you're hiding from us?"

Shisui chuckled and shook his head. "Nah, I was training."

"How would you know? I didn't say which day we came by." Anko replied suspiciously.

"No, but I've been training a lot, so most likely you stopped by either Tuesday or Thursday." Shisui answered and grinned widely when Anko scowled. Naruto pursed her lips and studied Shisui, noticing his tired appearance. He did seem a little tired these days. Maybe he didn't sleep well, though he wouldn't be the only one.

"You look tired, Shisui… What exactly are you training for? We could train together you know. We were going to the training ground that day and you're free to join you know."

"Yeah, you might have forgotten, but we're teammates and all." Anko added and rolled her eyes.

Shisui smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry, but I have some stuff going on."

Naruto tilted her head. "Clan stuff?"

Shisui looked thoughtful for a moment. "That too, but in general… just forget about it. I'll tell you when I'm finished."

"With what?" Naruto was using her most insistent tone, tugging at Shisui's sleeve while she did.

"Not now, but it's nothing to worry about." Shisui tried to reassure them.

"You know… I wasn't curious before, but now I am. What the hell are you up to Shisui?"

"Nothing!" Shisui replied exasperated.

"Liar. When do you have time though? We'll have dinner at our place, and you have to show up. No mission or training excuses." Naruto insisted and poked him at the side of the head.

In return she got a very annoyed glance. "I'll check my schedule, but I'm sure we can find a day."

"And then you can tell us what you're up to!" Anko said and snapped her fingers.

Shisui sighed and shook his head. "Stop nagging, I said I'd tell you later," Flashing them a smile he waved quickly. "And now I have to go."

He was gone half a second later. Using the sunshin to get away. "That is so annoying!" Naruto shouted and pointed at the empty spot Shisui had been standing.

Anko nodded in agreement. "And he's getting good at the sunshin… He didn't even use leaves to hide where he disappeared to."

Kakashi had become almost a constant fixture during meals except when he was on mission. They all had a busy schedule, but Kakashi was the only one amongst their friends who was jōnin. As a jōnin he was given more responsibility, he had more guard duty, more reports to fill out and usually less time.

But today he had managed to show up for dinner for the first time that week with Rin, Genma and Gai had tagging along. They had even managed to get Shisui to join them too, which was a small
miracle considering how busy their schedules were and how hard it was to find a shared time when none of them were busy.

Naruto loved having guests for dinner though. It was not something she'd done often with her old friends in the future, instead they had always gone out, but for some reason that wasn't as common in this time.

Instead Anko was put on cooking duty and Naruto gathered in a large enough crowd to annoy her roommate. Though she was sure that if Anko really disliked these dinner gatherings she would have put her foot down a long time ago. Instead Naruto was given a grocery list with way too much food to go shopping for, which meant Anko was up for a larger crowd for dinner. It was tradition by now to do this at least once every two weeks.

The only downside was the weather. Winter was upon them and the heating system in their flat was faulty, which left their home freezing. This was hardly the first time this occurred, so Naruto and Anko had a stack of blankets for everyone to use, and despite the low temperatures they managed to have a great time.

That was until the lights went out though.

It was the third time that evening, and left them all frustrated. The fuse box was located in the basement, which got annoying when they had to run down to turn the switch on again, daily.

"Oh, not again!" Naruto moaned and threw her arms up in the air.

Kakashi was looking curiously around. "Ma' whomever goes down can you turn on the switch in my apartment too? When the lights go off so often up here it usually means my apartment is without lights too."

"Naru and I busted our asses making this dinner and inviting you all, so I think it's time for one of our guests to go again!" Anko suggested, meaning every word. She wasn't aiming on becoming host of the year anytime soon.

"Oh, do we have to? It's a little neat with the lights off." Rin said and giggled at the sceptic look Naruto sent her. "Don't you have candles? We can light them, or we can make do with the street light outside."

"Nah, we don't have candles, and try going to the bathroom in this light. You can't see your hand even if you wave it in front of your face, dattebayo." Naruto answered.

"Fine, let's see…. Who hasn't gone in a while? Genma? Can't you go this time?" Kakashi said and pointed to the boy next to him.

"No, let the pretty one do it. I'm freezing and I was running up and down the stairs last time I was here too." Genma whined and gestured in the direction of Anko.

Anko raised an eyebrow before peeking at her teammates. "I'm sorry, but Shisui ran down an hour ago. It wouldn't be fair to have him do it twice in a row." Anko shot back without missing a beat.

Genma stiffened, while the others started laughing. Naruto clapped her hand over her mouth at the glare Shisui sent her.

"Hey!" Shisui exclaimed indignantly.

"What? You're the pretty one in our team, Shisui. I would kill to have eyelashes like yours. And your
big eyes! You must be deadly at the puppy eye no jutsu." Anko taunted and winked at Shisui flirtatiously, her perfectly innocent smile sending shivers down everyone's spine.

The Uchiha blushed and moved away from her quickly.

Naruto was laughing so hard she was clutching her stomach while Shisui was growing more and more red. "Shut up! I'm not pretty!" Shisui stated with narrowed eyes.

"Oooh, and you have such a killer heated look. You must have broken a lot of hearts in the academy. Such a pretty boy. Such a beauty." Anko continued, making Genma crack up too along with Gai and Rin.

"Stop! Just stop! I'm not pretty or a beauty!" Shisui growled with fury.

"Why are you getting angry? I'm complimenting you, Shisui-kun. It's a shame you're just a kid. I wish you were older than me, and then I would totally have dated you." Anko said in a matter of fact, twirling a strand of dark hair around her finger.

Naruto actually rolled over on her stomach at this point. Rin was the one with most composure after Anko, and even she was shaking with repressed laugher.

"Wh- what? I'd never go out with you! You're old and scary! You're… Anko!" Shisui almost squealed.

"You don't like older girls then? I get it… Saving yourself for Naru, huh?" Anko continued casually. Naruto was drying her eyes from laughing too hard, and Shisui had turned a uniform pink down to his neck.

"No! I'm not saving anything for anyone, I don't want a girlfriend! Stop saying weird stuff!" Shisui answered and looked close to storming off.

Anko finally started laughing herself, which resulted in everyone except Shisui to laugh harder than before. "You are so naive, Shisui! This is just too easy." Anko started cackling and leaned back on the couch, crossing her legs while grinning mischievously.

"You are mean." Muttered Shisui and folded his arms.

"Oh, lighten up." Anko said between chuckles. Shisui was still annoyed and turned away. "I don't mean to tease you Shisui, I just call them as I see them." She continued, but then started getting a hold of herself. "I'm sorry though. I'll stop now."

"I'll go and turn the switch on." Shisui stated, using any excuse to get away as quickly as possible.

"Okay, but I'm sorry okay?" Anko continued, looking seriously at Shisui. His tense shoulders slumped and he nodded, a scowl still on his lips but less uncomfortable.

"Good, thanks. I didn't mean to upset you or anything." Anko said apologetically.

Shisui paused in his track and smiled easily. "No worries." He said and was already turning away when Anko spoke up again.

"Great, but you know where the switch is right?"

"Yes, I was there just an hour ago." Shisui replied pointedly.

"No, I mean mine. You can always turn my switch on anytime you like, Shisui. Just flip your hair.
It's amazing you know? What shampoo do you use to get it so shiny and wavy? I'd die to have hair like yours." Anko said evilly.

Shisui actually growled and stormed off. Everyone's laughter following him down the stairs.

Kakashi arrived late to the factory hall again, but only by ten minutes. He hurried when his sensei waved him forwards. "Alright boys, now that we're all here I think we should try again. We have two complete teams…"

Kakashi quickly apologized and sat down in his designated circle. Shisui, Genma and himself made up one team, while the others had their own. They always switched who teamed up, trying to figure out who was better suited together for the task.

It was the most difficult jutsu Kakashi had ever seen. It was more intricate than he even imagined possible, but Minato was confident some of them would get it down eventually. The question was just who.

"You're too spent, Kakashi. Try to relax." Muttered Minato silently.

Kakashi took a deep breath and tried to quench the tension he felt from being late. It worked to some extent, but his frustration was still palpable in his body. He continued breathing deeply until nothing worried him anymore. He was closer to meditating than relaxing.

"Good… A clear mind is the key. There can't be doubt and there can't be distractions. You have too many variables to concentrate on to let anything get in the way." Minato's low voice echoed through the hall.

Kakashi opened his eyes. Now that he was relaxed he focused on his chakra again. He needed to catch up to where Genma and Shisui had reached while he was late.

Minato was making sure the Hiraishin lived on even if something happened to him. It had taken Minato years of study and training to improve on the Second Hokage's technique, but he wished to make the journey less frustrated for the next users.

The war had made him see that nothing was for certain, and he'd handpicked students who showed promise in certain areas.

They were six in total, who all were talented with ninjutsu, had good chakra control, were fast, and most importantly had a good mind for multitasking.

A certain level of intelligence was the key to understand the fuinjutsu seal, but so was to have a sense of artistry. It was the latter Kakashi couldn't get a grasp of. If logic was the ingredients of the Hiraishin, than the artistry was the binding keeping them together.

So far Genma and Shisui excelled at the exercises they'd been put through. Kakashi's main problem was his chakra, he had problems with the exchange flow, which the other two boys didn't. On the other hand he understood what was being done. He just had problems doing it.

Genma was still unsure about the bigger picture, and took it step by step, hoping they would all make sense when they arrived at the finish line.

Shisui got it, his Sharingan gave him the same advantage Kakashi had, but knowing what to do and doing it was two very different things. They still had a long way to go.
After fifteen minutes of silence Minato spoke up again. "Good work, I think you're ready to begin. Let's do a test run."

A few weeks later Naruto went to the graveyard alone. She had just finished guard duty for the night but didn't feel sleepy yet, and decided to stop by the memorial stone before going home.

She had been snacking most of the night, passing the time with Choza who had shared his bags of chips. Together they'd gone through numerous bags while sharing their more enjoyable mission stories, and by now Naruto was feeling nauseous from overeating.

It would pass soon enough, her bed was waiting at home, and the stomach ache would pass by the time she woke up. It always did.

Naruto hadn't been at the cemetery since Obito's funeral, and felt guilty for her lack of visits. They were busy, but that wasn't the reason she hadn't stopped by. She hadn't wanted to. Naruto didn't want to read the new inscribed name on the stone. She hadn't been ready yet.

It was a cool morning, but still pleasant. When she arrived at the graveyard it was in full activity. Birds were flocking around the trees and the wind rustled up the trees and made the branches creak. The place was uncharacteristically alive for a place dedicated to the dead.

The memorial stone was occupied when she arrived. Kushina, Minato, Rin and Kakashi were already there.

"Hey." Kushina said when she spotted Naruto.

"Good morning." Naruto replied and came up to stand next to her. "You're all here..."

Naruto wasn't sure how often they visited the stone, but it seemed an odd coincidence that all of them had decided to come at the same time.

"Yeah. We're going on a mission soon, we'll be gone for a couple of weeks, and today it's exactly three months since he died." Kakashi replied quietly, pointing to Obito's name engraved into the spotless marble.

Uchiha Obito

The name was placed high on the bottom half on the stone, together with other names on all sides. All who had fallen in battle. The memorial stone had all the names of people who had died protecting the village. The fallen heroes of Konoha, and with Obito there had been no body to bury, and therefore no grave.

"I came along with Minato. I wanted to come too. I haven't been here much..." Kushina added, smiling sadly while looking at the stone. "I wonder what he'd be doing if he was here."

"Probably be asleep. He was always late." Naruto replied, earning a chuckle from all of them.

Minato turned towards Naruto, putting his hand on her shoulder. He did that often. "I haven't had the opportunity to talk to you lately. But I hope you're okay..." He trailed off softly.

"I'm fine. Thanks for asking." She answered and waved her hand dismissively. Looking back at the memorial stone she felt her stomach turn again. "I haven't had the opportunity to say this before, you're always so busy. But I'm so, so sorry about Obito."
"Yeah..." Minato muttered and looked at the stone too. His hand fell away from her shoulder, cold wind cooling the spot his hand had warmed earlier.

Naruto read the other names on the stone, finding a few more Uchiha and Akimichi not far away from Obito's name. She'd never really taken the time to study this stone before. Just briefly. She'd never taken in the hundreds of names littering the surface.

She looked further up, her eyes pausing on one specific name.

_Aburame Shibi._

Naruto's brow furrowed. There was that name again… Shibi… Where had she heard that before?

It was a few years ago wasn't it? Minato and Kakashi had seen him die. But there was more… She must have met him in the future or something, because the name made her stomach uneasy.

_Aburame Shibi._ Naruto read the name a few more times.

Maybe Shino had introduced her to a relative? He was an Aburame, but there was more than one Aburame on this memorial stone, why did his name pop out in such contrast to the others?

Shino… Shibi…

Naruto's eyes widened. Her breath caught in her throat, and her vision blurred from lack of moisture when she stopped blinking. Her crisp filled stomach twist painfully, and she felt the need to cover her mouth to not start throwing up.

It was Shino's father. Aburame Shibi.

She had never met him. Naruto had only heard his name through Shino and her friends. But he was dead. Had been for years, and Naruto hadn't noticed.

No... This couldn't be right... No, no, no, no.

"Are you okay, Naruto?" Rin asked in concern as she noticed her quickly paling face.

Naruto only managed to get a few steps away before she retched. Her stomach emptying on the rich, green grass in front of Konoha's Memorial Stone.

. . .

_To be continued..._

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! And also thanks to AnjoRemix who is patiently still betaing After the Rain! I also want to say thank you to those of your who commented! You guys are the best and keep me so motivated! I'm sorry I'm so inconsistent at replying lately, but I'm just swamped with different things that needs to get done.
Well, a lot of scenes in this chapter!

This chapter is an aftermath chapter. I wanted to focus on the changes in people after everything that went down.

The next few chapters will probably come a little slow. Lots to do as always, but they're all drafted to some extent.
In a small bedroom closest to the lounge sat Naruto in a state of indifference. A needle was in her hand as she slowly but expertly sewed shut the hole in her pants. The thread was black, and it clashed against the orange fabric, but it was better than nothing.

After the cruel realization that Shino was gone, basically written out of history – because of her - Naruto found it a lot easier to focus. Maybe something finally snapped her endless optimism, the naive belief that everything could work out in the end.

It was a loss of innocence Naruto had believed impossible to lose. She'd already lived through enough shit for two lifetimes for this to be so significant. But yet it had changed her. Ebisu's death hadn't, neither had Obito's, but the loss of Shibi – and in extension Shino – had.

Naruto had previously believed that something like this would utterly destroy her. But the truth was she didn't feel broken. In fact she'd never been more intact. Never felt as in the moment as she currently did. It became apparent in the concentration she had on her current task. Simple though they might be. Sewing together a rift in her clothes.

Naruto had long since moved on after losing her friends, her life and even her own time. It was a necessity to stay alive. Many thought Naruto had no self-preservation instinct because of how boldly she battled – but that had never been the truth.

With a sigh Naruto pierced the needle into the fabric again; watching it disappear and feeling it slide against her finger on the other side. Stitch after stitch, she was patching her pants together. It made her imagine wistfully that her life could have such an easy fix too. Just some string, needle and a patch.

Ever since she was young Naruto had suppressed her thoughts and emotions. Stopped the ugly ideas from overwhelming her being. It required a good amount of lying. Mostly to herself, and in extent others.

She was fine. She was happy. She'd prove them wrong.

The mantra had been constant when she was young. It was the only way she knew how to get over how badly people treated her, seemingly for no reason at all.

With understanding came acceptance, and for the first time she really had been happy. Naruto understood why people had acted the way they did, and that made all the difference. Instead of getting revenge for their injustice towards her she had finally been able to move on. She understood what was needed.

But here in the past she was just one amongst many, a part of the crowd, something she'd never been allowed in her own time. No matter if the attention was positive or negative - mostly the latter – one
of the sacrifices had been the lack of normality.

She had never been allowed to be just a kid. She was *that* kid. The different one. Here she was allowed to be just one many.

One who had no prejudice against her and forced to manage through her own skills. For once no one saw deeper than her face. They believed what they saw was what they got. Even her resemblance to the Yellow Flash was overlooked here.

Sure, some pointed it out. But just like Sai had resembled Sasuke by some odd twist of fate, people seemed to draw the same conclusion here. To them it was just a coincidence, and Naruto had let them continue to believe so.

Though it was good to not be infamous anymore, the price she had to pay for it was growing more and more suffocating to her. Shino and his father were dead. A matter which Naruto was starting to come to terms with.

They were casualties of war, like so many others. It proved that the future was not set in stone. Which she already knew, but somehow not quite believed. Now no illusions were left.

It had led to a shift of perception in Naruto, as it made her realize she was not living in the past.

This was *now*.

This was no longer the past, just as her original time was not the future. Because everything had the possibility to be rewritten. Everything she did mattered. Every second counted. The idea was both horrifyingly scary and desperately appreciated. It was cruel and redeeming in their separate ways.

Naruto tightened the string to secure the knot after her last stitch. Watching as the fabric stretched. Holding the pants up, she studied her handiwork. It was a job well done and a small smile graced her lips.

It was all patched together now.

Black stitches on orange fabric. Proof they'd been broken and sown together at some point. Naruto found it oddly symbolic. It was just a pair of pants after all.

After folding up her clothes and pushing them into a corner for easy access in the morning, Naruto reached for her night lamp to turn it off. While trying to get comfortable she was still smiling absentmindedly.

Shino's loss in the near future would not be in vain, because Naruto would make sure the future left to her would not become as screwed up as it had been in her own time. No matter what the Kyūbi said, she would not lose hope. It just meant she had to work harder, and instead of hoping and praying for a greater good – maybe she could just fix it herself.

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An early Tuesday the Third Great Shinobi War came to an end.

The people who caught wind of the news first were the shopkeepers, who always somehow knew official news before everyone else. From there they spread the word to the whole village before the Hokage held an official speech that same afternoon, declaring their long suffering over.

Naruto first heard it from Orochimaru around the same time as the shopkeepers, because her team had a morning briefing before guard duty.
Naruto didn't feel like celebrating this matter though. It was a relief, but far from what she'd expected. People were still suffering because so many lives had been turned upside down over the last few years. So many had died. Children had become orphans and wives had turned to widows.

Most of all was the fact that people had changed.

Even Naruto didn't feel the same anymore, and it was not because she was growing older for the second time.

The battles were burned into her mind. Nothing was as noticeable as the people who were missing amongst their midst. There was a loud absence of those who no longer was with them, and friends who had once depended on each other had grown apart.

Gai and Genma was a perfect example of this. They were still friends, still trusted each other completely, but Gai was more interested in being friends with Kakashi than hanging out with Genma on their days off.

Genma himself didn't want any best friends, he was reluctant to let anyone that close, and instead choose to have many half close friends. The two who had bonded over the death of their teammate was simply not that close anymore. They had changed too much.

Naruto could relate. In many ways Anko and Naruto had changed too. Their characteristics could still be described similarly. Loud. Energetic. Crass. Pushy. But the way they expressed these qualities had developed differently.

Anko had never let anyone give her any crap, but it had grown worse during the war. Everything she was had intensified, while Naruto had calmed down. Luckily they were still best friends though. Their differences actually made them better friends. The war had brought them closer where others had slipped apart.

Where Genma had been confirmed in his belief that growing close ties would only cause pain later down the road, Obito's death had proved something else to Naruto.

Even after everything Naruto kept her heart unguarded. The pain of losing them was a constant fear, but it was outweighed by the happiness of having friends who counted on and trusted her completely.

Now that the war was over it didn't mean the danger was gone and all her friends were safe, but it did leave her with renewed motivation. It meant less restriction and new opportunities to make a better future without the fear of unexpected casualties of war on every corner. Not completely, but at the very least less.

While the village gossiped about the new found peace, Naruto and Anko walked home from guard duty by the gates together.

Their topic of conversation circled around another rumor which hadn't yet reached the civilians ears.

"Can you believe it? Our sensei might be the Fourth Hokage, Naru." Whispered Anko under her breath.

Naruto only shrugged, not entirely sure how to respond to that. It was Orochimaru who had told them the news himself that morning. That he was nominated for the Hokage seat together with one other person. Namikaze Minato.

After a beat of silence Naruto answered just as quietly. "Yes, it's big news." They couldn't be
overheard discussing this by any by passers.

"Be excited, Naru," Anko huffed, showing Naruto's shoulder lightly. "Do you not see a trend forming here? The First and Second Hokage were brothers. The second Hokage was the Thirds sensei. Orochimaru-sensei was the Thirds student. Do you get where I'm going with this? Aren't you the one who declared you wanted to become Hokage? Well, if things continue like this it's not such a farfetched dream anymore."

Naruto grinned. That was true, though it was an odd coincidence. But Naruto just hoped it was Minato who got the seat. Naruto couldn't imagine another outcome, even if she'd altered time she hoped she hadn't changed that.

"Let's make a bet out of it." Naruto suggested, stopping by the corner of the street, right in front of their building. "I'm betting Minato will become Hokage."

Anko's frown spoke louder than words, but a small nod revealed she was never the less on board. "Fine. I bet on Orochimaru-sensei becoming Hokage. What does the winner get?"

Naruto looked up at their building, trying to come up with a suitable reward. "The loser has to take two wash duties. Winner gets four weeks without any washing."

They had a simple system at home, mainly because Anko had insisted it was necessary. There had been a few death threats involved too, but Naruto had eventually agreed to it. Every week the lounge, hallway and bathroom had to be washed, and they took turn on who was stuck with the task. This meant four weeks without any washing for the winner. Except for their own room which was their own responsibility.

Anko snorted. "You have yourself a deal, Naru. Be prepared to play nice with the cloth and broom again, since you'll be spending more time with them soon enough."

The next day the rumors of the Sandaime's retirement had reached the rest of village inhabitants too, but team Orochimaru didn't get the opportunity to confirm or quench these rumors.

Despite the recent peace they were far from free of their duty, and their schedules were kept busy with new security measures.

Keep the peace. Keep vigilant. Don't be fooled. Those were the hushed murmurs within in the military force, contradicted the careful optimism of the civilian population.

They were at peace, but it did not mean they were safe. They had forced the opponent to their knees, but cornered wolfs were not to be trusted. Lower your guard and the desperate last resort bite of their caged opponent might turn fatal.

They were sent as part of a platoon towards the fields. A very large one. Naruto had never been sent out with such a number before. There were over two hundred ninjas all equipped for this mission.

Naruto knew some of the people. Team Kushina, team Choza, Rin and Kakashi were present. They were talking with two people Naruto had not gotten to know very well in the past, but knew perfectly well who they were. Shizune and Raidō.

Naruto saw them often around the village, but so far they had very little interaction. Though they knew who Naruto and Shisui were, Anko knew them pretty well and they always greeted each other in passing.
"Alright, captain. What are your orders?" Asked Naruto, giving Kakashi a proper salute while they stood at the edge of a large rocky hill. He was their captain, and Naruto was answering to him for the duration of the mission.

Orochimaru was the commander of the whole platoon, and the platoon had sub divisions. When dealing with such a large number of ninja it became difficult to keep track of everyone at all times. To make sure they were always accounted for they were divided into teams/squads, and the captains of them were the ones reporting to Orochimaru.

Since team Orochimaru and team Minato did not have a sensei to lead them through this mission they were merged together as a squad under Kakashi's responsibility. Orochimaru was the acting commander for everyone on this mission, while Minato was on a different mission and therefore did not participate.

Kakashi rolled his eyes at Naruto's less than discrete mocking. "For now… just pay attention when Orochimaru-sama speaks, okay?" He replied with a trace of humor, and pointed to the front of the crowd where Orochimaru was talking with Shikaku and Kushina before they set out.

Everyone was dispersed and searching for their team, their voices quiet and muffled. Orochimaru's voice carried over the gathering, quieting the remaining voices to a hush.

"We're setting out now. Keep your eyes open. The war might be over, but the threat is not eliminated yet. A strong front is the only way to keep the tension between the countries in check, and though we won we're yet to be at peace." Orochimaru cast a quick glance over the assembled platoon, before nodding once. "Next stop is in six hours by the country border. Everyone is to report to their captain and captain's report to me. Let's go."

The platoon made good speed the first part of the road, and stopped at the border to Fire Country around three in the afternoon for a meal.

Naruto had stayed with her squad for the journey, who travelled at the far back of the platoon. For their meal they made do with bread and water, since Orochimaru was not keen on lighting a fire for so many people.

It was quite a different experience travelling with such a large group. It was confusing, and Naruto was happy she didn't have to make sure at all times that every member was accounted for.

"What are we expected to find?" asked Anko conversationally, frowning at the piece of bread she'd just taken a bite off.

"Scouts." Kakashi answered, just as impressed with their meal as everyone else. Meaning not at all.

Shisui was retying his forehead protector, pushing back his hair so the cloth would keep it out of his face. "We're scouting for scouts?"

With a nod and a point in Shisui's direction Kakashi confirmed it. "Exactly. We're keeping close to the platoon, but we have our own area to scout. If anything is found we're to report back to Orochimaru-sama, if anything goes wrong we send up the signal."

"What's the signal?" Asked Rin, she seemed fine with eating dry bread and was munching on it as if it was a chocolate cookie.

Kakashi lifted up a kunai with an explosion tag fastened to the end.
"Right… That type of signal. Are we not trying to keep the peace? Not start a conflict with Kiri? Again." Pointed Shisui out, tugging at the end of the cloth to make sure the knot was tight enough. Their platoon was heading for Kiri. Making sure they would not take advantage of the peace treaty by attacking unannounced.

"It's our orders," Kakashi sighed and handed out a kunai to each of them with explosion tags attached. "It's a safety measure."

"I feel this is tamping fate." Shisui muttered, but accepted the offered kunai.

"Most likely nothing will happen. We'll be in and out. No problem." Kakashi said, uncharacteristically optimistic for once.

"What happens if we're scouted first though?" Asked Naruto as she received her own kunai, putting her bread in her lap to examine her borrowed weapon.

Kakashi thought about the answer for less than a second. "If you're attacked you attack back, but if possible you try to communicate with them. Orochimaru will speak with the groups individually later and give more specific orders. I doubt all of us will be traveling in such a large group for a mission like this. Soon we'll part, travelling in two divisions before splitting up into squads to cover a large area as efficiently as possible."

As Kakashi had predicted the platoon split up. They were closer to Water Country, and couldn't move around as easily and yet stay undisguised.

Shikaku was appointed the leader of the hundred who moved south, while Orochimaru's division took the northern route. Some of them were meeting up in a couple of weeks, where individual members from both platoons would continue closer to Water Country at a higher risk.

Infiltration… Naruto doubted she'd get picked for that specific mission.

Shikaku's division included all of the younger teams, which Kakashi explained was because they had the safest area to scout. But for once Naruto didn't complain about being coddled because of her age. It meant she could spend most of the day outside scouting with team Kushina.

Hitomi and Naruto would never be best friends, but they had come to an accepting tolerance of each other's presence for the sake of their teammates. They even exchanged pleasantries in passing. Or well, most of the time at least. "My… two days at tracking and scouting and you haven't messed up yet?" Hitomi said with a condescending tilt of her head.

Anko never had much patience for Hitomi's comments, and answered before Naruto could open her mouth. "Why, yes," She said an enthusiasm that didn't reach her steel, cold eyes. "Naruto has different qualities than you do, Hitomi. I mean, I've actually seen her fight. What about you? This mission must be prefect for your skill set. Stay quiet and run in the face of danger? It's right up your stream, isn't it?"

Hitomi blushed, backing away at Anko's hard stare and shifted behind Ensui.

"Case and point." Anko mumbled.

"Hey, that's my teammate. You have no place speaking to her like that." Ensui retorted and folded his arms in front of him. Staring right back at Anko without backing down.

"Please, she's luggage." Anko sneered and shook her head.
The comment wasn't well received, and Ensui bristled. "She's not. Can't you be civil?"

"We can." Naruto answered quickly and smiled to Hitomi. To no avail. The girl scowled and looked pointedly away.

"Hitomi..." Ensui said warningly, catching her behavior.

Hitomi was not happy but reluctantly agreed. "Fine... But she's the one insulting me." She mumbled and gestured towards Anko.

"And now you're telling on me?" Anko replied with a sickly sweet smile.

Naruto was having flashbacks to the orphanage, and Anko's endless intimidation act towards the younger girls. "Give it a rest, Anko. There no need to defend me from Hitomi."

Anko snorted, a genuine smile replacing the last. "That's actually very, very true."

Iruka and Shisui came up to them with Kushina in tow. "We're going to light a fire, I'm starving." Iruka moaned and rubbed his stomach, not noticing the tension. Shisui did though.

"Why don't Anko and Naruto help me find logs for the fire, huh?" He asked with more exuberance than necessary.

Ensui breathed in relief and sent him a thankful glance when Naruto and Anko went to join him.

While everyone met up at some point during the day, large parts of their platoon didn't see much of each other.

Kakashi's squad spent most of their time alone and only returned for dinner and rest, before they set off the next morning at an unearthly early hour.

Though the scouting came without result – which was a good thing – Naruto enjoyed the evenings more. By keeping Hitomi at an arms distance Naruto had quite a good time with everyone else.

Shizune and Raidō often joined them for meals, and Naruto was surprised to see how well Raidō knew and get along with Shisui. Naruto hadn't even known the two had met each other.

Naruto was also discussing at length with Ensui and Kushina about chakra chains. The Nara was eager to know more about the ability, and found the difference in Kushina's and Naruto's chains intriguing.

Rin and Shizune were getting along like a house on fire. Babbling away about medical ninjutsu and Tsunade for hours on end. Shisui spent most of his evening time with Raidō, Genma and Kakashi away from the rest, which made both Anko and Naruto confused.

When asked what they were doing Kakashi had simply answered "training." Which was not really true since they rarely left out of sight, just out of hearing, and Naruto hadn't even seen them go through their Kata once.

It was their fourth day out scouting, and they had not found anything suspicious so far. "No reports have come back with any results, I'm almost daring to believe there's nothing to find." Muttered Kakashi while hanging upside down from a branch.

Naruto craned her head back and grinned widely from the branch below. They were all up in the
trees, but Kakashi had climbed to the top to check if there was anything visible above the leaves.

The squad had split up. Naruto, Kakashi and Rin were scouting by the narrow path crossing the area, while Shisui and Anko were further down the forest closer to the coast.

Rin jumped from a nearby branch and landed next to Naruto. "Nothing to report here either. Anywhere we haven't checked yet?"

"I don't believe so. Let's wrap up for the day and head back to our meeting point." Kakashi answered and let himself fall from the branch. Smoothly he turned around in the air and landed softly in a crouch next to Naruto.

"Show off." She muttered while Kakashi straightened up.

He chuckled at her comment, dusting off a few leaves from when he'd crawled through them. "Use all possible opportunities to practice, Naruto. With our constant missions it's hard to find time to training."

Naruto was sceptic, but before she could reply Kakashi jumped to the next branch, Rin following quickly after and leaving Naruto to catch up. Four branches later she'd reached them but was irritated at their sudden haste. They backtracked the way they had come from for twenty minutes before reaching the meeting point Shisui and Anko would arrive at. Naruto's teammates had yet to show up though, so they sat down to wait.

Despite her effort Naruto quickly grew bored. Cleaning her forehead protector just wasn't something she found gratifying for any length of time, and Naruto tied it back in its proper place.

She looked from Rin to Kakashi, noticing how they wore theirs. Rin used it like Naruto, but Kakashi had a small fringe hanging down from his. This had annoyed her many times before, and she wasn't sure why she'd never mentioned it to him already.

"Why do you wear your forehead protector like that, Kakashi?" She asked bluntly. Kakashi looked up, one eye closed while the other black one stared her down.

"What do you mean?"

Naruto leaned forwards, tugging at one end so it covered his eye with the Sharingan. Leaning back she smiled widely. "There! All fixed. Don't you get tired of constantly keeping one eye closed? Doesn't that feel more natural?"

Kakashi's hand rose to the metal plate, adjusting it slightly. Rin was studying the effect of Kakashi's tilted forehead protector with a small grin. "It looks a little funny..." She admitted with a light giggle.

Naruto rolled her eyes and leaned forward again. Kakashi stared wearily at her and smacked away her hand when it came too close to his face.

"Hey! I'm trying to help here. Just push your fringe behind the forehead protector. That way your hair doesn't stick into your remaining eye when you wear it tilted." Naruto objected with some annoyance as she retreated her hand.

Kakashi thought about it for a moment, before doing as instructed. Naruto couldn't keep the grin off her face while Kakashi tried out the hairdo. He looked drastically more like the Kakashi she had first known in the future. "Like this?"
Perfect!" Naruto replied. "It's much cooler, dattebayo."

Rin nodded in agreement. "It's actually quite good Kakashi-kun, and now you won't have to wear that eye patch I gave you. Not that you have much, but this is practical enough for you, right?"

"Eye patch?" Asked Naruto confused.

"Rin gave me one. Since I'm not an Uchiha, Obito's eye can't be deactivated and I have to keep it closed all the time so not to drain my chakra." Kakashi explained quickly.

"But he finds it uncomfortable. He doesn't like overlapping his forehead protector with the eye patch string. He says it keeps shifting." Rin added.

"This works though… I always wear my forehead protector… How come I haven't thought of this before?" Mumbled Kakashi to himself while still fixing his hair.

"I've been annoyed about your fringe hanging in your eyes for years Kakashi, so I had to speak up now that you'd actually take my fashion advice. Soon I'll have you wear orange too." Naruto replied jokingly, and received a hearty laugh from Rin and a snort from Kakashi.

Kakashi's optimism about the mission strangely enough paid off. None of them ran into trouble, and their report came back clean. No sightings and no suspicious behavior in the area.

They gave their report to Shikaku, who had similar reports piling up next to him. They were asked to go with the platoon to their next destination within their current group.

They were covering large pieces of land, so the platoon used one day to travel, and one day to scout. They continued like this for five days, always on the lookout for something, and never gaining any results.

It looked like Kiri had kept their end of the deal.

So the evenings grew less strained with each day. They were moving out of the dangerous areas, which resulted in the possibility to start camp fires for some warm food in the evening.

"-And then he fell into the water." Kushina explained, hardly containing her glee while she pointed to her student. Iruka had a pink tint to his cheek, and was casting his sensei betrayed looks all through the story.

"Mah Iruka, you might be more of a klutz than even Naruto." Chuckled Shisui behind his hand.

They were eating dinner, even though it was closer to midnight than proper dinner time. They had arrived late and been stuck helping out another team.

"Hey! At least I didn't confuse a deer with an enemy." Naruto countered and stuck out her tongue towards Anko, who growled back.

"What?" Asked Ensui, looking between the two girls.

Naruto grinned widely. "You should have seen her. Getting all excited and ready for battle. She had Shisui come and fetch us from miles away so we could attack together. It was hilarious when we came back only to find Anko trying to scare away a deer." She turned towards Anko with dancing eyes. "Where you trying to cover up the mistake?"

"Oh shut up! I have so much blackmail on you Naru! And you're getting close to dangerous
territory! I can always tell them of the time you accidentally put a slo-" But she didn't get further, because Naruto threw herself across the distance between where they sat, her hand clamping over her mouth to stop Anko from talking.

Soon they were punching and kicking wildly, a spar starting up while the others laughed at their antics. Shisui sighed and rolled his eyes at his teammates. "I think they mentally de-age three years every time we are away from Orochimaru-sensei. It's only so much I can do to keep those two under control, but they have some serious social handicaps." He grumbled under his breath.

Ensui leaned back on his hands, a small smile on his lips while they watched the two teammates try very hard to fight silently and yet painfully. They were a little away from the camp. They had already learned not to fight around the tents, because waking up grumpy older ninjas was a terrifying experience. And it had happened twice already.

"They're really good friends aren't they?" Kushina said with an adoring smile while she watched the girls try to conflict pain on each other. Peeking between the female members around the camp fire Ensui decided he didn't get girls. They were a mystery to figure out.

Two were beating the shit out of each other – who proclaimed to be best friends none the less. His sensei looked at them the same way his mother looked at his little sister when she clothed her in pink frilly dresses, and Rin was already getting out salves for the upcoming injuries. Hitomi even looked amused at their antics.

No, Ensui didn't get this at all.

Shisui understood better, but just because he knew it was inevitable. He just wondered how long he should wait to split them apart. It was better to wait until both had a few bruises.

"They remind me of when Kakashi and Obito would start fighting." Rin said between sips of water, peaking at Kakashi who was more interested in his soup than the two girls fighting right behind him. "Somewhat at least."

"Should no one stop them?" Asked Raidō worriedly. "They might get seriously hurt."

Shisui sighed and got to his feet. Everyone grinned as he made his way towards his teammates while dragging his feet. With ease he jumped straight into the fight and got a hold of Naruto's neck and Anko's ear, dragging them away from each other with a jerk which had both females release a squeak of pain. "Stop it you two, it's such a bore to have to be peace maker all the time. Can't you act civilized for just a few hours?"

Anko and Naruto stared daggers at him, and Shisui quickly released them, stepping back when their anger turned towards him instead.

"Come over here, alright? I need to fix you two up for tomorrow." Rin called loudly, holding up a small tube which Naruto recognized by sight now. It was type of ointment used to stop swelling.

"Fine." Huffed Anko and walked hurriedly back to the camp fire.

The others continued talking while Rin fixed up Anko and Shizune worked on Naruto. Soon Gai, Genma and Raidō decided to go to sleep, and Shizune and Rin followed after.

Naruto was in a very good spirit, and after the many discussions about chakra chains with Ensui and Kushina she found herself asking something she'd wondered for a few years now, but hadn't been sure how to bring up.
"Is there a limitation to jutsu?" Naruto asked curiously. "We change the environment every day. Create the elements and counteract how a body works, but what are the limitations? Minato can even counter the laws of space."

The thought had often wandered in and out of her mind, and her question drew the rest's attention. Even Kakashi who'd been about to retire for the night stopped and turned back.

Kushina looked unsure how to answer for a long time. "Theoretically there aren't many limitations, only a lack of knowledge and means to use them. Why do you ask?"

"Could… you alter time?" Asked Naruto, scratching her arm while leaning back against a tree.

By the look on people's faces that was a very stupid question to ask, and slowly Kushina shook her head. "… No."

"But you just said there were no limitations." Naruto pointed out.

"To alter time… go forwards or backwards… you either forward or rewind the path of the whole universe. Your chakra would have to reach out to everyone and everything, alter it to such a fundamental degree it would be impossible. No one has that much chakra, not to mention control. Only a God could do such a thing."

"Have you thought about this before Kushina-sensei?" Asked Anko curiously.

"Yes. I wondered before… I did a lot of research on the matter. Space-time ninjutsu in particular together with Minato. The most you can archive is no time, and only to yourself. It's similar to what Minato can do. He goes in and out of time with almost no time difference. There is one, but it's so short no one can physically experience it. He's the closest person to be able to time travel, because for a split second he's not in existence, and technically he travels forwards in time while doing so. Leaving the world, only to appear after time has moved forwards."

"With the Hiraishin." Stated Shisui while nodding to himself.

Naruto ran her fingers through her hair and tugged at the tips of her ponytail absent mindedly. "And… there's absolutely no possibility to move backwards? But what if we pretend for a moment someone did… what would… what would really happen? Are you sure it isn't?"

Kushina shook her head furiously. "No, it isn't. That's just wishful thinking. If one was to do that… it wouldn't really be time travel anyway. It would be… dimension hopping. Because the future will not exist anymore. It's an abstract really." Kushina looked frustrated now, unsure how to explain her point.

"I don't get it. Time travel would be time travel no matter what wouldn't it?" Asked Naruto confused.

"If it's successful, then no." Ensui answered instead, gaining their attention in a flash. He had a way to demand authority even without raising his voice.

"I think I understand what Kushina-sensei mean. If I jumped back twenty years in time, I would end up somewhere time has gone undisturbed up to that point. If I cease to exist at once, than I guess you could say I time travelled, but I just never got to experience being back in time. That way, I would have gone from the future to the past, but not changed anything since I never lived in the past. That would be time travel. Going back but leave time exactly what it was without any traces of yourself." Ensui explained. Naruto was paying close attention while the Nara speculated on his theory, while Kushina nodded along in agreement.
Kakashi was staring at the dwindling fire with a half lidded eye, thinking silently over the dilemma while Anko didn't seem to completely grasp the concept.

Ensui scratched his chin and continued speaking. "Now, if I did survive something like going back in time, and I was able to live after my time travel, it would mean I had created a time paradox, or a different dimension where the world split in two because of my arrival to the past. One world where everything went the same and resulted in time travel at the end, and another world where I started by arriving from the future and living in a world which originally didn't include my existence at that point in time."

"So if someone could exist after going back in time, it would mean it would become a different dimension all together? It's dimension hopping and not time travel?" Asked Naruto startled.

Did this mean the future she had left had continued without her? Naruto had always presumed her arrival to this time period had erased everything before her. She had never thought somewhere in another dimension time continued alongside theirs.

Shisui nodded along with Ensui, but it was the former who answered her. "That could be… Everything needs a beginning Naruto. And if you went back in time and disturbed the future, you would erase your own future actions. But if they're two different dimensions… you would have a continuous existence that didn't interfere with each other. It would mean all decisions made create a new dimension. If you walk right instead of left, a new world appears. And this goes for all possible humans and animals. There would be gazillions of dimensions. It's truly an abstract concept, but since we're just babbling about theories anyway… But really; why on earth are you curious about this, Naruto? There's no such jutsu."

Naruto felt her cheek heat up and she waved her hand. "Just curious, dattebayo."

Feeling bored with the mission and hoping they'd go home soon Naruto followed at the tail of the platoon. Even the interesting camp fire discussion a couple of days before was not enough to keep her boredom in check.

No message for backup had arrived so they were returning to Konoha, hoping to meet the rest of the platoon behind the walls. A few had stayed behind to meet up with Orochimaru's platoon. Shikaku and a few high ranked ninjas had a more risky mission now; which is to infiltrate Kiri.

Shisui and Anko were walking with Kakashi up ahead, while Rin had joined Naruto at the back of the group. The others were spread around, and at the foremost of the troop were Inoichi and Kushina who now more or less led the platoon in some odd co-captain system that didn't really work.

"I can't wait. Tomorrow we'll be home, which means it's not long until I can take a bath in something else but the river." Rin said brightly, stretching her hands over her head to loosen up a kink in her back.

Naruto grinned. "I just hope the warm water tank in our building is fixed. I'm so tired of taking showers only to get frost bites when the warm water suddenly malfunctions."

Rin laughed. "That must be annoying. Don't you have a supervisor in the building? You're renting the apartment aren't you? It's their job to keep the building up to standard."

"We've complained many times, but hopefully he'll listen this time. Anko went to talk to him last time, and ever since he's tried very hard to avoid us. From his behavior I think she made her opinion clear. Hopefully it'll be fixed this time."
"If not I can ask Minato-sensei to have a word with him. Or you can ask Kushina-sensei! She can be really frightening when she wants to." Rin giggled at her own words.

"You know what? I think I will ask-"

Naruto stopped talking and turned slowly around. Rin halted too, noticing Naruto's stillness. "What?" She asked curious.

Naruto wasn't sure why she had stopped. It might have been a sound. Nothing much really, just something that had made her tense up. "I thought I heard something..." She muttered quietly.

Rin looked too. "Should we inform the rest?"

"I don't know… There's nothing out of the ordinary now. I'll get so much crap from Inoichi if it's nothing..." Naruto muttered, and took a step in the opposite direction of where they'd been heading.

She still felt on edge, but Naruto couldn't see anything that wasn't supposed to be there. Trees, grass, moss, bark, clear sky and trampled road. Everything was visually in order.

But the sound wasn't. Naruto watched a flock of bird fly up into the sky. That was what she'd reacted to. The flight of the birds, but they were so far away she really shouldn't have heard it so well.

"Better safe than sorry." Rin replied and turned towards the rest of the group. "Stop, there mi-"

But further she didn't get. Naruto threw herself at Rin, knocking her sideways just as hundreds of shuriken flew out from the surrounding trees at all sides. Two of them hit Naruto's leg as she used her body to shield Rin.

"GAH!" Rin cried as they hit the ground.

Next moment they were surrounded. Naruto stared wide eyed at the masked figures on all sides.

They were ANBU. Or Kiri's version of ANBU. But there were so many. Too many to just be a coincidence.

This was a planned attack.

"We're under attack!" Shouted someone up ahead. It sounded like Iruka, except he was much more panicked than Naruto had ever heard him.

Shisui stopped when Ensui halted. He was looking over his shoulder towards the back of the group. "Naruto and Rin have stopped." Ensui informed them quietly.

Shisui turned around too, but there were too many people blocking their view for him to see clearly. With effort he caught a glimpse of orange.

"I'll go check." Answered Kakashi, already turning around to see what was going on when the sound of Rin's voice carried over the group. "Stop, there mi-"

Her voice cut off abruptly, only to be replaced by utter chaos.

Shisui had ducked on instinct, not sure what he had expected, but his body had moved on its own accord. Kakashi and Anko had done exactly the same, but Hitomi screamed in pain as she was stabbed multiple times right in front of them.
With a thud she crumbled to the ground, Shuriken sticking out of her shoulder and stomach while she gritted her teeth in pain. Twitching as if she was having a seizure.

"We're under attack!" Iruka screamed. He was still standing, but miraculously he hadn't been hit by any Shuriken.

Ensui wasn't as lucky, as he plucked out a single Shuriken from his arm and hissed in pain.

"P-poison." Hitomi gritted out, her shaky hands fidgeting with the pouch tied to her waist. "A-antidote…"

Ensui seemed to understand, and he fell down beside Hitomi and wrestled the pouch open in a second, the many substances in her bag being revealed for all of them.

"Which one?" Asked Ensui panicked, his own hands growing shaky while he worked.

Shisui didn't catch the answer. His attention was drawn towards the rumbling sound of feet running over soil. Figures appeared on all sides, circling them in until no direction had a view without a masked opponent.

"Shit..." Anko mumbled under her breath.

They got up in unison, Anko going through hand signs. "Sen 'ei Jashu!" She shouted, and her right arm erupted into a dozen snakes shooting towards the closest ANBU.

"Katon; Great fireball technique!" Shisui was right behind her, his Sharingan activated as he helped Anko keep the enemy ANBU back. People were attacking on all sides. No sign of order at all. They'd been taken completely off guard.

"Where's Rin and Naruto?!" Shouted Kakashi, his attention towards the back of the troop now running around like mad. Shisui had enough with his opponents though, and ran forwards to meet them head on.

Behind him he heard Ensui answer Kakashi. "No idea! But we have more acute problems at the moment!"

Ensui was carrying Hitomi while Anko covered them. They needed to find a medic ninja as soon as possible.

Hitomi's breathing had grown labored, a slurping sounds rattled from her chest and she looked really bad. Ensui was growing steadily paler, sweat forming on his brow and in general showing all the signs of poisoning.

Anko finally spotted someone who could help. "Shizune!" The girl was standing with Raidō and covered him while he fought a masked Kiri ANBU. She didn't hear her.

Seeing the dangerous terrain ahead she signaled for Ensui to find somewhere to hide, and alone she charged ahead, ducking away from incoming Shuriken and Kunai on her way across to the battle.

Shizune saw her just as Anko was intercepted. Anko gritted her teeth, fear growing inside her as the man's katana came at her before she could react.

Before her head was cut off the man froze, going immobile mid slice. Anko glanced back, finding Ensui on his knee with the Shadow Imitation technique activated. The shaking had grown worse, but
he kept the technique up regardless.

Anko didn't waste another moment. Taking up her kunai she cut the Kiri ninja's throat efficiently and met Shizune who was staring wide eyed.

"You have to help! She's going to die Shizune, switch with me! I'll cover Raidō."

Shizune gathered herself after a deep intake of breath. "Sure." She hurried past Anko while Raidō ran forwards. His speed impressive as he zigzagged towards his opponent with his katana clutched ready in his right hand.

Using the recently used bloody kunai she attached an explosion tag to the handle, readying it for the next fucker who dared come close to her.

Kakashi charged up his chidori, furious as he stared down the people in front of him. Flying forwards he heard the air swish around him, knowing Genma was covering him with senbon from behind.

One of the Anbu fell backwards from being hit by Genma's attack, while Kakashi focused at his partner. His hand was through her chest before she had time to look away from the man who'd been fighting with her.

"We need to contact the rest of the platoon." Kakashi said and whirled back towards Genma and Gai.

"I know. How though?" Gai answered, his breath labored.

"Anko. She can send a snake summon to Orochimaru-sama." Kakashi replied as three ANBU circled in on them.

"Where is Anko?" Gai replied before the first of their enemies started attacking. They all paid close attention to the flying Shuriken. Knowing they were poisoned from the way people were slowly draining of energy much quicker than should be possible.

"Over there." Genma gestured wildly to their left, where a group of people were all out attacking one another. Kakashi spotted Kushina in the heat of the battle. Her water jutsu meeting a similar jutsu from one of the Kiri ninja.

"You won't get the opportunity brats." The voice was ominous, and both of them stared as a man the size of Choza stepped up in front of them. He had a blade larger than Kakashi whole body dangling over his shoulder. It wasn't a blade though, it was grey and furry, and the shape was all wrong.

Kakashi knew who it was though. He was an A rank in their bingo book. One of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist.

Fuguki Suikazan.

This was a foe far beyond Kakashi's level, but there was no way he'd go down without a proper fight.

Genma threw senbon so quickly Kakashi hadn't seen the movement. They were deflected by the sword, scattering around while Genma got out his Katana. Creating a distraction so Kakashi could get close. Kakashi was firing up a chidori again. He had dangerously little chakra left, but he had enough for one more.
And then it was snuffed out. One move of the swordsman's blade and Kakashi could feel his chakra being ripped out and into the odd looking sword.

Without thinking about it Kakashi got his tantō out. If chakra wouldn't work than there was only this left. He knew this would be suicidal. Going up against a man like this with their limited kenjutsu skills. Genma was better at this than him, but even his comrade paled to the likes of Fuguki.

Suddenly Fuguki froze, an odd look on his face. "Get back!" Shouted a voice from behind, and Kakashi and Genma jumped back in unison.

Choza's enormous fist was headed right for Fuguki, Inoichi keeping the swordsman in check with his mind body ninjutsu.

He took the punch head on, the mind technique being released just before the hit so Inoichi himself wouldn't feel the impact Fuguki was currently feeling.

Fuguki flew backwards, but to Kakashi's horror he got back up again, his eyes intent on Inoichi and Choza now, leaving Kakashi and Genma forgotten.

Naruto and Rin were running. There was no other way to keep Rin safe from the heat of attackers. If Naruto didn't find the idea absurd she'd say they were being targeted.

Her vision was blurring up though, and her chakra was going haywire. Her feet stumbled over a root in the forest while she held off a new round of Shuriken throwing.

"You're poisoned, Naruto!" Rin said aghast from behind her.

Naruto already knew that. It was the only explanation for all her symptoms.

When she'd jumped on Rin she had taken a hit for her. Normally that wouldn't have been a problem, but it was when the Shuriken had been poisoned. "I'll be fine. My body can deal with poison better than most." Naruto bit back in frustration.

It wasn't the poison she was most worried about, it was the lack of focus until the poison was cleared out of her system.

"Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!" Naruto shouted with effort, creating fifteen stumbling clones. At least it would confuse the enemy of who was the real one until they could rejoin the platoon. They had been too far back for them to get up to the group, efficiently split up from them because they'd been trailing behind. Naruto couldn't believe they had made such a stupid error.

"It's her." Said one of their opponents, but who he was referring to was impossible to tell.

Naruto took a hold of Rin's wrist while her clones kept the group of Kiri ANBU at bay.

For now.

"Go with my clone, Rin. I'll keep them back." Naruto said sternly and created five new clones. It was exhausting… Naruto couldn't believe how her body was reacting. Two of the clones successfully used the henge to turn into Rin. But only barely. "Follow one who looks like me, the others will run in opposite directions. A distraction." Naruto muttered quietly. "Get to the platoon, and send back help."

Rin nodded, pure terror making her movement jerky.
"Go."

"Kushina! Are you alright?" Asked Anko frantically, running over as Kushina was getting to her feet with the help of an unknown man.

She had bloody holes in her attire, the pants were rifted in multiple locations, but there were no visible wounds. The man didn't look much better. His hair looked burned off and he had multiple small cuts. "I'm..." Kushina gasped for breath, her hand covering her stomach. "poisoned." She finished in a hiss.

"The Shuriken right? So many are poisoned! I can't find Rin either, she could help you." Anko ducked as an explosion went off close to them, covering Kushina the best she could.

"It's... chakra potent. The more chakra you have the more efficient it is." Kushina said through gritted teeth. Anko's eyes widened, and she spun around, trying to find a hint of orange somewhere in the chaos of people.

"Where's Naruto then?" Asked Anko panicked.

"I saw them. Naruto and Rin had a whole horde of people after them." Iruka muttered panicked, coming out of nowhere, still looking relatively unhurt.

"Where?" Asked Kushina frantic, straightening up while exhaling deeply.

"I... it was a while ago. In the forest." Iruka pointed to their right, "I haven't seen them since."


"You can't go in there!" Anko exclaimed aghast.

"I have to." Kushina bit out. "I have to save them."

"We'll help." Anko said at once.

"No! You need to contact Orochimaru-sama. Iruka; you need to protect her so she has the opportunity to use her Snake Summons."

"I'll go with you." The man said and looked at Kushina. The red head nodded in agreement, and then they ran into the forest without a backwards glance.

Anko's attention was pulled away though, when Genma came flying straight into Iruka, knocking him over like a bowling pin.

Rin was growing out of breath. She was deep in the forest now. The sound of battle echoed around her while the clone led her on a detour on their way back to the platoon.

The problem was that everyone had been split up. There were no gathered platoon anymore, but many small groups. "We need to find Kakashi." Rin said in worry when they ducked under a bush. The sound of passing footsteps making their hearts slow down a fraction of a pace.

"They..." The clone said, her expression growing confused. She looked up at Rin. "They're here... for you."
Rin could only stare in shock back at the clone. "What? What do you mean?"

"The boss - the real me - she's still fighting. Giving you time. But the Kiri ANBU is discussing right now. Wondering if they should take the intendant target -you- or go with the optional." The clone said with steadily growing alarm.

"What? Why would they want me?" Asked Rin hysterically. It made no sense at all. She was no one. She was just a field medic of Konoha. Sure, her sensei was the Yellow Flash and her teammate was Sharingan no Kakashi, but she was by far the least interesting individual on their team. Why would the Kirigakure ANBU attack to get a hold of her? There were loads of other dangerous ninjas in this platoon. Inoichi-san, Choza-san and Kushina had much more feared reputation than her. Even little Naruto was more feared.

"I have no idea..." The clone looked around, her eyes narrowed. "It's quiet here though. This is a good hiding place. The battle is moving away and we shook off our pursuers." The clone said quietly. Going from alarmed to calm rapidly.

Rin could see the clone thinking furiously. Looking in the direction of the battle and back to Rin repeatedly. They stayed quiet for a whole minute while Rin tried to get control of herself.

"What's going on now?" Rin asked frantically when she couldn't stand Naruto's abnormal silence anymore.

"They made up their mind..." The clone muttered, a hint of fear in her voice. Rin stared in shock as the clone suddenly grabbed at her stomach. Fighting to stay intact. "There's... a man there, I think he's one of the Seven Swordsman of the Mist. This is bad. His blade... I'll dispel soon." The clone gritted out, but her eyes zoned in on Rin. "But they won't get you."

In that moment Rin had a moment of clarity.

Naruto was being captured in her place - for whatever unthinkable reason - and the clone was now about to make sure Rin wouldn't attempt to save her.

Naruto's hand chopped into her neck, and then everything went black.

To be continued...
Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! The chapter was beta'd by the wonderful AnjoRemix!

Sorry for the long wait… and the cliff hanger...

But still; Finally! I've been so impatient to get to this stage of the story. Things are about to unravel now. Naruto is becoming more focused on fixing things herself. Which might not be the best, though her intentions are good.

You know what they say; The path to hell is paved with good intentions…

Or in Itachi's own words; you can't do everything on your own. But Naruto never heard that in my story.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty Four – Broken Chain

_When captured birds grow wiser, they try to open the cage with their beaks. They don't give up, because they want to fly again._ - Shiranui Genma

"I know who you are,"

Kushina released a weak breath. Blinking repeatedly in an attempt to fight her growing double vision. The people in front of her were at an undeniable advantage.

Jumping backwards Kushina gained a little more distance between herself and the swordsman. As long as they were close the swordsman would keep taking her chakra with that strange organic blade he had. She needed time to access her chakra chains, but her only chance of distraction had already fallen. He was no longer moving and Kushina knew he was beyond help.

She'd seen them just as they had left with Naruto. The blonde looked miniature dangling over the shoulder of the large red head and that terrified Kushina.

They were kidnapping her!

At first it had looked like a standard ambush from Kirigakure, but it had been covering up the flanking manoeuvre. Though Kushina couldn't understand why they were making such an effort simply for a child.

If that really was what they were after of course. Though Kushina couldn't see any other reason to mobilize this way and then take Naruto instead of killing her.

Kushina was even more worried about the absence of Rin. Either she was killed, escaped or taken. The fact that she had no idea made the situation all the more worse.

Worry clouded her mind endlessly about her own students, but the majority of the surprise attack was focused in this area, not back where Hitomi, Ensui and Iruka were currently battling. Keeping them separated was crucial to give the platoon a chance to gain some advantage.

And these bastards had taken Naruto. Naruto!

Kushina had been kidnapped once herself, and it had been beyond terrifying. This time it was Kirigakure instead of Kumogakure, but the situation was disquietingly similar.

"Uzumaki Kushina of Konohagakure..." Clarified the ANBU, proving that he really did know who she was.

While keeping her in sight he shifted his stance so he had the swordsman covered. The others spread out, creating a semi-circle around her. "This just got much more interesting."

Through the rocky forest Anko and Genma made their way back to where the ambush had started. The terrain thinned out more and more until they were in a dusty harsh environment. The traces of
explosions and ninjutsu damages were apparent on all sides together with a growing lack in vegetation. To Anko it was like she was right back in the battlefield months ago, except this time there was no one who'd swooped in to save them.

In the end the attackers had retreated, but they'd left their group with more dead people than alive.

From their left someone spotted them. "Anko! Thank kami… I lost you in the battle." Shisui walked up to her, his foot stiff while he smiled sincerely at seeing her.

"Shisui… Who else?" She asked and gestured around. Genma echoed her question with his eyes alone as they raked over the changed scenery.

"Many are dead… We're gathering them up. Trying to make sure everyone is accounted for." Shisui pointed to the rocky ground where the mountain met the forest. A row of people were laying there. Kakashi and Raidō were putting down a body next to another while they watched. Anko recognized him. He was the man who'd followed Kushina into the forest.

Anko hurried up to the corpses, looking frantically at the dead and hoping she wouldn't find someone she knew.

Her eyes stopped at the shortest one of the corpses. Her brown hair was still tied in a loose ponytail, her usual sharp green eyes closed, and her parted lips had turned blue. It was Hitomi.

Quietly Anko allowed herself a moment of regret. Their efforts had been in vain then. The girl had been so annoying but she was still a comrade. Still a ninja of Konoha and a friend of her friends. And she had been quite harsh on her throughout this mission. Anko would never be able to make up for that…

"You're okay," Kakashi smiled to them, but while the mimics were right the expression was obviously just an act. He was looking searchingly around the field, the worry emitting from him obvious for anyone who looked at him twice.

"Who's missing?" Asked Anko, scanning the crowd for any hints of orange. She found Shizune working quickly on Yamanaka Inoichi. Green light emitting from her hands while she healed up the unconscious man.

Shizune didn't look good though. Half her face was busted up and she was sitting awkwardly, as if she was in pain. Another medic was working on someone close by. She looked well enough, and those who were not helping with organizing were helping people with basic medic treatment.

Gai was strolling between scattered bodies, ignoring the Kiri ninjas as if they weren't even present. Between the trees she could see a man sitting up. Wincing in pain at the action.

"A few… Ensui and Iruka are coming down with a few more bodies in the forest..." Kakashi answered vaguely. Still distracted while searching the thin forest for sign of something overlooked.

"Who is missing, Kakashi?" Anko peeked at Shisui next to her, trying to read the answer off his face. He was anxious, which intensified her suspicion.

Kakashi ducked his head, his hands crossed in front of him and he mumbled when he answered. "Rin and Naruto were gone for most of the battle. Kushina is gone too. No one has seen them in hours."

\[Rin...\]
The nagging sound of her name came from far away, like it was shouted by someone on the other side of the training field.

Her limbs felt incredibly heavy and the sudden movement sent a vibrating dizziness through her stomach. Opening her eyes felt like more of a hassle than required, Rin would rather sleep longer. Just a few more minutes.

_Rin._

The voice was deep and worried. Someone was nudging her. Increasing the uneasiness in her stomach. It was wrong though, her mum didn't wake her up this way. She was in pain too.

Memories flooded her mind, and Rin realized what was happening almost at once. Her eyes shot open, and she stared up into Pakkun's black, glistening eyes behind a wet nose only inches away from her face.

"Rin!" Ensui cried when he literally stumbled over her and looked back to see what he'd fallen over.

Pakkun was prodding her with his paw now, his maturing puppy face scrutinizing her with great care.

Ensui bent down so his head popped up next to Pakkun's. He had a fresh, swollen bruise on his cheek but was well enough to help her to her feet.

Rin was growing panicked. How long had she been out? Why was it so quiet? The air itself had been tense with heat from the battle when the clone had knocked her out, but now...

"What happened? Are you alright? Kakashi-san is really worried about you, and we need to let him know you're alright. Have you seen Naruto? She's missing too. You were with her earlier." Ensui asked while looking her over, making sure she was okay.

"They took Naruto, Ensui-kun! They were after me but they took her instead! She knocked me out to keep me out of sight! We were hiding because there were so many of them, and then Naruto made me go with her clone while she held off the others! To distract them! But she was drugged, and she had problems with her chakra! We have to go after them!" Rin started babbling a mile a minute, the panic increasing in tune with the ability to move and speak again.

Ensui had grown stiff, but raised his hand to stop her from continuing her ramble. Rin stopped talking at once at the gesture. It was amazing how efficiently Ensui could make someone shut up without saying a single word. "Come." Was all he said, and dragged her after him by the wrist.

Rin followed on shaky legs. She'd been in an awkward position during her time-out which had stopped her blood circulation and made them go numb.

"Kakashi-san!" Shouted Ensui the moment they entered the more harried battle area, and Rin gasped at the destruction. So many were dead or wounded…

"Rin! You found her, Ensui! Thank you. Are you alright Rin?" Asked Kakashi and came running towards them with Raidō right behind him.

"I'm… I'm fine, but Kami… this is horrible." Rin said and looked around at the aftermath of the battle. People were scattered around everywhere. Her eyes zeroed in on Hitomi. She had been placed in a row next to numerous others, her eyes closed and her skin a bluish white.

Dead. She was dead…
Peeking at Ensui she noticed he was looking anywhere but at the row of dead people. Iruka was sitting with a few of the survivors. Unlike the others in that group he didn't have any obvious bleeding wounds.

Genma and Shizune were treating someone further up ahead.

"But we need to find Naruto..." Rin started again, the sight of the damage making her mouth run away with her again. Ensui stopped her with another look. However Kakashi wasn't the only one who had heard her comment.

"Naru?" Asked Anko from the left, and Shisui and Anko came hurrying up the path. Jumping over a body on their way.

"They took her. She saved me and... I-" Rin wasn't sure how to explain how Naruto had let herself get captured to save Rin. How could she explain something like that?

"We believe Naruto was captured by Kiri. They were originally after Rin for reasons I can't guess, but they recognized Naruto when she tried to distract them from finding Rin. So they settled for Naruto instead after they managed to drug her and they took her with them." Ensui explained calmly.

Anko grew pale, while Shisui was disbelieving. Kakashi closed his eyes and dragged a hand through his hair. No one spoke after the explanation.

"... We have to go after her. Kakashi-kun... Pakkun can track her, can't he?" Rin asked desperately, gesturing to the pug sniffing around Raidō's feet.

"Kushina too... They must have taken Kushina." Said Anko weakly. "She was... We were talking about Naru and Rin... That's why she ran into the forest. She was trying to get them back safely, but we can't find her. She and Naru are the only ones unaccounted for." Anko whispered.

"We have to go. We're the only ones still willing and able to." Kakashi stated and looked around.

Protocol stated they were to help the wounded and wait for backup, but this was not a situation where they could waste any time. Who knew what would happen to Kushina and Naruto once they had been taken wherever it was they were going.

"Why though? I don't get it... Why would they try to take Rin? Why was Naruto taken instead?" Asked Ensui perturbed, asking the question they all wanted the answer for.

"There's..." Shisui stared saying, his face downcast while he swallowed audibly. "The only link between them is Minato-sensei." All of them looked up at Shisui, the realization dawning on them slowly. "Rin is his student and Naruto is known for using his technique." Shisui continued explaining to the ground. "The information is in the Bingo Book. It's the only link that makes sense."

"Was Kushina-sensei taken for being connected to Minato-sensei too? Maybe she didn't die? Maybe she was just taken like Naruto..." Asked Iruka hopefully, looking at Kakashi in question.

Kakashi answered with dead seriousness. "If they were both taken as leverage over Minato-sensei...."

"Then they'll kill Naruto. Kushina-sensei is far more valuable." Finished Shisui in a whisper.

Orochimaru looked down at the note, and then at Shikaku. A shadow falling over his eyes at the message Anko had sent him. "What do we do?" Asked Shikaku, his expression neutral while he
peeked between the note and Orochimaru. He was satisfactory at hiding his emotions. The others were not that lucky. It made his decision easier.

"Shikaku. You're the leader of this mission now." Orochimaru ordered quietly. "I'll rejoin the second platoon."

"What about the first platoon, sir?" Shikaku inquired.

"Can't anyone here take this mission?" Asked one of the others.

"No." Orochimaru answered calmly, "Send a message to the first platoon. They need to be informed of the route they're taking home. Hopefully they'll find the others within a few days if they need help. I'll go ahead." he explained while looking at Shikaku mostly.

The Nara nodded resolute, and Orochimaru left not a second later.

Before they could leave, they had to make sure the rest of the platoon would manage.

Shizune would stay after Rin healed up the worst of her wounds. In honesty they needed as many medics as possible with the platoon, but Rin was not staying behind. She was unmovable in her decision.

Their choice to go after Kiri was not a popular decision however. "No way. I forbid you! We have enough problems as it is, and you are some of the few who's still in fighting condition. We need you here to guard over the people who still have a chance to make it back to Konoha alive. Not go chase two girls who are as good as dead." Barked Jiro.

He was the only jōnin except for Kakashi still standing and in good health. He was now the unofficial leader of the platoon, being the oldest and with the most experience. And he was not happy that Kakashi was taking a group of Chūnin to track down Naruto and Kushina.

Inoichi was in a bad state. While Choza was hardly any better after going up against the ferocious swordsman of the mist.

"We're going no matter what. There are enough people to help here, but Kiri's actions were suspicious to say the least. From what we have figured out they targeted Rin – a medic ninja who has never really wronged a Kiri ninja in her career. When they couldn't get her they took Naruto and Kushina instead, and the only connection the three girls really have is Minato-sensei. We need to retrieve them at once." Kakashi answered, clearly frustrated. He understood Jiro's standpoint, but he clearly didn't see theirs. Kakashi wouldn't give up their lives yet.

"Now listen here-" Started Jiro, but Kakashi had already turned away from him, walking back towards the group watching their argument with spent expressions. Not happy with Jiro's answer.

"We need a plan of action." Kakashi explained, completely ignoring the jōnin's angry words behind him. Telling him to stay and help instead of getting themselves killed. "I'm not bringing anyone who's injured for this, so Ensui – you're not coming."

"Wrong. I'm coming with you." Ensui fumed, clearly affronted at Kakashi's words. "I bled out the poison as quickly as possible, and I also received a type of antidote. I was only hit once and I feel sufficient enough for this."

"I'm the leader here, and if you can't follow my orders than you're a liability." Kakashi answered sternly. "I understand you want to save Naruto and Kushina, but are you assured your condition
won't put your comrades at risk? When we go in we're a team, and I'm not leaving anyone behind. So answer me honestly this time. Are you healthy enough to support this team? Will you be of use to us? If not you might endanger Iruka, Shisui, Anko and the rest of us. Is it worth it?"

Ensui stopped sending Kakashi hateful glares, taken aback by his direct questions. After a few seconds he nodded assured. "I'm up for this."

Kakashi looked at him for a moment before agreeing. "Good." He turned to address the rest. "They have a significant head start on us. We don't know when during the battle they were taken, but Naruto was seemingly taken first. That was half a day ago. To make up time we'll follow Pakkun, he found her and Kushina's trail. They are going in the same direction." Kakashi gestured to the small Pug sitting next to his feet.

"We'll track down the Kiri ninja together, but most likely we'll eventually be forced to break up into groups. If so there will be three groups. Base one, base two and base three." He explained efficiently, everyone's undivided attention on him while he described his plan. Like hell he'd risk the others when none of them refused to back out of the perilous mission.

He pointed at Gai, Rin, Iruka and Raidō."You four are backup, now called base three. According to the signal I send you're to hide, or stay back, or wait to attack until the rest of us absolutely need help. Rin is our only medic and she will need protection." Kakashi was almost amazed that none of them objected, though Rin looked close.

He then pointed at Anko and Ensui "You will be the communication. Snake summons and shadow possession technique will be the best option for quick messages. You're base two. This will not be necessary until we're closer and might have to split up."Anko and Ensui nodded wordlessly.

Kakashi then pointed out the remaining members. Genma, Shisui and himself. "Since we have to get close to Kiri ninjas we will try and do this without being discovered. We are the best at scouting, hiding our chakra and at fighting simultaneously. We're the infiltration. Base one."

With a thud Naruto was dropped down onto the floor, and the impact woke her with a start. Her hands and feet were bound tightly, and her mouth was gagged with a cloth. The man who'd been carrying her - the man with Kisame's sword - looked bored down at her through beady eyes.

"Welcome to the world of the living, blondie." He said casually. Naruto looked confused around at where she was. A cave.

"You've been out for a day." He gloated, his double neck being pushed out from the motion.

Naruto's heart was pounding and it felt like her muscles were made of lead. The sword was still snacking at any chakra she possessed. Making her feel like her energy was being pulled out of her muscles through her skin. "Your chakra is delicious. Samehada hasn't been this happy in years."

Naruto really wished she could give him the finger for that remark.

"Fuguki, take the hostage somewhere else." A voice snapped from behind her, but Naruto couldn't move. She was tied so tightly she had problems rolling over to see who the other man was.

"How's it going in there?" Asked Fuguki.

The person stopped a few steps behind Naruto. "Good. They cracked her seal open with some effort. This mission went much better than we could have dreamed. Though because of the new situation we'll be understaffed for the next three days. There's too much to do and the sealer ninjas will be kept
busy every second until everything is done."

Naruto's eyes widened. Who were they talking about? Seal? Naruto was weak, she was drained of her own chakra, but she could feel the stirring of the Kyūbi deep inside her. Locked and sealed up. So it wasn't her they were talking about.

It was someone else.

Naruto started struggling against her bindings, trashing on the floor until she'd bounced onto her other side. The two men simply looked amused down at her.

Naruto's eyes flickered between her two capturers. They were so vastly different in appearance. One heavy, tall with bright and long red hair. The other had pale blue hair, a bandage over his eye and looked younger than Fuguki. "A feisty one this one is. Still able to move… Put her in the cell we prepared. We'll take her out later. We need at least half a day, so we'll start when we're almost finished with this unsealing. We need to time it right. And I think Konoha has finally caught up, go and distract them after."

Naruto felt pain to the back of her head, and she blacked out again.

The second time Naruto woke up, someone was standing very close to her face. She leaned back at once, not succeeding since her head was already resting against the ground. Naruto winced at the movement when her head throbbed painfully.

She was still bound, but the location was different. She was lying on cold stone inside a cave. Probably the same as before, but confusion ran through her at the decoration.

Candles?

Blood markings?

What was this?

"She's awake. Let's begin." The man who'd been inches from her face spoke monotonously, turning towards shapes Naruto hadn't spotted yet. She tilted her head to the side, finally spotting the dark figures in the corners. People. All of them sitting on their knees in a circle around her.

A ritual…?

Her breath quickened, and she felt sick and weak. What was happening? Why were they doing this?

They started going through hand signs. Many of them and all in synchronization. She tried to wiggle free, tried to scream, but her bindings held her pinned to the floor, and the cloth showed into her mouth made it impossible to make much more than strangled noise.

Her panic drowned out what they were saying as the markings on the floor around her started glowing, illuminating the cave brighter. She was being pulled down, as if gravity itself got heavier.

It felt like drowning. She was going to die. Whatever they were doing, it was going to kill her.

Naruto had no control of her body anymore, and she arched her back in pain as she was sucked into her own consciousness.

Kakashi stopped the others with a sign of his hand. "To dangerous. We need an alternate road"
He peeked quickly over his shoulder and found everyone bent down in the bushes many feet behind.

"What about a distraction?" Asked Shisui, his hands going so fast they blurred.

It was three days since the battle. The battle itself had lasted four hours until Kiri had retreated, and the ones still able to walk had used the remains of the day looking for survivors.

After hours on end only Rin, Naruto and Kushina was unaccounted for when nightfall had fallen, and then Ensui had found Rin at last.

Kakashi had panicked. It was only a few months ago that he'd sworn to Obito to protect her, but he hadn't been able to keep his end of the bargain. She'd been lost in the chaos from the very beginning, but Naruto had come through.

Of course she had. She had the same spirit in her as Obito. She would never let a comrade die, and she'd sacrificed herself - just like Obito - to save Rin.

It made Kakashi both frustrated and sad. If anything Kakashi felt he needed to protect Naruto too. Obito had cared for her a lot. Rin was the one he was in love with, but he loved Naruto as some sort of weird little sister figure. They were so similar and had the same convictions. Traits developed similarly.

Maybe that's why Kakashi was disappointed in himself too. If anything Naruto was one of the few people Kakashi cared about more than as an acquaintance. Maybe it was the parallel between her and Obito, or maybe the dinners she had nagged him into joining, or the fact that she would do the same for any of the people trying to rescue her. Whatever it was, it made him scared. He couldn't lose Naruto.

And then there was Kushina. The two of them were the only Uzumaki of Konoha, both gone in the same battle. But there was no body and no trace. Minato would be absolutely crushed if he lost Kushina.

They had headed out before Orochimaru arrived. Leaving it to the platoon to explain where they'd gone. He was sure Jiro would paint them as deserters for the way they departed. But they would have to cross that bridge later.

They were a group of kids though, some of them with very little experience in these type of situations. But there was no keeping Iruka from coming along, and Ensui had insisted too. Kushina was their sensei, and Naruto was a classmate. Of course they'd come. Iruka and Ensui had already lost Hitomi, and they weren't like Kakashi had been. They had never made that mistake, and probably never would. They would not leave their comrades behind.

Anko and Shisui was a comfortable addition. They had almost more experience in large scale battles than himself. Team Orochimaru had a nasty habit of getting into tight spots. Or if Shisui's theory was correct; that was all Naruto's bad luck acting up, and the rest of them got sucked into it.

Genma, Gai and Raidō had similar experience as himself, and Kakashi was sure they could keep themselves disguised long enough. Even Gai with his loud antics was currently unusually subdued. For all his annoying characteristics he knew when to be serious.

He had to keep Rin out of the way, which was problematic, since she was hell bent on saving Naruto and Kushina no matter what. Even if it cost her life doing it. Something Kakashi would absolutely not allow.
This was a good squad. A solid and engaged group who would not fail in their trust. But Kakashi was the leader, and he had problems coming to terms with the fact he was sending his friends on a suicidal rescue mission. But this was his occupation. Thoughts like these would only make him second guess himself, a trait not allowed in such a crucial situation where his decisions and actions mattered more than ever.

"No decoys." Kakashi signed back to Shisui. "We'll split up the three groups."

Shisui's brow furrowed, turning serious and decided. There was a glint in his eyes Kakashi had never really been privy to. Maybe he was more alike Obito than Kakashi had always presumed.

Everywhere was dark. Naruto could only register agony - like she was being torn apart from the inside - and her sight wasn't working.

She knew where she was though. Instinctively she understood where she had ended up despite the white hot pain flaring from her stomach. The Kyūbi was standing close by, but the darkness was too pressing for her to check.

Naruto screamed and thrashed. She bit and hit the thin air with arms and legs, desperate to make the agony go away by any means necessary.

"Brat!" Shouted a voice, and Naruto paused in her desperate battle with the darkness, only to take deep gulps of air. "Don't get a fucking heart attack! You have more pressing issues at the moment." The deep, growling voice of the fox hissed.

"Hurts..." Naruto wheezed through gritted teeth. Her breath faster and more urgent than she'd ever experienced.

The fox retorted in a shout. "I know that, idiot! Do you have any idea what is happening right now? Do you know what a mess you're in?"

"Where am I? Is that you Kurama?" Asked a second voice. One that didn't belong to either Naruto nor the Kyūbi.

And suddenly Naruto could see. It was like the lights were suddenly turned on, and everything became clear.

She was lying flat in the watery sewer. The Kyūbi was leaning against the bars of his cage, his eyes turned away from her towards the other corner where the voice originated.

Naruto sat shakily up, the pain still shooting through her from her lower back. Making her movements shaky and unsteady, but more controlled than when she had spasm on the floor.

It felt like she was going to faint, everything felt heavy and purely painful, but her pain was not nearly as surprising as the sight in front of her.

A towering figure stared curiously back at her. The white of its open eye was red, and its yellow iris glowed in the dark. It looked like a giant turtle with a crab like shell in grey. Spikes covering its body and a jaw which Naruto guessed could crumble houses as if they were the softest butter.

But most importantly, it wasn't the Kyūbi.

"GYAAAAHH!" Naruto screamed, completely forgetting about the pain she was feeling at the sight of the Three Tailed demon standing together with her in the sewer water.
"Outside the cage where the Kyūbi was still safely locked into.

"Those foolish Iwa idiots. They didn't even do a proper examination of you before proceeding with the sealing. What are they doing? Why are they sealing you inside my jailer? And look at that seal. It could barely hold the Ichibi for an hour. You will break free in no time." The fox said, annoyance and irritation flashed in his eyes while he spoke.

Naruto noticed it then. Around the foot of the Three Tails was a large cuff attached to a rusty and damaged chain holding it stuck to the bars keeping the Kyūbi sealed. It didn't look very durable.

"But you won't, Kurama. That's a very solid cage you've been put into." The Sanbi answered while tilting its head. He then looked back at Naruto who was still frozen in shock.

"Shut up, Isobu."

"Kurama? Isobu?" Asked Naruto, before keeling over again as another wave of pain rocketed through her.

"They really are acting oddly. This seal is crap. The last time I was locked into a jailer they had a much stronger seal. I'm not sure what's going on, or why they've sealed me inside someone who already has a bijū inside them." The Sanbi muttered, one large paw scratching at his chin in thought.

The situation was surreal. Naruto had been prepared for a lot, but certainly not anything of this caliber.

"They do not know about me, and Naruto isn't a Kiri ninja. She's from Konoha, and even they don't know she's a jinchūriki." The fox explained and shook his head.

"Naruto? Hello Naruto, I'm Isobu." The Sanbi said and nodded towards Naruto. She stared shocked from one to the other, trying to ride out the pains without screaming her lungs out.

"Pleasure..." Naruto breathed and crawled into a ball again.

"Clearly not." Kyūbi said with a snicker.

"While she is occupied with surviving this sealing, maybe you can bring me up to scratch Kurama? Who is this? What happened? I've been sealed in a jar for a while now, and it hasn't been easy to gain information." Isobu asked while looking at the fox.

"Kurama…?" Naruto wheezed and peeked up at the Kyūbi. The nine tails rolled his eyes before turning back to Isobu.

"I've been sealed inside Naruto for years. She's a Konoha ninja but we're… Well, something happened. It's complicated, and now it's even worse." Kurama growled. "All thanks to this stupid brat who doesn't own a single intelligence bone in her entire body!"

Isobu looked more amused than anything. "So Kirigakure just sealed me inside a ninja from another village? That doesn't make much sense… But this seal is really weak, it won't take me long to break out. I just have to wait until the sealing is over, right now they have me in transition. I'll give it a few hours." Isobu said thoughtfully.

"You can't break out! It'll kill her!" Shouted the Kyūbi, the whole cage rattling as he threw his weight against the bars.

"You care about the girl? I didn't see that one coming..." Isobu replied astonished.
"I don't care about the brat! But if she goes - I go. Use your head! This seal will trap me inside the shinigami's stomach for the rest of eternity! I have to get out myself before she dies!" Shouted the fox back enraged.

"Really? That is some seal… I haven't heard of it before."

"That's because it might not even exist yet."

"Wait… Don't exist yet? What are you talking about? What is going on? And why do I feel you in two places at once. You're... so small. You're only half of yourself… What is going on?"

The Kyūbi sat down with a grunt, his tails swishing annoyed behind him while he stared at the three Tails. "Splendid… Fine, I'll tell you everything, but it's a long story."

The fox talked more than Naruto had ever heard before, and she was surprised to see how civil he could be when he wanted to.

He was still short tempered and haughty, and was furious every time Isobu wasn't keeping up, but still got through the whole explanation of how they had fallen back in time and ended up where they were now.

"Hmmm… This isn't good. Almost all of us were taken by this organization calling themselves the Akatsuki before you two went back in time. That's not good." Isobu murmured loudly for all of them to hear. "The Ten Tails is not something the world should ever face again. Father told us that the return of the ten tails would mean the end of the world. Not good at all…"

Naruto sat cross legged on the side line, finally feeling like she could breathe again without so much effort.

While the Kyūbi explained Naruto had been in too much pain to be active in the conversation, only really registering the words towards the end of the tale. Now she had a lot of questions to ask, and the Kyūbi – who apparently was named Kurama - was finally speaking without such stubbornness.

"End of the world? Why would Madara want to end the world?" Naruto asked with a gasp, looking from each of them in turn.

Isobu explained for her. "The Ten Tails is a horrid beast we all came from in the beginning. Our father - the sage of the six paths - split us up into nine entities and gave us names, hoping for a better world by doing so."

"He miscalculated… obviously." The Kyūbi muttered and rolled his eyes.

"Maybe… Humans haven't impressed me either." Grumbled Isobu, nodding in sympathy with Kurama. "But we need to do something about this. What happened originally Kurama? Do you have any idea what happened last time? Because if Naruto isn't supposed to be born yet this is a time change and I never ended up sealed inside her."

"Yes..." The fox replied. "From what I understand a girl named Rin was originally taken which resulted in her death. They attempted to take her again this time too, but Naruto took her place when they couldn't capture her. I'm not sure on the details of Rin's original death though. My previous host – Kushina – discussed what happened to the girl with Rin's sensei who happened to be Kushina's mate. Rin got you sealed inside her and that brat Kakashi went to save her, but maybe he realized you were in there, because he killed her, and in extent - you." Kurama was musing.
Naruto's mouth fell open in shock. "No! Kakashi would never kill someone because they're a jinchūriki!" She cried in outrage. "And he would definitely never kill Rin!"

Both Kurama and Isobu snorted. "Kushina didn't believe so either, but you human are always so distracted. Always changing your minds." The fox said. "Though... Now I'm wondering what really happened... Isobu's seal is unstable at best. It was only a matter of time before it broke, and Rin would die either way."

Naruto looked from one to the other, thinking hard too.

"But that Kakashi saved her... Why would he save her just to kill her? Humans are usually easy minded beings... It seems an awful lot of effort don't you think? Wouldn't it be better if the seal broke close to Kiri ninjas? He's from Konoha right? That way he wouldn't have to kill her and he'd take out enemies in the same strike." Isobu mused.

Naruto was furious. "Shut up! Kakashi wouldn't do such a thing! Rin is his best friend! He promised Obito to protect her!"

"Hmmm... As loathing as it is to admit, Naruto has a point." Kurama explained. "Kakashi might be different in this time line, but he wouldn't just go and kill Rin without a good reason. Maybe it was an accident? Maybe..." The Kyūbi stopped talking, as if he just had a revelation. "The seal would break... Kakashi was bringing Rin back to Konoha when she was killed. They were chased the whole way... Maybe Rin realized... Maybe she found a way to kill herself to prevent Isobu from being released inside Konoha. And convinced Kakashi to do it because she couldn't herself."

Naruto swallowed. Looking from the fox to the turtle repeatedly. A sudden coldness seeping into her bones at the possibility.

"What do you mean she couldn't?" Isobu asked.

The fox gritted his teeth. "If what happened to Naruto so far is the same that happened to Rin originally, then Rin couldn't have killed herself. Before you were sealed inside Naruto she was placed under a different seal. The Cursed Seal Tag."

A what?

Isobu's jaw tightened, and his eyes moved from the fox to Naruto. Looking hard at her before he nodded. "She's been contaminated... I see that now."

"What? What do you mean? What did they do to me?!" Naruto asked slightly hysterically.

Here the Kyūbi actually snarled. His tails smashing against the bars of his jail harshly and the sound echoed through the sewer. "I'm not entirely sure. You were unconscious, so I only had my senses to go off. But I felt it... It was faint, but it was him. Or someone who had a part of him inside them. Maybe controlled... I'm not certain." Kurama hissed furiously, walking back and forth in his cage.

"Who?" Asked Naruto frightened.

"Uchiha Madara."

Naruto didn't have a reply to that. It was an out of body experience to hear the name. Her mind went wild with possibilities. One more horrid than the other.

"The Forbidden Individual Curse Tag is forbidden for a reason. It is preprogrammed, and you simply can't go against the command. It's a failsafe to assure the one with the seal follows through on the
Naruto stared at the Kyūbi in shock. Not wanting to believe him. This couldn't be true! "How do I get it off?! Where is it?" But just as she asked she knew where it was. Her hand rose to her chest, right above her heart, and she felt it. Wrapped almost snugly around the vital organ and keeping her within its power. Naruto swallowed.

"You can't get rid of it. Only death can." Kurama grumbled, sitting down and looking between Naruto and Isobu as a heavy silence fell between them.

"What are the commands?" Asked Naruto in a whisper. "What is it programmed to make me do?"

"Hard to say… It will affect your instincts. It corrupts you slowly and subtly. Though it doesn't have complete control over you, you can fight it but you can't go directly against it. It's a lot like the seal Orochimaru made, though less obvious in its corruption. You have to constantly fight against its power for it not to influence you, and knowing you - who has yet to fall to my own influence - this isn't nearly as strong. In other words; you can fight the influence of the seal, but not the command." Kurama explained haughtily. "And I think Madara is behind this. I don't think it's him who planted it on you, but the one who did was strangely... influenced by his chakra."

Naruto closed her eyes, her teeth gritting in despair. How was she supposed to help now? She was bound by a seal... Which was programmed to make her do something... Something she didn't even know what was. And if Kurama was right then Madara himself programmed this seal, while someone else put it one her. "There has to... be a way. Some way to work around it."

"Didn't you hear me? You can't! I don't know exactly what it's programmed to do, but it's impossible to resist."

"I'll find a way!" Naruto answered in a shout. Kurama growled in fury, his eyes becoming slits in his absolute fury. Isobu didn't look much better. Naruto held up her hand. "I'll find a way. There's no way I'll live following Uchiha Madara's command..."

That made them both stop. Kurama's tails which had been swishing ominously behind him fell to the ground, and Isobu tilted his head curiously.

"Really?" Asked Kurama slowly. "Whoever put that seal on you do not know about me, so the seal is probably related to what is going to happen to Isobu."

"I won't let Madara or anyone else control Isobu. I'll find a way to release you, I promise." Naruto whispered and looked up at the giant turtle.

Kurama didn't answer and neither did Isobu. They shared a look, and their skepticism was clear on their faces. "We'll see." Kurama muttered eventually.

Shisui silently snuck between the swaying bushes. His attention on the rocks and boulders up ahead. Genma was with him while Kakashi was with base one figuring out where they should be stationed.

They needed a strategy. Pakkun had picked up both Naruto's and Kushina's smell, though it was spread over the area. However, Naruto's smell was specifically strong around a certain section. Which most likely meant it was the cell. Their plan was to dig themselves in, but the problem would arise if Kushina was being held up in a different area. A very likely possibility.

Her smell was in a different part of the secret base. But so were a lot of others. Going in there would be extremely dangerous, and no one had an idea of how to go about it.
Their plan had stagnated for a while, but now Kakashi was pushing for breaking Naruto out first and use her disappearance as a distraction to get Kushina out. If they were out looking for Naruto it would mean less security around Kushina.

Shisui was getting tired of waiting though. They needed to act soon. He wasn't sure why, but something was making him believe they were rapidly running out of time.

By now Naruto understood at once what was happening when she woke up. She'd been knocked out so many times in the last few days it didn't startle her anymore to wake up in darkness.

She looked around. There was a candle in her room. A weak one. She stared at it for a moment, watching it flicker lazily.

Her eyes trailed down to study herself.

She was still bound, but her legs were free and there was no cloth in her mouth so she could breathe a lot easier. Her eyes trailed from her sorry excuse of a state to the room, and zeroed in on the person lying on the other side.

She was also bound. Her long red hair spilling out around her like a halo. She was pale, asleep, and sweat was pouring down her brow.

"No… Kushina." Naruto mumbled, leaning forwards only to realize the rope that bound her was attached to a chain. Bolting her in place.

"Kushina." Naruto tried again. The woman stirred slightly. "Wake up, Kushina."

Kushina opened her eyes slowly. They were sagging in exhaustion, and her breathing grew shallower from the effort. "Kushina… what..." Naruto couldn't get the question out. Her voice was so dry it cracked when she spoke, but with effort she continued. "What happened?"

Kushina didn't answer, but her eyes found Naruto in the dark. "Do you… remember… anything?" She asked weakly. Taking deep breaths between each word.

"I… They… I'm a..." Naruto wasn't sure how to say what had happened. The evidence inside her mindscape made it was painfully obvious. She knew all too well what they'd done to her.

"They didn't… Please tell me you are just wounded, Kushina." Naruto pleaded. Leaning as far as she could manage.

Kushina tried to smile. It was short and fell away almost immediately.

Naruto felt a tear run down her cheek. Hurriedly she ducked her head, trying to hide her face from Kushina when she silently started crying.

They had taken the Kyūbi. Taken Kurama from Kushina and now she was dying. Only her Uzumaki genes were keeping her alive, and it wouldn't be enough for much longer.

"Ssshhh." Kushina whispered, still lying motionless. "Don't cry… Naruto."

"I'm sorry… I'm so, so sorry..." Naruto forced out between gritted teeth.

"Me too..." Kushina whispered.

Naruto was too upset to answer, her throat closed up and she was shaking too much to get proper
words to the surface. Kushina was gazing at her sadly. Regret and heartache clear on her face. She
didn't want to die, and she wished none of this had happened. The guilt ate at Naruto. This was
worse than she had ever imagined.

Inside her the two bijū had grown silent. She could hear Isobu a lot clearer than Kurama, maybe
because his seal was so unstable, and yet he was quietly waiting for something. Naruto wasn't sure
what.

Naruto couldn't stop the steady flow of tears, but she managed to get control of her vocal cord after a
few minutes of silence.

"I know what you said before… But do you really not believe in time travel?" Naruto whispered
eventually, her voice gruff while she looked at Kushina with swollen eyes. Kushina's head turned
slowly from her position on the hard rocky floor. The movement made her jaw tense, and her fingers
flexed compulsively.

"… I'm… no... not really. I guess… theoretically it's possible, but practically it's highly improbable.
A strand away from impossible. That's what Minato said once." Kushina whispered back, her white
skin almost grey in its complexity from the strain of talking.

"Yeah… Highly improbable. But not impossible." Naruto answered, the chain clinking when she
again tried to move forward.

"You can't go back in time and fix this. I don't regret trying. I would d-do it again…. I couldn't leave
you behind. I'm s-sorry… I failed." Kushina croaked, her eyes piercing into Naruto's. She felt her
whole body tense. Her vision was so glossy Naruto could barely make out Kushina's face anymore.

The sobs escaped Naruto again before she could stop herself. Her whole body convulsing with grief
while her mum was slowly dying in front of her. "No! This shouldn't have happened. This isn't
how… You're not supposed to die. This is all wrong. I was going to save you this time." Naruto
blabbered. All she wanted was to go to Kushina, to hug her and give her comfort. It was the best she
could come up with in this situation.

"Save me? This… time?" Kushina muttered to herself. Her face was still constricted in pain, but her
voice was unusually calm. Fading.

"Yes. I was going to save you two." Naruto answered and stopped moving, all the fight in her was
leaving. It was almost welcoming to give up. It would be so much easier than trying to survive.

"…” Kushina didn't answer, her eyelids were drooping, and it looked like she was about to pass out.

"Stay awake, Kushina! Please! Don't do this! Fight!" Naruto screamed, her whole body pushing
desperately against her restraints. But Kushina didn't react.

A fear so consuming it was clouding her mind filled Naruto to the brim. Her breath was coming out
in quick successions, her mouth was saying stuff she couldn't keep track of, and her only focus was
to get to Kushina.

Kushina's eyes slowly closed, a lone tear falling down her cheek.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! The chapter was beta'd by AnjoRemix! Big thank you for being patient and always helpful with both grammar and plot ideas.

Well… This wasn't the most uplifting New Year chapter… But hey, its the last update of 2016!

And about the chapter; Okay… don't hate me. Please?

About some of my reasoning: I try to add some layers to Naruto when I write. They do feel more than just emotional pain (which is heavily focused on in canon) they also feel physical pain, and they are not so incredibly lucky as they are in canon.

Seriously. Only Neji dies? Of all the characters who has some sort of development through the series, only Neji dies in the fourth war? That is not very realistic compared
to how destructive the attacks were during the fourth war. Unknown characters died left, right, and centre, but only Neji dies of the ones we know? That still irks me, you know?

They say 40 000 people (all on the alliance side) died just the first day of battle! None of them were below chūnin level (since genin were left in the villages) but Neji, one of the strong ones, somehow was the only one who died of the known characters? And only because he sacrificed himself? On his own terms? What the hell is the chances of that? The whole lot was incredibly lucky, and you know… main characters… but I'm trying not to be like that.

Though now that I've had it pointed out to me I guess Shikaku and Inoichi did die too. And they died properly at least. Against their will and all that.

But it was more realistic how Kakashi's life went. Losing all his teammates and so forth. However, the "game of thrones" killing spree in this story will not continue indefinitely. That I can promise.

Next chapter will not take long at all. Have a great day and I wish everyone well in 2017!
Point of No Return

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Warning: Angst, character death and violence is present in this chapter. Please do not read this chapter if this offends you, and don't flame me too much either if you still choose to read. I've warned from the beginning that there would be character deaths, and now I'm doing it again. (sorry)

Chapter Twenty Five – Point of No Return

"Sometimes you must hurt in order to know, fall in order to grow, lose in order to gain, because life's greatest lessons are learned through pain." - Pein

It was hours later and Naruto was still in shock over her current situation. Kushina was still alive, she knew because Naruto was watching her chest rise and fall like an eagle watches its prey. It gave a sense of time passing in the dark, humid cave.

Tirelessly she listened for sounds. Naruto imagined she could hear waves… Were they by the ocean? It would make sense; Kirigakure was the Village Hidden in Mist and situated in Water Country.

Ever since she had woken up the distant sounds were sparse. Every now and then a thump would make her tear her eyes away from Kushina, but it never resulted in anything.

Had they forgotten about them? Would anyone come? What was she supposed to do now?

Naruto was working hard on her bindings, but whoever had done them knew what they were doing. Even though it was a simple looking rope tied to a chain fastened to the wall, Naruto was still so snugly bound it was barely possible to move.

After hours came the first sign of movement though. An odd bouldering sound. Naruto didn't look up this time. Maybe because the sound was close to where she was imprisoned, and for the first time in a very, very long while Naruto was properly terrified of the situation she was in.

Footsteps approached rapidly, and her whole body started shaking as they stopped right outside the door of the cell. Naruto's head snapped towards the door just in time to see it open, and her eyes widened at the shapes standing in the doorway.

Pakkun, followed by Kakashi, Shisui and Genma were staring back at her. Naruto wasn't sure what to feel.

The elation she knew she should feel was absent and Naruto was more scared than ever. How did they find her? Why did they come here? Did they not understand how dangerous this was!?

Kakashi was in front of her a second later, cutting her ropes while Genma and Shisui ran to Kushina. Kakashi helped her up, looking her over for any obvious sign of injury.

From the other corner Shisui spoke up quietly. "Kakashi… She's..."

"She's not dead yet." Naruto growled and the moment she was free she sprang across the room.

With great care Naruto put her hand on Kushina and concentrated hard. Once this had been very
arduous to do - it still was - but emotional distress had always simplified the action when Naruto had done this in the other time line.

She stole Kurama's chakra. Not the pure golden chakra from her mindscape, but the red one. Just like her Kushina could deal with the pure undiluted chakra from Kurama – even depended on it – and right now the lack of any Kyūbi chakra was the missing factor killing her. It wouldn't be a permanent fix but it would give her time. Short though it unavoidably would be.

Naruto felt chakra shoot through her. From her stomach, past her chest, into her arms and out from the palm of her hands and into Kushina's chakra system.

The others looked startled at her, all three having noticed the discrete but potent chakra which had just been summoned from Naruto, and Kushina's ragged breathing calmed.

Genma had two fingers against Kushina's pulse and after checking it he looked curiously at Naruto. "What did you do? Her pulse is stronger now." He mused relieved.

"It's good for now. She needs to go to Konoha though. We all need to get there. But Kushina doesn't have long left to live. This was just an easy fix." Naruto explained hurriedly and got up. She stumbled and caught herself against the wall.

"And you?" Asked Shisui while looking at her intently. "You're pale, Naruto. What happened?"

Naruto's mouth turned into a thin line. "They… They sealed something… inside me." She answered, not sure how to get away from this explanation. "But I think I can handle it. Just take Kushina and get her back to Minato."

"What did they seal?" Asked Kakashi and grabbed Naruto's arm just as she was about to leave. She bit her lip, trying to stop herself from speaking. Her mind was a mess and her chakra system was acting up. Making her feel almost drunk.

"Later." Naruto replied coldly, staring straight back at Kakashi without blinking. His eyes narrowed, but he didn't say anything. All of them had gone silent.

"Take Kushina. Now. Take her home to Konoha." Naruto gritted out, furious at the world in general.

Kakashi inhaled and exhaled deeply and then let go of her arm. "Okay, you're right. Kushina needs to be returned to Konoha, so..." He looked back at Shisui and Genma. "Raidō is outside, and the fastest way to Konoha is with the Hiraishin."

It was a testimony to how exhausted Naruto was that she wasn't surprised by this suggestion. If anything she was just pleased.

Genma protested at once. "Are you serious? You can't be serious. We have only managed that technique once, and that was while we had only a few steps distance. This is miles. This is transporting someone else along with us. This is too dangerous."

"Kushina needs immediate help. And I believe you can do it." Kakashi argued without missing a beat.

While Kakashi and Genma discussed in hushed voices, Shisui was studying Naruto. Noticing something was very wrong with her. It was more than the physical changes. "Naruto..." Shisui whispered, but she didn't meet his eyes.
"I'll be fine Shisui. You guys get out. I have something I need to do first." Naruto replied and rolled up her sleeves.

"What? No, you're coming with us." Kakashi hissed, turning from Genma to Naruto so quickly it could cause a whiplash.

"No. I'm glad you came for us, Kakashi, but right now there are bigger things to deal with than my life. They took the Kyūbi." Naruto explained and nodded towards Kushina.

Two of three boys looked confused and only Kakashi seemed to understand what she meant. His grim expression revealed it.

Kakashi's fists tightened but he didn't argue. "What is our plan then?"

"My plan is to make sure Kiri can't use the Kyūbi, yours is to get Kushina outside. Alive. You need to protect Shisui and Genma until they get to Raidō, Kakashi. I can get through this base easier than you can. I'm smaller and I've already seen where I'm going." A lie, but she had a good idea at least. She had never had problems picking up Kurama's chakra. "And frankly, I'm the strongest here. I'm the only one with the possibility of getting the Kyūbi back." Naruto explained and breathed heavily.

"No." Shisui said furiously, but Naruto didn't even look like she heard him.

Kakashi was torn between following her and doing as she said. Naruto was right. Shisui and Genma would have to carry Kushina together, and it would be better if Kakashi could cover them while they did it.

"You're right. Kushina needs to leave, but can't you make clones to cover them instead? I'm not leaving you to face the Kyūbi on your own. You don't have any weapons anymore. Hell, even your forehead protector is gone."

Naruto's hand flew to her forehead where sure enough only skin met her fingers. Kiri had taken everything that could be used as a weapon away from her. But Naruto was still startled she hadn't noticed her lack of a forehead protector. By now it was like a second skin, and she usually noticed whenever she didn't wear it.

Naruto wondered briefly how she'd tell Anko that she'd lost all her spare Shuriken. She doubted she'd take the news well. Kidnapped or not.

Shaking away the thought Naruto frowned. But Kakashi misunderstood her expression and thought it applied to his demand.

He had decided already. He was coming with her.

Reluctantly Naruto nodded and put her hands in the familiar cross sign. Four Naruto clones suddenly popped into the air. Shisui noticed Naruto had used an unusual amount of concentration though, and so had Kakashi.

"Get out of here… I'll… see you later." Naruto said quietly.

Shisui threw Kushina's arm over his shoulder, lifting her up while Genma went to carry her feet.
"Don't do anything stupid." Shisui murmured. "If it's too much get out. You alive is worth more than getting to the Kyūbi."

Naruto ran as fast as she could. Her legs were wobbly and made her trip a few times. But Naruto
was up again in an instant, fighting against the stiffness in her limbs with stubbornness alone.

Luckily Kakashi was more aware than Naruto was, and while he made sure Naruto managed to keep up he constantly kept an eye out for enemies too.

The dark tunnel wasn't long, and Naruto doubted they would have much longer without being intercepted. A group of ninjas was already pursuing them, but she sent out clones to fight them. Stall them long enough that they could get lost in the myriad of corridors.

"Where is everyone?" Kakashi asked in a whisper as they peeked around another corner with a small mirror. Makings sure the coast was clear for the moment.

Naruto had a suspicion, but she hoped it wasn't accurate. Maybe they were outside fighting their friends. Kakashi had the same worried line on his forehead as they made their way through the tunnel. "They'll be fine."

She didn't answer, but Kakashi had more questions. "What did they do to you, Naruto? What did they seal inside you?"

She could only shake her head, not able to answer despite the wish to do so. "I can't... say."

Immediately he stopped, looking at her closely. "Did they make you unable to speak of it?"

Naruto nodded. It was the only explanation to why she couldn't form the words. But maybe she could speak around it? "They... Kushina... Kyūbi..." She gritted her teeth, but then pointed at herself.

Kakashi's brow furrowed, and then his eyes widened. "Did they take the Kyūbi from Kushina and place it into you? Then where are we going?"

"No." She shook her head. "Another..." Naruto tried to form words that might work "bijū." and then pointed at herself again.

Kakashi didn't look anymore reassured by that. "They... sealed another bijū... inside you?"

Naruto nodded vigorously. Appreciating that Kakashi was so sharp. She then held up three fingers, indicated which one it was sealed inside her. Kakashi stepped backwards. Looking from her hand to her face repeatedly.

"I'm sorry... We'll fix this. We'll get help. We just need to get to Konoha. This isn't as bad as you might think, Naruto." Whispered Kakashi. "Minato-sensei has done a lot of research on bijū and jinchūriki seals, and Kushina-" he stopped himself abruptly, then hurriedly backtracked. "And then there's Jiraiya-sama too."

Naruto looked away, not sure if he was speaking the truth. But a conviction grew in Kakashi, and he gripped Naruto's arm, forcing her to look at him. "I don't care. I knew about Kushina and I never gave a damn. You're Naruto. My friend. And I'll get you home no matter what. This is not the end and I swear to keep you safe. I promise you that."

The declaration warmed her heart. Kakashi had never been one to speak so freely in her own time. His actions spoke louder than his words, but in that moment Naruto really needed it. "Okay." Naruto replied. Hearing for herself how much of a child she sounded like in that moment.

It was specious in this part of the base, and Kakashi was being more cautions than ever. Keeping Naruto behind him at all times as they continued tracking through the cave.
The both of them tensed as the sound of footsteps coming from behind. As silently as they could they set off running. Hoping to find a room or anything that they could hide behind. But the corridor was a simple cave path, only made for a destination in mind and winded at its own leisure.

The footsteps behind them started hurrying, and so did they. Someone must have heard them.

Naruto noticed the pathway split into two up ahead, one to the side and one straight ahead. Kakashi went straight, and though Naruto wanted to duck to the side she followed after Kakashi.

He stopped them by pushing Naruto against the wall, and mimicked her stand by pressing up against the wall next to her. They heard the pursuing footsteps take off down the other route, and Naruto's heart calmed down considerably. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply in relief.

"Let's continue." Kakashi whispered and pushed off from the wall, starting to walk again. But only after a few steps a shadow appeared at the end of the short corridor they were in.

Naruto would have recognized him solely on his outline by now. There was no mistaking Fuguki Suikazan. Kakashi had his tantō up a moment later, while Fuguki tilted his head curiously. "Now, now… If you managed to get out of that cell what would you be doing deeper down in the base, blondie? And I've seen one-eye before too." He released Samehada from its bandages while he talked, the blade gripped firmly in his right hand while he locked them with his eyes.

And then a second figure appeared, Naruto heard him first, and whirled around on her toes. Recognizing the blue haired man who'd spoked to Fuguki when she'd woken up the first time inside the base.

"Ao, you're dallying." Fuguki drawled, starting to walk towards Kakashi and Naruto. The children stood back to back, realizing just how big of a trouble they were in.

Naruto charged first. Heading straight for "Ao" while doing the clone technique. Four clones popped into the air as Ao readied himself. Two clones tried to get through his defense while one was helping the other make a rasengan. Naruto stood in the back, but turned at the sound of Kakashi's tantō clashing against Samehada.

He was pushed back at once, falling to the ground by the cheer force of Fuguki's strength. Naruto threw her only Shuriken at him. The one Kakashi had handed her earlier.

Fuguki had to duck to avoid it, giving Kakashi just enough time to roll away and get to his feet. "Brats." Fuguki muttered in a deadpan voice. Clearly not impressed with their effort. Just then Ao managed to dispel the clone with the rasengan with a well-aimed kunai, kicking her other clone and dispelling it at the same time.

Naruto gritted her teeth. They couldn't deal with both at the same time, and Kakashi was the only one with tools to fight against Fuguki. He sapped her chakra when she got too close, and she prayed Kakashi could stand on his own until she'd taken down Ao.

Ao went through hand signs just as Naruto did.

"Futon: Air bullets."

"Suiton: Water Shield,"

Naruto's air bullets clashed against the shield and Naruto barely had time to throw up a wind wall as the bullets repelled back at them.
Keeping the wall in control in an attempt to stop the cave from falling in she started moving it towards Ao, forcing him backwards as the attack left no room to get through. Still, the whole corridor shook despite Naruto’s efforts.

Naruto couldn’t check, but she was still able to hear Kakashi move behind her. Something smashed against her wind wall, and it was dispelled by the energy. Her hands shot up to shield her face as stones came loose from the ceiling. Naruto jumped out of the way of a falling stone which would have knocked her unconscious if it hit its target.

"Don't bury us in here Ao!" Shouted Fuguki angrily.

Naruto was already running through the smoke though, but Ao was ready when she emerged. He slashed at her with his kunai, but Naruto got underneath his arm and stopped his wrist with her hand, sliding underneath his feet and getting on his other side. Naruto was vastly faster than Ao, at least if his reflexes were anything to go by.

The young man had barely turned around before Naruto had stolen the kunai stored in his holster, and as his kunai came down a second time she had a weapon to defend herself with.

"My, my..." Said a new voice and Naruto stiffened. None of them had heard him approach, and yet she knew exactly who it was even without having to turn around. "You always get yourself in trouble, Naruto."

He came closer, and Ao jumped backwards as Kakashi slid past him. Getting to Naruto while the Kiri ninja kept their eyes on the new arrival.

"Orochimaru-sama." Kakashi breathed in relief, and even Naruto felt some of the tension leave her shoulders.

Orochimaru stepped up next to Naruto, sparing her a short glance before turning towards the two ninja in front of them. "Why are you targeting children? I'm sorry, but you kidnapped the wrong Konoha Chūnin this time. Naruto is my student."

Fuguki looked a lot more serious now, and Ao had gone pale.

"Will you be fine here?" Asked Naruto and looked up at her sensei. "I have something I need to do. Kakashi, you stay here too, Fuguki is the main threat to me, but the rest I think can deal with. I just need to get through them."

"You're sitting out a battle, Naruto? What sort of trouble are you about to make?" Asked Orochimaru curiously, looking inquiringly from Naruto to the Kiri ninja who had gone from predators to prey in just a few seconds.

"I need to. Trust me Orochimaru." Naruto answered firmly. She couldn't explain what she was about to do right in front of the Kiri ninja, and she was sure Orochimaru would be strongly against her plan anyway. Orochimaru arched an eyebrow, a small smile playing on his lips.

"It's your funeral. I'm not coming to save you a second time." He answered with a shrug, his attention fully turning on his opponents now. Naruto turned and ran as Fuguki attacked. She heard the clang of Orochimaru's sword hit Samehada, and she prayed Kakashi would be fine against Ao.

Shisui and Genma climbed out of the hole awkwardly while carrying Kushina. The clones coming out last from where they'd dug their way into the Kiri base.
"I'll go and create a diversion." Pakkun suggested and looked worriedly around. Knowing as well as anyone that he was poor help in a battle. "I'll reverse summon if I get in too much trouble, but hopefully you'll get far enough away by then."

"Thank you, Pakkun." Genma replied genuinely. The Pug raised a paw in goodbye, before setting out at a surprisingly fast speed. In silence they watched as the young ninken bolted away.

Shisui and Genma had a clone on all four sides while walking as quickly as they could manage while carrying Kushina between them.

"This is bad… This is so bad..." Genma was whispering under his breath. Noticing the activity not far away.

Shisui didn't look like he'd ever open his mouth again. His eyes were hard, and his jaw was set in a frown. Genma was keeping a look out for danger, but so far they were good.

Just as they reached the cover of forest the ground started shaking. They all looked back towards the base they'd just exited.

"What did she do?" Whispered Shisui harshly.

"Released the Kyūbi?" Genma suggested humorlessly.

The rumbling stopped as abruptly as it had started. It hadn't been a large attack then. Hurriedly they picked up their pace, heading for the cover of the few trees in the area to transport Kushina up the hill where they knew Raidō was stationed. Not five minutes later the shaking started again, but now it grew more and more intense.

Naruto stumbled into the wide cave, her eyes zeroing in on the jar in front of her. She could feel him from here. Kurama could too.

"Are you really going to do this?" Asked Kurama inside Naruto's mind.

"Yes. I said I wouldn't allow you to be controlled, didn't I? It might not be you specifically, but at least the past you." Naruto replied angrily.

"Hmmm..."

Her clones were fighting on each side, keeping the path ahead clear. Naruto ran forward, attaching herself to the jar with chakra and climbed it with four steps, landing on the shaking lid. The Kyūbi inside was fighting to get loose.

A large kanji for sealing was inscribed on the lid. There was cracks in it, and the killer intent of the Kyūbi was very noticeable this close.

"What are you doing!"

"Stop her!"

Naruto ignored them. Sitting down cross legged she concentrated, trying to figure out how to go about this. The Kyūbi was immensely strong, and Naruto was pretty sure if she could just weaken the jar the fox inside would gladly do the rest.

She had a good idea how she'd go about this too.
Five chains shot out of Naruto, attaching themselves to the jar, and finally she could read the chakra. There were multiple layers of chakra keeping the fox locked up. One chakra flow was going clockwise in a spiraling pattern, the next one was going vertically, and the last one was mirroring the first. She needed to counter each chakra flow to deactivate the jar. The problem was the chakra origins. She had to counter them individually.

Luckily one was Katon based, and Naruto could use Suiton to counter that. The other wasn't a problem either since it was Raiton and she had plenty control over her Futon. The problem was the Yang flow going vertically. She had to deactivate that with Yin - an element she had very little experience with and not a lot of talent. Maybe if she could unlock the first two the jar would become so unstable the Kyūbi would do the rest.

Biting her lip she pushed chakra through her chains, feeling how the jar mechanism started vibrating wildly.

The crack in the jar widened.

Naruto pushed more.

Another crack going parallel with the first appeared.

"Get away!" Shouted Isobu suddenly, "It'll crack any moment!"

Naruto threw herself off the jar just as light illuminated the room.

Genma saw Anko peek up from her hiding place on the other side of the field, and he had to release Kushina's feet to put his hands up in the air. Signing so clearly Anko had to spot it if she was looking in his direction. Telling her to retreat.

Suddenly the constant rumbling stopped again. This time it was worse though.

The two boys didn't dare move for many heartbeats and Naruto's clones all watched the base with frowns.

It was like the calm before the storm.

Then the sound of cracking stone rang through the air. A horrible chakra rushed through the air from the base, making goosebumps erupt all over Shisui's skin. On the outside very little changed, but Shisui knew that inside the cave was collapsing and crushing the inhabitants.

His breath caught in his throat, before movement dragged his attention away from the base.

They had lingered too long. They were discovered.

Kakashi coughed heavily. The cave had given in from whatever was happening. He could hear Orochimaru still battling on the other side of the fallen boulders, but Ao was now definitely dead.

That eye patch had to be very recent for him to still have a blind spot.

For a moment Kakashi took a break to contemplate their situation. While Orochimaru was stuck between a rock and hard place, Kakashi was simply stuck.

He had very little room to maneuver in, and he'd rather not wait for the rest of the cave to give in too.
It was lucky none of the boulders had hit him, but Kakashi had managed to move out of the way unlike the last time a cave had imploded on him and Obito had ended up sacrificing himself.

Dusting himself off Kakashi leaned against the wall, noticing that the fallen rocks had created a small crack over him. A slither of light streamed through, which meant he was not far underground at all.

His mind drifted to Naruto, wondering what she'd done to make the whole base shake and come to pieces. Who else could it have been?

A lump gathered in his throat before he forced it down. What could he do though? Kakashi was locked in. He couldn't move backwards or forwards, only up.

And he knew exactly the technique to get out of here.

Shisui was dragging Kushina along the ground. Genma had to let go when they were attacked, and left Shisui to his own devise to transport Kushina to safety.

He was so much smaller than her though, and Shisui cursed their situation while Genma blocked a kunai that had been heading for his skull. It clang and spun wildly through the air before landing feet away from them.

It was madness.

He'd seen this before. Experienced this sort of pressure during the war and now he was right back in that nightmare. His thoughts were drifting between Naruto and Anko. His team was spread out in all directions, and he had little hope one of them was still alive. But she was Naruto. She was a survivor.

He believed in her.

Gritting his teeth he heaved Kushina further up the tree covered hill. Glad the mossy surface gave some comfort to Kushina while he dragged her like a sack of potatoes along the ground. He had no hope of carrying her. She was much taller than him, and he needed his hands accessible in case an attack got through Genma and the remaining clone's defense.

He heard shouts up ahead, and Gai came swooping down the hill. "Konoha senpuuuu!" He shouted with fire alight in his eyes. His kick hit dead center of a Kiri ninja's head, breaking his neck by the impact and falling dead in a heap.

By kami Gai was lethal…

"I'm here to help! But where is my eternal rival and Naruto-chan?"

"Get Raidō! We need Raidō!" Shisui shouted while he ducked out of the way of a fire ninjutsu, ignoring his question.

Gai answered with exuberant energy as he danced between Kiri ANBU. "Raidō is protecting Rin!"

"Why aren't you doing that?" Snapped Genma furiously.

"You have more problems! He was dealing fine."

That was not what Genma wanted to hear however. "Switch places then, we need him right now."

"Where's Iruka if he's not with Rin and Raidō?" Asked Shisui between pants of air, again grabbing onto Kushina to continue the accent.
"Iruka is right he-" Gai stopped abruptly, staring around in confusion. "Where did he go?"

"Perfect..." Hissed Shisui, and his look alone was enough to make Gai turn tail and disappear the way he came from.

Naruto walked slowly through the cave tunnel.

One foot was placed in front of the other, and she repeated the motion until light finally appeared ahead of her.

In her wake she'd left a mass graveyard. All the Kiri ninja inside the main chamber had been buried after she'd unsealed Kurama.

It felt good. It felt horrible. She was relieved - They couldn't follow her anymore.

What troubled her the most was Kakashi and Orochimaru. They'd distracted the swordsman - the one person who could seriously have stopped her - and her action might have buried them alive.

They'd been far away from the main implosion, but the whole base had been affected by Kurama's unsealing.

But Orochimaru was a slippery snake, and for the first time that was a silver lining. If he'd come to save Naruto he would have saved Kakashi too if needed, right?

Her mind drifted back to what had happened. The bright light. The intense chakra that had rushed through the room as Naruto fell backwards onto the floor by the bijū jar.

Only thanks to the two bijū inside her did Naruto have the healing powers to survive such a blast of energy.

But things had gone very differently than she'd expected after that.

She'd only seen Kurama in all his form for a split second as boulders and rocks collided around her. And then something utterly unforeseen had occurred.

The Kurama of this time line had been sucked into her seal.

The bewildering disaster had proved that maybe being unconscious the first time had spared her a lot of pain when Isobu had been sealed, even though she'd been semi-conscious inside her mindscape.

The pain was excruciating but luckily it didn't last nearly as long as it had with Isobu. Naruto suspected it was the Kyūbi’s chakra being injected into her that made up the difference. After having his chakra run through her body since before her birth had probably made her chakra much more adaptable to his chakra over anyone else's.

Naruto had been desperate to talk to Kurama, and the second she could muster up the concentration she was inside her mindscape.

"What happened!" Naruto screamed at the fox, before her jaw hit the floor at the sight in front of her.

Two foxes were glaring at one another inside her cage. One was much larger than the other, except they looked like they were... dissolving...

Her eyes met Isobu.
"The two parallel Kuramas are morphing, Naruto." He explained without having to hear the question written on Naruto's face.

"Mo- morphing?" Naruto repeated in bafflement. "What! Why!? This doesn't make sense at all! If this... why? What! How?"

She wasn't sure how or what to ask. The only thing she knew was that she was clueless to what was happening and especially why it was happening now.

Naruto had been in this alternate time line for years, and the two Kurama had co-existed alongside each other just fine.

The smallest of the two - who Naruto believed was the Kyūbi who'd always been with her, his fur was just a tone lighter - turned to look at her, but he appeared less furious than Naruto had expected. He was studying her peculiarly.

Though his stare didn't take away the grotesque sight.

Parts of the large Kurama were fighting against the morphing. One paw was banging against the bars of the prison while the rest was being sucked together with the smaller fox. It almost looked like the demon was liquefied in places where they were becoming attached and blended.

After just minutes of shameless staring, the fox had six legs – four large ones and two sticking out oddly from its hips – and two heads. The only thing that didn't change was the number of tails. If Naruto had to guess she believed the tails had been the first things to morph together, and she had come into the mindscape while the back of its body was still growing together.

Finally it was over, and the fox fell into a heap as small shudders ran over his body.

Silence rang.

"Kurama?" Asked Naruto weakly.

"Hm?" Asked the fox in his deep, carrying voice.

Naruto walked slowly towards the cage. "Are you... okay?"

The fox eyes opened. The vertical slits in his red eyes zooming in her a moment later, and with the grace of the most gracious dancer he rose to his feet. "Just fine, brat."

"Then... What the hell happened, dattebayo!" Naruto screamed in rage.

"Can't you figure it out? There can't be two of the same being in one place, Naruto."

"But you've been in the same place as past Kurama for years! And nothing like this has happened before!" Naruto continued shouting. "Did you know about this? I was trying to set you free! I was trying to stop people from manipulating you! I was trying to prove that I could do something right! Why the hell didn't you say anything!?"

Naruto would have continued ranting if Kurama didn't start to laugh. And since the fox was who he was it was not a pleasant sound. The booming sound echoed through the room, making the whole of Naruto vibrate from the sound hitting the walls.

"I know. I wanted to see if you were serious. And I always planned to connect with my past self when I went back in time, and hadn't you interfered in my time travel I would have ended up a lot
further back than we did." Kurama explained.

Naruto just looked confused.

"So far Naruto," started the fox to say very slowly, making sure Naruto understood what he was saying. "I have been sealed inside you. In a way this mindscape is separated from space itself. It's your own personal pocket dimension your mind can travel to and create a clone inside. That's why you have a body in here. It's not your real body, because that one is still lying like a beat up child in the ruins of the Kiri base. Here you're a mental clone inside the seal dimension."

Naruto's brow furrowed, but slowly she nodded in agreement. That made sense. Sort of.

"Which also means; that I have never set a foot in the world in this dimension. The same situation applied for the other Kyūbi while he was sealed inside Kushina. He was not part of the world as long as Kushina banished his chakra inside the seal keeping me – him – locked up."

Naruto nodded again, hoping he was getting somewhere with this.

"But when you released the other me from the bijū jar you used part of my chakra to do so, and in that moment both of us was part of the same space and time. Something that's not possible. Then you continued to free him with that connection. He was forced to merge with me."

Naruto still didn't completely understand, though some things were starting to make sense.

She had never – not once – used Kurama's chakra here in the past. Not before today when she pushed Kurama's chakra into Kushina to prolong her life. Not like the chakra she had stolen from Kurama to free his alternate self.

He had healed her indirectly, and been very close to get out during the fight in Land of Frost, but Naruto had still been able to repress him that time. This time she'd used his chakra purposely and more importantly; successfully.

"But why… why did the alternate you end up here? Inside me?" Asked Naruto.

The fox looked sour now. His tails deflating behind him as a sigh escaped. Naruto felt the absurd urge to grin at the fox's disappointment.

"Your seal is a binding contract with the shinigami to seal the Kyūbi, brat." He started with obvious annoyance. "Though it hasn't happened in this dimension your father did once sign away his soul for this binding between me and the seal. The only way to stop the contract would have been for you to dissolve your seal. Which you have not done."

Isobu shook his head mournfully, clearly sympathizing with Kurama more than Naruto who was still fighting her own bewilderment. She was being bombarded with a sea of new information.

"Like with all creatures there can only be one shinigami. And the shinigami is always present in all time and space. The deal therefore spans across whatever dimension you find yourself in, Naruto. And since one of us had to morph into the other, the alternate Kyūbi had to merge with me instead of the other way around - which was my original plan."

"What was your original plan?" Asked Naruto.

"I already told you, brat! I was going back in time – much further back than where we ended up – to prevent myself from getting captured in the first place. Your chakra completely messed up the distance." Kurama growled.
"And since you don't exist in this world you didn't morph with anything upon your arrival either, as I would have if I'd succeeded. It would have created an alternative me with the knowledge of the future. I have no idea what would have happened to you if we'd ended up a few years later than we did, and you had already been born. You probably would have died. We bijū are pure chakra and our shapes can change and transform, but you human are stuck to your biology. It would probably have killed you – and in extent me."

Naruto stared wide eyed from Kurama to Isobu, trying to digest that.

Morph? She would have morphed with her baby self if she'd ended up in a time where she was already born?

Naruto had no way of knowing if what Kurama explained was true, but yet she believed him to be honest. Instinctively she was certain the fox had finally spilled the truth he'd kept away from her for so long.

Why she was in the past. What had happened and most of all why it had happened.

It was a desperate jail break which had backfired on both prisoner and jailer. Naruto had already suspected something of the sort, but to find out the details in this situation was still unsettling.

After that Naruto hadn't stayed long in her mindscape. She had more pressing matters than figuring out where she stood with Kurama now.

It was ironic really. Naruto had started out with half a bijū, and in the span of twenty four hours she'd ended up with one and a half more.

And the physical affects it had on her was excruciating.

Naruto could feel her wounds heal at a rapid pace. Her broken bones from getting hit by falling stones were mending themselves.

No one really understood how painful rapid healing was. Months of regeneration sped up so quickly her body went into overdrive.

And it wasn't the only thing that was in overdrive either.

Everything hurt.

She had so much chakra inside her it felt like chaos. She'd been injected with one and a half bijū into her chakra system so quickly her body could hardly handle the excess of chakra. The pain came from her body desperately trying to keep up with the changes. Burning… Every inch of her was burning.

It was like she was breaking and healing repeatedly. Her chakra coils melting before the bijū inside her mended them again.

Over and over and over.

Her mind drifted back to the present when Naruto finally reached the end of the cave and moonlight touched her face.

For a moment all she could do was breathe in the fresh air. Her eyes closing as she soaked in the chill wind cooling her overheated skin. Compared to the stuffy, moist underground it felt like a piece of heaven.
Then she opened her eyes and everything came back to focus. Naruto wasn't free. She was barely alive, and the ones she loved the most were fighting for their lives.

Someone was running towards her. Her blurry vision made it unclear who.

Iruka finally reached her, his arms crushing Naruto to him as he hugged her tightly. "You're alive. You're alive, thank Kami." He whispered and released her again.

Naruto smile appeared slowly. She had no more moisture to waste on tears, but if she had she would have started crying again.

"I'm alive. Thanks for rescuing me." Naruto murmured.

"Come on. The others are fighting. Can you..." Iruka took in her appearance for real this time. "You're... injured." He pointed out quietly.

Naruto nodded. "But I can fight. I won't give up yet."

"We need you." Iruka told her honestly.

"I'm here."

Anko was having the easiest post imaginable.

The fact that she'd been paired with Ensui should have given her a clue. He was the only one who'd been dangerously injured before they'd set out, so of course Kakashi would place Ensui somewhere quite safe.

Their hiding place was close to the ocean, between two large boulders where you got a small view if you looked closely between a crack in the stone. The view showed where base three was located, and where base one exited from the cave.

Anko had seen Raidō and Ensui return with Kushina and Naruto. Though it quickly became apparent that four of them were just clones. Meaning that Kakashi and Naruto were not there at all, and Anko had no idea why.

Then the earthquakes had happened, and the terrifying chakra which had exited from the cave, Anko had seriously considered abandoning post to gain some information and help out.

Yet no one had given them the signal to come help, though Shisui obviously needed it. Genma was left to his own device by now, Shisui dragging Kushina after him.

Soon after Iruka had broken away from base three. Completely disregarding any orders as he crossed the ground between his post to the Kiri base in a straight line. Anko’s jaw had dropped open in bafflement at the boy's action. Wondering what on earth he'd seen to disregard all sense of safety to get across a line mine of traps and enemies.

Gai was running back and forth between the two groups. Not sure where he was the most help. Raidō had less enemies, but Rin was not much help in combat. While Genma and Shisui was both good fighters, but they also had to protect a very unconscious Kushina.

And Naruto and Kakashi was still missing.

She fumed while she watched the base. Hating having to sit and watch because some stupid order hadn't been given yet. They obviously didn't have time to call for help. Anko and Ensui should be
helping already.

It was then she noticed the figure on top of the base. Kakashi was crawling out from between rocks, looking like he'd taken a dust bath with how his hair had changed from silver to brown. And he was alone.

Where the hell was Naruto?

What was happening down there?

"That's it. We're going now!" Exclaimed Anko, getting to her feet forcibly. Ensui looked up, and then dragged her down again as a Shuriken flew past her head.

"Okay… I guess we don't have choice now anyway." Muttered Ensui in answer.

Shisui had rarely been as relieved as when he finally made it to the top of the hill. Not only did it give him a good view of the battles going on around the base below, but it also made him able to see twenty orange dots and a beige one running crazy.

Naruto and Iruka.

Kakashi was all on his own, using speed to run in zigzag towards Shisui from a completely different direction than Naruto and Iruka was.

How they'd gotten split up was unknown, but Shisui was just happy to see them all alive.

Next he found Anko and Ensui.

They stood back to back battling at the foot of the hill, trying to fight their way up to them too. And lastly was Raidō, sprinting up the hill while dodging three ninjas throwing Shuriken at him.

Gai and Rin were even further away from the Kiri base than he was. Up by the start of the thick forest where they had put up traps. Shisui could hear Gai shout every other second as he held off whoever got too close.

They needed to gather. The group was stronger together than scattered about the battlefield like this. Especially if Genma, Raidō and him had to leave them.

Shisui laid Kushina carefully down. Stepping over her and readied himself to join the battle. If they were to perform the Hairishin they needed time. Time to prepare themselves.

Unlike Minato this was a highly difficult technique for them that needed their undivided attention. Being distracted by attacks couldn't be happening if the technique was to work.

Within a moment he was behind one of Raidō's pursuers, cutting into his leg with a kunai. Maybe Shisui couldn't do the Hairishin alone - but he still had the Shunshin.

While the first enemy crumbled down on one knee from his injury, Shisui turned the technique into the Zanzō Bunshin, enjoying the confusion of their attackers when they realized they couldn't figure out which of him was real.

But the longer Shisui battled, the more he grew frustrated. By now his blood was boiling as he attacked. They needed to get out of here soon.

Movements from the base caught his eye just as his ninja wire caught around a kiri ninjas throat, and
he pulled hard. Cutting his throat in one sweeping motion.

"Orochimaru-sama!" Cried Raidō while pointing towards the base, which caught the attention of quite a few of their attackers too.

Shisui had noticed him too. He had no idea when Orochimaru had arrived - and no understanding of how he'd gotten inside the cave - but the relief of seeing him almost made him stop breathing.

Orochimau was here. They were saved.

But not far away Naruto and Iruka were in trouble. They were trying to break through the group pressing them back towards the base, but it was clear they were struggling.

Genma had caught the problem too, and came up next to Shisui, his hand shooting forward. Shisui could not see where the senbon was aimed, but a second later an explosion went off right behind the Kiri ANBU targeting Naruto and Iruka.

It created an opening. As it went off their comrades took the opportunity to break through while their enemies dodged away to save themselves from the explosion.

Four clones were flanking Iruka, and they were running as never before to get to them.

Kakashi was just a little down the hill now, rolling sideways as a man with a katana was slashing wildly in an attempt to hit him. But no matter what he tried Kakashi was just one step ahead, rolling and ducking until the enemy was probably dizzy with having to spin around so much to keep him in line of sight.

Anko and Ensui had been joined by Orochimaru, and had much better success with his help.

Even though the Kiri base had imploded it looked like most of the ninja had been outside. Shisui couldn't help but feel frustrated at that fact, and very suspicious too.

The Konoha base was filled to the brim with their ninja at all times during the war. You stayed inside the base so it wouldn't get detected. Here hundreds of ninjas had been stationed outside instead.

Again the puzzle didn't add up to Shisui. Were they expecting them all along? Was this a second ambush?

Shisui didn't have time to ponder his theories though. They needed to gain room to work. Kakashi was heading for them, probably to provide cover so they could do the Hiraishin. But until he reached them they would have to fight smart. Being careful not to use up their chakra and to stay unharmed if possible.

Kakashi was their leader for a reason though, and expertly made his way up the hill towards them while he dealt with any ANBU who came at him.

He had almost reached them when Kakashi's voice carried over the chaos. "Go! Go to Konoha now!"

His attention was diverted then, and Kakashi dodged a water jet technique by rolling sideways. The technique left behind a crater in the ground while Shisui threw a Shuriken at the ninja who'd attacked Kakashi. The ANBU blocked it, but not the senbon Genma shot at a second later.

Kakashi turned his back to them, his intent clear while he readied himself against the incoming Kiri ninjas. "I'll cover you while you prepare. Get out of here now."
Raidō, Genma and Shisui shared a quick glance and nodded. The three hurriedly stood in a circle around Kushina, their hands coming up to form a cage.

It was then things went from bad to worse in a matter of seconds.

It happened so fast.

Shisui wasn't sure what caused him to look up at that precise moment. One second he was focusing on his breathing, trying to calm down his pulse and to access his chakra, and next his attention was forced towards Naruto and Iruka.

A Naruto clone was going up in smoke. A kunai was twirling wildly though the air – having been knocked off course. Before it smashed into Iruka.

Shisui stopped breathing.

Iruka stumbled backwards, wide open for any attacks in his pain filled shock from being hit. The Naruto clone which had evaporated had been covering him, and the Kiri ninjas knew it.

The same type of water jet technique which Kakashi had dodged earlier was cast again, but now it was hurtling at Iruka from one of his attackers. And the boy was barely standing with the kunai sticking out of his neck. With lethal precision the roaring liquid spear hit Iruka square in the chest.

In shock the real Naruto turned towards Iruka as the water went from clear and rushing white to blood red as it drilled into Iruka. Shisui heard the shout of pain all the way up the hill.

"Iruka!"

The scream came from Ensui. Shisui could see him getting pushed behind Anko who covered him while he was distracted.

When the water was gone Iruka was on the ground. Lying in a blood filled puddle. His shirt had been ripped away and a large part of his chest had been smashed away by the Water technique. His ribs were visible to the naked eye.

Shisui screamed, but Kakashi hurriedly blocked his view of the scene.

An incoming opponent had almost cut off his arm while he was distracted by Naruto and Iruka's battle.

"Go Shisui! All of you return to Konoha now!" Kakashi commanded in a hateful shout. Pointedly looking between Shisui, Genma and Raidō.

Shisui felt a hand drag him back by the shoulder and found Genma's grim expression look back at him. "We need to go. The faster we leave the faster we can get Minato-sensei here."

Shisui nodded in understanding, turning back to the circle where Raidō was taking deep breaths and Genma was already concentrating.

But Shisui was distracted, how could he not be? And yet he needed to push away everything around him. Trust completely in Kakashi's ability to keep them safe. Trust that his friends would stay alive until they could come back.

His eyes opened at the sound of Kakashi’s breath being caught in his throat.

All three watched in horror as Kakashi twitched and crumbled in on himself. Struck down by a kunai
to the stomach.

Shisui’s eyes trailed further - down to the field below to the scream of pure agony from Naruto.

She was sitting bent over Iruka, not even bothering to look at the Kiri ninjas circling in on her. Her tattered orange jumpsuit turning red.

"No..." Whispered Genma in realization.

Shisui took a step out of the circle, his priorities changing when he realized Naruto would not manage this on her own now. But he halted as a chakra shock wave flew over the field.

Shisui could feel it to his very bone. Naruto was still clutching Iruka, but she was illuminating the night with chakra - except it felt nothing at all like Naruto's chakra. It was pulsing, creating a shock wave in the air that made everyone take a step back.

This was what they'd done to her, wasn't it? This was what those Kiri bastard had done. And it terrified him to the point where he found himself running towards Naruto before he knew what he was doing.

But something grabbed his ankle, and Shisui pummelled face down into the grass, tasting the grimy substance. Spitting, he lividly whipped his head around to find the person guilty of stopping him.

Kakashi was holding onto his ankle.

"Her seal… It's weakening." Kakashi hissed. He kept a firm grip on his ankle while he crawled back on his feet, blood seeping down from a wound next to his navel. "They sealed a bijū inside her, Shisui! Making her a jinchūriki. But now… No jinchūriki survives if the demon escapes."

Shisui didn't want to hear it. It couldn't be true.

Kakashi's open eye narrowed in frustration. "There's nothing you can do, Shisui! You'll just get killed if you go any closer. We don't know who's in control right now. Naruto or the Three Tails."

Shisui tried to break free of Kakashi's iron hard grip, but he couldn't shake the boy off. He didn't even care about the fight around him, or how Raidō and Genma were working to protect them instead of readying the Hiraishin.

But at the sound of a painful scream Shisui finally forced himself to look forward.

Rin was immobilized by shock. She couldn't move or even breathe as something monstrous happened to Naruto. She didn't even know what it was!

They had been distracted by Naruto's scream. It had reached all over the area.

Naruto's skin was peeling off. It looked for a moment as if she was being burned from the inside out.

Bluish chakra emerged from her, creating an unstable lash of energy to shoot out from her and even making Gin stumble backwards from so far away.

Gai was covering her now, but it was as if his energy had been drained out of him as they watched whatever was going on with Naruto.

Naruto changed in shape as the chakra grew like a cloak around her. Wrapping itself around every inch of her while tails emerged.
Rin could count two tails swishing violently behind Naruto, and the sound of Naruto's grunts and screams indicated that she was in a lot of pain.

It was horrible and utterly grotesque. Naruto was still recognizable, but the bluish chakra seemed like a separate entity controlling the blonde. What had Kiri done to her?

"What… is that?" Gai whispered in horror.

It felt like she was falling into an abyss. Naruto's thoughts muddled with only one underlying common feature. Iruka.

It was such a stupid mishap. A redirected kunai. A water spear technique. So little could cause such horrible and irreversible damage.

Iruka. Iruka. Iruka. IRUKA!

Sweet, kind, caring Iruka who was too nice to be on this mission at all. He shouldn't have been here. Naruto should have done better. She wasn't strong enough to do anything.

Her mind was in chaos, the only constant emotion was sinking misery and the tempting relief to escape the truth as Isobu wrapped himself around her. Burning through her as he tried to break free. But Naruto couldn't find it in her to care. Break free if you can. Naruto thought hysterically.

But you can't! Haven't you noticed yet? The cursed tag is placed on me – and in extent you. You can no more break free than I can set you free. We're cursed together all three of us.

And Iruka was dead.

What the hell mattered anymore? Why was everyone still wasting their time fighting? Didn't they know the worst had already happened? The world was crumbling and nothing at all mattered except for this. Of all the deaths, of all the hardships and plans she'd made - what did any of it matter now? What was so great about this world to make it worth helping?

Through a red mist clouding her vision Naruto stared at the one who'd done this.

He would die.

She'd rip him to pieces.

Her hand shot out, Isobu's chakra which was wrapped around her skin, elongating and reaching all the way across to him in a heartbeat. The rest of her was wrapped around Iruka, holding the boy against her chest and refusing to let go.

The claw wrapped around the Kiri ninja's masked face. The shout of pain sent reckless shivers of delight down her spine. Naruto then smashed his face as if it was made of soggy mud.

Appalled the Kiri ninjas rallied, all of them running in unison towards her, and Naruto felt herself get dragged further into herself as Isobu took care of the rest.

A technique she'd never seen or used before escaping from her mouth, and mist covered the whole area.

Kakashi was back on his feet as the veiled mist sailed over him, confused he stared at it while feeling an unsettling heaviness in his chest weigh him down. The world contorted into strange shapes
around him, and Kakashi was suddenly no longer standing outside the Kiri base.

He was inside his old house.

Confused and disoriented Kakashi stared at his small hands. They looked childlike and young. But of course he was young. He was six years old.

The moonlight filtered through the crack of the door ahead of him - his destination. He knew exactly how many steps it took to cross the hallway, and his feet moved before he was consciously aware of it. The creaking sound of his dragging feet carried through the house.

When he finally reached the door he slowly reached out, and a strange sense of foreboding lurked in the back of his mind. Silly... He was perfectly safe inside his own home. Gently pushing the door open Kakashi stepped into the lounge.

His eyes were downcast, unreasonably afraid to look up. Something dark was staining the hardwood, and Kakashi's gaze followed the trail of liquid over the floor. The stain grew wider until it ended on the figure lying underneath the window. A dim shine illuminating his silver hair stained with red.

His father's face was turned down into the floor, his body curled in on himself. It was so silent, not a breath in the air, not a rustle from moving fabric. Everything was still and quiet.

Kakashi wasn't even sure he was breathing anymore.

Furiously he shook his head. A strange sense of deja vu going through him. He had been here before hadn't he? But his father was... he would know if his father had really...

Kakashi gritted his teeth. What was this? He wanted to run away and never look back. He hated the feeling of inadequacy. Not being enough to stop his father from going through with this. For being so small and weak.

So Kakashi ran. His feet didn't make a sound as he rushed past his father's corpse and through a door which had never been in their living room before, but which promised freedom from this place. The door opened before he touched it, and as he stepped through it was like someone had turned the sound of the world on again.

Thunderous crashes were beating against his ears. He was half blind. His eye hurting and the dust clouded air made it even more difficult to see. But he wasn't running alone anymore though he couldn't see them.

A sharp pain flashed through his head, and Kakashi didn't know he'd fallen before he felt his mouth fill with gravel. He was going to get up again - to run. But hands clamped around his shoulders, half lifting, half pushing him away like a sack of rice.

The sound and cracks was too much and he had to cover his ears to stop them from splitting. Feeling safer here where there was less sand to inhale through the air.

The world slowly calmed. The crashing and rumbling coming to an end and Kakashi slowly opened his non-bandaged eye.


This... These were his failures. What was this? The feeling of deja vu returned, and Kakashi gripped
his head. Tugging at his hair in sorrow, shame and terror.

And then he understood. None of this was real at all. It was a genjutsu.

Kakashi didn't want to be here a second longer. He was needed. It did no good for him to stay here in his personal hell.

"Kai!"

Kakashi gasped when the world snapped back into place. The abstract sense of space leaving him as he released himself from the genjutsu.

He was back again, and he was unsure how much time had passed since he'd gotten caught in the mist.

The mist.

Kakashi's head snapped towards Naruto.

She was exactly where he'd last seen her. Still hovering over Iruka while the terrifying bijū chakra attacked from her immobile position.

The technique used was like nothing Kakashi had seen before. A strange substance shot at lightning speed towards the ninja daring to come close, and on impact it turned hard and shell-like while paralyzing the victim.

No one managed to get close to them. For which Kakashi was grateful.

He hurriedly checked out the others, the fog finally gone from his mind and the urgency of the situation re-hitting.

Shisui was exactly where he'd been, though he was a tad paler than before. His attention was towards Genma and Raidō who both wore blank expressions. Kakashi ran over at once, wincing when he was reminded of the kunai wound to his stomach. The genjutsu had made him forget himself. Trapped him deep inside his subconscious and he was working on re-jogging his memory to get back up to scratch.

Shisui had realized too, and followed him a second later.

"Kai." Kakashi whispered simultaneously with Shisui, both pushing chakra into Genma and Raidō respectively. Peeking up towards the forest he saw Rin do the same to Gai, and he was sure Orochimaru could do the same for Anko if she got trapped. Ensui could probably dispel it on his own.

Genma shuddered and inhaled sharply as he was released from the genjutsu, while Raidō fell to his knees.

"That was a malicious genjutsu. It makes you relive your worst memories." Muttered Shisui and looked back towards Naruto. His brow furrowing deeply at the sight of the bijū influenced girl preventing anyone from coming too close.

"Naruto is only attacking Kiri in defense." Kakashi murmured, a hopeful tone shining through his words.

"Is that still Naruto?" Asked Shisui weakly.
It hadn't been easy. Nothing was more tempting to Naruto than to just float away and get lost in her own sub consciousness, but though Isobu had partly taken control of her she could still feel Iruka in her hands. Could sense his skin turning stiff and cool in her grasp.

That should have been more of a reason to want an escape, but finally she remembered her other friends.

They were waiting for her. They wouldn't leave without her as long as there was a chance. That thought alone was what brought her back in control.

She breathed sharply as she fought her own instincts. Going against a seal not meant to control a bijū. Not meant to do anything but demand and restrict, instead bend, shape and create like her father’s.

Naruto was back in the mindscape. Her lips curled over her teeth while she stared up at Isobu.

"Don't! My friends are there... Please don't harm them. I can't... no more. Please don't make me lose even more people." Naruto begged. She was kneeling in the bluish water, leaned forwards while she rested on her hands. Chakra was pressing through the pores of her skin, breaking and sealing while it tried to force itself free - but couldn't.

"You're just a human. Death should be a natural thing to you. Why fight an inevitable fate? Death will always catch up in the end." Asked Isobu curiously.

"I... I need to... I can't release either of you completely. Something is repressing me. I can feel it in my heart. You should have broken free, shouldn't you? I mean you should be completely free. But yet we're still attached... You realize that don't you?" Naruto wheezed out in pain.

Isobu grumbled in agreement, a flicker of frustration flashing in his open eye.

"It's the cursed tag seal." Kurama murmured. "It locks Isobu inside you for the time being."

"I know." Naruto stared between them. "I can't lose any more. None of my friends... and not you two either. I'll... I know what to do now. I should have seen it right away. Just please let me gain full control of my body again, Isobu."

The turtle thought about it for a moment before the bluish chakra swirling around her calmed down, and Naruto felt the pressure around her chest lessen. "What will you do?" Asked Kurama suspiciously.

But Naruto left the mindscape before he received an answer.

For a moment all Naruto could do was breathe.

She stared at her hands. Examining the chakra bubbling over her skin. It hurt so much. She could feel one of the two tails shrink and dissolve, the influence of Isobu lessened though not completely disappearing. She now only had one tail, but it would have to do. Naruto was short on time.

Glancing down in her lap was the sight of Iruka. She hadn't moved away from him while she'd been under Isobu's influence. Some part of her had refused to let him go even when Isobu had tried to gain control of her.

Faintly she registered she was covered in his blood. Especially her clothes. They were dyed crimson.
Grimacing Naruto slowly reached out and grasped the metal of Iruka's forehead protector, before carefully sliding it up off his head. Her hand brushed back his brown hair afterwards, her lip quivering at the cold feel of his skin when her fingers came in contact with it.

If she was going to do this Naruto would need this.

Once this forehead protector had been hers, and it had been more precious to her than anything else she'd ever owned.

On autopilot she tied Iruka's forehead protector around her head, a mute acceptance rising inside her stomach.

In the cell she'd spent hours crying for Kushina, and Naruto doubted she was physically capable of ever crying again. Her grief over Iruka's death was too heavy for tears. Now that her fury had subsided it left her numb instead.

As she tightened the knot Naruto knew there was only one thing she could do now.

Subconsciously Naruto had known what to do since her last conversation with Kushina, but like the frightened little girl she was Naruto had pushed it away. Hoping beyond hope there was a way to escape.

It was a delusion, and Naruto knew she needed to snap out of it now.

Looking up she saw her friends still battling. A large number of the Kiri ninja had broken out of Isobu's genjutsu mist, and with the exception of the ones she'd killed and the ones now stuck to various places with Isobu's coral attack, the rest was watching her suspiciously.

Probably considering the pros and cons of attacking Naruto again.

Adamant Naruto got to her feet, carefully sliding Iruka from her lap and onto the ground. The tail behind her swished annoyed. She was somewhere between transformations and Naruto could see her angry, red skin through the coat of chakra around her limbs.

It was like it had been during the battle against Sasuke.

Her clothes were ripped open and her head pounding with the headache of the millennium.

She was limping and had problems with her focus.

She hadn't eaten in days.

She was thirsty.

She was beaten and injured.

Naruto didn't think she'd ever felt as physically ill in her entire life.

And yet nothing hurt more than then the idea of Iruka leaving her. It was like she'd lost a part of herself. Lost her _home_ and the one factor that hadn't changed no matter which dimension she was in. That Iruka was always there, as her friend and kind older brother.

Naruto wasn't sure why the thought of home was so important in all this. Maybe it was from being kidnapped, and the need to get somewhere associated with safety was weighting on her heart.

At least it mustered up the strength to continue. She'd be home soon.
A brave opponent came at her, but Naruto had made a Rasengan before she was physically aware of it. Smashing it into the man with a brutality unlike herself, and not even noticing she'd made the technique without the use of her normal clone.

As the man fell dead her chakra went haywire and sent a row of people harshly into the ground. As parts of the wall of Kiri ninja fell Naruto spotted Anko at a distance.

Home.

The word popped back into her head.

Abruptly Naruto remembered what home entailed. Home meant arguing with Anko in their apartment about who was to do the dishes that evening. Pesterling Kakashi to eat dinner with them though they all knew he'd come despite his complaints. Joking with Shisui while they sparred on training ground three.

It was eating ramen with Iruka at Ichiraku.

Home. That was her home. And Naruto had to protect it at all cost.

Adjusting Iruka's forehead protector with both hands Naruto summoned her courage.

"Naruto!" Shisui shouted relieved when he spotted her. He had to refocus quickly on his opponent though, his tantō meeting the katana of his attacker while his Sharingan flashed. Casting a genjutsu on his enemy to gain an opening in his stance.

The ANBU stumbled, not catching himself on time before Shisui slashed him down. When the Kiri ninja fell Shisui hurried over to Naruto who had climbed up on a boulder.

Naruto placed Iruka's body carefully down on the boulder. It was up and away from the heat of the battle below. "You look… Are you okay?" Asked Shisui as he stepped up to her.

Of course he had noticed the pronounced animalistic features on her. The slight change to her eye color made the clear blue look muddy green, the paler skin and her chakra covered body. But despite the changes Shisui knew this was still Naruto. Somehow the look in her wrong-colored eyes was so purely Naruto he could never mistake it. She'd fought down the beast.

"Shisui," Naruto said between breaths, her focus now on a new enemy. "They did something to me, and now I can't go back to Konoha! You have to-"

The words were cut off because Naruto had to throw herself at Shisui and push him down to stop him getting pierced by flying Shuriken. The impact was enough to make him act again, and they were back on their feet a moment later, blocking the next round of Shuriken with their kunai.

"Have you lost your mind!? You're coming back to Konoha, Naruto! We'll fix this whole bijū thing. This isn't your fault." Shisui more or less shouted at her in anger. "We came all the way here and we're not leaving without you."

"Shisui-" But she was cut off as another round of attackers distracted her. No less than twelve ANBU flocked them, efficiently cutting off Naruto's reply.

Was it just Shisui's imagination or had they grown stronger? Had the Kiri ninja been holding back before?
Shisui distracted them, splitting up from Naruto he jumped down on the ground, and though he was pleased he found it suspicious that only one Kiri ninja stayed behind to deal with Naruto.

Her enemy was taken down easily. He hadn't even been trying. A Wind ninjutsu was enough to knock him out and for Naruto to focus on her task.

From below Naruto heard the sound of Kakashi's chidori, and her head snapped in his direction. His left hand was clutched around his right wrist, the electricity gave loud chirp sounds and lit up his surroundings while he readied himself. One eye closed and the red one glaring at his opponent.

He zigzagged andducked, quickening his speed to the limit as he found his target. And next moment his hand blasting through the man's chest.

Naruto was transfixed by the sight.

She knew that technique all too well. Naruto had once had Sasuke drill a hole through her with that technique. It had been extremely painful and a small reflex away from death.

"What are you doing?" Shouted Isobu from inside her mind.

Naruto was too focused to really pay attention though. Kakashi was skidding towards Raidō now, helping him while the sandy blonde boy struggled with his opponent.

"Answer, Naruto!" Demanded Kurama a moment later.

Raidō got a hit in while Kakashi distracted the Kiri ANBU. And both boys jumped in to help their friends. Naruto felt almost forgotten up on her boulder.

"I'm setting you free," She answered. "I can't go back to Konoha, because we all know what will happen the second I'm there. And I can't be controlled by Uchiha Madara. I just can't! I have to protect my friends."

It felt like she was outside her current situation. Naruto was simply an outsider watching as her friends fought for their lives. Outside heartache, pain and fear itself.

Orochimaru, Anko and Ensui had completely eliminated their attackers and were now running the great distance to rejoin them. Ensui looked furious and almost reckless in his movements and Naruto could relate.

He'd lost everyone on his team now. Kushina might still be alive but it wouldn't be for long.

Gai and Rin were struggling worse than before. The Kiri ninja had grown vengeful in the face of the destruction they had created. Genma and Raidō were protecting Kushina the best they could while Kakashi and Shisui were protecting them.

"Don't worry. I have a plan and I won't fail. You will not die." Naruto reassured the two very unsettled bijū inside her.

Naruto heard it again then. Chidori. She was running out of time.

The birds screeched into the night as Kakashi flew forward at blinding speed. Coming towards the Kiri ninja who was attacking Shisui.

With force Naruto stepped hard off the boulder, soaring free through the air before landing directly in Kakashi's path.
As her feet touched the ground Naruto hoped fervently that he would someday forgive her.

A split second later Kakashi's arm blasted through Naruto's heart in a shower of blood.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! The chapter was beta'd by AnjoRemix! And I got tons of help with this chapter from ReVeALxMeMoRieS! I can't thank you enough for all your help with this.

This was a horrible chapter to write. It was rewritten and edited many times, because I was indecisive to the extreme for obvious reasons. (Iruka)

But the fact that I'm afraid of flamers shouldn't stop me from writing what I had planned and want to. It's my story, and I take it in the direction I wish to. Though I'll admit to being very uncertain.

BEFORE YOU START ASKING, PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING:

Why I killed Iruka? For many reasons.

One: I wanted to draw a parallel between Naruto and Obito's state of mind. They are always described as similar, and here Naruto loses someone she loves as much as Obito loves Rin. Though its a platonic love. She's also been kidnapped (similar to Obito) and she's physically handicapped (also a lot like Obito).

Two: It activates Naruto's bijū transformation. Because Kushina is not dead yet, and Naruto is already used to not having Kushina in her life from her previous time, her current state isn't as difficult for Naruto to deal with emotionally.

Three: Where this leaves Ensui. He doesn't have a team any more. Hitomi and Iruka is dead. While Kushina is almost dead.

Four: It is a lot to do about Kurama and Isobu. These chapters were written with the intention of building a bridge between Naruto and the bijū. You will see why I mention these two in context with Iruka's death in the next chapter.

Five: One of them dying is more realistic. You have eight children, no one older than thirteen, in an area filled with Kiri ninja. Having all eight get out of this alive is simply ludicrous, since the Kiri ninja was all ANBU of chūnin and jōnin rank with more experience than many of them. Luck has a lot to do with surviving in a war. War is pointless and death is not reserved for those who deserves it. And though yes; Kiri was in canon chasing Kakashi and Rin back to Konoha they could still try and do it here too. They just didn't need to have all eight make it back to the village this time as long as
Naruto did.

Six: Naruto gets Iruka's forehead protector. Honestly, this is the one that tipped the scales in favour of his death.

And a random note at the end; The reason I describe Naruto's eyes as murky green; Isobu's eyes are yellow while Naruto's eyes are blue. Yellow and blue makes green – and since the transformation is halfway I did it this way, though I know perfectly well it doesn't happen in canon.

Thanks for reading and have a good day!
“People's lives don't end when they die. It ends when they lose their faith.” - Hanzo

Rin was screaming, but though he heard her anguished wail Shisui felt distant from it. Like he was deep under water and her voice was muted by the compressing depth. His ears were buzzing with rushing blood and his mouth felt dry while he fought to make sense of the world.

When had things gone so ferociously awry?

Kakashi's arm stood pierced through Naruto's chest. Red liquid covered his rigid hand where the Chidori was ebbing around his fingers.

Her luminous skin snapped back to normal. The bluish hue vanished along with the feel of foreign chakra. The whisker scars on her cheeks were no longer notably pronounced – instead turning back into the thin almost invisible lines he was used to. Her wild hair lost the glow from the foreign chakra. It fell matted and tangled. Her eyes - which had been murky green while influenced – turned back to their normal cerulean, and her previously claw like hands returned to simply look smaller than normal.

It was like someone had put out the fire - had turned off the switch.

And in its wake it left just Naruto.

"S-sorry..."

Naruto's fractured voice was barely audible over the crackling chidori, but everyone heard as she coughed up blood. Drops spattering onto Kakashi's shirt and neck.

A tear fell down Kakashi's gleaming red eye. He reached out, steadying Naruto with his free hand before he shakily tried to retract his arm from her chest. His eyes glued to her face in disbelieving shock.

He swayed dangerously as she was released with a slurping sound.

The hand on her shoulder loosened in his disorientation, and before he could secure Naruto again she fell backwards with a soft thud that to Shisui sounded like an earthquake.

Where her heart should have been a hollow hole mocked them in its irreversibility.

"Damn. He killed the host." Growled a voice behind Shisui, but he couldn't muster up the will to turn away from Naruto. Even the Kiri ANBU had stopped in their track when the chidori had hit.

Kakashi reached helplessly towards Naruto, stumbling at the action and falling to his knee as if all his strength had left him.

Naruto was untouchable to them all now.
Shisui clutched at his tantō so hard his skin turned white and felt almost inhuman in his wish to make them all pay. Even Kakashi. Even himself.

They'd failed completely. He was never strong enough to make a damn difference. He couldn't save Ebisu, had not noticed when Hitomi had passed away, he hadn't been there to protect Iruka, and now he'd simply watched while Naruto died.

What good had he ever done? Being kidnapped by Kiri hadn't been enough to kill Naruto, but being rescued had.

With a whispered word Shisui didn't hear Kakashi's eye rolled back into his skull and he fell forwards. Unconscious.

"Take the body, we can't-"

But the words were cut off.

A sound of metal hitting flesh restarted the world again and Shisui whirled around. A Kiri ninja lay dead with a kunai to his throat, and Orochimaru stood with his hand outstretched in the middle of the hill.

For once there was a crack in his façade – a grim anger was tangible in the air around his sensei.

Anko was next to him. Both hands in her hair while her vision looked blurry, and an ashen faced Ensui was gripping her shoulder hard.

And then the fighting started up again. An unspoken command hung in the air as Orochimaru flew forward, faster than Shisui cared to comprehend – no one was to touch Naruto and Kakashi.

Anko came up to him and dragged Shisui backwards by the shoulder, and Gai had arrived with Rin to finish this.

Anko screamed something right next to his ear, but Shisui couldn't quite make out what it was through his internal turmoil. It all sounded more and more like indistinguishable jumble. He was having emotional whiplashes. First the shock, then the crashing fury and now a numbing disbelief washed through him. The will to fight was ebbing away, and the urge to just lay down and give up made his body unresponsive.

A crushing fist bashed into his face, causing Shisui to tumble over and taste warm blood in his mouth. Stunned Shisui looked up at his attacker. Anko had punched him, and finally he could heard what the girl was saying.

"Snap out of it you fucking shithead! Get up and help us!" Anko shouted. Angry tears were streaming from her murderous gaze, while a small amount of blood was drying at the corner of her mouth.

Anko… She was right. He had to protect her. Naruto would never forgive him if Shisui let anything happen to her. He felt his mind take control of his spent and worn muscles again. And to accelerate the process he shot chakra through his system to jump start his body.

His older teammate held out a trembling hand for him to take. Her knuckles torn bloody and her fingers coated in wet dirt.

Shisui reached back and wrapped his hand around the hilt of his tantō. Drawing it out while slowly getting back to his feet with the help of Anko's hand.
When he was upright Anko took a short moment to dust off something from his shoulder. Her eyes unwilling to meet his own. And just then chakra started whirling around Naruto like a slowly building maelstrom.

Naruto stood on her knees in the sewer. The edge of her vision blurred and she knew her body had collapsed in the real world, but Naruto still had strength for this.

Kurama and Isobu was panicking in front of her, both of them dismayed at Naruto's utter stupidity and brashness. Their shouts and insults washed over her though, her concentration was on her last task. The last thing she could do before it was all over.

Slowly she got to her feet. Focusing one step in front of the other as she made her way towards the cage. Remembering doing something similar when she'd made it out of the cave not long ago.

Naruto suspected if she opened Kurama's seal than the chain keeping Isobu sealed to the bars would be cut too, or Kurama would break the rest up.

The Cursed Tag Seal was now gone. Kakashi had removed it, and nothing was hindering Naruto anymore.

Before The Cursed Tag Seal had been commanding her to return to Konoha. She'd felt it in her bones. It was ordering her back home and once there the tag would have made its second demand. So Naruto knew she'd made the right call.

If she'd returned to Konoha the seal would have broken upon entrance, releasing Isobu within the proximity of hundreds, if not thousands, of Konoha ninja. And nothing Naruto could say or do would have prevented Konoha from attacking the bijū then, or Isobu from retaliating. It was simply instinct to protect themselves against an obvious threat and it would have resulted in a blood bath.

As Naruto stopped in front of the cage the two bijū stiffened. With a violently shaky hand Naruto grabbed at the seal keeping Kurama locked up.

Smiling weakly she looked up at the fox with half lidded eyes. Fighting against the blackness attempting to claim her. Kurama was staring in incredulity back at her. "I'll let you out now… Please… don't harm… my friends…" She murmured brokenly.

Her fingers dug into the seal, and with energy running on her remaining willpower Naruto spun the lock open. The clicking sound of the seal unlocking echoed off the walls, and as the bars opened she was hit with a detonation of chakra. It scorched into her skin and whipped Naruto off her feet.

Not able to stand against it Naruto crumbled in front of the open bars of Kurama's prison cell.

The fox shot out immediately. Landing with both front paws on each side of Naruto's small form in the water. Swiftly Kurama reached out and broke through Isobu's chain. Ripping it open with one clawed hand.

All the while he stared down at her. Watching as the hole in her chest continued bleeding. The dark water gradually turning red. "Naruto..." Kurama murmured in bewilderment, as if he'd never seen her before.

"Kurama..." Naruto could only focus on his slitted eyes. He was all she could see and Naruto found she didn't mind. In fact she found it rather fitting.

Her life had begun with Kurama, and now it would end with him too.
"This doesn't suit you, Naruto. You shouldn't give up just yet…" The fox said in a rumble, tilting his enormous head while penetrating her with his red stare.

He touched the edge of one of his long claws against her head. Naruto was too far gone to really register the action. One small twitch would be enough for him to sink the claw straight through her head, and yet it didn't seem to be a threatening action.

Naruto had never seen less resentment in him.

"So what will it be? Fight or flight?"

Rin stiffened as chakra made the air heavy, almost moist in its consistency, and nervously she looked towards Naruto's still form on the ground.

The air was filled with dirt. It had previously been just an unrecognizable cloud but it was now shifting direction. It began whirling around Naruto in circles, and steadily her skin was again illuminated in a bluish light.

For a mad moment Rin thought Naruto had never looked more beautiful.

Then she remembered that Naruto was dead.

The chakra was growing denser around her small limp body, turning from opaque to a thick, glowing cloak warping frantically around her.

The chakra intensified rapidly, like a growing force of energy on the verge of exploding. Coldness seeped through Rin's body, rooting her in place and suddenly she was deathly afraid. Because whatever that chakra was it was more intimidating than anything she'd ever experienced.

With effort Rin tore her eyes away from Naruto and to the shape next to her. Kakashi was unmoving, completely unaware of what was happening right next to him. Conflicting instincts battled against one another. She was too scared to go any closer, but Kakashi couldn't stay where he was!

Anko must have read her mind, because she sprung forward, bending down next to Kakashi as Naruto started glowing fiercely. She slung him unceremoniously over her shoulder just as Shisui shouted so anyone within a mile radius could hear. "Get away! Run!"

Rin took one step backwards followed by another, and then she turned and ran for her life. Everyone else followed her example.

Raidō was carrying Kushina all on his own, while Genma was physically pushing him forwards to make him keep the speed up, causing him to stumble a few times as they tried to outrun the light flaring out from Naruto. Whatever it was caused havoc to their surroundings. The earth trembled vigorously under their feet and dust fogged the air.

They ran past Ensui, where Gai had to drag him by the elbow to make him come with them. Rin peeked over her shoulder and was aghast as she saw the size of the light now. It looked like it was taking a form – a rapidly growing shape that had come out of Naruto.

The Kiri ninja themselves were running too, but were trying to get organized while they fled.

But all Rin could concentrate on was running. Trees were torn out of the earth while flying boulders were crushed to gravel and showered over them. Shisui's tantō was forcibly ripped out of his hand by
the wild chakra. It twirled wildly through the air and nicked Ensui in the arm. Simply staying on her feet was difficult as the chakra infused wind whipped into her, trying to knock her off course.

Something hit her in the leg, but the stray senbon was far from enough to stop Rin from fleeing.

Not being able to help herself Rin looked back again, the need to know what was going on overriding the desperation to get away, and felt her breath get knocked out. Her pace slowed down and she almost ran straight into Genma by the dumbfounding sight.

A giant beast was still slightly illuminated in the blue hue, but the light wasn't nearly as glaring as before. It had to be as high as the Hokage mountain, and Three Tails swished behind it.

For a moment everyone's attention was at the beast while the demon looked calmly around. Assessing the situation with alarming intelligence. Rin could see it in its eye. This was no animal. This was no summon. This was one of the bijū.

And then shouting erupted from every corner.

"The seal! The seal!"

"It broke out too early!"

"Stop it! We need to reseal it!"

Rin and Gai was forgotten by their enemies, and the Kiri ninjas all stormed towards the large scaled creature with war cries, forgetting that they'd been running for their life just a moment ago.

Rin's throat had lost its ability to create any tangible words, only sobs escaped as she stared at the demon.

The night was filled with loud sounds. Rumbling and shattering noises that reached him long before he arrived.

While Obito had been running with his heart in his throat the entire way he still couldn't quite overcome the elation of smelling fresh air once again. After endless days in darkness with nothing to do but fighting through the pain of recovering it was overwhelming how the feel of fresh air felt on his skin. The images of Madara and his somber words and his own depressing thoughts were pushed to the back of his mind as he rushed as quickly as possible.

Though the pleasantries of being outside – of being free – had been overridden by festering fear for what he was running towards.

But the words from Tobi had edged him faster and faster through the forest in an attempt to reach his friends on time.

"Your friends are in trouble. Kakashi and Rin are some of them."

When the words had been spoken back at the cave it had made him desperate. Obito had precious little to live for, and it was only the idea of returning home that had ever made him keep going. To get well and strong enough to get out of that cave.

"What happened?"

Obito had only felt this type of fear once before. When Rin had been kidnapped.
"They are being attacked by Kirigakure ninjas. All of them ANBU of chūnin and jōnin rank… They're with a group of other Konoha children too."

That had not made him feel any better.

"Who!?"

Obito couldn't help feeling desperate. It felt as if he was on the verge of something. He was about to tip over and he had to reach them in time.

"Hmmm… I don't know them all by name… But your friends Naruto and Anko are there too… And I think the red head named Kushina is dead."

Obito had stumbled from the branch he'd just landed on. Falling to the ground before he caught himself. His insides turning to stone.

It was blurring after that. All that mattered was getting there while hoping against hope that Tobi was wrong. Kicking down harder for each step and taking the last part of the trip on ground. The trees thinning out more and more as he closed in on the unmistakable sounds of battle and the growing ominous chakra ahead.

He'd wanted to know what the chakra was, it didn't feel right, but he'd been too occupied with reaching everyone on time.

"Where is Minato-sensei!?"

As moonlight hit his eyes and the area opened up Obito stopped abruptly. The cheer chaos was enough to cause him to halt.

He found the source of the chakra first.

It was Naruto.

Her clothes were so steeped in blood and dirt that she was almost unrecognizable if it hadn't been for the blonde hair. Then Obito had seen her face. The cold, defeated glint in her eye had made him freeze. It was so wrong seeing Naruto with a look like that.

There was no trace of the carefree and lively girl he'd come to know. The girl who edged him on and proclaimed him her rival. All joy had been drained out of her, and nothing but a shell was left in her stead. It was wrong. That girl was not the friend he remembered.

The sight had made Obito look around in bewilderment. To find the cause of Naruto's state. What had harmed her so badly she was no longer Naruto, and it became apparent as Naruto put the unmistakable dead body of Iruka down in between all the battling bodies.

Next he found Raidō who was guarding the unmovable body of Kushina.

Everyone was fighting fruitlessly against opponents much more experienced. Much stronger. Shattering grief ran through him and all Obito could think was; what is the point of this?

What was the meaning of all this fighting? What would Kiri gain from slaying children? What were his friends doing engaging Kiri in this battle?

Why was the world so ugly. So brutal and unfair.

The thought was not unfamiliar. During his time resting from grueling days of training Obito had
pondered this many times. It was impossible not to while in the company of Madara despite his optimism to one day get out.

Why hadn't they looked for his body? Why were his friends so sure he'd died? Was it more normal for friends to die than to hold onto hope? Obito had pushed the thought away quickly back then. Repressing the resentment he felt. Thinking it unjust to accuse his friends for giving up on him.

Because after all he really shouldn't be alive. It was all thanks to Madara he was, and Kakashi and Rin had been in enemy territory. It wasn't like they could have stayed behind and dug through tons of boulders to dig out his body with Iwa ninjas on every side. Though Minato should never have left them. Things would have been so different if their sensei had just *been there*.

It was so unfair. To be taken away from them just as he and Kakashi had become friends. And Rin needed him. Kakashi had promised to keep her safe but how could anyone ever guarantee that? Obito's situation had made him very aware of his own limitations, and Kakashi wasn't without those. Their lives were too unpredictable to assure anyone of safety.

And the sight in front of him illustrated that in all its gory detail. Bodies scattered around. Disfigured or wounded.

To think children could cause so much harm.

To think adults would not put a stop to this sort of thing.

Wasn't the war supposed to be *over*? Wasn't this supposed to have *stopped*?! They were at peace! And this was not how peace was supposed to look like. Why did they let this continue!

The last proof came as Kakashi's chidori sunk through Naruto's chest.

He stumbled backwards, falling on his behind in disbelief while shaking so badly he wasn't sure he could stop.

The absurdity of everything pressed harshly down on him in a moment of clarity – they were all living in a living nightmare.

The blood. The screams. The tears. The violence was too much. Too brutal and too unreal. How could this be reality? What good was it fighting for anything when more pain was the only reward? When all it left was misery and death.

Naruto hit the ground. The gaping wound the only thing Obito could really see.

A world without Naruto. A world where friends became executioners. A world which left Rin *screaming* like she was now.

It was a world where his friends would rather die than keep going and where this type of desperation was all they knew. Forced them to act like this.

Obito clutched his heart. Feeling as cold and dead as Naruto was. Like Iruka. Like Kushina.

The anguish was worse than the feeling of tons of rock crushing half his body. Because at least then blissful oblivion had been there to knock him out. Take him away from the pain.

But here on the half destroyed fields of the Kiri base there was no escape from the brutal truth in front of him. He saw it so clearly now. What Madara had said all along, that this world was beyond saving.
And though Obito had already seen it, already knew in his very soul that this world was black, it still wouldn't stop turning, and the bijū was released.

It was pointless to engage it in battle. It was far beyond anything Obito could deal with at his current level. Nothing had prepared him for a demon on top all the hellish scenes he'd just witnessed. And he hadn't even been there long. Who knew what had happened before Obito got there…

He watched as it started killing with a strange sort of impassiveness. While the beast trampled people like bugs he saw for the first time how meaningless it all was. What had all the fighting led to?

There was only this nightmare. Only this hell of an existence.

There was nothing Obito could do. He was utterly alone here. It was only he who seemed to realize the reality in front of him. Because everyone else was still fighting and only he seemed to understand that no matter how much you tried you always loose in the end. Because they were shinobis. And as long as you had something to protect, it would always be at the expense of others.

The truth made him feel insane, and since the crushing weight on his chest was emotional this time and not physical, Obito did not black out.

He could do nothing as he was now, so he ran.

While the bijū attacked somewhere in his wake the only thing left in his mind was that this could not go on. There had to be a better way, and he knew now where to search.

He ran away from the Kiri base.

Away from the demon.

Away from his friends.

He ran away.

Shisui's breath was labored while he watched the bijū go on a killing spree right in front of them. With a simple swish of one of its tails it caused immense destruction. Sweeping away anyone daring to come too close with its deadly limbs.

"You need to go."

Shisui looked up at the voice. Orochimaru was staring hard at the scene in front of them. His mouth was set in a frustrated sneer while he calmly took in the situation.

"Naruto..." Choked Shisui, again turning back just as the beast swatted away ten Kiri ninjas with its foot. Killing them like annoying bugs.

"Is dead. If Kakashi's chidori didn't do it then the bijū breaking free made it absolute. Kirigakure must have sealed it inside her." Orochimaru answered before setting his yellow eyes on Shisui. "But you need to get to Konoha and get Minato back here at once. There's nothing you can do for Naruto now."

Shisui swallowed and peeked over his shoulder to where Anko was placing Kakashi on the ground. The boy was still unconscious, and though he knew better Shisui couldn't help the nauseating fury that whelmed up inside him. Kakashi's arm was still covered in blood; Naruto's blood.

Despite himself Shisui took a few steps towards the Three Tails. His mind torn between staying and
doing what needed to be done.

The demon wasn't paying them any attention. Too caught up in killing anyone directly attacking it. If they were to leave maybe they'd get back before the Three Tails turned its attention on the strays – his comrades.

Feeling like his body wasn't his own Shisui turned towards Genma and Raidō. They were standing by Anko and were both looking worriedly down at Kakashi. Kushina had already been laid down on the ground.

Shisui's vision was blurring while pain filled his head. Burning so badly it felt like his eyes were tearing out of their sockets. He closed his eyes, not able to keep them open for a second longer as the world tilted on its axes.

Naruto was dead. He had failed to save her. The pain of it was unbearable. He could only see the ones he hadn't helped.

Ebisu, Hitomi, Obito, Iruka and Naruto… Fuck… Naruto.

Despite the pain Shisui opened his eyes, finding that his vision had cleared. Something hot and wet was trailing down his cheek and automatically he reached up and dried it away with the back of his hand. Shisui was only minimally confused to see his knuckles covered in fresh blood. He was crying blood.

There was no energy left in him to ponder this unsettling discovery, and Shisui walked numbly forwards.

Feeling more blood bleed from his eyes he stopped in front of Kakashi to watch dispassionately how his chest calmly rose and fell.

He was alive then. Still hanging on.

Shisui couldn't muster up the proper happiness that fact should have brought him. Instead something ugly twisted in his stomach. Resentment. He didn't think he'd ever see the older boy the same after this.

Closing his mind to any more distractions Shisui stepped over Kakashi and joined Raidō and Genma in the circle. No one dared look at one another.

Wordlessly they rose their hands in unison, and a few moment later they were lost in time and space.

Naruto was half conscious and in a lot of pain. Kurama was everywhere. His chakra seeped into her flesh and burned through her heart like an inferno.

But Naruto didn't have a heart anymore… did she?

She made sure it was blasted to pieces. Used poor Kakashi to shatter it. Would he ever forgive her for that? Naruto could not imagine what she'd do if their roles had been reversed.

And yet it felt like her heart was set on fire.

Blinking repeatedly Naruto tried to clear her vision. Was this death? Was this what happened when you died? Naruto hoped it wouldn't last forever. An eternity with this pain was more than she could comprehend. But the fire was lessening and the fog in her eyes was clearing.
Around her was golden chakra. It filled up every inch of her surroundings in scorching heat and… something else… Naruto couldn't think of the proper word to describe it. Maybe the chakra was life itself.

Her ears were loud with an intense humming sound. Like rushing waves crashing wildly inside her blood veins while forcibly pumping raw energy to keep her body responsive and aware. It was far from pleasant, but not entirely unpleasant either.

"A little longer Isobu. Keep them away."

Naruto forced her head to tilt in the proper direction. She was still inside her mindscape, but the fox was nowhere in sight.

In fact his voice had come from somewhere within her. It sounded different than usual too. She had sometimes heard his whispered words from the back of her mind, but now they were everywhere. His voice escaped from every pore of her body from head to toe.

Isobu was just a mist in the air, still present through his chakra but not visible to Naruto's eyes. Had he broken free? Was he leaving? What was Kurama up to?

Naruto jolted as she remembered their last conversation and Kurama's following actions. The moment Naruto had given into darkness Kurama had surged into her. Deeper than ever before. Without the constraints of the seal Kurama had merged completely with her, so much that Naruto was unsure if they were even two individuals anymore.

Mind and body. That's why his voice was so close. Right now they were the same being.

As if on cue, Kurama jump started something inside her as he separated himself. She suddenly felt her heart beating franticly inside her rib cage. So she did have a heart…at least in her mindscape. Or maybe Kurama made it happen? The fox had healed her injuries no matter how grave they were before, but Naruto had no idea that he was capable of growing a living, beating heart so quickly. Or was she just being delusional on that part?

The chakra of the Kyūbi was pouring out of her faster and faster; reshaping itself around her and slowly becoming solid again. He was returning to the mindscape.

Kurama shook his head when he was whole again, a dazed expression in his eyes as if he was dizzy from the action. Naruto didn't doubt whatever he'd done had been immensely difficult.

Heart still beating, Naruto slowly sat up. Touching her chest where there previously had been a hole.

For a long moment they simply stared at each other.

"Th-thank you." Naruto croaked. Her voice gruff and dry. She coughed into her hand and took a shaky breath in an attempt to calm down.

"You're not out of the woods yet. You're injured… horribly. But at least you have a heart again. Take better care of this one than the last, brat. I'm not at your beck and call to give you organ transplants." Kurama huffed, his tails swishing in annoyance.

"I will..." Answered Naruto while listening to her frantic heart. It felt almost surreal. Her heart seemed adamantly on making up for the missed heartbeats since the chidori had hit, and Naruto came to realize Kurama was right. She was badly injured. Even Kurama couldn't fix everything. The longer her heart beat and the more she became aware, the more it hurt.
Eventually Naruto broke the silence again. "Isobu…?"

"Kurama frowned, his eyes going upwards while he lay down between the open bars of the prison. "He currently possesses your body. Surely you're not that injured to fail and notice that?"

"I do… I just… I'm dizzy…"

"Understandable."

Naruto looked at Kurama suspiciously, not sure why he was still entertaining her. "Why… are you still… here?"

"Hmm…" He hummed and looked away, seemingly embarrassed. "Well… I hate being indebted."

"You don't owe me anything." Naruto answered quietly. Her voice surprisingly steady despite her quick breathing and immense pain.

"Not anymore no, I fixed your heart while Isobu kept everyone away. So we're square now. You released us and we saved you in return."

Naruto arched an eyebrow, waiting to see if he was willing to share any more.

"And you know… I put down a lot of effort into fixing you this time, and I hate seeing my handiwork go to waste, so I guess I'll hang around a little longer. The moment I leave you'll keel over dead of course, and that will just be annoying. And then there's the fact that there's people hunting me, and I'd rather deal with you than humans such as Madara."

Naruto smiled and ducked her head. "Thank you Kurama… It's just boring without you… to criticize me all the time… You keep me in line."

"Not always." Snorted the fox and shook his head, clearly annoyed. "I won't argue the effectiveness of your actions, but you nearly gave me a heart attack. For a moment I thought you were taking all three of us out." He grumbled and his slit eyes narrowed, revealing a deep resentment at the very idea of the potential consequences she'd nearly doomed him to - an eternity in the stomach of the shinigami.

"I don't go back on my promises. I said you wouldn't die, and you could have escaped when I opened your seal."

"We could have, yes..." Kurama mused. "But because of our current situation our safest place is actually here. And you're a lot of things, but boring isn't one of them, brat."

Naruto chuckled and tried to stand up, but her body was weak and she fell back down again while heaving for breath.

"Isobu is still in control Naruto. You have to wait a little longer." Kurama explained.

"What... is he doing? What is... going on?"

Kurama grinned evilly. "Retribution."

Shisui opened his eyes slowly. The noise in his head finally settling down. The Hiraishin was like a crash landing. Teleporting was not for someone with a weak stomach.

"Oh kami…"
"Kushina-san!"

"What happened?"

Shisui first made sure everyone who was supposed to be there had actually made it through. Genma looked a bit green and he was forcibly keeping his mouth shut. Probably trying to swallow his own vomit. Raidō was swaying, and between them Kushina laid on the ground.

He should have felt proud. Shisui always imagined that when they finally managed something like this it would be a joyous occasion, but it couldn't be further from the truth.

Shisui stepped back as someone hurried between them, swooping down towards Kushina.

Minato.

"We need to go back." Genma said on autopilot. His eyes on Minato, but the man hadn't heard him.

"Someone get a medic in here now! Kushina? Please talk to me. What happened?" Minato stared up at Raidō with wild eyes.

"Um…" Raidō was as prepared for that question as any of them where. Where the hell do you start?

"They took the Kyūbi." Shisui had spoken without really meaning to, but it explained the situation Kushina had ended up in very efficiently.

Minato's face twisted in pain, he looked disbelieving from Shisui to the others before slowly leaning back towards Kushina. Shisui finally took notice of where they'd ended up.

The Hokage office.

Well, it could have been much worse. The Sandaime had his head downcast, a frown wrinkling his face while he mutely watched the scene.

There were two other people in the room, Hyūga Hiashi and his uncle Fugaku.

Fugaku was staring at Shisui instead of Kushina, something like pure shock showing in his expression. Shisui couldn't be sure, because his uncle had about three expressions on a daily basis. Stern, smug or sullen, and none of them covered whatever he was using now.

Some resemble of urgency found its way back into Shisui's mind, and he directed his words towards the man bending down between them. "You have to come with us, Minato-sensei."

Minato tensed, noticing the pressing tone in his voice, and he slowly turned his face towards Shisui. His eyes hardening. "Give me a short summary, and someone get the damn medic in here."

The Sandaime looked at Hiashi, and with a nod he was out the door within a second. "Please leave us too, Fugaku." The Sandaime said strictly to Fugaku. He didn't seem anywhere near ready to leave, but with a short nod he followed after Hiashi, admittedly a lot slower.

The door closed with an ominous finality.

"Tell us what's going on."

"He's alive?" Asked Anko, her head snapping over to Rin who was working on an unresponsive Kakashi. Rin's hands glowed a faint green over Kakashi's chest, her eyes narrowed in concentration
while she worked.

"Yes. He's weak but I can fix this. I… I will..." Her voice lost strength, and she shot a quick glance in Anko's direction. She had tear tracks on her cheeks and her eyes were red and swollen. "The most pressing issue is severe chakra exhaustion. I don't want to move him though, but we really can't stay here. We don't know what that thing will attack next." Answered Rin and looked frightened over at the bijū.

"So far it's been satisfied with just killing anyone who attacks it, but it's just a matter of time."

Orochimaru agreed, bending down next to Rin while shallowly examining Kakashi.

"We don't have much of a choice, we have to take Kakashi with us and run." Ensui argued, looking back and forth between the monster and the others.

All of them were keeping as low as possible. Hiding behind boulders were of little help against a demon as large as the three tails. One hit and they'd all be dead.

Anko stared numbly at the beast. Wondering what had happened to Naruto's body. Had it devoured her during the unsealing or squashed her into an unrecognizable mass on the ground? The morbid thought popped into her head without meaning too, and she felt nausea hit her like a ton of brick.

It was lucky she hadn't eaten in almost a day. There was nothing to throw up.

The ground shook with every movement the Sanbi made, and Anko noticed she was walking backwards. Her instincts telling her to flee for her life yet again.

There was no Kiri ninja left for the Sanbi to kill, and its large head was moving from side to side. Maybe it was making sure it hadn't missed anything, and the others seemed to be thinking along the same line. "We need to leave. Now." Hissed Orochimaru under his breath.

His arms reached under Kakashi, lifting him up as quickly and gently as he could manage before turning towards the forest. The rest were hot on his heel while Rin tried to work and move simultaneously while Orochimaru carried Kakashi.

"Where do we go? Won't Minato-sensei come soon? When the others return they'll end up right by the bijū." Asked Anko worriedly and peeked over her shoulder.

"They will just have to manage." Orochimaru answered. His focus was on getting them as far away as possible.

A strange surging sound came from behind them, but none dared to let their attention wander. Whatever the bijū was doing couldn't be good.

The wind whipped against their faces, and her hair obscured Anko's view while she ran. But before long Ensui's voice carried over the group of fleeing ninja. "Look at the bijū!"

Anko stopped automatically, not quite sure what was coming next. The sight was surreal, and Anko could barely believe her own eyes.

The Sanbi was glowing - transforming again. Just like Naruto had done when the bijū had escaped. Swallowing Anko looked quickly up at Orochimaru, hoping the answer for what was happening would be apparent on his face. If possible he was more baffled than Anko was.

"Impossible..." He whispered.
Naruto groaned as the last of Isobu chakra retreated into her seal. She was again sitting on her knees, breathing harshly for air while shaking from head to toe. Ahead of her she could see Iruka on the ground. He was no longer on the boulder she'd left him at, because there were no boulder anywhere around her, but from what her foggy eyes could distinguish that Iruka body remained intact.

She felt no remorse. Not yet.

They had taken so much from her these past few days. Her mother and her first friends.

Her skin was burned. The raw open wounds stung in the wind, which previously had been such a relief to her. She knew she would lose consciousness again any moment, but for now she was witnessing the aftermath of Isobu's rampage.

There was so much blood. Disfigured bodies lay spread randomly around her, but Naruto had no mental energy to really make up an opinion about it. Where were her friends?

She felt alone in the emptiness despite having Kurama and Isobu right underneath her skin. They were taking refuge in her for now, so at least she could do something for them.

Her breathing was frantic, and her vision was yet to clear up before black dots obscured everything again. Naruto thought she could make out a figure in the distance moving towards her, but she was nowhere near sure.

The pains of her injuries were too much, and Naruto welcomed the emptiness as she blacked out again.

It had been difficult to explain everything quickly and efficiently. Shisui's head was still jumbled with thoughts, and they needed to hurry. They were losing precious time reporting, but it was needed for Minato to be prepared. Not that Namikaze seemed to be much better off than they were. His worry for Kushina was distracting him, but he did a good job hearing them out while they waited for the medic to return to the office.

Luckily it only took a couple of minutes, and by then Shisui, Genma and Raidō had managed to give a quick summary of everything which had taken place since the ambush over three days ago.

The door to the office opened with a bang, and five medics came hurrying into the room followed closely by Hiashi and Fugaku. Minato put Kushina slowly down to the floor. Her form still limp and unresponsive.

In the chaos that started up Shisui was backed into the corner of the office, feeling lost to this idiocy of this stall. "We need to go." Shisui said over the crowd, looking intently at Minato.

The Sandaime gestured for them to follow him into the corridor, but Minato hesitated in the doorway. Looking torn between Kushina and the group.

"Minato..." The Hokage said slowly, and the blonde reluctantly turned away. His face stricken with pain Shisui felt he could sympathize with.

"What happened when it broke free? Which one was it?" Asked the Sandaime at once, not heeding the people buzzing around.

"It had three tails. Orochimaru ordered us to return with Kushina here, to make Minato return with us. It was killing everything in its path. We need to go. They're still there. They need us."
"I see… and you're right. We need to go at once, and I'm coming along too." The Sandiame said briskly, turning towards Minato. "Give them your seal, and you can bring me along with you once they have returned."

He looked carefully over at them then. "You can return right? You have enough chakra for the return trip?"

All three nodded affirmatively. "We left a seal behind. We should be able to connect with it."

"Good." Minato replied and fished up a kunai from his pouch and gave it to Genma. "Go back and I'll be able to follow."

The boys quickly found a spot in the corner of the hallway, standing in a circle while they concentrated. A minute later Shisui was again dragged into a gravity less abyss of whiteness.

Anko reached Naruto just after the girl fell unconscious. Throwing herself on her knees next to her while still suspecting her eyes were deceiving her. Naruto had fallen limply to the side while Anko hovered speechless next to her. Not daring to come closer in fear that this was all a very vivid hallucination.

Gai had been right on her heel, and stopped abruptly next to her without taking his eyes off Naruto. "What happened?" He asked confused. "Where did it go?"

Anko was too busy checking on Naruto to answer. She would have been unrecognizable if it wasn't for the mop of blonde tangled hair and orange outfit. All visible skin was burned, bleeding and blemished and the smell stung her nose. Burnt human flesh. *Naruto*'s burnt human flesh.

Anko was afraid to touch her. Burns were painful, and Naruto had some of the worst Anko had ever seen, but she could see her chest rise and fall. She was breathing.

Two emotions were battling to break out, and Anko couldn't choose between crying or laughing.

Naruto had done this to her before.

It had looked like she died, but then she hadn't. Anko wanted to kill her for making her believe she had died. Again. And she loved her for still hanging on. Was there anything that could kill this girl?

Laughner won out, and Anko couldn't stop the hysteric sound emerging from her throat.

Shisui appeared exactly where he'd left. Except it all was drastically quieter.

Everyone looked around, wondering what had happened. Shisui bent down, finding the seal he'd drawn on a piece of paper. Their return journey ticket.

"Minato-sensei!"

They all turned towards the voice far away. They could make out figures and hurried towards them. Soon they came upon Rin sitting on her knees while she healed Kakashi. Ensui was sitting at his other side.

"Kakashi..." Minato blurted out in panic, and he was at her side a second later. Both hands shot up into his hair, the frustration was so clear on his face it was painful to watch.

"I got him, Minato-sensei. Tha- thank you for being here… Oh, sensei..." Again Rin started crying a
steady stream of tears while her bottom lip quivered.

"What's going on?" Asked Shisui confused. "Where…?"

"It disappeared..." Ensui answered. The confusion audible in his voice. "After all the Kiri ninja were dead… it just… We didn't see it clearly though, we were too far into the forest, but Orochimaru-sama, Gai and Anko went to check. We had to help Kakashi though."

"Where are they now?" Asked the Sandaime concerned.

Rin and Ensui shared a glance, before the latter pointed towards the desolated area where Shisui remembered the Sanbi had been earlier. His stomach did a cartwheel, and Shisui swallowed down in nerves.

"Let's go then." The Hokage said while Minato nodded in agreement.

A soft and worried gleam came into Minato's eyes as he looked down at his student, "Take care of him Rin." Minato whispered quietly.

Shisui followed after the two men without looking back, he'd rather be anywhere but with Kakashi right now.

They found them quickly enough. Or rather heard them.

"She needs help! Why are you-" Anko was shouting furiously, but Orochimaru had a firm and steady grip on her arm. He was wrestling the girl away from Naruto - or what Shisui presumed was Naruto - while Gai stood quietly next to them.

Shisui didn't understand what was going on, but it looked like Minato and the Sandaime did. "Stay here. Don't come any closer." The Sandaime ordered, pointing at the boys.

"Can this day get any more abnormal?" Asked Genma and shook his head. They watched as Anko actually stomped her sensei on the foot.

"Anko! You need to leave. This isn't safe!" Orochimaru snapped so loudly they could hear him half way up the hill. Shisui arched an eyebrow.

"You can't just leave her to die!" Anko shrieked furiously.

"We're not! But you can't stay anywhere near her. The Sanbi might still break free again!" Retaliated Orochimaru and pushed her forcibly to the side. Anko stumbled and only just in time caught herself on the dirt. Shisui was walking forwards when Raidō caught him by the neck of his sweater, reminding him he had been ordered to stay back.

That's when Anko noticed him.

"She's still alive! Shisui, Naruto is alive!" Anko was pointing towards the body on the ground, and Shisui's breath caught.

"What?" Genma questioned astonished, also taking a step forwards before Raidō caught his elbow with his free hand.

"Go stand with Shisui." Ordered Orochimaru when Minato and the Sandaime hurried past her and Gai.

Anko sent her sensei a furious glance, not moving either way. "Come on." Gai said and held out a
hand. Anko looked at it for a moment, before she visibly sighed and let Gai help her to her feet. Together they walked up.

Shisui's question burst from his lips before they were halfway there. "What the hell happened?!"

Minato had too much on his mind, and too little time.

He wanted to go back to Konoha at once. He couldn't stand the thought that he was miles away while Kushina was dying. And yet this was where he was needed. With the person who yet had a chance of surviving.

He pushed the thought away while taking a deep breath to steady himself. There might be some chance. A possibility Kushina could get through this.

It was a lie, but Minato repeated the lie to himself to enable him to do his job. He bent down next to Naruto while Orochimaru kept threatening his students to stay away. If what Minato suspected was true than Orochimaru had very good reasons for chasing away Anko and Gai.

Naruto was undistinguishable. Minato's chest squeezed in pain at the sight. Naruto laid awkwardly sideways, the burns so horrid and grotesque it was a miracle Naruto wasn't dead from the pain of them.

It was probably a blessing she was unconscious.

"Can we check somehow?" Asked the Sandaime, addressing Minato instead of Orochimaru.

"Not yet. She needs to gain some strength. The last thing I want is to accidentally break the seal." Minato looked at Orochimaru. "You're sure though? It wasn't released from someone standing close to her?"

"I watched very closely. I was heading for Naruto when it was released. First I saw the boy get killed, and Naruto faulting during the battle. She wasn't defending herself and then she started glowing. Everyone felt the chakra pulse that ran over the field. It protected her for a while, but I didn't understand what it was at the time. She rejoined the battle before jumping in front of Kakashi's attack, that's when it was released. After the Kiri ninjas were all dead the Sanbi glowed again, retreating into Naruto who was left exactly how she'd been in the beginning." He gestured randomly towards his student, and though he pretended like he was unaffected Minato could see the strange glint in his eyes.

"How did this happen?" Asked Minato confused.

"We know Kiri had the Sanbi, but why on earth did they seal it inside Naruto-chan?" Countered the Sandaime. Orochimaru frowned and he looked thoughtful.

"The seal wasn't supposed to break yet." He said slowly. "The Kiri army panicked when the seal broke and the Sanbi appeared. They were shouting for everyone to hear how it broke too early."

"Too early? It was supposed to break from the beginning?" Asked Minato confused.

"Did you hear how Naruto was taken in the first place? She was the second choice of hostage. Their original target was your student, Nohara Rin." Orochimaru informed Minato.

"What?" Minato whispered aghast. Rin? What could they possibly-
His mind went blank. He would have done a lot to get Rin back to Konoha. The same with Naruto, had he just been present and not on another mission. He hadn't heard about this until a few hours ago when he'd returned to Konoha. Expecting to meet Kushina at home this evening when she returned from her own mission with the platoon.

But what would have happened if the rescue mission had succeeded? If Naruto hadn't insisted on bringing back the Kyūbi, and Iruka hadn't died?

Emotional distress was something that could weaken seals prematurely. Or more accurately the chakra imbalance of emotional stress. It had brought forth the Sanbi earlier than expected. If that hadn't happened, if Kiri had let Naruto "escape" with her comrades and returned to Konoha… The seal could have ruptured within the village.

He was stunned as he understood where Orochimaru's thoughts had been lingering by. Naruto had been made into a human time bomb. But it didn't explain how she'd been able to rile the bijū back in. Even unconscious Minato could feel no disruption in her chakra system, which would be noticeable if a bijū was at the brink of breaking free. There would be clear signs.

Minato sighed. "A time bomb? How do you explain how she reeled in the bijū then?"

"I have no explanation, but I have a suggestion." Orochimaru answered. "Her chakra chains."

"Her chakra chains aren't like Kushina's. Kushina is repressing the bijū with her own chains as well as the seal. The two are linked. Naruto's chains have a different ability. She can read chakra, not freeze it." Minato answered Orochimaru.

"But aren't bijū just pure chakra?" The Sandaime asked. "Maybe she managed to… read something about the seal put on her… or the bijū itself? Enough to reseal it?" Asked Hiruzen, leaning closer while he spoke.

"That… would be quite a feat. I seriously doubt that." Minato answered honestly. Slowly he reached a hand and touched Naruto's head gently. Barely brushing his fingers against her blonde hair.

"I need better access if I'm to examine Naruto properly." Minato muttered. "And we need to seal him up." He pointed over his shoulder towards the body of Iruka. He had been ignored so far in hopes of saving Naruto, but one look at the pale and still body was enough to make him nauseous.

Orochimaru wordlessly agreed by turning around and carrying out the duty.

Minato started working quietly by doing a visible examination first. But it was hard to spot irregularities on someone who'd been this burned. It was the bijū who'd escaped through her skin, burning her from the inside. Kushina had told him about the pain once, and Minato had seen some of the burns from when Kushina had been young.

Biting his lips he carefully adjusted Naruto, making her lie flat on the ground. She didn't even stir. Had she been awake she'd scream in agony.

Her nerves were raw from the horrid burns and if she was conscious the damage there would be a horrid affair for her. But she was a fast healer. He'd heard and read about it from different sources and hoped her abilities would come through in this scenario too. Since she was also an Uzumaki. Just like Kushina.

With Naruto lying comfortably, Minato started from the top. Lifting her head up, he checked for any chakra leakage. A spot that might indicate a seal.
There was a few ways to find them. The most common way was to see them, but with the skin burned you need to dig deeper. Namely chakra exit points or chakra disturbances under the skin.

It would have been good if they'd brought Hiashi with them. He was more efficient with his byakugan than Minato could ever be with his more hands on approach. A seal that can restrain a bijū had to be strong. It would create a complete chakra haywire for Naruto, which would mean the exit point should be noticeable for him whenever he found the right place.

There was no seal on her head, face or neck – which was not unexpected. If she really was going to be a sent back to Konoha they wouldn't want the seal somewhere visible, but he still wished to check.

Minato ran a hand over her shoulders, waiting to feel that uneasy chakra coil any moment. He was getting closer. The chakra was more unstable around her shoulders than her head.

Over her heart there was more, but not enough to be a proper seal. Minato furrowed his brow. It was almost enough, but not quite… He checked her ribs, and then her stomach, where his hands froze.

He found the seal.

Minato closed his eyes. Feeling his last remaining hope wash out of him as he prepared for the worst.

"I found it..." Minato muttered quietly just as Orochimaru returned with a body scroll in his hand.

Minato gently opened Naruto's orange jacket. It was already ripped to tatters already, and it was just a matter of pulling the sides so he could fold up her sweater high enough to see her stomach. While he worked, the stench of burnt skin hit his nose with renewed force.

Yes. This was where it had exited from. No doubt. If the burns on her face and arms were bad, they were still better than this. Nothing was visible though.

Minato sighed. "If I'm to continue… there's a risk involved." Minato looked pointedly from Orochimaru to the Sandaime. "I can do the Hiraishin over to Genma-kun. He still has my kunai, but you two might want to move away. I'll try to make the seal visible by infusing chakra, but we have no idea how the seal will react to that."

Hiruzen nodded and turned to move away, Orochimaru right behind him.

Minato looked back down at Naruto. His heart breaking for the little girl. Kami… how could this have happened to her? He didn't want to know what she'd been through these past few days. She'd been found in a cell together with Kushina. Had she seen what had happened to her? Knowing she'd go through it too?

Minato swallowed painfully, and looked up to make sure everyone was far enough away. Orochimaru was shepherding the children further up the hill, barking at them that this was for their own good.

Their own good. What an irony. There was nothing good about this. Nothing at all. The only good thing that could happen to them was if a Yamanake wiped their memories of this whole event.

Minato went through hand seals, making sure he didn't rush and that he was in the right state of mind. It was critical he did this right. For his own safety and Naruto's.

He put both hands over Naruto's stomach, resting them against the bloody and grimy surface where her skin had been before. Shivering at the heat emitting from it.
Sighing in relief he found out that it worked. A seal started taking shape. A spiral growing from her navel and out. Minato watched transfixed as it lit up slowly, going from curious, to intrigued, to downright disbelieving when the whole seal was finally visible.

This couldn't be right.


To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so very much for reading! The chapter was beta'd by AnjoRemix!

Over 90 reviews for one chapter? Wow! I didn't see that one coming and you guys are great! Either if it was critique or not its so wonderful to hear people's opinion, and now After the Rain has over 800 reviews! That is truly amazing! Thank you so much everyone! And I'm so sorry I'm not answering many comments these days… It takes a while to write replies, and these days all the motivation I have I use on writing the story instead of answering.
Chapter Twenty Seven – Waiting Game

"When people hurt, they learn to hate . . . when people hurt others, they become hated and racked with guilt. But knowing that pain allows people to become kind. Pain allows people to grow . . . how you grow is up to you." - Jiariya

Anko stood with her ear pressed against the door. Below her Shisui was on his knees mimicking the action while Gai stood behind her doing exactly the same.

They were trying to overhear the argument going on in the next room, because their sensei sure as hell was not sharing information anytime soon.

Everything had gone very quickly after Minato and the Sandaime had arrived at the Kiri base. Anko hadn't been able to hear what they had discussed, but after Minato had examined Naruto and spoked to the Hokage things had gone… weird.

Minato had insisted on returning to Konoha. They all needed medical help on various degrees. However, there was not another Hiraishin level of chakra left in Genma, Raidō and Shisui, which meant Minato had to transport everyone back.

There had been no question about bringing Naruto back first, but he'd been adamant about only the Sandaime returning with him on that trip, though they all knew he was capable of taking more than just the two. He wouldn't even bring Kakashi when Rin explained he was stable enough for the trip.

Anko suspected it had more to do with the monster Naruto had absorbed than her health condition, but it still bugged her that they wouldn't explain properly.

So the Hokage and Minato had left with Naruto not ten minutes after they arrived, leaving the rest to fend for themselves while they waited for Minato to return.

Though it seemed none of the Kiri ANBU had survived they were still in the Land of Water, and who knew what could happen if they stayed. So as a precaution they had started walking back towards Konoha.

Genma was instructed to hold on to Minato's kunai for whenever he returned. Orochimaru carried a limp Kakashi on his back while everyone followed mutely after. As they walked and waited they started wondering what the holdup was, but Orochimaru only answered that they were probably securing Naruto while making sure the village wasn't in any danger.

Hours passed by while they walked, and eventually even Orochimaru started to wonder what was taking them so long.

It wasn't before nightfall that Minato returned. They had walked since seven o'clock in the morning and Minato looked stressed and worn by the time he returned. He wasn't willing to share any information despite Shisui and Anko's demands to know what happened to Naruto. He only explained she was still alive.
He had returned them here, to the hospital where Orochimaru had demanded answers while the rest were hurried away by medics.

Kakashi had been admitted at once with severe chakra exhaustion. He had yet to wake up and the medics wanted to keep him under observation. Raidō had also been ordered to stay in the hospital overnight thanks to his many flesh wounds which no one had been aware of until their return to Konoha.

Ensui had yet to return from his own check-up - probably because of the wound on his arm and the poisoning he'd been subjected to. Anko suspected he'd been forced to stay overnight at the hospital too, just to make sure the poison truly was out of his system.

Anko was the first to return to the hallways outside the room Orochimaru and Minato was still heatedly discussing. The rest came trotting out within the next hour. All of them with fresh bandages on various parts of their body.

And that's how Anko, Shisui and Gai ended up listening at the door. Trying in vain to figure out what was being said in the other room. Their voices were too low and muffled to make much out of it, but from the sound of it even Orochimaru wasn't getting sufficient answers from Minato.

"What? She was shaken bell to be heated? What does that mean?" Asked Gai confused while they listened.

From the ground Shisui sighed."No Gai, Minato-sensei said; She was taken to the cell to be treated." Shisui corrected with an upwards glance towards Gai.

Gai nodded in understanding. "Oh."

"Sush!" Anko snapped in annoyance. Rin looked tiredly up from the chair she was occupying before her head fell back in her hand.

Unlike them she was not pressed up against the door and seemed close to falling asleep in her chair. Anko was just as tired, but unlike Rin, she was still running on adrenaline. Even if she wanted to Anko doubted she could fall asleep without knowing what the hell was happening to Naruto.

On the floor next to Rin's chair Genma was already fast asleep, and had been for over half an hour. The boy had been torn between going home and staying for an update on their comrades. If they had their own best interest at heart all of them would have returned home to their beds, but in the end everyone had opted to stay in hopes of hearing news of Naruto and Kushina.

The Hokage had requested a mission report tomorrow morning, and afterwards it would fall to one of them to deliver the devastating news to Iruka's parents. Normally it would be Kakashi's responsibility as the leader of the mission, but who knew when the boy would wake. So the responsibility fell to one of them, and Anko worried it might be her. So far in her career Anko had never been in that situation before. She had never had to be the one to deliver news of that magnitude.

"Footsteps. I think they're coming out." Shisui whispered urgently, and all of them jumped back from the door just as it opened up.

Minato came out with hurried steps, casting a sweeping and disproving look at the three of them. "If I catch you eavesdropping again all of you will be put on probation. No exceptions. Go to the waiting room. Someone will be out to inform you later." He snapped, his voice unusually harsh for someone who was normally so friendly.
All three shared a nervous glance before they nodded mutely. Minato sighed and dragged a hand through his hair. "Ensui should be finished by now. You should go and check on him." He murmured and walked back into the office, the door shutting with a bang in his wake.

Anko sighed and looked up at the ceiling. She breathed in an attempt to calm down. "Why can't they just tell us what's going on? We're the ones who were there. We already know the sensitive information." She moaned to no one in particular.

"It is sensitive though… We'll just have to be patient." Shisui murmured next to her.

"Let's go check up on the rest of them instead. I want to know when Kakashi will wake up and what is happening with Ensui. It's been three hours and he's yet to show up." Gai suggested and looked over at Rin. The girl had fallen asleep in her chair, her head resting against the wall and a little drool was coming from the corner of her mouth. Anko couldn't help but snicker.

Minato blinked repeatedly in an attempt to force away the sleepiness in his eyes. Exhausted was not the proper word to explain how he felt. Mind numbingly drained was more accurate. He was leaning against the doorway while he watched Tsunade examine Naruto's unconscious form.

It surprised him Tsunade had showed up at all. But he knew the Sannin and Naruto had interacted on a few occasions, so when the summon asked her to examine the two Uzumaki of Konoha Tsunade had returned, admittedly without sprouting a lot of profanities while doing so.

"It's impossible to say… I've never examined a jinchūriki in such a bad condition." Tsunade said while stiffly writing a few notes on her clipboard. Minato suspected she was fighting every instinct in her body at the moment, but her blood phobia was not enough to stop her. It helped that Naruto was bandaged from head to toe. There was no blood visible, but there were plenty of open wounds. Tsunade had been showed images for the worst injuries, while the rest was done above the bandages. She'd just seen Kushina on the other side of the base, and now she was examining Naruto.

Pursing her lips, she leaned away from the little girl on the table. "I think she's stable enough. She heals at an alarming rate." Tsunade pointed at Naruto's hands which were no longer blemished and raw with burnt flesh. Though the same couldn't be said for the rest of her. "I know Kushina have accelerated healing abilities too. Both from her Uzumaki genes and her status." Tsunade halted for a moment, looking at Minato for any reaction, but his blank mask stayed in place. "So it stands to reason Naruto has the same."

"I thought so as well. Can we wake her up then?" Asked Minato directly.

Tsunade folded her hands in front of her. "I wouldn't recommend it. According to her chart she had some massive internal trauma upon arrival to Konoha, and despite her accelerated healing ability Naruto can still feel pain. In fact… being this badly damaged while accelerating the healing process is probably hurting her in itself. If we wake her she'll be in a great deal of pain."

Minato analyzed her words, understanding Tsunade's concerns but knowing there was no time for empathy at a time like this. "Let me rephrase my question then; will she slip into unconsciousness again if we were to wake her up?"

Tsunade looked worried at Minato now. "No… But she might wish she was. I don't think she's in a fit enough state to give a report right now."

Minato didn't respond. Instead he sighed and pointed to the hallway. Tsunade followed him outside confused. "And Kushina? What's your assessment?"
Tsunade frowned. "I have already told sensei-"

"Tell me then." Minato cut her off, and for a moment Tsunade looked like she was about to hit him for his rudeness. It only lasted a second though, before she nodded. Understanding and sympathy clear on her face. It made him feel sick.

"I'm sorry Minato, but Kushina doesn't have long. The extraction of the bijū was slow. It probably took days." Tsunade started. "Before that she was also dehydrated, poisoned and injured. She is strong physically, that's for sure, and by all account she should have died the minute the Kyūbi was taken from her. Any normal person would have, but she didn't."

Tsunade paused for a moment and watched for any signs that Minato didn't want to hear anymore. She found none so in a professional and direct voice she plunged on. "Her current unconsciousness is more from the poisoning and lack of water and food for at least three days on top of the extraction. From what sensei told me Kushina was infused with bijū chakra from some source before returning to Konoha. I'm now guessing that was from Naruto. It gave her more energy, so there is hope she might wake up."

Minato still didn't allow himself to react as Tsunade took a deep breath. "But Minato… She is very bad off. Her chakra network…. I've never seen anything like it before. I don't think there is much left of it at all now, Minato. Her seal and chakra was so closely intertwined, that the forcible removal of the bijū completely shattered it and she doesn't have long. Her chakra network is dependent on the bijū chakra, but even if you were to inject her constantly with it she still wouldn't survive for long. What is left of her chakra system is slowly shutting down for every passing minute, and soon she'll slip into a coma and die. There's nothing we can do. Extracting a bijū will always kill the jinchūriki. It's an absolute law. It is just taking a lot longer for Kushina."

Minato closed his eyes. Trying to find a solution, and before he was aware he'd even opened his mouth the question burst from his lips. "And if we were to put a bijū back inside her?"

Tsunade's mouth opened, and her eyes widened in shock. Automatically she glanced in Naruto's direction before looked back at Minato, "You're not suggesting… You can't possibly- How dare you!"

Minato held his hands up, stopping Tsunade's words before she got into a rant. "I'm not daring anything. I asked you a question."

Tsunade glared at him angrily. "It won't work. You know this already. You have studied jinchūriki much more closely than I have. Kushina's seal was very strong and very tight. It didn't leave room for much maneuvering, and now that it's shattered it doesn't help her situation at all. A resealing of a bijū will just kill her quicker. Taking the bijū with her."

Minato looked away. He knew that already. He knew Kushina wouldn't survive if they were to seal another bijū inside her. The damaged seal had completely destroyed Kushina's body beyond repair.

But Minato knew of a seal which might have saved Kushina if only it had been used when the Kyūbi had been sealed inside her. Ever since he found out about Kushina's status as jinchūriki he had studied her seal and other types of fuinjutsu. It had taken him years of study to reach the level he was at now, and along the way he had started dabbling in his own self invented seal techniques.

He had even made his own Reaper Death Seal. A seal he had kept quiet about to anyone except Kushina and the Hokage after he finished it about four months ago. He had planned it for the future. For whenever the next jinchūriki would be picked their seal would allow the person to access the demons chakra, instead of locking it all away like Kushina's did.
It was one of his most taxing creations. He'd planned on using it himself for the next jinchūriki, because the caster would without a doubt die by getting their soul locked inside the shinigami's stomach. He had pictured it would be far into the future when he had and Kushina was old and weary and their kids were grown, and he could follow Kushina after his duty to the village was done.

Things had turned out quite different. Kushina was already dying. Minato would not be following her, and the seal had somehow ended up on Naruto's stomach while holding not just one, but two bijū.

And it was open.

Anko was rudely woken up by someone shaking her shoulder. She hadn't realized she'd fallen asleep at all, so the wake up startled her. Sometime between biting her fingernails and worrying over Naruto she must have dozed off.

Blearily she opened her eyes and saw Gai standing in front of her. "Kakashi woke up." He told her and looked over his shoulder.

Shisui was still awake, though he had dark circles under his eyes and didn't look very interested in the topic. Sunlight was creeping in through the curtains, which meant she must have slept for hours. They had crashed in Ensui's hospital room the night before and Anko's neck hurt like a bitch. She'd fallen asleep in the chair.

Ensui had also woken up from the noises, and was sitting up at the news.

"How is he?" Asked Genma while stifling a yawn. He'd made himself comfortable for the night on the floor from the looks of it. He sat up with his elbows resting on his knees and let his eyes wander between the occupants of the room. "And where is Rin?"

"She's with Kakashi already. He was…" Gai hesitated in discomfort, rubbing his neck nervously while glancing at all of them. "...upset... when he woke up."

Shisui snorted rudely at Gai's description while Ensui tried to sit straighter in the bed, but remained silent.

"I see..." Anko answered.

"Do you… want to see him?" Asked Gai nervously. Seeming to grow worried by how they would react to the question. His eyes flickering from Anko to Shisui in turn.

Anko didn't know how to answer. Did she want to see Kakashi right now? He hadn't done it on purpose… Everything had been chaos out there and Anko still wasn't sure exactly what had happened, but was she ready to go to Kakashi? If he was upset… what did Gai expect them to do? Comfort him? How the hell were they supposed to do that when none of them knew what was going on? No one had come to explain where Naruto was. They had no idea if she was dead or alive.

"No." Shisui answered and rested his head against the wall.

"No?" Asked Gai. "But-"

"No." Shisui said again more forcibly. Closing his eyes and looking like he was trying to block out Gai completely.
"It… Kakashi didn't mean to-"

"No!" Shisui snapped with surprising volume. In a rigid motion he was up on his feet, the chair banging against the wall as it was pushed backwards. He was out the door a moment later. Slamming the door so hard the walls shook.

Anko swallowed and tried to rub out some of the sleep from her eyes. Ensui was looking out the window, seemingly lost in interest to the discussion without bothering to give a reply. Anko had no idea what he was thinking, but the boy was a mess. He would not go and see Kakashi even if he wanted to.

"I'll go." Genma volunteered quietly, getting to his feet while eyeing the door timidly.

"I'll… wait. Just a little longer. I know Kakashi didn't mean… I don't blame…” Anko stopped talking and shook her head. "Just not right now."

Kushina was having an odd dream. The Kyūbi's tails were floating all around her, a consistent beeping sound was echoing in her ears and her body felt so heavy. She had a nagging feeling there was something she was forgetting. Something important she had to do and that things were very wrong.

Unfamiliar murmurs filled her ears and she was confused where they came from. They didn't belong in this darkness.

"She's waking up."

"Kushina-san. Can you hear me?"

"Don't exert yourself, Kushina-san."

"Kushina..."

Only the last voice was recognizable, and slowly Kushina opened her eyes. The ceiling she stared at had white square boards and a bright light obscured her vision. A face appeared in front of her, blocking out the view of the ceiling. Minato's blue eyes were blurry, but she knew without a doubt it was him.

"Minato..." Kushina whispered. She already knew what had happened, and all she wanted to do was cry. Cry because of what would happen to her now.

"You're safe, Kushina. You're in Konoha." Minato whispered back. She felt his hand close around hers, and all she could do was let the tears fall. But she needed to tell him, she needed to explain herself. Konoha depended on her as more than a kunoichi. She was a jinchūriki! She had been… And now Kiri had it. They had lost a bijū because of her.

"I- I lost the ky- kyū-" "I know. Don't think about that. Don't waste energy on worrying about that."

"And Naruto! Where…. Where is she? She was… with me… She… Naruto..." Kushina whispered, hearing the machines around her start beeping faster and louder.

"Naruto is safe. She is now… she managed to take it back, Kushina." Minato turned his head and looked at someone in the room. Next thing she heard was footsteps walking away and a door being
opened. When the door closed again she knew they were alone.

"She's safe? Oh thank kami… Thank you for getting her out of there. I failed… I had t-to try. I had to save her… I had to, but I couldn't..." Kushina said, her voice so sore she felt like her throat was ripping apart, so she took another sip of water when Minato offered it to her.

"Sssh. Don't worry, Kushina. Calm down and breathe. Focus on yourself now. Everything else can wait." Minato said soothingly, stroking a hand through her hair while kissing her forehead.

"I... I'm dying Minato..." Kushina said weakly, her eyes closing while she breathed deeply.

Minato didn't reply, but she felt the hand clutched in hers hold on more firmly, and the fingers stoking through her hair had stopped. "Not now. Not yet." Minato muttered, his voice cracking at the end.

They stood in front of the Hokage desk. After almost a day of waiting around they'd been called to the Hokage desk for the mission report and hopefully an update. Ensui had gotten out of the hospital but Kakashi and Raidō were still not released, so the rest was doing the report.

"I see." The Hokage said quietly as Anko finished the oral report. "I'm giving you two weeks off duty. All of you."

None of them answered, but Anko looked pleadingly at him. Hoping he'd explain what was going on. It would be disrespectful to badger him for answers. He was the village leader and their superior. If he didn't want to explain they had no right to ask.

The Hokage understood and nodded once. "The situation is delicate at the moment. However, for your own peace of mind I will inform you of some minor details." The Hokage explained while folding his hands together on the desk.

"Naruto-chan and Kushina-san are both still alive, but because of security measures they are not allowed visitors. Minato is handling the case."

"Will... will they survive?" Anko asked nervously. The Hokage sighed and leant back in his chair. "That I'm afraid remains to be seen."

"What about... Iruka and Hitomi?" Asked Ensui quietly.

The Hokage understood the question, and he answered in a solemn tone. "Hitomi's parents were informed two days ago. Iruka's parents are yet to receive the news... If you wish I can ask Orochimaru to go in Kakashi's stead."

"Please, Hokage-sama... I think I should be the one." Ensui replied quietly. He looked up brokenly, his hands limp at his side and his face downcast as if a weight was constantly pushing him downwards.

The Hokage studied him for a long moment, but the Nara never looked away. "Are you sure? You cannot inform them of any details concerning this mission as of yet. You're allowed to explain he died at the hands of an Kiri ninja, but no more. It's classified."

"I'm sure. He was my teammate. It should be me... Can I tell them that sensei was injured at least? So they know why she isn't the one to tell them? And Hitomi..."
"Yes… It's no secret that Hitomi is deceased, and you can tell them Kushina is injured. But no details are to be explained. And remember… you have to use the word Ensui. When you tell someone that their loved one has passed, you have to use the word 'dead'."

For a moment Naruto wondered if she'd dreamed everything up. That she was still trapped inside the Kiri base, and the whole escape had been a very vivid nightmare.

She was inside the cave again, but a different room. This one had different lighting, instead of the warm torches there was a lamp. The air wasn't as heavy either. No moisture and the temperate felt different. The other room had been warm and stifling. This one was cool and airy.

That's when she realized she wasn't alone either, and the confusion magnified when the people were not Kiri ninja at all. These ones had the Konoha forehead protector.

"You're awake. How are you feeling Uzumaki-san?" Asked a soothing voice from behind her. Naruto tried to shift to see who had spoken, but she couldn't. Her hands and feet were cuffed.

Confused she stared at the metal, not sure what was going on.

"What… What's happening?" Naruto slurred. Her throat was dry and sore, but it didn't explain why she felt like someone had banged her head in with a sledgehammer.

"You are currently in a holding chamber within TIF. Please stay calm." The person said and stepped up next to Naruto so she could see her.

*Konoha Terror and Interrogation Force?*

Naruto had never seen her before. She was pale. Her hair, skin and even her eyes were pale. "Why? What..."

"Hokage-sama will come shortly. We sent word for him when you started waking up." The woman spoke before Naruto could properly form her question. "Refrain from asking questions until he arrive."

Naruto shook her head - the only thing not strapped to the table. There were five people in the room with her, but they were all too consumed in whatever task they preformed to spare her much interest. "Wait! My friends… where are they? What happened… Please." Naruto said, growing increasingly panicked as more and more came back to her.

"Calm down, Uzumaki-san. You're injured and Hokage-sama will be here shortly."

As if her words were a summoning contract the door opened, and the Hokage and Minato entered the room."Hokage-sama." The woman welcomed him with with a bow, and Naruto's eyes widened.

"What? You..." Naruto mumbled, staring from the woman to the Hokage to Minato.

"You've been kept asleep to give your body time to heal." Hiruzen explained while Minato stood stiffly at his side.

She looked down at her cuffed hands, and then up at Minato. "What… Where's Kushina?" She asked in a small voice.

Minato's expression didn't change. He just sighed and gave a pointed look at the other ninjas in the room. "Leave us."
Without a word they filed out.

"Kushina… My friends. What happened? What is going on?"

Minato explained quickly what had happened after Naruto had passed out. Staying a few feet away from Naruto throughout the conversation. Naruto felt something was wrong. Minato was weary of her, and the Hokage was still standing by the doorway.

When Minato finished explaining Naruto didn't know what to say. "I'm so sorry..." The words couldn't even begin to cover everything she meant.

Minato pushed a scrawny timber chair from a corner of the room up to Naruto's bed. Sitting down he looked hard at Naruto. "Now is the time to explain. Naruto… Is there something you should tell us?"

Naruto swallowed. What did he mean? What… what did he want to know?

Instead of answering she stayed quiet, and Minato shifted his chair closer. "We have figured out what happened during the three days you were kept captive. Kiri made you into the Sanbi jinchiürīki. But you will have to tell me how the Kyūbi was sealed inside you too, and how my own designed seal is keeping it locked up. Or should have. When you returned that seal was wide open, but somehow the two bijū inside you seem fine with staying inside. That's why you're in here. That's why you're cuffed to your hospital bed. You're a ticking time bomb, Naruto. And you need to tell me everything you know."

Minato took a deep breath. "Right now."

Naruto felt like her heart was beating out of her chest. This was bad… What was she supposed to say? That Minato sealed it inside her, but he couldn't remember that because it had happened in a lost future?

Minato kept staring at her. His blue eyes so similar to her own yet filled with an impassiveness Naruto doubted had ever been in hers. They were void of the usual glint of kindness. He was on the job now. He wasn't Minato, he was the yellow flash now. The one who swooped in to take care of the enemy, and he was suspecting that Naruto was not on his side of the battle line.

"I can't… I..."

"If you refuse to speak we will just go ahead to the next step right away." Minato explained after a minute of Naruto spluttering nothing in particular.

"Next step?" Asked Naruto alarmed.

Minato didn't falter when he replied. "Yamanaka Inoichi will read your mind. We'll be doing it to make sure your explanation is true no matter what. But I wanted to give you the possibility to tell me the truth first."

"What… the truth?" Asked Naruto weakly.

Minato's eyes flashed angrily. "About whom you really are."

He left her alone when Naruto couldn't find her words. She was desperate to talk to Kurama and Isobu, but it was impossible. Minato must have sealed off more than her limbs, because there was no access to her mindscape. She tried and tried, but all she was met with was eerie silence. She had managed to get into the sewer, but the corridor was now blocked with a thick concrete wall to the entrance of the chamber Kurama had always occupied. The surface was spiky and painful to the
touch. On the other side of the wall she knew instinctively that Kurama was back in his cell and realized this barrier was something Minato had added to the seal to keep Isobu locked up.

It was such a solid wall that hadn't Naruto known it would kill her, she'd wonder if the bijū were still inside her.

Instead she was panicking. What was she supposed to do now? Pretend she had somehow sealed the Kyūbi inside her on her own? Say Kiri sealed them both? There was no way she could say either. The first one was so improbable it was ridiculous.

Naruto had no idea how sealing went down, she had no way to prove that except the seal on her stomach. She knew unsealing, but not the sealing. And if she could somehow convince Kiri did it there would be a lot of questions regarding her loyalty. Because why on earth would Kiri seal two bijū inside her? It was a great risk they'd run just sealing Isobu into her, and they had never planned on getting hold of the Kyūbi too.

Were they questioning her loyalty already? What a stupid question. Of course they were. She was strapped to a bed in some secret location.

They were interrogating her. Minato was suspecting she had something to do with Kushina's state.

With a start Naruto realized things really couldn't get any worse.

Ensui and Shisui walked down the streets of Konoha. Shisui looked repeatedly at his friends, feeling unsure what to say. In a way their silence spoke louder than anything words could describe.

The temperature was low despite a shining and cloudless sky above them. Around them people were chatting and wandering to their respective destination. It was lunch time and the street was unusually crowded. It took Shisui a long moment to realize it was a Saturday, so more people were out and about in the street. No children were at the academy, and instead they were running outside on this cool day. Shisui envied their carelessness. He wished he could feel something else besides angry and detached.

Ensui knew the way better than Shisui, and though Anko, Rin and Gai had returned to the hospital to await news, Shisui had followed Ensui when they had left the Hokage office. Genma had gone home after requesting to be informed if anything happened.

Despite not having asked, Shisui was adamant about being there when Ensui explained to Iruka's parents. Ensui and Naruto knew the boy better than Shisui, but he was a classmate and a comrade, and he'd liked Iruka a lot. More than that, Ensui could need the support. Shisui couldn't imagine what the boy was thinking. He was on the brink of what he could handle with worry for Naruto, but Ensui had it so much worse. Both his genin teammates dead in one mission and his sensei might follow after.

Shisui recognized the modest house they stopped in front of. He'd been over for dinner once, and a few times Naruto had dragged him along to hang out with Iruka on days off.

A woman was in the small garden while raking leaves. Her brown hair tied up in a ponytail while she tended to the lawn. Ensui went rigid as he spotted her, pain narrowing his eyes and Shisui placed a hand on his shoulder. Attempting in vain to give some comfort. There wasn't any to give, and the woman hadn't noticed them yet.

Ensui's face hardened and he stepped forward while Shisui let his hand drop. In a steady voice Ensui called out to her. "Umino-san,"
She turned around and spotted them. A small, confused smile lit her lips as she rested the rake against her shoulder. "Oh, hi Ensui-kun! And Shisui-kun… How are you? It's been a while. What are you boys doing here?"

Ensui started walking towards her while stuffing his hands into his pockets. "I need to speak with you and your husband. It's about Iruka."

The man entered after The Hokage and Minato, he was a bit taller than Naruto's father but his leg seemed stiff and painful from the way he was moving. Naruto had almost forgotten how banged up Inoichi had gotten during the ambush. It felt like ages ago that they'd been walking homewards from Water Country.

"Are you going to make this difficult?" Asked Minato and looked emotionless down at Naruto. The girl was still strapped to the table, but it had been angled up so she could see them clearly. Naruto didn't answer. What was she supposed to say? What the hell was she supposed to do?

"This will be painful if you try to fight it Naruto. It might rip your mind apart." The Hokage added. A note of frustration coming through his steady tone.

"I didn't… I didn't do anything wrong..." Naruto whispered. Fighting back tears as she looked up at Minato. The man's face crumbled for an instant, but the harsh mask was back so quickly Naruto might have been mistaken.

"Explain then." Minato demanded.

"I... I can't... You won't believe me anyway." Naruto wasn't sure how to do this.

The Hokage gestured for Inoichi to move forward, and Minato took a frustrated step back. His hands fist at his sides.

"The base is cleared?" Asked the Hokage with a pointed look at Minato. The blonde nodded without taking his eyes of Naruto.

"Yes. Everyone has been removed. I closed the seal too. She shouldn't be able to communicate with the bijū, and Inoichi should be safe during the intrusion."

Minato watched in silence while Inoichi worked. He had yet to sleep. He hadn't slept for two nights and he wasn't sure when he'd get the chance to either. After returning from the mission he'd been sent straight out again, and that mission was still in succession.

Kushina was awake… And she was asking for Naruto. She kept saying she needed to speak with her, but that was one wish he couldn't grant her. At the moment Naruto was a prisoner of Konohagakure, and there was no way he'd let her close to Kushina. Especially if Naruto had something to do with Kushina losing the Kyūbi.

It was unfathomable. He still had problems wrapping his head around it. Naruto had his seal. And that seal had not just the three tails, but the Kyūbi too.

Minato had worked none stop on it upon return to Konoha. Making sure they found a secure base to put Naruto outside the village. The last thing they wanted was a rampaging bijū making its way through Konoha.

The tests he did came back with shocking results. The seal created a space inside Naruto to store the two bijū, but since the seal was open nothing kept them locked in. Why they weren't breaking out
There was no additional seals keeping them chained to her before Minato had stepped in.

It had been difficult but easier than he expected to lock the seal again and add new barriers. The additions to the seal were not permanent, and Minato needed to come by every day to strengthen the barrier. A taxing job that required a lot of energy. He was confident in his sealing, and luckily he knew the seal on Naruto inside out, which meant adding new elements took a lot shorter than it otherwise would have.

And then there was the other thing… That Naruto might have stolen his design. That she might be a spy.

The girl wasn’t born in Konoha, which the Hokage had repeatedly and unhelpfully pointed out. Who knew where she truly came from? Had she been working with Kiri this whole time? Had she turned traitor at some point? Had the whole mission been an extravagant plan to gain the Kyūbi? A lot had been left to chance, but it was the only reasonable explanation for what had happened. There was no way Kiri – or anyone – would seal two bijū inside one little girl. A girl not even from their own village.

Unless she was.

Because Naruto couldn’t have done it herself. Someone had died putting the bijū inside her, and Naruto was obviously still alive.

Partly anyway. It had been a close call. He would never recommend sealing two bijū inside a vessel ever. In theory it was a bad idea, and now he had the proof to back it up.

Naruto's skin had turned a shade paler. Despite her many injuries he could see the new skin growing on her was lighter than what it had been before. The demons inside her were changing her inside out, and Minato wasn’t sure what to make of this.

Why? What the hell had happened? Why would Kiri think it was a good idea? That was the counter arguments he had used against the "Naruto is a spy" theory they had discussed. But someone must have opened the seal. Most likely Naruto herself. The whole situation had so many questions even Minato felt at a loss.

But he was surer than ever that Naruto was hiding something. Maybe he was naive, but he hoped they were wrong. He hoped Naruto wasn't the cause of all this. He hoped Kushina hadn't sacrificed herself for someone who had been playing her all along.

The whole situation was dodgy. The council had been informed of the events and they were already discussing a transfer of the bijū. Danzō especially was critical about Naruto having the bijū now that her loyalty was questioned. They didn’t want a jinchūriki that might betray them, and they had the means to move the bijū if necessary. It would be extremely difficult, but not impossible.

Minato looked away. Already feeling beyond impatient and agitated. He wanted to be with Kushina. They said she was stable, but every passing hour was one less spent with her. And time was all they had now. Kushina couldn’t even get out of bed anymore.

She was dying.

They waited for over an hour while the crease between Inoichi’s eyebrows grew deeper and deeper. Naruto twitched violently now and then, and sometimes her teeth would grit together in pain. Simultaneously something would tug at Inoichi’s lips.
A struggle of wills?

Was she trying to keep him out? Was she in pain?

The mind walking technique was not designed for someone as young as Naruto. Not at all. It was extremely risky to both Inoichi and Naruto to go through with this. It was classified as an A-rank mission in itself. The threat to their minds, being so intertwined as they currently were, was not without risk to both the caster and receiver. And if something went wrong with one of them, the other would suffer too.

But this needed to be done. Even if Naruto had cooperated this would happen. They needed to know what on earth was going on.

Finally Inoichi removed his hands from Naruto's head. It had been over an hour and his hands were shaky while his forehead was covered in a light sheen of sweat. For a long moment he just stood there, trying to collect himself while his body shivered slightly.

Inoichi opened his eyes slowly, blinking repeatedly before looking down at Naruto.

Then he looked at Minato and back at the girl. He did it repeatedly with the most confused expression Minato thought he'd ever seen on his face.

"Well?" Asked the Hokage.

"Um…" Answered Inoichi while Naruto started blinking too. Coming out of her trance like Inoichi already had. "I can see why she thought no one would believe her… Kami… even I'm not sure what to make of that."

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Shisui sat at the kitchen table and ate his heated up frozen dinner. His father was out on a mission and wouldn't be home for a few days.

Normally Shisui didn't mind being home alone. He quite liked it on the few occasions it happened. In fact, if his father had been home Shisui wouldn't have wanted to talk to him anyway.

He would have exchanged a few words with him. Probably delayed having to explain what had happened before going up to his room and stayed there. His father would probably try to speak to him, but Shisui knew he wouldn't have wanted company.

But it was the idea of him being around that made the difference. The house was so quiet. There was no presence here with him lifting the spirit of the house. Knowing there was someone there if he wanted to made a lot of difference. Shisui hadn't noticed that before.

The frozen meal had a quirky note from his father on it. Shisui had felt the corner of his lips twitch upwards for a moment a how goofy his dad could be.

He wondered if he should go back to the hospital. He was quite confident that at least Anko would be there, but he wasn't sure if he wanted to. He wanted to be home… he wanted to be alone.

To great irony there was a knock at the door while he thought this, and Shisui looked up. Wondering if maybe aunt Mikoto had noticed he had returned. Maybe it was Fugaku for all he knew. The man had seen him return, hadn't he? Shisui wasn't sure what had startled the man so much. Thinking back on it Shisui found it curious.

Taking his time he left the kitchen. Trying to figure out what Fugaku had reacted so badly to. Hyūga
Hiashi had been there too, but he hadn’t reacted anyway like his uncle had. Everything had been chaos in his mind at the time, and despite being in a relatively safe place upon his return to Konoha his mind had still been on the battlefield. Shisui found he had problems remembering a lot of it. Everything felt like flashes of certain scenes.

Pakkun digging into the base. Naruto leaving into the tunnels. Dragging Kushina after him. Sounds of explosions and metal. The genjutsu dragging him back into his childhood. They all felt like… Shisui wasn’t sure. They were patchy pictures he wasn’t quite able to sew together. Despite knowing what happened…

He opened the door as a second round of knocks hammered against the wood. Anko stood outside, still dressed in her mission clothes and in desperate need of a shower.

"Can I stay here tonight?" She asked without preamble. Shisui raised an eyebrow and stepped aside to let her enter.

The nonverbal invitation was good enough, because Anko stepped inside and took off her sandals before following Shisui in silence to the kitchen. He gestured to the pot which still had food heating and Anko nodded. He poured her a portion while she sat down at the table, and still not sharing a word they started eating.

"Why aren't you at the hospital?" Asked Shisui once they were both finished eating and the silence was turning awkward.

"Visiting hours were over." Anko replied with a shrug.

"Why come here? Why not go home?" Shisui wondered, but was secretly glad she had. He wasn't much company today, but neither was she. They made quite a pair really.

"Home..." Anko muttered while taking a sip of water. "I just... I don't want to go there. I'm afraid our place... will become my place."

That evening, while Anko went to sleep in the guest bedroom there were three commotions going on in Konoha at roughly the same time.

One at the hospital where Hatake Kakashi was currently trying to make a break for freedom through a seventh story window. To the great displeasure of his fellow teammate Rin who tried to bodily wrestle him back to the hospital bed with the help of two other medics. Kakashi was suffering from chakra exhaustion, the last thing he should be doing was walking down buildings.

The other was at the Nara compound. Where Ensui had gone home to tell his parents he'd most likely lost his entire genin team, only to be overridden at the door when he found a party going on in his house. His aunt Yoshino had just declared she and her husband were expecting a baby in September.

The third was a little outside the village at a high security base where Namikaze Minato had just been told the wildest and most ridiculous tale he'd ever heard in his life.

"Inoichi-san... Are you trying to tell me... that Naruto believes she's my future daughter sent back in time, which might actually be defined as a different dimension seeing as the time line changed, and that she's spent five unsupervised years here in Konoha with a parallel Kyūbi sealed inside her the whole damn time without anyone finding out?"
Thank you so much for reading! The chapter was beta'd by the awesome AnjoRemix!

Again (I say this way too often) so sorry for late update... This was just depressing to write. I can't help but be slow when I hate what I'm writing. I wanted the plot to go here, but it doesn't mean it's very fun to write it. And for a change, I wanted to finish a few
chapters before updating. Because that way you guys won't have to wait a month for each new chapter. So next chapter is already finished and with AnjoRemix at the moment, and I'll update as soon as it's ready!

And the last chapter received so many comments, though it's true that a few of them were "update soon" but I still say it counts… so... Holy crap, you are all fantastic! You have no idea how much I appreciate the feedback! Especially on hellish chapter such as this one.
A week had passed by at a sluggish pace since their return from Kiri. Kakashi had just been discharged, but though he was free to leave the hospital he couldn't rid himself of the claustrophobic pressure in his chest. It had been suffocating to pass out on the sight of Naruto - kind, spirited and boisterous Naruto - speared on his arm to waking up in a bare hospital room in Konoha.

So he did the only thing he could. He panicked.

*What happened? Where was everyone? How did he end up here? Where was Naruto?* He'd noticed he was hooked up to a machine, and without a second thought ripped out the tubes sticking into his skin, his mind set on getting the hell away.

Medics had come rushing into his room, shouting for him to stay in bed and calm down. Unfortunately for them all Kakashi hadn't listened, and they had to restrain him to prevent him from running out and possibly hurting himself. In hindsight Kakashi wasn't sure where he had wanted to go. All he'd really registered was his crushing fear and need to get away. But during the commotion Gai and Rin came crashing through the door, and together they'd managed to force him back down onto the bed.

It was probably their presence alone which had allowed them to restrain him. There were no words to describe how relieved he'd been. Knowing *they* at least were okay despite his blackout on the battlefield, had momentarily calmed him somewhat, but then he'd remembered Naruto again.

The soft crack as he'd penetrated her ribcage. Her raspy voice and ragged breathing as the life left her eyes. Her blood covering his arm. The warmth of her organs squeezing against his arm while the chidori died around his hand.

It was too much. His stomach twisted and Kakashi had thrown up what little was left in his stomach. All over Rin.

The girl hadn't even batted an eyelid.

*What had he done? Kami, what had he done?*

He vaguely heard Rin ask him what was wrong. If he was nauseous or was in pain. Kakashi didn't care to answer, he needed to know everything. Had he passed out? Had he been hit with some sort of ninjutsu? Why had he fainted? Obito's eye had hurt badly… He remembered that. The image of Naruto wrapped around his arm was burnt into pupils in vivid detail while his eye felt like it was on
fire.

So yeah, he was in pain. Just not the kind Rin was querying about.

"Kakashi?" Asked Rin as she handed Kakashi his medical report, shaking him out of the memories of the previous week. "I think I'll go to your place afterwards... After you're finished at the Hokage office we can make dinner. I want to see how Anko is doing."

Ah… Anko. He'd yet to see her. Or Shisui for that matter. Orochimaru-sama had stopped by to check up on him a few days ago, informing him that there was no news on the situation yet. Kakashi hadn't seen any outward changes in the Sannin, except maybe a slight irritation about not being informed. For a man who sought knowledge to such a degree it had to be maddening for him to be out of the known.

Gai, Genma and Raidō had stopped by every day for a visit, and Rin had basically lived in the hospital the first few days making sure his recovery went smoothly. Though she was probably making sure Kakashi didn't try another escape attempt too.

Ensui had turned up a couple of days ago. It had been the Nara's first visit, and Kakashi had woken up with Ensui sitting in the rickety chair next to his bed. The boy appeared tired and detached from everything, and it was hard to look directly at him. The twisting guilt had escalated with his presence, but Ensui hadn't said a word against him. In fact, he hadn't said anything at all.

He'd stayed for half an hour not saying a single word the entire time, before Ensui had left with a nod towards Kakashi.

But Anko and Shisui remained elusive. And really, Kakashi didn't blame them.

"Oh… sure. Have you heard anything? About Kushina and..." Kakashi had problems saying her name. He wasn't sure why, it wasn't like Naruto was dead. Not from what little they'd heard anyway.

The Hokage and Minato were being very tight lipped about the situation, and his sensei had barely visited him in the hospital. Like Ensui he had only showed up once, and he'd looked terrible. His hair wilder than usual, his skin pale, and there were dark shadows under his eyes. Minato had been so distracted during the visit he might as well not have showed up.

His appearance alone spoke for itself. Things were not good.

"No. I'm sure sensei will have some news for us today. Then we can go visit them together." Rin said, referring to Naruto and Kushina.

Kakashi averted his eyes and looked one last time in the mirror. Rin had brought his black clothes from home so he could go straight from the hospital to the funeral. Kakashi wondered how Naruto felt about missing Iruka's funeral... Or maybe she wasn't awake at all? Minato had said she wasn't able to have visitors yet. Who knew what that meant...

The feeling of blood dripping down his arm made Kakashi instinctively rubbed his wrist. His breath accelerated as he closed his eyes and he was transported back to Kiri base. He felt pulsing muscles and warm liquid around his arm. The sound of screeching birds filled his ears.

"-ashi?"

"Hm?" Asked Kakashi as he snapped out of the flashback. Turning towards Rin who had just finished brushing her hair.
Rin gave him a concerned look before nodding towards the door. "Are you ready to go?"

Minato was having the worst week in his living memory, and that was saying something considering the last few years of the war he was constantly sent out to. His current workload was out of the world and whatever spare time he could manage was spent with Kushina, leaving very little time for mundane things such as sleeping and eating.

And then there was Naruto…

He still didn't know what to think after Inoichi's report. The story was preposterous and completely insane. He would have discarded the whole thing hadn't it been for Inoichi insistence that he didn't believe the memories to be falsified. The discussion had been absurd, but the Hokage hadn't seen the harm in doing a blood test.

A blood test he was reading for the twelfth time.

This just couldn't be right.

He said as much. "This can't be right..."

"Believe me, Minato. I made sure they were thorough. There's no mistake here." Hiruzen answered humorlessly, leaning back in his chair while watching the birds outside on the window frame.

Minato wasn't about to accept that. "No… What… How on earth did this happen? Maybe someone tampered with her… Maybe she is some experiment? Someone who got a hold of Kushina and my DNA?"

Hiruzen raised an eyebrow, and Minato mirrored the expression back. "Come on, it's more believable than… than… It just can't be true."

"I would have believed so too, but Inoichi showed us some of her memories… As unbelievable as it seems, there is a very strong possibility Naruto-chan is in fact who she believes she is."

Putting down the papers on the desk with slightly more force than necessary he shook his head. "Or a very confused child. An orphan. She saw the resemblance and imagined some wild made up story."

Hiruzen was quiet for a moment, and then; "and somehow altered her own DNA?"

Minato deflated, pinching his nose as he tried to make sense of this impossibility. Nope, it still didn't make sense.

"Time travel is impossible." Minato stated firmly. It was infeasible. "There… There has to be another explanation for this."

"Kushina had a miscarriage..." Hiruzen countered, trying to get through the wall of doubt clouding his mind. "If this hadn't happened the child would have been born in October, wouldn't it? Naruto's birthday, according to both our records and her memories were October tenth of this year."

Minato's jaw tightened and he looked away. Yes… according to the medics Kushina lost a fetus during the extraction of the kyūbi. The little one hadn't stood a chance, and Minato hadn't had the heart to tell her yet. It was early, so he was pretty sure she hadn't even known she was pregnant. It was the kind of news Kushina would have shared immediately.
"Minato-

"Please just… I know what you're going to say. I'll deal with this."

Hiruzen held up a hand to stop Minato from continuing, his eyes narrowing as he tried to express the urgency of what was happening. "Even if you do, you will still hear me out. The council is getting impatient with our hold up. We have to tell them something soon."

Minato pursed his lips and peeked at the blood results again, letting the Hokage continue without interrupting this time.

"If you're right then we have either a very confused young girl on our hands, or an excellent spy. But if we're wrong we are risking the council executing your daughter to find a more suitable host for the bijū. All they know is that the bijū inside Kushina is now inside Naruto, and they still suspect Naruto's involvement. We don't have any more time, Minato. We have the blood results. We have Inoichi's report. We have confirmed it was your chakra that created that seal on her stomach and it is a seal of your own design. This time you have to consider that the impossible is the only possible option."

The statement was met with a restless silence, the message being heard, but not entirely listened to.

Hiruzen sighed, the shine in his eyes dimming as he continued. "You are hurting Minato, and despite your current problems you are doing a wonderful job, but this is too personal for you to decide. Please cool down and try to look at this differently. Pretend that this doesn't concern you or the woman you love. That someone else was in this position and you were an outside observer. What would you do then? What would your conclusion be? Think like you were me in this situation. Think like a Hokage now, Minato."

Impassively Shisui scouted the turn ups with trepidation. He'd avoided Kakashi easily in the last week but according to Gai he would come to the funeral, so his time was up.

Despite Anko's gentle reproach for his negative view of her old classmate Shisui didn't find it in himself to forgive Kakashi quite yet. He wouldn't do anything stupid, he had more control than that, but just knowing he was about to see him made his skin crawl unpleasantly.

The fact that he was in the cemetery didn't help either.

While inspecting the crowd Shisui didn't spot Kakashi, but he did see his sensei. He hadn't seen much of Orochimaru this last week. Unlike them his sensei had kept himself busy. First and foremost by doing research on the sword Samehada he'd taken from Suikazan Fuguki.

Feeling restless Shisui walked up to him while people mingled before the ceremony. The mood somber while the few who'd already showed up talked in murmurs. "Hello sensei." Shisui greeted him quietly, drawing Orochimaru's attention away from a dark haired man Shisui didn't recognize.

"Hello, Shisui. You're here early..." Orochimaru answered after saying goodbye to the man. "The ceremony isn't for another twenty minutes."

"You're early too." Shisui pointed out.

"True," Orochimaru replied with a quick twitch of his lip.

"How's the sword coming along?" Asked Shisui, hoping for a conversation which wouldn't resolve around dead classmates. The day would be dreadful enough without seeking out more misery.
"Not too well. It's a fascination creation. I would almost classify it as a beast instead of an object, unfortunately it has a will of its own and doesn't wish to serve me despite the fact I won it from its last wielder."

"Oh?" Asked Shisui curiously.

"Yes… The sword eats chakra, not only against their opponent but also the wielder, unfortunately it's selective in what types of chakra it prefers, and mine is not one of them. I guess that factor gave me the upper hand during my battle with Suikazan."

Shisui's lip flickered upwards for a moment as his sensei's obvious displeasure. "Ah, so the sword won't allow you to wield it because it doesn't like your chakra?" He asked, finding the whole idea weird but incredibly fascinating. He wondered who created it and what sort of jutsu was required for such a creation.

"Well… yes." Orochimaru answered and shook his head.

Shisui spotted Anko come in through the gates together with Raidō and Akiko, and the fleeting distraction fled out the window.

He noticed people were already getting into line despite having fifteen minutes left before the ceremony. Anko walked straight towards them with a wave to Raidō who was heading for Genma and Gai. Akiko lingering a bit behind her, seemingly not sure who else she was supposed to go to.

Shisui smiled sadly to her. Akiko wasn't a ninja, but she had gotten along very well with Iruka. He wondered what she thought had happened to Naruto. They weren't allowed to tell her anything specific outside the "Naruto-was-injured-during-mission" line he'd repeated about twenty times this last week.

Anko reached them and released a heavy sigh. "I am never having kids. Have you seen Iruka's parents? They're a mess."

"You're a mess." Orochimaru pointed out and indicated to both Shisui and Anko.

"Still…” Anko replied. "Iruka was our friend, but imagine losing your kid. Parents shouldn't have to bury their kid. It should be the other way around." Anko answered argumentatively.

"Yeah..." Shisui replied and looked hurriedly away.

Anko spotted Kakashi the moment he arrived at the cemetery. Rin was keeping a constant eye on him while they waited for the ceremony to start. She wasn't the only one to notice either, next to her Shisui stiffened.

Breathing in deeply, she steeled herself before turning towards the new arrivals and started walking towards Kakashi. He noticed almost immediately, because their eyes met after only a few steps. He straightened while Rin waited nervously beside him.

"Hi..." Anko started lamely. Not sure what to say. She hadn't really planned this out, but also couldn't ignore him any longer. Peeking over her shoulder she saw both Orochimaru and Shisui look at them. Shisui turned pointedly away, his hands fisting in badly concealed anger.

Ignoring her teammates, and wanting to patch up some of the damage Anko turned back to Kakashi and Rin. "How… how is she?" Asked Kakashi, not quite able to meet her eyes. "I'm... I'm so sorry." The last word came out in barely more than a whisper, and Anko didn't think she'd ever seen
Kakashi so out of place.

Anko shook her head. "We haven't heard anything. I just want you to know no matter what happens... Just know... I don't blame you. And Shisui knows better too, he's just worried. We both are."

Anko tried to smile though it was forced, and Kakashi glanced towards the photographs lined up at the front.

Iruka smiled back at them from his framed picture.

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It went by surprisingly quick. The week had dragged on dully, but the shift from prolonged minutes and uneasy moments switched to a rush without Shisui realizing when it occurred.

He'd woken up and dressed that morning, his father nagging at him to eat up his breakfast before leaving for the ceremony. His walk from home had gone by surprisingly fast without Shisui really remembering taking the trip, and the funeral had finished before he really took in that it was taking place. The Hokage had spoken, the turn ups had put down flowers, and now it was already over.

So when the ceremony came to an end Shisui followed Orochimaru and Anko towards the Hokage office while still feeling like he was on his way to the funeral instead of leaving it.

He knew they were being briefed about Naruto's situation, but he loathed having to be in close proximity with Kakashi.

Not all of them were summoned for this. Just team Orochimaru, Ensui and Kakashi, so Rin waved halfheartedly and told them she'd wait in Kakashi's apartment before they took off. Rin had been bringing him things all week and she was still in possession of his house keys.

When entering the office they stood in line in front of the Hokage desk while Minato waited at the front with Hiruzen.

"We have decided to let you know some of the developments with Naruto and Kushina." The Hokage started while lighting up his pipe. Drifting smoke rose from the tip and he shared a glance with Minato who nodded.

"This case is larger than you know. We found some concerning information from Naruto and Kushina which are unfortunately classified..." His eyes swept towards Orochimaru when he said this. A slight crease marring his brow before he continued. "And I regret to tell you that Kushina does not have long. A few days at most."

Ensui's shoulder slumped next to him, and Shisui swallowed as the information registered. Minato stood impassively next to the desk with his arms folded. He had a very good poker mask. Shisui envied him.

The Hokage continued. "I'm sorry that I can't allow any visitors. She's very ill, and spends most of her time asleep. But I will inform everyone when it happens."

The smoke from his pipe created translucent patterns through the air while he spoke. Shisui heard the inhale as he sat down further in his chair, before slowly exhaling. Shisui wondered what had both the Hokage and Minato this concerned. They both seemed off. "As for Naruto... She'll live. She's already on her way to full recovery."

From the other end of the line Shisui heard Kakashi make a small sound of relief and for the first time
since the Kiri base Shisui couldn't feel the resentment for him. Not through the sudden onslaught of emotions welling up in his chest. Anko clutched his elbow joyous, her eyes shining as they met his own.

Their happiness was short lived though, because the Hokage wasn't finished. "However… There were... complications on this mission which remains under investigation. Until the case is resolved Naruto will remain in custody awaiting verdict."

The words hung in the air for a moment, before-

"Excuse me?" Asked Orochimaru.

"Wait! What?" Anko said in shock.

"You're not serious?" Shisui whispered unfathomable.

"Now, please respect that there are information we can't share at this moment in time." Minato interrupted before Anko, Shisui and Orochimaru started talking up a storm.

"What do you think she did?" Asked Shisui in growing dread. "Wait. Is that why we can't see her?"

"Yes." Minato answered while keeping his attention on Shisui. "Naruto is in custody, and out of everyone in this village her team is the last people she's allowed to interact with."

"Why?" Asked Anko, no longer trying to keep herself in check as she bristled in fury at the Hokage and Minato.

"Flight risk." It was Kakashi who answered, and despite himself Shisui turned to look at the older boy.

He was staring down his sensei with an expression somewhere between accusation and puzzlement. "It's procedure for registered ninjas with charges against them to be isolated from any family, team or squad until investigation is concluded. They can be an accomplices, had knowledge of the offence committed, but more often than not it's because people personally involved can help the suspect escape."

"Correct." The Hokage said and tilted his head towards Kakashi. "In this case we don't suspect you of anything, but we're not taking any chances."

"So… wait a moment… You're saying... that after everything Naru was put through… the beating, poisoning, starvation, the experiments, burns and a fucking chidori through her chest…. You threw her in a prison cell?" Asked Anko breathlessly. Staring at the Hokage with wide unblinking eyes.

"For now." The Hokage nodded, a grave expression on his face.

Anko didn't seem to believe him, because her expression wasn't changing.

In silent unison Shisui and Ensui turned on their heel, both of the same minds as they left the office before they did something they would regret. It was disrespectful to the extreme, but shouting at the Hokage was a sure way to get yourself suspended from active duty and right now Shisui needed to be anywhere but here.

The anger was bubbling up again. Shisui was normally an easy going person, he rarely wanted to hurt others or felt much fury, but now he did.
He wanted to harm someone. He wanted to hit and punch and kick something until it was bloody and dead. Preferably Kakashi. Ensui looked just as pissed off, but like him he simply focused on getting the hell away.

Behind him he heard Anko explode in fury, but Shisui kept on walking.

"I'm going to strangle him! Why can't we see Naru?! She needs us right now! She went through hell and they put her in a dungeon all on her own! I'm not accepting this, I'm not! She's my friend! My roommate! She could be my sister for crying out loud!" Anko raged while walking back and forth in her living room.

The first few days Anko had stayed with Shisui, but once his father returned she'd gone back to her and Naruto's flat though she still ate dinner with them at Kagami's insistence.

Shisui sat subdued together with Ensui. Both boys looked silently at the floor instead of Anko's continuous one way dialogue. They had come to ask if she'd learned anything more after their departure, but from her rambling dialogue it didn't seem so.

"Minato-sensei is just following protocol. We'll get her out. Everyone knows this isn't her fault." Kakashi said tiredly from the kitchen chair. He was drinking a glass of water while Rin was trying to make them all dinner. The girl was constantly frowning though, making it look like she absolutely detested the rice she was boiling.

"Not everyone… They are questioning Naruto's loyalty to Konoha. They think she was somehow involved with what happened to Kushina-sensei." Shisui said bitterly, his eyes never leaving the floor board. He'd traced the scratches and recorded them to memory from the intensity he was studying the tired timber. "The war might be over but mentally it's still war time… Getting your loyalty questioned at a time like this… It can be catastrophic. She's a jinchūriki with questioned loyalty…. They will want to act fast, and… what if..." He trailed off and swallowed.

"Minato-sensei won't… He wouldn't allow them to take the bijū from Naruto. It would kill her. And why would they? She didn't do anything." Kakashi said, not sure if he believed his own words.

"He could. He doesn't want to, but he could." Ensui argued tiredly. The boy had never been very energetic on his best day, but Shisui couldn't ever remember Ensui being this beaten before. "The fact that she wasn't born in Konoha makes them question everything about her… This is bad. To go this far there has to be something we don't know. Something must have happened."

Shisui looked slowly up from the floor and over at the Nara. "I can't let them do that." He said slowly and matter of fact. Like a statement of a truth that was unquestionable.

"No one here can." Answered Kakashi. Shisui pretended he hadn't heard him.

"You're a jōnin, Kakashi." Anko said suddenly, stopping her pacing and looking at the teenager with scared eyes. "And you're not banned."

"Not yet." He replied with a grimace.

"Why are you here? Go to her! Let her know not everyone has abandoned her! She needs a friend right now and since I can't, and no one else either since we're all Chūnin - you have to go."

Kakashi looked from Shisui to Ensui. It was true, out of all of them Kakashi had the best chance of gaining access to Naruto. As a prisoner she was probably not allowed visitors, but Kakashi's position might work in their favor. It would be difficult, but not impossible. The question was if he should try
"I doubt his presence will help her much." Snapped Shisui and looked betrayed at Anko.

"Oh stop acting like a brat, Shisui! This is for Naruto! She jumped in front of that chidori! How the hell can you be an idiot at a time like this? She's alone, injured and probably scared out of her mind!"

Shisui huffed and shook his head. Not bothering to answer.

"If you can… go, Kakashi. Just try. You owe her that."

Kakashi swallowed while Rin sent Anko an angry glare for her choice of words. "Sure. I'll keep her company, but I'm not sure how long I'll be able to stay. I don't know if I'll even be allowed." Kakashi replied uncertainly.

"It doesn't matter. Just don't let her be alone right now." Anko said tiredly, pressing her fingers against her forehead like she had a headache.

Finding out how to visit Naruto was easier said than done. Minato was reclusive to the extreme, and the Hokage on the fence about allowing Kakashi access.

But Kakashi was a jōnin and technically neither a team member nor family of Naruto. Just a neighbor who had taken part in her rescue mission under a separate squad. On paper he was clear to gain access to prisoners if he had a plausible cause.

And Kakashi wanted to apologize, he needed to, and he'd told them as much.

In the end it was decided he could go under the condition he was supervised, under chakra repressing seal and completely unarmed.

So it was a resentful Kakashi who met his sensei at the Hokage office. He would be searched for hidden weapons and put under the seal here, before Minato would use the Hiraishin to transport him to the cell Naruto was kept in. It was to prevent anyone from finding out the exact location.

"You're prohibited to ask about Naruto's condition." Minato told him sternly as he finished up the seal. Kakashi stepped back, giving his sensei a calculating look.

"Am I not allowed to ask her about the injury I inflicted on her? Or… what happened? At all?"

"I'm referring to her jinchūriki status." Minato answered and handed Kakashi his sweater. Kakashi put it back on, hoping he wouldn't get any ink smudges on them from the still drying seal.

Minato raised his hand and went through hand signs, and Kakashi felt a sting run through his body as his chakra locked down. He closed his eyes and paced his breath through the pain before it lessened and a dull discomfort settled in his body.

Minato nodded to the Hokage. "There, it's done. I'll remove it upon return."

"Then I wish you luck."

Kakashi didn't say anything as his sensei stepped behind him and took a hold of his shoulder. In flash the office disappeared before his eyes, becoming stripes of light as they rocketed through space.

They re-emerged in a dark corridor lit by torches along the wall.
Upon landing it took him a moment to steady himself. It wasn't the first time Minato had dragged him along for the ride, and Kakashi had studied the technique closely, but it just didn't sit right with him.

A tall ANBU in a bird mask stood at the end of the hall, and Minato pushed gently against Kakashi's back to lead them forwards. "Hatake Kakashi is here to see the prisoner." Minato said to the masked man. Shadowed eyes glanced up and down the boy before he nodded.

"Follow me, Hatake-san." The ANBU answered.

Kakashi glanced back at Minato. "You're not going to come?"

Minato hesitated, a strange expression crossing his features before he shook his head. "No."

"Hmph... I see." Kakashi replied and turned to follow the ANBU, his steps sending echoes running down the hall.

He sought her out the moment Kakashi entered the holding cell. She was sitting against the stone wall in a grey shirt and trousers. Probably clothing she'd been handed out. Her feet were locked in chains, but the chain was long enough for Naruto to have a bit of mobility. Underneath her was a mattress along the wall, so at least she wasn't sitting on concrete floor.

The guard hung around just long enough to lock Kakashi into the cell together with Naruto before leaving. Kakashi could still see him through the bars, but though outwards he seemed disinterest he knew the guard would be listening to every word shared.

There was something pressing at his chest. A heavy, stinging pain at the sight of the small girl. He could see bandages sticking out from underneath her shirt, and Kakashi wondered if she was even healthy enough to be out of bed. Far less locked in this dungeon.

Naruto stared at him with empty eyes, barely bothering to raise her head at his entrance. It was horrible to see her like this. She looked beaten. Defeated. Helpless.

Without warning Kakashi felt a hot burning fury for what was happening to his friend.

What the council, the Sandaime, and even his sensei were doing to Naruto. This wasn't her fault. None of this was! She couldn't have stopped what was happening, and if it hadn't been her, than it would've been Rin in this situation.

Imprisoned because she'd been kidnapped and experimented on. It wasn't fair. It wasn't right.

"Hi..." Kakashi whispered, afraid of breaking the heavy silence.

"Hi, Kakashi." Naruto answered, her voice hoarse and dry. Kakashi swallowed just from hearing it.

The silence only grew heavier from their exchange, and Naruto turned her head so her bangs fell out of her eyes. There were some light in them. Just a small spark where there usually was a roaring flame.

Kakashi felt it again. His arm barraging through her chest. The lightning zapping through her body and breaking her from within. He couldn't breathe. Couldn't move or speak. The walls were coming in on him and for a moment it felt as if the gravity itself had turned dense.

Kakashi sunk to his knees, his palms falling flat against the ground as he bowed his head so low his nose was an inch above the floor. His heart twisting in his chest as he words spilled from his mouth. "I- I'm... I am so sorry, Naruto. I can't... I never wanted to hurt you. I didn't see you. I didn't notice
until it was too late. I should have killed you with that attack. I thought I did… Please.. Please forgive me." His body was shaking from repressed guilt and grief. His deep regret for what had happened.

There was a stunned pause, and though Kakashi couldn't see her he heard the chains clink as she shifted forwards. "Kakashi," Naruto murmured. "Don't. You idiot, you have nothing to apologize for. This is my fault. It's I who should apologize."

He was doubtful at her words, and didn't dare look up. So Naruto continued. "I was desperate and I used you… They did something Kakashi. I was not under my own control, and had I returned to Konoha in the state I was in… it would have caused a mass casualty. The only way to remove the influence was for someone to smash the seal they had placed on my heart. And I used you… I'm so sorry."

"s-sorry" The word echoed inside his head from that day. She had apologized when he'd put the chidori through her. He hadn't thought much of it because so much of his energy went into repressing the memory.

Kakashi didn't look up. His head tilted down and he sat down on his knees as he processed her words. "A seal… on your heart?" He asked eventually.

Naruto nodded, her chained feet shifting as she adjusted to sit cross legged. "It was giving me commands. It told me to return to Konoha. They always meant for me to be rescued. It's why you managed to get into the base. It's why they didn't start taking us seriously until later. When… when Iruka… It was a trap.. They made me into a time bomb set to explode upon my return to Konoha, but… that couldn't happen."

"Fuck..." Kakashi hissed while his hands fisteed tightly.

Kakashi slowly got to his feet again, feeling both heavier and lighter simultaneously. To know she was alive couldn't quite quench his fury at being tricked like that. He wasn't sure what else he should have done. Would he have acted differently if he knew it was a trap? Would he have left Naruto and Kushina at that base?

With renewed interest he looked up and studied Naruto.

At first he hadn't liked her at all. She had been annoying and cocky. Too much and too bright for someone of his temper to deal with. Not serious enough and too brash. Back then he'd thought her only redeeming quality was her skills. That she hadn't been completely useless.

He'd been so wrong. It wasn't a new thought. He already knew he had been mistaken about Naruto, Obito and his other comrades. In fact, there had been something wrong with him. And he'd worked hard to change himself. To allow himself to have friends. It pushed you to extremes you didn't know yourself capable off.

Everyone who'd gone to Kiri had gone of their own free will. Everyone set on saving Naruto and Kushina despite the mortal danger awaiting there.

So no… Knowing beforehand wouldn't have made a difference. He would still have pursued them and tried to save Naruto and Kushina. He might not have sent her back to Konoha right away without having Minato look at her seal, but she was an invaluable friend to him. She had the same conviction as Obito. The same belief and spirit he'd grown depended on in the last year. He'd sworn to protect his friends. Through any means he wanted them safe, and that made him willing to go further than he previously ever could have.
But how could he protect her from this?

How could he protect Naruto from their home? Her kidnapping had been traumatic enough, but to have your village turn their back on you like this... After going from one prison to the next. After doing so much and fight so hard only to have it all explode in your face. The growing numbness was transforming into a calm and looming rage.

Was this what had happened to his father? Was this the treatment they could expect for forming bonds with their comrades? In an impossible situation, where there was no right answer but a hundred wrong ones, and you had to choose the lesser evil...

They always preached the importance of comradery and teamwork, but look at where it got Naruto.

Naruto didn't feel the need to fill the extended silence, seemingly too subdued to make much effort at conversation anymore. It hurt to see her like this.

"Kushina is awake. Minato-sensei is with her." He explained softly. Naruto straightened up, her expression never changing but still curious enough to listen.

"Will she... will she live?" Naruto asked quietly. "They won't tell me much."

"No... They don't think so. The Kyūbi chakra have been keeping her going so far, but her health is worsening every hour. The chakra infusion you gave her is only a temporary patch and it won't last. They believe she'll die soon. Her chakra system was irreversibly ruined when the Kyūbi was extracted." Kakashi answered. Trying to be as direct and matter of fact as he could be in the situation.

Naruto was a mess. Minato was a mess. Everything was a mess.

Naruto nodded and fell back against the rock wall. Kakashi walked up next to Naruto and sat down on the edge of the mattress. Their arms gracing as he rested his back against the wall.

Naruto didn't speak. She was staring at the ceiling, her eyes completely dry. She must have run out of tears by now.

He felt her head fall sideways to rest on his shoulder, and for a moment they just sat there. Two children trying to make sense of the world.

Kakashi watched the clock visible through the bars. It was almost four thirty, and he was officially late for a meeting.

He couldn't be bothered. Naruto needed someone right now, and Shisui and Anko were prohibited from the holding cell. He noted the guard peeking at them through the bars, but Kakashi decided not to tell him to go mind his own business.

"I want to see her..." Naruto whispered weakly.

Kakashi wasn't sure how to answer. He already knew that but there was little he could do. If he broke her out she would be in a much worse situation than she already was.

The fear of what might happen was eating at him, but he couldn't let that show.

What if they decided on removing the bijū from Naruto and find a new host? A host that would be better suited or more controllable. Naruto was not one to follow rules blindly, and that spoke against her on top of everything else. Kakashi had to swallow. If Minato agreed... It was as good as
executing her.

"We could make a break for it you know." Kakashi whispered low into Naruto's hair.

The blonde shifted against his side and looked confused up, her blue eyes gaining some of its old energy. "Minato-sensei still believes I wouldn't go against him… But if… I won't let them kill you too." He muttered, being completely honest.

Naruto's head tilted to the side. Her expression unchanging. "I'll figure it out. I won't drag you into my mess, Kakashi." Naruto answered just as silently.

"And that's exactly why I would help you, but I think it will be fine. Things are… hectic right now, but we'll get this sorted out soon. You just wait and see." Kakashi answered and reached his arm over her shoulders in a one armed embrace. In an uncharacteristic move he pulled her to him, hugging her against his side.

For a moment Naruto froze. Kakashi kept her in place though, and slowly he felt her hug him back. He could feel her shaking. Soundless sobs rocketing through her while she silently cried, and Kakashi didn't mind.

Minato entered the dark, depressing hallway at a fast pace. He'd been here way too often in the last few days just making sure she was okay despite never letting Naruto know of his presence.

His eyes zoomed in on the guard who had yet to notice his approach. He looked up as he came closer and bowed as Minato stopped in front of him. "They fell asleep." The ANBU whispered, and Minato looked confused towards the bars separating them from Naruto's cell.

His eyes widened at what he saw. Naruto and Kakashi were asleep inside the cell. Kakashi with his arm around Naruto's shoulder while she rested against him.

For a moment he wasn't sure what to make of it. His mind was so tired, so exhausted. He had never even entertained the idea of there being anything more than comradeship between his student and Naruto. But their position made it seem like there was more. Mostly because he knew what an introvert Kakashi was, and that he would only volunteer to sleep in a prison cell for people he cared deeply about.

On autopilot he started wondering if maybe Kakashi needed to get prohibited from her cell as well. Hell, he himself was a flight risk for Naruto. Though only Hiruzen and Inoichi was aware of that fact.

He couldn't let the council kill her for being a victim. Screw the fact that she had been withholding information, crucial though it had been. He couldn't deal with more death. Couldn't handle another loss. He had enough with his wife.

He asked the guard quietly to open the cell, and when the door squeaked open the two woke up groggily. Though they saw him neither reacted much at his entrance.

Yeah… Kakashi was definitely a risk to Naruto's imprisonment. He had to stop thinking about the old Kakashi. Obito's death had changed him. Kakashi was not the same boy anymore.

"Kushina wants to see you, Naruto. It's important."

She was chalky pale. Her eyes were closed when she entered the small windowless room.
Naruto looked back at Minato who nodded once and closed the door from the outside. A seal activating as the door shut. "Naruto?" Whispered Kushina from the bed, her eyes opening from where she was resting on the bed.

She walked forward and sat down at the edge of the bed, taking Kushina's hand on instinct without taking her eyes of her mother. "You're okay… I'm glad… I wanted to see you. I've been having… weird dreams." Kushina whispered slowly.

"I'm here. And Minato is right outside. Do you… do you need anything? Can I… do anything?" Naruto asked and looked hopelessly around.

"Tell me… what's happening… Why… is Minato so… Why didn't you come before?" Kushina asked between lungful of breaths.

Naruto closed her eyes while pictures flashed behind her lids. Wondering where and how to explain. "They came for us. Kakashi led a group into the enemy base and got us out. Shisui, Raidō and Genma used the Hiraishin to get you back to Konoha quickly… While… I took care of the Kyūbi… I'm now the jinchūriki of two bijū." Naruto whispered without opening her eyes.

Some energy flashed back into Kushina's face, and her mouth opened in shock. She looked Naruto up and down as if she didn't believe it. "Two…? The three tails… and Kyūbi…"

"Yes. It was… chaotic, and the details aren't important. Not now." Naruto said and looked back over her shoulder at the door. Knowing Minato was itching to come back into the room.

"You asked me… before I blacked out… If I believe in time travel. That you were supposed to save us… this time." Kushina said, her focus solely on Naruto while she tried to speak. It looked painful.

"Yeah…" Naruto whispered.

"Why… Why did you ask me that?" Kushina asked.

"… You'll think I'm crazy."

"You… are a time… traveler?" Kushina asked, her tone nowhere near humorous or accusing.

Naruto tried to find the words to explain. To avoid the whole discussion. The words sounded stupid said out loud. Completely ridiculous. But she couldn't lie at a time like this. Naruto fiddled with the covers for a moment, before she chose the nonverbal approach and nodded.

"… That… sounds ridiculous." Kushina said and cracked a smile. Naruto couldn't help it, and smiled too.

Tears were forming in her eyes, and she felt one fall quickly down her cheek and stain the white sheet covering Kushina. "Yeah…"

"I believe you… You… You're different."

"I've always been different." Naruto said with a small sniff, quickly drying her eyes before reaching for Kushina's hand again.


"Yeah, me too."

Kushina took a deep breath and turned quiet. "Are you… If you… if you are a time traveler… where
did you come from? You were born in Konoha right?" Asked Kushina.

Naruto chuckled darkly and nodded again. "I was born in Konoha this year... I... I was sent back in time. I was almost seventeen." Naruto said, feeling increasingly foolish the more she talked.

The words felt unnecessary. Not important. Nothing had much meaning anymore.

"Are you our daughter?" Whispered Kushina barely audible.

Naruto felt herself unable to respond. Her throat had closed up completely and her mind was working on overdrive. Instead her focus was on the monitors at the back of the bed. The screen showing how Kushina's heart was beating. How her vitals were holding up. They made no sense to her.

"Naruto? You said... you wanted to save us this time. Were you talking about me and Minato?"
Kushina whispered, her hand squeezing Naruto's a little tighter.

"Yes." The word was confirmation of everything Kushina had guessed. And she knew that. Neither was looking at each other, and the heaviness of the room felt suffocating. Naruto shook her head and looked back at the door. Wondering when Minato would come barging in again.

"I'm glad." Kushina said eventually, her voice surprisingly steady again. "I believe you. To me it makes sense. Though I'm not sure if I would have believed you before now. I always thought you looked like Minato, but you act like me."

"..."

"You're so... so good. So pure and sure of yourself. But you always felt off somehow. Especially around me. At first I thought you had authority issues, but that's not the case. You just... thread very careful around certain people for no reason at all. Like me and Minato... and the Sandaime... Even Jiraiya. It's not like when you're with Anko and Shisui. That's really the only time I feel like I see you properly. You don't hide so much around them."

"I'm sorry...."

"You have nothing to say sorry for. I'm so, so proud of you, Naruto. I never wanted this for you. The Kyūbi was my burden. I was supposed to carry him, and now you... I am s-so sorry..." Kushina broke off at the end, her tears falling quickly.

"I have had him for a long time, mum." Naruto muttered, and the word made Kushina's eyes fly open and stare at her through thick tears. "I never knew who my parents were before I was sixteen. It wasn't too long before I fell back in time that I found out who you were. And I was so proud. Because my parents were brave, kind and wonderful people who gave everything for Konoha and their family. I've had Kurama- um, that's the kyūbi name by the way - inside me since the day I was born, and I can handle it. I'm your daughter after all." Naruto said with a watery smile.

Kushina smiled back brilliantly.

Outside Minato and Kakashi sat on chairs opposite each other in the empty the corridor. Kushina's room was inside the same base Naruto was kept imprisoned. Kushina's injuries were too specific to trust the hospital to keep quiet about the findings, so this facility had brought in trusted medics for her care. And despite being ordered to leave Kakashi had insisted on waiting to make sure Naruto was alright.
Neither student nor teacher was looking at each other while the girls talked. Or Minato wasn't looking. Kakashi was drilling a hole into his sensei's head with his gaze alone.

It took Kakashi eight minutes after Naruto's disappeared into Kushina's room before he cracked.

"You can't kill her." Were the first words he said. "This isn't her fault. None of this is her fault. If it wasn't for her we wouldn't have gotten away. Kushina would be long dead and most of the rest of us too. How can you even consider extracting the bijū?" Kakashi bit out furiously.

Minato looked evenly up. Surprised Kakashi had guessed as much. They'd never come out and said it was a possibility, but he guessed the kids had enough information to piece together the severity of the situation.

Kakashi didn't know the whole truth though. From his perspective there was nothing to discuss. But there was more. Naruto was accused of theft. Of withholding crucial information. Of fraud. And for potentially being a spy.

At least the council was under that impression. Danzō in particular.

Minato and Hiruzen had been doing damage control after Inoichi's mind walk, but the council had already been informed of their suspicion before they had talked to Naruto. Before the blood test and endless discussions.

And to appease Danzō was difficult. He wanted proof of innocence. And Naruto wasn't completely without fault.

If anything she'd withheld information and put people at risk by being an unknown jinchūriki inside the leaf village. She could have indirectly been the cause of a mass casualty if the Kyūbi had somehow broken free and she had lacked to report it to the Hokage. There were seal masters in Konoha. People who could make sure everything went okay. He could have done it. Or Kushina… Though he understood why she'd kept quiet - that didn't mean it was right.

She was also refusing to cooperate with them, which made it so difficult. And for every hour she refused to help the council grew more angry and restless.

And Minato was so distracted.

The situation would be awful no matter what, but with Kushina in this state it was unbearable.

The fact that Naruto was the only Uzumaki with a foreseeable future was the only reason the council still hadn't voted for her execution.

Minato was so deep in thought he had forgotten to answer Kakashi, and the boy was growing furious. Misinterpreting his silence. "If you- If you let her be executed… I will never forgive you. You can stop this." Kakashi hissed.

"It's more complex than you know. I'll do everything I can, Kakashi. But right now… With Kushina, I-" He stopped talking and ran a hand through his hair.

"Kushina loves Naruto. Do you think she would like it if her husband let her only remaining relative get executed for being kidnapped? For being abused? For doing her duty and being one of the few decent people who calls themselves ninja?" Kakashi muttered furiously and got to his feet. In frustration he lowered his mask and took a deep breath.

Minato's eyes widened. He had never seen his student without his mask on, but it looked like
Kakashi was growing claustrophobic from the tension. For years he had been Kakashi's sensei, and yet he had never seen the boy's face. Never even asked.

"Until this is over... I can't let you visit Naruto. You're prohibited from visiting her cell again." Minato said without taking his eyes off the teenager. Kakashi's face twisted in a grimace of fury.

He had a mole on his chin. Otherwise he looked astonishingly like a young Sakumo. Maybe a bit leaner than his father had been at that age though. He was a handsome young boy and it was odd he always wore that mask. He didn't seem to even think about it while he kept his mask down. Instead he was staring at his sensei as if he hadn't understood what had been said.

"Why?!" Kakashi demanded.

"Because you're a flight risk to Naruto. I see now that you're good friends. It shouldn't surprise me, not really. You risked a lot of lives to get her and Kushina back. I just assumed it had more to do with Kushina but that was a mistake. You care too much. You're too emotionally involved." Minato explained monotonously. Just going through the instruction on autopilot.

"AND YOU AREN'T?!!" Screamed Kakashi, ripping off his forehead protector so his face was visible in the light of the dimly lit hallway. He pointed at his eye. Obito's eye.

"I learned the hard way what's important. Your friends are what matters. Your people! You don't execute them for a mistake. For being afraid! And for good reasons too! Look what you are planning to do! Look at whatever information you found has done to her! How the hell can anyone be trusted to report to their leader if they fear being executed?!" He shouted with uncontrollable rage.

"Calm down, Kakashi..."

"No! You should be less calm! You shouldn't hold her in a prison cell while Kushina is dying in the next building! She fought! She fought so hard! She is nothing but loyal! The only difference between Naruto and me is that I was born in Konoha while she was born a few days outside the village! And yet no one is questioning my loyalty. No one is going to execute me though I went against a direct command and went after them. For getting a kid killed on my watch, and almost murdering a comrade myself! No one is putting me in a prison cell beaten, injured and scared! She should be with her teammates and her friends. She should be with you sensei. If anyone knows how you're feeling right now it's her. Kushina isn't only your family. She's Naruto's too!"

Minato stared mutely on as Kakashi took a few calming breaths. He was pacing up and down the corridor now. His whole body tensed like a wire while he stared at the floor. After a few turns he halted and without a word he pulled down his forehead protector to cover Obito's eye and rearranged his mask. Going back to his normal appearance.

"... I can't talk about this now, Kakashi. First Kushina." He replied tiredly. Fighting away the images Inoichi had shown him. Naruto was family... and yet she wasn't. She was... something. A potential child who would never be now... If things had been different. If Naruto had just said something. If he hadn't been so blind. If Kushina hadn't been kidnapped...

Minato had no fight left in him. He couldn't sleep. He couldn't eat. He barely had energy to get through the day. And he didn't want to fight with Kakashi because he full heartedly agreed.

Minato would fight for her, but not today.

Today all he had energy for was Kushina.
It was the dinner from hell. No one was talking, and all Anko could think of was how she wanted to be anywhere but here.

Kagami had invited the clan head family over for dinner. A long standing arrangement that was still scheduled when Anko had come over for her daily meal with the small Uchiha family. Usually it wouldn't be that big of a deal, but today it was pure hell.

She looked annoyed over at Shisui who had a new level of concentration when it came to using chopsticks. He was just as uncomfortable as she was.

Kagami had tried some halfhearted attempts at conversation, but no one was in the mood to talk. From previous interactions Anko could usually count on Fugaku having something to say. Normally negative, but at least something.

Today he was quiet, slightly agitated even, and Anko was pretty sure it was her presence which bothered him. Kagami had tried to talk with Mikoto, but she had been even more tight lipped than her husband.

Itachi was the only one who didn't look burdened by anything, but like the freak he was he seamlessly pretended nothing was out of the ordinary. That kid was too sharp for his own good…

So when the dinner finished it was with a huge amount of relief that Anko volunteered to do the dishes. Unfortunately she was redirected away, seeing as Mikoto was insistent at doing them instead. So she was forced to follow the company into the living room for "small talk" instead.

Anko was pretty sure whatever would be said was going to be as awkward as the rest of the dinner. But as she walked through the hallway she felt a hand on her shoulder, and turned to see Kagami standing behind her.

"How are you doing, Anko-chan? Have you been able to go see Naruto-chan yet?" He asked quietly so no one overheard them. Anko shook her head in the negative.

"I'm sure it will be alright."

"Naru will be up in no time. She's always one to bounce back better than before, but maybe I should just go. This is a family gathering and I am crashing this party." Anko said, hoping to be thrown out if it meant she could leave with a plausible reason. She wasn't sure what she'd done to make the mood so charged in here, all she knew was that it was better if she was removed from it.

"Nonsense. I'm not letting you go back to your apartment yet. You and Shisui have had a tough day and I don't want either of you to be alone. In fact, you can take the guest room again if you wish." Kagami said and gave her a friendly pat on the shoulder. "But I'm sorry we're being so quiet tonight. It's… clan things. Don't take it personally."

"It's fine. I appreciate that you invited me, Kagami-san." Anko didn't want to be here, but it was more because of the additional company than Kagami and Shisui.

Upon entering the living room they found Fugaku pouring himself a glass of sake before offering the bottle to Kagami. "I wonder if maybe Anko should go into another room. I wish to speak to Shisui about clan matters." Fugaku suggested though they all heard it more like a command.

"Uncle… Anko is a guest and my friend. She is welcome to stay." Shisui argued with a frown.

Fugaku's eyes narrowed as he sat down in the armchair while the rest found seats on the couch. Itachi coming in last with Mikoto and making himself comfortable on the floor. "It's confidential. It's
about our gekai kenkai, and she has no right to be here for this."

"The Sharingan?" Asked Anko before she could stop herself. Fugaku, who until now had mostly pretended she wasn't there, was finally forced to pay her some attention, and his displeasure couldn't be clearer if he'd spelled it on the Hokage mountain. What she'd ever done to him had always been a mystery, but then he always acted like this. She felt sorry for Itachi and Mikoto for having to put up with him.

The day had been emotionally draining from her grief for Iruka and Kushina, and fury for Naruto's situation. By now she felt irrationally vindictive, so despite knowing she had no business butting in like this she kept on. Like hell if the big bad Uchiha clan head scared her. "I'm Shisui's teammate Uchiha-dono. I don't know how you do it within the Uchiha clan, but personally I would never go against my comrades. Whatever concerns Shisui concerns me too - because we're on a team - and in a team we trust one another."

Itachi looked up with interest at Anko, a small glint in his eyes she couldn't remember seeing there before. Was he amused? Could the brat even feel such an emotion?

"Then we'll discuss this at a later time. You've been hard to get to lately Shisui, and this concern you specifically. I expect you to come to the station tomorrow at noon." Fugaku ordered and took another sip of his sake. Dismissing Anko immediately and returning to pretend she was air.

Shisui's brow furrowed in confusion, and he peeked at his father for answers.

His words made Anko wonder though; it was about the Sharingan and Shisui specifically? "Is this about what happened to their eyes?" Blurted Anko brashly. Unlike the others Anko seemed to be the only one who'd noticed the strange Sharingan in both Shisui and Kakashi, and had been dying to ask what the hell had happened. Even Orochimaru-sensei had seemed to miss that detail.

Fugaku coughed on his drink. Disbelief flashing across his face for a moment, while still making sure she knew she was being rude. She didn't care. This week had been too full of waiting and worry, so she'd let the matters drop until they found out what had happened to Naruto. But the subject was now on the table, and if she could get some answers - any answers at all - it would help. She was fed up with being in the unknown.

"Excuse me?" Asked Fugaku harshly.

"Them?" Asked Kagami.

"Yeah… Kakashi and Shisui. Their Sharingan went wonky during the mission." Anko replied with a pointed look at Shisui who didn't seem to understand what they were talking about.


"Hatake? His Sharingan changed too? Was it the Umino kid? What happened?" Asked Fugaku, holding up a hand to stop Shisui from continuing his query.

Everyone looked strangely at Fugaku now, and Anko felt her teeth clatter together. Shisui twitched slightly in his seat. "We can't speak of the mission, Uncle." Replied Shisui, a forced calm about him before turning back to Anko. "And what do you mean about my eyes changing?"

"Dude… Didn't you notice you were crying fucking blood? It looked like someone had senbon target practice with your eyes." Anko answered exasperated.

"I-" Shisui started, before a thoughtful look came over his face. "Oh..."
"Exactly, that happened after your eyes went weird. And well.. I'm not sure about Kakashi, but he blacked out just when his eye did that freaky Sharingan thing. Spinning like some sort of pinwheel off its socket you know, and then they changed and he was out of commission after that."

"Wait? Kakashi's Sharingan changed when… But I didn't see anything." Shisui said confused.

Annoyed at Shisui's slowness Anko swatted the boy's shoulder. "Of course you didn't. You stood on the side. Ensui, sensei and I came up behind the rest of you - a little ahead of Kakashi - and his face was lit up with the chidori so I saw it pretty clearly. And then he fainted you know… In fact..." Anko thought about it for a moment. "Is that why he fainted? He was a bit banged up, but not enough to get knocked out so abruptly, and definitely not so much that we suddenly couldn't wake him up anymore. Rin said he had chakra exhaustion too."

"No, Kakashi fainted because-" Shisui started arguing, but stopped himself with a startled look towards his family. Remembering they weren't allowed to discuss this.

"Did this happen when Umino-san was killed?" Asked Fugaku, the annoyance he had for Anko was now directed somewhere else. Outwards towards the room as a whole. She must have revealed something he didn't like, though she wasn't sure what.

"No." Anko and Shisui replied in union, which was not the answer he had been expecting. He shared a glance with his wife and Kagami, all of them seemingly puzzled.

Then Kagami realized something, because he turned towards his son with a sudden understanding. "You said she was badly injured… It was Naruto-chan, wasn't it?" Kagami said softly. "You all thought she was dead, didn't you?"

Anko and Shisui exchanged a loaded glance, neither confirming nor denying it. She felt a shiver go up her spine just thinking about it. "What does that have to do with anything?" Asked Anko, shaking her head out of her unpleasant thoughts.

Fugaku leant back, focusing on his drink again while he contemplated how to answer. It didn't take long before he came to a conclusion, because he firmly placed the glass on the table. Drawing everyone's attention with the simple action. "When you returned to Konoha I saw you at the Hokage office, Shisui." Fugaku started, his hand massaging his chin and casting a quick glance towards Anko.

"And I saw the same thing Anko-san saw. Your Sharingan had changed pattern." He paused. Maybe for dramatic effect, thought Anko.

"That dōjutsu is rare… In fact, you are the only one I know who has activated them in a very long time Shisui. It's a higher level of the Sharingan called the Mangekyō Sharingan."

Kagami shook his head and looked sadly at his son, whatever Fugaku meant by that worried him. Shisui himself hadn't reacted much. From the looks of it this was news to him, and the fact that Shisui was uninformed on anything - let alone clan matters - was a bit surreal in itself.

"I'm mystified about how Hatake can have activated it though - if that really is what happened. Obito-san must have had very strong bloodline for them to activate even through Hatake. It takes a specially strengthened kekkai genkai of our clan to activate those eyes... And it requires despair through responsibility."

Anko tried to decipher the sentence, not sure she understood what he meant.
"You mean… What happened to Naruto caused my Sharingan to evolve?" Shisui asked quietly.

Fugaku nodded solemnly. "It is a myth that the Uchiha would kill their best friends to achieve the Mangekyō Sharingan, but that's not true. It's true that the death of a loved one can activate the eyes but it's not the whole truth. If that was the case every member of the clan would have those eyes. Our clan history is bloody, and yet only a few of our clansmen has activated them. The most famous is probably Uchiha Madara."

Anko twitched slightly at the mention of the Uchiha traitor, and yet marveled at Fugaku's openness. She'd been sure he would toss her out of the room when she had acted up, and yet here she was.

"You already know the Sharingan can activate through emotional distress and many within our clan activated their eyes on missions. In fact, it's unheard of that the Sharingan activate without being under some form of pressure. With the Mangekyō Sharingan it's much more brutal. Very much more so."

Everyone was paying close attention to Fugaku as he tried to explain. Though Itachi, Shisui and obviously Anko were the ones uninformed, Kagami and Mikoto was just as interested. Whatever this Mangekyō Sharingan was they found it immensely important.

Fugaku took another break in the explanation while watching Shisui like he was the most interesting piece of a space time ninjutsu he'd ever seen. "It's about grief and responsibility. In your case Naruto-san is your teammate and a friend you love. You felt responsible for her welfare and life, before believing she died. That grief toppled with a strong pair of Sharingan would in theory be enough to activate them, and in your case they did…"

There was a pause, and then; "Wait… does this mean Shisui is in love with Naruto?" Asked Anko curiously, and despite the heavy atmosphere both Kagami and Mikoto lips twitched upwards. Itachi became thoughtful and looked inquiringly at Shisui who groaned.

Fugaku was the only one not amused. "There are many forms of bonds. As far as I know it's only been recorded to happen within family. Like a man losing his younger brother, like a father losing his child. If it's romantic or not has little to do with it. The love - or in our case grief over - someone you cared for deeply is what makes a difference."

"Naru isn't family though," Anko said, her lips twitching when she saw how annoyed Shisui was getting. "...yet."

Fugaku bristled at Anko's nonchalant attitude, finding it undignified if his expression was anything to go by. "Stop this nonsense, Anko-san. This is a serious matter. I have revealed some very sensitive information to you, because as you said earlier you are his teammate, and as his teammate I expect you to protect him and not to betray our trust. He can become a target all on his own if this information is leaked to the wrong person. The Uchiha has to fear kidnapping for even having the gene to activate the Sharingan, can you imagine how much more danger Shisui would be in if this came out?"

"Fine, fine," Anko replied and leaned back on the couch. Shisui was thinking hard about something, so she moved towards him and whispered conspiratorially; "But just so you know you have some competition. With Kakashi also activating those freaky eyes because of Naru… Poor Rin… Does that qualify as a love quadruple?"

Shisui simply glared at her, and Anko put on her most innocent smile in return.

"But what do they do?" Asked Itachi, talking for the first time since he arrived to the house.
Fugaku stopped glaring at Anko and turned to his son. "It varies. I won't discuss that of all things with Anko-san here. I'll say this though, do not use those eyes lightly, Shisui. They are a great gift, but there are equal downsides as there are upsides."

They lapsed into silence, giving Shisui time to think over the information he'd just received. He crossed his arms over his chest and seemed to close off from everyone even while being the center of attention.

It was Mikoto who eventually broke the silence. "Is there any news concerning Naruto-san and Kushina?" She asked, trying to change the subject.

Shisui was still spaced out, so Anko answered. "We can't talk about it." Anko grimaced at the used up line.

Mikoto's face fell. Her eyes sad as she turned to look out the window.

Fugaku was looking curiously from Shisui to Anko, but both were avoiding his gaze. Kagami was busying himself with another glass of sake while Itachi was twiddling thumbs in a corner.

"I hope things will be resolved soon." Itachi added quietly. "Minato-dono must be distracted with his wife in this state."

Anko peeked at the boy quickly before her eyes landed on the sake. People drank when they wanted to distract themselves. That was what she'd heard at least. She could understand why people fell to the impulse.

"He is. Naruto will be back on the team in no time." Kagami said with false bravado. No one bothered to point it out.

Minato sat in the chair next to her bed and watched helplessly as Kushina slept. There were deep rings under her eyes, and her ragged breathing cut him like a knife. Hiruzen had let him have the night off duty despite being more needed than ever because of the uncertain condition of Naruto. But right now he couldn't be anywhere but here.

He held her hand while she slept. Knowing she wouldn't wake up.

The medics were out of tricks. There was nothing more they could do for Kushina. Her body was shutting down and all they could do was make sure she was as comfortable as possible here at her end.

Their end.

His arm shook as he listened to the heart monitor beeping too slowly in the background.

Minato though of the first time he'd seen her. So full of life and attitude. She had personality enough for five, and used it to fight her personal demons. Her lost home village. The Kyūbi.

Her life had left scars Minato knew he could never truly understand. Not without experiencing them himself, but Kushina had faced everything head on. Always finding a silver lining no matter how impossible the situation was.

Even now… A few hours ago when she'd still been awake.

"You know... You know who Naruto is, don't you?"
Minato skipped over the reminder, drowning himself in old memories again. He had been captivated by her from the first moment, though Kushina had needed more persuasion. But in the end she'd picked him just like he had picked her. She had made him a better ninja. A better person.

And not once had he ever imagined the possibility of Kushina ever leaving him. Not really. He knew they lived dangerous lives. It was the price to pay for choosing to become a ninja. But it was this life which led him to Kushina. This life which gave him reasons to grow stronger in order to protect his loved ones. To protect the village where so many lived their lives in peace thanks to them.

Hiruzen had told him a few hours ago that he'd become the Fourth Hokage of Konoha. In two weeks he'd be Hokage and his childhood dream would become reality, but now he would have to do it without her. She would not be the one he could protect.

He had no right... Not really. He hadn't been able to protect her from this, had he?

Minato studied her face closely. Trying in vain to hold on to hope. Imagining she'd open her eyes and miraculously gets better. That they would have countless conversations about nothing in particular and go home to their newly purchased house. The house they had planned to fill a family together...

Naruto looked so much like her. Over the years people had pointed out the fun coincidence that Naruto looked like him, but he'd always disagreed. Naruto looked like Kushina... Somehow he'd always seen so much of Kushina in the blonde girl. He'd said it so many times it was ironic in hindsight.

"I don't need... evidence. I... know... in my heart... she is... our daughter."

The absolute certainty shone on her face even while Kushina hung onto life by a thread. And for a moment he had believed - but only for a moment. Because it became clear she'd used her last energy saying those words.

Kushina didn't care if Minato thought it impossible. That word was not in her vocabulary. It never had.

Minato had held himself together for the whole week. Through taxing jutsu, interrogations, endless discussions, revelations of life altering information, harsh decisions and endless suspicions.

Minato couldn't do it anymore.

He clenched his eyes shut as tears trailed down his cheek, a sound like a wounded animal escaping through clenched teeth while he clutched at her hand tightly. For the first time allowing himself to break apart to the sound of the heart monitor flat lining.

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to be continued...
Thank you so much for reading! The chapter was beta'd by the awesome AnjoRemix!

I know a lot of people wished Kushina wouldn't die, but she were always going to in this story. In canon Minato choose to seal the kyūbi inside Naruto instead of Kushina, which there must have been a reason for. Why make his son a jinchūriki when his wife was qualified, you know? And it might even save her? That way Naruto would have grown up with at least one parent. (and not be a jinchūriki… anyone else who's wondered about that? Well I did, but maybe I missed a detail somewhere in the 700 chapters, it's quite likely actually.)

Anyway, this is my answer for why that happened. Kushina's seal, (unlike Naruto's) made it so once out there was no going back again. And though Kushina survived for a while despite loosing Kurama, black Zetsu pointed out that every jinchūriki died when the bijū was extracted, but that the Uzumaki were stubborn and held on longer than anyone else. (but would still inevitably die.)
After the Rain... Comes the Sun - pt 2

Chapter Notes

Warning: Looong chapter up ahead. (It's like two chapters in one.) Angst and drama again, but don't worry, it will lessen from now on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty Nine – After the Rain... Comes the Sun

"You don't need to understand who Naruto is now, you need to know the Naruto who made it all the way here." - Uchiha Sasuke

Kurama growled deep in his throat, his eyes narrowing as the space flickered briefly around him.

Ever since that day they'd been in complete darkness. He could no longer hear Naruto in the air, no longer connect with the seal that once had allowed him a peek into the outside world.

That man… The Yondaime. The bane of Kurama's existence...

If Kushina's death hadn't been payment enough Kurama would rip him to pieces one of these days. He paced back and forth inside the locked cage, his irritation keeping him restless. He knew what was happening and it made his fur stand on end.

Isobu's heaved for breath, the other bijū hung suspended opposite his cage and was even more restrained than Kurama, at least he could stretch his legs. Once upon a time - both long ago and simultaneously just a short time ago - when he'd been inside Kushina, Kurama had been trapped in a similar seal and couldn't say he envied his younger brother.

But Isobu's new seal wasn't as strong though, not nearly as sturdy as the one Kushina had. It was an addition to the existing seal imprisoning Kurama, because Minato had to improvise when he'd come in to trap them like bugs.

Though the Yondaime had been helped by the fact that Kurama had no plans of leaving Naruto. It was annoying to realize he had actually grown to care for the insufferable brat, but there were other reasons too. Here, Madara would have a very difficult time getting to him. If the Sharingan user somehow managed to break Naruto than nothing else could keep him safe either, and Kurama much preferred the brat to the Gedo statue. Madara needed to be dealt with and he had decided to help his jinchūriki do it, because a Naruto with his help… Well, who knew what they couldn't achieve?

Like him, Isobu had stayed for a similar reason. He'd been informed of what the future held and found Naruto the lesser evil for now. Kurama knew she was just an escape route to the Three Tailed turtle, though Isobu seemed to have taken a liking to her. Especially after almost killing herself to release them. Kurama also suspected he was getting ideas of who she might be.

Personally Kurama wasn't entirely sure, but he had never met a human that fit the old man's description better than she did. "A blue eyed youth..."

Well… Minato had the same eyes… But still, he was almost eighty percent certain that if his Father's
prophecy ever came true, than the person he described was Naruto.

But things had grown troublesome after the Yondaime brought Naruto back to Konoha. Kurama had stayed quiet and let the girl heal in a show of cooperation. It would be obvious then that neither Kurama or Isobu meant any harm.

Now he regretted the diplomatic line of thought and blamed it entirely on Naruto. Because of course she was different, she was unique compared to the rest of these blundering humans.

Without any warning Minato had showed up so abruptly after he'd brought Naruto to Konoha, and hadn't left until they were both locked up. Their only real way to escape would have been by exiting the seal entirely, which for a short moment Kurama had considered, and yet… hadn't.

Neither had Isobu.

And then it was too late.

Minato had used clones… Kurama still couldn't believe he'd been fooled by his jinchūriki's favourite technique. In fury he recollected how swiftly the Yondaime had trapped him inside his cage again, *with a clone*, while spending the majority of his effort onstrapping Isobu to the wall.

When would Kurama stop underestimating that particularly annoying human?

And this time Minato hadn't even had the decency to die for the effort either… Though he guessed Naruto might have gotten a bit torn up if he had.

Maybe not so much now though.

He could still vaguely feel her. Their chakra connection might be dormant thanks to the suppression seals, stopping the flow that usually allowed them to communicate here in the mindscape, but he still felt the tinge of her in the air. Her sorrow and desperation seeking through the cracks of the seal that could never be entirely separated from her. Deep down Naruto could probably feel the tinge of his annoyance if she really tried, like he did with her.

But now a new presence could be felt, a similar but separate chakra Kurama would recognize anywhere.

His eyes narrowed and his growling rose in volume. His ears falling back as his claws came out. He appeared less elegantly and swiftly than Naruto could, but still in the same fashion.

Within another moment the man was fully visible. His familiar blue eyes looking straight back at him with a coldness he'd never seen in his jinchūriki.

"Yondaime." Kurama growled, and then he sprang at the bars, the whole room shaking as his temper got the better of him.

"Kyūbi." The man replied above the noise of the clattering bars, not a muscle flexing as Kurama tried to slap away the bug. "Or should I say Kurama?" Kurama's jaw snapped between the gaps of his cage. Wanting so badly to rip him apart for using that name. *His* name. "I came to ask you something."

Kurama roared. He wouldn't cooperate with this piece of flesh no matter what sort of relation he had to Naruto. He'd eat him. Chew him until there were no piece large enough left of him recognisable as a human. "You despicable ant. You know nothing, and I will tell you nothing!" He roared.
Minato looked over his shoulder at Isobu who was leaning forwards in his chain. "Free us this instant, human! Or you will regret it when I get out of here!" Shouted Isobu.

Minato looked dismissively away, his eyes meeting Kurama's again. "Why did you save her? Why did you stay with Naruto? What is she to you?"

The bijū turned quiet at once, only their growling intensifying. The Yondaime frowned, his fists clenching. "I see… Naruto might trust you two, but I do not. I'll be back later then. Until you can answer me, Naruto stays imprisoned."

Her footsteps echoed through the dark hallway as Naruto was guided by two guards in their late thirties. She had no idea who they were or where they were leading her. If at the end of the walk would lead to freedom, a prison cell or an execution room.

She kept her head low, feeling a burning shame at her situation. Clad in grey prison clothes, bound by the hands and chains to her feet.

It was a nightmare.

Each step made her think of time moving forwards and how little control she had over it. How utterly at mercy she was at their hands. Her village which had turned against her, and in a way it was so many times worse than anything she'd experienced in Kirigakure.

The fright which had slowly been building up inside her was starting to take a hold of her, and her thoughts had turned dark. Just the thought of Minato was enough for an anger so violent to flare up in her and halt her movements.

He knew. He knew who she was and yet… How could he go through with this? This wasn't the Minato she had met before in her mindscape where she'd first spoken to him. Or in the memory Kushina had shown her of the night she was born.

Was Minato even him? Her father? Or was he just someone who could have been?

Traitorous tears were pressing against her eyes, but she forced them back by taking calming breaths. She was helpless and there was nothing she could do. Minato had made sure of that when he had sealed off her chakra completely. She couldn't even access her mindscape anymore. There was just endless silence.

They walked past a window, and Naruto spotted sunlight and a blue sky, making her think of those who were still out there.

What were Anko and Shisui doing now? Or Kakashi and Rin? Were they worried? What would they think? If she was executed how would they recall her? As the girl who got completely screwed over during the war? Reckless Naruto who got herself kidnapped? What would they say?

And what if she were just imprisoned for the rest of her life? It wasn't unheard of, but what life would that be? Never be allowed to be free... As if she wasn't imprisoned already.

Out of her time. Out of her home. Out of peace.

Just sitting there and wait for the Akatsuki to come get her and put her out of her misery. Wait for the Uchiha massacre. Wait for Madara...

Naruto gasped for breath as panic welled up inside her. Halting in her steps as her legs started
shaking.

Her escorts turned as Naruto stopped. "We're almost there." Said one of the guards without emotion. Naruto heeded them little mind but forced her feet to take one step in front of the other. If anything it was nice to be able to move again. Who knew how many steps she had left.

The guards stopped in front of one of the many doors. It had the number 1173 written on it, and Naruto held her breath when he held the door open for her. Naruto was apprehensive as she walked inside, almost too scared to find out her new situation.

But it was just a room. A small one with nothing inside. Concrete walls, concrete floors and concrete ceiling. No windows.

She turned back to the guard in confusion. Was this prison? Wasn't Minato or anyone even going to tell her what the verdict had been before throwing her in jail? "What…?" She asked subdued.

"We'll be back soon." Said the tallest of them, and without further explanation closed the door. The click of the lock rang through the room, and then there was complete darkness.

Naruto wasn't sure how long she'd been in there. Time was a funny thing… Without any way to indicate time in the form of passing daylight or distractions, and with nothing but your own breath to listen to an hour felt like a whole day.

Naruto was sitting in the corner. She'd used her tied hands to find the wall, and followed it to a corner where she'd sunk into a ball like a pathetic cornered animal.

She was also in more than emotional distress. Something was very wrong with her.

Maybe it was the effect of being under chakra suppressing seals for so long or maybe it was the unbalance in her system, but Naruto was experiencing pains.

She'd heard Minato say her chakra was acting up. That Isobu on top of Kurama was a bad combination because their natures weren't compatible. There was a reason why people didn't use the same person twice to hold bijū, and Naruto could testify now why it wasn't recommendable.

It was why Minato so frequently had to deal with Naruto these days. Every other day he came to suck out her chakra and do a series of techniques Naruto didn't know. Simply because it lessened her pain.

How he knew she was in pain in the first place was a mystery though. She'd never said a word about it. No way she'd tell them that now. Who knew what they'd do if she did.

Another round of these pains were shooting through her now. Her whole body crawled with stinging pain, an agony that made her nerves burn, and Naruto gritted her teeth while she waited for it to pass. It always had so far. Either it was an hour or six, eventually it would go away. It had so far.

With nothing but pain and her thoughts Naruto let her mind wander once again to everything that had gone so wrong in the last few weeks. From friends and warmth to a prison cell.

Then she'd started thinking about her mistakes.

About why she hadn't tried harder to get back to her own time. Naruto had never really tried.

In her years as the no-name orphan on team Orochimaru she had never asked anyone about time
travel ninjutsu before recently. Why hadn't she? Maybe someone, somewhere, would have known. Maybe someone did. Instead she had messed so much up, and now she was wasting away before she could right her wrongs.

When had she run out of time? Despite turning back the clock and growing younger, she had somehow shortened her lifespan. She had abandoned her old friends. Shino would never be born, Ebisu was dead, Kushina was dead, Iruka was dead and so was her unborn self in this timeline.

Was this the universe's way of making sure that happened? Since Kushina and Minato never had a child this time, it meant Naruto was never born. Never conceived, and therefore had to die. To be erased. The universe was righting up her mess.

And Naruto was scared because she didn't want to die. She didn't want to go yet.

She thought of Anko. Her best friend would be so furious at her for screwing up so bad and leaving her behind. At Minato for executing her. At the next jinchūriki for being picked.

Shisui would… Naruto wasn't sure. He would be sad, she knew that. They were friends and Shisui valued his friends almost as much as Naruto did. But he understood the system better. In his eyes everyone had flaws, but everyone could be redeemed too. If the council executed her he would still see the good qualities as well as the bad. He didn't see the world in black and white. Not to the extent Naruto and Anko did. He didn't let his emotions rule him, and that would allow him to get over it. He understood sacrifice.

The idea that he would one day be happy again made Naruto unreasonably angry. She wanted everyone to miss her. To see that she shouldn't be dying!

Anko, Shisui, Kakashi, Ensuī, Jiraiya, Minato… They would all get over it. The world would keep on turning, and it would do so even without her. It made her so angry.

She missed Sakura. She missed Sasuke. She missed her sensei, Kakashi. She missed the old gang.

Shikamaru would have known what to do. He would have had some silver lining which ended with the word; troublesome.

Kiba would have called her baka and Hinata would have held her hand and just been there for her. Ino would have thrown a fit, badmouthing the guards and sharing all the dirty secrets she'd come across.

Chōji would have offered her food. Lots and lots of comfort food. And that would have been quite a sacrifice too, seeing as the boy was only ever selfish when it came to nourishment.

Neji would have been quiet about it, but all the while shown that he was worried for her. He would have been helping in his own way. Lee would be crying. Not much help but the idea that someone would miss her meant a lot to Naruto.

Tenten would be trying to get Lee to stop crying while at the same time cursing Naruto for getting herself into trouble again. Shino could have sent her bug messages, keeping her distracted, and Sai would have drawn her a cartoon.

She kept herself busy like this. Picturing her old friends and how they would have acted in this situation. But she wasn't sure if it was correct what she was imagining. Would it be so much more different? Sure, they knew Naruto's true origins, but they didn't know her any better than her friends in this time, and they couldn't oppose the village. Naruto didn't want them to.
So she reminisced about their old missions. When they had tried to rescue Sasuke and failed spectacularly. About Gaara and their first meeting during the chūnin exam. About dinner at Ichiraku ramen stand, and Teuchi was old and white haired instead of middle aged and brunette. About classes where Iruka was her sensei, and not her dead classmate.

Naruto had no idea how long she sat there. Because inside her head she was years into the future, and Madara was dealt with, there had been no Fourth War and she had brought Sasuke back home to Konoha. Tsunade was retiring and handing Naruto the ropes, while Sakura and Kakashi was buying her ramen.

The dream was so much more beautiful than reality.

From outside she could hear people coming up the hallway, but Naruto didn't pay it much attention. She was too deep inside her own mind, her imagination so much more comforting.

But when the sound of the handle being turned rang through the thick silence her eyes opened. The guards from before were back, but so was a third person.

Minato.

After giving the room a quick check they locked him inside with her.

The mask was up again, the man Naruto had now started identifying as the 'Yellow Flash' instead of her potential father was as cold as ever. During their meetings he never let his guard down. "I'm sorry I couldn't come down sooner." Minato apologized eventually in a dry tone, clearing his voice slightly at the end.

Naruto didn't reply. What was she going to say anyway? That's okay?

It wasn't.

"I've been talking to the council all day. We came to an impasse, but well..." Minato took a deep breath and shook his head. "Some wish for a transfer of the bijū, but that's not happening." Minato explained.

Naruto tilted her head to the side. That was good news... It meant she wouldn't be executed.

"But Naruto... You did do something wrong. I can't explain the truth to them, so me and the Sandaime has given an alternate story. It's still just us that know that you're..." He stopped again, lost for words while he dragged a hand through his hair. "The fact is that you withheld crucial information from us for years. Information we could have used to track down Madara already. When you became a ninja you took a vow to protect the village to the best of your capabilities. To serve honestly and loyally to no one but Konohagakure. You've failed that vow by keeping this secret, and though it was not done out of disloyalty it will still have consequences."

Naruto felt her fists tighten. What was she supposed to have done? It had gotten more and more difficult too. At first the secret had been at the tip of her tongue so many times, but as time passed it had grown harder and harder to admit the truth, until it came to a stage it felt just about impossible to admit. It still did in many ways. And had she come out and told them right away they might have acted a lot worse than they were now. Back then she'd been an outsider brought back by Jiraiya. They wouldn't have put any credibility behind her words at all. The only reason they were now was because they were forced to.

"However, you won't go to prison and you won't be executed. Eventually you'll be allowed back
"... But..." Naruto said, not sure what exactly she could say. It was better than prison and death, so she could feel herself come back to life now that the numbing panic was slowly ebbing out, but it still didn't make sense. Probation? Exile?

"I have a few ideas for what you'll be doing while away. We need to find a solution for your current condition. Your chakra network is overloaded and your body can't handle the imbalance. It's a better option to have you away from Konoha when you start that training anyway. Until a permanent solution can be found you need to be under chakra suppression seals too - if not entirely than partly. That way you will have access to your chakra but some of the bijū chakra can't harm you to such a degree. You should know that no matter what you will be in pain if you do though. Your own chakra use can hurt you... So for now... that's what's happening." Minato said into the silence.

"I see..." Naruto muttered.

Minato got up to his feet, already on his way to leaving. Naruto looked up when she heard him knock five times at the door. When the door opened he looked back at her. "I'm sorry." He said genuinely.

Naruto was too numb to do anything but nod. "I am too."

Kakashi sat nervously in the brick clad lobby while they waited for Naruto to appear. It was a month since she'd been imprisoned, and the process had taken extremely long. Today however they would finally let her out, and he and the others had made sure to be mission free for her release. Minato had gone to fetch her ten minutes ago but they had yet to return.

While they waited they kept themselves busy in various ways. Orochimaru was reading through some papers he'd brought along, not really affected by their current location and from his nonchalance it seemed he regularly used the prison lobby as an office.

Anko was pacing in circle like a dog chasing its tail, while Shisui was leaning against the wall, using the time to study the cracks of the floor with unnatural focus. Rin had joined Kakashi on the bench, her hands nervously fist in her lap. They were all eager to get Naruto home, but the wait was showing the strain.

Weeks had passed by though, and the time Naruto had been kept imprisoned had not been uneventful. Because of her imprisonment she had missed Kushina's funeral along with Hitomi's and Iruka's, and none of them had been allowed access to visit on Minato's orders. Especially after
Minato had taken over the Hokage seat a couple of weeks ago.

Kakashi felt happy, sad and angry all at once at his sensei these days. It was confusing to have so many conflicting emotions concerning someone he looked up to like he did with Minato.

He was glad the village was now under his sensei protection, and he believed from the bottom of his heart that Minato would do a great job under his new title. But Kakashi was also worried for him because he just lost Kushina, and though he kept himself busy it was clear Minato was suffering. And lastly he was so angry he could throttle Minato for keeping Naruto locked up for so long.

The day after Minato came into office he'd summoned the squad who'd led the "Uzumaki Rescue Mission" into his office - namely those who knew Naruto was a jinchūriki - and finally they had received an adequate explanation for everything that had happened since their return to Konoha.

Naruto wasn't just the jinchūriki of one bijū, but two.

That was the reason so much confusion had arose in the beginning. The council wanted to make sure she was both a suitable candidate to hold the bijū physically, and make certain she was mentally capable of keeping her two new charges. It was all about the village's security and Naruto's future role in it.

It had been quite a shock to have it confirmed. Kakashi had often wondered what had happened after Naruto had left Orochimaru and him to fight Ao and Suikazan, but apparently she had succeeded in her wild attempt at reclaiming the Kyūbi. Kakashi had already suspected as much though he was puzzled as to how she did it.

Minato hadn't gone into details on that though; breezing through it when Ensui had asked by saying she had used the already existing seal from the previous bijū sealing and her chakra chains.

He'd told them they were still testing Naruto's seal, and were making sure she was ready to rejoin the village. Because at that time she hadn't been. He'd even hinted that Naruto wouldn't be back on active duty for quite some time either, and that she might need training outside the village.

He'd also explained what Naruto had already told Kakashi. That she had jumped into the chidori because of the cursed tag seal giving Naruto commands to act against Konoha. Kakashi's attack had squashed not just her heart but the seal too, and her jinchūriki status had done the unimaginable and saved her despite the sure death sentence.

Her teammates had all been stricken by that, though an underlining understanding was finally blooming within them. Kakashi had told Rin what Naruto had told him, but not Anko and Shisui.

If he were to explain it would just sound like some desperate excuse. And he didn't want to give excuses. No matter how it came to be Kakashi had still nearly killed one of his closest friends, and he had to live with that knowledge.

Ensui had also taken a leave of absence.

Losing his whole team had crushed him, and the boy didn't know if he wanted to continue being a ninja after what went down. Kakashi knew Shisui had visited a few times and tried to talk to him, but the boy wasn't ready to discuss the matter yet. He was not allowed to leave Konoha anymore though, his knowledge of Naruto's jinchūriki status made him tied to the borders of Konoha as long as he was off active duty. The knowledge was now an S-ranked secret they didn't wish anyone but those who already aware to know of.

Then there was Orochimaru… He was on the warpath for being overlooked for the Hokage post,
and was still refusing to address Minato as anything but Namikaze-san both in public and in private. He’d also refused to speak with the Third since the announcement had come up.

Kakashi wondered if Naruto’s situation had spoken against Orochimaru for the Hokage post. He’d been the senior shinobi on the mission and in charge of the platoon which left from Konoha, and yet it had been such a spectacular failure it reflected badly on the Sannin in hindsight. Kakashi suspected that was what Orochimaru thought at least.

And then just a few days ago Shisui and Raidō had been promoted to jōnin.

Kakashi had been startled when Anko told him and Rin of the news. It was Minato who had pressed for the promotion, and though he understood Raidō quite well - after all they were the same age and Kakashi knew exactly how good his old classmate was - he was surprised by Shisui’s promotion.

He was just so damn young. Kakashi was considered an extremely young jōnin himself, but Shisui was three years younger than even he was. Kakashi hadn’t worked much with him except on the latest mission and during the Hiraishin training with Minato, so he couldn’t say for sure, but the boy had a very good head on his shoulders at the very least.

But according to Anko, Shisui was good all around. He didn’t really lack in any area. He specialized in ninjutsu and genjutsu, but he could do all the arts to a considerable extent. From strategy to medical ninjutsu Shisui had above average, which made him suitable for a jōnin position despite not being old enough to be allowed access to the adult section of the book store. But then Kakashi wasn’t, technically speaking, allowed there either...

And then there was the fact that the village was extremely short on jōnin these days. After the war a lot of their higher ups had been killed, and the shortage was affecting everyone’s workload. Had the times been different they might have waited with Shisui’s promotion, but unfortunately the Uchiha wasn’t that lucky.

All in all the weeks had passed by eventfully in the aftermath of the Kiri mission, but they were glad the waiting had come to an end.

They all looked up as the door opened, and Naruto came out followed by Minato. Kakashi noticed she wasn’t wearing grey, but standard dark shinobi clothes. The absence of a forehead protector also caught his notice. But though she was being released, the girl was still not reinstated as a Konoha shinobi.

"Naru!" Anko screamed the moment she saw her and tackled Naruto. They stumbled backwards but Minato caught Naruto’s shoulder in time to prevent her from falling.

The girl recoiled at the touch, and Minato hurriedly removed his hand.

"Anko..." Naruto whispered with a relieved smile and hugged her back. Anko released her just so Shisui could hug her too. The boy was smiling from ear to ear.

Orochimaru put down his papers and stepped up to his students, he placed a hand on the top of Naruto’s head making her look up at him through her messy bangs. The girl got a strange gleam in her eyes as she studied her sensei. A small smile gradually growing on her lips. The Sannin smirked back before letting his hand fall.

"You are the worst, you know? I’m going to get Kakashi’s hair color if you keep doing this to me!" Anko said happily while shaking Naruto back and forth like rag doll by the shoulders.

"Yeah, I’m considering locking you up just to keep you in check from now on." Shisui partly joked.
Naruto spotted Rin and him as they came forward, and then next moment Rin had thrown herself at her too. Pushing away Naruto's team while crying and laughing as she squeezed the short girl as hard as she could.

Kakashi watched them with a warm feeling in his stomach. Everything had been scattered and disorganized, but now something was shifting back into its rightful place. Naruto met his eyes over Rin's shoulder, and he could see the emotions there. Trepidation, hurt and relief swirled under glossy cerulean irises. But as Rin released the girl, he refrained from moving into the crowd.

They'd made their peace already.

"Thank you so much... I'm glad you guys are here." Naruto said, her eyes suspiciously red as she looked them in turn.

Anko laughed, her voice light and relieved. "Hey, Gai and Ensui tried to get in too, but there's only so many allowed in the lobby of a prison at a time. Wired law though... I wonder who had so many visitors they had to get a law to limited the number."

Naruto chuckled weakly, still quite on edge. "Can we just leave? I have spent so much time doing nothing. I want fresh air! I want to use my chakra now that I can access it again! And ramen! We are so having ramen today, dattebayo!" Naruto exclaimed. Despite her effort the words didn't hold the same energy he remembered, but it was a thousand times better than how she'd been in the prison cell.

Kakashi couldn't stop smiling as they left, but in the doorway he turned towards his sensei.

Minato was looking at them with distant eyes, a deep rooted sadness just underneath the surface which he couldn't quite conceal from someone who knew him as well as Kakashi.

It was almost identical to what he'd seen in Naruto.

She knew it was temporary, but Anko couldn't help feeling over the moon with happiness with Naruto's return. They were all back in the apartment, and quite a few had joined them for Naruto's home coming.

Everyone but those who'd been involved were under the impression Naruto had been severely injured, and was returning from a very restricted hospital stay. She knew Asuma believed Naruto had been poisoned with something extremely contagious during the mission, which was why none of them had been allowed to visit. They had let them believe as much by answering with the now tedious; "we-are-not-allowed-to-speak-of-it" line.

But now they were having dinner all over the living room again, just like before, though Anko could sense Naruto wasn't entirely with them.

Her smiles were just a little less wide, her eyes a bit less lively and there was just less of Naruto as a whole. In the back of her mind Anko worried, but she was still too jubilant about having her best friend back to really think much of it.

And after everything it was to be expected Naruto couldn't just fall right back into old habits.

Rin and Kurenai had taken over Anko's kitchen to make dinner for everyone, demanding that as long as Anko focused on cleaning the hell hole they could make the food. Anko had rarely been home the last month. She'd crashed at Shisui's as often as she could and only came home for the occasional shower and clothes. It had showed at the state of the place.
Now it was back to its old standard, Naruto included where she sat in the middle of the crowd with a tender smile on her face. She was looking at each of them with something akin to wonder. The list of people who had wanted to join tonight was admittedly a bit ridiculous.

In total eighteen people had squeezed into their tiny flat, and Anko had luckily gotten the window seat this time around. She sat with one leg on each side of the frame while Kakashi had taken the other. It was just claustrophobic sitting with the crowd.

The Uzumaki rescue mission squad were all there, but some of Naruto and Shisui's old classmates had tagged along this time too. Chou and Mizuki were for the first time joining for dinner on Shisui's insistence when they'd walked past them on the street. Anko had been miffed about the invitation. After all it was no secret that Naruto and Mizuki could barely stand each other, but it was going fine so far.

Two of Naruto's classmates from before she jumped up a year, Izumo and Kotetsu - a duo where you couldn't see one without the other being far away - had also joined for the first time. The boys had pestered Shisui and Ensui for information after they heard Naruto had been severely injured, so they'd been invited too.

Akiko was a constant at these dinners, but the civilian girl was talking more confidently than Anko had ever seen her with Asuma and Aoba about her new accommodations. The girl had lived outside the orphanage for a while now, and had already been forced to switched homes about three times despite being only ten years old. But this last place was apparently a lot nicer than her earlier ones.

Asuma and Kurenai hadn't been there that often, though they were no strangers to these dinners. However Shizune was, but she was doing a good job of ignoring the absolute ruckus around her while enjoying herself.

The night was cheery, and Anko couldn't help feeling as if things were finally looking up.

It struck her that the crowd had changed a lot since the dinners started. At first there had just been Naruto and her, but soon Shisui, Ensui and Iruka had joined. They had eventually wrestled Kakashi into coming, and soon three teams had been making food and chatting. Of the original nine, three were now dead.

But the absence of Obito, Iruka and Hitomi was not forgotten, and tonight was in their honor as much as Naruto's.

It would be a hell of a cleanup, and it was always stressful to have these dinner parties with a bunch of children, but Anko wouldn't trade these chaotic events for anything in the world.

The only downside was the continuous ice front between Kakashi and Shisui. Ensui was also subdued around the older jōnin, but not to the extent Shisui was.

It was a strange sort of fight. There had never really been an argument, and the two could coexist within proximity of one another, but Shisui had developed a seething resentment for Kakashi bordering on obsessive.

Anko had forgiven Kakashi a while ago. She had never really blamed him to such an extent to begin with. Even in the heat of battle Anko had saved Kakashi when the Three Tails had exploded from Naruto, but she suspected that if Shisui had been the only one to witness the event he would have left Kakashi there.

To Anko it just proved that Shisui really was a kid despite his jōnin promotion. He knew what had
happened now but still held onto his irrational anger. In truth she was a bit relieved. Shisui was sometimes too mature for his own good and didn't really let his emotions rule him. So it was nice to find out he was as human like the rest of them somewhere in that prodigy head of his.

"Oh, and Aunt Mikoto just told me I'm getting a new cousin!" Shisui exclaimed suddenly, drawing smiles from the people around him.

Naruto's head snapped towards Shisui so fast her hair whipped Rin straight in the face. "What?" She asked breathlessly, and Shisui – happy to get such a reaction out of Naruto - grinned widely. "Yeah, she's due this summer so she's well along too, which means Itachi will have someone else to terrorize instead of me!"

"Uchiha Itachi terrorizes you?" Asked Anko skeptically. The boy was a prodigy like Shisui, but a completely different type. Where Shisui still had social antennas the other boy was an introvert to frightening degrees. He was just scary sometimes. It just wasn't natural for a child that age to be that freaking composed at all times.

"You don't know him like I do, Anko. Itachi has his own way of terrorizing people."

"What does he do?" Asked Ensui doubtfully. "Eat your ice cream?"

Shisui's face fell, meaning Ensui had hit spot on, and Anko barked out laughing at the pout Shisui was sending his old classmate.

"It's really bad. Every time we look after him he empties the freezer of ice cream!"

"You should introduce him to dango then," Anko suggested. "It's so much better than ice cream anyway."

"Nothing is better than ice cream." Shisui argued and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Wrong, ramen is the food of Gods, dattebayo." Naruto countered at once, looking affronted that Shisui had even suggested that anything could be more appetizing then her precious instant food.

"Your team has a strange obsession with food." Ensui said while sipping water from his paper cup. Anko mused over the fact for a second and smiled evilly. "You're right… Sensei eats almost exclusively eggs."

"Well obviously. He's basically a snake isn't he?" Naruto muttered, but the normal loathing was absent from her tone. It was more of an reflex to diss their sensei by now.

"So Naruto," Kurenai's voice cut across the crowd, "When will you be back on duty? Anko told us you're still not on the roster."

Naruto's hand absent-mindedly fell to the back of her head, her expression closing off at Kurenai's question. "Actually, I'll be leaving the village for a while."

The voices around the room quieten down, and Anko looked down frowning. She already knew this, but she didn't appreciate the reminder.

"Why? Where are you going?" Asked Izumo.

"I'm actually… sort of."
"She's going on a training trip." Kakashi cut her off, saving Naruto from the blunt lie she was about to spout to them all. The truth was Minato was sending her out of the village for her to gain control of her new powers. The new Hokage didn't want her anywhere close to Konoha for that. "And Rin is going too." Kakashi added at the end.

"What? You're leaving too?" Asked Kurenai disappointed as she turned to Rin. The brunette smiled back warmly.

"Shizune is going as well. We get to travel and train under Tsunade-sama!" She replied excitedly. She'd been bursting to tell everyone about the news for over a week. They weren't sure why the slug Sannin had been seen in Konoha so much lately, but she was well on her way out again and now she was taking two apprentices with her.

Originally she had just planned on taking Shizune, but Rin – fed up with just waiting around for Naruto's verdict – had heard that one of her old classmates was going to train with the Sannin, so she had gone to pester Tsunade until she accepted her too.

"Wait, are you going with Tsunade-sama too? But... you're not a medic." Asuma said confused, pointing to Naruto.

Rin interrupted before Naruto got the chance to answer. "Just for a while. Jiraiya-sama has agreed to train her, but he's currently on a long term mission and he'll meet up with us later. But she'll leave the village with us and stay for a few months before she starts training with Jiraiya-sama. I am so excited about this!" Rin was almost bubbling over, and Anko couldn't help but smile at her excitement.

She wasn't looking forward to Naruto's departure at all. She would be gone for years, which meant Anko had to sublet her room until Naruto returned. There was no way she was giving up the place though.

Naruto would return eventually and when she did she'd need a place to live, and Anko was determined it would be here in their flat. The place they'd made a home and grown stronger together. Two orphans who had managed to get out of their circumstances despite the odds being against them.

Aoba whistled to show his impressment and looked at Naruto. "Wow, Jiraiya-sama has offered to train you? He was Hokage-sama sensei, you know. I'm so envious of you right now."

"Wait!" Interrupted Kotetsu, holding up a hand to stop the sudden ramble starting up in the room. He was smiling crookedly at Naruto. "Does that mean you'll have trained under all three Sannin by the time you get back?"

Naruto was thoughtful for a moment before shrugging. "I'm not sure how much Tsunade can teach me. I have no talent whatsoever in medical ninjutsu. But I guess it can't hurt to know some tricks if things turn bad on a mission."

Shisui and Anko snorted in unison despite not finding it funny at all.

"When are you leaving?" Asked Kurenai, addressing Rin though Shizune answered.

"Not for a while. To give Naruto time to recover properly Tsunade-sama said we'll leave in about two months."

That was also a lie, though Shizune didn't know that. She just repeated what she'd been told. Because Shizune didn't know Naruto had already recovered, and she also didn't know that the reason for the delay was that the council was making sure her security was adequate during her absence.
They were not about to send a fresh jinchūriki of two bijū out into the world without making sure they got their weapon back intact.

"Oh, so we still have some time then." Kurenai said relieved. "I'm glad. It will be so weird when you three leave. I'll be like... The only female left of our graduation class."

"Hey!" Anko shouted, and Kurenai grinned back teasingly.

"You don't count, Anko. You're brasher than all the guys put together."

Anko couldn't help but glance at Gai. Feeling truly offended now. She was more brash than Gai? But he was in a league of his own. Though she was a bit more sarcastic than the green clad chūnin. Gai was brash in a nice way. Anko in a spiteful one. It was just how she was, and she didn't feel bad for it.

"How long will you be gone?" Asked Akiko, cutting off Anko as she was about to retort to Kurenai's taunt. The Chūnin was startled, wondering when the hell the girl had grown a spine. To Anko Akiko always been the meek, pretty girl Naruto had taken pity on.

"A few years." Rin replied eagerly, though peeking at Kakashi from the corner of her eye. Kakashi was staring out the window without paying them much attention anymore. At least that's how it looked.

"Well, here's to Rin, Shizune, Naruto and their inspiring new journey in life! They will grow stronger with their hard work and dedication!" Gai shouted over the crowd, raising his paper cup of water in a toast. People cheered and mimicked him. Not noticing how Naruto hadn't raised her cup at all.

The party came to an end later than anyone had foreseen, and the only one left was Shisui who had offered to help the girls clean up the worst of the mess.

The three were exhausted and it was close to midnight. The next day would be their first team meeting in forever, and Naruto hoped Orochimaru wouldn't be too brutal though...

She was quietly dusting the floor while Anko was doing the dishes. Shisui was crawling around on the floor picking up any leftover paper cups or plates disregarded at the most random of places. He came back to the trash can with his arms full of half dirty one-time cutlery and disposed of it before leaning against the counter. Wordlessly he started drying the dishes Anko had washed.

"It's nice to have you back Naruto." Shisui said quietly without turning away from his task. Naruto stopped her dusting and looked at the back of his head.

"I missed you guys." She answered quietly. Anko let the casserole fall back into the sink and turned towards Naruto. Her wet dishwashing gloves spraying soapy water over the counter and floor.

"We knew it would be okay." Anko replied.

Naruto grasped the broom handle tighter, finding it hard to look at them directly. The last time she'd really spent time with them were before her kidnapping. And though she'd been released that morning the day had been filled with people who had wanted to catch up with her, and Naruto had felt so incredibly blessed to find out so many people cared.

Because she had been missed, and not just by her usual crowd. Even Mizuki had said he was glad she was okay. If it was true or not Naruto wasn't sure, but it was still nice to hear. For once the boy
was being polite.

Shisui’s dad had even bought all of them ice cream and smiled brightly when he'd seen Naruto, and Gai’s dad Dai had almost crushed her with the hug she'd received on the street. It had been really awkward too, because Naruto had never met Might Dai before. Neither here or in her last time line, but now she finally understood where Gai got his personality from.

But she hadn't really talked to her teammates yet. She had not asked them how they had been while she was away. Not shared any stories of the last month at all. Not asked if they were okay.

She knew Shisui had been promoted though. About sixteen different people had commented on it before looking pointedly at Ensui while mentioning what a shame it was that he was considering quitting.

"How are you really?" Asked Shisui while drying a wooden spoon, some water spilling onto his dark shirt.

Naruto rested her head against the broom shaft. "I'll be fine. It just… sucked." She finished lamely.

Anko walked up to Naruto and roughed up her hair. She felt water run down her face from her dishwashing gloves and gave a small smile. "We know. But you're back now, and you will always be our annoying teammate no matter how many demons you try to absorb in the future." Anko sighed and tilted her head. "But just to clarity; you're the most insane person I've ever met, Naru."

Naruto felt like she was about to cry again. Damn. She had to stop crying soon. She'd cried so much in the last month, and she was surprised she was even capable of it anymore. There had to be a limit somewhere.

"We'll always be here, Naruto. You have to realize that." Shisui added quietly. His tone was serious and he'd finally turned to look at her.

Naruto smiled weakly. Not sure what exactly he meant by that. He'd said it in a strange way. "I'm glad I have you… I don't know what I'd do without my friends."

"Comrades."

Shisui had said it automatically. Correcting her without seemingly being able to stop himself. Naruto frowned. "Well… yeah, that too."

"Really? Do you really understand that?" Asked Shisui as he put down the towel on the counter.

Naruto blinked. Was he mad at her? "What?"

Shisui shook his head. "Never mind..." He mumbled and turned back to his task.

Anko looked as puzzled as Naruto felt, but she just shrugged as if to say; "I have no idea what's up with him."

"I'm just glad we're still… us. Despite what happened… to me." Naruto said carefully, getting a bad feeling Shisui was not as okay with her jinchūriki status as he'd first seemed. Now that the rest were gone and it was only them, Shisui's behavior was slowly changing. The mask he'd worn falling.

Anko picked up on her hesitant tone, but if Shisui did he didn't show it. The boy continued drying dishes without looking back. "Of course. You're still you, Naru." Anko snapped towards Shisui's direction. "We saw what happened, didn't we, Shisui?"
The Uchiha's shoulder slumped, and slowly he turned back again. His jaw locked tight as he stared at Naruto with calculating eyes. "I don't give a crap about the bijū, Naruto. You should know me well enough to realize that." He said bluntly. If anything he seemed highly offended she even suspected he might have turned on her. "Nothing has changed."

But from his tone that sounded like a bad thing.

"Don't mind him, Naru. He's been so fucking grumpy lately. You should see how he treats Kakashi. Man, you need to chill, Shisui." Anko said and rolled her eyes at how tense Shisui was acting.

His lips pursed and his eyes narrowed at the mention of Kakashi's name, but otherwise he didn't say anything.

Naruto just felt sad. Shisui was not acting like the carefree kid she'd come to know. He could deny it all he wanted, but all day she'd felt as if something had changed. That somehow Shisui was different.

Naruto placed the broom against the wall and made her way across the room to the window where she sat down in her favorite place. They might have a couch and four chairs, but Naruto loved the view from their living room window.

The frame was wide enough to sit in and since the living room had two windows Naruto and Anko had a habit of sitting in one each and watch the scenery. Sometimes they brought their breakfast over and had a window picnic while watching the sun rise over Konoha on early days.

What was she supposed to do? What if Shisui couldn't accept she was a jinchūriki? The idea hurt just to think about, and though she had feared this outcome she hadn't really believed it would happen. How could she convince him she was still the same as before? She'd been a jinchūriki from the beginning, but only three other people were aware of that.

Anko had drifted back to the sink to finish the dishes in the awkward silence, but Shisui had pushed himself away from the counter, crossing the modest room to lean against the other window.

"I think you should do better." Shisui said firmly.

Anko stiffened by the counter, her head turning with incredulity written all over her face. "What the hell is that supposed to mean? Naru did fucking everything she could, you little shit." She hissed, but Shisui didn't heed her words.

"I didn't mean it like that." Shisui said exasperated and his head tilted down. Naruto noticed how tired he looked. Anko did too, and she wondered how stressed out they'd actually been. They had seemed the same at first, but now she could feel the tension as if someone was painting it on her skin.

Shisui gripped the window frame and turned to watch the village. Going distant as Naruto and Anko waited for him to continue his explanation.

"Did I ever tell you about my family?" He asked suddenly, peaking at Naruto from the corner of his eye. Naruto shook her head.

No, Shisui mentioned his father often enough, but only trivial things. Such as what his father made for dinner or generally how he wanted to one day beat him. And he especially never divulged any information about his clan. Anko shifted a bit uncomfortably by the counter, suddenly tense at whatever Shisui had said.

Shisui dragged a tired hand through his hair and looked back out of the window. "It's just my father and me now, and I don't really remember much about my mother, but over the years I've found out
her story." Shisui started.

Despite hiding it, Naruto could see the words made him uncomfortable. Anko and Naruto looked at one another in confusion. His mum? Whatever did that have to do with anything?

Shisui continued hurriedly, looking like he wanted to get the story over with as fast as possible. "My mother was strong. She made jōnin at fourteen, but personally she was a bit of a mess. When she was young, she lost her mother to illness and later her father, which she witnessed. Back then she was arranged to marry a man she grew up with, but he died too on a mission when she was fifteen… There were others she cared about who died too, and she didn't really cope well with it." Shisui paused; he was scowling at the translucent glass while he fiddled with his forehead protector. His hands leaving fingerprints on the worn metal.

"Despite losing so many at a young age she was very skilled and became part of ANBU… but it probably would have been better if she didn't though."

Naruto tilted her head curiously. Shisui never mentioned his mother. Not once since she met the boy. Despite not seeing the connection she was still curious what he had to say about her. "She mostly did solo missions. She worked better alone, as she felt it unnecessary to have a partner or a squad. I think she was about twenty when she got engaged to my father… another arranged marriage, but they were friends. And I think… for a short while they were happy at least." A flicker of a smile tilted the corner of his mouth up, and though he still fumbled nervously with his forehead protector he was growing less uncomfortable.

"But my mother only took one break as far as I know, and that was when she got pregnant with me. In fact she kept the pregnancy a secret from my dad until she was four months along just to keep doing missions, and then she was forced to stop. She was off active duty just long enough to give birth to me, before returning to ANBU..."

The words halted for a moment and he pushed himself away from the window frame to tilt his body towards Naruto. "My mother took on a lot of assassination missions, and for each year they kept getting more and more dangerous. It became normal that she came home injured and spent most of her time off duty in the hospital recovering. Because of that I don't have many memories of her… I remember visiting the hospital, but mostly it was just dad and me… And aunt Mikoto of course. She was my mother's sister, and also a sort of my surrogate mother despite the fact she was a busy jōnin herself. Mikoto came home at least."

Shisui seemed lost in his memory by now, and Naruto wondered why he hadn't told them any of this sooner. But then she wasn't one to criticize her teammates about keeping secrets… She would really be a hypocrite if she did. "I think I was four… maybe five? I'm not sure exactly how old I was when one of her missions went horribly wrong and she was captured by Kumogakure. In the Uchiha clan we take our bloodline seriously, and she destroyed her eyes to prevent Kumo from getting a hold of the Sharingan." Shisui swallowed and looked Naruto directly in the eyes.

"But she was a woman, and there were other ways of getting a hold of the Sharingan despite my mother being blind. So they kept her alive and raped her."

Naruto felt her throat go dry as Shisui kept her locked in his gaze. "My father and his team managed to track her down and get her out after three weeks of captivity. With some difficulty she was brought back to Konoha blind and pregnant with some Kumo ninja's child. And she was just… destroyed. I actually remember her best from that time. It's the clearest memory I have of her... we humans have a habit of remembering negative memories better than the positive ones, you know? Though my mother was never the liveliest or talkative she was so much worse after that. Day in and day out she would sit in our living room chair with bandages over her eyes. In a way she'd lost her
life on that mission, and now she was just merely existing. She rarely spoke and dad did the best he could. Aunt Mikoto too. She was over all the time and helped out."

Shisui looked back out over the village, his hands absent mindedly tracing over the Konoha emblem scratched into his forehead protector. "Dad took her out while I stayed with my aunt. Hoping she'd get better with some fresh air. All her life she had been in such a hurry. Always working and never sitting still... They took a walk through the forest and ate lunch there. I remember I had helped dad make the onigiri they ate... But while dad was getting water from the river she managed to slip away from him. He got help from the clan and spent the rest of the day and night searching for her without result. The next day they found her at the bottom of a cliff. She'd jumped and killed herself."

Naruto had no idea what to say, or even if it was required. Shisui shook his head and looked away from Naruto. "My mother had a death wish, Naruto. It was always only a matter of time before one of her missions went wrong. She was sick and should have gotten help years and years ago, and she wanted to die long before she was captured by Kumo. Though I think she expected it to be quick. That if she one day failed a mission her death would be swift, but the opposite happened. It was prolonged and painful, even if her body was technically speaking healthy."

"I'm so sorry." Naruto said quietly.

"I'm not telling you this to gain sympathy from you, Naruto. I don't remember her well, and when she died nothing really changed. Everything went back to how they used to be... I guess I didn't really understand. I found her selfish. I was angry she didn't want to spend time with dad and me and even angrier when she died, because she'd finally gone and left us for good. At least that's how I rationalized it. But I moved on soon enough. I didn't really know her to begin with, and I never will."

Naruto wondered how Shisui had dealt with it. She pictured the young Shisui from the story, and couldn't really form a proper idea. He was one of those people you couldn't really imagine had felt pain. Not real one like she had. But maybe he was just as good an actor as Naruto had proven herself to be. Or maybe he truly had moved on. Naruto leaned more towards the latter. She knew him well enough by now. "I'm still sorry. It can't have been easy to deal with. You're lucky you have Kagami though."

"I know. But..." Shisui hesitated, folding his arms and leaned his shoulder against the frame while he tried to find his words. "I'm... I'm worried about you. The reason I always bugged you about safety and precaution isn't because I like to nag at you, but because I'm concerned about your recklessness. You always charge in with no concern for yourself. It's like... I mean, how many times haven't you ended up injured? The fact that you heal quicker doesn't take away the fact that you're dangerously close to being suicidal in your actions. You're taking unnecessary risks with no one's input but your own."

"I know. But..." Naruto argued at once, finally starting to see why Shisui had shared the story with her, but she didn't get to finish before he cut her off.

"Hn, you're not listening Naruto. It's your actions that worry me. You're too independent. It's like you forget you're part of a team and that it is not your job to take on the danger just to make sure the heat is off Anko and me. You... you act like Anko and I are just-" Shisui struggled for words, before biting out the one he found the most appropriate. "...baggage. And since you don't like sensei you disregard him too. We're there for entertainment and strategy, but the moment things get dangerous... It's all you Naruto. It's always you who have to fix everything. You're a one man show, and I think if you continue the way you are now you'll die."

Shisui frowned, visibly upset at the idea. "You rely on no one but yourself."
"I do not do that." Naruto shot back angrily. "The risks I take are necessary. No one knows as well as I do the importance of comrades. To me not having my friends would be the same as not living at all! You are wrong."

"No you are." Shisui was hissing now. "Look at our last disastrous mission, Naruto. You knocked out Rin, effectively stopping the only person who could possibly have warned us of what was happening before too much time had passed. And why? Because you had such a great handle on the situation? No! It was because you seem to think we're all a bunch of civilians! You didn't want anyone to save you, because it would endanger us, right? Well you should know us better than that Naruto! We care about you just as much as you care about us!"

Shisui had worked up quite a pulse by now. Naruto's eyes widened at the accusation, growing just as angry Shisui seemed to be. "I don't think that! How dare you! I know perfectly well how strong you are Shisui, and I have never doubted your friendship! Knocking out Rin was the only right thing to do! They were after Rin. They would have taken her and I can just imagine what would have happened if she had gone running to save me on her own. It was the right thing to do!"

He took an angry step towards her, his eyes narrowing in frustration. "No, you were doing what you always do! When thing gets bad you are somehow always the one getting hurt. Haven't you noticed that? It's like you're... trying to take the weight of the world or something. Well...look where that left us, Naruto. You got kidnapped. You were experimented on. You tried to commit suicide."

Shisui swallowed once, his Sharingan changing pattern for a short moment, before he continued. "And would have succeeded if it wasn't for your absurd luck. Where the hell were we amongst all your plans back at the Kiri base? You certainly didn't look happy when we came to rescue you. No, it was all about what your plan was. Not ours. Kakashi somehow managed to tag along, but you lost him along the way to the Kyūbi too. So you were alone. You're always trying to do it on your own, and I will not let you continue like this. We are your comrades Naruto. Your team. Can't you trust us to have your back?"

Shisui took a rushed breath of air. "Because believe it or not, but you do need us. You can't do it all."

Naruto was growing pale. She stepped backwards while Shisui stepped forwards, his hand coming to rest on her shoulder. "Look at me Naruto."

She was already looking, not quite able to break eye contact as Shisui's eyes morphed and changed patterns. She knew what it was but still had problems believing it really was the Mangekyō Sharingan glaring back at her from Shisui's face. It wasn't right. He wasn't supposed to have those eyes. Naruto was struck with a strange sense of déjà vu. The image of a crow screeching flashed before her eyes before returning to the present.

"You activated these eyes Naruto. Do you know how that's done?"

Naruto wasn't sure how to answer, so Shisui plunged on. "It's activated when an Uchiha loses someone they love. When such a grief takes over them it changes something fundamental inside. But not only that, it is also about responsibility. Everyone who came to rescue you felt a sense of duty, because we all wanted and needed to save you."

Naruto looked down. A nagging shame bubbling in her stomach now.

"And then you died, Naruto. You ran into Kakashi's chidori. I still can't see either of you without thinking about... You should know how hellish that felt. Because if you had the Sharingan yourself they would have activated when Iruka died. So you can start to picture what I felt when you... again... completely disregarded us, and went ahead with your plan to get yourself fucking killed."
Naruto tried to argue, meekly though it came out. "It's not that simple. I had to remove the cursed tag seal."

"I know. I know why you did it, Naruto. But it doesn't stop me from being furious at your stubbornness to accept help. It was a horrible and chaotic situation, but you should at least have told us. Told me. You had the chance to explain when we broke you out - but you didn't. Because again this was something you had to do alone, wasn't it? If I remember correctly it was because you were the strongest." He said the last word with a sneer. Releasing Naruto's shoulder and pushed her gently away.

Naruto closed her eyes painfully. Taking in Shisui's word as if he'd beaten every syllable into her. She dragged both hands through her hair and tried to fight away the guilt flaring up inside her.

Because Shisui was right.

Ever since coming to the past Naruto had tried to do it all on her own. Her paranoia of being discovered had made her self-dependent and controlling. She had truly believed this was a one man mission for her to complete. What had she imagined? That she could save the fucking world all on her own? When had Naruto ever been at her best in solitude? Hadn't it been her connection to her friends which had allowed her to grow stronger? It had never been about being the best. It was about being able to help. And helping would indicate she was relying on someone else but herself.

But now… Her unwilling to risk those she cared about and her own obsession with getting strong was bordering on something she'd seen in Sasuke. He too had wanted to go it alone. He'd been in a team, but hadn't he too always felt stronger than her and Sakura? How stupid hadn't Naruto thought he was back then? How idiotic hadn't she thought Sasuke's independence was? And now... had she turned into that too?

A hand touched her cheek and Naruto opened her eyes again. Shisui was still stern looking, but he was drying away a lone tear from her whiskered cheek. "I'm sorry." Naruto said through gritted teeth. Not feeling the words were even remotely adequate to express her regret.

"I know."

Sighing Shisui turned and left without another word. His hands going into his pockets as he closed the door softly behind him. Naruto listened to the fading footsteps fading down the stairs.

"Well..." Anko said awkwardly from the sink, and Naruto jumped as she realized they hadn't been alone through that conversation.

"You know he means well… Shisui was just scared that's all. Did you know I had to punch him to get him to react back at the Kiri base? He completely spaced out after… Um…So yeah, he's still adjusting… probably. He had a valid point though, but I think he could have gone a bit easier on you."

After going to bed Naruto was finally allowed some peace while Shisui's words still rang in her ears.

This would be the first time Minato allowed her an unsupervised meeting with Isobu and Kurama too.

During her imprisonment he had slowly started testing out her seal. Minato had even accessed it several times to see the bijū inside there himself.

The meetings had been catastrophic if the pains she'd experienced were anything to go by.
Isobu and Kurama had not been happy at all, and Naruto was afraid her imprisonment had been prolonged thanks to their meetings.

Now however her chakra was partly free, and technically she could enter her mindscape again. She'd refrained from doing so all day, focusing on her human friends while she was under so much scrutiny.

Closing her eyes Naruto sunk into her mindscape. The world going black before shapes of space morphed into existence around her, and finally she landed on the other side.

"NARUTO!" Roared Kurama at once, the bars of his prison rumbling dangerously as he knocked against the now closed bars.

Isobu was standing chained to the concrete walls opposite the cell. The chains a lot more sturdy than his last one. They were pierced through his neck and had him suspended from his arms and chest. It looked like a crucifixion.

Naruto grimaced. She had a new level of empathy for their situation after the last month.

"Oh kami..." She breathed, shocked at what she saw. When Minato had gone in Naruto hadn't really been allowed access. She got the gist of what was going on. The seal and herself couldn't be completely separated while Minato was in there, though he'd done his best.

"You better open this cage again! This was not what we agreed on! You better set us free!" Kurama shouted so loudly the walls shook.

"I will!" Naruto screamed back, her panic growing as she looked from one to the other. "But I can't yet! I promise you both, the moment I'm sent out of Konoha I will, dattebayo! Right now I'm under too much surveillance!" She answered, her arms flailing up and down at her side.

"That horrid human. One day I'll show the Yondaime exactly what I think of him. For him to blackmail us like that…" Kurama growled low in the back of his throat.

"Are you okay, Isobu?" Asked Naruto in a small voice. Kurama might be behind bars, but what Minato had done to Isobu looked a lot more painful.

The Three Tails looked at her with a narrowed eye. "Oh, just peachy. What do you think, baka."

"I'll get you… down..." Naruto said unsure, looking at the chains perplexed. How the hell was she supposed to do that really? She had the key to Kurama's prison, but this was a more messy form of fuinjutsu than what Kurama was under. She suspected it was because it's was just an addition to an already existing seal, which made it less cooperative than Kurama's.

"You better, brat." Isobu growled.

The next day team meeting was tense. Naruto and Shisui were keeping an uncomfortable distance between them, and Orochimaru raised an eyebrow at the strange development but refrained from commenting. Setting out to torture Naruto for the day instead.

His excuse was that being locked up for a month was no excuse for being out of shape, but Naruto suspected he was just being malicious for the hell of it.

After warming up he had Naruto and Anko do pushups together while he stood with one foot on each of their backs. He'd done this plenty of times before, but Naruto hadn't really used her muscles.
in a month, and the strain was real.

Shisui was set to train with Hebimei and a dozen other snakes in a perverse game of cat's vs mouse; with Shisui as the mouse.

While the girls were shaking from head to toe while pushing themselves off the ground, Orochimaru barked out orders for them to keep going. From far away Shisui screamed like a girl as Hebimei almost sunk her teeth into him when he was caught unawares. The snake was poisonous, so it would hurt quite badly if he got bitten.

And that part of the training was only the beginning.

By the end of the day Naruto was too exhausted to remember to be cautious around Shisui, and he seemed in a similar state. Orochimaru ordered them back the next day, intent on getting as much team training down before Naruto left the village.

When it was time to leave Naruto hung back while Anko and Shisui shakily made their way home. It had been years since their training had been this intense. It was becoming increasingly clear Orochimaru took out his frustration on them instead of dealing with his jealousy for Minato.

"I wanted to say thanks," Naruto said awkwardly. Her feet shifting slightly while she looked at anything but Orochimaru as she spoke. The Sannin was packing up his equipment, but stopped when Naruto spoke up.

"Why exactly?" Wondered Orochimaru, his dark slick hair falling over his shoulder when his head turned.

Naruto shrugged. "For coming for us. For helping out. For fighting for me. I heard from the Hokage you argued against the council on my behalf. You're not even required to train me, seeing as I'm not a Konoha ninja at the moment, and yet..." She gestured to the training ground.

"You're my student, Naruto. Despite your appalling personality and brashness I put a lot of effort into training you. I was not about to let that go to waste. And it was entertaining seeing Namikaze-san and sensei sweat."

Naruto laughed loudly. Their relationship was messed up. Most of the time they used their time insulting one another, but despite everything Naruto was starting to see what Jiraiya had.

The weeks flew by in this matter. The training was grueling, but thanks to them Naruto was back in shape in no time.

Things remained strained with Shisui, who still wasn't finished being angry at the world in general, though they came to a silent agreement to pretend things were fine. It wasn't really anything to do about the matter. Shisui would have to see her rely on them before he calmed down, and Naruto wasn't sure how to do that.

It was three weeks before she was set to leave that she was summoned to the Hokage, and Naruto was dreading it. Until her probation was over Naruto wasn't a ninja, so she had very little reason to go the Hokage. And because she no longer received missions her financial status would soon grow strained too.

Luckily Naruto had been careful with her money over the years, and had enough saved up to pay for rent and food for a while longer, but Anko was helping out too. So what exactly Minato wanted with her now was confusing.
Upon entrance to the meeting room she found not just Minato, but Hiruzen too. The two were standing by the window, both looking at her when she walked in with steel in her stomach.

"Naruto-chan, I'm glad you could come at such short notice. How are you feeling?" The Third said with a warm smile. It was warmer than anything he had directed towards her since she'd fallen back in time, and for a moment the sight made her freeze up.

"I'm good. It's not like my schedule is full these days." Naruto replied, a bit more sarcastic than she'd intended.

"True, true." Hiruzen replied and gestured towards a seat. "Please sit down. We have a few things to discuss."

Naruto raised an eyebrow, but did as instructed. They all sat down, Naruto on one side, the other two on opposite her. Minato cleared his throat before starting to speak. "We learned a lot from Inoichi's mind walks last month. He's been showing them to us for information concerning possible threats to the village."

Naruto grimaced at the reminder. They'd extracted so much information she had gone around with a constant headache for over a week on top of her chakra pains. Now they knew just as much as she did concerning the lost future.

"First and foremost we have started investigating the Akatsuki and Uchiha Madara. We have a team gathering information as we speak, and once you and Jiraiya-sensei meet up you'll be tasked to find out as much as possible. He has been informed of our suspicion towards them, and he's already left for Ame in an attempt to speak to his old students. He's not been in contact yet, but we remain hopeful he'll have something concrete for us soon."

Naruto was surprised. For all his excuses she was sure she was being thrown out of the village because Minato couldn't stand the sight of her. Even now he had problems looking her in the eye.

"And then there is the matter of your background story," Minato continued, his lips twitching slightly, before picking out a paper from the pile next to him and handing it over to her.

Curious she accepted the paper and looked at it. Her eyes narrowed the further she read. Once finished she put the paper down slowly, more confused than anything.

"You want me to pretend to be your daughter?" Asked Naruto. Finding the sentence incredibly ironic. For years she'd pretended she wasn't, and now she was going to pretend she was the daughter pretending she wasn't when she really was. The thought made her snort.

"Technically, or at least genetically, you are." Hiruzen pointed out, smiling sadly at Naruto as her eyes hardened.

She looked at Minato who finally got a grip on himself and met her gaze. "It's the best solution. The story is plausible since Kushina was out of the village often around the time period of your birth. Pretending she had a child and gave it up for adoption is not unimaginable, especially since we were already in a relationship back then. It will be classified information though. After your adopted parents died you came to Konoha in an attempt to find your real parents, you never knew for sure though but you suspected the truth from the beginning, but you never confronted us. I didn't find out until recently myself, and Kushina found out during captivity."

He paused and straightened up a few of the papers. "We don't plan on you ever having to tell anyone this. As I said this is a classified story and it shouldn't be possible for people to find out, but since the
impossible usually happens to you we thought it better to have the cover story straightened out."

"So… I'm the kid you and Kushina put up for adoption." Naruto muttered dejectedly.

"From now on, yes." Minato replied firmly.

"There is nothing about reasons here." Naruto pointed out and gestured to the papers.

"Those aren't necessary. If people do the math they'll notice Kushina would have been seventeen when giving birth to you and unmarried. Some will assume that was the reason in itself. The secret that Kushina was a jinchūriki has been compromised too and some might speculate that was the reason. Others might think she wanted to hide your identity as an Uzumaki, seeing as the clan has been hunted down for years. If this is ever discovered we can let them assume what they want."

Naruto pursed her lips, but agreed anyway.

"A few people will be informed of your cover story though…" Hiruzen said and pointed to the paper. "Orochimaru, Tsunade and Jiraiya will be informed. Orochimaru as your sensei will need to have the proper information, and the same goes for Jiraiya and Tsunade while you're travelling. We can discuss letting Anko and Shisui know at a later date, but only if the situation requires it, but the less that knows the better."

Naruto nodded, her mind spinning with possibilities. "Even Orochimaru?" She asked, one eyebrow arched as she looked at Hiruzen.

His eyes hardened slightly, but otherwise he remained unchanged. "We have been over it many times, but we believe Orochimaru is not the same as he was in your time line. To makesure we have put up surveillance, but they've came back empty handed for months. Orochimaru might have the potential, but now that we are prepared we can prevent the darkness from overtaking him. You have already helped just by being here, Naruto-chan."

On her way back from the Hokage office Naruto's mind was so full she didn't really registered where she was going. It wasn't before she stood in the middle of the Uchiha district she realized she'd taken a wrong turn.

For a moment she was startled, looking around at the people walking by as if they'd popped out of thin air. Her attention was drawn to two figures on the other side of the street, exiting a house she'd visited many times over the years.

Mikoto and Itachi were smiling, neither really noticing Naruto staring at them. Mikoto had her hand on her bulging stomach while she talked to her son on their way home from Shisui and Kagami.

Sasuke. Mikoto was pregnant with Sasuke right now.

Naruto swallowed. Her old friends were coming back, and it was hard to deal with, because they were no longer the people she remembered.

As Mikoto and Itachi disappeared around the corner Naruto set out and walked determinedly towards the house. After she knocked it only took a short time before the door opened, and Kagami smiled surprisingly back at her. "Naruto-chan? How nice to see you! Shisui isn't here right now. He just went out."

Naruto nodded, and after a few exchanged pleasantries she left to find her teammate. Luckily it didn't take her long. She knew where Shisui liked to train in privacy.
The sun was setting and the forest cast long shadows when she found him sitting on a branch. His clothes looked worn and he had fresh cuts and scrapes that had been absent the last time she'd seen him. It looked like he'd just finished training because there were ninja wire and kunai scattered all over the area.

Shisui watched her as Naruto climbed up the tree and sat down next to him. Taking a deep, calming breath Naruto turned to look at Shisui.

"You should come by for dinner soon." She said awkwardly, and Shisui found the sentence as lame as if the arched brow was anything to go by.

"Sure." He replied sarcastically while twiddling a kunai around his ring finger absently. "Just make sure it's only the three of us."

The message was clear. As long as Kakashi wasn't invited he'd come along too. "You should be a little easier on Kakashi, Shisui. It really wasn't his fault." Naruto murmured, feeling horrible about being the source for the animosity between her friends.

Shisui disagreed, because a scowl was starting to set on his mouth. Naruto was shaking her head before he could answer her. "No, I mean it. I choose to jump in front of his technique. He never would have hurt a comrade that way and you know that, Shisui. In fact... it's me who should be asking for forgiveness. And I am."

"I forgive you." Shisui answered automatically.

A deep sigh punctuated the tension. "I don't think you are."

"I am."

"You're not."

"Well, Kakashi should never have used that technique. Just because he has a loaned Sharingan doesn't mean he's mastered it yet. Even we Uchihas spend time mastering it. If he had you never would have been caught up in it."

"I see..." Naruto mumbled and shifted were she sat. "Then I guess it would have been you instead then."

Shisui stiffened. Slowly he turned to look at Naruto. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what it sounds like. If Kakashi hadn't done it, you would have."

"I would never."

"You would Shisui." Naruto interrupted quietly. "Don't you remember? Before I jumped from the boulder I tried to talk to you. I tried to ask you to kill me, but I never got the chance to."

Shisui's breath caught in his throat and a small tremor went through his body. "That... I..."

"And you would have." Naruto continued, her eyes landing in her lap. "You don't see the world like I do Shisui. You don't believe there's a right or a wrong answer. Just answers which leads to the best for as many people as possible. And right now you're angry at me. You're angry at Kakashi and you're angry at the situation we ended up in. But the truth is that if you had known everything the way I did, and you had to decide between me or Konoha..."
Naruto trailed off and looked back up at Shisui. "You would have killed me."

She reached out and squeezed Shisui's shoulder in comfort. "You know how to make the hard choices Shisui. You always have. It's your strength more than anything, and I admire that about you. You will always make the right call, because you're... you. You see everything so clearly. I don't even think it's an Uchiha thing, it's just a Shisui thing."

Shisui was teary eyed and angry now, but he looked stubbornly away while Naruto spoke. "So use those eyes of yours and see clearly again Shisui. Kakashi was not at fault, it was all me. You already told me that remember?"

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have-"

"You should, and you did. I needed to hear that because I've been slowly pushing you all behind me, and I understood what you meant. I also think you were right. Again. It's a bit annoying you know? I'm getting tired of you correcting me all the time." Naruto finished teasingly.

"Don't do it again then. It's such a hassle keeping you in line all the time." Shisui muttered, a hint of a smile on his mouth.

Naruto chuckled and shook her head. "I'll do my best, dattebayo."

Naruto was watching the clouds and she couldn't help feeling a strange sense of nostalgia gazing up into the blue. Her fingers were wrapped around the straps of her bulging backpack, while her tattered orange trousers were half covered by a sweater she'd borrowed from Shisui.

She was dangerously low on clothes again. Everything she bought got torn apart either during training or missions. And so last week Shisui had taken pity on her again when her last jacket had lost one of the sleeves when she'd reached for a glass in the cupboard.

It was a quiet gathering, standing by the gate.

Shisui, Anko, Kakashi, Ensui and Rin were sitting with her, all of them subdued.

They were all wearing their forehead protector except for Naruto. Minato had said he'd return Iruka's forehead protector upon her return.

"I heard the Land of Grass is beautiful. You should try going there while you're travelling." Suggested Ensui, breaking the silence between them. Naruto looked up at him and tried to smile, but it appeared more like a sneer. Rin nodded next to her, a lot more energetic than Naruto could hope to be.

"Mah, stay clear of Kumo. They're ruthless. And Kiri, but I don't think I need to remind you of that." Kakashi advised.

"Or Iwa. I hear the Tsuchikage has a grudge against all Konoha ninjas." Anko added.

"I'm not a Konoha ninja though." Naruto replied quietly.

"Yes, you are." Shisui hissed.

"You are." Agreed Ensui seriously. "This is a probation. It's unjust, but it's not forever. We're here when you come back, and you better come back."

Naruto smiled weakly towards Ensui and nodded. She would be back. She'd been away from the
village for more than two years before, but never on the premises that she wasn't allowed to step foot within the borders in that time frame. That she would be punished for being seen too close to her own village. She would be homeless for the next few years. And she had no idea what to do with herself.

"You need to train hard. I gave you all those books for a reason." Kakashi interjected. "Rin will so you shouldn't fall behind." Rin smiled widely at Kakashi's word. Naruto knew she was trying to cheer her up, but no matter what people said about this trip it didn't take away that the fact she was being banished from her home.

"I… I'm banned from the village. I am basically a missing nin." Naruto said in a shaky voice. Anko twitched and looked down, but Shisui actually growled.

"You are nothing even remotely like a missing nin. This is just a mess… When you two come back we'll throw a big welcoming feast and we'll get past all this. In the meanwhile you keep your strength up. Use the time to explore the world. And if either of you happen to run into any Kiri ninja, give them hell from us." Shisui said and gave everyone a dark look.

"Don't be reckless." Kakashi said quietly. "We won't be there for the next two years, so keep all your limbs intact. No suicide missions, okay?"

Both of them nodded, but Naruto's lips pursed as if thinking about it.

They looked up when they heard footsteps, and Minato followed by Tsunade and Shizune came towards them. Naruto stood up in unison with her friends.

"Are you ready?" Asked Minato and looked from Rin to Naruto at her searchingly. "You know what to do if you get in trouble." He said, addressing Naruto now.

"Sure," Naruto said and pointed to her stomach. "The seal works fine."

"Huh?" Asked Rin confused.

"He put in the Hiraishin seal on my stomach." Naruto explained.

"What?" Asked Shisui confused. "You put it on her?"

Minato nodded.

"But… that seal never goes away." Shisui said and looked between Naruto and Minato.

"It's a precaution and protection at the same time. If she needs help I can get there quickly, and it will also be a way of track her down in case she… breaks our agreement." Minato explained. As if this was just another mission briefing and completely normal.

"It's fine, Shisui." Naruto said quietly.

"Fine." He said and stared darkly at Minato. It was disconcerting how much more like an Uchiha Shisui looked when he was pissed off.

"Okay gaki. Are you ready to get going?" Asked Tsunade with a raised eyebrow.

Naruto nodded to Tsunade, and looking at her timeless face Naruto felt something else. The tightly wrapped knot in her stomach loosened ever so slightly, and her chest filled with a spark of warmth for the woman who had thrown Minato's desk out the office window a few weeks ago. "I'm ready
for anything, dattebayo." She answered with a shrug.

"Then let's head out girls." Tsunade called and looked down at Rin and Shizune standing next to her. Surprisingly Naruto felt the flickering spark igniting now, becoming a dozed flame inside her stomach. "Let me say goodbye first, yeah?" Naruto asked.

"Sure, but we'll start walking ahead so come and catch up. I've waited around for you long enough as it is. Say goodbye to your friends quickly." Tsunade ordered and pointed to the road.

Without heeding Minato a second glance she marched past them. Tsunade was angry on Naruto's behalf, but she wasn't sure when it had happened. When exactly Tsunade had started backing her up.

Shizune waved uncertainly to the younger children and bowed to Minato before following after Tsunade.

Naruto turned to Minato again. "I'll see you later then, Hokage-sama." She said quietly.

Minato didn't react to the use of his title, though his eyes hardened in the bright spring sun. "Be safe. If you need assistance you know what to do. You're still a citizen of Konoha, and you have responsibilities to the village despite this situation." He stated firmly.

"I know. I won't betray the village."

"I believe you. But… just don't be audacious."

"I'll try."

Minato gave a weak but yet sincere smile. It was the first time in months she'd seen it, and then the next moment he was gone.

"That was rude. He didn't even say he had to leave." Muttered Anko darkly, and Naruto remembered fondly back to a time her best friend had been so smitten around Minato she had problems forming words. How things had changed...

"I'll miss you guys so much." Naruto said and looked at each of them in turn. All of them smiled back to her. "We'll be back before you know it. Enjoy the peace will you?" Naruto added with a chuckle.

"We will. Come back in one piece." Kakashi said, his eyes trailing from Rin to Naruto in undisguised worry.

"Don't do anything stupid. And I'll have whoever takes up your room kicked out by the time you return. So you know you have a place to live when you come back." Said Anko.

"Be safe. And… Try wearing something else but orange, Naruto. It's just so much easier to stay camouflaged." Shisui added and handed her a scroll. Naruto looked confused down at it.

"It's some more of my old clothes. You won't be getting paid, and I know how fast you tear up your clothes. There's also a sewing kit in there and patches to fix the stuff that gets ruined."

"Huh… Thanks!"

"I'm going with you of course, but I still have something for you too." Rin said and handed her a package. Inside was a medic kit identical to the one Kakashi had. "I won't rest until you know the human anatomy inside out and know what to do in an emergency. It's my new goal and this is the
"Thank you… You really didn't have to-

"Here." Interrupted Ensui and stuck another scroll up in front of her. Overwhelmed she looked at that one too.

"Weapons?" Asked Naruto surprised after reading the kanji on the scroll.

"Some shuriken, kunai and normal knifes. I'm sure they'll come in handy."

"And you have my books." Kakashi added.

"I don't have anything…" Anko said, a look of guilt on her face when she gazed at Naruto.

"You don't need to Anko. You just make sure the apartment building doesn't collapse while I'm away." Naruto told her and laughed when she nodded in all seriousness.

"We really need to leave now," Rin said, "I'll miss you all so much."

Naruto didn't doubt her, now that they were about to leave Rin looked pensive about the trip, which was ironic since Naruto was finally starting to see it as an opportunity. In the span of five minutes the pathetic spark had burst into a fire flaring inside her chest.

Naruto could get away from her troubles for a while. Take a break, focus on finding out about Madara and make sure she was doing something productive. Minato and Hiruzen would take care of thing back here in Konoha, and maybe… just maybe together they could achieve what Naruto hadn't managed alone.

"Take care. I look forward to see how much stronger you are when I return." Naruto peeked quickly over her shoulder. Tsunade and Shizune were almost out of sight by now.

To remember the people she fought for she cast one last look at them and grinned widely. Turning on her heel Naruto left Konoha and her comrades behind at a run, hearing Rin shouting at her to slow down.

The End of Part One

Chapter End Notes

This was the end of Part One of After the Rain! Next chapter will be the start of Part Two!

Which means I can finally start letting these guys grow up a few years. Chapter thirty sets off Part Two, which will probably turn out just as long as part one.
When I started writing the story I honestly thought Part One would be between 100 000 – 150 000 words, but damn was I wrong. The first part of After the Rain turned out around 260 000 words if you look away from author notes and warnings and stuff…

Dear me… I hope the second one will not be that long too. I'm still planning on 150 000 words, but I seem to have a habit of underestimate how long these chapters are...

I also struggled badly with how this was going to end. I had a lot of plot for the last few chapters, and I simply couldn't cram it all in, so I've moved it to later in the story. It caused a more angsty story line the last few chapters, but at least its more focused and to the point than all the other sub plots I wanted to include at this point.

The chapter though was beta's by the lovely AnjoRemix - like the whole of Part One of After the Rain was, and I'm so grateful for that.

Have a nice day!
Off the Beaten Track

Chapter Notes

Okay, time for Part Two of After the Rain! (Finally) Part One had its ending and can be seen as a complete story, but a lot of threads haven't been tied up yet. Part Two will include some pairings though, so be warned. Some people might be very against the pairing, or just pairing in general.

I'm just continuing the story here instead of creating a separate story for the continuation. And just for those of you who haven't picked up on this yet; the pairing is ShisuixNaruto, but there will be other characters that start dating too. You have now been warned. I have never written a story where I have so much teen drama planned. It remains to be seen if I go through with all of it, because it can get quite distracting (despite how hilarious it is to write sometimes) and I do wish to keep to a more adventure/action/drama focused plot over romance.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Part One Summary of After the Rain:

While the Fourth Shinobi War starts up hundreds of miles away Naruto is training on turtle isle with Killer Bee to gain control of the Kyūbi chakra, but in a freak accident she's sent back in time before the Third Shinobi War.

Brought back to Konoha by Jiraiya she is placed at the orphanage where she befriends Mitarashi Anko and starts at the academy. While there she meets a lot of her old friends in younger bodies, but also those she's never met before. The fellow orphan Akiko, her classmates Nara Ensui and Uchiha Shisui along with Kakashi's teammates Uchiha Obito and Nohara Rin.

At graduation she is disappointed to not be placed on team Kushina, where Iruka, Ensui and Hitomi is. Instead she's placed on team Orochimaru together with the already graduated Anko and Naruto's classmate Shisui. Reluctant but without a choice the three forms a tight friendship while forced to participate in the Third Shinobi War that is breaking out across the nations. Her bad memories of her new sensei cause tension within the team, but as the years pass by Naruto and Orochimaru comes to a tentative alliance based on respect. One by one dear comrades start falling. Ebisu, Shibi and Obito's deaths hits her hard, but not until the war concludes does she end up in real trouble herself when their platoon is ambushed by Kirigakure.

Naruto is captured in Rin's place and forced to become the jinchūriki of the Sanbi named Isobu. While Kushina who attempted to save her is imprisoned herself while Kiri extract the Kyūbi from her. Now with two bijū inside Naruto she's broken free by the rescue squad led by Kakashi, but things does not go to plan. Iruka dies during the mission, and Naruto sacrifices herself to save Konoha and release the two bijū now residing inside her. The act cause the bijū inside her to shift their alliance to her, and in return for helping them attempts to save the dying girl. But when Minato and the Sandaime comes to help the overwhelmed and injured squad, Naruto's secrets starts to unravel when she doesn't die from Kakashi's chidori.

With Kushina's death Naruto is placed under suspicion for her involvement, and at last her secret is revealed through force of the leadership of Konoha. After the interrogation is over she's cleared of
her charges for being a traitor, but her silence concerning her future knowledge is not received kindly.

The new Hokage Minato sends Naruto out of the village as both punishment for not warning them of crucial information that could have helped the village, but also because Isobu is causing disturbances in her chakra system, which needs to be solved. Sent out of the village to travel with Tsunade, Shizune and Rin Naruto decides to see it as a way to get away from her troubles and to grow stronger to protect the people who fought for her when she couldn't protect herself.

After the Rain

Part Two

Chapter Thirty – Off the Beaten Track

"In the world, those who break the rules are scum, but those who abandon their friends are worse than scum." - Uchiha Obito

October,

Six Months Later...

Shisui leaned languidly against the railing. For two hours he'd been observing the tree tops from the wall encircling Konoha, and despite his best effort Shisui was starting to feel sleepy from the constant lack of anything to do.

It was guard shift and the ANBU stationed with him was being switched out. Shisui vaguely noted that the otter masked ANBU left and Kakashi took his place. His face was hidden behind a dog mask, but the hair was a dead giveaway. On this part of the wall there were two areas to keep watch over, one directed out to the vast forest surrounding Konoha and the other in towards the village.

Shisui wished he'd covered the other spot. There was a limit to how interesting the tree tops were after five straight hours of staring. "Anything to report?" Kakashi asked quietly, adjusting his mask to clear his line of sight.

They were both rookies in the squad, but Kakashi had a few years on Shisui in age, so his entrance into the ANBU had gone a lot smoother than his own. The older ANBU had a problem with Shisui's lack of years lived.

"No." Shisui answered simply. There really was nothing. Both the ANBU and the regular troops were on high alert and had been for over a week. Shisui wasn't sure what to make of it, but he guessed there was a potential threat to Konoha they weren't properly informed about. It was the only explanation for why the Hokage was keeping such tight security around and inside the village. Down by the gates Anko had drawn the short straw and had to stand guard at the entrance desk
together with an older Chūnin she had a strong dislike for. She'd told Shisui all about it the other day, and was bemoaning the fact she had two weeks of night shifts with only "Mister Mundane" as company.

"How long will this continue?" Asked Shisui, knowing Kakashi probably didn't have the answer but still hoping his sensei had shared some details.

Kakashi peeked at him through the holes of his mask, but otherwise only offered a casual shrugged. "I haven't heard anything. Like all of us I've been ordered to keep the surveillance at maximum."

Shisui frowned underneath his mask, disappointed with the lack of knowledge. They had all been ordered to keep a lookout for anything unusual or a masked man. Considering everyone in ANBU wore masks that didn't really tell them much. But there would be a lack of Konoha uniforms and most likely dark hair. If spotted they were to ring the alarm at once.

But why that required the entire military force out and about in the street was beyond Shisui's comprehension. What exactly that man had done was left unexplained, or even what he might do if he got into Konoha.

"What about Ensui? Did he go in?" Asked Kakashi stiffly.

Ensui had decided after many restless months to return to his duties. Shisui knew it had not been an easy decision. To have been constantly working with three people who all died within weeks. Team Kushina had been part of his identity within the troops, and the ones he'd lost had been precious friends he'd repeatedly trusted his life to. They had literally been through a war together. The shock of losing them had still not entirely settled, and he doubted Ensui would ever be the same again.

But then again… were any of them left unchanged from the war?

Looking over Shisui told him what he knew. "He went in today. If thing goes well he'll be back on full duty within the next month. There are protocols for people who have been off the roster for so many months."

Kakashi nodded, and the conversation stopped as Shisui returned to watching his designated area. His mind now on Ensui's return to his Chūnin chores and how it had come to that in the first place.

It was nine months since Kiri had ambushed the Konoha platoon on their way home from Water Country, and the events that followed kept showing up in Shisui's nightmares.

Though he'd calmed down some Shisui still felt weird being around Kakashi. Logically he understood what had happened, but Kakashi's presence was still enough to make him want to hit something. Luckily they weren't in the same squad, so Shisui only had to deal with him on missions like this, or whenever Anko was daring enough to invite them both over to dinner simultaneously.

Naruto had asked him to forgive her though - and he had. Shisui had to at least try and be civil towards Kakashi too. If nothing else he was still a comrade. They worked to protect the same village, and before the "accident" he had quite liked Kakashi.

His mind drifted back to Naruto, and Shisui glanced down at his watch. In three minutes it would be her birthday, which made him wonder what she was up to these days.

"Brat, you think slower than my slug summons move!" Tsunade shouted in frustration, her arms crossed while she glared at Naruto. Swallowing nervously Naruto hurriedly tried to remember the one that came next.
They had retired for the evening, but when Naruto whined that she couldn't fall asleep Rin had told her to name the standard two hundred and six bones in the adult human body as a way to get sleepy. Like some weird alternative to counting sheep.

Rin had kept to her promise from their set out, and was spending large amount of free time drilling Naruto in anything medical related. There was no chakra use, but she wanted Naruto to have a firm base knowledge so she knew what to do if she or a comrade were hurt on a mission. Therefore Naruto was now forced to memorize the most abstruse things.

Naruto had listed up all the names in the leg, pelvic and chest, but after naming the five vertebrae in the lumbar vertebrae she'd faulted without remembering what came next in the spine. That's why Tsunade was having a fit at the moment…

"How many times haven't Rin gone over this with you? Are you just stupid or are you actually trying to remain an imbecile? Next is the thoracic vertebrae, you moron." She snapped angrily, sitting up in her sleeping bag while glaring at Naruto who only had Rin as a shield between them.

"Uh..."

"You know what? Learning through experience is supposed to be your thing, right? So why don't I break each bone in your body one at a time while I name them to you? I'll be thorough, and that way you might actually remember them next time."

Naruto scuffled sideways still in her sleeping bag, fear starting to surface at the realistic threat in Tsunade's voice while she imaged exactly how painful it would be. Tsunade would probably break the bone then heal it again, before moving on to the next one.

Naruto had new found respect for Sakura. No wonder the girl was so terrified of upsetting Tsunade back in her old time. She'd dealt with the Slug Sannin for years.

"I- I'll remember next time!" Naruto promised in a squeak, hoping to appease Tsunade despite knowing it was fruitless.

"Tell me how many thoracic vertebrae are there, then?" Tsunade demanded.

"Eh..." Naruto racked her brain for the answer, the names mixing up just from panicking under Tsunade's threatening presence. "Um... twelve right? It's the middle part of the spine... T1 to T12."

Tsunade nodded before wobbling back into her sleeping bag. "Continue."

Naruto did, stammering when she struggled to recall the next bone on the list. Rin was giving small encouraging smiles, sometimes helping her out by pointing to the area the next bone on the body was while making sure Tsunade didn't notice.

Rin was awesome.

Naruto hadn't really noticed how cool the girl was before leaving on this trip. Back in Konoha she'd never interacted with Rin one on one. Kakashi or Anko had always been present, and the girl wasn't one to make a fuss out of herself.

Now however - when they spent every waking hour together - Naruto was coming to appreciate the girl's quiet kindness. She was one of those people you couldn't help but like. And where Anko had been loud, brash and sometimes violent, Rin was soothing, positive and just plain nice.

She wanted to compare Rin to Hinata, but the truth was that Rin had another type of kindness than
what Hinata had. She wasn't as... meek... as the Hyūga had been. Being kind had been something
Hinata wanted to do, but had problems executing because of her shyness. Rin wasn't shy at all and
never had problems speaking her opinion, even if she always said it gently.

They had come to a deal while they travelled. Rin would teach her medical terms and jutsu and in
return Naruto helped Rin with her fighting.

So now whenever Tsunade wasn't teaching them herself, they would get together and train. Rin was
still instructing her on the different ways to assess injuries, using a henge on herself to show what
sort of injuries needed to be treated with specific procedures and what she absolutely should not do.

They'd been stuck on that for some time, Rin telling Naruto varies of wrong ways to treat wounds.
Such as unless someone is actually on fire, you shouldn't treat open burns with running water.
Something about introducing bacteria or the like.

In return Naruto was helping Rin develop her own combat method. It had started with Tsunade who
believed Rin she had the accurate chakra control to learn Tsunade's Chakra Enhanced Strength
technique. But the truth was that the technique didn't suit Rin at all. She felt uncomfortable with it,
and like Shizune wished to find an alternate way of using her abilities than on such a damaging
attack.

Naruto still struggled to control all her chakra chains simultaneously, and Tsunade helped her with
working out how to multi task with the chains. And it was while Tsunade was helping Naruto with
her chakra chains – a task she'd taken over now that Kushina was no longer with them. – that Rin
had started playing with chakra strings to mimic what Naruto was doing with her chains.

Naruto had some knowledge of them thanks to Orochimaru, but though she'd been given the basics
Naruto had never really mastered it. She didn't own the control necessary, but the chakra chains were
based on a similar principle except that the chakra was boosted up. Naruto compared it to how
chakra strings were more difficult than her chains the way a normal clone was more difficult than a
shadow clone.

But unlike Naruto, Rin had an excellent handle on them. They were all about accuracy just like Iryō
ninjutsu. That's how with a bit of input from Naruto, the Chakra Wires had come into creation.

Rin used them like Shisui would use ninja wire, but the difference was how she could affect the wire
compared to a regular one.

It was Naruto's memory of Kabuto which gave her the idea to make the wire so sharp it could tear
through just about anything. Rin's knowledge on cutting skin, muscles and bones were all
incorporated into the wires, and if she ever needed to just capture a target she could also immobilize
her victims by incorporating a sedative Iryō ninjutsu they used on patients under a lot of pain.

The technique was still in the beginning stages, but Rin, Shizune and Tsunade was having a blast
finding new ways to incorporate medical knowledge into how the wire preformed. From cutting off
arms to simple restrain or even heal.

She'd tested it out on Naruto's clones, and after they popped she could tell Rin exactly how effective
it was for the victim. Lately Rin had managed to change between having multiple wires in the air, to
combining them together into one thick wire which almost appeared like a whip.

As a whip the chakra was much more visible than the wires, but also pretty cool looking as far as
Naruto thought. Rin was just so gentle it was almost hysterical watching her battle with a whip.
Visibly it suited Tsunade better with her slave driving tactics.
Through their many hours of work, both under Tsunade and on their own initiative they'd become quite tight. Shizune too of course, but the unlike the other two Shizune didn't share the same experiences. It led to Shizune usually following Tsunade while Naruto and Rin worked in private.

But right now she wished she'd taken Shizune's advice to just shut up and sleep instead of Rin's suggestion to name bones.

It took her an embarrassingly long time to remember the maxillae, even with Rin pointing to her head to indicate where it was, but eventually she remembered before Tsunade demonstrated its location.

Finally Naruto had named them all, feeling incredibly proud she'd remembered them. Rin had listed them for the first time over five months ago so it had taken a while, but it didn't take away the feeling of achievement running thorough Naruto.

"Happy birthday, Naruto." Rin whispered tiredly when Naruto lapsed into victorious silence. Her eyes already closed as sleep took Rin. So while she slept Rin didn't notice the pained glint in Naruto's eyes.

Right… it was now her eleventh birthday. The day she was originally born.

Turning over she crossed her fingers - knowing the name of the bones inside there - while wondering if everyone was safe in Konoha right now.

And as if on cue, chakra pains started growing from her stomach, and Naruto could only hope to get a wink of sleep that night.

May,

Seven Months Later…

Anko grumbled annoyed as Shisui sat down next to her. "What's up sunshine?" He asked amused, picking up on her terrible mood with a single glance. Ensui sat down at her other side without a word.

"I hate my roommate." Anko huffed, picking at the ramen that was quickly getting cold. Anko had come here to reminisce about Naruto - the rightful roommate of their flat - but she was discovering that Ichiraku ramen stand had lost its charm without Naruto here to pester her. Well... at least the ramen was decent.

"I hate my roommate." Anko huffed, picking at the ramen that was quickly getting cold. Anko had come here to reminisce about Naruto - the rightful roommate of their flat - but she was discovering that Ichiraku ramen stand had lost its charm without Naruto here to pester her. Well... at least the ramen was decent.

"Oh? She seemed nice enough when I talked to her. She offered me some water the time I waited for you. That's a sign of a good hostess." Shisui replied after ordering a portion for himself.

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Anko frowned into her bowl. "She's a civilian, Shisui. She doesn't have anything better to do than being a good hostess. Do you know how much we have to talk about? The answer is nothing! She works in the storage room of the library... the library Shisui! And she's always home... Why doesn't she have a social life at least? I never get the place to myself anymore." She whined.

"She's clean though. That has to be an upgrade from Naruto." Ensui pointed out, untiring his forehead protector and placing it on the counter. Anko had noticed that peculiar habit of his before too. He always took it off during meals.

Since Naruto was out of town, Shisui had joined ANBU and Ensui had lost his entire team Anko found herself on an increasing amount of missions with the Nara. He wasn't a bad teammate; he was just an adjustment Anko hadn't expected. The boy got over well with Orochimaru, though anyone
who talked so little would. Ensui was always efficient and to the point, but Anko would be lying if
she said she wasn't worried about his gradually developing muteness. Sometimes she recognized the
old Ensui, but the moments were rare and far between.

"Well it's not worth it." Anko snapped. "I just don't feel comfortable at home, yah know? No matter
what time of the day she always looks impeccable. It makes me self-conscious and I feel like I have
to get ready before I go out of my bedroom for kami's sake. Why does she even make the effort? She
works in a storage room. Who is she trying to impress back there?"

Shisui smiled lopsided, accepting his ramen with thanks to Teuchi. "Go easy on her, okay Anko?
You've already chased off two roommates and it's not like this will last forever."

"Have you heard anything from Naru lately?" Anko asked, changing the subject before Shisui tried
to talk sense into her. It was highly irritating and she'd rather not have that lecture again.

Shisui shook his head. "No, nothing for over a month. She did say she would be busy in her last
letter though, and that for the next few months she might not reply as frequently."

Anko placed her elbow on the counter, her chin resting in her hand as she imagined all the
catastrophes Naruto could have caused in this time frame. "Hopefully she's not in trouble again."

July,

Two Months Later...

Minato coughed as he appeared on the other side, waving away the dust he'd kicked up at the
landing. Frowning he saw the group waiting in a circle around him, their difference in appearance
staggering.

There was Ma and Pa. Two toads with hair of vastly different coloring. One harsh midnight purple
and the other grey. Pa's hair color was probably the closest to the wild manes on Jiraiya, who was
standing with his arms folded in front of him. The little girl compare to Jiraiya's height made her look
dwarfed, had as yellow hair as himself. Her eye color was identical too. A year ago her skin tone
would have matched his own, but the two bijü inside her had changed her appearance ever so
slightly and her skin had turned a tone paler - closer to Kushina's.

Minato took in the place he'd been reversed summoned to. They were close to a tall spiky mountain
with rich green grass spreading out from underneath his feet. The sky looked unnaturally blue. The
tree bark a lighter shade of brown, and the air was even fresher than in the village hidden in leafs.

It had been years since he'd last been to Mount Myōboku, but from a first glance the place hadn't
changed at all.

"Minato-chan" Croaked Pa and spread his arms in welcome. He was standing on Jiraiya's shoulder
and the Sannin had to swiftly tilt his head to prevent being smacked in the face by a paw.

"Fukasaku-dono, Shima-dono, it's nice to see you again." Minato replied softly. "I wish it was under
a less serious errand though." He turned his eyes to Jiraiya, before finally – painstakingly – they fell

"Hi." Naruto replied drily. She was looking straight at Minato but there was an invisible filter
between them. A wall of distrust Minato couldn't see the beginning or end of.

He felt regret… He really did. Kushina's death had made him act cold, and to say it politely his
reaction to Naruto hadn't been the best. The situation had been too complex and difficult, and Minato hadn't had the energy to deal with his own sorrow on top of the discovery of Naruto's past.

Biologically she was his daughter, but he had never created Naruto. It was another Minato and Kushina who had birthed the girl in front of him, and though they shared DNA he couldn't automatically turn on a switch – making him love her the way a father should love their daughter.

The way Kushina had loved Naruto almost from the beginning.

He still cared for Naruto the way he always had. She was the girl Kushina had trained. The kid Kakashi complained about, Obito had raved against and Rin had taken the Chūnin exam with. He had allowed his wife to teach Naruto the Rasengan, but he later found out she already knew.

When thinking back on it Minato was conflicted. Sometimes it felt like Naruto had played them all. Fooling them by not telling them the truth. By letting them see only what they assumed, and no more than the surface of who she truly was. If the Kiri mission had never happened, if Kushina hadn't died and Naruto's secret never revealed than most likely Minato would be dead by now too. Naruto's silence – well intended though it might have been - had been dooming a lot of people to their deaths. No matter what she assumed Naruto had lost all control on the situation, and keeping the secret had protected no one but herself.

And other times he understood her completely. Her situation was unimaginable, and he understood how she came to pick the path she'd walked. And yet… It was two sides of the same coin. He both agreed and disagreed with her decision simultaneously, and his mood changed which one he felt the strongest about.

It had not done them any favors though. Before they'd gotten along fine and Minato had really adored the sunny little orphan. He even liked to imagine Naruto had appreciated him too.

Those emotions of fondness hadn't gone away despite everything that happened, but they were now tangled with betrayal and uncertainty from both sides.

Would Naruto ever truly trust him again? Her view of him had drastically changed during her imprisonment, and Minato didn't need Inoichi's mind walking technique to confirm that.

"So..." Minato said awkwardly while addressing Jiraiya instead, since looking at Naruto was disturbing. She just looked too much like Kushina. "Is everything prepared?"

It sounded like her lungs were torn apart, her whole body shook in desperate trembles and Jiraiya had no idea what to do. Naruto was curled together in a ball, the small figure so fragile it tugged at his heartstrings just to watch.

"This wasn't right... You shouldn't have done it Naruto." He said gravely, drying away more sweat from her forehead in a weak attempt to make her comfortable. It had been his job to protect her. Minato had specifically tasked him with this, telling him to keep her hidden and out of danger with every ounce of his skill, cunning and power.

And yet he'd advised this. Had approved and convinced the Fourth Hokage to go through with this madness.

Minato was standing a safe distance away, now and then peeking over to check if Naruto's condition had changed. Jiraiya wasn't sure what the unspoken tension between them was, but he guessed being reunited with the daughter given up for adoptions, or the father who gave you away had not gone over as smoothly as Jiraiya had hoped.
He still found it an absurd coincidence that he had been the one to find Naruto all those years ago. Back then he had no idea Minato and Kushina had birthed a child, far less that they had given the child up for its own protection. That the spirited, big mouthed girl he’d met randomly out in the wilderness was her or that he’d ended up returning Naruto to her rightful home.

What were the chances of meeting your student's long lost daughter after she'd recently been orphaned by her adoptive parents? The chances were so astronomical Jiraiya was starting to believe it was fate.

Back then he’d noticed the resemblance, but he'd never really allowed himself to see. He had expected to see a struggling orphan with an amusing resemblance to his favorite student, and that was what his mind supplied. It had been a joke really. He hadn't actually suspected a blood relation, far less one so close.

But the story had been confirmed by Minato himself, and therefore Jiraiya took over her protection when the Yondaime had asked. Partly because of her probation, but also out of worry she would be a target within Konoha.

Naruto had grown but she was still just a child. She hadn't even hit puberty yet, but the growth was undeniable. The only negative change was probably her attitude because Naruto acted very different from their first meeting.

Though she’d been through a lot since then, and Jiraiya couldn't fault her for allowing the world to leave its traces. It happened to the best of them. To taste war so close left wounds deeper than some could heal.

They'd been travelling together for several months now, but today had been different.

Today she'd released one of the bijū.

"No change?" Asked Minato. He hadn't spoken a word since the unsealing, at first he'd examined her and made sure everything had gone to plan, but as soon as he was satisfied he'd backed away. Ever since Minato had been hovering in the background, allowing Jiraiya to keep a closer look at Naruto instead.

Jiraiya hadn't thought about it at first. His worry for Naruto had distracted him but it was two hours later now, and Minato had yet to make a move towards them. Something must have gone very wrong between them, and he wished Minato would explain why he was so weary of Naruto.

"Not yet... I'm getting very concerned. Naruto? Please squeeze my hand if you can understand me." Jiraiya asked and put his hand around her much smaller one. A fragile squeeze of her fingers gave him momentary relief, but it was quenched when the hand trembled.

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"There's little we can do. She reassured us this would pass with time, sensei. We knew it would be rough on her." Minato stood up, his Hokage robes billowing as he took a hesitant step forward. Jiraiya had never seen Minato this insecure or lost. It didn't suit him at all.

People had a habit of being deceived by Minato appearance. They saw his timeless handsomeness, the soft spoken words and gentle spirit and misinterpreted it as amiableness. It was a wildly spread misconception even after everything he did in the war. People didn't see that though he carried himself as a man of peace, fairness and loyalty, he had gone a long way to get there.

In his relationship with Kushina it was easy to think her as the "strict one", and that Minato was the "obedient one". That Kushina was the iron hard will and determination, while Minato was the heart
and protective backbone.

People failed to see what was underneath the surface. It was a reason Minato was chosen as Yondaime, and it wasn't because he was "nice".

It was a fallacy. In all truth it was actually opposite. Kushina had been a lot softer hearted than Minato. She just hid it behind a boisterous exterior, and Naruto was the same.

Minato had been the one to shoot for his dreams. The one to go for what he wanted with a disguised ruthlessness Kushina couldn't hope to copy. He had convinced Kushina to marry him hadn't he? He had become Hokage.

And Kushina's consciousness would have torn her apart if she'd been forced to do the things Minato had done during the war. Kushina couldn't have killed a thousand ninjas in one single day, and then continued living without letting it break her apart.

The difference now was that before Minato had always had Kushina. He had found his will to protect the village and the people he loved, but the one he loved the most was now dead. His most intimate weakness torn away and he was still adjusting. Trying to find a foothold to steady his ever changeable reality.

It unsettled Jiraiya more than he liked to admit.

Swallowing a lump in his throat Jiraiya glanced down the hill to the water edge of the lake. A giant bijū stood calmly while bathing in the water. It was still absurd to think they were this close to a bijū, and yet none of them were afraid of being attacked.

Jiraiya was only just starting to realize how little he actually knew about the nine bijū.

Though this was all Naruto's work. Her stupid, foolhardy and mad idea to bring "Isobu" here of all places.

He still wondered how she'd convinced Ma, Pa and Gamamaru to hide the Sanbi from Madara. Naruto had talked with them for days, but it was still a lot shorter than the hoops she'd jumped through to get Jiraiya to even consider the idea.

But somehow she'd changed his mind, and Minato was easier to convince than he'd been.

Logically Jiraiya understood her reasoning. Ever since becoming the jinchūriki of Isobu and Kurama she'd been in a bad shape. No one could ever hope to contain two bijū of such different natures without having to deal with the imbalance. She was struggling with her techniques and her chakra control, but worst of all she experienced pains every other day from eruptions in her chakra system.

It was through Tsunade's whispered concerns that he'd started checking for himself. Naruto had hid it well, and if he hadn't known what to look for Jiraiya would only see a slight discomfort on her face.

There was also the fact that if Naruto – kami forbid – was captured Madara would get a hold of two bijū instead of one.

Jiraiya had argued that they would have to create another jinchūriki instead of setting it free. But Naruto had really not liked the idea, neither had the bijū inside her, and surprisingly not Minato either.

Because Minato strongly believed they were currently at an imbalance in the system. The Kyūbi was too strong, but with the Three Tails in Konoha's possession too they outweigh the other villages
completely. Konoha had just come out of one war, and Minato refused to allow a repetition of what happened to Uzushiogakure.

"Can we move her?" asked Ma concerned, coming closer to put her paw on Naruto's forehead. "We should put Naruto-chan somewhere more comfortable."

"I'm not sure. What if it hurts her to be moved? She will recover from this, won't she?" asked Pa, his question directed down the hill towards the Sanbi.

It freaked Jiraiya out when the large demon turned his head in their direction and nodded. He didn't think he could ever completely quench his fear for the gigantic crab-turtle. "She'll be fine. I can feel Kurama working, and Naruto is the most hard-headed human I've ever met. Give her time and she will be alright."

Isobu was so calm. Nothing at all like what Jiraiya had expected or imagined.

Sighing Minato dragged a hand through his hair. "It will be fine. We wouldn't be doing this if I wasn't certain. She will no longer have an out flux of chakra, and eventually she'll be able to access her techniques a lot easier and morph it to her old standards. The mix of the two bijū inside her system was causing her pain, Jiraiya, and we have found a secure location for the Sanbi to stay and out of the Madara's reach. Isn't it better to have a strong jinchūriki of one bijū, instead of one who's in pain charged with two?" Minato said tiredly. Reminding Jiraiya of the reasons it had come to this.

He knew from Minato's explanation that his seal had been stolen and tested on Naruto to seal the Sanbi, but she'd later used it to take the Kyūbi too after Kushina had been attacked.

It was a crazy story, but then Naruto was one to have impossible things happen to her. It had been even more insane when she one memorable afternoon lifted up her sweater to show that her seal had been open for months and that she was working on tearing down Isobu's chains too.

Jiraiya had demanded answers, and soon the whole story had come out. How she had opened the seal keeping the nine and three tails locked up with her last dying energy. That the act had made them grow to trust her despite everything, which is why when given the opportunity they had stayed instead of breaking free.

It was why none of the still living Konoha ninja had died when the Three Tails was released. Naruto had begged him to spare them, and Isobu had listened by only attacking Kiri ninja.

Naruto had admitted she had no plans to keep the bijū against their will. Isobu had stayed for convenience, simply because sooner or later Madara would come for him and Isobu had no plans of ever being captured by him. They feared Madara's plans almost as much as Naruto herself did, and Isobu had found it more convenient to stick around until he found a proper hiding place.

And apparently the Kyūbi had stayed because he'd put so much effort into re-growing Naruto's heart after her original had been blown to pieces.

It sounded ridiculous to Jiraiya, but after hearing the same story from two enormous bijū inside Naruto's seal he was starting to believe too.

And then Naruto asked him to help her tear down the seal keeping Isobu tied to her. He wasn't there as volunteer like the Kyūbi was, and she hated his current predicament. Naruto would survive the extraction thanks to Kurama because her chakra system was much more depended on his presence than Isobu's thanks to being Kushina's daughter.

The discussion went on for months, and Jiraiya wasn't sure exactly what she'd said to convince him,
but somehow she'd managed to talk him into freeing the Three Tails.

Looking back he wondered if he had been temporarily delusional.

He ran a hand through her hair before letting it rest at the nape of her neck. He lifted her head up gently and nudged the water bottle towards her lips. Naruto was sweating and shivering, and he suspected she was dehydrated. Naruto frowned with her eyes tightly shut. She tilted her head away in protest while Jiraiya tried to make her drink.

Isobu was sitting completely still with his head raised towards the sky. Jiraiya imagined he was enjoying the fresh air on his face but it was hard to be certain. His worries lay with the girl completely spent on the ground.

"She really will be alright, human." the bijū assured, and Jiraiya peeked up uncertainly. "When she's well enough I'll allow her to sign me as her summon. That way I can repay her for all she's done for me."

January,

Seven Months Later…

Kakashi stood perched on the frame looking in through the open window. "Mah, are you making what I think you are?" He asked hopefully, sniffing the air longingly.

Anko rolled her eyes and nodded. "Yup. Eggplant soup today." She answered with a wide toothy grin. Kakashi jumped lightly down into the room, making his way up to the counter to peek into the pot. Anko growled at him, warning him to keep out of her personal space.

"It smells good." Kakashi noted while stepping back, his arms firmly planted in his pocket. Anko could see he was trying to act casually, his posture lax as he tried to avert his eyes from the food.

An evil idea popped up in her, and just as casually as Kakashi was acting she replied. "I know."

"You also made quite a lot." He pointed out, his gloved hand pointing towards the stove.

"The pot is large enough." Anko agreed.

There was a longer silence before Kakashi pouted. "It'll probably take a while to finish all that on your own."

"To make food for days saves me a lot of dead time cooking." Anko answered energetically. Stirring with growing energy at her own little game. It was surprisingly fun to mess with Kakashi like this.

Kakashi didn't think so though. "It might go bad though. You don't want to risk it."

"Oh, you underestimate my appetite. I train way too much to have problems finishing this off on time." Anko answered, her spoon lifting out of the pot so she could take a demonstrative taste of the soup and make satisfying yummy noises.

Kakashi sighed in defeat. "Fine. Can I have a portion, please?"

Anko turned towards him with narrowed eyes. "What do I get out of it?"

Kakashi was in full mission mood now. His brow furrowed in concentration as he saw where this was going. "I'll pay you back for the food I eat," He offered at last.
Anko was shaking her head instantly. "Nope. That's a bad deal if I ever heard one. Not only do I make no profit of you eating dinner from my plates and pots, but I've also wasted billable minutes making you food and washing up."

"Fine, I can pay a five percent of the full price for the groceries on top of my share of dinner eaten." Kakashi suggested instead, his hands lifting from his pocket to his hips in annoyance.

Anko thought about it for a moment. "Nah, thirty percent."

"Are you insane? Ten. And not a percent more."

Anko didn't find that adequate at all. "I say twenty at the very least. Don't kid yourself here. It takes time, knowledge and effort to make these meals. If it didn't you would be down in your own apartment eating dinner already."

Kakashi sighed. "Fifteen percent?"

She saw she wouldn't be able to press him any higher now, and slowly nodded. "..I guess..."

"Mah, we have a deal then." And then he proceeded by sitting down at her table, waiting impatiently for her to finish up.

"You can make the table while you wait." Anko suggested, turning back to the stove and peeking in to make sure everything was progressing right.

"What? Of course not. I'm paying you for this service."

August,

Seven Months later...

Minato rested his head against the top documents of his stack of paper. Wondering if it would ever end.

How had Hiruzen done this? He was swimming in documents without an end in sight and no matter how many piles he finished there were always a new one waiting.

Sighing he raised his head when there was a knock on the door, and calling out for them to enter his receptionist peeked her head in. "Danzō-sama is here to see you, Hokage-sama."

"Send him in." Minato answered at once, instantly more awake.

Danzō came in, his cane clicking against the floor for each step he took. "You requested me, Minato." He said in his deep monotone voice.

"Please have a seat." Minato gestured towards the chair opposite his desk. Danzō fleetingly looked it over before sitting down while taking his time to get comfortable. "Let's not prolong this," Minato said. "I'll get straight to it. Root will from today integrate with the ANBU troops."

For the first time in memory Minato saw Danzō speechless, there was a few moments of silence before; "Absolutely not, Minato. Hiruzen and I had an agreement. I deal with the darker side of our village business, and to do so I need control of Root independently from ANBU." He kept calm, but Minato heard the edge to his voice.

"No disrespect to the Sandaime of course, but I am not him." Minato replied just as calmly. His eyes
never leaving Danzō's while waiting for a reaction. "As I inform the council of my movements and decision it only stands to reason you do the same. I am the head of Konoha now, and as its leader it falls to me to make the hard decision. What sort of leader would I be if I didn't?"

"There are sides to Konoha darker than you imagine, Minato."

"Which are all the more reasons for me to be involved."

"I disagree with this decision, Minato. I highly recommend you reconsider. While you are familiar with practical warfare, the political one is quite different. You do not have the right mentality for this sort of work."

"Do not presume to know me, Danzō." Minato said, his voice chilling at the implication that he wasn't capable of this. "You are an outside observer who's read my file. And if that's any indication you know me as well as I know you. Though we both know our profiles aren't all that detailed, do we not?" He started, leaning back in his comfy chair while pushing away a pile of papers with lax slowness.

"But to clear the air let's recap what I know. I know for a fact you want my position. I know for a fact that if you had gotten the Hokage post both Root and ANBU would both have answered to you. So why should I not do the same Danzō? Do you believe me inadequate to be informed of your decisions?" He paused, his head titling curiously while waiting for the reply on both of their minds.

Danzō was wise. He didn't say anything.

So Minato continued his voice soft and easy in tone. "You will from now have the position as captain over Root, but every single mission will go through me. And like all of my decisions, yours will also be discussed within the council and executed with approval from us. Fail to do this and the consequences will be severe. I will not have disobedience from someone in your position."

Danzō's frown was growing deeper and deeper, and the arguments Minato knew was coming was told while he gripped his cane harshly enough to make his knuckles turn white. "You don't give me much leeway here, Minato. Have you discussed this with Hiruzen at all? Young men are known for acting rash. Personally this sounds more like you are marking your territory than a well thought out decision."

Minato's eyes flashed, but the glint was gone not a second later. "I have discussed this with Hiruzen ever since I took over his duties, and he supports my decision fully."

The old war hawk turned quiet, and Minato could see how his mind was spinning with possible arguments. He had to quench those.

"Don't misunderstand me, because I'm giving you no leeway, Danzō. None at all. You will disband Root while integrating it into ANBU, you will inform the council of everything from now on, you will do this without protest and you will be branded a traitor to Konoha if you fail to comply with my orders. I will not be lenient about mutiny. People in a seat of power are always the most dangerous, and I know more about your character than you think, Danzō. Your head is still at war despite not lifting a kunai during the last. And though all you wish is to protect Konoha it's time you realize it's not a job you can do behind my back. Your way of warfare will only gain us more trouble than lessen them. You don't nurture peace, Danzō. You breed enemies."

"And you are too naive." Danzō hissed. "You're just like Hiruzen. This village deserves someone who can look ahead and see the negative instead of the positive. It's how we predict danger. It's how we plan our strategies. It's how Konoha developed into the strongest of the hidden villages. You will
lead Konoha through disaster if you're too soft. Just look at what happened to the jinchūriki. Despite being suspected of treason Uzumaki Naruto is currently free to run away and never look back. The best solution back then was to transfer the bijū into new jinchūriki. Someone more trustworthy than that questionable Chūnin. At the very least we should have kept her under close surveillance and trained her into her full potential. But you and Hiruzen were thinking of her mental welfare above this village's protection. Which proves again that you are too soft. To disregard emotions and eliminate threats is the only way to protect Konoha. You will never be able to handle Root. Despite all your considerable skill your pliability is making you weak."

Minato looked emptily back at Danzō while he spoke, not a muscle flexing throughout his argument. "I respectfully disagree. As I have assured you many times Uzumaki Naruto is a perfect candidate to keep the bijū. Her blood ties speak for themselves and though the council wasn't informed of the entirety of the investigation we found no hostility towards Konoha nor any ill intent. In fact she is loyal to a fault." Minato explained slowly, his head tilting to the side. "And since when was murder the equivalence of strength? Or refraining to kill considered weakness? To know when not to kill is as important as knowing when to do so."

Minato took a deep breath. "It's a fine line I have reason to believe you are confused by. You only ever consider the danger of an indisposed threat while failing to acknowledge the damage of eliminating someone who shouldn't have been. That makes you dangerous, Danzō."

October,

Two Months Later...

It was a dreary place. Naruto had never really pictured Amegakure much, but whatever she had imagined it wasn't what she found. The tall buildings looked like piles of enormous but random materials stacked on top of one another through the thick fog and constant drizzle.

Wrapping her cloak tightly about her she peeked up at Jiraiya. His eyes were fixed intently on the village, and Naruto suspected he was both reminiscing about the past and drawing up a route to gain access. "You really think this will work?" Asked Naruto quietly, feeling cold despite the humid temperatures.

"I don't know, but it's better to try is it not?" Asked Jiraiya heavily.

Naruto wondered if it really was. Her head knew it, but her heart was strongly against this. "You're right." She replied her voice low as if she was awaiting an unavoidable doom. It wouldn't be too far from the truth.

"I'll go in, and you will remain here at all cost. If I'm not back within a week you leave for the passage of Ishigakure, and if-"

"...you don't show up for a month I call for Minato. I know." Naruto finished, her eyes worried as she looked between the village and Jiraiya. "I can still come with you. I can help."

Jiraiya was shaking his head before she finished speaking. His hair peeling water onto Naruto who didn't really notice in the light rain. "Absolutely not. This place is far less safe for you than anyone else. I never planned on bringing you so close to Ame at all."

"What if they won't listen to you?" Naruto asked instead, huddling into her cloak in hopes of finding some comfort there. To sit on the sideline and watch Jiraiya walk into Ame was worse than she'd imagined it would be. All she could think about was the last time he'd gone there for Naruto's sake.
Jiraiya had not come out again. In her timeline Jiraiya's body was still being crushed by the ocean depths.

"I will reverse summon if it comes to a battle. I have it all figured out with Ma and Pa." Jiraiya told Naruto kindly, peering down at her warmly.

Yet Naruto shivered at the thought and looked up at him pleadingly. She couldn't lose him too after Iruka and Kushina. And the idea of him dying a second time was unbearable.

But here she was, ordered to stay put and out of sight. Probably to twiddle fingers while waiting for Jiraiya to return from this death trap of a village.

Naruto swallowed. As the more logical part of her brain came into action. Jiraiya was right though. He had figured out an efficient exit strategy. Unlike last time Jiraiya was prepared now. He knew the risks a lot better, knew just how deadly his old student was if he'd been converted into Madara's Akatsuki. The question was if he had been or not.

Was Nagato and Konan still part of the rebel group led by Yahiko? Naruto had no idea exactly when it had taken place just that it had. Most likely around now, a few years ago, or in a few years. If they were too early or too late was impossible for Naruto to tell.

But this was one of those instances Shisui had referred to. A moment where she had to place her trust in someone else but herself despite feeling like it would kill her. She had to hand over the ropes to Jiraiya because her presence might cause more harm than good. "Hanzō is in charge of this village though… There are so many things that can go wrong. And… And you have to come back."

Jiraiya smiled and roughly up her hair playfully. It made her smile for a short instant.

His arm fell to his side, and without saying goodbye he started walking down the long field towards the water edge. Despite herself Naruto reached out, her fingers intertwining with Jiraiya's cloak and halting him in his steps.

He looked back surprised at first, but seeing her face he softened. "I'll come back Naruto."

Wordlessly Naruto let him go, and unable to let him out of her sight just yet she watched his departure. As his figure became smaller and smaller in the distance Naruto thought bitterly. Happy fucking thirteenth birthday to me.

_________________________

February,

Four Months Later...

To assemble a shelf was more complicated than Kakashi had expected. Or maybe it was just his lack of foresight that had affected the finished result so much. Contradictory to his intentions his new shelf had not been level after he'd nailed it hurriedly to the wall. It resulted in him having to dismantle it and redo the whole process, but after his second attempt Kakashi was confident the books on the shelf wouldn't fall and hit him in the head while he slept.

The shelf was mostly installed with books in mind, but Kakashi had one other item he wished to display as well. So nostalgically he placed his old team photo in the middle, his eyes trailing to the black haired figure like every time he glanced at the picture in passing.

Obito and he had been annoyed at each other the day their team photo was taken. Kakashi had bemoaned the fact that Obito was late, while Obito had been angry at Kakashi for being cross with
him. Minato and Rin had always acted as the middle man, the latter more than the first, and it showed through the picture.

Kakashi wondered what Rin was doing now. He'd received a letter from her two months ago, and it sounded like she was learning and experiencing a lot under Tsunade's guidance.

Despite only hearing good stories from his teammate Kakashi still couldn't help but worry. That fateful day he'd promised Obito to keep her safe, and yet here he was hundreds of thousands of miles away while she fended for herself.

But what was he supposed to do? Lock her in a room and throw away the key? That was no life. To exist and live were two different things. Obito wouldn't have wanted her to not seize her life. To take control of it and choose her own path.

In the beginning it had been difficult to accept that Rin would be leaving. Especially since Naruto left too. They were the closest thing outside of Minato he had left to call family. His pack.

Anko was… well, Anko. He hadn't ever been able to forge such a trust with her as he had with the other three. As they were his teammates Minato and Rin was probably natural. They'd experienced so much together and he'd imprinted them into his heart after Obito's death. It had probably happened before that, but Kakashi hadn't acknowledged it until it was too late for his best friend.

Naruto was different. She had barged her way in. Nagging him until he accepted her stupid dinner invitations and hung out with her after missions or training. When Obito was no longer there to call him out for being an idiot Naruto had taken over the job. His spirit shining strongly through her actions.

It had comforted Kakashi to see her, at times it had seemed like Obito wasn't as gone as they all knew he was.

But sometimes Kakashi had felt guilty. Not able to shake the feeling he was replacing Obito with Naruto, but that thought hadn't entered his mind since the disastrous rescue mission. When he'd almost killed her himself.

He shuddered. Feeling the old tingle around his arm just thinking back on it.

But Naruto wasn't Obito. Nothing would ever replace him. It was only Obito who had made Kakashi open himself to new people. Naruto had just shown there were rooms for more than he'd originally thought. Obito made him accept that people were not a weakness, but a strength and support he needed to keep living. There was no worth in living unless you had that, right?

Kakashi removed some dust from the clear glass, wondering if he should be like Obito and tape over his old rival's face. It would definitely make Rin laugh when she returned. He'd told her of Obito's little stunt before she left.

But it was still a long time off. Kakashi wouldn't see her for a long time yet.

He looked up at the clock, noting it was five minutes until his meeting. He glanced back at the picture while considering his options. The meeting would have to wait, he hadn't been by the memorial stone in ages and it was only right to be late when visiting Obito.

_October,_

_Eight Months Later_…
"Hi Naru!

I can’t believe it’s been over three years since you left. If it wasn’t for our team photo I don’t think I would remember your face anymore. When I recall you it’s more a blurry shape of yellow and orange than anything specific. Does that make me a bad best friend?

I’m currently writing this on your birthday, so before I forget; Happy Birthday! Fourteen, huh? Hopefully you’ve grown a bit. You always looked like the weakling, but then I guess that was always your strength. No one would ever take you seriously, which always made it fun to watch you prove them wrong.

I hate my new roommate. I am at number six now, and still say number four was the best one. I haven’t bothered to remember his name yet, he’ll go like the rest of them, you know? But he’s thirty five and newly widowed, which makes him such a depressing roommate that I just want to tear my hair out! I think his wife died of illness and they had no kids, so the guy moved in here with me. Apparently it’s quite expensive with hospital bills for civilians. Did you know we got a discount because of our profession? I had no idea, but it’s good we have medical coverage with duties like ours, right? Kakashi especially is a regular at Konoha Memorial Hospital.

In fact I was on this mission with Kakashi the other week. Though of course he never said it was him, he was hiding behind his mask, but let me tell you it does not hide away his annoying voice or that gravity defying hair. And one look into the eye holes of his mask was enough to see one Sharingan. A dead giveaway. I mean.. who do ANBU think they’re fooling? And it’s just on missions too. He blew his lids off when I called him Kakashi and started shouting at me to shut up. But when I call him that within Konoha he doesn’t care at all. I must say he has a lot of fate in the village’s security.

Shisui is being a brat. Nothing new there, but he’s adopted a brat to go around being brats together. His cousin Itachi is starting to remind me of Shisui's shadow. He’s always there. Right behind Shisui, dark and quiet – just like a shadow.

And now the Shisui shadow has his own shadow. The mini shadows is just three years old, and you have no idea how annoying that little shit is. His name is Sasuke and unfortunately happen to be related to Shisui. I could just strangle him! I invited Shisui over for dinner, and then he brought those two side-kicks with him unannounced. Fortunately I had enough food, but for fucks sake Sasuke made a mess. You remember those dinner events we threw sometimes? Well, Sasuke makes twice as much of a mess all on his own. I found salmon in my dresser a week later. My dresser, Naru! I have no idea how he even got into my bedroom, far less the hanging dresser halfway up the wall, but it’s the only evening I’ve had salmon in months, and the only possible suspect is that mini devil.

On a different note Sensei is keeping busy. (As always) I’ve only had three missions with him so far in the last four months. Shisui was with us on one of them though, but these days he’s always too busy with his new position to keep me company, that loser. Which reminds me; I’ve got a new position too. I applied to both the TIF and the I&R, and I got the first one. So you’re currently reading a letter from the rookie of the TIF department, Naru! I can’t tell you anything specific in a letter, but I’ll just say this; I love my new job! I mean, it must suck being on the receiving end, but by kami I feel powerful these days.

I’ve found my call in life. You should be proud.

Please try to write more often Naru. It’s been months since your last letter, and it’s getting tiring listening to Shisui worry about you being MIA all the time. Before he’s proven wrong when one of your letters show up a month later.
"Just write okay?

Take care,

Your Blessedly Patient Best Friend Anko

PS: You better bring me a souvenir when you come back."

Naruto chuckled as she read through the letter, Jiraiya peeking over her shoulder while Naruto held the scroll away from his prying eyes.

Anko seemed to be doing well, because the more she complained the better. She was the type of person who got caressingly ruder the better her life went. Which was a bit weird when Naruto came to think of it.

She picked up the next letter the toad summon had brought and found Shisui’s neat handwriting on the scroll. Opening it eagerly she started reading.

"Dear Naruto,

How are you doing? Have Jiraiya-sama taught you anything new? Where are you now? I overheard you might have been to Mount Myōboku, is that true?

Here at home Anko is driving me absolutely mad with her anxiety. Anko swore you were MIA just yesterday, which I tried to point out was impossible seeing as you're not on active duty, though I get where she's coming from. She has been coming by every day for the last two weeks asking if I'd received a letter from you yet, so thanks for finally replying. I think she misses you. I do too by the way. Konoha is a very quiet place with just Anko to cause mayhem.

There's not much news on my end, though Itachi has started training regularly with me. Unfortunately he's exceptional - I hardly have to teach him a thing - and it gets annoying after a while. And then there's Sasuke... You should have been there during dinner last week with Anko. I told her I was spending the day at Itachi’s but she still demanded I came over so I brought them along. Unfortunately Sasuke absolutely detest her. He was being such a nightmare just to rile her up. First refusing to eat the food, saying it was "yucky", and then smearing the sauce at everything he came into contact with. He even put a piece of salmon in Anko's new jacket, and I don't think she realized it was there.

Don't tell Anko though. I was sworn to secrecy by Itachi, who for some reason believes Sasuke is a golden child and Anko is the problem. Personally I say it's fifty/fifty.

Anko got a new job where she's paid to bully people. I think it fits her perfectly. I swear I saw her glowing once when she came out of the TIF department.

I work in another division too these days so I don't see that much of sensei, but I hear he's running another research program. It's all very hush, hush, and I don't have any idea what he's doing. Anko tried to sneak in, but sensei caught her and threw her out before she saw anything of value.

And I'm sad to say that Anko is getting addicted to breaking and entering. Because after leaving Orochimaru's research lab she went ahead and found the ANBU station. She won't admit it, but I suspect she followed the two ANBU who escorted her off the premises on Orochimaru's orders. For some reason Anko doesn't want me to tell you this, because apparently you two had a pact? (What's the story behind that anyway?) But she's being increasingly annoying these days, and this is my petty revenge for stealing my favorite quill to write you her own letter. I'm left with the reserve one, so I apologize for the ink smudges.
I'm writing this letter on the tenth of October, and though I know you won't receive it for some days I still want to wish you a happy birthday! Keep safe, train hard and hopefully you won't take four months to reply this time around.

Write soon,

Shisui."

September,

Eleven Months Later….

It was bone frosting cold. Naruto could barely see through the pouring rain and Jiraiya wasn't faring much better.

"Naruto! We will stop at the first inn we find, there's no way I'm dealing with this through the night."

Jiraiya bellowed to her and yet Naruto nearly didn't hear him. The howling wind was chilling her soaked skin, making it feel like it was twice as cold then it actually was. The rain and fog made it impossible to see more than ten meters ahead, and the soaking grass made their feet sink into mud for each step they took.

Not for the last time Naruto wished she wasn't wear sandals.

"Where the hell do we find an inn?! I have no idea where we are!" Naruto bellowed back, and still had to repeat herself when Jiraiya didn't hear her.

"There should be one close by! If I'm correct we're close to a village!" He shouted while pointing a water wrinkled hand in the direction Naruto guessed they were heading.

Making sure her hood was secured Naruto set out running after her teacher. Using chakra enhancement on her legs, as they pelted through the forest being washed away by the rainstorm.

Of course they got lost, and it took them five hours instead of one to find the village Jiraiya spoke of. But once they finally found the inn of the village Naruto was so incredibly relieved. The building was tired, worn and in desperate need of refurbishment, but to her it was as good as a palace. Despite heaving leaks the inn at least had a roof.

Jiraiya shook his head as he lowered the hood of his cloak, getting water everywhere from his shaggy hair and making Naruto recall they'd been to Ame a few years ago. Back then his hair had constantly been heavy with constant rain too.

Though Jiraiya had managed to enter the village he had not able to track down the leaders of the peace organization Akatsuki the first time.

He'd found a lead before he'd left to meet up with Naruto. It felt like an eternity since now. After his first failed attempt he'd felt forced to go a second time. And that time he'd brought Naruto along.

She would probably always remember her panic when Jiraiya had failed to show up for the entire week, and as of their agreement Naruto had headed towards Ishigakure without him.

The track there had been filled with heart clenching worry and Gamasho trying to cheer her up. Jiraiya's summon had been with her the entire time and put it upon himself to take Naruto's mind off her troubles.
When Jiraiya had showed up two days before Naruto was supposed to call Minato for backup she was torn between murdering him and crying. It had ended in a mixture of both. She'd first punched him hard in the jaw, and then started crying, before sending a wind cutting technique at him. Unfortunately shortening his hair somewhat when he ducked.

This time the infiltration had gone over better. He'd managed to make contact with all three of his old students and they celebrated the fact that evening. It had taken Jiraiya over a week to find out exactly where they hid, and then it was a matter of getting in without being attacked at the door. It was Yahiko who'd recognized him first, and after that Jiraiya had mostly been making up for lost time with his old students. Naruto wanted to strangle him for neglecting to tell his current student about his whereabouts though.

But the mission was successful. They'd been warned and informed to a full extent, and they had agreed to be a lot more cautious.

Jiraiya had informed Minato with the help of their toad summons about the development. That the Akatsuki was informed of the current threat, and that both Naruto and him had made it out intact.

Minato had responded furiously. Even in writing portraying just how pissed off he was that Jiraiya had brought Naruto into Ame at all, but at the end commenting that it was good that the mission was successfully completed.

But that was months ago. Naruto had not heard much from Minato since and neither had Jiraiya. But they both wondered when she would be called back to the village. It couldn't be too long now.

"What did I tell you?! Coming here was a huge mistake! You knew there was a storm coming in and if we'd just stayed in Wind Country we'd be nice and dry right now!" Naruto shouted, ripping off her cloak the moment they stepped into the rented room. It was a worn place, and though they could afford two rooms it was just easier and more economical to bunk together. Especially for Naruto who was almost completely broke by now.

Jiraiya chuckled at her frustration, placing his coat on the hanger while roughing up his hair in an attempt to get more water out of it. "Now gaki, it's a surprise and I don't want to ruin it. I didn't give you anything for your birthday, so I have a belated fourteenth birthday present for you. It's just wrong we never celebrated that you finally started developing curves!"

Naruto shrieked. "You perverted old man! Stop saying things like that! It creeps me out, dattebayo! Gah, I miss Tsunade, Rin and Shizune. Why the hell did I go with you again?" Then she registered what he'd said. "And… It's my fifteenth birthday in a month… Why the hell would you give me a present for my fourteenth?"

The night was restless thanks to the howling wind and the constant; drip, drip, drip from a leak in the room. Naruto woke up several times from the noise and turned annoyed at her inability to sleep. Jiraiya was out like a light on the futon across the room. His snores falling into the symphony of highly irritating sounds keeping Naruto awake.

By morning she was bleary eyes and disorientated, and wondered if she'd slept at all or taken a light nap between her awakenings in the night.

Jiraiya buzzed around excitedly, throwing her a package over his shoulder when she woke up and calling out "Happy birthday," to which Naruto replied; "It's not my birthday!".

Yet she opened the present, curious as to what it might be. It was a book.
Naruto couldn't stop smiling and her grumpiness ebbed away almost instantly. "It's the book I was writing on when we met Naruto! Funnily enough the main character shares your name… But I swear I made that name up before I even met you, though now I wonder if I heard it from Minato and subconsciously recalled it later on… Who knows, huh, brat? Anyhow, I finished before you joined me on this trip. It hasn't sold that well, but I still think it's a good gift. You'll like it a lot more than some of my other writing."

"Thank you, Ero-Sennin! I love it." Naruto replied, tracing the new binding while she studied the book.

"And for your eighteenth birthday I have another book for you!" Jiraiya said and wagged his eyebrows. Naruto picked up her clunky backpack and threw it at Jiraiya, knowing he was talking about his Icha, Icha book. He'd started writing the book a few years ago, and then handed Naruto drafts to look over. It had been released just six months ago, and the sales were picking up.

Jiraiya dodged out of the way of course, and Naruto went back to focusing on her new book. It had a different cover than the one she remembered, but the title was the same. Not thinking much over the alteration she opened it excitedly.

"Wait with opening that, Naruto! It's for after your surprise!"

"This isn't my surprise?" Asked Naruto, her hands freezing as she was about to turn the pages and skim through the book.

Jiraiya shook his head, his smile widening. "Of course not! I have a better fourteenth birthday surprise for my apprentice than my old book."

"Gah! It's not my birthday, you moron! It was eleven damn months ago!"

To Naruto's annoyance Jiraiya told the receptionist at the inn they were celebrating her birthday when they left. Then he told the grocery store salesman the same, before informing a random couple on the street. Naruto was starting to suspect he was doing it just to rile her up.

He then asked her to wait at a street corner for fifteen minutes before following him to a park down the road. Naruto sighed, letting Jiraiya have his fun. It wasn't like she could stop him if she tried.

Impatiently she waited while watching the village wake up. The early birds had already cleared the street, and a stream of people was starting to exit their homes to do their daily chores. Naruto gave up after ten minutes of people watching, deciding she might have to intervene on whatever Jiraiya had planned for her "birthday surprise". Who knew, maybe there was a bathhouse in the village and Jiraiya had gotten her a ticket. There was no way she was going in one of those with Jiraiya within a hundred mile's radius.

Strolling down the street with her hands folded behind her head she searched for the park Jiraiya had mentioned. Soon after the street ebbed into a quiet little park with a river running through it, and she found the back of Jiraiya's wild hair within a few glances.

As she came closer she noticed the second person Jiraiya was talking animatedly with. Sitting on the bench, looking highly annoyed with his old teammate was none other than Orochimaru.

Naruto stopped a few feet away, finding she'd forgotten how the Snake Sannin looked in the last few years. He appeared like he always did, as pale as ever with yellow slit eyes that currently seemed to
impress how utterly idiotic he found Jiraiya. "Is this the big birthday surprise?" She asked loudly, drawing both men's attention towards her.

Jiraiya twirled around and nodded with a toothy smile.

"You know it's not your birthday, right?" Asked Orochimaru with an arched eyebrow.

Jiraiya and Naruto both ignored him. "Are you kidding me? What on earth made you think I wanted Orochimaru for my birthday?"

"But it's not your birthday." The Snake Sannin pointed out with a huff.

"Your book was a thousand times better than him. Why, oh why did you think this was a good idea? Why not Anko? Or Shisui? Or Kakashi?" Naruto was listing off on her fingers, while Orochimaru was looking increasingly affronted Naruto was ignoring him as if he wasn't even there.

"He's your sensei, brat! I thought you'd be happy!" Jiraiya answered, waving his arms up and down while Naruto rolled her eyes.

"Clearly you haven't seen me and snake face interact much, Ero-Sennin."

Orochimaru smirked, his arms folding in front of him while he gave Jiraiya a smug grin. As if he'd just been proven right about something. "Believe me, Naruto, coming all the way here for you is not how I prefer to use my time either."

Naruto turned towards her team sensei, eyeing him suspiciously. "Why did you then? Wait, you really came here specifically for me? I was hoping it was a coincidence, dattebayo…"

Orochimaru gestured towards Jiraiya, "He still has some things to clear up without your presence, but you are requested back in Konoha and I'll be your escort home."

"Surprise!" Shouted Jiraiya as Orochimaru finished, his hand shooting up in the air as if he was cheering and drawing the attention of a few by passers who hurriedly scurried away. "Your probation is over, gaki. You can go home to Konoha now!"

For a moment Naruto was stunned. She started counting on her fingers again, and sure enough; It had been more than four years now… Almost four and a half. She'd left sometime in spring hadn't she? And it was September now…

And then Naruto moaned. "What?! Are you kidding? I have to travel with you as my only company? What on earth did I ever do to you, Jiraiya? What sort of crime did I commit to deserve such a punishment?!"

Jiraiya chuckled nervously, looking back and forth between them while wondering how much were joking and how much were genuine dislike. "I'll return to Konoha in a month, until then it's Orochimaru who has to keep you in check, gaki."

"It's a good thing I'm getting well paid for this…" Muttered Orochimaru and waved his hand dismissively at Naruto. "But no, we won't have to endure each other's exclusive company throughout the entirety of the trip. We're meeting up with Tsunade and her students tomorrow. They're heading back too and are not far off."

"Really?" Asked Naruto, perking up at the very idea of seeing them again. "Okay… but tomorrow? Are they coming here?"
"No. So pack up your bag, we're heading out straight away. We're meeting them a long way from here, and we'll never make it on time unless you hurry up."

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so very much for reading! The chapter was beta'd by AnjoRemix! This was the first chapter of Part Two. In the next chapter Naruto will be back in Konoha.

And just to explain some shortenings in Anko and Shisui's letters;
I&R – Infiltration and Reconnaissance.
TIF – Torture and Interrogation Force.
MIA – Missing in Action.

Have a nice day!
Chapter Thirty One – Some Things Never Change

"A cute girl stopped me on the way, so I danced." - Hatake Kakashi

It looked grim. The closer Naruto got to Konoha the more she dreaded walking through the gates. Four years ago she'd felt horrible about leaving Konoha, and now she was apprehensive about returning. It was a strange contradiction she tried to ignore.

Naruto looked over at Shizune and Rin walking next to her. Shizune was smiling excitedly, almost skipping up and down as Konoha came into view.

They'd both shot up in the air since last Naruto saw them. Especially Rin. Shizune had always been tall, but Rin was starting to catch up. Naruto realized this must have happened to her friends in Konoha too, and briefly she wondered how Anko and Shisui looked like now. Out of Shizune and Rin it was the latter that had changed the most, or maybe Naruto was just so used to how Shizune looked from her own time, that Kakashi's teammate seemed like the one who'd changed. Rin's hair was now brushing her shoulders instead of the old bob cut Naruto recalled. She'd switched out her old outfit and was comfortable in her new auburn, long sleeved kimono style shirt with an obi that matched her black, shorts and long legged sandals.

Compared to Rin Naruto looked like a drowned dog though. Her hair hadn't been cut in four years now and she'd long since lost track of her hairbrush, so it was constantly bound in ponytail in an attempt to stop it from knotting. Her knee length pants had once been sparkling orange, but had turned dull and stained from wear. The black jumpsuit jacket had multiple holes in it, and she was seriously starting to consider just wearing the Konoha uniform upon her return to Konoha. They would have to give her at least one set, and it would be a lot better than what she had now.

"I can't wait! Did you know I haven't slept in a bed for three months? It's almost bordering on illegal! And making food on a stove instead of a camp fire! And toilets! I miss toilets." Shizune ranted while the three girls strolled towards the village side by side.

Orochimaru was far ahead of them, no longer able to stand their constant chatter after they'd met up.

Like Jiraiya, Tsunade had opted to avoid Konoha for now and sent her students with Orochimaru the last distance to Konoha. To his great annoyance that left Orochimaru with three girls who hadn't seen each other in years. To say he hadn't been pleased would be an understatement.

But Naruto was quiet now. She couldn't help the bubbling nerves making her whole body stiff with anxiety.

"Come on, Naruto. You've been complaining about not having Ichiraku ramen since the day we left. This is good." Rin reassured and stepped closer to whisper quietly enough to prevent Shizune from hearing "You're clear now. Things will go back to normal in no time." She added and patted Naruto on the back.

Naruto looked uncertainly back at her. Not sure if that was true.
"We'll see." Naruto muttered. The gates were growing bigger and Naruto felt a strange sense of dread at how the stone faces watched out towards them. Minato's face had been carved into the mountain since their departure. Just like Naruto remembered it being while growing up.

But not soon enough and too quickly they finally arrived at the gates, there they were met by two sleepy ninjas who had clearly been on duty all night. Naruto smiled when she recognized them though. Kotetsu and Izumo were back in the role Naruto remembered them as. The ones keeping the village safe at the gates, and usually a friendly face whenever they left or came to the village.

"Naruto?" Asked Kotetsu when he spotted her, blinking repeatedly as if he thought he was hallucinating.

"Hi, Kotetsu." Naruto answered and waved.

"Long time no see… And Shizune-san, Rin-san an Orochimaru-sama." He replied happily and picked up some papers on the desk. "You're a few days late. Hokage-sama has been asking about you for a week now." He explained and smiled back up at the girls while crossing out three names. Theirs.

"Yeah, we got held up when we were supposed to meet. Tsunade-sama got into some trouble with a money shark and we were late meeting up with Naruto-chan and Orochimaru-sama." Shizune replied bashfully.

Kotetsu and Izuma shared a puzzled glance, but then they didn't know about Tsunade's gamble problem.

"You made chūnin?" Asked Naruto as a distraction and pointed to their vests. When Naruto had first started the academy they'd been in the same class for a few months before she'd been pushed up a year to Shisui and Iruka's class. They weren't exactly close, but they always greeted each other in the passing. It was nice to see that hadn't changed while Naruto had been away.

"For three months now. Had to do the damn exam twice." Kotetsu answered with a dismissive wave.

Rin was repeatedly peeking towards the village, her impatience palpable in the air so Naruto decided it was better to wrap this up. Orochimaru seemed annoyed too. "It's great to see you two again but we should get going. Congratulations on the promotion guys, and see you around." Naruto said, and waved while they walked further into the village.

"You girls can make your way to the Hokage office on your own I presume?" Asked Orochimaru drily when they got further down the street. The girls looked uncertain.

"Why? You're not coming with us?" Asked Naruto and kicked up some dirt from the ground impatiently.

She felt extremely nervous about having to face Minato on her own. Orochimaru – in some surreal way – would actually be a comfort to have on her side for that meeting. They always bickered at one another, and most people probably believed she was much more hostile towards her sensei than the Yondaime, but it was just how they interacted. They'd done so for nine years, and it was hard to turn it off now.

"I'd rather not. I'll hand in a report at the mission desk later, but right now I have more interesting things to be doing than handing in paperwork."

Naruto pouted. "Fine, have it your way. It's not like we can't order ourselves out, but do you know where Shisui and Anko are though?"
"I haven't been in the village for three weeks Naruto. How could I possibly know that?"

"Well, you're a better shot than anyone else amongst us. We haven't been here for four years!" Naruto pointed out.

Orochimaru sighed, dragging a hand through his hair in annoyance. "They're both busy I presume. Just ask Namikaze-san when you go in. They're my students and therefore turned into valuable ninjas of Konohagakure and don't have much downtime. Unlike you." He bit out.

Naruto bristled. "Hey! I'm valuable!"

"Maybe you were, but whatever Jiraiya put into your head has cancelled out the years under my tutelage." Orochimaru replied and smirked. He turned on his heel and waved lazily over his shoulder as he left, not letting Naruto get the last word in as she turned red with anger.

"Gah! I hate that guy!" Naruto shouted. Shizune and Rin exchanged worried looks, before the latter smiled knowingly.

"You two have a weird relationship, Naruto." She said and shook her head. "Let's go see my sensei now, okay?"

It was too early for people to be hurrying around, and instead the birds were keeping them company. They walked side by side down the street towards the red circular building holding the Hokage office, Naruto muttering under her breath how much a pain in the arse her old sensei was.

"You are being very negative… It's a little unsettling." Shizune said and patted Naruto on the shoulder.

"Yeah… It's been a long time. I just hope things won't be problematic. I miss my forehead protector." Naruto muttered.

Rin nodded as they stopped in front of the door; reaching for the handle she pushed it open. "It will be fine, just wait and see."

"I'm sorry, but Hokage-sama is currently in a meeting. If you wish to speak with him you'll have to make an appointment." The receptionist said in a sing-song voice.

Naruto hated her.

She was showing too much of a cleavage, her dress was of a bold red garments and the woman had black shiny hair. She was also unreasonably pretty, and this was the Hokage's secretary… And from what Naruto could see she wasn't wearing a ring either…

"Okay… when is the next available one?" Asked Rin disappointment. Naruto knew she had been excited for this because Rin had missed her sensei and Kakashi from day one, though it hadn't stopped her from taking the opportunity to learn under Tsunade. The last three days however she'd barely slept with how excited she was about returning to Konoha.

"Hmm… Let me just check in the book here…. That would be in two weeks. The one-thirty appointment. Will you take it?" Asked the woman and looked up with a professional smile.

There was a moment of silence. "Two weeks?" Naruto asked shocked.

"Yes. I'm sorry, but Hokage-sama is a very busy man. His schedule is fully booked until-"
"We've been out of the village for years, and I know Minato is busy. I'm simply saying that won't work. He was expecting us a week ago, but we got delayed thanks to a drunk Sannin!" Naruto started rambling, but stopped when the receptionist held up a manicured hand, her eyebrows arched in haughty expression.

"I am sorry, but if you missed your appointment last week that is your own responsibility. You're not listed as an active ninja so you're down prioritized, Uzumaki-san. Now, as I said you can see him in two weeks, will you-"

But Naruto was already walking away before the receptionist had finished her little speech. "Wait! Naruto no!" Shizune shouted and hurried after Naruto, hoping to stop her from barging into the Hokage office.

"Uzumaki-san! You can't just-

"Naruto-chan? Rin-chan and Shizune-chan?" Asked a deep voice, and all four turned back towards the receptionist desk where the Sandaime was standing. He was coming through the entrance door held open by a guard with his hands folded behind his back.

"Sandaime-sama!" Shizune exclaimed happily.

Hiruzen smiled warmly, his eyes travelling between the three girls. "You're back, that is a relief. The Yondaime has been worried lately but you look well. You've all grown up."

"She said we had to wait two weeks to see Minato." Naruto complained and looked bitterly at the receptionist.

The woman's lips pursed into a scowl, and her stink eye was just as effective as Naruto's. "That's not how to address Hokage-sama, Uzumaki-san. Show some respect." The dark haired woman sniffed.

Hiruzen chuckled. "Ah, that can be fixed. Why don't you come back at six? I'll meet you in the Hokage office with him then." He walked up and patted Naruto on the back. "I heard some very exciting news while you were gone. How was Mount Myōboku?" Asked the Third.

"Oh…! Good. Though I don't want to eat anymore bugs for the rest of my life." Naruto replied with a shiver.

He nodded once and passed them by. "Most of your comrades should be in the village I believe. Though you might want to wait a bit before waking people up. It's only six in the morning." The Sandaime said and nodded to the girls.

"Thanks!" Naruto, Rin and Shizune said in unison. The Sandaime gave one last smile before disappearing up the stair and the rest turned to head out again.

Naruto scowled at the receptionist who'd taken her seat behind her desk again. She frowned back.

The graveyard was quiet. Not unexpectedly, seeing as it was so early in the morning. There were a lone crow screeching in one of the trees surrounding the graves, and the grass danced in changeable directions of the wind.

Naruto stood up, having been sitting crossed legged while talking to Iruka for half an hour already. Telling him all about her travels and the time he'd missed, while wondering if he knew now – wherever he was – who she were. And if he had the time it would be nice if he could check up on the other dimension where Iruka had lost her, instead of the other way around.
Naruto had visited their graves once already, but it had been right after her release and Anko and Shisui had insisted on coming with her that time. The gesture was nice, it really had been, but Naruto hadn't felt comfortable with their presence. Especially when she'd visited Kushina's grave.

Neither knew who Kushina was to Naruto, and she had felt like a lie standing in front of her mother's grave back then.

Walking quietly along the rows of Headstones Naruto found her grave last of the people she was visiting this early morning. The stone looked just like the other ones; just the inscription carved into the surface gave away the difference.

"In memory of Uzumaki Kushina.
Honoured Shinobi of Konohagakure and Uzushiogakure - an Irreplaceable Comrade.

To live in the hearts of those we love is not to die."

It was a nice spot she was resting at. It was the top row of the headstones, and glancing up Naruto looked directly out towards the village while the forest reached out behind her. Naruto wished she'd brought some flowers along and scolded herself for her short sightedness.

"Hello mum." Naruto whispered quietly. "I'm sorry for taking so long, but I'm back."

Half an hour later Naruto had made her way back into the village and tracked down the familiar building she called home. Her mood had become somber because of her visit to the graveyard, but now another feeling was interfering with her sadness. Bemusement.

There were noises coming from the other side of the door and Naruto was reluctant to go inside. She was standing in the hallway outside her old flat, and the noises were coming from inside. At least that meant Anko was home, but the shouting was far from comforting.

Naruto contemplated her options. To knock, or just enter without any warning? Potentially ending up in the middle of a very violent battle.

Steeling herself Naruto grabbed the handle and turned it before pushing the door open.

"-fucking piece of shit! It wasn't there for you to eat! Now I have nothing to eat for lunch! Whenever you sleep over you always steal my food and I'm so fucking sick of it!" Shouted who was unmistakably Anko, abut her voice was mingled with the sound of a radio song in the background.

Because of Anko's shouting it seemed neither had heard her entrance into the apartment, though Naruto wasn't sure if there even was a second person there. Maybe Hebimei stole Anko's lunch.

Kicking off her sandals she heard a second, deeper voice reply just as angrily. "I asked! You said take whatever I want, and there was barely any food there! You always take whatever you want from my fridge!"

Anko’s response was half muffled as the song on the radio was closing in in the refrain. "-though in the end, it's father that makes me agree." Naruto had heard the song before, the woman singing had a suprisingly high tone, and for some reason the voice irritated at her eardrums.

Standing in the hallway and contemplating what to do Naruto took a look around. The first door to Anko's bedroom was open, revealing a futon with a cover messily thrown to the side and a few garments stuffed in the corner.
"It might take a few years, but I'll get there eventually!"

Despite the awful song that always got stuck on her mind Naruto was still hit with a sense of familiarity at standing in her old flat and slowly started walking walking through the narrow hallway. The tired, panel walls were exactly how she remembered them, the sunlight coming from the living room window broken on the corner of the hall, casting long shadows towards her. She came to end of the corridor, and peeked into the living room.

Unfortunately she regretted it a moment later.

Anko was standing in only a tank top and panties in the middle of the living room with a guy Naruto had no idea who was opposite her. Only in boxers. "Gah!" Naruto cried and backed into the hallway again as quickly as she'd come in.

"Caus' dad said; stay out of trouble, and no trouble comes to you. Work hard and you'll get what you're due."

Trying to ignore the tune and get over her embarrassment Naruto wondered if the man was the new roommate. The guy looked older than Anko, but for them to be standing in the flat in just their underwear was very forward. But wasn't Anko's latest roommate a girl? She distinctly remembers Anko mentioning in her last letter that her seventh flat mate was a girl around their age. Huh… Anko was good at chasing them out wasn't she?

"Wha-" Anko said, and next moment she was standing in the hallway too. "Naru!" She squealed and threw her arms around Naruto. She barely had time to return the hug before Anko pulled away, her hands landing on Naruto's shoulders while she looked her up and down. "Holy shit, Naru! You're taller than me now!" Anko said with a face splitting grin.

"Huh… yeah maybe." Naruto replied curiously. If there was a difference between them in height than it was very little though. Naruto guessed it also had something to do with the fact she was wearing sandals while Anko wasn't.

"File the kunai, dear, you never know when it'll be useful. Why is it so hard to listen when he's being forceful? We-" To Naruto's great appreciation the song stopped abruptly there, as the one in the living room must have turned it off before footsteps came closer.

The guy who'd been with Anko peeked into the hallway, and Naruto shuddered when he gave her an appreciative look. "Uh, I'm sorry I interrupted. I see you two are… occupied." Naruto muttered, blushing because the guy did not seem bothered by standing eighty five percent naked in front of her.

"Kato was leaving to go buy me something for lunch. He ate my lunch! Again!" Anko replied and turned towards the guy again, her hands landing on her hips and scowling.

"Fine, just let me get dressed." "Kato" replied and squeezed into the hallway to get to Anko's room. Naruto flattened herself against the wall just to make sure he had plenty of space to maneuver on.

The door closed behind him, and Anko dragged Naruto into the living room again. "I missed you so much, Naru! Your room has been waiting for you for a whole month. The girl who rented it moved out two weeks early before her lease expired but she still had to pay for her share anyway, so I didn't complain. But now you're back! Finally!" Anko chatted happily, turning towards the counter and poured water into the kettle. That meant tea. They were having tea it seemed.

Naruto peeked into the hallway, and then pointedly back at Anko. "Wait…then who is that? Isn't he your roommate?" She asked confused. Why was the dude in his underwear unless he slept here?
People didn't go to other people's places and stole food before undressing.

"That's not my roommate, idiot. Didn't I mention it in my letter? Maybe not... But that's my boyfriend Kato. We've been together for three whole months now!" Anko said and giggled girlishly. Naruto wasn't sure she'd ever heard Anko giggle before and tilted her head in confusion.

And Anko had gotten herself a boyfriend while she was away. Great.

"Really... Um, congratulations then. He looked older, how old is he exactly?" Naruto inquired, growing a little scared at how Anko was acting.

"He's twenty five but he's a genin though. The idiot never got his act together to take the exam. He didn't want to be on the front line during the war, so he still hasn't taken it." Anko babbled while putting the gas on the stove.

"Okay, fair enough, but how did you two meet?" Asked Naruto.

"That's not fair, Naru. Let me ask you some questions too, okay?" Anko said and shook her head.

"I think you just did. So where did you two meet?" Naruto asked cockily, making Anko snort. A much more recognizable sound then the previous giggling.

"On a mission. I led him and a few others about four months ago into Suna. Delivering stuff, jada-jada. We hit it off." Anko replied and shrugged.

"I see..." Naruto turned as Anko's bedroom door opened again and Kato stuck his head out.

"Nice to meet you, Naruto-chan. I've heard a bunch about you from Anko and Kakashi-san." Kato told her politely.

"You know Kakashi?" Asked Naruto.

"Sure. I met him a few times. He's over a lot and Anko makes dinner for him and others now and then. He told me how you two met too, he was arguing for why academy outings led by genin should be banned from the curriculum, if I remember correctly?" He ended the sentence with a loop sided grin.

"Oh... Yeah... Kakashi had his hands full during that outing, dattebayo." Naruto answered and thought back to second year in the academy. Shisui and Ensui in the river and Kakashi saving them from the waterfall. And even more the hours of dragging Shisui through the woods. Now it was a fond memory, but back then she'd been really worried.

"Nice to see a face to go with the name at last." Kato answered.

"Don't check out my best friend right in front of me, Kato." snapped Anko sourly.

Naruto jumped at the words, and shifted a few steps away while Kato only laughed. "I wasn't checking her out, silly." He replied charmingly. "What do I have to buy then? As punishment for taking your lunch box?" He asked.

"Dango." Anko demanded at once.

"What? That's way more expensive then-"

"You checked out another girl right in front of you girlfriend. So yes, you're buying dango to make it up to me."
"Fine, if it'll make you shut up." Kato snapped and waved lazily over his shoulder as he left.

Naruto looked skeptical back at Anko. "He seems..." She wasn't sure what she thought. He was okay, but all the arguing and shouting wasn't really what Naruto associated with romance. Not at eight in the morning. Not really ever. But then, what did Naruto know? The most she knew about romance was through Icha Icha and Jiraiya. The girls in Jiraiya's books giggled a lot, and Anko did at least seem to have that action down.

"He's nice. Don't worry, Naru." Anko said and snickered at Naruto's puzzled expression. "But tell me how you've been! I haven't heard anything in ages so you have to tell me what's happening in the world. I guess you're the well-travelled one amongst us now."

"Well, there's a bit to tell. Why don't you put on some trousers before I begin? And where should I start?"

"I heard something about toads. Why don't you start there?" Anko suggested.

It was about ten minutes after they sat down to eat breakfast together that someone appeared on the window frame. His shadow fell over Naruto, and looking up she squealed. "Kakashi!"

He smiled, and the pug hanging over his shoulder raised a paw in greeting. "Yo, Naruto." Pakkun greeted in a deep voice, sniffing curiously at the smell of freshly made breakfast at their table.

"Mah, so Pakkun was right when he said he smelled you in the hallway. Welcome home, Naruto." Kakashi replied and came up to the table with Pakkun still hanging off his shoulder. After putting down a loaf he sat down next to Naruto and reached for the butter as if he always did this.

So maybe stealing food from this place wasn't that unusual, but at least Kakashi was clothed. "So Rin and Shizune should be back too, right?" Asked Kakashi while stealing Naruto's knife to butter his bread.

With her mouth full Naruto nodded her head eagerly. "Yes. Rin went home to see her parents first though. She mentioned she would stop by your place later."

Kakashi frowned while Pakkun looked pointedly from the pieces of ham on the table and back at the young man he was sitting on. His summoner rolled his eyes and handed the pug a piece over his shoulder. "I'm on duty today so I'll have to track her down after my shift instead."

"She's grown taller." Naruto informed with a grin. "Shizune too."

"So did you, Naru." Anko pointed out.

"Yeah, but I see myself every day, I didn't see them for years and they changed a lot."

Anko, Pakkun and Kakashi laughed. "What about us? Haven't I changed since you last saw me?" Anko asked, puffing out her chest and wagging her eyebrows.

Naruto chuckled and looked from Anko to Kakashi. Yes, they'd changed, but if anything it felt like they were returning to normal. Kakashi and Anko were both at the height she recalled, and seeing them hadn't been as much of a surprise as seeing Rin. "You have, but we're in our flat eating breakfast together just like before. In a way time hasn't moved at all here. It's really nice, dattebayo."

She turned from the window to the young man next to her. "And happy birthday Kakashi, it's today
isn’t it?” Naruto suddenly remember.

"Mah, yeah. Thanks.” He muffled through a mouthful of bread.

"It's a great birthday present, isn't it? Me coming back to the village and all."

Kakashi hummed in agreement. "It's a nice surprise, yes."

"You're eighteen now, right Kakashi?” Anko asked and received an affirming nod. "Well, it's not long until Naruto is fifteen, and then I'll be seventeen a couple of weeks later. Man, can you believe how many years it's been now? It feels like an eternity since we moved into this flat and I had to deal with the two babies on team Orochimaru.” Anko muttered lost in thought.

Naruto scowled at being called a baby. Anko had no idea that mentally Naruto was about twenty years old when she'd been in a genin squad with her.

"Oh, I almost forgot Naru! Guess what?” Her roommate exclaimed and straightened up proudly in her seat.

Naruto looked her up and down searchingly. "Your hair is longer?"

Anko rolled her eyes and shook her head. "No"

"You… have new pajamas?”

"No."

"Um… You're taller?"

"No."

"You have breasts now?"

"Well duh," Anko said and actually shimmied in front of them, Naruto held a hand over Kakashi's eyes to prevent him from getting too good a view. "But no, that's not what I'm referring to."

Naruto gave up. "I have no idea. What is it?"

Anko pointed her thumb at herself with a wide grin. "I got promoted! I'm now a tokubetsu jōnin! Cool huh?"

Her eyes widened. "Congrats Anko! I'm so happy for you!"

Anko grinned proudly. "So you better hurry up. Shisui has been jōnin for years already and now I'm ahead of you too."

Many hours later and with Kato trailing along, Naruto and Anko went to go see Shisui.

They'd brought along some food, simply because Naruto felt constantly hungry today and Anko carried the box of dango Kato had miraculously procured before eight in the morning. With her free hand Anko and Kato held hands while they walked, making Naruto feel like bit of an outsider though both tried to keep her included in the conversation.

Kato was explaining more about whom he was and why he thought Naruto and Anko were fools to climb the rank ladder so quickly. In his mind it was idiocy to have an eight year old promoted to
chūnin, and Shisui was even worse for being a jōnin before hitting puberty.

By the end of the explanation Naruto had made up her mind. She didn't like him.

He was handsome, polite and even funny, but something about him put her off. Maybe it was his superficial look on his duties. He openly claimed to be a ninja to stay in shape and earn easy bucks doing D and C rank missions. It was the easiest way to make money with the least amount of school, and he stayed handsome in the meanwhile. His words - not Naruto's.

Worst off was how Anko let it slide. She disagreed wholeheartedly, but didn't care if he had such a different viewpoint on their occupation. If Naruto had ever met anyone with less Will of Fire she had yet to notice them.

The Uchiha district was in full activity when they arrived. Naruto noticed they were gaining a lot of attention, but one look at Anko told her that she at least wasn't bothered by it. So Naruto shrugged it off and headed for Shisui's home.

They never made it though. Halfway down the street Naruto was suddenly lifted off the ground by someone from behind and spun around. "You're back!"

Naruto looked startled over her shoulder and found Shisui beaming back at her. "Shisui! Kami, what happened? You're tall!" Naruto replied as she was put down on the pathway. People had stopped to see what was going on, some with disapproval while others out of curiosity.

"I know! You too! You were always the shortest one. What happened? Wait…are you taller than Anko now?" Shisui asked and stepped back to get them both in view at the same time.

"Nah, we measured earlier and we're exactly the same height actually. But man did she shoot up in the air while away from Konoha." Anko answered with a chuckle. Shisui then spotted Kato, and his smile faulted the tiniest amount.

"Ah, hi Kato-san." Shisui said a lot less enthusiastic.

"Shisui-san." Kato replied with a nod. Shisui then turned back to Naruto, completely ignoring Kato.

Naruto wondered if Shisui disliked him or something, it wasn't like him to dismiss people like that. "I've missed you around here, and Minato-sama has been a nightmare the last week. Always sending us down to the gate to ask if you and the rest had returned yet. And then the Sandaime said this morning you'd tried to get into his office, but was turned away by the receptionist. You should have seen his face. It was hilarious how mad he got. And poor Akane-san... I'm impressed she didn't run out of there crying after the lecture Minato gave her for not even notifying him of your request."

"Who's Akane-san?" Asked Naruto.

"The receptionist. Tall, dark and pretty." Shisui replied cheekily.

Anko snorted. "That's you, Shisui."

Naruto reached up to pinch Shisui's cheek. "You forgot puppy eyes." And it was then she noticed what he was wearing. "You're ANBU?" She asked surprised.

"Yeah. I got listed just a week after you left." Shisui answered, before starting to walk down the street, making the others follow him with a wave of his hand.

"You didn't know?" Asked Anko puzzled. "Neither of us mentioned it in a letter?"
"No… I don't think so." Naruto replied. "And Anko has started in TIF… Does that mean we won't be going on missions together anymore? That sucks… I'm just a regular chūnin." Naruto complained and moped at the idea.

"Right, very regular." Shisui said in mock seriousness.

"Shut up." Naruto replied at his constant jabs.

"I think you'll be teamed with Kakashi, actually." Said Anko.

"What? Why do you think that?" Asked Shisui confused.

"Kakashi told me." Anko replied with a shrug.

"But why? Kakashi is in ANBU too. He's got plenty on his plate right now."

"That might be why. Minato wants an ANBU to keep her in check."

"Hah, Kakashi could try." Naruto answered with satisfaction at knowing that no, Kakashi would not have been able to hold her back if Naruto set her mind to it.

Shisui frowned. "Still… I know her fighting style better, plus I'm ANBU too… and I have two Sharingan instead of one. But I was sure I would be on her team at least… Are you sure Kakashi said that?"

"Yes." Anko replied exasperated.

Naruto chuckled and grinned widely to Shisui. "I don't mind working with Kakashi. It'll be fun, and I haven't heard anything about Ensui. What's going on with him?"

"Promoted to jōnin half a year ago and is currently dodging every attempt Hokage-sama throws at him to take a genin team. We're still short on jōnin in the village." Shisui said meaningfully. "Okay, we're there."

They all looked up to see what they had reached, only to find themselves in front of Itachi. "Look who came back, Itachi!" Shisui exclaimed and gestured towards Naruto.

"Welcome back, Naruto-san." Itachi with a polite nod. "I'm relieved to see you, since this means Anko-san won't come over at any untimely visits to find Shisui anymore."

"Hey!" Anko shouted indignantly. Itachi ignored her as if she wasn't there.

Naruto cracked a smile. "It's good to be back! I missed Konoha. You grew up too. How old are you now? And nice forehead protector, when did you graduate?"

"Hn, I'm ten," He pointed as his forehead protector. "And I graduated about three years ago."

"Itachi just got promoted to chūnin." Shisui informed Naruto.

"Congratulations. I'm sure you did very well. Tell me, did you win the whole thing?"

Itachi was surprised for a moment, before he nodded slowly. "Yes."

"Welcome to the group then, so did I!" Naruto informed him proudly.

That surprised Itachi even more, and his eyes travelled from Naruto to Shisui. "Fine" His cousin
admitted. "Yes, I might have been beaten by Naruto in the Chūnin exam, but she wouldn't even have
made it to the second round if it wasn't for me."

Naruto stuck out her tongue at Shisui, who chuckled at her childishness.

It was like riding a bike. Despite her previous concerns she was falling straight back into the old
group as if no time had passed at all.

They were sitting on a bench, eating the food Naruto and Anko had brought along all of them.

Anko had to leave since her shift started soon, taking Kato with her while Shisui, Itachi and Naruto
were left in the park. Before she left she told Naruto that since her shift ran late they wouldn't be able
to eat dinner together, but hoped she could stay awake long enough to have a cup of tea before going
to bed. She then handed Naruto her old key back, grinning like a cheetah while doing so. They left
with a wave, Kato less enthusiastic than Anko.

"I do not like him." Muttered Shisui while watching their retreating backs.

"Shisui..." Said Itachi warningly.

and shaking her head.

"You noticed it too? It's just… Anko really should pick someone who's less…" Shisui stopped,
looking at Itachi apologetically before continuing. "...less of a player."

"Kato plays? With what?" Asked Naruto confused. Shisui snorted unexpectedly, covering his mouth
in his hand and looking away.

It took her a few seconds before she understood what Shisui had actually meant, and then felt like an
idiot. "Um… Nothing. Forget I said anything." Shisui said with barely hidden glee.

"Oh, shut up. I just didn't… I get what you meant. I just didn't expect… Gah, stop snickering
Shisui!" Naruto barked and crossed her arms demonstratively.

"Sure you did. Anyway, Kato is quite superficial. I don't think he's a good match for Anko to be
honest."

Naruto wanted to argue, if anything just to prove Shisui wrong, but then remembered she had agreed
to this point silently already, so she just nodded. "I guess… But maybe he's better in private?"

"Let's hope so." Shisui mumbled.

"You know… I have five hours to kill. Any idea what I can do in the meanwhile?" Asked Naruto,
changing the subject.

"I'm free today. We could go from door to door and announce your return, but I doubt that's what
you had in mind?" Joked Shisui.

"Or you can check out Konoha's new restaurants. A few good ones have popped out lately" Itachi
suggested next to them.

"I don't know, I'm broke but I'm also a little weary of going home before cleaning the apartment.
Kami knows what Anko and Kato have been doing in there. I saw enough this morning and they
weren't even doing anything." Naruto said in a low voice. Itachi blushed and his eyes briefly
flickered to Naruto in embarrassment.

"I have too… But that was on the training ground." Shisui said and grimaced.

"What?" Naruto asked aghast. The training ground? Really? That was a very open place for such a thing.

"Okay, change the subject please. I hear enough about Anko's free time curriculum as it is." Itachi said sternly.

Shisui looked apologetically towards his cousin, making Naruto chuckle at their display. "Well, I think I'll go to the chūnin lounge. Maybe there's someone I can catch up with." Naruto said and got up from her seat. Stretching her hands over her head.

"I'll join you." Shisui offered and got up after her.

"I'm expected at home. I have to watch my brother while mother is away, but afterwards we were going to train Shisui" Itachi pointed out, he then looked uncertainly at Naruto. "… You can join if you want to, Naruto-san." Itachi offered, surprising both of them.

"… Yeah, that would be fun. Unless it is when I have my meeting," Naruto replied.

"Shisui can show you where we usually train. I'll see you later then." Itachi explained and got up from the bench.

Shisui looked after him with an odd expression, before Naruto poked him on the shoulder. "Should we go?" She asked.

"Yeah, sure" Shisui replied absently and fell in step with her.

"Does Itachi usually invite your friends to train with you two?" Naruto asked when they were a good distance away.

"Itachi… isn't the most social person. I think it's because of my stories. He must have a good impression of you, and he does remember you quite well from the war. That must be it..." Shisui said more to himself than to Naruto.

They shared stories while they walked, catching up with the occurrences of the last four years. Naruto explained how she had to eat bugs at Mount Myōboku, and Shisui was grossed out before explaining that Anko had dared him to drink sake a few months ago. He couldn't really picture anything worse tasting than that. Naruto told him in all seriousness that they really were gross and that she'd probably tasted it all while she was away.

While they talked animatedly it took Naruto ten minutes before she realized they weren't walking in the right direction anymore. "Wait, we're walking in the wrong direction."

"Nah, dad wanted to see you when you came back, and since you have nothing to do I thought we could stop by my house. He's there already." Shisui told her and nodded in the direction of his house.

"Ah, yeah! That would be nice. Let's go see Kagami, dattebayo!" Naruto exclaimed happily and quickened her pace.

"Hey, wait up! You're more excited to see my old man then me? Real nice…"

The sound of the door shutting behind her made Naruto stand up from her kneeling position on the
She peeked from the now locked door where Rin and Shizune had exited to the Hokage getting up from behind the desk. With practiced ease he activated a series of seals, and as chakra lit up around them Naruto knew he had just locked the room down from any intrusion or sound.

"How are you doing, Naruto?" Minato asked quietly, his stance shifting so he was turned towards her.

Naruto shrugged uncomfortably. She'd been fine until she had to show up here. Until she had to interact with the Sandaime and Yondaime. "It's an adjustment, but it's been fine so far."

Hiruzen nodded from his chair in the corner and stood up. "Have you mastered Senjutsu yet?"

Naruto nodded, a slither of satisfaction overcoming her when she remembered her training. It was nice to have her old abilities returning to her arsenal. "Yes, though the toads only allow two summoners simultaneously and Jiraiya and Hokage-same fills those positions, they were still willing to teach me Senjutsu. They know I have already received this training before and that I only needed supervision to master it again."

Minato nodded quietly and the Sandaime smiled. "That is good news indeed. It's been a while since Konoha had a Sage residing within Konoha. Minato never really mastered the art and Jiraiya is always travelling."

"I know." Naruto answered pointedly. It was petty, but she couldn't control her own emotions when a vindictively pride shot through her at knowing she could do something the Yondaime couldn't.

"We still haven't been able to locate Madara though. Jiraiya informed us he hasn't contacted the Akatsuki and in general we have very little information regarding him. As far as we are aware there is yet to be a single meeting between him and any of our ninjas since there was no Kyūbi attack."

The Sandaime murmured. "But we won't stop yet. We have teams out scouting on a monthly basis. He's a top priority as an S-rank threat to be eliminated at all cost."

Naruto sighed. She knew that already. Jiraiya and her had been one of the teams discretely searching for him. Though she wondered who else had been tasked with finding the ancient Uchiha.

"On another note you will be placed on a new team tomorrow." Minato explained, turning towards his desk where he lifted up a scroll before handing it to Naruto. "You need to read through this and sign it before tomorrow morning. Since Orochimaru-dono and Anko-san are busy with their own positions you will be placed on a different unit from now on." He explained.

Naruto fleetingly opened the scroll to browse through the document. "So this is it? There's nothing more I need to do before returning to duty?"

"There is actually. You will receive a test tomorrow to be executed together with your new team. It's more to check your current level than anything else. The Sandaime will be the supervisor and he'll give me his evaluation afterwards. Other than that, no. You were never thrown out, Naruto. Officially you were just put on a break off active duty."

"But what about my forehead protector? Does this mean I can get it back?"

Minato walked around the desk and opened a drawer, fishing out another scroll. "Everything you wore during the Kiri mission was confiscated to look for traces of any jutsu. So if you want you can have it all back. Though I should warn you, your clothes were in tatters, and I doubt they'll fit you anymore."
Naruto nodded as Minato unsealed the scroll and in a small pop of smoke a few items appeared on the desk. Naruto recognized the folded pants and jacket, and resting at the top was the forehead protector Iruka once wore.

Minato reached out and picked it up before turning towards Naruto slowly. Reverently Naruto accepted the forehead protector and inspected the metal.

It was scratched and the garment worn, but though it stung to be reminded of Iruka she clutched the metal tightly. Her blood circulations cutting off slightly and her knuckles turned white, and yet she felt a sense of rightness at the action.

Naruto wondered if she had actually ever worn this yet. She had lost her old one to Kiri and taken Iruka’s after his death, but Naruto could no longer accurately recall those last moments during the battle in Kiri. The one thing she vividly remembered was lifting the forehead protector off Iruka’s limp head and taking it for her own, but if she’d just pocketed it or actually put it on was blurry. Though she was unsure, she suspected she’d put it on.

But when she woke up again after Kakashi’s chidori her clothes had been changed and her forehead bare.

"Thanks," Naruto replied quietly, her eyes fixed on the Konoha emblem on the metal, though she was not sure she knew what she was thankful for. Maybe for keeping it safe for over four years? For returning it to her now? It certainly wasn’t for Minato.

In a never forgotten action she tied it around her head, feeling the familiar weight against her skin and the rushing rightness made her shoulders straighten. Even without the headband, without the approval of the Hokage and without even being allowed back to the village for so long Naruto would always be a kunoichi of Konoha.

It just felt right to be recognized as such by more than herself.

"You should also take this. I think it will come in use." Minato continued and handed her a set of the Chūnin uniform. Black sweater, pants and a green vest. It really would come in handy.

"It's good to see that on you again, Naruto-chan." Hiruzen hummed and pointed to her forehead protector. He walked up to Naruto while she watched apprehensive as he placed a wrinkled hand on her shoulder. "You have fought hard for our village, Naruto, and though it's not over yet we are grateful to have you with us."

"oooooh, ah, ah, hah, haaa!"

Naruto's eyes flew open and she sat up straight on her futon. She stared bewildered up into the ceiling, which was unusual since she'd lived outside for so long. It took her a moment to remember where she was and then she sat up. Wondering what the hell the sound which woke her up was.

From the other side of the wall Naruto heard banging and looked confused to the side. It came from the direction of the bathroom.

"Haaah, ah! Ah!"

Naruto's eyes widened and she gaped in shock, finally realizing what the sound was through her sleepy mind. It was Anko moaning, and the source of banging noises was Anko and Kato, well... banging.
With a huff she fell back on her futon. Staring up at her dark ceiling while the sounds intensified. Great… This was… new.

She could now understand why the girl who'd rented Naruto's room had moved out a month early. If Anko and Kato kept this up every night Naruto might have to move out too. They were loud.

Though she'd made a mistake, the sounds weren't from the bathroom. It was from the room on the other side of the bathroom; Anko's.

And from the sound of it Anko's plumbing was currently being properly clogged up. Naruto could almost tell from the repeating noises of skin slapping together, something hitting the wall and their labored breathing alone that Kato had to be doing some through servicing in there...

Naruto groaned and covered her head with her pillow. Hoping to drown the sound of her best friend having sex with her boyfriend. They shared a lot of stuff, intimate secrets, dreams and nightmares, but this was a bit too much. Naruto found the whole situation incredibly embarrassing.

"Kato! I'm- I'm going to…!" Naruto could guess what Anko was going to do, even without her finishing her sentence.

She could only hope they would finish soon, the sex noises were making it hard to fall back asleep, and Naruto had an early morning the next day.

As the sun rose on the horizon Naruto was tired with a capital T. She met up at the training ground half asleep, only to find the Sandaime standing with Shisui, Rin and Kakashi. Confused she blinked the sleep out of her eyes.

"Eh… do I have to fight all three simultaneously?" Asked Naruto confused.

"Do I have to fight Naruto?" Squeaked Rin simultaneously as Naruto.

They blinked at each other for a moment, before both cracked a smile.

"No, in fact this test will be done in pairs." Hiruzen explained and gestured towards Shisui and Kakashi. "Rin-chan and Naruto-chan, you will fight together against these two."

Both of them looked startled over at the guys. Shisui wagged his eyebrows while Kakashi put down an awfully recognizable orange book. "What are you reading!" Naruto bellowed, causing Kakashi to freeze. The young man glanced nervously between the two girls while Shisui snickered vindictively next to him.

"Um..."

"What is that book about, Naruto?" Asked Rin confused.

"It- it's..." Naruto whispered low in her throat. "It's porn."

Rin went pale and whirléd around to look at Kakashi with horror. "What? You read porn now?! In public?!"

"Um..." Kakashi said bashfully, scratching his arm in discomfort. "This technically isn't a public area. It's restricted to ninja."

"Oh, so then it's completely fine, is it?" Rin shot back angrily, her cheeks heating up in embarrassment or anger. Naruto couldn't tell which.
Shisui looked like he was having the time of his life.

"Let's get back to the task at hand shall we?" Asked Hiruzen, and the four quieted down immediately though Rin's lips were tightly shut in displeasure. "Your test is to get the bells Kakashi and Shisui is currently in possession of." He gestured towards the guys who held up a bell each.

Shisui really looked pleased with himself now. It had to be nice to be on the other side of this test. To have the bell instead of having to take it. Naruto couldn't believe it would be her fourth time taking this stupid test, and yet she'd still not been on Kakashi and Shisui's side of it.

Naruto pursed her lips and held up a hand to ask a question. "Yes Naruto." Hiruzen said amused at her academy like behavior.

"Have you finished that book yet, Kakashi?" She asked curiously.

Kakashi nodded reluctantly. "Yes…"

"Damn, then I can't spoil the ending..." Naruto muttered to herself, causing all of them to look at her weirdly. Noticing this she held her hands up defensively. "What? Ero-Sennin wrote that while we travelled. Who do you think had to proof read it?"

Kakashi arched an eyebrow, and Rin smacked her hand over her forehead. Shisui was eyeing Kakashi's pocket curiously now.

"Enough. Get in possession everyone. No more distractions." Hiruzen said sternly, and Naruto breathed dejectedly. This would be difficult.

It was.

Naruto's arsenal of attacks were mostly of mass destruction, and the less damaging ones Shisui and Kakashi were fast enough to avoid.

It had been extremely fun to watch Rin get out her chakra whip though. Kakashi repeatedly tried to dispel what he believed to be a genjutsu.

Naruto however had been caught in Shisui's genjutsu, and almost had a heart attack. She'd seen it before.

The world had turned red and suddenly she was floating. She had attacked Shisui, but the boy had erupted into crows as her kunai made contact with his chest. It was then she'd broken out with Kurama's help. The fox muttering annoyed how she could still fall for that trick.

Naruto was more startled about the fact Shisui was using that genjutsu. It had been Itachi's speciality… Had Itachi taught it to Shisui?

Or had Shisui taught it to Itachi?

Eventually though they put their heads together, deciding Shisui and Kakashi needed to be taken down individually. Despite both being mainly combat specialized their teamwork wasn't as good as Rin and Naruto's. So they made a simple strategy. Naruto would go in first, using her much more advanced battle skills to distract Kakashi while Rin used her Chakra Wire Technique to capture him.

That was how Rin and Naruto got the first bell from Kakashi.

Shisui was even faster than Kakashi's considerable speed though, and getting him to stand still was
as easy as making Naruto stop saying dattebayo. He'd also caught what happened to Kakashi, and they no longer had the element of surprise to use the same strategy on him.

He'd managed to tie Rin up when she found him, and Naruto was pissed off beyond reason that he wouldn't allow her to free the girl. He played extremely dirty by using Rin as a hostage by carrying her over his shoulder to prevent Naruto from attacking him.

In the end she'd managed to catch him with her chains. One of them wrapping around his arm and forcing him to let Rin fall. One of her clones had caught Rin before she made a drop from the top of the tree, and then no God could save Shisui from Naruto’s irritation.

He didn't look as handsome anymore when Naruto was finished, and was gingerly holding his head when the Sandaime and Kakashi came walking into the forest.

The test had taken five hours in total. Four to catch Kakashi and one more for Shisui.

"Congratulations. Well done, Rin-chan and Naruto-chan." Hiruzen said.

Naruto sent Shisui a dirty glare which he returned.

"You did well. I'm glad to confirm you four as a team." Hiruzen said happily.

Naruto halted, already knowing Minato had said this but still unsure. "But… what about Anko?"

"She's on full time duty in the TIF. Her obligations do not include teamwork outside of that station. Orochimaru is also too busy to leave the village often. Their skills are needed within the village, but in Konoha a team consists of four members. Seeing as Kakashi and Rin has been missing one for a very long time, their sensei is not able to follow up with his position, and Anko is no longer as available we decided it would be best to combine team Minato and team Orochimaru. You have already proven to be able of working together, and your arsenals vary enough to create a very solid base."

Naruto looked at her two new teammates and couldn't make herself hate the idea. She would still see Anko all the time. They could still train together and she would see her at home at the very least.

"This is your base team. It won't stop you from being sent on mission with others if required. Shisui and Kakashi both have other obligations outside the team, and they will not stop entirely." Hiruzen added knowingly. "You are now Team Kasai under captain Hatake Kakashi. A front line offensive team."

Despite what she'd expected, Naruto fell quickly back into a routine. The first week was a bit of an adjustment. She couldn't quite get used to Anko's night time activities, and going back to team training was unusual, but as September bled into October it felt like Naruto had never really been away.

Naruto would wake up and eat breakfast with Anko, Kakashi and Pakkun, then head out to meet Shisui and Rin for training or missions. On days off she went looking for friends she hadn't met yet, and found Kuranei and Asuma at one point. Shizune was at the hospital, so she always knew how to find her, and Aoba dropped by every now and then to spend time with Anko.

How those two were such good friends Naruto would never understand. They were so different, but when Aoba came over he become more animated while Anko calmed down, so Naruto guessed they had found a middle ground to communicate at.
Genma Gai and Raidō came along with Shisui one day, and they had been very curious to see what she'd learned while away. Naruto was only too happy to demonstrate a few of her new tricks. Especially the rasen shuriken. Shisui's eyes had remained a bit too wide to be natural for the remaining of that day.

When out at Ichiraku ramen stand one evening - celebrating Naruto's first pay check in four years - they ran into Akiko. The girl smiled eagerly and came over. Even hugging Naruto happily when she sat down to join them.

Naruto told her in great detail of the places she'd been while away, and asked how she was doing. Akiko was working at a restaurant down town and doing very well apparently. Her clothes looked brand new and she'd grown into a very pretty young woman.

Naruto had even seen Mizuki at one point.

The boy looked more like the man Naruto remembered and she couldn't quite make herself walk across the street to say hi. Even with Chou right next to him to buffer if it came to an argument. So she'd settled for a wave, which they'd returned with surprise before she ran off. Pretending she was in a great hurry to avoid an awkward interaction.

There was one who remained elusive though, and that was Ensui. Anko told her he was probably out of the village on a mission. He was a jōnin after all, and probably had enough on his plate. Yet no one could inform her of when he was returning either.

In a way things were quiet upon her return to Konoha. Unlike the return from her previous time line when she'd come home just to rush out to save Gaara, things had never really been calmer. There were no war anymore, just regular missions and training. If it wasn't for the continued tension between Minato and her it would have been great. Naruto still couldn't get over how she'd been treated by Minato and the Sandaime, but at least Hiruzen was attempting to act friendly towards her. The Yondaime was never more professional than whenever Naruto was around those days.

It was a couple of days after her birthday Naruto showed up at the Hokage office, again feeling like she hadn't slept at all the previous night. She needed to figure out how to make a sound barrier around Anko's bedroom.

"Why are you so grumpy? You're usually pretty hyper no matter what time of the day it is, or did you grow out of that while you were away?" Asked Shisui who was the only one of team Kasai yet to show up. He sat and leant forwards with his elbows resting on his knees in a chair outside the office.

"I had to listen to Anko and Kato have sex most of the night. Unlike me neither of them had to get up early." Naruto replied exhausted while making her way up to him. Her feet sagging in exhaustion.

Shisui grimaced and looked down onto the scroll in his hand. "Uh… I see. That sucks…"

"Not as much as I think Anko was doing yesterday…”

Shisui coughed, his cheeks turning a faint shade of pink at Naruto's sarcastic comment. "That… is not something I'm interested in hearing about."

"I'm not either, but I live in the same flat so I hear everything, dattebayo! It's not exactly sound proof where we live. And the banging! I'm surprised the wall is still standing!" Naruto growled and plopped into the chair next to him while folding her arms in front of her.

"Can we change the subject?" He asked hopefully.
Naruto shook her head. "Not yet! How long has Anko been active? Is it really that good? I mean; you'd think she was reaching nirvana or something. It can't be that good." Naruto muttered while shaking her head back and forth.

"Um… I wouldn't know." Shisui replied while keeping his eyes strained straight ahead.

Naruto chuckled. "Really? You're a smart guy, and you must have come across the subject of sex in one of your boring books. Come on, give me some answers here, you always have an answer."

"Naruto, with all due respect; shut up." Shisui answered.

"There's no need to get snappy, I'm just having a rough morning since I didn't get to fall asleep before… when was it? Four? Yeah, around four in the morning. They kept at it for three hours, Shisui. Three! How is that even possible? I thought guys… you know, spilled the beans at some point and then it stopped. But they just go on, and on, and on and—"

"Shut up!" Shisui shouted and held a hand over Naruto's mouth. When Naruto seemed to have gotten the message he released her slowly. "Anko is one of my closest friends, and I don't want to be thinking of her and Kato… it's just weird, okay? Please don't… just don't." Shisui pleaded.

"Okay, that's fine… Next time I'm doing something about it, though. I'll knock on their door and ask them to take it outside, dattebayo." She responded.

Shisui just looked emptily at her. "You're sharing again."

"That's what friends do, Shisui!"

"I'm not one of your girlfriends, Naruto! Don't talk about sex with me. You know what; don't talk about sex with guys at all." Shisui replied, his volume a little too high, and just at that moment the door to the Hokage's office opened.

Minato looked oddly at them from one to the other.

Shisui and Naruto both blushed.

"Uh… Good advice, Shisui. Don't do that… Just… eh…" Minato was flustered and for the first time he seemed to have lost his usual professional manners. The one he always wore whenever Naruto was around. "You're too… um… young."

Shisui buried his face in his hands mortified.

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To be continued…
Thank you so very much for reading! The chapter was beta'd by the wonderful AnjoRemix!

I called their team; Team Kasai, because in canon you already have a team Kakashi. And that team is for Naruto Sakura and Sai, which I didn't want to use. Kasai is Japanese and means; an uncontrolled fire, which I found suitable for such a team. It's a team in the land of fire and then you have the will of fire. Mainly I though about Naruto thought, but still. It's a name… like any other name, it's a bit symbolic but also quite random. I had a few options and just went with that one in the end. Mostly because I can remember how to spell it without having to look it up all the time...

I had way too much fun writing Anko in this chapter. Kato is no one from canon, just purely made up to show the changes in Anko and how she is in a bit of a hurry to be a grown up. Anko will date a bit in this story, but you'll see how it turns out. She won't be less in the story just because she's not on a regular team with Naruto anymore though. Things just changed while Naruto was away, and like all children they grow up and goes on to do new things. Kakashi and Shisui are both still in ANBU, but like Yamato was in canon put into Team Kakashi, they are also part of team Kasai.

Until next time!
Chapter Thirty Two – Papa's Playhouse and a Horse Carriage

"Tobi, even a Buddha loses patience when insulted a third time… One more word and there'll be no doubt about the cause of your death.” - Deidara

Coming to a stop in front of the desk Jiraiya grinned down at his student. Minato sat comfortably back in his chair, his white cloak with fire patterns embroidered around the bottom lay folded over the back of his chair. "It's nice to have you back in the village, sensei. It's been a very long time now. How long do you plan on staying this time?" Asked the Yondaime with a small smile.

"Heh, I'm guessing a couple of months? Nothing can really compare with home." Jiraiya answered and laughed warmly.

It was strange seeing his old student in that chair. He was picturing Hiruzen instead, but this was how things evolved. The new generation taking over and surpassing the last. It could have been Orochimaru in that chair, and Jiraiya shuddered to think of the tasks his old teammate would have put him to just for the hell of it. Minato was much less petty when it came to old rivalry. Jiraiya would know, he'd taught Minato and the two other brats himself.

"How did the last trip go?" Asked Minato and leant forward, his hands folding on the desk as the easy atmosphere morphed into something more serious.

Jiraiya frowned and he looked uneasily at Minato. "Not that good actually… I can't get in touch with Yahiko or the others anymore… I'm not sure why. One day everything was fine, and the next… Just silence."

Minato looked down, his forehead wrinkling as he frowned. "I see… It's not that much of a surprise. Amegakure is seeing tough times these days. I have sent Hanzō multiple letters and he only replied to one about three years ago. Since then there's been nothing for me either. The team I sent out has also not come back… That was three months ago."

Jiraiya knew the last fact already, it was why he'd been sent to Amegakure so hastily while Naruto had been ordered back to the village under the protection of Orochimaru.

Minato was attempting to patch up the relationship with almost all the other nations simultaneously. A very difficult task seeing as they ended a war not many years ago. Minato himself was the most wanted man in the Iwa bingo book, and his reputation as a warrior had given him a lot of enemies.

To their own village he was a beloved war hero, but to all their enemies he was hated with such a passion it could rival Konoha's opinion of Uchiha Madara himself. "What do you think we should do next? I think its fruitless digging around in the ground. There are so many places Uchiha Madara could be hiding… It wouldn't surprise me if he chose one of the inaccessible areas as his own hideout. Like somewhere in Kumo… Or even Iwa."

Minato sighed. "I sent a warning to Iwagakure to inform them of our suspicion that Uchiha Madara isn't as dead as we first believed, and that he will most likely target their jinchūriki at some point. I did it to all the villages. It's the only time the Tsuchikage has replied to any of my messages and it
was quite a colorful letter too. Ōnoki called me a useless baby with no control of my own ninja, before accusing me of being a liar with some serious comedy problems for coming up with such a ludicrous idea. The man is terrified of Madara." Minato rolled his eyes and shook his head. "I have no idea how to ease the relationship with Iwa... Just the mention of Konoha is enough to rile them up, and me being the one corresponding with them is not gaining us any favors. I killed too many of their men during the war and now they have a vendetta against me as a person."

"Why not have sensei do it then? He was the Hokage before you after all." Jiraiya suggested.

The Yondaime picked up his cloak and stood up. "That won't work I'm afraid. He was the military leader during the war we won so he is not much better than myself, and I can already picture their reply if I even receive one. It would go along the lines of me being so arrogant I'm no longer bothering to send them letters in person by using the retired Hokage to contact them instead. They'll just see it as an insult."

Jiraiya pursed his lips in thought, trying to figure out a way for his student could open a communication line with Iwa, but came up empty. "What will you do then?"

Minato put on his cloak with an elegant motion. The action so frequently done it was natural for him by now. "I'll keep trying and hope they don't see my insistence on this matter as pestering. We need to better the relationship and I have no better solutions."

"Are you... in contact with Kiri?" Asked Jiraiya hesitantly. He had no idea what Minato felt concerning the village that had slaughtered his wife and used his daughter as a time bomb to destroy Konoha.

Minato's jaw tighten slightly, but he nodded stiffly. "Even Kiri. I couldn't fault Iwa for not responding if I refused to include Kiri myself, could I now?"

He chose not to answer. There wasn't much to argue against because Minato had an excellent point, and he was relieved he could see that himself. Minato walked around the desk and paused next to Jiraiya. "Though they are just as difficult in a very different way... Not everything is right over there. It's chaos."

Jiraiya could only feel sympathy for the frustrating situation. He had nothing but respect for his old student. At times he disagreed with his decisions, but he knew who Minato was at heart. He was someone who would always strive to make a better world. Him wishing to communicate with the other villages wasn't a weakness as other might perceive it as. It was the necessary step they needed to take in the long road towards peace. "You're the better man then, Minato. I admire that. The world would only know war if it weren't for people like you."

Minato smiled sadly. "There are better people than me, sensei. Much better...

Jiraiya got the impression he was referring to someone specific, though he wasn't entirely sure who. Only Kushina and Naruto came to mind at that moment, but he refrained from asking him to clarify.

Minato shook his head, coming back from his own thoughts as he started heading for the door while Jiraiya fall in step behind him. "At least Sunagakure isn't a problem. After I helped their new jinchūriki we have had very good communication."

"You helped them?" Asked Jiraiya shocked. It was true Suna and Konoha had been allies during the war, but to go that far?

Minato's eyes narrowed as he nodded. "Yes. You should have seen the seal they were planning on
using though. It was complete rubbish. The poor boy would have been severely unstable and not to mention insane. I gave them one of Uzushiogakure's old sealing techniques. A loss to us, but at least it helped better our relationship with their village."

Jiraiya was startled. The old sealing techniques of Uzushiogakure was a treasured secret of Konoha. They'd been gifted to the village by the old Uzu leader Uzumaki Ashina, the father of Uzumaki Mito who had been the wife of the First Hokage. The fact that Minato had given one away was not something he could picture Hiruzen ever doing. The old sealing arts might have been stolen by Kumogakure and Iwagakure when they raided Uzu to the ground, but the seals had yet to reach Suna before now.

"Are you sure that was wise… With an unstable jinchūriki it would weaken their military force. Not to mention the knowledge they could gain from such a seal." Jiraiya said before he could filter out his own thoughts. With Minato he relaxed too much, and he had a habit of speaking before he should.

His old student turned slowly. The anger radiated off him without a change in his expression. "Yes. I'm completely sure. It's about improving the relationship with their village, and they just fought a war alongside us. This gift is clearly an act of good will. Just like Uzushiogakure showed Konoha decades ago when we first received those seals. The damage to the jinchūriki from a faulty seal can be both painful and fatal. You know this too, sensei. Think before you speak next time."

Naruto walked homewards with Shisui. The Uchiha district was in the same direction as her building, and Kakashi had gone with Rin to eat dinner at her place for once. Her parents wanted to have him over for dinner again, seeing as it had been years since Rin had brought him over and they hadn't seen him much while she was away.

Her attention was caught when she spotted a familiar white haired man up ahead One Legged Parade, and she stopped mid stride. "Ero-Sennin!" She shouted so loudly everyone in the street heard, while cutting off Shisui mid-sentence.

The man turned around, an annoyed look on his face when he spotted her. "How many times have I told you not to shout that name!"

Naruto ran up to him, Shisui hesitantly trailing after with wide eyes. "I'll stop calling you Ero-sennin when you stop being a pervert, dattebayo." Naruto replied with a cheeky smile. "And have you met Shisui? He's my teammate."

She gestured towards the tall boy next to her who nervously reached out a hand, his eyes wide while he looked up at Jiraiya who was a half head taller than even he was. Jiraiya was freakishly tall.

"No I haven't," Jiraiya said and grasped the offered hand to shake it.

"It's nice to meet you, Jiraiya-sama. I've heard so much about you." Shisui said formally, a bit awestruck if his expression was anything to go by.

Jiraiya's smile widened. "My, you look just like your father don't you? And your grandfather too. Kagami-dono was one hell of a ninja. I didn't know him well since I was just a kid back then, but I've heard a lot from Hiruzen-sensei. Though I remember Kagami-dono had a mean aim too. Once I stole an onigiri from a tray your grandmother had put out in the garden and he hit me square on the nose with a spoon. I was terrified of him after that, and my nose swelled up to twice its size… Tsunade had a field day making fun of me, and I wouldn't be surprised if Orochimaru sent him flowers. I learnt to never take stuff from an Uchiha at least. Your clan knows too well how to retaliate." Jiraiya laughed while Shisui smiled weakly, looking almost shy while the Sannin
reminisced about the past.

"But… Isn't Kagami Shisui's dad?" Naruto asked curiously.

"Yes, he is, but he has the same name as his father. Shisui's father is Kagami jr. Poor guy though. Kagami-san. never really got to meet his father, did he? His mother was pregnant with Kagami-san when Kagami-dono died. He didn't grow old at all… A real shame. He was a student of the Second Hokage and one of the best shinobi Konoha has produced. But you know what they say don't you? The good ones always die young."

"Then what does that make you, old man?" Asked Naruto with an arched eyebrow.

Jiraiya stuttered. "I'm not that old! I'm just super awesome, I'm so awesome even death cannot take me."

Naruto laughed and Shisui chuckled next to her. Jiraiya turned back to the Uchiha with interest. "You really look just like him, and from what Naruto tells me you're not an easy opponent either."

Shisui grinned, shifting a bit from foot to foot as he answered. "I'm not sure I could win against Naruto, I haven't so far, but I try my best. One day..." Shisui trailed off and looked annoyed at the blonde next to him.

Naruto smiled innocently back. "You'll never beat me Shisui! I'm too awesome just like Ero-sennin!"

"I almost had you during the bell test..." Shisui mumbled under his breath. "Had it been a real battle I could have stopped you when I put you under genjutsu."

"In a real battle I would have been more worried about looking into your eyes," Naruto pointed out. Shisui huffed. "In a real battle I would have stopped you before even getting started."

"In a real battle I would have messed up your face even more than I did then!"

"In a real..."

"Okay, okay!" Jiraiya interrupted, pushing Shisui and Naruto away from one another as he chuckled at their childish spat. "I get it, you two are competitive. But good for you Shisui-san, I can give you some tips on how to beat the brat if you come see me later. I found out where she's ticklish."

"Hey!" Naruto shouted and Shisui grinned widely.

"Now, now, it's only fair to have an even playing field. Though how have you been, Naruto? I hear you're in a squad with the Hokage's brats now. And Shisui-san of course." He gestured towards the Uchiha without taking his attention off Naruto.

"It's been fine. Boring actually. We did so much on our trip Konoha feels a bit mundane. At least I'm back on regular missions again, but did you know I now have to do guard duty too? Like border patrol? I never had to do that before! It's so freaking boring, dattebayo." Naruto moaned.

Shisui patted her on the shoulder in sympathy. "I know, but it's good for you. Too much excitement would get to your head."

Jiraiya's eyes twinkled, but then he grew more serious. "But outside of missions... How is... um, you've felt welcome right?"

Shisui's grin slipped slightly, and Naruto simply shrugged. "Well... It is what it is. You know him
better than I do and he's the one with the problem. I never did anything to deserve what I got."

Jiraiya looked away uncomfortably, his mouth a tight line while the mood turned sour. "Oh, he's…
He is under a lot of stress. His position is a very tiring job you know."

Naruto didn't answer while Shisui was scratching his arm for something to do.

"Anyway, I'm on my way to an inn down town. I'll catch up with you later, okay Naruto? I want to
meet the last member of your old team too. This Anko girl you say is a handful." Jiraiya said and
turned to leave.

"Sure. I'll see you later Ero-sennin." Naruto replied while Shisui nodded respectfully.

"It was an honor meeting you Jiraiya-sama."

As Jiraiya left Naruto distinctly heard him mutter under his breath. "Why can't the brat have
manners like that? Ero-Sennin… puh..."

"Well… I see now why you two get along so well." Shisui said and turned towards Naruto.

She looked curiously back. "Huh? Why?"

"You are so similar." Shisui laughed heatedly as they started walking again.

"I am not a pervert!" Naruto shouted back, which only made Shisui chuckle more.

"No, I'm referring to your temper, Naruto. I know perfectly well who the pervert of team
Orochimaru is, and it isn't you. You and Jiraiya-sama is just of equal temperaments. And both are…
well, you both get noticed don't you?"

"Jiraiya is great. If you look away from the alcohol, brothels and perverted books of course." Naruto
supplied while they crossed the busy street separating the West and East side of Konoha.

Shisui seemed worried for a moment, but then shrugged. "I guess. Sometimes I think that if you
grow to become a strong ninja you are doomed to have some oddities everyone take notice of."

"Maybe..." Naruto sighed and wondered what Minato's quirk was, but came up blank. Not
surprising seeing as she barely knew the man personally. Wanting to think of something else she
turned towards Shisui. "Hey, you want to meet tomorrow? I know we don't have training but it's
your birthday and I thought we should celebrate. We've never done that for you before."

Shisui smiled and nodded eagerly. "That sounds fun. I'm on duty early tomorrow though, but I can
come over during lunch. You're free all day right?"

Naruto grimaced suddenly, remembering she had forgotten about Akiko. "Oh, wait... I'm meeting
Akiko for lunch. I met her earlier and she agreed to meet me at Ichiraku tomorrow. Is it okay if we
meet afterwards? Around two maybe?"

Shisui nodded and flicked her hair over her shoulder. "Sure, I'll come over at two then. But if you
can manage it please chase out Kato before I arrive, okay? I don't want a repetition of your birthday
when Anko took Kato into your bedroom and didn't come out for hours. Man… and everyone could
hear them..."

Shisui sighed and rolled his eyes.

"Don't worry, Shisui. The message is clearly received." Naruto replied and winked. "No sex during
your birthday."

Shisui turned red around the ears, but continued walking as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

Naruto asked Teuchi for the fifth time what the time was, and the man answered in understanding. "It's a quarter past one, Naruto-chan. I don't think your friend is showing up."

Naruto sighed. He was probably right. "How weird... She's usually so punctual."

She had waited for two whole hours already and eaten two bowls just to quench her hunger while she waited. Though it seemed Akiko wouldn't show up at all, and Naruto was well past her patience limit. Anko had duty until three today, and in an hour she was supposed to meet Shisui.

Sighing she stood up from the booth, deciding to look around for Akiko instead of waiting any longer. She was a civilian and it couldn't be that hard to track her down.

His youngest ninken were making a commotion in the bathroom, but Kakashi couldn't be bothered to go check. In the four weeks they'd lived with Kakashi - getting used to their new turf and settling in under Pakkun and Kakashi's guidance - there had never really been a peaceful day.

Bull and Akino were both too young to be taken on missions, and though Kakashi would usually be training with them today he couldn't be bothered. Kakashi just hoped that they weren't attacking the toilet rolls again. Pakkun was in there supervising them, and he hoped the pug would keep them in check a bit longer.

Even though they hadn't lived there long Kakashi had no idea how many times he'd come home to find scattered white pieces of ripped paper at every available inch of his flat. Usually whenever Pakkun had fallen asleep from exhaustion.

Pakkun was of great help, but even he seemed to reach his limit from time to time. Bull was so large that even though he was only three months old he was still twice the size of Pakkun, but still seemed to look up to the pug with reverence. It was a bit funny watching the pug bark orders at his two new pack members. The problem was actually Akino, who Kakashi suspected was half cat. He would walk on the furniture more than the floor, push down any glass standing on the counter and when he got startled he jumped up in the air with his hair on end and make a spectacle trying to reach the bathroom where he would take refuge under the counter.

Compared to Akino, Bull was an angel child. Always calm and collected while listening with rapt attention to whatever Kakashi and Pakkun said, even if he had yet to actually reply in anything but a bark.

The problem now was that Pakkun wasn't shouting at them to stop whatever they were doing in the bathroom, which he usually did. Kakashi had the nagging suspicion Pakkun was actually helping the two pups destroy his bathroom this time.

"Kakashi? Are you home?"

And there it was, the proof that Kakashi's quiet afternoon had definitely come to an end.

He was lying flat on his couch when his upstairs neighbor had decided to grant him a visit. He took the pillow resting on his chest and covered his face with it. Blocking out both sunlight and any blonde girl who would undoubtedly start nagging him. "No" He answered in a muffled voice.
Today he would have preferred being left alone, like always, but it was hard to argue against Naruto. This was also one of those instances where he should be better. After all he had started a new way of life. Friends over solitude and all that, but old habits were difficult to break. Even after so many years...

Naruto made her way inside without an invitation and stepped into his living room. Without taking her sandals off… "I'm sorry to barge in here."

"No you're not."

"-and I wouldn't come here if I didn't think it was urgent."

"Yes you would."

Naruto scowled while Kakashi peeked over the top of his pillow, a small smile playing on his lips at how easy it was to annoy his upstairs neighbor.

It was then he noticed the serious expression on her face. One he hadn't seen since the bijū incident. He sat up slowly, one eyebrow arched while Naruto took a deep breath. "I need Pakkun's help. A friend of mine is missing. We were supposed to meet for lunch but she never showed. I have asked around and no one seems to have seen her. You remember Akiko, don't you? She's been to some of the dinners a few years back and she was my roommate back at the orphanage. The problem is that she moved, and no one I asked could tell me where she was staying." Naruto explained. Her large, blue eyes shining with concern.

"Are you sure she's missing? Lunch was only three hours ago… Maybe you were stood up?"

"Akiko hasn't been late before." Naruto frowned.

"Okay, then I'll help. Let's go." Kakashi answered without needing to think about it. As if summoned Pakkun came trotting out from the bathroom, a piece of toilet paper stuck underneath his paw and his eyes wide with innocence.

It was half an hour later Pakkun finally caught a scent that could be Akiko.

Naruto and Kakashi had been trailing after the dog, keeping their eyes on the crowd around them, while Pakkun was trying to pick up the scent. Naruto had let him sniff a piece of paper Akiko had used to scribble down the address of a herb store to Naruto when they met a few weeks ago, and the ninken was doing his best finding it.

Now he was speeding up, his tail wagging wilder than normal while the two ninjas followed after him. He took a sudden turn into a side ally, Kakashi and Naruto following close on his tail. The alley was filled with bars, but they were all closed at this time of day. Not many wanted to be seen drinking at three in the afternoon.

They followed the street until the very end where Pakkun did another turn, this time into an even smaller alley Naruto had never known of before, and quickly realized why. This was probably where those who didn't want to be seen drinking in the morning went to get some privacy.

Kakashi exchanged a skeptical glance with Naruto, before hurryingly to catch up with Pakkun. The ninken was already half way through the narrow ally when they caught up.

"Here… Her sent is faint, but it has definitely been here at some point, though not recently. The trail
is old." Pakkun explained before looking up at the building in front of them. A large sign with blinking letters wrote; Papa's Playhouse.

"Papa's Playhouse…? Something tells me this is not a kindergarten." Pakkun muttered while looking up and down the narrow street.

Naruto swallowed.

"Are we… going in?" Asked Kakashi uncertainly. His words brought Naruto back to the present, and taking a deep breath she nodded.

She led the way with firm footsteps, Kakashi and Pakkun trailing behind, both feeling a mix of discomfort and curiosity as they followed Naruto into the brothel.

The entrance was lit by a blue neon light, and Naruto blinked a few times to adjust to the glare. To her left was a narrow, spiraling staircase and in front of her a long narrow hallway. She decided to keep to the lower floor and followed further down the hall.

The end the hallway opened up into what was basically a strip club. Naruto had never been in one herself, but she couldn't imagine it to be anything else.

Three girls were dancing up on the stage. Their movements lazy as if they were just going through the motion without being entirely present. Naruto didn't blame them, their small audience was really not worth the effort.

A guy was sleeping with his head on the table. Another sat in the back, slowly sipping a drink while looking glossy eyed around at the interior instead of the girls, and the last was the bartender.

Naruto looked at Kakashi standing next to her, only to find him engrossed with the women dancing on stage. She gave him a slap on the head. "Focus."

Without checking to see if Kakashi had his eyes back in his head, Naruto walked up to the bar.

"Mah… New girl? It's a long time we had a blonde here. Innocent looking too. You'll do great here, darling." Said the short, plump man. His crooked nose stuck high up the air while he looked down at her.

"Um..." Naruto said, not sure what he meant.

"Certainly not." Kakashi hissed and came up behind her with a scowl.

The bartender looked back and forth between them a few times, before shrugging and folded his arms in front of him. "If yah' say so… What can I get yah' then? But how stupid of me. You're ninjas aren't you? I can see the forehead protector, and all ninjas that come in here with a forehead protector is always on duty and not here for pleasure. Though I do see quite a few of them return on their days off... But I'm getting off track, I'm sorry. You've probably been sent to find Jiraiya-san again haven't yah'? I'm sorry, but he isn't 'ere. He was here last night and left around midnight." The bartender said with a scary smile. His teeth were rotten and a third of them missing.

"What? Ero-sennin comes here?" Naruto asked disgusted. Not able to contain her revulsion at the idea of Jiraiya in a place like this. She was suddenly extremely happy he had never brought her into one of these places before.

The pretense of friendliness left the bartender at Naruto's question. Leaning back while looking down at Naruto with disdain. "I just told yah', didn't I? Now get out! I don't want you snobby foot
soldiers destroying the atmosphere in 'ere." The man snapped back. Clearly offended at Naruto's words.

"Please excuse my teammate, she has never been to one of these venues before and we'll leave in a minute. We were just wondering if you have seen a girl. We can't find her and we tracked her to this bar. Her name is Akiko and she's about the same height as my friend here, but with black hair and brown eyes." Kakashi explained, saving the situation from turning nasty.

"Humpf." The man snorted and turned to pick up a finger stained glass, taking a small sip before placing it back on the counter. He was eyeing Kakashi speculatively for a long moment, but then he shrugged. Breaking their eye contact. "I know who you're speaking of, but we call 'er Arrow 'ere at the club." He said, a small but creepy smile growing on his face.

Naruto's eyebrows furrowed in puzzlement while Kakashi leaned back, his eyes darting quickly to the stage on their right.

"Why do you call her Arrow?" Asked Naruto.

"The girl worked here for years as a cleaning girl, but on her first proper working day she got full score on her first customer. It was a while ago though, about two years ago now? She got a wealthy businessman to buy 'er for the whole night. Not bad looking fellow either. She was nicknamed arrow because he kept coming back, love struck fool that he was, to buy her again. You know; love's arrow and all that? But it's a long story, yah' know? Anyway everyone still calls 'er Arrow."

Naruto had gone pale. Her eyes stared wide eyed in disbelief up at the bartender. Akiko… worked here? She was… a hooker? That was impossible.

Akiko had been the most decent and well-mannered girls in the orphanage. Kind and positive most days, though she could get stressed if things got tough.

But she was doing well these days. She had found a well-paying job, which absolutely was not in this place, and a new place to live. She had also been...

"Akiko was thirteen years old!?" Naruto shrieked so loudly everyone in the club jumped in surprise. Her eyes flashing red with fury, and causing the bartender to stumble backwards at the intensity of her killing intent.

Everyone was immobilized by it, except Kakashi who clapped his hand over her mouth and restrained her with his other arm.

Naruto was already trying to get at the bartender. Wanting to tear him apart for telling such a lie.

Akiko wasn't a hooker. She was working in a restaurant! She'd said so herself! Akiko was doing well with her life and was making something of herself. She wasn't selling her body for money to anyone with a high enough amount.

"Calm down, Naruto!" Kakashi exclaimed angrily. Forcing Naruto back while the bartender watched in shock as Naruto tried to wrestle free from the much taller boy.

She was very close to succeeding.

"Please calm down. Let me ask him what he knows. He can't answer anything unless he's conscious, alright?" Kakashi attempted to reason with her, and was partially successful. He stepped in front of her, blocking the bartender from Naruto's view.
"How long has she… been working here?" He asked carefully. The bartender looked terrified back. He had never seen such an innocent looking thing fire up with such wrath, and it hadn't been the least bit amusing. In fact his heart was pounding so hard it was painful.

"Um… four years in total… but only two as a… as I said before… Maybe a little more." He answered.

"Can we see her room? We might have misunderstood each other. Maybe the girl you're referring to is someone else, but if we were allowed to see her room it would make things clear." Kakashi suggested, and Naruto's eyes lit up.

Maybe it was just a misunderstanding.

"Um... I'm sorry, but no… Her room is currently in use… by a client and his companion." The bartender said weakly, his eyes keeping track of Naruto while he started visibly sweating.

"..."

"But you can see the call book. There's a picture there!" He suggested at once, bending down behind the bar and coming back up with a catalogue. Quickly he handed it to Kakashi.

Kakashi looked from the catalogue cover and over to Naruto uncertainly. "A catalogue? Um… why a catalogue?" Asked Kakashi while turning the book over to glance at the back.

"For customers. Sometimes they want… em… something… uh… specific. You know, not everyone buys… that. Some just want someone who plays a role. Housewife, teacher, student or… Other things. A catalogue just organizes things better and makes it… easier… for them to pick." The bartender explained, growing increasingly sweaty while his eyes snapped between Naruto and Kakashi.

With a quick look at Naruto, Kakashi had the foresight to take a step away before opening it. Making sure the blonde didn't have a chance to peek. At the first page his visible eyebrow raised and his cheek turned pink.

"Which page?" He inquired. Keeping his tone normal despite his obvious discomfort.

"Not sure… Somewhere in the middle."

Kakashi flipped quickly, getting to the middle in a heartbeat while Naruto looked closely for any outward sign of recognition from him.

He coughed suddenly, and grimaced before shutting the book in a hurry.

"Let me see!" Naruto demanded.

"I think it's better if you... don't, Naruto. It was Akiko in there, so that means it wasn't a mix up. That's all you need to know isn't it?" Kakashi answered, already about to hand the catalogue back to the bartender.

Naruto flew forwards, tackling Kakashi to the ground and wrestling the catalogue out from his clutching fingers.

Jumping to her feet again and stepping away from them both she started browsing quickly. Her eyes scanning each page at record speed while she flipped through the middle pages. Then her heart sank.
Akiko was sitting on a bed with red sheets. Clad in nothing but barely covering lingerie while holding a bow and arrow. Pointing the weapon directly towards the camera with a shy smile on her lips, but there was absolutely nothing shy about the pose.

Naruto wordlessly shut the catalogue and stiffly put it down on the bar counter. She hadn't noticed how everyone in the strip club was staring at them, nor the blazing killing intent radiating from her.

Kakashi was itching to wrap up, so he quickly turned towards the deathly pale bartender. "When was she last at work?"

"Well… She was here yesterday, but I don't think anyone… um… booked her… the girl has a debt to pay down because she lives upstairs like all the other girls. But she didn't show up for breakfast this morning and I have no idea where she's been since she was supposed to be here two hours ago. She has the afternoon shift… I just informed the boss she wasn't here an hour ago." The bartender muttered in a weak voice.

"Thanks for your time. We'll look for Akiko, and you can inform your boss she's a missing person. Whatever depth she owes him has to be negotiated through my sensei - the Hokage - before being demanded back. I know how some club owners can get a little worked up by missing employees, and for all you know this is just a misunderstanding." Kakashi added with a forced calmness.

Before he could answer, Kakashi spun around and grabbed Naruto by the wrist, dragging her outside. She came willingly, though she was still visibly upset.

Naruto was breathing harshly as sunlight hit their eyes. Blinding her momentarily. "Akiko isn't a… a… There's just no way. She is fifteen years old… Thirteen when… she..." Naruto whispered. Trying to convince herself more than Kakashi at this point.

He had the decency to remain silent.

"How the hell can you be buying girls for sex!" Shouted Naruto and stormed into the Hokage office. Jiraiya whirled startled around while Minato looked confused up from his papers.

She was red in the face and behind her Kakashi hurried after. He grabbed her arm and tried to yank her backwards, but the girl managed to break his grip. She pointed accusingly at Jiraiya, her hand shaking while she stared at him.

Minato stood up and looked concerned from Naruto to his sensei. Not sure what this was about.

"Do you realize it could have been me in there? If you hadn't found me and brought me to Konoha? If I hadn't shown talent? Is that all it took for me not to end up in a brothel?! Would you have bought someone like me to have sex with because you can't get laid the normal way?!" Naruto screamed in rage.

Jiraiya was growing pale while Minato's mouth was now firmly shut. This was not a topic he wanted to get involved with.

Jiraiya had dug his own grave this time.

"Naruto! You're upset. You shouldn't take this out on Jiraiya-sama. He wouldn't buy Akiko for sex. I've seen the girls he-"

"Don't get me started on you! You're both perverts! I know you read his dirty books! Where the hell do you think he gets the inspiration?!" Naruto snapped and turned on Kakashi instead. The boy
wisely stepped back at once, his hands up in a sign of surrender. Though his face was growing red at Naruto's words. Minato wondered if what she said was true. From the look of discomfort Kakashi was wearing it probably was.

"Um… Why… er'- are you suddenly…?" Jiraiya spluttered while looking nervously at Naruto. He had never seen her this upset before.

"Her friend from the orphanage is missing. She asked me to help and we tracked her trail to a brothel called…Papa's Playhouse… where she's working. But we still didn't find her." Kakashi explained, seeing as Naruto was too upset to form the words.

"She was just ten or eleven when she started there! Thirteen when she… was being sold!" Naruto shouted again, her voice cracking through the fury she couldn't control.

"I have never touched a girl that young!" Answered Jiraiya defensively, finally shaking out of his stupor.

"It doesn't matter! She's a teenager now! And now you wouldn't feel guilty about buying her like some sort of kunai at display in an equipment shop! She's my age! You could have been buying me for all the difference it made!"

Revulsion crossed Jiraiya's face, but wisely he kept his mouth shut. Seeing as Naruto was beyond reason at this point.

Minato picked up his papers and started to read. Pretending the scene in front of him was not happening and hoping dearly he would have a sudden case of memory loss that would erase this whole conversation from his mind.

"They should be in prison all of them. The… The pimps selling them like groceries. Is there nothing in the law against this? To help keep children safe from sex trafficking?" Naruto asked weakly, looking at Minato now.

"… No." He said slowly.

Naruto's mouth opened in shock. There was nothing that hindered a man from buying a kid? How could that be? How could Minato allow it!? "What people choose to do with their bodies is up to them. It's how we can legalize children into the ninja occupation. You yourself were emancipated to be allowed to continue your career as a ninja, and all orphans who applied were given the same opportunity during the war. It's how you could be considered an adult without being of age. If the person has been emancipated then what they do is their choice. The result of their choices is not within my responsibilities, for better or for worse. Legally they're adults." He added from behind his papers.

Naruto was looking increasingly like Kushina at the moment, and it was painful to watch her.

"That has to change..." Naruto whispered under her breath.

"Naruto, there's not much you can do about the law in Konoha, but you can do something else. You can keep looking for Akiko." Kakashi said quietly.

"...

"Come on. If you want to help your friend you first have to find out where she is. So let's continue the search. I'm sure we can get Rin, Anko and Shisui to help with this too." Kakashi suggested.
Naruto nodded silently, and turned to follow Kakashi out of the Hokage office. But at the door she halted, and with her hand at the frame she turned her head back towards Jiraiya. "If I see you… doing that. I'll break your bones. It's disgusting. Get a grip Jiraiya and find yourself a girlfriend instead." She said so coldly it could freeze fire.

Without looking back she left Minato's office, and the two men were left in utter silence.

"I just can't find her! Do you really think she might have run away from the guy she owes money?" Naruto asked and folded her arms in front of her.

"It's not unusual, Naruto," Shisui frowned and turned towards Anko. "Did you know she worked as a prostitute?" Shisui had been at their apartment when Naruto returned, talking to Anko while they both wondered where Naruto had disappeared to. Itachi had tagged along too, and the boy had looked very out of place in their tiny flat.

In her haste to find Akiko Naruto had completely forgotten she was supposed to meet Shisui. Luckily he understood and now Naruto, Kakashi, Anko, Shisui, Rin and Itachi were all walking down the street wondering how to track down Akiko.

"No, I barely see her at all. When Naru left we didn't exactly hang out one on one. Naru was sort of the middle man." Anko answered with a shrug.

"Well you should have!" Shouted Naruto angrily.

"Hey, don't blame me for this! If Akiko choose to whore herself out that is not my fault!"

A few people stopped around them, and Shisui shrunk back a bit under the outraged expressions directed their way.

"Stop saying that! It's not her fault the system is messed up! She probably ran out of options and did the only thing that kept her fed! Now maybe one of those bastards tied her up and… Oh, kami! What if she's being raped? What if one of her clients wouldn't let her leave again? And Akiko is locked up in some dirty old man's basement and being whipped? What if-"

Anko held up a hand and forcibly interrupted Naruto before her imagination went any further. "Stop, Naru. She's been gone for what… half a day? There's no reason to panic just yet. This isn't like at the orphanage where when one didn't show up for meals it meant they'd ran away. Akiko is fifteen years old and I'm sure she has a good reason to be late. For all we know she married one of her clients and are currently on a honeymoon with her new sugar daddy."

"Shut up!" Naruto cried horrified. Wanting to hit Anko for being so blasé about the whole ordeal.

Shisui was looking very uncomfortable while he absent mindingly tried to pretend he didn't know the two girls having a very loud conversation about whores, sex and whipping in the middle of the street.

Anko laughed. "You are working yourself into a jiffy over very little Naru. Yes, it's a bit strange she didn't show up for work, but she is an adult, Naru. Unlike us ninja it isn't crucial that a civilian show up for work. For all we know she's at the hospital with the flu, or at a friend's house with the flu for that matter. I mean, being sick in the whore house can't be the most pleasant thing. Who the hell knows, maybe her vagina was sore and she needed a break. There are just too many explanations for her absence that you going off on a rampage isn't necessary. Just calm down. We'll keep looking, but it's no reason to panic just yet."

"How can you be so calm about this?" She asked breathlessly.
"Please, it's just sex for kami's sake. You travelled with Jiraiya-sama so you must have seen some brothels on your trip."

"Are you insane? He never brought me along! And I told him exactly how I felt about his life choices!"

"The only difference is that now you know one of the girls he buys, Naru." Anko replied exasperated. "I'm not saying it's a good thing or anything, but it's not like you didn't know about the sex industry, right? But not until you knew Akiko was one of the whores did you go off the handle. It's really hypocritical of you really. And Akiko have found an occupation that might not do well for her reputation, but at least she's not a prude like you seem to be."

Naruto gaped in shock. "I'm not a prude! You are the one who's way too open! There's some things that's just better left in private!"

"Too open? It's not like I'm having sex with my boyfriend in front of you, Naru." Anko replied offended.

"You might as well have! I hear enough to know your routine by now!"

"There's nothing routine about what I do with Kato."

"You two quiet down, please!" Shisui hissed angrily. "I know you never had anyone to tell you this seeing as you grew up in the orphanage, but this is not a discussion you have on a Saturday afternoon in the middle of the street!"

Both girls huffed and crossed their arms, turning away from one another annoyed.

Shisui sighed. "Though Naruto does have a point Anko."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Anko asked angrily.

"What I'm saying is that you're being a bit too… affectionate… in public. While I don't have anything against you having a boyfriend, and what you two do in private is… you know, your business, I would still appreciate it if you didn't… share so much." Shisui fumbled over the words. His cheeks heating up the more he talked.

"Come on, it's not like it affects you guys." Anko argued, folding her arms in front of her.

"It does actually." Naruto piped up. "Your private business is keeping me up several nights a week, dattebayo."

"You should get earplugs then. It's not my fault you guys aren't getting any. If you did maybe you'd loosen up a bit." Anko replied with her nose in the air.

"This isn't about not being… loosened up." Naruto said exasperated. "It's the fact that you seem to think it's completely alright to have sex in the bathroom while we're over for dinner at Shisui's! It's not like Kagami didn't notice!" Naruto shouted, blushing just from the reminder of the previous week.

"Please, the guy has a son. He's done it himself." Anko taunted back. Shisui made an angry sound, taking a step back as he glared annoyed at Anko.

Naruto smacked her forehead. "Of course he has, but it's the way you act about it. It's like… You parade around the fact you're having sex regularly. Like some sort of… of..."
"Whore?" Finished Anko coldly, reminding Naruto more of a cat about to attack it's pray than anything else.

"I didn't say that!" Naruto denied at once, crossing her arms in an X in front of her. "Though… You have to admit there are some similarities."

"Excuse me?!" Anko screeched, and Naruto was surprised she hadn't been hit yet.

"I mean, Kato is over all the time, and don't pretend for a second you enjoy it as much as you make it sound. You have to be faking some of it because there's no way sex can stay that good for so many hours, and then he buys you stuff too, doesn't he? Like the new lamp that you two ruined and dango… and…" Naruto faulted, seeing just how red Anko had turned with fury.

"Shut up! Me being treated to dango by my boyfriend is not the same as Akiko being paid for getting a hundred guys off with her pussy!"

Shisui moaned pitifully, and their audience had backed away several steps by now.

"It isn't, I just… okay, I'm sorry. I took it too far." Naruto muttered and looked away.

"You sure as hell did! You called me a whore!"

"No, I meant there are simil-

"Oh for crying out loud you two!" Shouted Rin from the side line, her face pink with embarrassment. "Stop talking so loudly!"

Itachi was nodding energetically in agreement next to her, and Kakashi was standing with his hands in his pockets while looking at the pavement in interest.

"Don't be so shy, Rin. I know you've been antisocial for the last few years and that you've been secluded from people of the opposite sex but there's no reason to be embarrassed." Anko replied with a smirk.

"She's a lost cause." Shisui mumbled while nodding to himself. "Just keep it down with Kato, okay? Try considering others before you go around making out for the whole village to see."

"Oh, for kami's sake it's not such a big deal." Anko snapped, dragging Shisui down by the collar of his shirt before attaching her mouth to his.

Naruto froze in shock and so did Kakashi, Itachi and Rin. For several second the silence rang while all of them stared as Anko stuck her tongue down Shisui's throat.

The boy was too startled to react at first, letting Anko all but maul him.

But suddenly he seemed to get his senses back and pushed Anko harshly away. "What the hell is wrong with you!" He shouted, his arms floundering at his side and his face redder than Naruto had ever seen it.

Anko barked a laugh, waving her finger back and forth while she taunted Shisui. "Now you're a man Shisui. And see, that wasn't such a big deal, was it now?"

"You have a boyfriend!" He shouted back.

"So? I have friends - doesn't stop me from killing other's friends, does it?"
"You are messed up, Anko." Naruto muttered, her face in her hands while shaking it from side to side.

"It's just a kiss. It's not like he'll get germs."

"You know going around kissing random people really doesn't help you argue against the prostitute accusation." Naruto pointed out.

Anko huffed. "It does; because I'm not expecting Shisui to pay me back for that."

"You have to stop doing stuff like that! It's bad enough that Kakashi goes around reading porn in public!" Naruto gestured towards the older boy wildly, but Anko wasn't listening.

"You are too innocent, Naru." Anko replied, and then she dragged Naruto forward by the collar too, her hand falling to the back of her head to lock her in place before planting her lips on hers.

Naruto squeaked in shock, keeping her lips firmly shut so she wouldn't get attacked by Anko's tongue like Shisui had.

Wrenching her head away from Anko's grip she screamed. "You lunatic!" And then she punched her fist into Anko's jaw. The girl stumbled backwards, a hand to her cheek as she smiled through the pain.

"Now you've both lost your kiss-in-ity." She taunted in a sing song voice.

Kakashi was stuttering in the background. Shisui was incredulous, Itachi was looking pointedly at the clouds while Rin had taken several steps back - probably to prevent Anko from sweeping in on her too. "You don't go around kissing people! For fucks sake you're worse than Ero-Sennin!" Naruto shouted back while dragging her sleeve across her mouth.

Naruto was grumpy. After Anko's sexual assault on her two old teammates they'd all returned to the flat in an attempt to celebrate Shisui's birthday as originally planned.

There were no traces of Akiko anywhere, but then there weren't any signs of anything bad having happened either. Kakashi had gone back to the club and asked a few of her female co-workers if this had ever happened before, and apparently it had.

About a year ago Akiko had gone off with a customer and disappeared for an entire week. The pay had apparently been great, and this was not an unheard of situation. Maybe Anko was right… Maybe Akiko was simply still working. Naruto shuddered just thinking about it. Wondering who she would have to service to make a living.

It was causing Shisui's birthday to turn into quite a disaster though, but luckily he wasn't angry about it. He was quite understanding in fact.

Unfortunately Anko wasn't.

"I've had enough of your moping. From what we found out Akiko is probably off working, and this will cheer you up, Naru. You have to come with me to this bar. It's the best! It's called the Retired Jōnin and only ninja are allowed access because the drinking age is different for us than they are for civilians. At least usually. Bring your ID batch and you can drink whatever you want at the Retired Jōnin." Anko gushed happily.

Naruto stayed quiet and glared at Anko who simply bit her lip and tried a different angle. "And I will
even promise not to bring Kato, since you two clearly get a brain freeze because you're such prudes, so I'll be considerate this time and go stag."

Naruto looked uncertainly at Shisui who rolled his eyes. "Really? But I'm not of age..."

"I just told you. Maybe not in the civilians eyes, but to the ninja you are considered an adult. Everyone who's emancipated is. However this place I'm talking about does have an age limit. It's mostly to keep brats from scaring away the senior clientele though. You have to be fifteen at the very least, which you both now are! This is a great way to celebrate Shisui's birthday and to get you out of your funk!"

Shisui bristled. "I'm not spending my birthday there." He snapped at once. "You snuck me in once already remember? I ended up with a drink in my face and the worst hangover in history. You wouldn't stop buying me drinks the entire evening."

"I know. And it was beautiful!" Anko grinned evilly and then turned towards Naruto. "I just love corrupting, Shisui, and it was so hilarious. He had to be supported out the door! You'll see, the first time you drink it hits you quite hard. I can't wait to see how you react!"

"No. I'd rather not." Shisui protested in panic, his head shaking from side to side even before Anko finished speaking.

"Ignore mister pansy boy. The Uchiha clan never taught him how to live." Anko replied at once. "But still, you have to come with us Shisui. We can't leave the birthday boy to spend his day with his depressing cousin. And you'll love it Naru. I promise."

"I hate this." Naruto dragged a hand through her hair in frustration, looking over at Rin and Shisui who appeared to have as much fun as she did.

Anko however was having the time of her life.

She had dragged Kakashi out on the dance floor and was doing some very suggestive moves around the guy, making Naruto stare at the absurdness because Kakashi hadn't left yet. In fact; he looked like he was having fun too.

Rin however didn't seem to like it much.

She was fidgeting badly with the etiquette around her bottle. It was almost ripped off entirely; leaving white patches of moist paper against the glass while Rin worked hard at making it come off completely in agitation.

Shisui was just bored.

It wasn't that Naruto was against the concept of the club/bar - whatever it was the Retired Jōnin was supposed to be. It was just that it was designed in such a way to work against Naruto's senses.

There was a constant sting in her nose from the liqueur served, blended with something musky and rotten somewhere in the room. Like Naruto's sense of smell her hearing was also enhanced, and the loud music coming from the worn speakers gave her a migraine. Especially since Naruto's most hated song was currently being played, and the drunk men on a table close to the bar were singing along with bravado. "Caus' dad said; stay out of trouble, and no trouble comes to you. Work hard and you'll get what you're due."

To add to Naruto's annoyance the woman on stage had twice as an annoying voice as the one on the
radio, and it definitely didn't mix well with the wasted men she suspected were part of the Yamanaka clan. Naruto was also throwing money out the window buying drinks, seeing as they tasted horrible and the desired after effects never kicked in. Naruto literally couldn't get drunk thanks to Kurama.

"This is Anko's go-to place." Shisui said just loud enough to carry over the music. "I don't know why… It's like she wants to act like a brainless loony on occasions. Personally I think it's the attention that draws her."

The singer was punctuating a really high tone of the refrain now, and Naruto hoped it would end soon."But time is precious so I said it would do, caus' I have a mission to get to."

"She's getting enough of that." Naruto agreed, watching as a man seated at the opposite end watch Anko like a piece of meat. Anko ignored him in favor of finishing her dance with Kakashi, but as the song came to an end - and there was finally some blessed silence before the next one started up - she came skipping back over, dragging Kakashi after her by the elbow.

"You guys are lame! Cheer up! You have to drink and dance for this to be fun!" She shouted over the first few notes of the next song. Another up beat one.

"That's too bad. I can't get a buzz." Naruto answered and gestured to her barely touched drink. "And I have no rhythm. I'd make a horrible dance partner, dattebayo."

"Oh, you're exaggerating. Empty your drink now." Anko replied at once, bumping into Naruto's arm so her glass almost spilled over.

"Careful!" Naruto snapped at her, trying to steady the glass but Anko ignored it.

"Go on. Drink up." She commanded, pointing to the glass with narrowed eyes.

Naruto hesitated, looking between Anko and the drink to see how serious she was. Anko didn't budge at all. "Fine." She replied, and in one go threw her head back and emptied the sake down her throat.

While Naruto grimaced Anko squealed and clapped her hands together. "Another drink for this one." She shouted to the bartender who simply nodded while handling Kakashi's order.

"This really isn't our thing." Rin said quietly, trying hard not to look at Kakashi. Naruto would bet Iruka's forehead protector the girl was jealous about Anko's dance with him. It couldn't be more obvious. Even after four years the girl was still infatuated with her genin teammate, and Naruto had no idea how she could be… Naruto just didn't get it. Personally she had never felt any romantic feeling for someone else which could survive rejection or such a long time span.

Unfortunately it wasn't only Naruto who was aware, because Anko noticed Rin's behavior too. "Maybe if you tried that might change. Naruto has started and in no time she'll be having fun too. You should keep up Rin, and who knows who might ask you to dance, right?"

Rin glanced at Kakashi again and frowned. "I don't know." She muttered so low only Naruto heard her.

"Fine, see how much I care. You downers won't spoil my night. Shisui! It's your turn. Dance with me birthday boy. Naru will need a few minutes before the alcohol gets to her head." Anko ordered, dragging the Uchiha by his shirt collar towards the mingle of dancers.

Kakashi noticed Shisui's departure, and hurriedly took the available seat before anyone else had time to blink. "You enjoy this? Really?" Asked Rin across Naruto, leaning forward to see Kakashi better.
He shrugged. "It's okay. Anko makes such a spectacle it's usually good blackmail material."

Naruto laughed, peering over at the dance floor where Shisui was awkwardly trying to keep up with Anko. The birthday boy was so embarrassed he couldn't help but laugh at Anko's performance.

"This..." Said Naruto, watching as Anko swayed up to Shisui and put her arms around his neck suggestively. "-is actually starting to get entertaining."

Shisui was beat red from the way Anko was moving against him, but the idiotic smile was enough to reveal he wasn't too hurried to get away.

"You don't feel anything yet? That was some strong sake you just chugged." Kakashi noted.

"Nah, poisons have very little effect on me. Especially alcohol." Naruto replied casually, her eyes browsing the crowd for eavesdroppers.

Rin and Kakashi understood simultaneously, both of them straightening up automatically. "Right," Rin said, her eyes following Anko as Shisui spun her around. "Anko will be devastated."

"She will. Anko's been talking about getting you drunk for months, Naruto." Kakashi pointed out with mirth. "It will be hard for her when she realize that's more or less impossible."

Naruto laughed, noticing Anko and Shisui were calming down some on the dance floor. "Oh, I won't have to burst her bubble just yet. I know perfectly well how to act like an idiot. I just need Anko buzzed enough so she won't notice it's just how I usually am."

Rin and Kakashi chuckled while Anko and Shisui returned when the song ended, both a bit sweaty from the dance. "Shisui, ask Rin to dance." Anko demanded of him the moment they were within earshot.

Rin blushed at once and stammered out that she didn't want to, but Anko rolled her eyes. "Give it a rest, Shisui is too much of a pansy to do anything. You're safe Rin. Your dignity will remain intact through one song." And then she all but wrestled Rin out of her stool, pushing her into Shisui who was not stupid enough to argue. They walked a bit awkwardly through the crowd until Naruto could only see them fleetingly between the ones dancing.

"Feeling anything yet?" Asked Anko and wagged her eyebrows.

"Oh yeah, this is actually starting to get interesting." Naruto replied and raised her glass in a toast. It was the truth. She might not enjoy the loud music, the horrible tasting alcohol or the stingy smell of the location, but the entertainment was certainly picking up.

Anko laughed happily. "I told you, didn't I? All you needed was too loosen up a bit. Come dance with me Naru!" She shouted happily, and as Anko dragged her out to dance Naruto met Kakashi's eyes over her shoulder.

He arched an eyebrow in question, but Naruto just shrugged in reply.

Even if Naruto didn't enjoy it, she might as well let Anko have her fun.

Anko did get her perfect night, though when they arrived home Kato was waiting for his girlfriend, and Naruto was again kept up while her roommate apologized for ditching him that evening.

Naruto had more than enough, and maybe her sleep deprived mind was the reason she demanded
that Anko couldn't bring Kato over more than twice a week unless they kept it down.

She needed sleep. Badly. Anko could very well go over to her boyfriend's place instead of tormenting Naruto.

Anko had snorted at first, but must have seen the desperation in Naruto's blood shot eyes, because she agreed.

The whole of team Kasai had to get up early the day after Shisui's birthday and left for a two day mission outside the village. It went off without a hitch despite the slight hangover Shisui and Kakashi seemed to have the first few hours of their mission. Luckily they hadn't drunk much, and they were only a bit more sluggish when they moved at first.

Upon her return to Konoha the very first thing Naruto did was ask Anko if she'd seen Akiko yet. But Anko boldly stated she hadn't even checked, which annoyed Naruto to no end.

For a moment Naruto considered going over to see for herself, but team Kasai had returned at ten in the evening and she imagined the brothel was in full swing at this time of day. That toppled with the increasingly bad weather outside made Naruto choose to wait until morning instead.

So she joined Anko at the window to watch the lightning show outside, incredibly relieved they'd beat the storm home. The two girls soon found themselves chatting animatedly about their latest missions, and Naruto thanked Anko for not bringing Kato over that night.

The window was uncomfortable to sit on. The frame gnawed into her thighs and when Naruto leaned on her side it was impossible to get comfortable. Still, she continued sitting there. Her feet dangling over the edge in the open air while she watched the storm. "Maybe we should get inside the room and close the window? It's getting cold and rain is getting everywhere." Anko suggested from the other window where she'd been watching the storm together with Naruto.

Naruto turned her head and leaned forwards out of the window to properly see Anko. She smiled widely. "But the view is so nice! I love watching storms." Naruto steadied herself against the frame with her hand so she wouldn't slide out of the window.

"I do too, but we've been sitting here for an hour and it's getting really bad outside." She waved her hand in front of her, rain splashing off her skin as it was subjected to the weather. "Look over there!" Anko said suddenly and pointed up straight forwards towards Konoha library.

"What? I didn't see anything..." Naruto answered while staring in the direction Anko was pointing.

"I think I saw a tree flying! It fell down so fast I'm not sure anymore, but it was big. This is not the safest place to sit. I'm also drenched. The rain is really bad..." Anko muttered, still trying to find the tree she'd spotted earlier.

"We could... Or do you want some tea? I feel like drinking something warm. We could sit here in the windows and drink tea, dattebayo!" Naruto mused to herself as much as Anko.

Anko thought about it for a moment, before she smiled appreciatively and nodded. Naruto lifted her feet over the frame and jumped into the flat with practiced ease. She was at the counter in three steps and started preparing the tea. Despite being past midnight she was still wide awake for once. She just found it ironic it was one of the few times Kato wasn't here.

"You sit too much in the window. You'll wear the frame one of these days and then you'll fall on your neck on the wrong side of the wall." Anko said over her shoulder.
“Nah, you always say I'm a lucky bastard. Falling out of my living room window won't be the end of me.” Anko snickered while Naruto filled a pot with water and put it on the stove, her eyes lingering on the clouds outside the window.

The lightning was intense now, and everything was being rustled by the wind. Even the electricity poles were swaying in the wind.

"Wow… I think I've never seen such a storm before. So much lightning and wind. If we had been up in the heights I wouldn't be surprised if we were lifted off the ground. I'm glad we're not on a mission in weather like this," Anko muttered as Naruto returned to the window with the tea and Anko's mission cloak to screen her from the wind.

Anko took her tea while Naruto hung the coat over Anko's shoulders. "Me too. Thank kami we made it back before this hit. Poor Kurenai though. Her team left for a mission this morning," Naruto muttered while she put on her own cloak and got her tea at the counter. Soon she was sitting on the window again while sipping tea.

"Do you think there will be a lot of damage from this storm? I mean… I've seen so many foreign objects drifting through the wind tonight. I wouldn't be surprised if people ended up in the hospital from this. Who knows what you'd get hit with if you were walking outside." Anko said thoughtfully while parts of a fence crashed into the Hokage mountain on the Third Hokage's nose.

"I wouldn't be surprised in the slightest. Look how dark it is in the western end of town. It's completely black over there. Do you think the power went out?" Asked Naruto while pointing. She took a sip of her tea and realized she had forgotten to bring a teaspoon to stir.

"Yeah… It looks like a blackout. Hopefully that won't happen here..." Anko mused and looked uncertainly up at the lamp standing on the dresser in the living room.

"We're going to sleep soon, and we have a gas stove to make food tomorrow during daylight. It's not like we need electricity for much tonight." Naruto added and stirred her tea with her finger.

Anko frowned and looked at Naruto with a serious expression. "We don't have candles… We should have candles to keep around in case of long periods of blackouts. Prepared people have candles."

Naruto laughed at the seriousness of Anko's tone, and her friend cracked a smile at Naruto's good mood. "Fine, tomorrow we'll buy candles. But you'll have to store them in your room. My cabinet is already filled with towels since they can't fit in the bathroom." Naruto replied, trying to say it seriously and failing.

"Neh, I think we can fit them in the drawer in the living room."

"But then they would get mixed up with our equipment. Does wax and metal go well together?" Asked Naruto with a tilt of her head.

"Um… I'm not sure? But does wax and clothes go well together? I don't want my clothes ruined." They thought about it for a moment before Naruto came up with a solution. "We'll ask Shisui tomorrow. He knows everything, dattebayo."

"Well, almost everything. He knows a lot about useless stuff, that's true. But who knows, maybe he has a training session with Itachi and don't have time to meet up. If he's not with the new team that's all he's doing these days." She said and rolled her eyes. The envy so clear in her voice Naruto could pick it up a mile away.
"He's your ex-teammate so be supportive, Anko."

"I won't give any promises… And anyway, why aren't you more annoyed? He's off doing clan business instead of hanging with us! You've been gone for years and he's like; yeah, hi Naru, good to have you back but I have a clan that matters more." Anko said displeased.

"Where are you coming from? We see Shisui plenty and he's not that bad. I see him all the time. I am still on his team you know. You're the one who was stupid and joined TIF."

"TIF is not stupid! It's great! And yeah, maybe lately he's been around a bit more, but that's just because you're finally back. Once that's old news he'll go back to being his evasive self." Anko argued at once.

"If you say so." Naruto replied teasingly. "I'm just glad you can take out your frustration on Shisui at TIF instead of at home."

"Hah, he's fucking lucky for that!" Anko agreed, and they dived into the topic of Anko's duties at TIF.

They spent an hour talking, their voices drifting in and out while they watched the horrid weather attack their village. Before long it got tedious though, and they retired for the evening, both girls tired from the long day and knowing they would have to get up early the next.

Naruto had problems falling asleep that night despite the late hour. They were on the top floor where the constant sound of harsh, falling rain on the roof and howling wind kept her awake. She tried counting sheep, but all she could picture was how the live stock was fairing in this weather. Most of them were probably being taken in a tornado and thrown across fire country at the moment.

So Naruto switched to counting knocks instead. Something was repeatedly hitting the wall on one of their neighboring houses, and it was highly annoying. Only to realize it was keeping her awake, instead of tiring her.

After an hour of failing to sleep Naruto gave in and got up. Wondering if maybe a cup of milk would make her sleepy. Maybe she would even heat it up - that usually made other people sleepy - though she herself had never tried out the method.

Putting on her slippers with clumsy movements she walked clad in only her pajamas into the kitchen. The room was dark and Naruto only turned on a weak, glowing lamp to cast some light over what she was doing.

The constant flashes of lightning gave some light, but in general it was pitch dark in the room, and it was a miracle Naruto hadn't tripped over her own feet in the darkness.

She had just gotten the gas on the stove running when the sound of a click went through the room. The lamp she'd lit earlier flashed once before going dark, and then it was pitched black.

Looking out she noted that the lamp posts in the street were all out too, and the previous window lights from earlier were now completely dark. The whole district was without power.

"Fantastic!" Naruto grumbled and fumbled with the knobs on the stove, hoping she was turning the gas off instead of making it worse. She was not going to risk making anything on the stove in the dark.

She listened closely to the stove and couldn't hear any gas leaking, and felt confident that it had been turned off properly. Her hands fumbled a little while she tried to find the kettle filled with cold milk,
and hit her hand on something else in the process.

Naruto was just grabbing the handle when things changed drastically.

One minute she was just focusing on getting the milk in the kettle back into a normal glass, and the next moment the windows of her apartment blew to pieces.

"Gyaaah!" Naruto shouted as rain washed over her together with shards of glass, pieces of stone and small timber spikes from the window frame. Her hands shot up to shield her face, and she felt stings all over her.

For a moment she stood frozen, and then she looked up. Barely believing what she was seeing.

At first she couldn't make heads of tail of the destruction.

Their living room wall, which had been perfectly intact only a moment ago, was crumbling around a large timber object with crushed metal wheels. It must have flown through the upper part of the wall and edge of the roof, because tiles were clashing down around her, miraculously missing her. But Naruto was too focused on figuring what had bombarded its way into their fifth floor apartment, and couldn't believe it when she figured out what it was.

A fucking horse carriage had gone through their wall.

Like the ones that usually horses pulled along after them. It was such an absurd sight Naruto wasn't sure what to do for a moment.

"What happened?!!" Shouted a voice from the hallway, and next moment Anko came hurtling into the living room. Her nightdress getting soaked from the rain the moment she came out of the hallway. Her eyes widened comically at the sight, and just like Naruto she was at lost for words.

Naruto looked from the wreckage and back at Anko, an unsure expression on her face. "I think we need to sleep somewhere else tonight…”

"Mah, why are you two here?"

Kakashi was wearing his pajamas but looked wide awake when he opened the door to his apartment.

Naruto and Anko had gotten dressed before deciding it would be best to crash at Kakashi's apartment for the night. All they needed to do was walk down the stairs to get to his apartment, and they wouldn't even have to go outside in the storm to get there.

"Our wall got a horse carriage through it and everything is a mess. We need to crash on your floor tonight." Anko replied as matter of fact as she could muster. They each carried a pillow, a sleeping bag and a folded futon. More than enough to stay comfortable as long as they had shelter from rain and wind.

"I know. I heard the crack, I think everyone in the street did, and looked out of my window and saw what had happened. What I meant was; why are you at my place? Go crash somewhere else." Kakashi replied grumpily.

The girls exchanged a look before Naruto stepped forwards. With a firm hand she pushed Kakashi's shoulder backward, making the boy stumble into his apartment before walking briskly inside. Anko hot on her heel.
"We are two helpless girls in need. You can't just send us out into a fucking storm, can yah?" Anko said and grinned when Kakashi's shoulders slumped. Knowing they had already won the argument.

"Just for tonight, right?" Kakashi asked desperately.

"Sure..." Naruto replied absent mindedly, and Kakashi's frown deepened even more.

"Seriously! Its fine for tonight, but you two are not staying in my apartment until yours are back in order. That can take weeks. I have enough with you two as my neighbors. I do not wish to be your roommate for any longer than absolutely necessary." Kakashi protested, but his words seem to fall on empty ears.

"Don't worry, Kakashi. We don't want to stay here longer than needed either." Anko replied exasperated. She unfolded her futon on the middle of the floor, next to where Naruto had already put down all her stuff down.

"You better not." Kakashi muttered and walked back to his bed.

Kakashi had a single room apartment the size of the girls living room and kitchen in total. There were only two doors, one which lead to the hallway and the other to the bathroom.

Pakkun came out of the bathroom, his head tilting curiously as he saw the camp being put up in the middle of the room. "Are we getting a bigger pack?" He asked curiously, and Kakashi shook his head vehemently.

"No! They're guests. They will only stay a night, Pakkun."

Pakkun's tail stopped wagging, and if anything the news disappointed him. But brushing it off, he trotted over to Kakashi's bed and jumped up. Making himself comfortable on top of the covers.

Naruto was still too pumped up to relax, and instead decided to tell Kakashi about what had happened. "You should have seen the crash, Kakashi! I was in the kitchen when it happened, trying to warm some milk-"

"You turned off the stove, right?!" Interrupted Anko and looked shocked up at the ceiling towards their flat, Kakashi's eyes also wandering in the same direction.

"Yeah I did. You see the light went out first and I didn't want to use the stove in the dark, so I turned off the stove but then the crash happened! It was unbelievable! And a horse carriage! How the hell did that get up to the fifth floor? I mean it's not exactly ground level where we're living. And who is missing their horse carriage? It's unrecognizable now, because part of the wall collapsed on it, and-"

"Go to sleep, Naruto. We're getting up early tomorrow and we don't need to do the friendly chatter thing. You can stay for the night and we can take a look at your apartment tomorrow morning. See if we can plaster up the hole for the time being," Kakashi said tiredly from his bed.

"But I'm not sleepy." Naruto moaned but lay down on her futon. Anko doing the same while getting into her sleeping bag.

"Take a walk outside and come back when you get tired then."

"Oh, ha-ha." Naruto grumbled and put her head down on the pillow. From the bathroom two other ninken filtered out too, and both made themselves comfortable on Naruto's futon. Bull at foot of the futon and Akino lay down on her stomach. She looked irritated as Anko smiled smugly at not getting her space taken by ninken. What was it about Naruto that made others summon think it was perfectly
okay to use her as a heating mat?

For a moment it was eerily silent. Naruto wondered how the couch would look when they get it out from the rubble tomorrow. Or their coffee table… That had collapsed completely, but maybe if they had some glue they could fix it up again.

Naruto decided to vocalize this, because there was no way she'd get to sleep anytime soon. "Maybe we can use glue on the coffee tab-"

*Crash!*

All of them jolted up in a sitting position, Kakashi so far up on his bed he was sitting on his pillow, and Pakkun was suddenly on top of his head. Akino jumped in the air with a pitiful squeak and pelted towards the bathroom while Bull had taken refuge behind Naruto.

They stared at the wall.

A lamp post was sticking through the window, not nearly as bad as it had been with the horse carriage, but badly enough for the whole window glass to have sprayed over Anko.

"Mah, I should never have let you two in. You bring bad luck…"

*To be continued...*
Thank you so very much for reading! The chapter was beta'd by AnjoRemix! I've also found out how to put in images inside the chapters, and decided to put in a few of my old Naruto fan art here and there. They're scattered over the chapters and some are more relevant than others. Sketching is sort of a hobby of mine, and while writing this story I've sketched a few drawings when I've been stuck on a chapter. The sketch at the end of this chapter is potentially how Naruto might look like now... When she's angry? Not sure, because for some reason drawing a female Naruto is hard as f***.

And I'm still having too much fun writing Anko... In Part One it was difficult keeping her attitude sassy and brash without any sexual references, seeing as her character is heavily based on her lack of shyness (in canon she wears mesh from top to toe, which means she basically walks around naked underneath a coat. It reminds me a lot of a perverted flasher in some ways.) So now that she's old enough to be curious about these things, not to mention a teenager with wild hormones, I had an overload of situations I wanted her to do. I believe Anko, thanks to having no parental guidance and a "make it on your own" mentality, would be the type that wanted to grow up as quickly as possible. Alcohol and sex would be tools to be recognized as an "adult". In fact... she's sort of based on a friend of mine who went a bit crazy in her teenage years. I just exaggerated the traits I saw in her and put them into Anko.

It's also fun writing her in contradiction to Naruto, seeing as while they're both loud and boisterous Naruto is more innocent in this field compared to Anko. In canon Naruto was against the life style choice Jiraiya choose, so I imagine Naruto would be a bit lost to
Anko's new habits too.

Until next time!
"Don't cry, Sasuke. Your big brother is here to protect you, no matter what happens." - Uchiha Itachi

"This is a disaster. How did we not pick up on how bad it would get?" Minato asked as he turned towards the other two in the room. Hiruzen stood with his hands folded behind his back while Danzō sat on the chair to the side, both hands resting on his cane.

"We couldn't have known… For all our strength the weather is still beyond our control." Hiruzen mused and looked out the window. His brow furrowed in worry.

"We knew it would be a big storm. We just didn't know how big." Muttered Minato and picked up the black rain cloak resting on his desk. "They have started evacuation I presume?" Asked Minato over his shoulder.

"Yes." Replied Danzō quietly.

"I'm calling in the guards on call. We need more than the usual number to look for anyone who might get lost or hurt." Minato mused. He sent out a chakra signal, and next moment an ANBU jumped in through the window.

Minato didn't spare the bird masked ANBU that responded to him a chance to greet him and spoke hastily. "What is the situation at the hospital and the shelters?"

The ANBU started talking at once. "Because of the blackout people are going to whichever is the closest. The hospital is becoming overfilled as it is one of the few places that have a backup generator and people follow the lights. They are asking for you, Hokage-sama."

"Of course." Muttered Minato too low for anyone else to hear.

After the lamp post had crashed into Kakashi's apartment they decided that they needed somewhere else to go, so in line they trotted down the crowded staircase and out onto the street. The fretting people outside had the appearance of someone who had been kicked straight out of bed, and the moment they came out they were met by pouring rain and wind whipping their hair in every direction.

It took exactly two seconds before the rain had worked through their clothes by the downpour. The clouds flashed so often it created a light show, and the sudden illumination followed by complete blackness created confusion for those trying to find their way.

"Shouldn't we help? We can't let them walk through this storm on their own, dattebayo. What if another horse carriage comes flying?" Asked Naruto as a woman and her husband walked past them in just their night slippers.

"We should help." Nodded Kakashi, his gaze following the same couple.
"Great… Should we leave our stuff here then?" Anko asked and looked around.

Kakashi scoffed and shook his head. "If we did then someone else will get our belongings through their living room window instead. So no, I have some scrolls in my pouch so we can seal them up and bring everything with us."

Anko scowled but agreed. After quickly sealing everything they hurried after the couple and Kakashi offered to escort them wherever they were going. The couple looked grateful, and Kakashi was about to follow them when Anko stopped him. "Hey, we're going to see if anyone else needs help. Shouldn't we agree to meet up somewhere before we start going in different directions?"

Kakashi looked back at the couple before nodding. "Yeah, let's meet up in an hour? The academy grounds?"

Naruto nodded, but just then another crack shook the air, and all three looked up as the roof of a building was torn off. "Um… Maybe we should just meet up by the hospital instead? I think a few people might need to be escorted there….

The other two nodded.

Naruto had split up from Anko five minutes ago. Her roommate was escorting an old man to the hospital. He was shaking, afraid and completely alone, so they had offered to bring him safely to the hospital.

In the meanwhile Naruto was walking by the orphanage. A lot of civilians lived in the area and many would need help if the weather damaged any more buildings. The rivers were overflowing, the trees were being uprooted, and random objects flying through the air made even standing still a very dangerous task.

"Naruto!"

Naruto turned around at the sound of her name, and saw a dark shape come quickly towards her. He hadn't been far away, but it was so dark that without any lights it was impossible to make out who was walking on the other side of the street. As the shape came closer she recognized Ensui.

She was both surprised and a bit annoyed. It was the first time she'd seen him in four years, and now of all time was the moment she'd run into him. Ensui was taller now, his dark hair still tied in the low ponytail, but the rings under his eyes were deeper than she recalled. A hand was held up to cover his face from the worst of the rain, and he was clad in the normal uniform despite the late hour.

"Hey, Ensui! I can't believe it's you! Where the hell have you been? I've been back in the village for weeks! And what are you doing outside? It's crazy out here!"

Ensui chuckled and placed a hand on her shoulder. Squeezing it gently as a way to tell her; welcome home. "I've been on a mission and came back yesterday. Right now however I'm helping people. What about you?"

Naruto smiled. "The same."

"Good, because we could really need some help. A lot of houses were damaged and I'm helping these kids get to the hospital, but if you follow the road you'll find a lot of wreckage." Ensui explained and pointed in the direction Naruto had been heading. Naruto looked to where Ensui had come from and could make out some shapes in the darkness.
"Okay, I'll go there right now. Thanks. Stay safe from flying horse carriages on the way." Naruto replied and waved as she started running.

Behind her she heard Ensui talk to himself in confusion. "Did she say horse carriage?"

Soon she found the wreckage Ensui talked about. Wind and rain made her squint to see, but people were using flashlights to look around, which Naruto was thankful for. In the air the voices of people shouting mixed with the hammering rain and lightning strikes made Naruto wonder who she needed to help first. Some of the voices carried on the wind, and she caught clipped sentences from the scattered people.

"My house! Everything is gone! Where will-"

"Worst storm I've ever experienced, what are we going-"

"Help! Someone help!"

Naruto followed the last voice and hurried through fallen walls, destroyed furniture and glass pieces while she tried to find the source of the voice.

"Hello?! Does anyone need help?!" Naruto cried when the voice stopped.

"H-Here!"

Naruto walked to her right, her eyes scouting the ground while she tried to find out where the person was. A woman from the sound of it.

"Here."

Naruto had almost stepped on the person, and halted when she spotted the woman lying flat on the ground. "Hi, I'm Naruto. I'm a ninja and I'll help you to the hospital. Where are you hurt?" Naruto could tell with a single glance this person was injured. Silently Naruto thanked Rin for her grueling hours of medic field lessons. It seemed it would come in handy tonight.

"I- I'm fine. My leg is broken or… something. But my son, he's somewhere under here and I can't get him out! You have to help me!" The woman begged. Naruto could barely see the person she was talking to, but she could hear the desperation in her voice.

"Do you know where? I'll get him out."

"Over there! Tarou! Tarou talk to me! Talk to mummy... Can you do that? I got help! Naruto-san will get you out, she is a ninja. She'll get you out now." She shouted while crawling on the ground. Naruto doubted it was only her leg that was injured.

"If you know, please stay still. I'll find Tarou while you stay still and I'll get you both out of here."

"You are a ninja?! We need help! My brother and his wife didn't get out! They're stuck and we can't get them out!" Shouted a voice to their right, and two people came tumbling towards them.

"No, Tarou! You promised to get Tarou!" Said the woman desperately.

"Don't worry, I can help everyone. I can even help everyone at the same time, just wait a second. Kage Bunshin no jutsu!" Naruto cried, and next second thirty clones sprung into existence and a moment later into action. "Now, show me again where Tarou is."
It could have been very easy to overlook, but by some fortune Kakashi spotted the man from the corner of his eye. It had just been a black blob down at the ground, but Kakashi had gone over to check and found a person half drowned in mud and water. He was face down with an injury to his head, and carefully Kakashi tried to move his face so he could breathe. But one touch was enough to confirm his suspicion. The man was dead.

Sighing he did a quick examination. The injury to the head wasn't that bad, but he suspected it had knocked the man unconscious, and then he'd fallen into the water and most likely drowned. The whole village was flooding, and though it wasn't deep it was enough to drown in if you lay flat on your stomach. Kakashi rummaged through his pocket and fished up a scroll in a second. Planning to seal him up as quickly as possible before helping more people. He had gotten around to quite a few by now, but this man was the first casualty of the storm he'd seen so far.

As he placed the scroll on top of the man's stomach Kakashi heard movements to his right, and surprised he glanced up. He didn't think anyone was here. It was a deserted area of the town, the place where all the machinery and heavy storages were located, which was probably why no one had noticed the dead man before Kakashi had used it as a short cut to get to the southern part of town.

Frowning Kakashi got to his feet, because he was sure he heard something now. Someone was walking through the water, and next moment a figure stumbled out between two buildings.

It took Kakashi a moment to recognize her.

"Akiko-chan?"

Akiko looked up surprised, and covered herself deeper in her long cloak. "Who are you?" She asked suspiciously, not able to see him properly in the darkness.

"I'm Hatake Kakashi. Naruto and Anko's neighbour, we've met a few times there. Where have you been? Naruto has been on the warpath for three days now. You never showed up for your lunch, and then..." Kakashi faulted, wondering exactly what he was supposed to say. Deciding to check if Akiko was alright he straightened and walked up to the teenager who leaned against the brick building.

"What? Oh... shit, I completely forgot." Akiko smacked her forehead in frustration. "Tell her I'm sorry okay? I just... I... I had work."

Kakashi was silent for a moment, and squinted to see her clearly. With no power in the village it was extremely dark, and he had problems making out her expression. It was a miracle he'd recognized her at all. "Are you injured?"

Akiko shook her head. "No, not at all. I think I'm a bit lost actually, it's so dark and I'm freezing."

"Understandable." Kakashi answered and peeked back at the dead man on the ground. "I just need to seal him up, and then I'll help you to the shelters."

"You don't need to. I'm sure others need more help than me." Akiko replied airily.

"It's not safe out here. Let me finish up and I'll escort you up to the mountain.... And..." Kakashi dragged a hand through his drenched hair and regretted it a moment later as his fingers got stuck between tangled hair strands.

This was really awkward and he dearly wished his luck had turned out better. Why did he have to get mixed into this again? He hated his upstairs neighbours sometimes... "Well, I should warn you I
guess." Kakashi started, feeling his cheek heat a bit when thinking about Akiko's occupation. "We went looking for you and Naruto now knows where you work." There. At least he could just give a few hints to what was awaiting Akiko when Naruto found her without having to go into details. He really didn't want to go over the details with Akiko.

Her head snapped towards him, and though it was dark he could still see Akiko's stunned expression. "I..."

She didn't seem inclined to continue after the small sound, and Kakashi sighed. In that moment he understood the Nara perfectly. Women really were troublesome... "I'll tell her I saw you, but she'll probably want to speak with you soon. Give me two seconds, and I'll get you out of here."

"Just find a room! We already have overcrowded the shelters but the situation is completely disorganized. Anyone who comes here have to be accepted. Use the cafeteria if you have no other room. Get out futons, do whatever, but you can't send people away." Minato said while he dragged a hand through his hair. The whole evening he'd been taken aside to deal with some organizing issues, and he'd yet to actually help anyone thanks to everyone needing help figuring out how to structure themselves. "I have to go out. I need to help people."

"Wait! Hokage-sama. The storm isn't over, and the hospital is at risk too, what if something happens to this building? What if."

"I already know! I have to put up a physical barrier around the structure and my guard is helping people through the barrier. As long as an earthquake doesn't happen too the hospital should be safe. It's one of the few places that is actually safe at the moment. But the rest isn't, I need to go help."

"Hokage-sama!" Minato turned exasperated as his student came hurrying down the hall. Rin looked tired, but he could understand why. She'd had a busy couple of days and then been asked to help out at the hospital only an hour after returning from a two day mission.

"What now?" He asked, trying to keep his voice gentle despite feeling bile of frustration at constantly being sidetracked.

"Um, Naruto just came into the hospital." Rin replied distracted just as a chart fell out of her grip and clattered to the floor, she swooped down to get it while balancing the tower of papers in her other hand.

"What? Is she alright?" Minato asked, completely forgetting about the doctor he'd been talking to moments ago.

Rin straightened up wearily, her eyes on the pile of papers while making sure nothing fell out of her grip again. "Oh, Naruto seems fine. She just brought in a horde of people with the clone technique. Her clones alone is filling up the entire entrance hall and there's so many people injured we're currently a little overcrowded." She replied absent mindedly, her focus more on her papers than on what she was saying or who she was talking to.

Minato nodded and at once started walking towards the reception. "Thanks for letting me know, report to the Sandaime while I'm gone. I need to help outside."

"If you stop by the lobby tell her to dispel the clones! I don't have time to go down there again!" Rin shouted over her shoulder, and Minato just nodded absent-mindedly.

He arrived in the entrance hall a moment later, appearing right over the seal he'd placed on the staircase railing.
The sight that met him would have been humorous in almost any other setting. A hundred Narutos were walking around, looking confused and lost while supporting or helping people to a seat.

He was about to speak up and tell the clones to dispel but someone beat him to it. Orochimaru's voice carried over the crowd. "All Naruto clones!" He gained the attention from everyone in the entrance hall and a sea of Narutos turned towards Orochimaru along with all the refugees. Minato wasn't sure which one was in the majority.

"Put down any injured patient and dispel your clones now brat! And the real Naruto come up here!" Orochimaru shouted from behind the reception desk. The only place that actually had some room to maneuver.

A series of pops sounded through the room, and instantly there was a space to walk through again. They just had to wait for the smoke to go away. When it did only one Naruto remained and she was at the foot of the stairs Minato was standing on.

It struck him that if Naruto had any medical training she could have run the whole damn hospital on her own.

The medics were immediately able to move around more efficiently and he could hear several sighs of relief around the room. Minato noticed Kakashi and Anko were helping at the other end and the real Naruto walked past Minato without a glance.

"What's happening out there?" Asked Orochimaru and folded his arms in front of him. Naruto was only too happy to answer, and didn't pay attention to him as Minato came up behind her.

"I've been digging people out from the civilian housing district close to the orphanage, but there were so many. It's really dark too, and people don't dare move around in the street, so I brought everyone who wanted to here, and a few who didn't want to move too because they were hurt." Naruto replied while glancing at the people sitting while resting their backs to the wall and the medics trying to get to everyone who needed assistance.

"Good. What about injuries?" Minato asked.

Naruto shifted a step away from him before answering. Orochimaru following her body language with a glint of interest.

The Snake Sannin was only too happy to point out what a disappointing father Minato was. He had liked to remind Minato of that fact ever since he'd been given Naruto's cover story four years ago along with Jiraiya and Tsunade.

"Basically a lot of minor injuries, but the most serious ones are already being looked at by medics. I'm going out again, but I was told to wait for you by Genma. He said I needed to give you a report, but the thing is; I'm not on duty. I just went to help. I think the worst is over though..." Naruto explained with a worried glance at the injured man being hurried past them. His leg was twisted in an unnatural angle, and even Minato felt a flinch at how painful that had to be.

"It is." Said Shikaku and came up next to Minato. He was dripping a fresh batch of water everywhere and Minato wondered if he should even bother with a raincoat at all when he went outside. "I was where Naruto was helping, my clan are already out scouting, and the Inuzuka clan has all their dogs out looking for people along with the Aburame. Though the Aburame is reluctant about letting more of their bugs out in such a strong wind. Even some of theirs can't stand against this weather. The Hyūga is looking through the collapsed buildings, and the Uchiha police force is keeping the evacuated people inside the mountain safe. I'm just glad so many were evacuated.
early..." He said and sighed heavily. "You should go home, Naruto-chan. The backup shift has been called in for duty and you've already made a lot of us look bad." He chuckled a bit at the end and glanced around the hall.

"I can help! It's no problem, dattebayo." Naruto protested, turning towards the Nara clan head with big blue eyes. Minato remembered Kushina with a pang, and instinctively shifted from foot to foot. Orochimaru tilted his head, his small smile growing the more uncomfortable Minato got.

"We will need fresh minds tomorrow, Naruto. Go home and come back tomorrow morning when the night shift is exhausted." Orochimaru ordered without room for argument.

Naruto frowned and glanced sideways back at her sensei. Or was it enemy? Minato wondered how she overlapped the two in her head. One had taken her best friend and brother figure away from Konoha and killed the man that was like her grandfather, the other had protected her and her friends through a war. It had to be an emotional conflict, and Minato could easily sympathize with the confusion.

"I can't. A horse carriage flew through our living room wall. Our plan B was to crash at Kakashi's place, but then a lamp post destroyed his living room. So our plan C is to help." She informed them in an annoyed tone.

"A horse carriage? So that's where it went..." Muttered Shikaku and looked exasperated up at the ceiling.

"It was yours?" Naruto asked aghast.

Shikaku shook his head. "No, but a client stayed in the village to ride out the storm and we parked it on our land to secured it, though it flew away despite being chained down." Shikaku explained with an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry about your home. You and the others could go to our place if you want. It could be your plan D." Shikaku suggested with a grin.

It was at that moment two others entered the conversation, and Kakashi and Anko stepped up next to Naruto. Both of them looking like they'd been bathing in mud. "Nah, I think we'll visit Shisui first, but thanks for the offer." Anko said with a polite nod to Shikaku.

"Really?" Asked Naruto.

Anko nodded and tried to remove some of her muddy bangs out of her face, it only gave her a new smudge of grime on her nose, but she didn't seem to care. "Yeah, we were told to go home too. Everyone wants to help, and most of the damage was to the civilian resident which is being handled. The thing is we need people in the morning too, so we'll come back then. Come on, I'm sooo tired. Let's go bother Shisui instead."

Naruto jogged up on the front porch with Anko and Kakashi close behind. She shielded the wind from her face with her hand, while keeping a firm grip on their storage scroll. Her hands were freezing, but hurriedly Naruto started knocking hard on the wooden door, hoping desperately someone was home while ignoring the sting in her knuckles.

The lights were out, but so was every other house in almost all of Konoha.

She continued knocking just to make sure that it was heard over the roaring storm around them. Kakashi and Anko was standing right behind her, both trying to get as close to the wall as possible to shield away from the freezing rain.
The door opened after a few minutes, and Shisui looked out clad in a tightly wrapped morning robe. "Wha-" He stopped as he glanced confused from each person in turn, noting their drenched state and dirty clothes from digging for people.

"A horse carriage crashed through our wall so we went to Kakashi's apartment, but then a lamp post flew through his window. Can we stay here tonight? Please?" Asked Naruto hopefully.

"A horse carriage?" Asked Shisui puzzled.

Naruto nodded in over exaggerated sadness. "Yeah… From what we've found out it flew from the Nara forest across town and into our flat. Our whole living room is filled with roof tiles, planks, bricks and water."

"Can we come in? It's freezing out here!" Anko complained irritated.

Shisui looked like he was still deciding if Naruto was joking or not, but stepped aside anyway. "Sure, come in." He offered and let the three come into the warmth.

"Thank you." Kakashi murmured with a nod to Shisui.

"No problem, but I should warn you that you're not our first refugees for the night." He replied and gestured towards the wall on his right. The wall that separated the hallway and their living room.

Shisui walked a few steps back and picked up some towels from a chair, Naruto knew they didn't usually store towels in the hallway, and suspected they too must have struggled with some flooding even here.

Shisui handed Anko and Kakashi a towel each, and then dunked the last one over Naruto's head. Naruto growled as he roughed up her hair with the towel, and when she snatched it away from her head Shisui chuckled.

Hurriedly they all dried off the best they could while Shisui leaned against the wall patiently, the only sound he made was a small snicker when Naruto fished out a chunk of mud from her hair. "I would have offered you all a shower, but we've closed up the pipes in case the plumbing floods too. We do not want any sewer waste in the house." Shisui explained apologetically.

"Understandable." Kakashi agreed while a worried look came over his face. Probably hoping someone had done the same in their building.

Naruto got tired of finding mud everywhere, and with a huff threw the towel towards Shisui who snapped it from the air automatically. Without a word she walked back outside, the other three looking confused after her as she stepped back onto the porch. A water jutsu later and Naruto trampled back in dripping wet and snapped the towel from Shisui to start drying anew.

A minute later someone called out from the other room. "Where did you go Shisui? Who was at the door?" Asked a deep voice that sounded like Kagami from the other room. Shisui waved at them to follow him, and together they walked through the hallway and into the living room. Naruto coming in last while still trying to towel off the worst of the water.

A small group of people were already sitting around the room, and Naruto's eyes widened as she recognized them.

"A horse carriage knocked down the girl's apartment wall, and a lamp post came through Kakashi's window. They have sleeping gear with them, but it's alright that they stay the night, right dad?" Asked Shisui and gestured towards the soaked teenagers behind him.
"A horse carriage?" Asked the woman sitting next to Kagami on the couch. Uchiha Mikoto.

Itachi stood by the window, and on Mikoto's lap was a sleepy child who was trying to blink out the sleep from his eyes.

Sasuke.

"Yeah… We have no idea how it made its way to the fifth floor, but it did." Anko explained and looked out of the window.

"Our roof was blown off, and we came her half an hour ago. It's leaking water everywhere, so we needed to sleep somewhere else." Explained Mikoto as Sasuke slid off her lap and onto the floor. His cheeks were heating up, and it was probably because Naruto had yet to stop staring at him.

"I'm sorry. Hopefully this storm will pass soon." Kakashi said a little awkwardly, his one good eye looking at the floor instead of the Uchiha. He was uncomfortable being around so many people with the Sharingan. It was the occupational hazard of being gifted a Sharingan himself.

"We're a full house tonight it seems. Anything I can get you? You look cold and wet. We have no electricity, but we lit up the fireplace to make tea. Do you want any?" Asked Kagami friendly, smiling while he got to his feet.

First then did Naruto take notice of fire running right next to them, and then the relief of warmth that seeped into her skin. She still found the absurdly small kid inching closer to Itachi a lot more fascinating though. It felt like her brain had stopped. This was hardly the first time she'd seen someone in their younger bodies. Both Anko and Kakashi had been a shock, but this was even worse.

It was Sasuke.

And he looked adorable, which was just wrong...

"A cup of tea would be wonderful, Kagami-san." Answered Anko because Naruto had yet to find her voice.

"Are you alright?"

Naruto hadn't realized she was the one being addressed, and didn't look away from Sasuke before a hand grabbed her shoulder. Even then her eyes only lifted from the child for a second to see quickly who was touching her.

Shisui looked down at her with a confused expression. "Um… Yeah! Sorry, I guess I'm… tired. Or something. Thanks for letting us stay." Naruto said and smiled on autopilot before looking back at the child with Sasuke's appearance except so much cuter.

Shisui didn't look convinced but let the matter drop. "That's my cousin. His name is Uchiha Sasuke." He explained and gestured to the boy a bit freaked out by Naruto's staring. "You never met him before have you? Just Itachi?"

"Oh… yes. Right… No… I mean; I haven't." Naruto said, shifting through words to answer without managing to decide.

"Okay?" Shisui sounded confused, but Naruto doubted he was anywhere near as confused as she was. "Well, he's Itachi's younger brother. I mention him in my letter remember?" Shisui answered with some humour, trying to make light of Naruto's unusual behaviour.
Sasuke had made his way to his brother and was holding on to the hem of Itachi’s shirt while looking shyly from person to person. It was absurd seeing him act like a normal kid.

"Sasuke, you remember Anko-chan, right? The man is Hatake Kakashi-san and the blonde one is Uzumaki Naruto-san." Itachi explained with a fond smile to his brother.

Sasuke nodded and waved shyly.

Naruto shook her head in an attempt to get her brain cells to start up. Maybe if they did she would act like a normal human being again.

"Hey there." she said with a small wave back towards Sasuke. "I left when your mum was still pregnant with you... You've grown so much, Sasuke." Naruto said and bent down, holding out her hand for him to shake.

Sasuke looked at it suspiciously for a moment before turning to his brother for an answer. Itachi nodded, and Sasuke finally took her hand and shook it. A small smile on his lips.

"How old are you now? Four?" Asked Naruto. Wondering how all her other friends had to look like at the moment. Naruto hoped she didn't get a mental breakdown from seeing them too, if not all the clans in Konoha would have some serious doubt about her mental stability by the time she'd seen them all.

"Yes, I turned four this summer." Sasuke answered with a tone of pride.

"Cool, you know I met Itachi for the first time when he was four years old too." Naruto shared and looked up at Itachi.

"Itachi-nii was four?" Asked Sasuke astonished. As if that was unheard of.

Naruto chuckled. "Yeah, and I met your cousin Shisui when we were six."

"Are you and Shisui the same age?" Sasuke asked with a head tilt, letting go of Itachi's shirt and taking a step closer to Naruto.

"We were on the same genin team." Naruto replied and smiled.

Sasuke was adorable! It was completely wrong, but also so refreshing to see him like a normal curious kid. A sweet one in fact.

"Really? What rank are you now? Ni-san is chūnin!" He said seriously and pointed at Itachi standing less then a step away from them.

"I'm Chūnin too." Naruto answered.

"Cool. Why haven't I seen you before then? Shisui says Anko-baka was on his genin team too, and I've seen her before, but not you."

Anko huffed and folded her arms, and from the couch Mikoto looked apologetic.

"Naruto-san was travelling outside the village for years, Otouto. So she couldn't come by." Itachi explained kindly. It was hard to see who adored the other more. Sasuke would look at Itachi with admiration while Itachi moved around Sasuke like a guard dog.

"Hey Sasuke, do you want a gift?" Naruto asked curiously, and sat down on her knees, leaving them on eye level when Sasuke stood straight.
This was so absurd... Of all the thing to get to her. It was like the time she couldn't afford Ichiraku ramen all over again. But instead of wanting to cry Naruto just wanted her brain to start functioning properly again.

Sasuke nodded, a wide grin appearing on his face. Naruto smiled secretive, and put two fists out into the air. "Pick a fist, Sasuke. If you get the correct one there will be a treat in it for you."

Sasuke looked between her two hands, his brow furrowing while he concentrated on which hand to pick. "Um... that one!" He said eventually and pointed to Naruto's right fist. Naruto turned her palm up and summoned a tomato from her fridge back home and into her hand. She had nailed the technique after four months of pestering from Tsunade.

Sasuke's eyes widened in shock as smoke erupted from Naruto's hand, but smiled widely when a perfect tomato became visible. Naruto offered it to him gladly.

"Whoa! That was so cool!" He exclaimed and sniffed the tomato. He peeked at Itachi again, who simple smiled back, which Sasuke took as confirmation that the tomato was alright to eat.

Anko stepped up next to Naruto and roughed up her hair a bit more harshly than necessary. "Nice. I specifically asked you to bring me back a souvenir, Naru, and then the brat gets a gift instead." She said with a roll of her eyes.

That seemed to make Sasuke even happier, at least if the smug grin on his face was any indication.

Before any more could be said the door opened in the hallway without a knock, and confused Shisui disappeared from the group. Leaving the six in an awkward silence. Well, not all of them noticed, because Sasuke was looking up at Naruto with hope shining in his black eyes. His tomato already eaten up and probably expecting another one.

Naruto was pretty sure the old Sasuke had never looked at her that way. Man, the Uchiha massacre must have given him a completely different personality. The expression made her almost wonder if it was the same child. Was it possible this wasn't Sasuke?

There were footsteps coming towards them from the hallway, and the sliding door to the living room opened up again. Uchiha Fugaku - looking just as wet as Naruto felt - came in followed by his nephew.

"Oh, you're off duty already?" Asked Mikoto surprised.

Fugaku nodded while Kagami had finished with the tea. "Yes. The worst of the storm has passed and Yoshiro-san is in charge for the rest of the night. I'll go back at seven and organise the cleanup." He told his wife and handed his wet coat to Shisui. Without a word he put the coat up to dry by the fireplace while Fugaku turned towards the outsiders. Because that's definitely what Naruto felt they were, despite having been over for dinner more times than she could count the house suddenly felt very different with the additional Uchiha present.

"It's been a while since I've seen you Naruto-san. Welcome back to Konoha." Fugaku said politely and Naruto shook his hand a bit stiffly.

"Hello..." Naruto said, before hurriedly adding as an afterthought. "-Uchiha-dono."

Shisui's eyes widened, and Anko actually coughed from the corner of the room at Naruto's use of honorific.

She really had to be out of it, Naruto decided. Hopefully she could go to sleep soon and get her head
back on her shoulders.

Fugaku let go and looked over at Anko and Shisui's reaction. "Kagami-san told me you've perfected the Hokage-sama rasengan technique with the help of senjutsu. Is that true?"

Naruto only nodded, taking an awkward step back while Itachi looked curiously at her. "Most impressive." Fugaku mused and studied her for a moment. Naruto had to snap out of this soon, she was acting like some crazy person thanks to Sasuke's presence.

"You're an Uzumaki of course, and the clan was known for their chakra reserves and long life spans. I wondered why Hokage-sama didn't ask you to take part of the Hiraishin training as he did Shisui. The Uzumaki had additivity for fuinjutsu after all. Did you learn anything while travelling with Jiraiya-dono?"

"Um… I learned a lot of things, but we didn't focus on fuinjutsu." Naruto replied, finding she could access her voice a bit easier now than earlier. Fugaku was a brisk man with an air of authority about him, and the whirling thoughts inside her head was making it difficult to focus.

"You seem much more calm than Kushina-san was at least." Added Fugaku and turned away from Naruto. Her mouth opened in shock as she heard the relieved note in Fugaku's voice. It sounded like he'd just insulted Kushina!

"Hey! Kushina was the best, dattebayo!" Naruto burst out at once, so angry she wasn't sure where it had come from. Shisui's shoulders tensed as he glanced nervously between Naruto and his uncle, while Anko was starting to grin widely.

"I see." Fugaku replied monotonously, his eyes speculative as he looked her up and down. "You have a similar verbal tick as she did." He mused, and his eyes travelled from her face to her hair, which was a shade darker than normal thanks to the water. "But you look a lot like Hokage-sama… How old are you again?"

"She's the same age as me, uncle, and Naruto was born outside the village. She came here when she was six." Shisui interrupted at once, stepping in between them and holding up a glass of tea for his uncle.

Fugaku took it automatically, and Naruto used the distraction to move next to Anko and away from the conversation. Mentally she thanked Shisui for interrupting before she got interrogated by the Uchiha clan head. "I'm so glad I didn't go to Kato's place instead. You're acting like a moron, Naru." Anko whispered quietly.

Naruto scowled and leaned her head against the wall. Leaving Anko without a reply.

"So!" Said Kagami and clapped his hands together, drawing everyone's attention towards him. "We need to organize the sleeping arrangements. Fugaku and Mikoto is taking Shisui's room, and our guest room is missing a patch of the ceiling. The boys were planning on camping here in the living room for the night. Or at least what's left of it..." Kagami said and picked up the pot to pour tea into the remaining cups on the table.

"We'll be fine wherever there is space, Uchiha-san. We don't wish to be more of a burden than we already are." Said Kakashi, who Naruto had partly forgotten was still with them.

"Why don't you three sleep with the boys here in the living room? There is plenty of space here and it'll be warm since the fire is going." Kagami suggested.

"That's fine. We're just happy to not sleep in a tent tonight. We might have woken up in Suna with
wind like this." Anko said with a wry smile and accepted her cup from Kagami.

Kagami chuckled at her joke while handing Naruto her own tea. She noticed that Kakashi and Shisui had sat down on the couch with Anko following after. Leaving only a space next to Itachi and Sasuke for herself. So she sat down next to the fireplace instead. Using the excuse to warm up as reason to not sit next to the two Uchiha.

Kagami took the spot instead once he had offered tea to everyone, and another awkward silence overtook them.

"So… Bad storm. This house hasn't seen this much activity in a while." Kagami said eventually.

"No, I would think not." Fugaku said unhelpfully. Naruto shifted on the hard floor, looking into the fire while she tried to gather her thoughts.

She was currently making small talk with a boy she knew went through with a massacre - the reason behind which was still uncertain. A man who might have planned a coup, while showing tricks to a boy who had sworn to destroy Konoha and once been her best friend.

Naruto peeked at Kagami and Shisui. Had Itachi killed them? For whatever reason, justified or not, had he killed them? How could he have killed them. How could anyone…

Her cheeks heated up, her inner turmoil blaring up again. Maybe she really was tired, Naruto usually had better control over herself than this.

"Why don't you tell us about that horse carriage, Anko?" Asked Kakashi, trying to lighten the atmosphere in the room. Anko blinked once, before jumping at the topic with vigour.

For the third time Naruto tried to fall asleep. It was close to one in the morning and the grownups had gone up to their respective bedrooms.

Naruto had ended up in between her two genin teammates. Opposite them lay Sasuke, Itachi and Kakashi.

Sasuke was the only one to actually have fallen asleep. He'd been slumbering on the couch before his parents had gone to bed, and Itachi had carried him over when it was time to sleep. The rest however were listening to the rain outside and wondering if the wind would drag the roof off this building too. At least they slept on the first floor. It would be the grownups who would get a rude awakening if the storm affected the house. Luckily Shisui's house was higher up in the terrain, so it would be one of the last houses to be flooded.

"So… Want to hear who I met outside in the storm?" Asked Kakashi in a bored voice.

There was a silence, before Anko replied in an annoyed tone. "Not really." Which caused Naruto to chuckle.

Sasuke shifted in his sleep, and suddenly Kakashi tensed. "You know what? Why don't I tell you tomorrow instead. It's late."

"Who did you meet in the storm?" Asked Naruto curious,

Kakashi peeked over at her, and then back to Sasuke for some reason, before he shook his head. "Forget it. I don't want to wake him up."
"Sasuke is a heavy sleeper." Itachi whispered soothingly. Rolling over on his stomach and resting his head on his folded arms in front of him. "As long as we whisper it should be fine."

"I know one thing I want to know." Anko said and copied Itachi to roll over on her stomach. "Why did Sasuke freak you out Naru?"

Naruto turned her head to look at Anko with disapproval. That was not something you should say while in hearing range of neither the person in question nor his overbearing brother. "I didn't freak out..." Naruto answered stubbornly. Not feeling a need to get into the subject while her brain was so groggy.

"You actually sort of did. You looked pale as a sheet. I thought you were sick or something, and then you used a respectful suffix with Uncle." Shisui whispered confused before he looked thoughtful. Next moment he reached out a hand and placed it Naruto's forehead.

Annoyed she leaned away. "I'm not sick, Shisui. I never get sick."

"You were respectful." Shisui whispered slowly, as if to punctuate just how messed up that was. "To Fugaku." His tone was horrified, which caused Naruto to grin. It had almost been worth acting so out of character just to mess with her friends.

"Shisui..." Itachi said disapprovingly, and Naruto felt the smile that had formed on her lips be erased without a trace.

Itachi was terrifyingly present. That was always what had put him in a different category than most others. Few people had such a presence when they walked into a room. But Itachi did. Even at his current age. The presence wasn't as looming at this point in time, it was more searching and inquisitor, but unmistakably there.

"Sorry, Itachi. I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I just mean uncle Fugaku is very strict, and Naruto is very... not strict." Shisui said, sending Naruto an apologetic smile.

"I know what you meant." Itachi said evenly. His voice a little breathy from exhaling while he talked.

"So why did you react like that to my little brother, Naruto?" Itachi asked, his eyes finding hers.

"I... It was just... I'm tired. And he is so small." Naruto replied, feeling a burn on her face at the lame excuse.

"You're a bad liar." Itachi answered.

"I'm not!" Naruto replied, knowing she had more than enough experience to back up the claim.

"Shhhhh!" Hissed Anko and Shisui, glaring at Naruto.

"Sorry." She mumbled abashed. "He just reminds me of... someone."

"Sasuke? He's a kid. How could he remind you of someone?" Shisui asked and turned towards her.

"He just did... Someone conflicted that I knew a long time ago. Before I met any of you guys." Naruto explained. Hoping it would be enough to satisfy their curiosity.

"This 'someone' doesn't sound like a good person." Itachi concluded, his tone offended.

"He was though. But bad things changed him." Naruto answered, watching the wooden ceiling
without really seeing.

No one replied to her words, but she felt Anko look away from her and the others didn't try to talk to her again that night.

The next day only saw a light drizzle. It was still windy and cold, but the morning light had calmed the storm and everyone went out to help with the cleanup. Mikoto had made them all breakfast with the help of a grumpy Sasuke who was too tired to do much more than whine. The little boy didn’t have the chance to sleep long though, they'd all crashed in the living room, and when Fugaku came bustling downstairs to get to work on time he'd woken everyone else too.

Naruto had woken up from the sound of footsteps, and found Shisui's head on her stomach while his pillow had somehow travelled to the other end of the room. It seemed he was still a restless sleeper… After rudely pushing him off and over onto Anko Naruto got up. Her roommate cursed drowsily and pushed Shisui hard off her chest and back onto the floor where he finally woke up with a grunt.

After a nostalgic bickering happened between the three old teammates Mikoto had already served breakfast, and they all gulped it down before leaving to help out. They were actually a bit behind schedule because of how late it was before they went to sleep the previous night.

It was weird walking through the street in daylight and see the destruction properly. In areas you could walk with water up to your hips, and there were random objects in the weirdest of locations. At one point they walked past half a couch standing on top of a water tank.

Luckily a lot had been done throughout the night, and in areas it was almost completely cleaned up.

They arrived at the Hokage building where they needed to find out where they were needed most. It was chaos there, and it seemed the ones organizing had decided to put up a desk outside for the many ninjas coming in to help out. Naruto spotted Genma and Hayate a few people ahead in the line next to them, but they settled for a wave while they waited.

Rin was still helping at the hospital and she didn't have the time to spare to help outside too. So team Kasai plus Anko decided to work together with whatever task they were given. As the que moved forward they got a glimpse of who was in charge. Fugaku must have bolted fast, because he was already barking orders at a woman who had just handed something over, and apparently she should have delivered it somewhere else and was currently wasting his time.

Next to him Shikaku and Orochimaru were also amongst the ones organizing this chaos, and as it was finally their turn they ended up talking to the Nara. "Good morning." Grunted Shikaku as they arrived. He scribbled something on his notepad before pointing towards North-East. "We need more people outside the village. The roads are flooded and a lot of trees are blocking the road. It needs to be cleared up for civilians to access the village again. You four can help with that, right?" He asked without any preamble.

"Sure." Kakashi replied with agreeing nods from the other three.

"And we're getting the horse carriage out of your apartment as we speak." Shikaku added with a glance towards Naruto.

She grinned widely. "Really?"

"Yes, my wife is over there because the client wanted the pieces back. Hoping to restore some of it. Again; we're really sorry this happened. We believed it was properly secured, but we didn't know how bad the weather would get." Shikaku mumbled tiredly.
Naruto waved it off, it wasn’t like anyone could predict the weather, while Anko only sighed at the reminder of the state of their home. Shisui was actually surprised. He’d been half suspecting Naruto had been exaggerating about the horse carriage.

"Are there any more casualties?" Asked Kakashi.

"There have been five so far. All civilians." Shikaku answered while turning towards the desk behind him where a steaming mug waited for him. A sip later he fished up a map and started showing them the area he wanted them to clear. It was a bit outside the village, and Naruto expected it would take a while to clear up the mess Shikaku had described in other areas.

As they were about to leave Minato turned up, and Shikaku immediately handed the Hokage a bunch of scrolls. From Minato’s expression Naruto suspected them to be reports.

As they were about to leave Minato called out to Kakashi. "Wait a moment, Kakashi."

The oldest of them turned around and backtracked to the desk while the others waited behind. The two exchanged a few words before Kakashi returned to the group and Minato disappeared with his stack of scrolls.

Sighing Naruto followed after Kakashi. Minato hadn’t even glanced her way.

Naruto, Kakashi, Shisui and Anko used an hour to get to their designated area, and found the forest half ripped out from the roots.

They quickly realized that if anyone wanted passage from that direction they would have a very tough time of it if they weren’t ninja. The client that had lost their horse carriage wouldn’t have been able to leave even if it had still been intact.

Kakashi had brought along his ninken for the day. It was adequate training for the two puppies seeing as they were so close to the village and the risk of anything happening was minimal.

They split up to cover more ground, and Kakashi made sure he had Bull and Akino so Pakkun could get some rest after looking after them all night. The pug was working with Anko today, and when they divided into two groups Shisui tagged along with the better ninken while Naruto joined Kakashi and laughed at the spectacle Akino was making.

The two puppies had never been this far outside the village, and found it amazing how fun it was to run around and sniff every available surface.

Kakashi mostly ignored them in the beginning. They had a task to get through, and while the ninken was supposed to look for any possible victims of the storm Kakashi quickly realized that was far above Akino’s skill level.

Kakashi and Naruto first decided to get the fallen trees out of the road. There was still severe flooding on the ground, so until the water level went down again the road wasn’t very usable, but at least it was better than before.

Shisui, Anko and Pakkun had gone ahead to look for travelers who’d tried to make it to the village during the storm. Since the rest would come up the road later with the two younger ninkens they decided to travel off the road in case someone had wandered into the forest.

Though Anko understood it was necessary she still found it incredibly dull. They used the trees to stay out of the water and travelled mostly in silence. The only thing to be heard was the constant
They were several hours out of Konoha when Pakkun noticed something strange and halted. "I smell... something."

"Isn't that your job?" Anko asked pointedly. Pakkun looked up with a puzzled look.

"I don't think I've smelled this before. It's a light fume coming from the ground, and I can hear water falling close by."

Anko was confused for a moment, and then stood up from the branch she'd been sitting on. "What do you mean with water falling? There's water everywhere."

"A dripping sound. One with a slight echo." Pakkun replied with a shrug. He pointed a paw to his right. "It's coming from that direction. I'd say it was water dripping onto concrete, but... I didn't think there was anything out here except for a forest."

"There isn't." Anko replied with a tilt of her head. "What exactly do you smell?"

"It's... dusty?" Pakkun explained uncertainly. "Or maybe heavy? I'm not sure. I can't place it."

"It's not gas is it?" Anko checked, a bit weary now as she looked between the trees.

"I don't think so." Pakkun answered, but his ears were one end and he had yet to stop sniffing during the explanation.

"Good, but we should probably check it out." Shisui said, and Anko looked down and found him looking up at them from the ground. He'd been away for five minutes and looked like he'd fallen into the water. His arms rested on his hips and there was a tired air around him.

"Should we get the rest?" Asked Anko and jumped down from the branch with Pakkun following after. He landed on her shoulder and Anko stumbled forwards at the unexpected weight. Shisui caught her shoulder in time to steady her.

"Naruto and Kakashi went in the opposite direction, and I don't think we should bring Akino. That ninken is a mess. It might just be something that was blown out here during yesterday's storm. In fact I found a bookshelf not far away from here." Shisui replied with a roll of his eyes.

Pakkun jumped down from Anko's shoulder and onto the water filled ground. His nose up in the air instead of towards the earth.

Anko and her old teammate followed the ninken quietly. It didn't take Pakkun long before he stopped, looking from side to side, and by now Anko could hear the dripping sound too.

"Where is it coming from?" Asked Shisui confused. The area had less water than anywhere else in the forest, which had been a relief if it wasn't for the mystery of where the dripping came from.

"I think it's underneath us." Mused Pakkun. He touched the ground with his paw a few times, and without warning he jumped up into the air. When he landed a weird sound hit their ears. Not the soft thud of grass and mud, but something hard.

"Wait... Is there something underneath this?" Asked Shisui, and stomped his foot. The ground gave off the same sound again. The Uchiha bent down curiously and touched the mud with narrowed eyes. They morphed into the Sharingan as he scouted the area.
Anko didn't really feel like digging around in the mud, but she didn't see a way out of it if Pakkun and Shisui's suspicion was right. "I think it is..." Muttered Pakkun confused. "The smell is coming from somewhere around here."

While Shisui continued examine the area Pakkun started searching for the source of the smell, leaving Anko with little to do but look around for something Shisui might miss. Which she doubted he would. The boy had always been annoyingly observant.

"Hey, I think it's a pipe." Pakkun said quietly five minutes later, pointing to a batch of grass that hadn't been drowned in the flooding. Pakkun removed some of the grass and Anko wasn't sure what she was looking at. It was a black hole in the ground? At least it was clear where the dripping came from. A tree stood close to the hole, and water dripped down from the leaves and into the hole. The echo came up clearly.

Shisui moved away. His brow furrowed while he looked around. "Stay here and keep quiet. I just need to check something." He whispered, a hand coming to Anko's shoulder to keep her in place. Quietly he walked past the tree and deeper into the forest while the remaining two looked after him.

Anko waited and waited.

Then she waited some more.

Shisui had been gone for an hour while she and Pakkun stayed put. Only looking around in case they'd missed something earlier. She was reaching her limit and considered following him when Pakkun's ears twitched, and his voice broke her plan of action. "Someone is coming."

Anko picked up Pakkun and soundlessly slipped deeper into the forest, keeping up in the trees in hopes of staying safely out of sight. Whoever they were came from a different direction than Shisui had left, and she squinted to see who it was through the leaves.

It was two people who hurried through the area and disappeared in the direction Shisui had left.

Anko had barely caught a glimpse and couldn't help wonder who they could be. There might not be a storm anymore, but the conditions out here were far from ideal, so the people had to have a destination in mind.

"Stop doing that! You're supposed to sniff for clues, not roll around in mud!" Kakashi said exasperated, watching as Akino rolled around in the puddle happily and barked in reply.

Naruto was keeping in her laugh out of solidarity to Kakashi as the dog came up again. His fur which was usually beige and white was now almost black from the dirt.

"Look at Bull, that's how you're supposed to search for clues." Kakashi continued and pointed exasperated towards the big black dog sniffing around a tree. But as Kakashi turned his back to shout at Akino some more Bull raised his leg up to pee. Naruto chuckled silently and shook her head.

Akino strolled out of the mud and over to Kakashi, where he then shook off all the water eagerly, spraying mud, water and dirt all over his summoner before prancing over to the tree to sniff the pee Bull had just left behind.

Kakashi sighed. "I give up."

"They are a handful aren't they?" Naruto mused, which only gave an eye roll on reply.
"You haven't seen the half of it." Kakashi mumbled with a shake of his head. "They're impossible. Pakkun was never this difficult. Akino will be the death of me, and he's starting to affect Bull. I wish it was the other way around."

"Oh, lighten up. I'm sure with a bit of time and patience Akino will be alright." Naruto said, not sure if she actually believed her own words as the ninken started barking at a bird up in the tree. Bull looked at Akino for a moment, judging if the action was alright or not, before he started a barking duet with the smaller puppy.

The frustration was palpable in the air, but Kakashi seemed to think it a lost cause, because next moment he sat down over a tree they'd just dragged out of the road. Naruto strolled over and sat down next to him, watching as Akino and Bull tried to scare the small song bird up in the tree. They were not succeeding, because the bird only looked curiously down without showing any sign of budging.

"I actually wanted to talk to you, but things have been a bit hectic because of the storm." Kakashi said eventually. Naruto turned curiously towards him, but Kakashi was still watching his ninken instead of her. "You probably want to know I saw Akiko-chan last night."

Naruto froze and immediately forget about the two ninken who had given up on the bird and was now cooperating on chasing Akino's tail. "What? You saw her? You really, really saw her?"

Kakashi nodded seriously. "Yes. She was completely fine, and she wanted me to apologize on her behalf for forgetting to show up for lunch. She told me she had been working."

"Where is she now then? I need to speak with her!" Naruto exclaimed.

"I dropped her off at the shelter. She wasn't injured so I didn't see the point of dragging her to the hospital, and I'm imagining she went home after the storm passed."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?!" Naruto shrieked.

Her teammate gave her an "are-you-kidding-me" look. Naruto still expected an answer though, and Kakashi realized he actually needed to word his reasoning. "When was I supposed to tell you this? In front of the Uchiha toddler last night? At the hospital with a bunch of sick people? Or in front of the Uchiha clan head? I knew how you'd react, and since Akiko isn't in any danger I waited to tell you so we could avoid making a similar scene as the other day on the street.'"

Naruto scowled and with a huff turned away from him, half wondering about heading back to the village right away to track down Akiko. Kakashi took a secure hold of her shoulder. "Don't even think about it. We have orders. Right now we need to clear the road more than you confronting your friend's life choices."

It was lucky he felt their approach, because it gave Shisui just enough time to flatten himself against the crack of the boulder and mask his chakra as much as he could when the two figures arrived into the flooded cave. Or was it actually a cave? This place was huge.

He bit his lip and wondered how much longer Anko would stay patient before she came after him. Shisui suspected it would be really bad if she did. It was also time for them to meet up with the other two, and the last thing Shisui wanted was for Naruto to come barging in here. They'd be discovered within a second. Naruto was talented in many things, but masking her chakra wasn't one of them. Kakashi and Anko would actually be preferable in that scenario.

Quietly he climbed up the boulder and peeked over the side, the sight that met him puzzled him too.
much. The new arrivals were covered from head to toe, so Shisui couldn't really tell who they were.

They were even wearing masks, though not the ANBU ones, but something closer to what Kakashi wore. There was a black cloth tied around their head and a mask similar to Kakashi's covering the rest, leaving only the eyes distinguishable. They wore plain robes in grey, and Shisui had absolutely no idea who they could be. He suspected one of them were a woman thanks to the shorter stature though.

At first he wondered if these guys were Root, but after a second thought he decided they couldn't be. Shisui had seen the masks of the newest division in the ANBU force. Their masks were different, but at least they were proper masks. These guys were just wearing an old fashion ninja mask.

When they continued deeper into the tunnel Shisui had to fight the sigh of relief. This was definitely something he had to mention to the Hokage. Though for all Shisui knew he'd stumbled across one of Konoha's secret bases. A badly guarded one.

"There you are. Shit, I thought you were another one of those masked people." Anko muttered and jumped down from a tree. Shisui shrugged and glanced back over his shoulder.

"You saw them too?" He asked simply.

Anko nodded and put her hands on her hips. "Yeah, I did. What were they doing here? And where did you go? You've been away for over an hour and it's been boring as hell."

"I was checking out the area. They came past the place I was scouting." Shisui replied vaguely just as Pakkun fell down from a tree and landed next to Anko.

Pakkun tilted his head curiously and asked what they'd both been wondering. "Anything shabby? Did you find out what this place is?"

Shisui hesitated for a moment, reluctance forming his mouth into a thin line. "Not really… It's a cave which I suspect leads to something underground. The two masked people went in there."

Anko's eyes widened. "Like a… secret base?"

Shisui nodded uncertainly. "I think so… but do not tell the other two. Not yet."

"Not even Kakashi?" Asked Pakkun curiously.

"If you could avoid it, then no." Shisui said sternly.

"Well… as long as he doesn't ask me directly it's not really lying is it?" Pakkun mused to himself.

Shisui gave a weak smiled and nodded. "It might be nothing, but we'll mention this to the Hokage and take it from there, okay?"

To be continued...
Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! The chapter was beta'd by AnjoRemix!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirty Four – Two Sides of the Same Story

"No matter what happens I will protect our... no, my village. I still believe that protecting the village is the best way to protect people, shinobi, and children...! Anyone who tries to harm it, whether they are my friends, siblings or my own children. I won't forgive them." - Senju Hashirama

Minato's brow furrowed at the newly acquired information.

Uchiha Shisui and Mitarashi Anko had stayed behind while his student and estranged daughter had left. They had returned from the cleanup, but clearly Anko and Shisui were more concerned about their discovery than any fallen trees on the road. He also agreed with Shisui about keeping this quiet. Naruto especially wasn't qualified for any type of infiltration into an unknown base. Potentially a hostile one at that. The girl was even more visible than Kushina had managed to be.

Their description didn't really fit with anything he knew about nor what he'd gotten from Naruto's memories. But if Shisui was right someone had made a base only a few hours away from Konoha without anyone finding out.

Minato sighed. This had to be Danzō… right? Orochimaru was always in the lab working on the research material Minato himself had approved of. He was researching a number of forbidden techniques, a few of the Uzumaki ones the most prominent at the moment. To satisfy the Sannin he needed to be working with extremes, and since no one was better suited than him Minato had allowed him some freedom. But Danzō… Was he satisfied with simply being in control of the new Root? The one that had to share all their missions with Minato himself? Had he acted out like Minato had feared he would? He certainly hoped not. Not to mention this reeked of someone with inside information. The location was too close to go under the radar without help from someone who knew the pathways and infrastructure of the area.

"Thanks for informing me. I'll look into the matter but while I do you are to keep quiet." Minato told the two with a pointed glance. "Understood?"

"Yes, Hokage-sama." Shisui replied while Anko nodded next to him.

"Pakkun knows of it too. Shisui told him to keep silent but he might inform Kakashi if he's asked directly." Anko added.

"Really?" Minato muttered, his lips thinning as he shot a quick glance out the window. "I would rather the information didn't go any further. I will deal with it if Kakashi finds out. You're dismissed."

The two teenagers left with a respectful bow and when the door shut Minato found himself staring at the handle a lot longer than necessary. His mind whirling with different suspicions to the point where he forgot to blink before his eyes watered up.

Blinking repeatedly he gathered his thoughts. Minato needed to investigate this right away. Maybe it was a new threat and not one Naruto had known about during her own time. She would have been four years old, how could she possibly have known of this if it happened? But to be sure he needed...
to keep watch over a few people while he kept surveillance over the newly discovered base. It looked like Jiraiya would have to take a break from his vacation, his espionage experience would come in handy within the village this time.

Naruto knocked repeatedly against the door. The brothel was half drowned from the storm, and there was more than enough people bustling around. Luckily no one had tried to stop her as Naruto found her way to Akiko's room. She heard footsteps on the other side of the door, and finally it opened the barest amount.

"Akiko! Where the hell have you been!?!" Naruto barked, having to restrain herself from tearing the door off its hinges. She could see half of Akiko's face from behind the ajar door. Her expression was stony and Naruto had never seen her so cold before.

"I was busy. I apologize for not meeting you, it was an honest mistake, but I was busy and it slipped my mind."

"I don't care about the lunch, I was worried! Where were you?"

Akiko eyes hardened. "That is private. Now, I have a lot to do, so can you just… leave?"

"No! You need to explain a few things first. Where did you go? You weren't in Konoha, or I would have found you." Naruto told her while contemplating if she should just storm into Akiko's room or to respect her boundaries.

"I was, you just didn't look in the right places, stop bothering me."

Naruto's eyes widened at the rude tone, and she growled as Akiko looked about to shut the door again. "Don't dismiss me. We are going to talk! Right now! You're lying, just tell me."

"No I'm not." Akiko snapped, and was about to close the door again, but Naruto's hand shot out and stopped it from closing completely. Naruto could feel the force Akiko used to shut her out, but she had no hope in hell of budging Naruto.

"We are not finished here. What the hell is going on? Why do you work here? Why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"Let it go, I want you to leave! My life has very little to do with you Naruto. You certainly don't tell me everything you do in your occupation, so why should I tell you the details of what I do?"

Naruto snarled in anger. "You told me you were a waitress! You lied to me!"

"I do wait on people. I serve drinks, but I just didn't tell you the rest of the job description." Akiko hissed from the other side of the door which she was still trying to shut. Naruto had placed her foot in the opening though, preventing it from closing.

"That doesn't make it okay, Akiko. I can help you, why didn't you?"

Akiko interrupted her before Naruto could finish. "I don't want your help! The only thing I want from you is to leave. So get out and stop prying into my business!"

Naruto gaped like a fish, staring towards the door in disbelief. Since when had Akiko been this angry? Why was she so angry with her? She was only trying to help! "Akiko-"

Naruto stopped talking as Akiko gave up trying to shut the door, and instead opened it wide. The
dark haired girl stood with one hand on the edge of the door handle and the other against the frame. She also looked more furious than Naruto had ever seen her. "Stop talking! I'm not your roommate anymore, and you have no right to come in here and demand answers! I'm not one of your ninja friends, I'm a civilian and I sure as hell don't answer to you. I don't need to explain anything, and I don't want you here. Just get the hell out!"

It was late by the time Naruto returned to Shisui's house. Anko had decided to stay at Kato's place, which had survived the storm a lot better than theirs, while Kakashi was staying with Rin at her parents' house.

Shisui's extended family had returned to their own home after their roof had been fixed during the day. Naruto guessed being the chief of the police force and a clan head allowed you to be first in line to get your roof repaired. Which left only Naruto unsure where to go, so Shisui had offered her to stay with them.

"How did it go?" Asked Shisui curiously the moment he opened the door and found his teammate at the doorstep. For some mysterious reason he hadn't wanted to join her while she confronted Akiko. Naruto shook her head dejectedly and walked in without a word. "Well?" He prodded while Naruto slipped out of her sandals.

"She didn't want to talk. She all but threw me out and told me I was prying." Naruto answered tiredly.

Shisui smiled apologetically and patted her on the shoulder. "It'll be fine. Just give her time. There must be a reason she kept it a secret and she might be embarrassed. Maybe she didn't want you to find out."

"But she was being so rude! It's not like her. Akiko could be stubborn and difficult, but she was never cold. That place isn't good for her. I need to get her out of there, dattebayo." Naruto muttered to herself. Already plotting different ways of getting her friend away from that brothel. Did the orphanage take back emancipated children? For some reason Naruto doubted Akiko would agree to that though. Though maybe Ichiraku needed another set of hands?

Shisui shook his head and followed Naruto into the kitchen. Kagami glanced up and smiled widely when he spotted them. "Good evening Naruto-chan, you have really good timing. We just finished dinner here so I hope you're hungry."

Naruto nodded but her thoughts were still with Akiko and the disastrous confrontation. Why couldn't Akiko just talk to her? Why was she being so damn difficult?

It had been a long day. Minato had only gotten an hour sleep the previous night by taking a nap in his office chair before he'd been woken up by his secretary, and it seemed he'd be busy for quite a few more days.

Though it wasn't like he had anywhere else to be. He'd sold the house he and Kushina had bought together, and now lived in a flat with nothing but a fridge with food and a shower to lure him home. He was of much more use at the office. Here he had a reason to stay. He didn't have that at home anymore.

As he heard footsteps from the hallway he raised his head. Hoping he didn't look as tired as he felt. The door opened to reveal his last appointment of the day, and the thought made him almost cheery despite the topic he was about to discuss.
"Good evening, Fugaku-san." Minato said politely, and the Uchiha head repeated the words back at him with a polite nod.

"I have a mission for you, but you're free to decline it if it's too impractical to complete or it affects the efficiency of the police force." Minato told the Uchiha with a serious tone. Fugaku's brow furrowed. It wasn't often he was called up for a mission. He could count on one hand how many missions he'd gone out on by the Hokage's request since the war ended. His responsibility was to the police force, and their interactions were mostly though report exchanges concerning how it was run or specific prisoners.

"How long do you estimate the duration of the mission?" Asked Fugaku, not able to deny his curiosity.

Minato hesitated for a moment, before he frowned. "A month, maybe even a bit more."

Fugaku considered it for a short moment. "I might be able to arrange it."

"If you do then it has to be kept under wraps. You will complete most of the mission while remaining within the village. It has to appear as if your schedule hasn't changed."

Fugaku's eyebrow raised in surprise. Well, that one was new. "Oh?"

Minato nodded gravely. "Do you accept?"

He thought about it for a moment. Inabi and Yoshino could handle the station if they worked together, and he could send a clone or have Kagami pretend to be him if he wanted to be seen at the station. "I accept." Fugaku answered assured.

Minato nodded, and if anything he looked a bit relieved. Fugaku felt like he was about to go on a mission he wasn't sure he wanted to be on though. "Good. When you leave this office you will go into the meeting room on the floor below. Your partner for this mission is waiting for you already. The two of you will take a twelve hour shift each and switch to cover the whole day. When off duty you are to go home and pretend you've been doing your normal chores whenever you're off. The mission is of an extremely sensitive nature, so you're not allowed to mention any details concerning this."

Fugaku nodded in understanding. "What is my task?"

"You're to spy on one of our own." Minato sighed. "Namely Orochimaru."

Fugaku was speechless. Orochimaru? Minato wanted him to spy on Orochimaru of the Sannin? This had to be serious if Minato wanted him to be supervised twenty four hours a day. What exactly was the suspicion to begin with?

"You can see why this is sensitive I imagine?" Minato said drily and stood up behind his desk and stretched his arms over his head tiredly. Fugaku had to admit he looked more tired than usual today.

Minato walked up to the window and peeked down towards the academy right below. "We have come across an unknown network close to Konoha, and I have a reason to fear Orochimaru's potential involvement. I don't have any evidence that Orochimaru has done anything wrong though. This mission is only a precaution, and I hope my fears are unfounded. Which they very well may be, however..."

Minato turned his body to face Fugaku. "Orochimaru is currently in the lab. You're to make sure he doesn't do anything not expected of him. He has a pretty regular time table, so it would be easy to see
if something is amiss." Minato picked up a scroll from the desk and handed it to Fugaku. "That is his schedule. What we consider suspicious behaviour is described at the end. Though he is allowed to leave the village, he shouldn't have any reason to. If he does you are not to stop him. You're to call for me instantly and follow him from a distance. Do not get caught Fugaku-san. Orochimaru is excellent, and I don't trust many to be able to handle this case."

Fugaku nodded, filing down the information in his head and wondering what else the scroll would tell him. "Understood. Who will I be working with?"

Minato's expression changed, a sheepish glint entering his eyes. "Well… since the task is spying on someone of Orochimaru's caliber I needed someone with particular abilities and the talent for this type of mission… Just like you really."

Fugaku wondered why Minato seemed a bit hesitant. "It's Hyūga Hizashi-san."

The whole village was demanding repairs these days, so Naruto and Anko couldn't expect to get their home back in order for weeks. Naruto had been offered to stay with Shisui and Kagami as long as she needed, which she appreciated more than she could express.

The idea of having to stay with Rin was a bit awkward. She had yet to even meet her parents, and it would be even worse if she somehow ended up with Anko and Kato. That was just asking for an upcoming homicide. Who the victim would be was a bit unclear though.

Living with the two Uchiha had been an adjustment at first though. By anyone else's standard living with either Anko or Jiraiya would be a challenge, but not for Naruto. Namely because she worked at the same energy level as the other two did. Shisui and Kagami did not run at that level though. Especially not in their own home. If Naruto was to describe them as anything then it would be… quiet.

They ate in silence, they did their chores in silence and they even talked quietly. It was an unspoken rule in that home to speak in a little over a whisper, and that was just not something Naruto was capable of.

Shisui was also constantly reminding her to put her sandals on the rack when she came inside, almost as much as he was reminding her to do her dishes. They were both really clean. Naruto always thought Anko was a bit too nagging, but clearly she hadn't been subjected to Shisui's slave driving. He even wanted her to keep her clothes folded! It was exhausting, but seeing as she was a guest in their house she relented to Shisui's ridiculous rules. Kagami was much more easy going, or maybe he was just sending his son to do all the nagging.

One thing Naruto could do better than them however, was to get up in the morning. Naruto quickly found out where Shisui got his sleeping pattern from too. Kagami was probably twice as sleepy as his son when Naruto woke them up in the morning. By the end of the first week she even had a ritual. First she knocked relentless on their door while asking loudly if they were up yet, and if that didn't work she'd barge inside and shout what the weather condition was that day.

Kagami jolt awake when Naruto did that. She suspected it was the unknown chakra signature that did it more than her volume, since she'd been just as loud out in the hallway, but for some reason going into his room always did the trick.

Shisui was another matter though. He was more than used to her chakra signature, and she'd woken him up two out of five days by dragging him by the feet out of bed. Naruto also did it for the kicks of seeing the shock on his face when he tumbled to the floor. It usually meant he was grumpy during
breakfast though, but at least he didn't run out five minutes before they were supposed to meet up for team practice while mixing up which sandal went on the right foot.

Shisui and Kagami were also a bit unsure of how to deal with Naruto's hyper mood no matter what time of day it was, her loud indoor volume and her habit of forgetting to clean up after herself. It was about eight days into her stay Kagami took her aside while Shisui was on his ANBU shift to talk to her.

"I know you have had a… irregular childhood and that you weren't explained some things. So I thought I could give you a few advise that might make things… easier… on a daily basis." Kagami started, and then pointed to her black sweater hanging over the kitchen chair. "How long is it since you washed that, Naruto-chan?"

Naruto turned around, looking at the sweater while thinking back. "Um… a week ago? Right before I came here."

"Ah, right… You see, with your level of activity you sweat a lot, and going a week without washing your clothes when you use them every day is not hygienic."

Naruto pursed her lips. She'd heard something like this before too. For some reason she was picturing Iruka right now. "Hygienic?"

Kagami nodded. "Yes. If you have an open wound for example, and then wear dirty clothes you can get an infection. You can pick up bacteria and then you can get sick."

"But I never get sick, dattebayo." Naruto pointed out.

Kagami smiled fleetingly and nodded in understanding. "I know… Shisui told me, but by skipping the normal steps you can also make others sick."

Naruto's eyes widened in horror. "Really? Is that why Anko is so strict about these things?"

"Probably. It is why it's important to wash your clothes, your towels and your sheet regularly. We are outside almost constantly while on duty, and to keep things clean is a very efficient way to prevent bacteria from spreading. It's why people wear a mask if they're sick so to not make others sick. It's the same with washing up your plates after dinner, or washing your clothes after training," Kagami told her patiently.

"Huh… I guess that makes sense." She replied in dawning realization. This also fitted with the medical crap Rin had been pestering her about a few years ago.

Kagami smiled and patted her shoulder. "I just wanted to make sure you were informed. I know you grew up in the orphanage and that you've lived by yourself from a very young age."

"I didn't though, I live with Anko." Naruto pointed out.

Kagami's smile turned pained, but he held his mask admirably. "Anko-chan was a child herself, and could probably need some tips too. I mean you haven't had any grownups to explain these things. If there's anything else I'm more than happy to explain."

Naruto grinned widely. He was so nice about this! She was pretty sure Iruka had explained something similar when he'd been her sensei, though he'd been shouting. She always ignored the stuff he had shouted. It had always been the calmly spoken words that had been the most important. "Thank you, Kagami-san! You're really cool about this."
"Oh! It's really weird Kagami-san! Because I'm really good at making food on missions, they always leave me in charge of food there, dattebayo. But for some reason every indoor kitchen hates me!"

Kagami chuckled lightly. "That's probably because when you're on a mission you have to stay put and keep supervision of the fire constantly. However, when you are home and put on the stove you shouldn't leave it unsupervised. Especially if you're frying things. If not you'll get a repetition of yesterday's smoke bomb. If you're impatient and have to do something… um… be quick, or if it takes too long send a clone to supervise the food. If not it will all taste burnt and you can start a kitchen fire... Like you almost did yesterday..."

"Well, I know what to do by now. I've learned a lot of useful suiton ninjutsu for exactly this reason..." Naruto explained seriously.

Minato glanced down at the report he'd just received. This didn't look promising. So far his spies had detected over forty separate chakra signatures by the base. No one recognisable and a few who had abnormally large reserves.

They were all reported to wear the same though. The masked faces and the grey cloaks. If he didn't know better Minato would suspect a cult. But if that was the case he wouldn't worry unless the damned Jashin hadn't relocated from Land of Hot Water. Though unfortunately it seemed like something more ominous than that.

He pushed the scroll away and opened the next one. It was the report Hizashi had left an hour ago when he came off duty. There had been no suspicions activity from Orochimaru at least. The man was glued to his lab, and barely seemed to come up for food. After the flooding he'd been quite a pest actually. He was furious that the basement of the facility had been flooded. Some of his research had been damaged and he was making a lot of his subordinates pay for it. Namely through an absurd amount of working hours to save as much as possible.

Danzō however was a bit more uncertain. He'd disappeared for several hours two days ago. Somehow having managed to sneak past Jiraiya's radar. It was not enough though. He couldn't place Danzō at the base, so there were no proofs he was involved.

His spies were currently mapping how extensive the base was without actually entering it. They were having problems, and Hiashi – who was leading the ones looking over the base – was having difficulties looking inside. The base had some protective barriers against dōjutsu's, and it was annoying the Hyūga head more than he admitted during his reports.

Minato wasn't in a hurry yet though. He'd strengthened the village security since the storm, and if anyone within Konoha was connected to that base he would catch them in the act. He would not make an arrest or infiltrate the base before he knew who were involved. If it was international or national, he would get the facts one way or another.

Shisui came into the ANBU office stiff from his latest mission. It had been an ugly one, and all he wanted to do was go home and sleep. Though knowing his new roommate she would probably keep him up to tell him about her day.

It was weird having Naruto around all the time. The girl really never ran out of energy. He'd known that before, but he was getting a rude reminder these days. He also disliked how she'd wake him up
when she thought he slept too long. He'd tried to explain that even though she was up – it didn't mean he had to get up too.

He had a system. He could make it from bed and to wherever he had to be within five minutes as long as it was within the perimeter of Konoha. It had worked for years, so why did she have to start changing that?

These days she even made him eat breakfast before leaving the house. He had a system! He packed lunch in the fridge which he brought along and ate as soon as there was time. He got the same nutrition but he also got a bit more sleep. Naruto was ruining everything.

"Kawauso, your shift is changed for tomorrow." His ANBU captain said as Shisui entered the locker room.

Half listening he glanced up at the Spider masked man. "How come?"

"You're requested for team mission. You'll take the Tuesday morning shift instead." The captain explained.

"Understood." Replied Shisui and took off his otter mask. After placing it in the locker and closing it shut he rested his head against the door. He just needed a bit of peace and quiet before he went back to the hurricane waiting at home.

Naruto was great. She really was, but he had no idea if he could take her energy level for much longer. At first it had been okay. It was like when they were on missions - doable in limited amounts - but after weeks he was starting to get exhausted from just watching her.

She ran everywhere with excessive energy. Up the stairs. To the bathroom. To her bedroom. Hell, she even jumped when moving from the kitchen table to the counter sink. She was making his previously calm and quiet home into a very loud and exhausting one.

He needed to find somewhere quiet and deserted. He could pass it on as an extra-long ANBU shift or something. Just an excuse to get out of the house for a few hours and do absolutely nothing in peace and silence. His father could go to work and be quiet with the other Uchiha. Shisui didn't have that. He had an unusually chatty ANBU squad, and then team Kasai before coming home to Naruto. There had to be a balance somewhere!

"You okay, Kawauso?" Asked the captain as he walked past.

"Yeah… I'm just getting ready for my next shift." Muttered Shisui and gave a weak smile.

"You look tired Shisui. You should get more sleep -ttebayo." Muttered Naruto and looked concerned back at her teammate. Shisui gave a snort in reply, though she wasn't sure what that was supposed to mean.

"Keep it down, Naruto. We'll need to keep quiet a little while longer here." Kakashi said quietly from ahead of her. Turning away from Shisui she nodded in understanding.

"Great… Why don't she ever listen to me that easily?" The words were so low Naruto barely caught them, and glancing over her shoulder she sent a glare towards Shisui. He looked unapologetic back.

"I listen to you." Naruto whispered.

"Only when you want to."
"I told you to keep quiet Naruto." Kakashi interjected.

Naruto whirled back towards the team leader. "Shisui is talking too."

"Yeah, but you talk a lot louder." Kakashi replied drily.

Naruto huffed and crossed her arms in front of her, to her annoyance she heard Shisui snicker behind her. He was such a brat when he was grumpy. She didn't even get why they needed to be silent. They were just a few hours out of Konoha, and they were far from any potential enemy areas as far as she knew. But for some reason Kakashi suspected enemies though, and they had gone off the road and been ordered to stay quiet until they made it out of this part of the forest.

They continued walking in silence, and despite Shisui's subdued mood she was actually enjoying the trip. It was the first mission outside the village since they'd been cleaning up from the storm almost a month ago. They were heading towards Sunagakure to deliver a scroll to someone at the border.

As they made it to thinner forests they decided to stop for dinner, and while Naruto was in charge of making food the others used the time to drink and change to warmer clothes as nightfall loomed closer. They'd continue for a few more hours afterwards and probably camp before meeting the messengers on the border the next day. All Naruto could really focus on though was if she'd recognize one of them. She doubted she would though…

"Is it true we're not having practice next week?" Asked Naruto while Rin sat next to her and watched her make dinner.

"Yes. I'm on ANBU duty all week." Replied Kakashi lazily.

"Me too." Added Shisui. "By the way, when is your flat finished again, Naruto?"

"Oh, it should be soon. They started last week, and Anko stopped by today to talk with the ones fixing it. They've been efficient and she thinks it will be ready sometime next week."

"Ah, good." Sighed Shisui relieved.

Naruto glanced at him suspiciously. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Um… nothing." Shisui replied sheepishly, smiling slightly from where he lay in the grass. Naruto narrowed her eyes.

"You know you've been really grumpy lately. What is it? Do you not want me to stay with you anymore? I can find somewhere else you know. Hey Kakashi, your window was fixed right? Maybe I could-"

"No, no. It's fine. It's just an adjustment." Shisui interrupted her with a wave of his hand.

"It takes a few months to get used to the constant chatter." Muttered Kakashi in Shisui's direction before turning back towards Naruto. "And no, you're not staying at my place for a week."

Naruto pouted. "I'm a good roommate… You'd be lucky to have me, dattebayo!"

Rin chuckled and put a hand on her shoulder. "If something happens you can always come to me. We have a guest bedroom available."

"Thanks, Rin!" Naruto replied and peeked into the pot. "And dinner is ready."

"Finally! I'm starving." Shisui said and sat up at once.
"Well, if you ate breakfast more often than maybe you wouldn't be so hungry right now." Naruto told him matter of fact. He was so tardy about the most important meal of the day. At least Kagami called it that.

"I eat breakfast. I just bring it with me." snapped Shisui.

"Not always. I found your packed food unopened in your weapon pouch the other day." Naruto snapped back.

"You went through my stuff?" asked Shisui with raised eyebrows.

Naruto shrugged causally. "Well yeah."

"You can't just go through my stuff Naruto. It's not polite." he said exasperated.

Naruto stirred one more time just to make sure the food didn't burn at the bottom while wondering why he was so fuzzed about it. It had just been a mistake. "I took the wrong pouch, I thought it was mine but it turned out it was yours. I recognized the lunch box so I put it down again."

"Still, you shouldn't go around looking into others personal belongings. What if there was something sensitive in there?" asked Shisui sourly. Naruto cast an annoyed glance at him and spotted his expression. Was he pouting?

"Then you'd done a shitty job by keeping it in your pouch where anyone can find it, dattebayo."

"It was at home, I don't expect anyone to go through my hallway drawer to look in a weapon pouch. And anyway, why did you think yours was even in there? You leave your stuff all over the place except where it should be."

"Can we eat?" interrupted Rin, efficiently stopping the bickering between the two old teammates.

"Sure, give me your bowl and I'll pour for everyone." Naruto replied. They all handed her their bowls, and Naruto made sure to serve Shisui last just for the hell of it.

The mission took three days, and upon their return Kakashi gave a very efficient summary just to be finished as soon as possible.

Out of the four of them Naruto was the one with the least to do. Rin worked at the hospital while Kakashi and Shisui were still in ANBU, and had to work around the clock to be able to do both. It made Naruto wonder if she too should try to find a division to work in aside from team Kasai. ANBU did look kind of cool. Especially the uniforms. And then she'd have another set of clothes to change into too.

The thought was driven away as Kakashi's final sentence. "-It took a day and a half to return, but we didn't encounter any trouble."

Naruto stood behind him with hands behind her back in a stance mimicking Rin. She was staring out the window instead, seeing as there was little she could do but stand there until it was over. Rin was sending her pointed looks, hoping she would get her act together, but Naruto couldn't be bothered. There was a bird on the rooftop outside that was a lot more interesting than the mission report.

Minato nodded as Kakashi finished. "Good job on a well-executed mission. You should get some rest now. You are all dismissed, except Naruto. Please stay behind."
Rin's brow furrowed but left with the others while Naruto stayed put. The relief from finishing the mission was quickly ebbing out, and her head snapped from the window to the Yondaime. What did he want with her?

"I think it's time we had a conversation. It's been long overdue." Minato said as the door shut behind Kakashi.

Naruto didn't answer. Instead she looked hard back at him, refusing to blink until he had. "I see you've integrated okay back into the village. I heard from the toads a few days that Isobu is still staying with them and is actually quite pleased with his new turf. There was a slight disagreement over a meal the other day, but otherwise everything is fine."

"Good." Replied Naruto without much emotion. Within her she could feel Kurama paying attention, though he had yet to actually say much.

He gave a small smile at her words. "It also seems the probation did you some good."

Naruto's fingers flexed on impulse, her anger flashing up as she glared at the Hokage. "If that's your assessment."

Minato sighed, his eyes narrowing at Naruto's tone. "Do you disagree?"

"I had a good time thanks to my travel companions." She answered stiffly.

Minato stood up behind his desk and rested both hands on the top. His expression growing serious. "For the rest of this conversation I am not the Hokage, and you are not my subordinate. You speak to me as if I'm still just Minato, and I want you to be honest."

"Is that a command, Hokage-sama?" Asked Naruto with an arched eyebrow.

"No. If you don't wish to speak with me you are free to leave."

Naruto stayed where she was. Torn between just leaving and getting the hell away or actually confronting him. She'd wanted to for ages, but… Naruto turned on her heel and walked towards the exit, but as she gripped the handle hard, her mind intent on leaving, she hesitated. Reluctantly she glanced back over her shoulder where Minato was still looking back with equal force. Letting go of the handle she walked back to the desk with heavy footsteps. "Fine. What do you want to know? What do you want to talk about?"

"Us." Replied Minato simply. His hands went through hand signs, and she felt the privacy seals go up around them.

"What about us? You made it perfectly clear you don't want anything to do with me."

Minato shook his head. "That's not true."

"Oh, I'm sorry. You want me around because of Kurama, but if he wasn't around I wouldn't be of much use to you would I?" Replied Naruto, a rushing irritation knocking against the mental barrier keeping her emotions at bay. The barrier she used her entire will power to keep up to stop her from screaming at Minato in fury every time she saw him.

Her words triggered a deeper frown on his face, but unlike Naruto he didn't look anywhere close to bursting with anger. He was cool and collected. As always. "That is very simple minded of you to think."
"Really? I don't think so. It's the only possible explanation for what happened. For how you treated me."

"The only explanation?" Asked Minato with raised eyebrows as he straightened up, his fingers resting lightly against the desk top while pushing the chair further back.

Naruto took a step forward simply because her blood was singing with the need to take action. To clarify just how furious she was at the Hokage. Inside her Kurama was quiet but aware; Naruto could almost feel his curiosity as to how this would turn out. "Yes. You could at the very least apologize – but you barely have the time to spare me a glance, so I don't think you feel sorry at all."

"You want an apology from me?" asked Minato quietly, his arms folded in front of him as he looked down at Naruto over his nose.

"Yes. For what you did. For what the Sandaime did. But you're the leader now, so I want to hear it from you." Naruto answered in a growl.

"For your imprisonment? For being forced out of the village?" Minato clarified. "You believe yourself… entirely guiltless? Still? After being given over four years to think about it?"

Naruto wanted to hit him for his slowness. Of course that was what she meant! "I did what I had to. There was no other choice for me. You should be able to see that, and I demand an apology for the way I was treated."

"I won't give it. I stand by my decision. I might feel regret that it was necessary, but I never regretted doing it." Minato said sternly, and Naruto could see he actually believed his own words. It was too much.

"So you thought it was completely fine, did you? Locking me up. Invading my mind. Chaining me to the wall like some misbehaving dog too unruly to let loose? Sending me away from Konoha because you couldn't stand looking at me?!"

"You are jumping to conclusions Naruto, and honestly I can't believe you think such a thing." Minato replied hurriedly.

"What am I supposed to think? You won't talk to me, and most of the time you don't even bother to look at me. I have no idea where I stand with you. Do you hate me? Do you just not care? Do you wish I never existed? I don't know! All I know is that I'm a bother you have to sort out. I try to not bother you, because all I know is that you don't want much to do with me. You might not have said it out loud, but I know what it is like to not be wanted. And believe me, I have no interest in trying to prove myself to someone who doesn't give a damn. If it wasn't for the fact you are the Hokage I would have stayed clear of you entirely, because I can't stand looking at you most of the time too." Naruto told him heatedly, wanting him to feel even an ounce of the frustration running through her body. Why didn't he get it? Why was he so stubborn and narrow minded? He wasn't like this, so that meant he was actively trying to be stubborn.

Minato's face didn't give anything away though his hands had fisted at his side. But the dam had opened, and Naruto was on a roll now. "Time travel didn't really change the fact that I was someone who could be jostled around. For some reason everyone thinks I can be used. Even before anyone knew about the kyūbi. Jiraiya didn't just bring me back to Konoha because I was a child in need – he brought me back because he thought I could be of use to the village, and because he thought me being young enough to form a loyalty to the village. Of course I was already loyal, but he didn't know that. I'm sure some part of him empathized with me, but all his ninja side was concerned about was how I could be of use to Konoha. I might not have brains like yours, but I know when I'm being
used, and I know when I'm unwanted."

She took a deep breath before she continued in anger. "Of course… That's not something new. Thanks to you it was the first thing I learned. I was always a tool. You made me into a tool the day I was born. Making me a jinchūriki was for the sake of Konoha and not for my own benefit. I was left with little choice from the beginning. Grow strong or die. I don't hold it against you, I never have. I'm just trying to point out that when it comes between your family or the village, you have always chosen the village. No matter which dimension or time we are in, you pick the village. Though I guess that's what makes you such a good Hokage. You might feel bad, but that has never stopped you from going through with your plans. Be damned who pays for it, right? As long as your duty is fulfilled you get a good night sleep."

Minato's nostrils widened as he inhaled at her words, and without warning he turned around. His back to her as he walked up to the window. Naruto wasn't finished though, and not letting him say a word she plunged on.

"That's where I keep comparing you to Orochimaru. He is as ambitious as you are, but he doesn't have any problems telling people straight out what he thinks. Orochimaru is obvious, and he's had the decency to tell me outright what he wanted. He wanted me for research and he never tried to sugar coat it. For that at the very least I can respect him. I appreciate honesty, so why don't you try that too? Tell me exactly what the hell you were thinking when you strapped me to a table and had Inoichi barrage into my mind. When you found out the truth and threw me in a prison cell. When I was forced to sit in there for weeks not knowing what the hell would happen to me. When you kicked me out of the village because what you found disappointed you."

Minato glanced back at her, his mouth twitching slightly while she forced the words out of her mouth. Her fury beyond anything she could properly explain. Before Naruto had always blown up in anger whenever something displeased her, but this time… with Minato being the source of her fury… it had been impossible. At first she just didn't want anything to do with him, but that was difficult. He was the Hokage who protected the village all her precious people lived in, and to go against him would be the same as going against all of them. It was too late now though, she had to get it off her chest. She'd been dying to for too long.

Minato turned around slowly, his movements carefully controlled. "You want me to explain myself then? I was hoping you understood already."

"Understood what exactly? That you're heartless? That you don't give a crap? That I'm the worst thing that ever happened to you?" Naruto replied coldly.

"No." Minato said at once. "That you understood why there was a necessity for the actions I took."

Naruto's teeth gritted as her pulse rose. How dared he! "There was no need! I never did anything to Konoha! I have always been loyal, I have always fought tooth and nail to keep the village safe! I have always acted to make sure the people of this village are safe and you… You completely disregarded that. You didn't care at all about the nightmare I went through to protect everyone! You got hung up on one thing, and apparently that disregarded everything else I've done!"

"You are wrong."

"Then please enlighten me Minato!" Naruto shouted, her voice a tiny bit hysterical at how calm Minato was despite her own overwhelming anger. "You hate being around me so much it is impossible to know what the hell you're thinking! You keep trying to keep me at a distance as one of your subordinates, but that isn't true! I'm more than that and you should damn well know that already."
"I know very well you're more than a subordinate, Naruto." Minato hissed, and finally, finally, there was a reaction. He exhaled and closed his eyes. When they opened they were harder than ever. "You are a soldier of Konoha, but you are also my daughter and a jinchūriki, but that doesn't stop me from disciplining you when I think one of my ninjas are out of control."

Naruto didn't get it. What was that supposed to mean? "Out of control? What sort of excuse is that?!"

Minato pointed at her with a steady hand. "You were. You were completely out of control Naruto. You kept crucial information from us for years. Crucial life-threatening information." He said before letting the hand drop to his hip.

"What was I supposed to say?!" Hissed Naruto. "Hey, I know we're at war and everyone is being put under a huge amount of suspicion, but anyway; I'm your time travelling daughter from the future? Yeah, I can see that go over really well. No one would ever believe a six year old girl sprouting something like that! A six year old outsider at that! The only reason I even gained access to Konoha was because Jiraiya pulled every string in the book to make the Sandaime allow me entrance! And that was before the war even started!"

"That there." Answered Minato, his eyes furious as he glared at Naruto. "That right there was the problem, Naruto. Yes, I completely understand why you stayed quiet at first. But you were not six years old when the truth came out. You'd been in the village for years. You had trained under Orochimaru, a Sannin, and frankly you were more respected than a lot of the clan kids for your achievements during the war. You were no longer a no-name orphan and yet you never even entertained the idea of telling us the truth. You didn't even try!"

"Of course not! It was private! It was my life, and though you are allowed to know what I do while on duty, my private-"

"Oh, no you don't!" Minato cut her off, stepping closer to the desk to lean his hands on the top again. There was something threatening about him now, and the cool air was rapidly disappearing and being replaced by an anger that could equal her own. "That information was crucial to the village. You took an oath to protect Konoha, and that means you should have come to the Sandaime willingly with the information you in fact did receive while on duty. Just not in this time line."

"How can you say that? Look what finding out has done! If that Kiri mission never happened we would all be happy! Kushina wouldn't have died, you wouldn't know about me, and I could have continued just being the orphaned girl you met from time to time!"

Minato laughed without humour, and he was looking at Naruto in disbelief now. "No, Naruto. If that Kiri mission hadn't happen I would be dead! You would be dead. Kushina would still be dead, and most likely the alternate you would also. Be. Dead. You keeping that secret was dooming us to death! That's why you were punished. That's why I sent you out of the village. That's why. You were out of control, and you needed to see that your actions had consequences. Though evidently it failed."

She could only gape at the accusation, her words dying in her throat at the anger on Minato's face as he took a calming breath. "What? That's what you think? You are wrong! What do you think I was going to do? Not act upon what I knew about the future? Just let it run its course and stand on the sideline? Me being punished like that was not right! Why the hell can't you see that?!"

Minato's hand hit the desk top hard, causing an echo to go through the room as Minato gritted his teeth. "Your chakra was out of control, Naruto. We had to seal off half of your reserves just to make sure you didn't have a heart attack from the pains. A solution was needed, and I was not about to let you experiment with two bijū inside the village. You needed to leave if you were to find a way to
stop being in pain. Madara was also originally set to attack the village that year, and I didn't want him to find you. You needed to drop off the map until things had calmed down. I might have the final say, but I was also worried about the actions the council might take behind my back if they were to see you go off without a punishment. You were always going to have to take responsibility for what you did, but unlike me they are still under the belief I let you off easily. From what your memories show Danzō could have acted behind my back. I couldn't imprison him just for a suspicion though. It wouldn’t be right, and yet I wasn't about to gamble your life on him staying in line. If he got to you and you died from him taking the bijū I would have to kill him, and then nothing would be resolved at all. Only more death would come from that scenario. I acted how I saw fit, and I still believe it was the right call. You needed to be disciplined, the council needed to be appeased, and the bijū had to be sorted out. The solution was probation outside the village. So yes, it was more than a little justified."

Minato said so matter of fact it shocked Naruto.

The council could have killed her? Behind Minato's back? But…

"And I won't apologize for my decisions." Minato continued before her mind caught up with her voice. "You weren't going to talk and it left us with no other way of withdrawing the information but through the measures we took. We had no idea exactly how big this was, and the procedure was something we did to more people than we can count during the war. Yes, we felt bad about doing it to a child, but you are not a child. You haven't been a kid even if you looked like one. Take responsibility for your mistake Naruto. It might only have been one mistake, but it was far too large for me to let slide."

"How- What… It wasn't that big for anyone else but you and me! You wouldn't have died. I was there! I was going to protect you! I did everything I possibly could to keep the village safe! I won't take that back!"

Minato was shaking his head while she spoke, and the moment he got the chance he was arguing against her. "You deluded yourself into believing your presence was enough to prevent deadly occurrences completely out of your control from taking place. But that was not within your ability! That was not something you could not control!"

His voice was high now, higher than Naruto had ever heard him before. Minato was a soft spoken person, no matter what he usually kept an indoor volume even on a battlefield, and it was unnerving how terrifying it was when he raised his voice.

"What did you expect would happen?" Minato asked harshly. "If the Kiri mission hadn't happened and the truth never came out… if you continued your life in pretense and acted only when you yourself were involved that somehow everything would be fine? That by not giving us a warning you would miraculously stop Madara from attacking the village at the day of your birth? Even when your unborn counterpart would have erased your own existence? No. You were sent back in time, and because of your limitations both physically and politically were allowing it to repeat itself. You failed to see you were dooming a good percentage of the population to their deaths simply by keeping your mouth shut. And that was what I punished you for when I sent you out of the village. Because though you still can't see it; you were out of control. If it had only affected yourself… that would be one thing, but your decision to not tell us the truth would have deadly consequences for the entire village. I will never allow something like that to slide. Even if you are my daughter."

Naruto faulted, looking up with furrowed brows. Was he telling the truth? How could she know if he did? The Hokage had the right to sprout lies all he wanted, but for some reason she believed him to speak the truth right now. "No… That was only one possibility. That... The Kiri mission did happen, and you did find out the truth so all of that was avoided. But you treated me like crap. You still do! What you did to me was not justified. I never deserved that. I was scared of telling you one thing, but
everything else was the truth, dattebayo! You shouldn't have done it. You should have given me the benefit of the doubt. As a ninja of the village and the only living relative of Kushina within Konoha. I had rights, but you and the Sandaime completely disregarded them... I knew the bijû wouldn't harm Konoha, and you read my mind. You knew as well as I did what they told me. Why can't you get that stick out your arse and stop being such a coward!? I'm right here, no matter if you wish it or not you still have to deal with me. At the very least I deserve your respect as someone who has sacrificed everything for the sake of Konoha!"

Minato pinched his nose and a heavy sigh escaped him. "How… can you not see it? We read your mind Naruto… But not the bijû. We had no idea what Kurama and Isobu wanted. I kept you imprisoned to keep them locked up. You wouldn't part with them and I respected that. But I respected your wish for that, not theirs. You had just released them both during the Kiri mission, and the worst thing we could imagine was you blindly trusting those two and causing a mass casualty within Konoha… That's why I went into the seal so many times. I needed answers. I needed to see what you'd seen in them. But they were so furious it took weeks to get them to talk. They just kept threatening to eat me up and tearing me apart for ages."

Naruto's fists were so tight she could feel her skin tearing.

"And as I said; we put a lot of people under the mind walk back then, and many for far less serious accusations than what we were suspecting you of. We were freshly out of the war and suddenly you had two bijû inside you while one of them was kept locked up by my own seal. The easiest way to explain that situation was to assume you had taken the seal, brought it back to Kiri by pretending to be kidnapped before they put it on you. That seal is a lot stronger than anything they had access to. To use it on someone not loyal to themselves were unimaginable at the time, and the only way we could find out the truth was after the mind walk since you never tried to explain yourself. You even refused when I offered you a chance. I told you to explain, but you refused."

Naruto was shaking her head from side to side, but apparently Minato had wanted to get this off his chest as much as Naruto had wanted to scream at him. "So I will not apologize for my actions concerning your imprisonment, but... I will for my behaviour. I won't deny that Kushina's death affected me and caused me to indirectly blame you for not preventing it. I did, and for that I apologize, though you were not the only one I blamed. I was much more furious at Kirigakure. It affected my behaviour when speaking with you, it's why I came off as cold, but don't think locking you up and sending you away was some petty personal revenge from my side. It's insulting and a completely unfounded accusation."

Naruto opened her mouth to disagree, but Minato continued before she even got a sound out. "I stand by my thoroughness to assure the village's security. We deal with traitors too often not to, and you being my daughter changes nothing. The people of the village deserve a leader who can take actions even when there's a conflict of interest, and sending you away was for your peace of mind as well as your punishment for being so incredibly naive it's a miracle you even managed to flow under the radar as long as you did."

"Naive?" Whispered Naruto in disbelief. Was there one thing she wasn't any more than it was bloody naive. She didn't always see the whole picture, she hadn't thought of all those things Minato had talked about. Like the how Danzō might react and how the bijû situation could have been resolved while still being in Konoha, but she was damn well not naive. That had disappeared when she was thrown back in time and lost everything. When she had to start all over again and create a life from even less than she had the first time around.

Naruto took a step back, but Minato was not allowing her to be released by his electrifying eyes. Her own eyes. "I do not disregard your efforts though. You did the best you could with very little
resources. But that is as much your achievement as it is your mistake. Thanks to those however I have worked hard to keep your reputation intact though you were technically punished. I decided to let you travel for the years of your punishment instead of keeping you locked up until the probation was over. Though a lot would say it would have been wiser to keep you under constant supervision. It was the right thing to do for the future because I’ve seen how influential you can be, and we need you to be able to convey your opinion. That's easier with a wholesome reputation, and that way you wouldn't have to start from scratch when you returned from the probation. Now we can both work towards a common goal, which we should have done since the beginning."

"What would knowing have changed? What… What exactly would you do differently? Would you have somehow stopped Kushina from going on that mission? How would you have known? I didn't know! And I'm the one who's seen the future!"

"No, you didn't know about the details of the war, but you did know about the consequences the war had on the future. Like the resentment between the nations. About how Kakashi was hated by Iwa for blowing up that bridge. At me for killing so many people during the war I can't even count the number."

"Oh, and you couldn't see that one coming yourself? You think killing someone will not leave to resentment from their loved ones?" Asked Naruto, not entirely believing Minato was even saying this.

"Of course I know. But the future is dependent on a better relationship between the nations. For your sake as jinchūriki I believed you could see that. The other jinchūriki and their countries deserve a warning so they can keep their jinchūriki safe from Madara, but you were not about to warn a soul. You had a unique possibility right in front of you and yet you didn't take it. Do you have any idea how difficult it is to make right what's been done? To patch up the things that has happened during the war? Things I might not have done if I’d seen the entire picture? Iwa refuses as much as opening my letters, hell bent on keeping their vendetta against me. Don't you think I might have acted differently with some warning? That I might not have burnt all bridges before finding out what a huge mistake it was later? I'm not claiming everything would be resolved had you just spoken up. But we have never been more dependent on communicating across the nations, how can any leader do that without having a proper communication with their own ninjas? Just me being Hokage is now a hindrance to peace." Minato said exasperated, his hand dragging through his hair in frustration.

"Are you… blaming me for how the war turned out?" Asked Naruto breathlessly.

"No." Minato answered at once, his voice firm. "That's not what I'm saying. I'm trying to make you understand that things might be exactly the same, though then again maybe not. But you never even attempted to explain, and now we'll never know."

He looked down, and his shoulder slumped as he placed a hand against the back of the chair. His fingers clutching around the edge. "You can't talk yourself out of this one Naruto. Keeping all that secret was wrong. You had been de-aged, lost most of your strength and was in no position to actually do anything about the threats the village was about to face. You had no control at all, and was taking it as it came. That is recklessness to the highest degree, and you were betting thousands of lives on your own arrogance."

Naruto swallowed, and gradually the room was starting to feel smaller. Minato's eyes met her own again, and there was a will in there that pleaded with her to understand. To see this from his standpoint and not her own. The one she had believed for years now was the only truth. But maybe… Just maybe, Minato had a point too. One that might be just as true as the one she believed in.
"Things could have turned out differently if you had found a way. And don't tell me there wasn't. From what I've seen you've done some incredibly thing in the past - or future, with just words alone. If you had put your mind to it there is no doubt in my mind that you would have succeeded eventually."

They turned quiet. Minato giving Naruto the time to digest his point of view of this entire mess. She couldn't fault him for everything… But still, he shouldn't… she hadn't deserved it. It felt stupid to repeat that in her mind, because with Minato's explanation it was hard to come up with counter arguments. It had been so clear at the beginning, but they were being pushed away by Minato's speech.

Had she been wrong? Had she… unknowingly been repeating history? Had she been watching and waiting for her parents to die… again? Without the Kiri mission she would never have found out that her own counterpart could have erased her own existence, and if Kushina had given birth to her other self than Naruto would have died… Kurama had explained as much. Leaving Minato to die again and Konoha to be attacked by Madara.

During her imprisonment Naruto had been terrified of being executed. She had been so defeated and scared. In way… had she been putting Minato in the same situation by withholding the truth? Had he been awaiting his execution in ignorance while Naruto kept her mouth shut?

Was there one thing the Kiri mission had showed her than it was that Naruto really didn't have the amount of control she wanted… And back then… If Kushina had given birth and Naruto had somehow not died from her counterpart being born… would she even have been strong enough to face Madara on her own? In her weak child body and without the help of Kurama? Maybe she would just have watched as Kushina and Minato died for the village again…

"But you continued… You continued being so damn cold to me. Are you telling me that was completely acceptable? That there is nothing at all you would have done differently if you could do it again?"

Minato paused for a moment before replying. "I wouldn't change it… But I would have tried to explain better." He admitted at last. "We saw your mind, and though you felt trust for Kurama and Isobu - we did not. The bijū can lie as well as any human Naruto. Their words to you meant little to us. To us it seemed like they wanted something out of you which is why they stayed. And we were right. They want to escape Madara, and they picked you over him. They didn't pick Konoha at all, and you can't expect us to have your experiences just because we watched your memories. The emotions behind those are still yours alone, we just watched a film. You can't expect someone to go against all their instincts... just because you want them to."

Naruto looked slowly back up, her eyes burning. "Like with me? Like the fact I'm the daughter you threw away?"

Minato frowned. "I guess… Yes."

Naruto swallowed, feeling tears burning in her eyes at Minato's admittance. "I can't love you like a father does, Naruto. How on earth can I? You were a stranger I didn't even conceive. Do you honestly see me as the same man who fathered you?"

She was quiet for a moment, her hands fist ed so tightly it hurt. "No… But you are. Even if you aren't…" It sounded weird saying it out loud, but it was still true. The man in front of her was her father. He held all the characteristics and genetics as the man who fathered her. Even if this was a different dimension Minato still the same man. And that was probably what hurt the most. If Naruto could somehow distance them, if she could pretend they weren't the same it would be so much
Minato nodded, his expression sad. "We might share DNA… but that isn't enough. Kushina…. She loved you so much. She told me before she died that you truly were our daughter. But for me… I have no relationship with you Naruto. You were the little firecracker on Orochimaru's team. The Uzumaki related to Kushina. Nothing more and nothing less, and then suddenly you were my daughter, but between those two there was no transition at all. You should know how hard it is to change your views so fundamentally… How many years did it take for you to accept Orochimaru as a ninja of Konohagakure? A comrade? You associated him so strongly with an enemy that you hated him for years no matter how many proofs to the contrary."

Naruto shook her head repeatedly. "I don't give a…. a fuck what you think of me, Minato. Hate me all you want, but that is not what this is about! I have always been alone, so that's not something new!" She shouted furiously, fighting back tears the best she could.

Minato held up a hand in a calming motion, his eyes softening as Naruto was at the brink of crying. "I don't hate you. I never did. I think now... with time it becomes easier to accept all this… But our situation is too unique. Nothing like this has happened before Naruto, and that is probably a good thing. I..." Minato stopped, looking down at the floor while he shifted his weight. "Kushina already loved you when she found out… but I didn't. I wish I did, but as I said it's an emotion I just can't alter by simply wanting it."

Minato glanced up again, and for a moment Naruto saw so much uncertainty and pain in his eyes it took her off guard. "Though despite all this... The pain and the deaths and the secrets… on both sides. I would like to believe we could be more than just boss and subordinate at some point… because despite all the things I just said I'm not blind to your hardship Naruto… Don't think just because I don't regret my actions that I'm disregarding all of yours. You have done so much in the face of the impossible..."

He took a deep breath. "Because of something I did… or at least the other me, you had to take on the hate of the entire village… But you didn't let the hate consume you though you've had all the reasons in the world to let it. You were betrayed by someone you considered your own brother. He even tried to kill you. You were targeted, beaten and then lost to time itself. And yet you never stopped. You never gave up. You fought despite impossible odds against you, and you do so easier than breathing. I don't think anyone but you could have managed to go on. I might have punished you for keeping the secret, and I don't regret it, but never think I don't know. I know what you've done. And..." Minato's shoulders tensed as he struggled for words. "...I'm really proud of you... If there is… any way at all you would let me I would still really like to get to know you, but... I just don't know how to anymore."

They were both silent, the two of them too hung up on the words being thrown between them to say anything at all. Naruto had her arms folded tightly around herself. She was finally coming out of the angry haze and her eyes tracked to the people down on the street. Ninjas on duty. Civilians at work. People living their life without so much baggage and frustration.

Naruto cleared her voice. "Why… from all of that… if that's what you think of me then why would you even want to know me? Do you even see me as a ninja of Konoha anymore? How can you possibly trust me to protect Konoha if you believe all that?"

Minato sat down again. His chair scratching against the floor as he pushed himself closer to the desk. "That depends… What did you take from this conversation? Can you see my side of it now? Can you see why I did what I did?"

He had listed off a lot of reasons for why he had punished her, but Naruto doubted Minato was after
a recap of the entire thing. "Because... I needed to see that I had no control."

A gentle smile was in his eyes, even if his lips barely moved. "Then yes, I do trust you Naruto... Do you trust me?"

Naruto had to look away for a moment just to get her thoughts in order. When she glanced back he hadn't moved. "I trust you to protect Konoha." The fact that she didn't trust him with herself went unsaid.

to be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so very much for reading! The chapter was beta'd by the wonderful AnjoRemix.

Minato has gotten a lot of hate in this story, which is natural seeing as a lot of the perspective has been from Naruto's point of view or her friends. But Minato did have his reasons, which I have mentioned in lesser detail before, but is put into better light in this chapter. I hope it's a bit more understandable now.

Have a nice day everyone!
Chapter Thirty Five – Hunted and Cornered

“Because they saved me from myself, they rescued me from my loneliness. They were the first to accept me for who I am. They're my friends.” - Uzumaki Naruto

There was a sliding sound, and Naruto looked up at the noise of the door opening from the hallway. A moment later Shisui came in, his bare feet sagging and his ANBU uniform was sporting new cuts and rifts. She arched a brow and felt curious about what had happened but knew she couldn't ask about his mission. Stupid ANBU protocols...

"Hungry?" Naruto asked, and Shisui gave an "hn" sound in reply while he sat down on the other side of the kitchen table. She took that as a yes.

Getting up she walked over to the fridge and found the leftovers from the day before. Kagami was out on a mission and they didn't expect him back for a couple of days. There was an unusual amount of work at the Police station these days. Naruto didn't know how much work they had normally, but from Shisui's random comments here and there it sounded like Kagami had more work than usual these days.

In silence she warmed up the dish, making a bit more rice on the side to fill out the meal a bit more. They were ninja, and they all ate a ridiculous amount of food compared to civilians. According to Tsunade those with larger chakra reserves had a faster metabolism. So Naruto herself was pretty much screwed if she didn't get enough to eat.

Shisui hadn't moved from the table, and Naruto glanced worriedly over at him. ANBU had cool uniforms, but what wasn't so cool was when Shisui spent hours after coming home from those missions in silence.

Naruto now understood why Kagami never pestered him for details or how he was doing. It was a sure way to get Shisui to close up completely, and if he was especially agitated he'd jump out the window and not come back for hours. It was an adjustment period. Not always though. Some days he was fine right away, but from just the energy radiating from Shisui Naruto knew this was not one of those "fine" days.

Shisui got up as the food was almost finished. His steps were effortlessly soundless while crossing the floor and started helping out with setting the table. Naruto wondered if she should remind him that he hadn't taken a shower yet, but decided against it. Kagami was the one who was so strict about that sort of stuff.

A couple of minutes later they were eating, and Naruto could almost see the moment Shisui snapped out of his dazed state. His movements a bit more purposeful, he ate faster and he didn't look so pale anymore. Maybe he was just hungry this time?

Naruto had spent the day training with Anko, but the next day they had a mission again. Team Kasai had an escort mission where they would definitely get attacked; it would be a miracle if they didn't, so they needed all members to be prepared and ready.
She glanced at Shisui. Would he be ready to go on the mission? She couldn't see any serious wounds, but who knew what ANBU did to their members.

The new client was some rich snob who'd made enemies with a ninja. The ninja was well connected, and they were paid to escort him safely to his wife's family estate. It would probably take a little over a week. She huffed internally at the idea of having to meet up at the Hokage office for briefing, but it wasn't like there was anything she could do to avoid it.

It had been almost a week since the confrontation between Naruto and her father. Since then she'd kept their contact to strictly polite. During mission briefings she barely spoke at all unless a direct question headed her way, but even those were less. In a way it was more awkward than ever, but the anger had faded. Naruto had used a lot of time just thinking which Shisui had picked up on.

"You are quiet." He said curiously. "Is everything alright?" He wondered, breaking the silence surprisingly early. She had been prepared for a quiet evening. In a way she was quite proud of her ability not to snoop into his business, and until now she'd thought he'd appreciated it.

"I'm fine." Naruto replied and started scooping herself more rice. "I should be asking you that actually."

"It was just another mission. It went well actually, but you don't seem fine. You've been painfully silent all week." Shisui commented after taking a bite with his chopsticks.

"I am fine."

"Is it Hokage-sama?" Shisui wondered with a pointed glance. Damn. How the hell did he know?

Naruto stuck her chopsticks a bit too harsh into her bowl, making it slide sideways and almost tumble off the table if it wasn't for her fast reflexes.

Shisui's brow arched. "I take that as a yes." He murmured and bit down on his chicken.

She studied him for a moment. He looked like he'd spent the majority of his mission rolling around in dry bushes, and he was in dire need of sleep if the shadows under his eyes were any indication, but apparently he was as observant as ever. Internally sighing she realized there was no reason to keep it secret anyway. It wasn't like Shisui didn't know there was tension between her and Minato already. "It's nothing. We just... had an argument."

Shisui sent her a small comforting smile and thankfully refrained from prying. After a few minutes he looked up. "I never thought I'd say this; but I'm starting to miss your exuberance. I know I'm not Anko, but feel free to bad mouth him. I promise not a single word will make it back to Hokage-sama." He made a grimace at the end, but his tired eyes were filled with mirth.

Her lips pursed as if thinking about it, and then Naruto put on an automatic grin. They came as easy as breathing. "Nah, there's nothing wrong, Shisui. Just a mission disagreement. I'm actually more annoyed about the fact that our flat isn't ready yet. I'm starting to miss having ramen for dinner every night. You and Kagami-san eat waaay too much vegetables." As to prove her point she pointed to the chopped broccoli in her bowl.

Shisui smiled fleetingly but didn't reply. There was a sceptic glint in his eyes that told her she hadn't fooled him this time.

On the other side of the village Minato was thinking furiously. His mind working a lot faster than his mouth as he made absolutely sure there was no confusion between him and his former sensei. "Are
you sure?"

Jiraiya sighed. "Yes. That was Danzō's chakra. I couldn't see him, but I'm positive I felt his chakra moving through one of the tunnels."

Minato nodded and stood up, he froze for a moment before he slowly sat down again. "I see…"

"Are we going in then?" Asked Jiraiya.

"No... Not yet." He replied quietly.

"Why? Wasn't this part of the plan? Take down the base while the ones in charge was down there? Danzō is definitely involved one way or another. If not he should have reported to you about this base he's in right now." Jiraiya argued, wondering what his old student had in mind this time.

Minato was as hard to read as ever. He was thinking furiously, the tight jaw and his narrowed eyes gave him away, but exactly what his idea were remained a mystery.

"We'll wait. You are to continue the surveillance. Do not make contact with Danzō, and do not enter the base. We'll infiltrate during his next visit there. It will give us more time to map out the interior of the base and get a better picture of what we can expect. We don't wish to go down there without a proper understanding of what is going on. Where these soldiers came from, or if there are more people in our ranks with associations to the base."

"More people?" Asked Jiraiya confused. Minato was expecting someone else might be involved?

"Yes... Root for one." Minato replied with a pointed glance.

"How could they? Root is more than busy with their missions from you. You've kept an annoyingly tight watch on them for years now. I think this base is actually composed of new soldiers. Maybe even missing nin from other countries." Jiraiya answered.

"What makes you think so?" Minato asked, his attention snapping back in full focus as he met Jiraiya's eyes.

He shrugged. "I'm not entirely sure. It's their movements. I've seen a few of the people at the base. Their... behaviour. It doesn't really consist with either ANBU operative or Root for that matter. Well... Some of them might, but others... It's like a mix of different ninja."

"That doesn't help me at all, sensei." Minato replied with a sigh.

"Doesn't it?" Jiraiya replied with a tilt of his head.

"Well, maybe, but it only makes me more sure of my decision. It just proves we have too little information to make a move at this point in time."

"Ah! It's so good to be home!" Naruto exclaimed loudly. She traced her fingers over their new wall, a small smile on her lips before she turned towards Anko with a wide smile.

"Yeah, it's nice to be back again." She replied with a small smirk. "Did you miss me, Naru?"

"Yes!" Naruto answered at once and bounced over to the kitchen counter. She let her hand trace over the surface lovingly. It had been nice staying at Shisui and Kagami's place, but there was a difference. No matter how welcoming they had been it was always supposed to be temporarily. You could never be as comfortable as a guest compared to being at home.
Anko was chuckling at her good mood and walked up to check out their brand new windows. The frame was pristine with no wears from their countless hours sitting on it, or Kakashi's most used travel route between their flats. Naruto then spotted the state of the couch and sighed. "I think we need a new one." She told her roommate and pointed towards the sorry piece of furniture. It had smudges from getting the wall collapsed over it, and half of it had imploded from the weight.

"A new table too." Anko agreed and gestured towards the corner where a pile of plank had been placed. Naruto recognised the dark splinters of wood that had once been their coffee table.

Curiously she started picking out pieces. If they put in a bit of an effort they might be able to save some of this. They would need some very sturdy glue, and might have to find a replacement for a couple of the legs too.

Eagerly she shared the idea with Anko, and soon they were trying to put together the pieces of their old coffee table. It was a complicated sort of puzzle where they had to figure out which part went where, and they soon realized it was harder than they thought. A few of the larger pieces were obvious, but the smaller ones were much more numerous and harder to place. It was already late afternoon when they started, but as darkness fell over the village their task was interrupted by Kakashi.

"Mah, back again?" Kakashi asked with a wave from the window. Naruto grinned widely while Anko gave a smug smirk.

"Do you have any wood glue?" Asked Naruto and pointed towards the almost completed table top on the floor between them. Kakashi studied the pieces for a moment and arched an eyebrow.

"No, but wouldn't it be easier to buy a new one?"

"We got this from Ensui! It has history, dattebayo!" Naruto argued at once.

"Hey, I got it from Ensui." Anko corrected her.

"Huh? When did-" And then she stopped and smacked her forehead. "Of course. For your first apartment. Man, I completely forgot you used to live by yourself. Half the stuff in here was at your other place first, wasn't it?"

Kakashi came over and nudged one of the mystery pieces at the side with his foot. It clicked into place perfectly against one of the sides. Annoyed both girls looked up. They'd been turning their brains for an hour trying to figure out where it went. Kakashi smiled innocently back so they continued on with their task while ignoring the smug energy from their downstairs neighbour.

"How do you think that place looks like now though? It was on basement level. It must have gotten completely flooded during the storm." Anko said thoughtfully.

"It would have. Be glad you only got a horse carriage through the wall. That place is probably a lot worse off than here." Kakashi pointed out and sat down to help them with the table top.

"How would you know? You never saw it." Anko replied back annoyed.

"He's probably right though." Muttered Naruto so low the other two barely caught it.

"Mah, Anko-chan, why do you always have to disagree with me?" Kakashi whined. Or at least as much as Kakashi could.

"Well, one of us must keep you in line. Naruto always listens to you, but I keep things real." Anko
replied haughtily.

"Good thing Naruto keeps you in line then." Kakashi muttered with a roll of his eye.

"It's a perfect triangle!" Naruto realized with a bright smile. "I keep Anko in line, Anko keeps Kakashi in line, and Kakashi keeps me in line." There was no point lying about it. Naruto still had a habit of thinking of Kakashi as her sensei. Following him came pretty easy compared to most others.

"Mah, what will we ever do the day one of us move out, huh?" Kakashi pondered with fake seriousness.

"Move? Why on earth would any of us move?" Asked Anko, and unlike Kakashi she seemed pretty genuine in her concern.

"Well… What if you marry Kato? I doubt Naruto will want to stay here if you move him in. In fact; I'd think you would move out in that scenario." Kakashi thought aloud.

"Marry? I'm way too young for that. Anyway, I don't even know if I want to get married. Marriage usually leads to kids." Anko said the last word with a shudder.

"You don't want kids?" Asked Naruto confused, though her roommate's expression was enough of an answer.

"You do?" Retorted Anko horrified.

Naruto simply shrugged. Once upon a time that question had been completely irrelevant. She'd mostly focused on staying alive and growing up herself. But Minato did have a point when he said that Naruto was not a child anymore. She might be fifteen biologically, but her mind was a decade older. The idea of having children wasn't completely alien to her, but before she had any she had a long list of tasks to complete. Like live long enough to get rid of Madara.

"Who would the lucky baby daddy be then?" Anko drawled, her sly smile growing on her lips. Naruto almost shuddered by how similar she was to Orochimaru when she wore that expression.

"Eh', I'll take it as it comes. If anyone is crazy enough to be with me then I'll figure it out then." Naruto replied with a mischievous smile. She then looked Kakashi up and down with an evaluating expression. The young man shuffled away, his cheeks heating up which caused Anko to burst out laughing.

Naruto had barely a scroll worth of supplies at Shisui's, so moving in again had been very quick. Though ever since they returned to the flat both Anko and Naruto had a habit of admiring the new wall each time they entered the living room.

It was just so pretty! And new. The paint was fresh and there were no holes or stains on it. They were both really pleased with the whole ordeal, especially since they hadn't had to pay for it themselves.

In contrast the clumsily patched together coffee table stood in horrid contrast to the wall, but as long as it did its task neither of the girls complained. They got a second hand couch a week later. It was about the same size, but the shade of beige was lighter. Anko was fantastic at bargaining, so they got it for a very good price.

Though Naruto was glad to be back there was one thing she could do without though, and that was the numerous visits from Kato. Luckily Anko hadn't forgotten their deal about not bringing him every night, which Naruto could only be grateful for.
Shisui had also been more absent after Naruto moved back to her flat. He was rarely there for their team practice, and she mostly saw him at team missions these days. He was getting increasingly busy with his ANBU duties, and Naruto realized Anko might have a point about him being more absent than before.

And with Shisui's absence, it meant Kato was around more. Naruto couldn't be sure, but she was getting the impression Kato and Shisui avoided each other out of mutual dislike. She couldn't fault Shisui exactly, because Naruto herself had started coming up with excuses to be out of the flat whenever Kato came over. She had no idea why though, and couldn't point to any obvious reason to feel the need to leave when she heard he was coming over. He had never been rude or cruel towards her and whenever they met he acted rather pleasant.

It was a mystery, because Naruto usually liked people who were nice to her. So why did she have such a problem with Kato? All she knew was that she hoped Anko didn't marry him. For some reason Naruto felt their friendship would suffer over time if that happened.

One thing that saved her though, was the missions. So far she hadn't been on any long term missions, but that was about to change. At the end of November she was called into the office, and was expecting a normal team Kasai mission, but was surprised to find someone else standing in the hallway.

"Hey! What are you doing here?" Asked Naruto as she spotted Ensui. He stood in front of the door to the Hokage office when he turned towards her.

"Hi, Naruto. I have a mission." Ensui replied with a small smile. It was an automatic gesture - a reflex he still did. She hadn't really seen him genuinely happy since she came back from her probation. Not since before the Kiri mission.

"Me too! Have you seen my team anywhere? They're all late." Naruto muttered and gestured around the empty hallway. As she turned back towards him Ensui glanced over her shoulder and nodded.

"Yeah, Rin-chan is here."

Naruto turned to find Rin wave back. She looked well rested and ready for the day as she stopped in front of them. Not a second later Orochimaru came up the hall, his nose in a book as he barely bothered to acknowledge their presence.

The receptionist came up the hallway after him and nodded towards the door. "Hokage-sama is ready. You can go in now."

Sharing a confused glance with Ensui, Naruto turned the handle and walked in. The others followed after her in silence as they came into the office.

"Good morning." Minato said pleasantly and held up a scroll. Orochimaru immediately moved forwards and opened it before Naruto could ask what was going on. "This mission can't wait, so I hope you don't mind the mix up. You four will have to execute it together."


Minato gave an apologetic smile. His eyes meeting hers. It was weird having him pay attention to her like this. After their confrontation he seemed more at ease around her despite Naruto's attempt to keep away from him. "They are required here in the village, so I thought it better to put you four together. You'll leave the village right away and I'll be expecting you within two weeks if all goes well." Finished Minato.
Orochimaru, Ensui, Rin and Naruto nodded in understanding. "Capturing?" Asked Orochimaru curiously and glanced over at the three teenagers.

"Yes. Hiamo Naoki has been seen twice now in under two weeks. We are pretty sure where he is headed."

"Who is this? What did he do?" Asked Naruto curiously and tried to peek at the scroll Orochimaru was still reading, but he pulled it away with an annoyed glare in her direction. Right. Boundaries. It was a while since she'd worked with him, but he hated when people bothered him while he was doing a task.

When Naruto leaned away Orochimaru replied bluntly. "He defected during the war and killed his genin squad by cutting their throats in their sleep."

Naruto's eyes widened as she straightened up.

"Capture if possible." Reminded Minato and leaned back in his chair. "He's dangerous and don't expect him to come quietly. He was always temperamental."

"Kunai, Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!" Naruto shouted and threw the kunai. It multiplied in the blink of an eye, and over a hundred kunai cut deep into the mountain side.

Ensui walked up and studied her handy work. "Powerful. Do you use wind chakra in the blade too?"

Naruto nodded proudly. "Yeah. Effective isn't it? Ero-Sennin taught me."

"That is impressive chakra control." Orochimaru mused. "To not only multiply the kunai, but to multiply the wind chakra used within it too. That attack is lethal. But then so is most of your techniques. Maybe you should focus on more C rank techniques and blocking attacks?" It was a sad truth that Naruto was one hundred percent front line attacker - a heavy hitter with less than subtle moves. It was wonderful for the village during wartimes, but less useful in times of peace. Naruto knew Konoha would have used her to the fullest during the Third War if she'd just been a few years older.

She was still proud though. That attack didn't need to be used with wind chakra. She just wanted to demonstrate that she could. The unique kunai was a gift from Tsunade a few years back. Her favourite tool was the academy standard kunai, but the Slug Sannin had gotten her a few that was compatible with wind chakra. Though the kunai kage bunshin wasn't the only thing she'd worked on while on the road. "I did. I've been working with my chakra chains. Mostly on blocking though. They can create quite a counter shield against ninjutsu."

"How?" Asked Rin interested.

Naruto beamed at her question. "I read the chakra coming towards me, and by pushing the counter affinity through my chains I can nullify ninjutsu. It was really difficult at first, because I need to read the attack so fast, but Ero-Sennin kept throwing different ninjutsu at me until my chains were fast enough to keep up. And if someone throws a kunai at me I can use the chains to block them too."

Orochimaru nodded in understanding. "I guess that's something. You should still get a larger repertoire of attacks for more versatile results though. You don't always want to kill your opponent. Maybe you should speak to Shisui about the sunshin when you return to the village. You have the speed for it."

"The sunshin? Yeah, that would be cool." Naruto agreed thoughtfully. "But it's still cool with the
new bunshin technique right?" Naruto said and punched the air. "I worked really hard on it, and now I have it down!"

"You did a good job, Naruto." Rin agreed with an encouraging smile.

"Yeah you did. But maybe we have slacked enough? We still have to figure out which road our target might have taken." Muttered Ensui and folded his arms in front of him.

"Ensui-kun is right. Let's get going. You two," Orochimaru said and pointed towards Rin and Ensui. "Go east. Naruto and I will take the west side of the mountain. If anything happens you return to the meeting point, and if not, return at two o'clock. If you find any decoys you know what to do."

Ensui and Rin both nodded while Naruto stretched her arms before folding them behind her head. She fell in step with Orochimaru as he started walking up the hill while Rin and Ensui walked down towards the shore of the lake.

They kept their eyes out for any tracks. It was one field Naruto had never really got the hang of, because it was all about details and not much action. It was no secret that Naruto worked best under pressure. Usually they did this type of work in silence, but for once Orochimaru was the one to break the silence. "There's one more thing you need to work on."

"Oh?"

Her old sensei gave her a dry glance. "You need to stop sucking up the attention. You don't learn techniques to brag about them."

She pouted in reply. "Why not?" It was a lot of work to get all her new techniques down, and it was so much fun showing off! "I worked hard. I put in time and effort, and now I want to share it with them. It makes it much more fun to learn!"

Orochimaru huffed, and Naruto could tell from his expression that he found her question idiotic. "You learn for the simple reason of growing powerful. Letting anyone willing to listen find out all your strengths will only give them an unnecessary advantage. It's how others learn how to take you down." He explained.

"I don't tell random people. I tell my friends." Naruto replied sourly.

"There's no difference. You tell, and therefore others know."

They were heading out of the field and into a thickly growing forest, and they both bent down to pass underneath the low hanging branches. Naruto was more focused on their conversation then their task though, but Orochimaru's statement set off some concern in her. "That is such a sad way of learning though. I like sharing. It makes life so much better."

He pushed away some more branches with an elongated hand and let Naruto walk first as he replied. "Really? Or does it make life much more depending?"

She looked up at him confused. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"I mean; what will you do if all your friends died tomorrow. What would you do then? Throw yourself in front of a chidori again?" He asked sarcastically.

Naruto grimaced at his casual tone. "Um… That's the point of getting stronger though. That way I can protect them from dying tomorrow."
Orochimaru shook his head, disagreeing with her, but he didn't reply. "Hey." Naruto said while tugging at his arm and causing the Sannin to look down at her with an arched eyebrow. "Do you remember when you learned the three climbing exercise for the first time?"

"… Yes? Why do you wonder?"

"How did you learn that?" Naruto asked curiously.

"I was taught by Hiruzen-sensei back when I was a genin."

She nodded at the expected answer. "Did you learn it with Tsunade and Ero-Sennin?"

"Yes." Replied Orochimaru annoyed, his patience already fading.

Her smile was growing at his irritation. "So you learned together, and I bet that the moment you could do it you told the others."

Orochimaru pursed his lips. "I did..."

"So you trained together, you accomplished it and then you shared your success with them. It made the accomplishment sweeter, didn't it? I bet you even rivalled against Jiraiya for who could do it first."

Orochimaru snorted at her guess. "It wasn't much of a competition. Tsunade always had good chakra control, so she managed on her first try, but Jiraiya was awful. He used days while I managed within a few hours."

"Still! You tried your best and managed to walk vertically. You then told your team."

He sighed, clearly not grasping the point of this but playing along with her anyway. "Yes I did. But I would still have learned that myself some way or another. Even if they weren't there that wouldn't stop me from learning to walk vertically."

"Probably, but it wouldn't be as good. It wouldn't mean as much if you couldn't rub it in Jiraiya's face that you learned it faster. Having friends to compare yourself against was the only way you knew you were a prodigy. The only way you had someone to measure yourself against and train harder because of that. Your friends made you stronger, and in return you made them stronger."

Orochimaru used a few moments of thinking about her argument, but then; "You could achieve the same if you had an enemy."

Naruto shook her head from side to side, starting to grow irritated that he couldn't grasp the point. "No. Having friends - and therefore someone to protect - always make you take one step more than you would if it was only yourself. It makes you work a bit more, push you a bit further and train a bit harder if it means keeping them safe."

Orochimaru stopped walking, and Naruto halted at his abrupt stop. "Friends can betray you. What then? Will you stop growing stronger because your friends define who you are?"

Naruto's brow furrowed. "Of course not. If your friend betrays you it is even more of a reason to grow stronger. That way you can kick their arse to make them see what an idiot they've been."

He was looking at her speculatively, and she could almost feel him contemplating what words to use next. "I see… So when will you beat up the Yondaime?"
Naruto's eyes widened and she didn't have a reply. Orochimaru smirked in victory.

"Five years ago your own village turned their back on you for being strong. For going one step too far for your friends, and it ended up exploding in your face. How did your bonds help you in that scenario? In the end all you could count on was your own strength and your own decisions."

Naruto looked away. "That situation… It was too complicated."

"Really? Because from my perspective your own father almost executed you."

Naruto didn't answer.

"You get stronger for others. You share your little secrets with them. But the way I see it, that isn't enough. Go ahead, pour your bleeding little heart out to those willing to listen, but it won't do you any good when they come back and rip it out of your chest later." Orochimaru told her seriously.

She huffed at his cynical view. "You're just a ray of sunshine, aren't you? The thing is that you hold theirs as well. It's a double edged sword, Orochimaru."

"Well… Only if you let it be. You hold too much regards in others, Naruto. I had hoped you would start to see that on your own already. You let your heart rule you instead of your head. It cause for unnecessary worry and heartbreak. Especially in our occupation where we risk our life so often. Even if they don't betray you they can still simply die."

His argument was ended with a challenging glance, and Naruto shook her head at his stubbornness. "Maybe from your perspective. But you're a cold hearted bastard, so I don't usually take your advice to heart anyway."

"And you're an emotional basket case. I don't usually take your words seriously either." Orochimaru replied with a smirk as they started walking again. Naruto remembered she was supposed to look for tracks, and she hurriedly glanced around the forest while listening with half an ear. "You know I never liked you much. I found you fascinating, and that's why I pushed to have you on my team. Otherwise I would never have bothered with someone as demanding as you."

The insult only made her grin as she studied a broken branch for any signs of human tampering. "I know that. You told me years ago why you picked me to be on your team. I'm still pissed about that actually. I sort of hated you. A lot."

Orochimaru hummed in acknowledgement. "I know. I found it refreshing really. For all your delusions at least you have a lot of guts."

Naruto looked up at him strangely. "I guess you have brains. For some things at least. You're actually kind of loyal."

"Loyal?" Mused Orochimaru surprised. "I thought I was arguing about not blindly following your heart."

"Well… You fought for me didn't you? You fought for my freedom against your own sensei and the leader of the village. That's loyalty."

Orochimaru didn't answer for a long while as they passed over a small river. "Hmmm… I actually kind of regret that. Keeping you locked up would probably be easier. You're a lot of work sometimes."

That made her laugh. "I'm a lot of work? What about you? You are impossible to argue against. No
"That has nothing to do with stubbornness. It has to do with your words. Because what you say is usually idiotic."

"Is not! A lot of people listen to me, dattebayo!" Naruto argued.

"I know. Which speaks more of their level of intelligence than yours." Orochimaru replied drily.

She narrowed her eyes and ran ahead. Her feet getting wet as she stepped in a puddle of water but ignored it in favour of insulting the Snake Sannin. "A lot of people listen to you too, and I don't get that. Your face alone doesn't really gather a lot of trust you know."

"Are you criticizing my looks? I think I'm holding up fine considering my age."

She snorted rudely. "Your face has nothing to do with your age. It's the experiments. You have to stop doing that crap, dattebayo." Naruto muttered. "What are you even doing? I hope it's not human experiments. I take personal offence to that crap. Always have, even before I ended up one myself. Strangely enough Shisui isn't against them, though his own mum ended up in an Iwa lab once."

"Shisui can distance his emotions from his job. You should try it yourself sometime." Orochimaru snapped without heat.

Naruto pursed her lips in annoyance. No matter what she said Orochimaru always shot her down. It was like talking to a brick wall. "Why do you do the experiments? I still hate the way you work. It's not right. You do to them what Kiri did to me, and yet you taunt Minato for his actions against me. It's really hypocritical, isn't it?"

"It is. Though I've never locked up my own daughter with the threat of execution over her head."

"You don't have a daughter to do that to." Naruto pointed out.

"Yes, and I have no wish for them either. Children are a biological necessity because of the human instinct to reproduce and carry out the continued existence of the species. But if you can break the restrictions of a life limitation then having a child doesn't become a priority."

Naruto blinked. "Eh?"

He gave an amused but not surprised sigh. "Children are the future, but if you can live forever you don't need children."

Naruto rolled her eyes. "You're still on that path, are you?"

"Of course."

"Why though? Why would you want to live forever? I never would have wanted it myself."

"That is because of your attachment. You care too much about people, and the idea of having to continue without them is probably the worst fate you can imagine, isn't it?" Orochimaru answered casually as they stopped next to a boulder. They both checked out the terrain with interest, seeing as the boulder was the only rock without any moss or growth on it. It was an unnatural addition.

When Naruto answered her voice was lower than before. "Yes… But I could survive. The question is if I could find new people to fight for. But you're not like me. You don't connect with people easily, so wouldn't it be really lonely? When you lived on while Jiraiya and Tsunade grew old and
died? When everyone you let yourself care about is gone and it's only you left? What is the point anymore then?"

His reply was short and matter of fact. As if it should be a given. "To live."

"You know… Living and existing are two very different things. When I was locked up after the Kiri mission… I was alive, I was breathing and talking but I wasn't… I felt purposeless, which is so much worse than being powerless. I had two bijū inside me and I was so pumped up on chakra I could probably have blown up Konoha if I got angry enough, but I would never trade that for those I care about. That power felt so meaningless without anyone to protect it with. My friends, my job, my village… It's worth so much more than any ability I might acquire."

Orochimaru was quiet for a long moment and looked. "But it's not supposed to be like that. You were punished for becoming too dangerous too soon, but we live in a ninja village. Working for power should be encouraged, and not within the limits that's put down today... They expect people to walk around like sheep, to follow every rule that's put in place to limit them. The restrictions stop people from evolving to the next level."

"...I don't get that." She said, honestly confused. Konoha had never put a limit to how strong you could get. Orochimaru didn't know the whole story, so he couldn't possibly know how conflicting her situation had been during her imprisonment. At long last she was starting to realize Minato had a reason for his actions. She might not agree with all of them, but they were not done out of a wish to limit her. Out of spite or some sort of revenge. He'd thought about the village best interest, and that had come at the expense of Naruto's wellbeing.

It wasn't a strange concept. They were ninja, and their occupation was all about sacrifices for the village's best interest.

Orochimaru's slithering voice drifted back to her consciousness and snapped her out of her thoughts. "Not many decades ago the general level of shinobi was a lot higher. There was constant war and it pushed people to the limit without restraints. That's how the likes of Senju Hashirama, Uchiha Madara and Senju Tobirama came to be as strong as they were. Today we call them Gods of Shinobi, but how did three of that level pop up simultaneously? They were close in age, they lived in the same country but today you will have a hard time finding anyone who could stand against them in all the nations combined. That is the system, Naruto. The system gives people a sense of laziness. It stops people from working towards new heights."

Naruto frowned and looked ahead. "But unlike how it is today, they were desperate back then. The system we use today protects people from having to go to such extremes anymore. It is the reason for the hidden villages isn't it? The price of a handful extremely strong shinobi was the life of thousands of others. That's not healthy. That's not right. The hidden villages gave people a chance to mature and grow strong at their own pace, and not through some death race to see who could stay alive the longest."

He nodded in acknowledgement, but he wouldn't be Orochimaru if he didn't have a counter argument. He never let her have the final say if he could help it. "Maybe for the weak minded, but for me? For you? We strive for power, and then we're punished when we reach for it." Naruto was about to object, but Orochimaru held up a hand. "You do, it doesn't matter what your reason is, but you do push yourself harder than anyone Naruto. Just like I strive for power. Our reasoning might be a little different and our methods varied, but the goal is similar. Get strong or die attempting. You have come too close to dying one too many to deny that."

Naruto grimaced. She was being compared to Orochimaru? Seriously? They actually had something in common? She'd never seen that one coming. "You grow stronger at the dispense of others though.
How can you argue that the system is limiting people when you take their choices away completely through your experiments? How can you justify your own methods and yet blame theirs at the same time? My method doesn't hurt anyone except myself. While yours have caused who knows how many to suffer."

Orochimaru had grown serious by now, and some of their usual causal banter had turned more sober. "I have seen and survived two Great Wars Naruto. That has shown me one thing very clearly. People are dispensable. The kage sends their people out to die and suffer while fighting for something not everyone can recall by the end of the war. By then the losses is what keeps them going. It fuels their hate. Those bonds you cherish so much is the main reason that wars happen in the first place and lasts for years. Tell me; why did the Third Shinobi War start?"

Naruto opened her mouth, but then she closed it. What was the reason? He nodded at her confusion. She'd just confirmed his point.

She knew why she fought. Someone was threatening her home, and she defended it in response. By the end of the war she had felt genuine dislike for both Iwa and Kiri because they were responsible for her own suffering. But… why had it come to that?

"You killed others to save your own friends. But the other nations fought for the same thing. Peace is a fleeting thing we humans have no idea how to hold on to, and we have very little interest in keeping it either. It's only in the contrast of war that we cherish peace, but as peace comes upon us we find excuses to keep our hate and fuel it in the memory of what we lost to achieve it. It only breeds more conflict."

Naruto shook her head, suddenly realizing something she'd never really imagined before. "So that's why? That's why you don't form friendships? You can't bear to care about someone who's weak enough to die?"

Orochimaru missed a step and looked startled at her. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"You only care about really strong people. The Third, Tsunade and Jiraiya. They're all super strong, and there's very little chance of them dying."

He was too startled to snap a reply, but after a pregnant pause he put on a sarcastic expression. She could see it as the defense mechanism it was though. "You don't think I care about my students?"

Naruto pursed her lips thoughtfully. "You would be angry if we died, I'm sure. Because you've put in a lot of effort into us. But would you be sad? I'm not so sure. However; if Jiraiya died?" She paused and looked up at the snake Sannin. "I don't think you'd ever admit it, but I'm pretty certain that would hurt you."

They finally manage to make it out of the forest and up over the tree line, the terrain now mainly consisting of grass and moss with lower bushes. Naruto had yet to spot any tracks though.

Orochimaru summoned snakes to make their way through the grass and rocks, some of them hissing at the cold wind. Naruto kept herself alert. The missing nin was somewhere around, but if he wasn't in their area it would most likely mean he had headed for the village close by. Not unlikely, but if he did there was a possibility he'd stay the night there. Perfect for them to locate and later capture.

They worked in silence as they scouted the area. Orochimaru seemingly in deep thought, but if it was about the mission or their discussion was unclear. He was good at multitasking though, so Naruto guessed it was both.
They started heading back by a different route than they came from, trying to cover more ground. Orochimaru broke the comfortable silence rather abruptly though. He was unusually chatty today.

"I think you're right." Said Orochimaru as they made their way down from the mountain.

Naruto tilted her head. "About what?"

"If my old teammates died it would hurt." He sounded annoyed though, and Naruto chuckled.

"That's a good thing Orochimaru. It means you still have something worth fighting for."

Orochimaru didn't seem to agree though, and Naruto rolled her eyes at her emotional stunted sensei. He was a horrible piece of shit, but he wasn't beyond help. "You have to get over it to truly know strength."

Naruto snorted. That didn't make sense at all. Orochimaru continued though. "Only strength matters. No bonds of friendship or love will ever help you unless you overcome them. Look at what your own father did to you, Naruto. Because he was able to distance himself from his emotional ties to his own flesh and blood he came out stronger, while you – who let your emotions rule you – for the first time lost. It is the first time I've actually seen you defeated."

Naruto bit her lip, hating that he had to keep bringing up the subject of her imprisonment, but Orochimaru continued with a frustrated tone. If she didn't know him better she'd think he was stressed. "I never want to fall to my own limitations, and from everything I've observed I can only conclude that emotions are a biological limitation. These emotions are why Konoha breeds people too short sighted to see past their own clans or friendships, and yet we pretend it is our strength. Konoha is supposed to be the nice village, but there's nothing nice about the fierceness of which we protect what we claim as ours." Orochimaru said in a low hiss.

Naruto raised an eyebrow, because from his rapidly speeding speech pattern he was working himself up. Naruto had never actually seen Orochimaru frustrated before, but she was suspecting this was how it went down.

He fiddled with a kunai in his hand, almost measuring it with his long fingers that traced the sharp metal. "We preach the Will of Fire as if it is an ultimate law, but the truth is few hold a spark of it themselves. The will of Fire -The will to never give up... And yet so many do. Your father gave up on you, Naruto. Hiruzen gave up on his title, and even you gave up your life when you tried to commit suicide. I don't wish to be that way. I want to be greater. I have the will of fire and I will never give up. To break all the rules of our lifespan and create a path where no one can even dream of touching me."

"I don't give a crap about how strong you want to be, Orochimaru. It's about how you get there, not the goal itself!" Naruto shouted, abruptly snapping Orochimaru out of his own musing as he looked at her with a flicker of surprise. "If you fight your way through friends and foe the power you gain is tainted, but if you allow the people around you to help you on the road you can succeed - you might even go further than you dreamed. To get help isn't a weakness - It's an acknowledgement. It's proof you actually exist, and that all that effort wasn't done for nothing."

They stared each other down, Orochimaru not willing to back off just yet as Naruto continued ranting. "You don't seem to notice that the strength you want so much can destroy you. How can you think for a second all this power will mean anything? If you became as strong as Uchiha Madara himself you'd still end up just like him. Thrown away by the village to stew in your own filth with nothing but vengeance to keep you company."
Orochimaru opened his mouth as Naruto took a breath in between words, but she plunged on, going increasingly red from her lack of breathing. "Strength in the hand of the lonely almost always leads to hatred... And don't you see why? It's because they're lonely. It's because they have no one to share that power with - share that effort with. It's all empty and meaningless and eventually you rot in your own empty existence. Because... It's like when you're far away on an exotic island, and you see the most spectacular sunrise in all history, but there will be no one but you to see it, so the sight will lose its uniqueness if you can't tell anyone about it. Don't have anyone to share it with. You shouldn't push us all away. I might have hated you with a passion when we met, but right now I'm kinda fond of you." Naruto's brows furrowed.

Wow... That was one sentence she never thought she'd ever say. It was true too. She actually liked Orochimaru despite his slightly twisted world view.

Orochimaru was miffed at her admission, and he was looking at her as if she'd grown a second head. "I will never believe that having someone precious to me will ever make me weak. I have been there myself, I've been alone, and it's the most pathetic existence imaginable. My bonds can never be a weakness." Naruto said assuredly. Her eyes hard as she stared him down. She almost gasped as his eyes flickered down. Did he finally get it?

"Within limits perhaps..." Orochimaru allowed eventually.

For a few passing moments a bird singing punctuated the silence.

"Gah! You're impossible, dattebayo!" Naruto exclaimed her hands flapping at her side in frustration.

"I don't think you really understand what I mean. You can have friends... I guess... and still be strong, but you can never rely on them like you do yourself."

"Of course I can!" Naruto protested.

"No. If you could then tell me all your secrets, Naruto. Right now. It's for the benefit of our bond, is it not?" Orochimaru told her in a slithering tone. He was goading her, and Naruto's teeth clenched.

"Ku, ku, ku." His laugher never failed to make Naruto shudder. She suspected Orochimaru did it so often because he was aware of it too. "Exactly. You have some level of survival instinct then. That's good to see at least. Because even your closest friends don't know everything do they? Do they know who your mother was? Who you father is?" He asked though he already knew the answer. Orochimaru didn't give her an opportunity to reply either. "No they don't, because you're too sad about the fact that Minato is so ashamed of your existence he's denying he even has a daughter."

It was such a slap in the face Naruto faulted in her step, and she felt her pulse quicken in anger, yet her voice remained icy as she answered. "What Minato feels is not a reflection of me. I'm proud to know that the Yellow Flash is my father. No one is perfect, no matter what rumours say he is only human, and whatever he might think is irrelevant to my own emotions..."

Orochimaru tilted his head curiously. His expression going carefully blank, but his eyes told a different story.

Her hand lowered until she was clutching the fabric over her stomach, right above where her seal was located. "To me... I know what he is at heart. Anyone can make mistakes. In my life I've made more than I can count. But how you choose to act when death comes for you shows your true character despite the mistakes you made along the way there. I know as well as I know that grass is green to the extent of Minato's sacrifices. And for that... he will always be my hero."
The Sannin tilted his head, a puzzled frown curling his lips as he studied her. "Minato? He of all people is your hero? I would never have imagined he was your role model. You want to be like him, even after everything he did to you in the name of the village?"

The corners of Naruto's lips slowly rose, a small mischievous smile growing on her face while her eyes sparked with hidden secrets. "Neh, don't you know it's not about being like your hero, Orochimaru? It's about surpassing them, dattebayo."

Kakashi flew over the rooftops while heading for the ANBU station. He was in dashing rush, there were really little time and he'd stalled in favour of taking a shower before leaving home.

The workload was getting ridiculous. If this continued he would have to make a choice between his ANBU career and continuing with team Kasai. Not that there was much of a question which one he'd pick if it came to it, he would choose his friends in an instant.

Though that didn't take away the fact that Minato was pushing the limits of how long a person could go without sleep with his ridiculous hours these days. Recently he'd actually fallen asleep on the floor thanks to exhaustion, and woken up to Akino sitting on his face and almost suffocating him. Either they needed more ANBU or he was resigning. He needed some spare time. He wanted to have time to read his Icha Icha book. Was that really too much to ask?

He landed on the street in front of the ANBU station, his hair more ruffled than usual thanks to the fast pace he'd used to get here, and apparently he wasn't the only one. Quite a few people were heading into the station, and immediately his thoughts of reading and spare time left him.

So many turn ups at the same time couldn't be a good thing… could it?

ANBU worked quite differently from normal teams. The most prominent difference was their lack of bonding amongst the members. As they dealt with both dangerous and dirty missions the fatality rate was higher than in the regular forces, but there were other differences too.

Most commonly they were usually divided into squads, but there were other forms of formations within the organization. Unlike when put into genin teams, where the ninjas were still maturing and finding their specialty, ANBU squads were more well thought out from the beginning.

Squads could have a number varying from five to fifteen people, though the most common was around ten or nine. Smaller squads were usually put together for sole purposes. Like the strategy squad was a squad of five, and that number never changed even if one of their own died. In that scenario another took their place with similar skill sets. The leader of that squad was ANBU Fukurou. Or as Kakashi had first met him; Nara Shikaku. They were higher up in the ANBU because they had a hand in almost every mission any of the others squads were asked to fulfil later. They also rarely used masks. It was an unsaid rule that the strategy squad were honourable ANBU who didn't really have a choice about joining. Their skill sets was not required. It was demanded.

Kakashi's own squad - Ro - was first and foremost specialized in heavy hitting, front line attacks, but they were also part of a three squad platoon where each squad had abilities that the other lacked to some extent. Though they rarely worked together across squads, there were still some occasions where they needed all three to cooperate for a particularly large and difficult mission. Which from one glance around the numerous turn ups at such an odd hour of the day seemed was coming up ahead.

Rō was mainly a heavy assault squad. Ibo was a tracking and infiltration squad. While Kem was the capture and reconnaissance squad.
The three squads together were usually referred to as the Komorebi platoon, an anagram of the three squad names Ro-Ibo-Kem. It was an ironic name, seeing as Komorebi meant light filtering in through the leaves of trees - yet they were ANBU.

His own squad consisted of nine members. They had been ten, but their captain had died a year ago on a mission. Though he was far from the oldest on their squad, he had still been promoted to captain, and now this squad was his responsibility. Just like team Kasai was.

Personally Kakashi didn't understand why he kept on receiving leader positions. From experience he had not exactly proven himself a natural leader. Far from it.

The first people he ever led; three academy students back when he'd still been genin himself, had ended up in disaster. They came up last in the competition after almost drowning, one breaking his leg and all but one cheery blonde ending up sick. Two of his three charges had ended up in the intensive care at the hospital, and he himself had to face the Chūnin exam with a bad cough. Though luckily no one suffered any lasting damage that time.

After that he wasn't so fortunate anymore. His first time leading a real team; his own genin teammates, they might have succeeded with blowing up Kannabi bridge, but before even making it there Rin had been kidnapped and Obito ended up dead, before Minato had to save the two still alive after Kakashi fainted from chakra exhaustion.

Then it was the first time he led a squad; the Uzumaki rescue mission. Where they arrived too late to save one imprisoned Uzumaki and came close to killing off the other one himself. Iruka had died while it also led to Naru getting kicked out of the village for years and a lifelong sentence as jinchūriki. That particular mission had gone down as the worst memory of his life, which said quite a bit considering his track record.

If he'd been superstitious Kakashi would suspect he was cursed. Because the worst case scenarios always seemed to happen the first time Kakashi led any new type of formations. He was pretty sure if he was ever paired up with a partner instead of a team his new partner would die on their first mission just to keep to tradition.

The insecurity always nagged at him, but so far he had pushed through. Was there anything those missions had taught him it was the importance of your comrades. Not just for his own sake, but for others too. Because it wasn't just his subordinates that relied on his leadership, it was also everyone who cared about those he brought into danger.

So he might not know what each of his squad members favourite colour was, but he knew their strength and weaknesses, he knew who cooperated better and he worked endlessly to make sure everyone came home safe. That way less people would end up screwed over by his mistakes yet again.

Today his entire squad had been called in, and from the looks of it so had the rest of the Komorebi platoon. In the hallway leading to the locker rooms he spotted Shisui and Raidō, both hurrying on their way to their own locker rooms. The two were in squad Ibo together with five others. A smaller squad than his own, but a very competent one.

"Inu taicho." Kō asked, better known as Tonbo within their current crowd.

"Yes?" Kakashi replied and turned towards the doorway. Kō was a couple of years older than himself, but his short stature and soft face made him look younger.

"We need to hurry. They want us in the meeting room in five minutes." He replied with a sigh.
Kakashi grunted in reply. Great. The entire Komorebi had been called in simultaneously and they had to hurry to get changed. This had all the signs of a disaster waiting to happen.

In the end they found Hiamo Naoki in the small mountain village after all. They had waited until he left the next day, making sure to follow him at a distance until he left the village on his own. They wanted to catch him without making enemies out of strangers. A lot of destructions could be caused during a capture, and since Hiamo seemed to be in a rush they didn't have to wait too long before he was well alone a long way from the village.

The plan had been simple but effective. The hard part was actually tracking him without losing him again, but the capturing part had been surprisingly fast and easy.

Orochimaru had charged first, while Rin and Naruto came from the side. They'd chased him straight into Ensui's shadow, which efficiently stopped the terrified man with a Sannin after him.

However, if tracking him had been difficult, Naruto didn't realize how hard the return journey would be. They hadn't walked for more than an hour, and had yet another five days until they were back home, and it was already a nightmare.

Hiamo just wouldn't stop screaming and pleading.

"I did what I had to! You have to believe me. We were too deep inside Iwa. We were surrounded! If I had left them to save myself they would have died anyway. Iwa would capture them, torture them and then kill them after they were broken! The best for them was a quick death without fear!"

Shouted the man hysterically. Naruto sent him a nasty glare, Rin looked angry while Ensui kept a blank expression.

"Really?" Asked Orochimaru drily, pushing the man forwards to make him keep the pace up. "So how do you excuse your own escape? Why not come back to the village if their deaths were so unavoidable? Why not let them die and come back?"

"I- I..." The man's eyes looked crazed. He was sweating and mumbling under his breath, and Naruto had to keep herself back from beating him up. His genin students had been nine and ten years old. He'd killed them after drugging them to sleep. It was disgusting.

"I wanted to live. I didn't want to do it, but I… I had to. I couldn't go back! I can't go back!" He shouted, again trying to get free, but Orochimaru's gripped his neck with an elongated hand and squeezed.

"Weak minded idiot." Orochimaru murmured. Naruto doubted the other two could hear it though. He glanced over at the three of them, and his voice gained volume. "Shut him up. Everyone in the country will hear this if he continues wailing." He ordered, and Ensui stepped up at once.

The man struggled and begged, but Ensui's face stayed carefully emotionless as he dragged back the man's head by his hair and stuffed a cloth into his mouth.

As captain of his squad Kakashi stood first in row. His other squad members in a line behind him. To his right was squad Ibo led by ANBU Kumo, where Shisui stood third in line under his Kawauso mask and behind him stood Raidō with his Yagi codename.

The Komorebi squads were all lined up neatly along a few random others. With one glance though Kakashi spotted a large number of people who had peculiar specialties. Mainly from infiltration and TIF. Inoichi, Ibiki, Hiashi, three Inuzuka, a couple of Aburame and even Anko stood amongst them...
with a few people Kakashi could neither identify nor recognize. Nara Shikaku was there too, and
Kakashi was surprised to see his ANBU mask propped to the left side of his head. That meant he
was joining in on this to. A rarity, seeing as he almost never went on missions for ANBU himself.
They usually needed his brains more than they needed his muscles.

Minato came into the room followed by the Sandaime. They both looked deadly serious as they
came to a stop in the middle of the gathering. "We are on the clock, so pay attention." Said the
Yondaime strictly and gestured towards the hill. "We have gathered information of a secret base, and
we're about to infiltrate it. We have reason to suspect Shimaro Danzō is behind this, and I warn you
all to be vigilant. This will not be easy. Scouts have found two entrances. The main one and what is
most likely an escape route. The order is to capture if possible, but kill if necessary. This is a clean
out, and I myself will lead this."

Kakashi straightened up. Minato would lead the attack? The Hokage was leaving the village? His
eyes wandered to the Sandaime. That meant he would most likely be the one in charge while Minato
was away…

"Nara Shikaku-san is my second in command, and Hyūga Hiashi-san is third." Minato continued.
"Your tasks will be explained now." Minato stepped away as Shikaku came up.

"This is a large base, and we will split up to cover more ground. Here's the map. It might be
incomplete, but from our research this is the rough draft of how the base is put together." One of the
ANBU came over and handed everyone a map each.

Kakashi glanced down at the map, shocked at how large the thing was. It also looked intricate… A
lot of incomplete tunnels connected larger rooms across multiple levels. The base was oval in shape,
with what looked like two identical halls in the middle. They were huge compared to the outlined
passages, and if the passages were large enough for a person to get through it would mean the halls
in the middle were easily the size of one of the training ground. Though as Shikaku had said, the
map wasn't entirely completed.

Shikaku continued going through the plan. Kakashi took in each word carefully, but no matter what
Shikaku explained he already knew what this meant. They were in for a blood bath, and if failed,
there would be a lot more at risk than an unsuccessful mission.

"HEGDY! GEESHO! SHAAA!"

The muffled shouts of their gagged prisoner was getting very annoying. Naruto glared up at the man
she had no sympathy for and was growing highly annoyed with. "You piece of shit! Shut up!"
Naruto growled and hit their prisoner hard in his jaw.

The man looked dazed from the impact and Rin glared at Naruto. "Stop doing that. Now I have to
heal him again, and the less I have to deal with him the better." Rin scolded her and stood up.

"Just wait a moment. Let him stew in the pain for a while. He deserves it, dattebayo!" Naruto
growled. The prisoner was a pain in the arse.

Ensui sighed and stood up. "Or Rin could put him to sleep. He's making such a spectacle and I'm
assuming you have the right equipment with you?"

Rin nodded and stood up at once. Naruto tightened her hold on the man's arm, just to make sure he
didn't do any sudden movements as Rin came forward. She took up a needle and filled it with
something from a capsule. Next moment it was pushed into the man's arm, and the affect came
almost immediately. His eyes grew heavy, his constant whining dwindled and soon after he sagged and fell down.

Naruto didn't bother to catch him.

Orochimaru glanced at each of them in turn with an unimpressed scowl. "Since you decided knocking him out was a good idea you three can sort him out yourself. I'm certainly not carrying him."

Shisui took a deep breath. He did this before any mission started. It was a way to calm himself down before a particularly nasty mission. This one was no exception.

Shisui glanced back at Yagi who had his eyes glued towards the forest surrounding them. Their taicho was the calmest of the lot though. He was sitting lazily on branch, but Shisui knew he was as aware as the rest of them. Their ANBU tattoo would sting any minute now.

The seal on their upper arm was there as a way to communicate between the ANBU on mission and the operation station. It was a very simple but effective system. Sometimes the code differed, but in this case it would signal their start by a simple sting in their arm.

After the start signal a simple sting in their ANBU mark meant "backup." A sting that lasted for two seconds meant "mission completed," and a sting that lasted for five seconds meant "mission failed."

Team Ro and Kem had already entered along with Minato and his team. They were heading north inside the base while Shikaku would lead the second infiltration group south. His own Anbu squad Ibo was in the second group and they were still waiting for the clear signal.

He was using the time to focus on his breathing. He wasn't more nervous than normal, but it was an efficient way to start a mission. It cleared his head and pushed away everything else. When he had his Kawauso mask on he was no longer Shisui. No longer an Uchiha. He was only an ANBU and nothing else. Here Shisui's problems were not the ones Kawauso had. Kawauso was a clean slate. A blank page with only room for the mission. It made things so much easier, less complicated considering the missions they were sent on. Because what he'd done as ANBU Kawauso was not something he'd ever do as Uchiha Shisui.

At least he liked to pretend so.

It was a weird mentality, but it was one many used to prevent the scenes they partook in from eating them up from within.

The skin on his arm tightened slightly. It was as if his muscles cramped up around the ANBU seal burnt into his skin. And next moment they were all moving.

Fukurou was in the lead, Shisui was close behind him and followed at a fast run. They arrived at the base soon after, and as planned Shisui and one other ANBU continued while the others stopped. His Sharingan activated as he looked for any enemy agents.

Four people lay unconscious by the entrance which was the work of infiltration group one. His comrade was scouting too, his byuakugan visible as he turned towards him and gave the clear signal.

With a small nod he signaled for the rest and soon the group made their way into the base.

Minato glanced back at the team following him. Without meaning to his eyes lingered a bit longer on
his old student. It was a habit he couldn't quite shake off after years of being responsible for his wellbeing.

At least Rin and Naruto wasn't here, the two should be safe far away from Konoha at the moment under the protection of Orochimaru. He was incredibly relieved to find no indication what so ever that Orochimaru was connected with the base. It seemed Hiruzen was right. Naruto's influence had changed him this time, and from Fugaku's and Hizashi's rather repetitive reports he didn't do anything more suspicious than psychologically torture his research staff by giving cheery death threats if they didn't step up their work efficiency.

The base was a maze of passages and corridors. They had already had to split up once already, and now they had to do it again. Minato was getting frustrated too. He'd be faster alone. But for now they needed to stick together until they reached the room in question.

Jiraiya and his squad was outside blocking off the exit routes in case someone got past them or tried to escape through the hidden exit. They should have all routes covered, but this was a nightmare of a base and Minato knew they were running out of time.

"Incoming, ten o'clock." Someone said from behind him, and they all snapped to attention. Their attackers came fast though they all halted slightly as Minato charged first. If they didn't fear the Yellow Flash, they at least feared the Hokage of Konoha, and with good reason too.

It was extremely efficient teamwork, and Minato had only time to take down two of the eight attacking before they were all down.

With a sigh he let the others clean up while he looked down the three corridors they could now pick from. The base itself was made to confuse. It was made like Konoha itself, the structure was designed to warp your perspective and prevent infiltration. He glanced back at his subordinates and started signing hurriedly. "We're splitting up."

Kakashi hated traps. They were always around. He watched with a frown as Tonbo deactivated their twenty sixth trap carefully. His movements iron steady as he worked to loosen the threads without activating the whole death trap.

If she'd been with them Naruto would be having a field day with all these set ups. She might accidently set one or two off, but she had a strange sense of luck to never get caught in them. He always thought if Naruto had been a bit more dark and damaged she'd do wonderful in his own squad in ANBU. Though the idea of Naruto in ANBU was as ridiculous as Kakashi dyeing his hair mint green.

Tonbo gave the thumbs up. The trap was deactivated, and they continued forward, their tempo a lot slower now than before.

The passage was sloping down and growing smaller with less refined and rough surfaces. Half of his team had split up from them, taking another route to clear out. While ANBU usually didn't cooperate with the regular forces, today was different. The rest of team Ro was joined by Ibiki and an Aburame, while Kakashi had somehow ended up with Anko amongst his subordinates. He guessed having TIF members was a strength in this situation though. While ANBU teams were there for the clean out, TIF were with them to gather information.

He'd give Anko credit though. She wasn't here simply because she worked for TIF, because he could easily see that infiltration was definitely one of her talents. Though the girl loved attention more than anything, she was very skilled at being sneaky too. It was a strange contradiction, and if
she wanted to she'd do well in Ibo with Shisui.

Kakashi made them hurry down a couple of stairs, making sure his footsteps were soft and soundless. He repressed his chakra so tightly even the sensor on the team would have problems detecting him from a few steps away.

The further down they got the air around them changed. It had been uncomfortably warm for a while, but there was a draft coming from this passage, which was why they had continued this way.

The base had a lot of dead ends, but the fresh air along this passage indicated it connected with something other than a wall. Kakashi had a grudging respect for whoever had designed the base. It was an infiltration team's worst nightmare and it was a good thing Minato had prepared for this infiltration, because otherwise they would have been lost from the beginning.

They came into a passage. A round room with multiple exits leading into seven different passages. Kakashi frowned. Where the hell did they go from here… He thought back on the map. He had an idea where they might be, but the map had showed five exits, not seven. Then again it might not have been picked up on.

He studied the ground and found traces of dirt and wear on the floor. Three of the exits were used more than the other four. To follow them or take one of the lesser travelled ones? He glanced back at his subordinates, still trying to decide what to do when Anko stepped up. "Split up?" She signed in question.

Though he understood where she was coming from Kakashi didn't like it. They were already reduced to five, and splitting up now was not a good idea. The only backup they could count on to come on time would be Minato, they all had the Hiraishin mark with them, and they could get immediate help if Minato could afford to go. Though if Minato was busy then the others would need to come themselves, and Kakashi was quite certain by now that if they split up it would be a nightmare to find them again. But then again...

"Yes." Kakashi replied in sign language. He didn't have a choice. The mission was too important to waste time. "This is the last split. We'll go in two teams and Anko is with me. Tonbo will be in charge of the remaining members of team Ro."

Team Ibo and the TIF members had stayed together for about three corridors, before Fukurou split them up. Shisui followed half his squad after Fukurou, while the other Kem members took a different route with their taicho.

But they hadn't been split up for more than four minutes before the first opposition arrived. Guards ambushed them in their sixth corridor, and Shisui didn't as much as blink as two of his comrades hit the ground.

It was about efficiency, and from their performance it seemed their enemies was also all about the same principles. They were clad just as Shisui remembered from last month. The grey cloaks and faces obscured in black ninja masks.

He jumped and spun midair to twist out of the rain of shuriken, landing vertically on the wall as he sent his own towards their attackers. It was a feint move from his part, because while the shuriken still spun in the air he cast a genjutsu on two of their attackers. Causing them to think everyone was closer to them than they actually were and throwing off their aim.

Yagi was one of the two fallen, having been hit in several places. Shisui didn't have time to help now
though. First eliminate the enemy, and then help the fallen.

Fukurou had trapped seven in his shadow, making it easy for two of them to knock them out brutally and concentrate on the three still standing. One tried to get away, probably to sound the alarm or report back, but Shisui sprang after him. The operative had a head start, but Shisui was faster and had a clear shot.

A second later the enemy fell. Three shuriken sticking out of his back. All in crucial points. Shisui stopped in front of him and sent a precise hit. Leaving the man unconscious before he dragged down the cloth covering his face.

Shisui had no idea who it was. A man. That was all. Fair skin and brown hair. With automatic movements he threw the man over his shoulder and returned to the team.

The rest were already busy with the cleanup, and the enemy survivors were currently being restrained. Fukurou was treating Yagi the best he could, his injuries didn't look life threatening, but he would be a liability if he continued which meant he was off the mission. They all knew he would have to make it out of the base on his own for now.

They couldn't turn back, and they couldn't bring the two injured men with them either. On the other hand, it was probably safer to go backwards than forwards at this point. They were a tracking and infiltration squad, and this mission was their specialty. They all knew the protocol like a dog knew how to bark.

Shisui stood guard while the rest finished, looking out for any enemies while the squad regrouped. Yagi got to his feet shakily, and with the help of Fukurou the two men was standing upright. With a nod from the two injured the squad continued without them.

They had barely gotten into the next corridor before they all felt the repetitive short stings on their upper arm.

They halted in unison, none of them having expected such a call to come this quickly. The stinging continued. Short burst of pain in their shoulder which could only be a desperate and repetitive call for backup from somewhere inside the base.


to be continued…
Thank you so very much for reading! The chapter was beta'd by AnjoRemix! Horrible, horrible chapter to write. Extremely tiering and annoying to type and I’m still not really pleased with it...

And I apologize so much for the long wait, but my computer met a swift and abrupt end in the beginning of May. So rest in peace my loyal beast of a neck breaker (it was soooo heavy to carry around in my rug sack…) he did his job faithfully for the first two years, and then it went steadily downhill.

So yeah, that’s why the update is so late. I’m borrowing a computer right now since I’m saving up for a new one, and it might affect my updating schedule for some time. (I’m a student, so food trumps tech) At least the next chapter is mostly completed though, so I promise that the next chapter will be up by Sunday (at the latest).

ANBU masks translations:

Inu (Dog) – Kakashi
Kawauso (Otter) – Shisui
Yagi (Goat) – Raidō
Kumo (Spider) – Shisui and Raidō's captain
Fukurou (Owl) – Shikaku
Tonbo (Dragonfly) – Kō
Komoreb (sunlight that filters through the leaves of trees.)

Have a nice day everyone!
Chapter Warning: Gore, violence and death up ahead. It's also a very long chapter.

Chapter Thirty Six – Into the Shadows

"Let's die together." - Inuzuka Kiba

They halted in unison, none of them having expected such a call to come this quickly. The stinging continued. Short burst of pain in their shoulder which could only be a desperate and repetitive call for backup from somewhere inside the base.

When the signal ended Kakashi gritted his teeth in bitterness. Anko had noticed his tension but she didn't have the ANBU tattoo, so of course she didn't understand what had happened.

It was the squad members that had gone off with Ibiki when Minato had split them up that had activated his ANBU tattoo. They had called for backup no less than six times, but all Kakashi could tell was the chakra signature which had called for help. It was Kō on his team, but he couldn't pick up the direction, which meant they were too far away for the seal to work properly, or a barrier was hindering the signal.

They could be anywhere by now.

"There was a call for backup." Kakashi signed swiftly, his focus temporarily distracted as he tried to plan out their next move.

Anko didn't react much to the message. Her lips pursed slightly and her eyes narrowed, but otherwise her face was uncharacteristically hard to read. "Then we have to get moving." Was the almost casual reply he got.

Kakashi knew she was right, and without another exchange they continued. The corridor they followed was larger and more comfortable than the previous ones. Unfortunately it was also a perfect place to get attacked, so they were both on high alert to any miniscule sign of an enemy as they made their way through the passage.

He'd already fought two battles, and Kakashi was under no illusion that would be all. ANBU missions were usually pretty clean cut. Two fights during one mission was considered a lot, though it was the level of their opponent that usually made them difficult. So far they'd had the advantage, attacking in relevantly large groups with a varied skill sets that were all combat types. However now it was only him and Anko, and they were a much weaker target without the rest of his comrades.

Though it was hardly unexpected. Kakashi had known going in that this would happen, and now he had to finish the mission while making sure Anko made it out alive.

They moved fast, covering long lengths of ground by pumping chakra through their muscles to keep the speed up. It didn't take long before Kakashi spotted a strange addition to the corridor, and with a short signal they both stopped.
Above them, concealed to lesser eyes than Kakashi's and leveled with the rocky ceiling, was a trapdoor.

They shared a glance while they carefully tried to sense anyone above them. Neither were specialized sensors, but both had enough practice to be useful in situations such as these. Though no matter how much he tried Kakashi didn't get anything at all from the attempt.

It could mean there was no one there, it could mean someone was good at suppressing their chakra, or it could mean something was blocking it instead.

But this was the first trap door Kakashi had spotted in this place. They were deep underground, so Kakashi suspected it was relevant to their mission even if he couldn't recall this from the map they'd received.

Anko took matters into her own hands and jumped. She attached her hands to the ceiling of the passage before heaving her legs up with her abdomen muscles and firmly planted her feet on each side of the trap door. Properly secured she tried to turn the handle, but not surprising to either of them it turned out to be locked. Biting her lip she gave the trapdoor a quick look over before signing. "Permission to summon?"

"Granted." Kakashi replied.

She did the summon hanging upside down from the ceiling. For a moment Kakashi thought she'd failed though. She had barely used any chakra at all, there hadn't even been a puff of smoke and he couldn't see any sort of snake anywhere. But next moment Anko put her hand against the lock, and she seemed to be waiting. Her hand fell away, and she signed again. "My smallest summon Hebiko. He's a master at working locks. He's in there right now." She explained and pointed to the lock.

Kakashi arched an eyebrow. Yep. Anko could definitely be an asset to team Ibo. He wondered if all of Orochimaru's student had been taught how to infiltrate to such extents. At least two out of three seemed to have an unusual aptitude for this type of work.

The lock made a soft click, and when Anko tried the handle again it opened with ease. Light streamed into the dimply lit passage and Kakashi repressed the urge to wince at the sound of the door opening, but there was little they could do to prevent it. His nerves were on edge as they prepared to go in. If there were enemies on the other side then they'd just given away their position, which would result in an immediate battle where they would most likely be ambushed.

Subduing any rising apprehension he watched as Anko went in first before Kakashi hurriedly jumped up after her.

Landing on the floor next to the trapdoor he was forced to blink immediately. The room was so much brighter than the dark corridors downstairs. This room was also surprisingly high and narrow.

The interior was so different from anything else they'd come across so far he was momentarily bewildered at what he was seeing.

The room wasn't as narrow as he had first assumed though. They were in a pathway leading between tall bars that ran up to ceiling height on each side. Going up for at least two or three stories in total.

And… On the other side of the bars - imprisoned and chained - were people. More people Kakashi could count in such a short time.

Prisoners. There had to be hundreds of them.
Anko was gaping, her eyes wide as she looked into the closest cell. At least seven people were squeezed into the tiny cell. Granted, the prisoners of that cell didn't look very old. They were all children so they had more room to go on than if they'd been older. But the higher up his eyes travelled, the larger the stacked cells became.

A prison? Where the hell was this in the mission briefing?

Kakashi swallowed. Not sure what the hell he was supposed to do now. This was a cleanup, not a rescue mission. They were supposed to capture or kill anyone they saw, but these people were already locked up.

And they were unnaturally quiet. They must have noticed their entrance, but not one of them had moved forwards. A few had shuffled a bit inside their cell, but not a single one of them had made a sound. Their entrance had gone unacknowledged.

Eventually he looked back at Anko. She was staring back with a question marring her face. It couldn't be more obvious what she wondered.

What the hell do we do now?

After a long pause Kakashi decided. "Leave them. We'll continue."

Though it made him uncomfortable they would have to come back instead. They were not equipped to deal with all these people. Especially since he had no idea if they were friendly or not. The last thing they wanted was to set off a trap upon releasing them. It wasn't unheard of that cells were trapped to prevent the prisoners from escaping. Rather a dead prisoner, than a prisoner that could leak information...

Anko nodded, and Kakashi started walking down the path between the cells. The room was tall and long, more like a hall than anything else, but there was a door at the end of the room which he had set as their destination. His mind still whirling with different questions. Why they were even here, where they came from, and most of all; how this many people could be so quiet.

The door was still far away when Kakashi finally picked up on something, and they never reached the other end. There was a faint pulse from somewhere in the room and Kakashi tensed. A feather light swish came from somewhere above them, and he felt at least two presences from behind.

They were surrounded.

Shisui studied the strange machine in worry. His Sharingan examining the weird object with distrust and paranoia. They'd made it here without too much trouble. The room had not been protected and that didn't sit well with him. This object was certainly something to keep tabs on, so it's lack of security made him jumpy by expecting an ambush at any moment. "What is that thing?" Signed ANBU Kani while keeping a distance from the object.

"I believe it is some sort of transmitter." Answered Shisui when no one else seemed to have an answer.

Kani leaned forward in curiosity. "What exactly does it transmit?"

The stone with the proportions of a brick glowed faintly in the dark room. "Chakra..." And though all of them were wearing masks, Shisui could all too easily imagine their raised eyebrows at that reply.
"That doesn't make sense. I can't feel any chakra in the room. Where does it go?"

"This stone isn't normal. It's littered with fuinjutsu. This sign here is for storage." Shisui pointed to the underside of the stone placed in the middle of the strange device. "You can feel chakra coming up this tube if you touch it." He pointed to the pipe leading up from the floor, and the guys dared a few steps closer to see what he was gesturing towards. "And this sign here means communication or travel."

"Why do you think its transmitting chakra though? If anything it sounds like the chakra is coming up to be stored in the stone." Kani's signing was impatient.

Shisui shook his head. "I can't be a hundred percent certain, Minato-sama could, but I'm pretty confident that this stone is storing up chakra, and then sending it to another source. This is space-time ninjutsu. It gathers chakra from wherever that pipe leads, gathering the chakra, and then sends it away to another source through space ninjutsu. This… This is a chakra transmitter." Shisui concluded, growing more assured the more he looked at it.

"Should we take the stone?"

Shisui shook his head forcibly. Stepping away from the stone at once while he signed to the others. "No. That would not be wise at all. There's a reason why so few people dabble with fuinjutsu, and that's because wrong handling of seals usually ends up in disaster. We leave this to be deconstructed when we have more time on our hands. This is complicated fuinjutsu. I'd need days, if not weeks, to get this down." Shisui then gestured helplessly around the shabby room. "And we really don't have that type of time on our hands."

"Fine. Let's head out again then. This place creeps me out." Kani replied with a slight shudder.

Minato was beyond furious. The man he'd just defeated was a missing ninja from Kirigakure, and he couldn't believe Danzō had dared bringing him so close to Konoha.

With a harsh tug Minato pulled up the mask that had covered the nose and mouth off his now dead opponent. The man was jōnin, and who knew how long he'd been hiding in this base. From memory Minato thought he'd been listed as a missing nin by Kiri about two years ago, and he'd somehow ended up here. As a guard…

He glanced around the room. There were so many children, but none of them were making a move towards him anymore. Minato knew what they were too; the next generation of Root. A new force Danzō was training up behind Minato's back. He wanted to curse but refrained with some effort. They were probably traumatized enough already. No need to add swearing.

"Stay in this room." Minato ordered them.

None of them actually replied, but a few tried to shuffle further away though it was made impossible thanks to the walls making up this room. It was an underground dojo as far as Minato could tell. "If you go out there's a chance you'll get killed. So stay put."

He was staring into the eyes of a boy who couldn't be more than eight, but probably one of the oldest ones of the crowd. Minato kept the contact until the boy slowly started nodding, and soon half of them were nodding in agreement. Good, the message was received then.

With his senses reaching out for signs of danger Minato backtracked out of the room the way he'd come in.
This part of the base looked different from the rest. The paths were better lit, the construction more refined and there were proper floors and the walls of steel instead of rough stone.

He stepped over the two dead guards that had tried to stop him from entering the room with the children. They were idiots if they thought the two of them were enough to keep him back. Minato hadn't felt like this since the war. He hadn't felt this sort of emotions in years.

It was like waking up. It was like realizing he'd been in a daze for years, only to finally snap awake and realize the dreams weren't reality. He'd gone through his days in a state between sleep and awakening. Well, he certainly was awake now.

Kushina might be dead, but walking through the corridor Minato realized he had more people to protect still. Kakashi was here somewhere, and he deserved a future just as much as all the kids Danzō had stolen from who knows where.

The entire village was his family, and Danzō was risking them by creating enemies through oppression. This wasn't right. He had gone directly against Minato's command, and he had warned the old war hawk of the consequences if he ever were to do so.

Minato was no longer new and inexperienced as Hokage. He had almost five years as the leader of Konoha, and his times of receiving advice from the council in his transition period had now officially come to an end. They might be his elders. They might have information and experience Minato did not, but if they were going to pull crap like this they needed to be shut down.

He would not stand for mutiny. Not when it wasn't even well founded mutiny... What the hell did Danzō know? He knew absolutely nothing, and yet he pretended to be God.

The hallway flashed by as he ran down the corridor, knowing he was running out of time. The other teams should be able to handle it. They hadn't wanted him to continue on his own, but to lure out Danzō it was a lot better that he acted without help. The man might have a lot of flaws, but he was certainly not stupid. He knew if it came to a fight between them they needed Minato alone and on their own turf. They needed home advantage.

He was going to give them that too.

Minato hurried further through the corridor, his eyes narrowed as a door shut with a bang behind him.

So he was finally discovered was he?

The door ahead of him was still not shut and throwing one of his kunai ahead of him and out the door he teleported to its location just as the second door snapped shut behind him.

He was in a large chamber with no way escape now.

A man stood on the other end.

Danzō… He'd been correct. The old war hawk couldn't take orders after all.

"You broke my orders." Minato said quietly. "You undermined my authority and went directly against the commands I set in place. I warned you of the consequences such an act would result in. What is your defense Shimura Danzō?"

Danzō stepped forward, about twenty soldiers on each side, and Minato didn't doubt there were more hiding in the wings. Shimura had come prepared. "That right there, Minato. Your hopeless habit of
trying to see the best in people. A true leader would strike at the suspicion of mutiny. And yet here you are, asking for my reasons for doubting your ability to protect Konohagakure."

"You are still using that excuse? What exactly is your plan here? Why this base? Is it to kill me? Then go and kill Hiruzen? You must know we planned this together. So what will it be, Danzō? A coup de etat? Have you finally snapped, or are you really that thirsty for power? That desperate for ultimate control?" He felt a humourless irony in his own words. Danzō performing a coup… The man who in another time line was so adamant on preventing a coup on the village.

He didn't receive a reply, because next moment he was attacked from behind.

Shisui swore.

It was a slip, but the words were out before he could stop himself.

They'd made it through a large winding passage, and found themselves standing in a huge room. There was no other way to describe it. He'd never seen anything quite like it before, and for a moment none of them had been able to form words.

He'd seen this on the map. It was one of two identical formed rooms at the heart of the base, but knowing it was there and actually experiencing it were two very different things.

It was quite an adjustment. From the narrow passages with low ceiling and almost no lighting, to a vast industrial hall with sunshine flowing down from the window glass high above them. Casting shadows upon half of the room while illuminating the other part.

The hall had to be several stories high and as wide as several training grounds. The stone walls had large tanks with pipes running up, down and sideways in a pattern Shisui couldn't immediately decipher. A smell stung his nose. Like he was in a hospital, but only so much worse.

Several stone columns held up a platform above them, a stone stage with noisy equipment that created a background buzz that echoed through the hall. Shisui couldn't make any sense of it at first, but he figured it was some sort of processor. Some sort of… something, was being produced in here.

That was not why he swore though.

At first Shisui had looked searchingly through the hall, trying to find out if there was anyone with them, but with the exception of the machines everything was silent.

He searched and searched. Sure there had to be someone there. He could feel it more than sense it.

Shisui walked up one of the stone columns after signing he'd check the platform, disappearing over the edge within a second. The other three continued ahead, keeping aware as they checked behind tanks and corners for any sign of life.

There were none. Everything pointed to them being alone in this waste hall, but Shisui would bet anything they weren't. In some form Shisui was absolutely certain they were being watched.

It was then the doors suddenly shut.

Shisui whirled around, his eyes going to the entrance they had arrived through, but now a door had bolted down, blocking their exit route. The entrance into the other room, the mirror hall to this one, had shut simultaneously, and he heard his squad members hurry up to the second door.
Shisui jumped down from the platform, landing on the harsh floor by cushioning the impact with chakra. His Ibo members were trying to get the door open already, but their first attempt was no success.

Even this had not been enough to make Shisui swear.

He’d ran up to them, his Sharingan blaring to life as he tried to figure out how to get out of this. The door had no handle. It had come down from the ceiling of the passage separating the two halls, and it was now flush with the tall walls of the industrial room. He asked them to step back, and his comrades jumped away as Shisui started going through hand signs.

He'd abruptly stopped though, because he suddenly noticed what he'd missed before. And it had been just too late to, because next moment the first one of his squad members collapsed.

Shisui was sure that to the normal eye it would be impossible to spot, but with his Sharingan activated Shisui could see it clearly.

The air was slowly filling up with gas.

_That_ was when he swore in a very Anko-ish fashion. "Fucking hell!"

The next one gasped, and he fell in a heap on the floor. Acting purely on instinct Shisui flew forward and grabbed the only one still standing and bolted towards the platform. The gas was coming from the ground somewhere and was slowly being released into the room. They had to get up to the platform as soon as possible to prevent more damage. Shisui more or less threw his comrade onto the platform and he hit the ground limply, already affected by the poison, before Shisui hurried back to the two unconscious ones on the floor. He threw both of them over his shoulders, and headed back for the platform again. Though in his haste it took him longer than normal for Shisui notice something very odd.

Why the hell hadn't he fainted too?

Anko wondered why on earth she'd agreed to this. It was a suicide mission, and she'd known that from the beginning, yet she'd been downright eager to go. She must have been suffering from temporarily insanity. Or maybe something had been slipped into her tea...

While a lot confused her about their current predicament, there was one thing Anko was pretty sure about; that she would die here. She could smell it in the air. The thick odor of sweat, blood and other bodily fluids of prisoners with limited access to a bathroom. The rotten and heavy air with no draft. It smelled like death.

This room was made for death; this base was for people with no future.

But Anko didn't have any more time to dwell on how royally screwed they were before her mind snapped to attention. Their attackers came swiftly, and Anko and Kakashi acted on instinct.

Snakes erupted from her arm, halting the closest attacker, but the second avoided them easily. Kakashi had hit the palms of his hands to the ground, a doton jutsu raising a solid wall to prevent a fire jutsu from hitting them both.

The caged people were waking up now. Moaning sounds and panicked squeaks starting to emerge as the attacks started.

Anko blocked them out while rapidly growing a tunnel vision, her only focus was the enemy.
Her kunai met a tantō aiming at her chest, the clank of the metals hitting one another echoing through the hall, and distressed shouts erupted around them as she heard the screech of chipping birds from behind her. The room illuminated by the lighting, but Anko didn't look back to see who Kakashi was trying to kill with his chidori. She had more than enough on her plate with her two attackers.

They came at her in pairs, and Anko could only go on the defensive to prevent herself from getting speared by them both. She jumped up to one of the bars, just as Kakashi did the same. They split up; because there was no way in hell they could do this without creating some distance between the attacks raining down on them.

Her two attackers followed as she escaped, and from the corner of her eye she vaguely noticed Kakashi had three opponents to deal with on his own.

She had to fight smart too. In this situation Anko couldn't go all out, because they were still deep in an enemy base and far from the exit. She needed to be efficient. Adrenaline was rapidly making it both harder and easier to attack. It had a habit of making her both reckless and better at thinking simultaneously, but Anko had to focus on the latter in this situation. Recklessness was a sure way to get killed here. By giving everything she had they might win the battle, yet lose the war, because this base was a maze of a battlefield.

Her mind whirled as she fled. She jumped and twirled up the wall while dodging the attacks from behind while she tried to force herself to come up with a plan. Think Anko! Think! The mantra went through her head as she tried to gather her thoughts.

What would Orochimaru do?

She spotted a gap between two of the cells. There was no cover and you could see through the bars. This room was officially the worst type of area for a strategic fight, seeing as it was impossible to hide. There was nowhere to shield behind, and Anko grunted as she ducked out of the way of a lightning jutsu. It went straight past her shoulder and hit one of the cells. Several people screamed. Some in fright, others in agony….

Anko kept running. She had almost reached the ceiling, and she would have to change course. She sprang forwards, her foot meeting the underside of the ceiling and she pushed herself back harshly. Chakra pushing through her leg to shoot her down towards the ground.

Turning sharply, she shot her hand out, the jutsu already prepared as she came face to face with one of her masked attackers. He wasn't fast enough.

The poison hit his face dead on. And her hand gripped his neck as they fell. She twisted it harshly, hearing it snap, and as they landed she propelled herself off the ground. The second one released a water jutsu, but Anko used the body of her downed enemy as a shield. Rolling away while throwing him away carelessly Anko focused on her next opponent.

She vaguely registered that this one was female, and Anko threw out shuriken but they were blocked expertly by the woman's chokuto.

Good aim. This one knew kenjutsu. Anko wasn't sure which of her attackers had used the lightning jutsu earlier, but she hoped it wasn't this one. The woman suddenly changed, her form bleeding out of focus slightly, and Anko almost snorted aloud.

She had been teammate with Shisui and this genjutsu was child play compared to the stuff he had subjected her to during their spars. She dispelled it easily, but detected another one immediately.
A feint. The first genjutsu was a feint to cover up the second one. To her eyes the woman was still in front of her, and Anko raised another set of shuriken, chakra rushing to her head now instead of trying to dispel the genjutsu.

She turned sharply and threw.

"Guh." There was a grunt of pain. And the genjutsu collapsed entirely. The illusion she'd seen before disappeared, and the woman sank to her feet in front of her. The shuriken sticking out of her neck.

Huh… A lucky shot. Anko had only followed her chakra enhanced sent to find her, and had shot with only eighty percent accuracy. She was not going to complain though.

Her head snapped towards the other end of the room. Kakashi was fighting two on his own, and hurriedly Anko came to back him up.

Kakashi swung out with his katana, making one of them stumble and fall back while the other dodged. A man and a woman. Their body shapes indicated as much. The third of Kakashi's opponents were unmoving on the floor already.

Anko jumped forward in a kick, but the woman blocked with her arms, the impact sending violent shivers down both of them. Kakashi had her back though, and while Anko retreated he didn't give the unknown woman time to rest. He managed to grab her around the dark cloth covering her face and tugged her forward into his fist.

Anko was focusing on the other one now. He was backing away while preparing a jutsu. He couldn't be allowed to finish it though, and she shot towards him, forcing him to stop the hand signs in favour of blocking her kunai.

He used a kunai too. Which indicated he was a jutsu user. Jutsu users normally preferred the plainest weapons. Kakashi preferred it, Naruto preferred it, Minato preferred it, and even Orochimaru preferred it. It was like a freaking rule or something.

The man jumped up on the bars of one of the cells, and ran in a half circle out of reach of Anko's shuriken, before landing next to the woman. Kakashi jumped back, landing next to Anko as her eyes travelled to the woman.

And then her mind went blank.

The mask covering her face had slipped off and the hood of her cloak was down. Revealing short blonde hair in a pixi haircut and murky green eyes. Her face was heart shaped and her mouth wide and thin lipped. Though the woman was wearing an unrecognizable expression, as if there was no one there behind her emotionless eyes, Anko would still have recognized her anywhere.

"E-Emi?" Asked Anko breathlessly, momentarily freezing as if a thunderbolt had shot through her body. Paralysing her movement from the shock alone.

The woman in front of them, maybe around twenty years old, looked emptily back. "I can't allow you to disrupt Danzō-sama's work." The woman – Emi, she even had her voice - replied monotonously. "You will die for trespassing."

Her hand did a seal, and next moment the floor turned to mud, their feet starting to sink into a substance like liquid glue.

Kakashi shot out wires to link with the bars to the right, and grabbed onto Anko as he pulled them out.
Emi shot out shuriken after them, almost hitting spot on if Anko hadn't snapped out of her shock. She kicked one of the shuriken out of the air, the other one diverted by her own kunai. Next to her she heard Kakashi's own shuriken hit Emi's in a perfect collision.

Kakashi swung them forwards, and they fell towards Emi and the other enemy on the altered terrain. Kakashi's hand erupted in a chidori while he fell on top of the man, impaling him before his feet hit the ground.

Anko fell close to Emi, who already had a fuma shuriken out, and it was flying towards her so fast she could only focus on rolling out of the path of the rotating star.

She was surprised she even had breath to spare as she screamed. "What happened to you?! How did you end up here? You weren't even a ninja!"

Emi's expression didn't falter to her pleas. "Danzō-sama came and gave me strength."

"Stop it Emi!" Anko shouted, but the girl who had once been her best friend didn't react to her words at all. "Don't you remember me? It's Anko!"

Yet there was no reaction.

"I remember you Anko." Emi confirmed, not at all upset. "But you have no value in regards to protecting the village and Danzō-sama. True value is those who protects without cause. Protect without reason. But protects in the name of protection. You lack that."

Kakashi threw a kunai past her shoulder, but Emi dodged by twirling sideways through the air. "Hatake Kakashi… I'll deal with you first."

Something burst inside Anko at Emi's calculating words. She deemed Kakashi the bigger threat of the two of them, as if Anko was just a side thought. It was like Anko was a complete stranger to her. A nobody without value.

But Kakashi was her friend… Emi… she was not allowed to hurt him. No way.

Anko's hand shot out, snakes flying out from the sleeve of her coat towards her ex-friend while she was distracted by Kakashi's advance. They wrapped around her form, strangling her as she fell to the ground.

Kakashi came over, his breath coming out in fast pants.

"Is that who I think it is?" Asked Kakashi and gestured towards the woman struggling to breathe at her feet.

Anko nodded stiffly.

Kakashi looked between them. "Anko… If you don't slacken her restraints you're going to strangle her to death."

Anko felt only fury. By believing it gave her value Emi had become nothing when she'd once been so much. She'd given up everything that made her herself for Danzō's importance, but in the end she was just another dispensable foot soldier in this place.

Look where Emi's value got her now… Anko realized something was seriously wrong with her as she watched Emi's face turn dangerously red. Her eyes bulging. Yet Anko only felt blood lust. There was no regret in her…
"Good."

They was so screwed. The hall was eerily silent with the exception of the buzzing machines, but as far as Shisui could tell the presence he had felt earlier was not present anymore. Though he was not sure if that was a good thing or not.

There were large beams running between the columns holding up the ceiling. It was the furthest away from the poison Shisui could get, and in an attempt to save his comrades he had tied them to the beams with ninja wire. He'd put masks over their mouths in hopes it would filter out some of the toxin being pumped into the room, but there was only so much he could do. There was a barrier between the glass window above the hall, so Shisui couldn't break through. They were stuck in every way.

And yet the poison wasn't affecting him, and Shisui had never thanked Orochimaru's crazy experiments more than in that moment.

He was immune, because having the snake Sannin as your sensei made you a lab rat for some of his creations. Poison immunity was one of them.

He'd injected it into Anko and him about three years ago. Shisui remembered being skeptical to the whole ordeal, especially because of Naruto's refusal to even hand over a vial of blood to their sensei. Yet he'd reluctantly gone through with it in the end. So Naruto wasn't immune, but then again she wasn't here either. Something he was immensely relieved about.

His ANBU comrades weren't as lucky though.

Shisui gritted his teeth as he saw the sweat pouring down their faces and he felt sick with worry. What the hell was he supposed to do? How could he help them? How could he do anything?

He could do first aid. He knew how to pop a hip back in place and stabilize broken bones. He could patch up wounds and stop a bleeding.

But poison? An unknown poison at that?

Shisuis swallowed. His feet dangling from each side of the beam as he looked down. Trying but failing to find a weakness that he could use to get them out of here.

His head snapped up as the whole base rumbled. The sound made the beam shake under him, and Shisui couldn't help it as more concern filled him. Deep crashes and a small bang followed before the walls calmed down, and he noticed dust falling down from cracks and holes before floating down towards the floor far, far beneath him.

Helplessly he accepted the silence.

Useless… Right now he was completely useless. They needed to get out of here, but their escape routes were blocked.

Restless he stood up, balancing on the beam as he went over to check on his comrades once again. They were still alive… But it didn't look good. None of them had woken up yet.

Shisui closed his eyes and focused on his breathing. The sound of his exhale and the feeling of the inhale grounded him, and forced a calmness to settle in his chest. There was always a way. There was always a weak spot.
He just had to fucking find it.

It was deathly quiet as they continued on. Kakashi still not able to believe Anko had killed Emi so coldly. It didn't really fit. Anko could be a bitch and a lunatic at times, but seeing her kill off her first friend was honestly freaking him out. She was also acting… cold.

Kakashi wasn't sure what Anko was thinking. Her eyes had hardened as they continued deeper into the base. He made sure to be extra aware, not entirely trusting Anko to be completely sane at that moment.

Emi had meant so much to Anko. She'd told Kakashi how Emi was the one who'd taught her about chakra. The only one at the orphanage who'd supported her dream of going to the academy even if she hadn't wanted to go herself.

But this wasn't the place to ask questions. They were skin deep in a base filled with ninjas who'd attack them upon discovery. But if they got out of here alive though he was sure Naruto would have a word or two with her roommate about second chances. Or maybe he himself would have a few advices to spare too.

A rumble went through the base, and Kakashi and Anko threw themselves down with their hands over their heads as the pathway shook. Rocks came loose from the ceiling, and Kakashi forced chakra out of his body to cushion any hard hits.

Fuck. He hated collapsing tunnels. He was not up for this.

It calmed down as quickly as it had came. Squinting, Kakashi took a hesitant peek. He found Anko on the ground next to him, but the air had filled with dust so thick it was hard to see anything without his eyes stinging. Laying down Kakashi realized how tired he had grown. This mission was already straining, and he wasn't sure how much more they could take. They needed to regroup. He needed to find his team. He needed to find Minato. Not knowing if they were okay was eating at his mind. Especially after the stunt Anko just pulled.

Anko was getting to her feet while dusting off rubble and dust, and Kakashi mutely followed suit. He turned towards her and caught her attention before he signed. "We'll pick up the tempo."

She didn't respond in any other way but to face forward and start running, leaving him with little other choice but to follow.

They ran for no more than three minutes before they were forced to stop though. Because the tunnel came to an abrupt dead end.

Anko sighed heavily, but Kakashi uncovered his left eye to use Obito's Sharingan for the first time since entering the base. A few seconds later he pulled down his forehead protector again.

"Save your chakra. It was a constant mantra inside his head at this point.

"It's a door." Kakashi signed, which Anko was surprised by. "But there's no handle. I'm not sure what to do."

Anko pursed her lips and glanced up and down the door. "I could… try to blow it up?"

Kakashi stared. "What if you bring down the passage too?"

Anko just shrugged in reply and walked forward. Kakashi grabbed her hand before she could touch the door herself. "No. No explosions. That's an order." He hissed so low it was barely audible.
Anko sulked and stepped back, and Kakashi walked forward again. There might be something he could do to get through, but it would take a lot of chakra, and there was no guarantee it would actually work either. He went through jutsus in his head. The one he was thinking about was a fuinjutsu Minato had taught him. It would take time though, and maybe it was better to just back track and continue through a different passage? Who knew what was on the other side of this door, and maybe -

Kakashi's eyes widened as a kunai cut into the door right above where his hand rested against the metal. There was a seal on it, but not one Kakashi recognised at a first glance. He pelted backwards, and saw Anko was already ahead of him. Next moment an ear splitting explosion went off behind him, the warmth hitting his back as he crashed into the ground. If the corridor had been dusty before, it was nothing compared to now.

He glared murderously at Anko.

She gave an innocent grin in reply, before another sound interrupted the rumbling.

A crack.

"Run!" Kakashi barked, and stumbled to his feet. They ran back towards the door as the passage collapsed around them. Thank kami the explosion had worked though, because there was a hole in the door, and Kakashi jumped head first through it with Anko hot on his heel. His arms shot forwards as he cushioned his landing by rolling, with his short sighted comrade landing almost on top of him in their haste.

His ears still ringing from the explosion and feeling like he'd inhaled sand Kakashi looked dazed around. If they got out of this alive Kakashi promised himself he'd get Anko suspended from active duty for that stunt. But before he could give her a piece of his mind his focus was drawn towards the floor in front of him.

Because they'd landed in blood.

His eyes followed the red liquid over the floor until he found a cracked tonbo mask. He then found its owner.

His breath caught in his throat and stunned he studied the pale complexion of Ko. He was drained of all colour and there was blood all around him. Then there were the other bodies. Detached he counted them one after the other.

There were nine corpses.

And half of them were his comrades from team Ro.

Anko was too shocked to react at first. The sight of the dead had momentarily knocked all thoughts out of her head. She could only stare numbly at the cut up corpses and the blood bleaching the stone floor red.

It took her therefore a long moment to realize how light the room was. It was also huge.

While Kakashi sat rooted to the spot her eyes travelled over the large tanks around the room, the platform reaching up towards the glass windows high, high above them.

They were in one of the two core rooms of the base. She remembered it from the map. They were mirror rooms. Very distinct because the room reached all the way from the lowest level of the base
and up to the surface. About four stories high.

Kakashi released a half swallowed sob, and even such a small sound echoed. He shook his head furiously, and Anko watched as his shoulders sagged. She felt bad for him… She did, but the empathy she knew should have been there remained elusive. Because another sense was trickling her skin, another instinct was overruling her emotions and blocking out everything else. She could feel sorry for Kakashi if they made it out alive, but right now they had other things to worry about.

Because they were being watched.

Kakashi must have sensed it too, because his head tilted up, his body stiff as he raised his forehead protector to reveal Obito's Sharingan.

Anko's hand slowly moved to her pouch, where she fished out the kunai she'd taken from one of their earlier enemies. "Show yourself!" Anko called out harshly, her voice carrying and repeating several times up the hall.

No one replied.

Kakashi got to his feet while his red eye tracked the surfaces of the hall.

"I know you're here. I can feel you." Anko gritted out through her teeth.

"Anko." Kakashi warned, but the girl was already walking forwards, her footsteps loud against the stone floor in the eerie silence.

"Show yourself." Anko sang, her eyes darting between every surface sharply. "Are you hiding in the floor? Or the walls? Please tell me it's not one of the tanks? Whatever you cooked up can't be good for your skin." She drawled haughtily, her anger coming to her defense.

This piece of shit. They would pay for what they'd done. Danzō or whomever of his fucking followers was going to be snake food when she was through with them.

"Ku, ku, ku, ku"

Shisui swore again.

He was on the ground and looked frantically for anything that could be an exit, but had so far been unsuccessful. He'd tried fire techniques, he'd tried some seriously damaging seals to knock down the door and even an explosion tag or two, but the door and the wall still stood intact. And just a few moments ago there had been another explosion. This time from the direction Shisui suspected the other twin hall was located.

Swearing to himself - it was the only thing keeping him sane right no - he studied the room he now found himself locked inside.

While his frown was hidden behind his ANBU mask he scouted the walls for any weaknesses. Somewhere the steel frame showed or the reinforcement was visible through worn concrete. Some type of damage to the structure he could take advantage of. There was none though… This base was absolutely secure and reinforced with more than just stone and water. He suspected a very strong fuinjutsu barrier was making sure he couldn't just break through the glass windows on the ceiling too.

But Shisui hadn't given up yet, and his eyes stopped at the pipes.
This room was filled with large tanks and machines running even now. After two earth shaking explosions – that definitely would have alerted the inhabitants of the base to their presence if they already didn't know - this place was still as active as when he'd entered.

Which meant there had to be some sort of ventilation system.

He found it not long after. Laying almost directly under the reinforced glass there were large horizontal air ducts running along the edge, taking out toxins and pollution raising up from the ground. He checked the bottom of the hall too, finding one behind each of the larger tanks.

Now it was just to find out which of them were actually safe to travel through. Experimentally he kicked in the cover of air duct behind one of the tanks and found a passage. Peeking in he saw the air duct twisted in a direction Shisui doubted he wanted to travel, so instead he ran up the wall all the way to the ceiling where the beams connected. These ones were even larger than the ones on ground level, and they were more of them too.

This could work, he just needed to transport his unconscious comrades into the ventilation shaft and then he could get them to help. It would at the very least be a way out. Though he hoped to kami the ducts weren't too heavily polluted with other types of toxins that could be harmful.

Shisui hurried over to his comrades, feeling dizzy with relief at finally having a plan, but the closer he got the more he slowed down.

Silently he stopped a few steps away. His eyes jumping repeatedly between each of them, while thinking over and over again that he hadn't been away for more than four minutes.

Feeling his mind go strangely blank he realized he had been too slow. The empty lightheaded feeling evaporated and was filled with a new emotion. Biting his tongue Shisui strangled the sound about to break free, his vision tearing up.

They were gone. All three of them were already dead.

Kakashi felt shivers run down his spine at the sound coming from above him, and whirling around he stared up at the solid concrete wall opposite the door Anko had blown up to get through.

In horror he saw a person emerge from it, but his gut was turning in fear as he recognized just who it was.

Orochimaru's head was emerging from the surface like tree sap coming out of bark. He stared down at them with yellow eyes, his face cast in shadows as he broke the light above him. His shoulders appeared now, then his upper body until he was halfway out. His legs still somehow merged into the wall.

Kakashi took several footsteps backwards, Anko stumbling after him in dumbstruck shock.

"So you can sense me, Anko?" He asked with a curious head tilt. "It took you a long time. I've been watching for a while."

Orochimaru placed his hands on the wall, and used the leverage to push himself entirely out and sitting down on the wall, his eyes half lidded as he kept watching them. His gaze was focused on Kakashi at first, before moving lazily to Anko. "So Minato sent my student in here. Tell me, how did he find this place? I told Danzō it was a bit too close to the village, but then it was also the beauty of the location. It was so close Minato didn't even consider the possibility. The cheer nerve of someone setting up a base so close to Konoha. In between the outer and inner borders of Konohagakure… Oh
well, it is just a base. I can always make more."

He let himself fall, landing softly on the ground and making much less noise than their hurried steps had done. Orochimaru straightened up, his hair falling back from his face to rest over his shoulders.

"Who are you?"

It was Anko who asked, and Kakashi sent a worried glance her way. She must have recognised him by now?

"Ku, ku, ku" His smile was like cold venom, his eyes intent on Anko. "Don't be an idiot. I trained you better than that."

"No." Anko whispered weakly, but the sound carried easily for all of them to hear. "No. You're not here. You're out of the village, you're not… you're not in on this!"

"If you were watching," Said Kakashi, trying despite himself to keep his fear in check, to keep some control on the situation. Because Orochimaru? They were up against him of all people? Even if they hadn't been tired from their previous battles they still stood no chance here. They were already dead. "Why haven't you killed us yet? We're tearing this place down. Your experiments will be torn apart."

Orochimaru chuckled, the sound echoing up the walls. Kakashi had never noticed just how ominous that sound truly was before that moment. "But my fellow leaf ninja, I don't wish to kill you. Or at least not Anko. You're much more valuable to me alive. I don't enjoy ruining so many hours and days of testing only to destroy my subjects before they reap."

"What did you do?" Asked Kakashi at once, his foot taking shaky steps forwards despite every nerve in his body screamed at him to stay as far away as possible.

Orochimaru pursed his lips, his head tilting again. "Not that much really. I usually tested things already well documented on my students. They even know some of it. Like aversions to poisons, and Anko and Shisui tested well on those, while Naruto - not at all. Even before Naruto became a jinchūriki my substances just seem to flush out of her system. She only got more cranky and rash." He told them pleasantly. As if they were discussing this over a cup of tea in the jōnin lounge.

The Sannin gave a sarcastic smile. "I probably shouldn't have injected those in her during the Kiri mission though. She acted very rash from what I remember – and probably you do too."

Kakashi swallowed a gasp. Just the mention of that mission could usually make him agitated, but right now it was unbearable.

"Then there were the soldier pills… You probably didn't know exactly what I put into those. They were actually to increase stamina and muscle mass. Again, Anko and Shisui responded well to those, while Naruto - not so much. But then after the sensing pills I started putting her in the exemption category. She just isn't a very good test subject." Orochimaru concluded with a small shrug. As if to say; "What can you do about it?"

Anko was trembling uncontrollably, she seemed to want to be swallowed up by the wall, but Kakashi raised a hand that landed on her shoulder. "Calm down, Anko." He tried to say it softly, to reassure her, but how the hell could he?

"Though I guess I should mention that all those substances were made with the approval of the Hokage. Well.. Almost all at least. Testing them on you three while you slept might not have been, but then they never did you any lasting harm, did they? In fact I wanted my students to be exceptional. I didn't wish for you to turn out as weak morons, it would reflect rather badly on me as a
person, which was why I injected those into you."

"So you did it for our own good then?" Asked Anko and managed to sound unsure and hopeful at the same time.

"How do you explain what you did here though? All those people locked up… Is this for their own good too?" Kakashi asked quietly.

Orochimaru laughed and shook his head. "No, not at all. This is for my own good."

Gritting his teeth Kakashi saw red for a moment. "So underneath that Sannin façade… this was always going on?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. I changed a lot. I grew and matured. Every day I found new solutions. Every day I saw the hopelessness of those previous solutions. Unfortunately it's the cost of progress to make mistakes."

Kakashi stirred, his frown deepening while he shifted where he stood. Anko looked like she'd never move again. "For a while… Perhaps there was enough to do with my mundane tasks. The village allowed me to do my research, I had three students to train and make sure didn't die on a daily basis. It kept me quite occupied for a while though it did take me away from my life's work."

"You mean this." Asked Anko angrily and gestured to the large tank next to her.

"Yes. This, and so much else."

"You feel no regret then? You never saw how wrong this is?" Kakashi clarified.

Orochimaru shook his head and smiled. "This research facility came up about three years ago and I found my calling in life. I finally saw what the last two wars tried to show me. That no matter how much you try, train and accomplish, death will always take everything away in the end. And yet people are too damn blind to see that truth."

He lowered to so his hands touched the ground and a second too late Kakashi realized what he was about to do, as a puff of smoke erupted from underneath Orochimaru's hands.

Two shapes grew impossible tall and swallowing back a sigh of exasperation Kakashi took in the two overgrown snakes looking down on them. As if Orochimaru himself wasn't way too much to deal with.

It would seem the Sannin wasn't taking any chances….

Shisui felt detached while he crawled through the pipe as quietly as he could. Thanks to the large tanks the shafts were ventilating, Shisui fit quite easily, but for every move it made sounds.

He was only half sure he was moving in the right direction. The shaft went in a wide loop through several rooms, and he had already tried and failed with one. This was his second choice after ending up outside instead of in the next room.

He was starting to hear something now though, and he was realizing there was an argument going on far below him. A very loud one… Or maybe it was the echo that reinforced the voices?

Shisui stopped in front of a metal plate where he could make out the edges in the pitch blackness. Hadn't it been for his Sharingan Shisui would be completely lost in the mayhem of shafts leading
around the base.

As silently as he could he pried it open, his fingers getting a grip around the edge of the large and long plate. He hoped the whole shaft wouldn't come down from the deconstruction though. Shisui suspected the drop would be quite high.

He heard voices drifting up from the room bellow, and froze mid pull as he recognised his sensei slithering voice and Kakashi's.

Not wanting to believe it he stuck his head through the opening he'd created, and found himself looking down at a mirrored version of the hall he'd just been trapped in. Orochimaru stood on a platform, Kakashi at one end of the room while Anko was pressed up against the wall of the other with two gigantic snakes separating them.

Kakashi's voice was easily heard even from the different ends of the vast drop. That was saying something, seeing as Kakashi almost never raised his voice. "Why are you of all people doing this? What did you gain from this?"

"Ku, ku… Funnily enough I had this conversation with Naruto just yesterday. I'm not interested in a repetition."

"Naru…?" Asked Anko, and even from such a long distance Shisui could see her skin grow paler.

"Where the hell is she!" Shouted Kakashi.

Shisui swallowed. Naruto was here? But Naruto was on a mission. But then technically so was Orochimaru supposed to be. And Rin and Ensui? If Naruto was here at the base then where were they?

"Oh, out of reach." Orochimaru replied simply.

"Don't you dare!" Shouted Anko, snapping out of her stupor as she grabbed for something in her pouch. "Don't you dare lie to me, sensei! What the hell are you trying to say?"

"I'm not lying. I'm just pointing out that she will not be coming to your rescue. With her on your side you might have stood a chance against me. After all, she's grown into quite a heavy hitter, hasn't she? I'm pleased with all of your developments. Anko – you have potential still, you have already inherited many of my jutsu, and you should know what an honour that is. Naruto is a wild card, but she's at least not blinded by the system like most of you are. Unfortunately it means I myself have some problems controlling her, but all experiments usually have a crucial point in their development. Yours and Naruto's are happening right now Anko. While Shisui…. Ah, he is coming along splendidly."

Kakashi looked as sick as Shisui felt, he hadn't noticed his hand had started shaking.

"Now… What do you say? I could go into detail, but seeing as you've so kindly come to see me in my lab there's no need to beat around the bush. Believe it or not but this conversation is not merely for pleasantries. You have all seen and experienced the short comings of the system in Konoha, and seeing as I won't be staying for much longer I think it's only fitting to extend an invitation to join me. You both have potential, though I'm pretty sure I know Hatake's response already, but I don't wish to be impolite, you know?

Shisui was struck dumb. Did he just…? Was this real? Was this really happening?

"What? To… join you? To betray Konoha?"
"You'd stay with you best friend, Anko. And me. What else is actually binding you to the village?"

"Shut up!" Kakashi growled. "You will never convince me Naruto is okay with what you've done here. He's a liar, Anko. Look around you. He's kept this secret for years. He already consider you an experiment, not become one willingly too!"

Shisui looked from Kakashi to Orochimaru, his brow furrowed at having barged in halfway through this confrontation.

"You are a traitor, Orochimaru. We cannot allow you to continue." The echo of Kakashi's low voice made the words hard to hear, but Shisui made them out anyway.

The reply was short. "I see."

And then the snakes shot forwards, crashing into a column that made the whole room vibrate. Orochimaru jumped up on the head of one of the snakes.

The snake spun around, its tail rotating and taking Kakashi with it on impact. It was luckily a grazing shot, and Kakashi had jumped up the wall to get away, Anko mirroring him across the hall.

"You stand no chance against me, stop this foolishness." Orochimaru answered eventually, though Shisui imagined there was a slight hesitation in his tone. "You should realize that I've evolved from the simple minded stage you linger at. I've cast away these bonds you think makes up the meaning of life. It's not a betrayal if I don't see the alliances between people the same way you do. I am no more a traitor than the Hokage is. My means to protect the village is simply just different than holier-than-thou Namikaze."

Shisui gripped the panel harshly, dragging it off its hinges in one go and crawled through it until he stood upside down to the underside of the shaft.

They'd heard the sound, and three people and two snakes looked up confused.

His Sharingan glared back at Orochimaru as their eyes met. A silent fury bubbling under his skin and lashing out. Wanting to roam free and attack this man who he'd lost faith in.

He was attacking his student.

He was betraying Konoha.

He had shed his humanity.

This was not the man who had trained them. This wasn't a man at all. It was a snake lashing out when their backs had been turned.

With lightning fast movements fire roared from his mouth, shooting towards Orochimaru with scorching intensity as Kakashi took advantage of the distraction to run up the back of the snake. His katana was out, and he stabbed it with swift blows and making it royally pissed off. The scales were hard though, and he made little progress as Shisui's fire followed Orochimaru's flight from the heat.

Orochimaru was backed away from his friends, and Shisui stopped his assault as Kakashi jumped away from the snake.

Anko hadn't moved at all. Her eyes bore into Orochimaru as if still not believing what she'd seen and heard. Shisui dropped all the way from the ceiling and down, chakra pumping through his body so he would survive the landing, and ended up next to her. Orochimaru smiled.
"And Shisui… My, so another student of mine is here. Though I think you might be my favourite. You should appreciate how blessed you are for being born with the Sharingan." He said in a high, amused tone.

Kakashi came up behind them and placed a hand on Anko's shoulder, whispering for her to calm down. Vaguely surprised Shisui noticed that she did.

"Sensei..." Shisui breathed, too furious to string a whole sentence together. How could he have done this? It seemed unfathomable. This went far above anything Shisui had imagined when it came to human experimenting.

It was cruel. Only someone without a consciousness could possibly inflict this much suffering on others for their own gain.

He was doing it even now. Anko was simply crushed. She couldn't stop crying.

Biting his lip Shisui considered his options. This situation was beyond their level. They couldn't go all out, because the base could collapse on them and take hundreds of lives with it. That ruled out some of his more destructive ninjutsu. Orochimaru understood this himself if his goading was anything to go by.

But their sensei was not someone to take lightly. From what he'd overheard this was not some misunderstanding, and Orochimaru would not come calmly with them to the TIF for an explanation. Yet they couldn't allow him to get away… With sinking realization Shisui saw that most likely one or more of them would die in here.

"I have finally seen. There might have been a time where I still valued those feeble bonds Naruto talks about all the time, but look, even in the end it's caused her nothing but pain. It's a new level of idiocy. Why risk oneself for others? Only when you've truly broken all ties will you ever achieve true strength."

He was talking crazy… There were no other words for it, and yet his thoughts kept circling back to the possible results of the upcoming battle. Because there would be a battle. There was no way out of that. The floor was already covered in blood of their fallen comrades, and Orochimaru couldn't get away with that. But the idea of Anko getting killed by their sensei was such a horrid thought he desperately steered away from it. He didn't want that… He didn't even want Kakashi to get hurt by Orochimaru. Was there a way they could all make it out of here alive? Was there a way they could even hope to win this fight? And if there was, was it possible to take Orochimaru alive?

The immediate answer was no.

But… there was hope… Shisui would need to act precisely for this.

Shisui and Kakashi reacted simultaneously as Orochimaru was about to attack. Without preamble they pelted across the room. Kakashi to the left of him as they tag teamed.

Shisui was faster, reaching Orochimaru he slashed at his sensei with deadly precision. His tantō had been caught by a snake slithering out from the Sannin's sleeve. The metal surface reflecting the sharp fangs locking it in place. Kakashi's chidori chirped as he aimed at Orochimaru, but the Sannin twisted away, still keeping Shisui's blade trapped, as his knee shot out and hit Kakashi hard in the stomach. The older ANBU got his wind blown out of him, but twisted out of the way as Orochimaru's free hand shot out. Elongating to an impossible length as Shisui jumped and twisted around, his hand still holding onto the tantō as the snake's head was snapped by the violent rotation.
Orochimaru hurriedly dodged Kakashi’s fist, just as Shisui’s now free tantō was aimed as his legs. They forced him backwards, but then the giant snakes in the hall made themselves known. Orochimaru jumped backwards, and Shisui dragged Kakashi away just in time to avoid a swinging tail.

They landed hard on the ground and rolled away as the second snake came from the other side.

Kakashi had just enough time to shoot a fire jutsu that would have the Uchiha stamp of approval straight into the second snake’s face. The great beast hissed furiously, twisting out of the way as Shisui got to his feet.

"I got the other one." Anko finally joined them, her eyes red and wet in a devastating resolve. She was doing signs with one hand while she raised the sleeve of her coat, revealing a black seal inked into her skin.

"Good thinking!" Shisui shouted as he realized what she was about to do. Orochimaru understood too, and his attention was forced towards Anko. He didn’t wait to see what their old sensei would do to prevent Anko from getting to the huge snake, and instead threw himself in his line of sight while blocking Anko to give her time.

Shisui cast his first genjutsu with his left hand, then another with his right. He knew Orochimaru had caught them both - how could he not? Shisui hands hand moved a bit too obviously and had drawn Orochimaru's attention at once. But he hopefully didn't notice the one he cast with his mouth. It was a tricky piece of sound genjutsu that could be cast through your breath. By whispers on the wind.

It bought them just enough time, while Shisui took up the Sannin's attention Anko had made her way onto the first snake, and just as her hand reached the scales her seal activated. In a large pop of smoke the snake was promptly reversed summoned from where it came from.

Thank kami she was here. She could not hope to fight against the snakes Orochimaru was able to summon, she'd never been able to summon even one of such a massive size yet, however she could reverse summon them thanks to being signed to the same contract.

While they'd been distracted Kakashi had made good work of taking on the second beast all on his own. His katana had been pierced through the second snake's eye, and it gave a ferocious hiss as its head swung back and forth. Its attacker was balancing on top of its head while trying not to get thrown off the gigantic snake.

Orochimaru raised his arm, it was aiming towards Kakashi, but as dozens of smaller snakes shot from his arm they were intercepted by the exact same technique from Anko. They crashed midair from the side, throwing them off target and were pushed to the floor in a battle of hisses and snaps as snakes attacked snakes.

Shisui was not staying on the ground much longer. The place was gradually turning into the most grotesque snake pit.

Anko charged ahead, well past reckless and turning desperate, coming heads to heads with Orochimaru with a wild fury that had her chakra bursting out of her.

Her kick was blocked with his elbow while Shisui had a split second to figure out which one to help. Concluding that his former teammate had a much harder opponent than Kakashi he hurried to catch up with her, but as Anko twirled around, her fist gaining speed from the spin, Orochimaru’s hand caught her elbow in an iron grip, his feet spread to gain balance, and with force picked the girl up and flipped her over his head, smashing her body into the concrete floor so hard it cracked.
As Orochimaru straightened up he was met with Shisui's foot to the jaw, kicking him straight across the hall from the force. While still in the air Shisui threw the only weapon at his immediate disposition, and his tanto flew after the Sannin before he'd even hit the floor yet. But Orochimaru was all too fast for that. As he rolled away from the tantō Shisui had just enough time to dodge out of a poison attack that hit the wall behind him. He was morbidly fascinated to see the wall start melting. Whatever that was it was highly acid.

Kakashi had downed the second snake. It lay dead, the body separated from its head in a chunky puddle of blood against one of the columns holding up the platform. Kakashi was sporting some slimy green substance all over his uniform that Shisui didn't need to know the origin of.

Kakashi looked a bit off balance though, and he was grimacing in pain from a wound to his ribs. Their eyes met, and with a small nod from Kakashi they charged again. Kakashi was closer to Orochimaru than Shisui, but instead of getting close he threw a kunai at Orochimaru that went off in a shower of deafening explosions. With the wall behind him Orochimaru was forced towards them to get out of the blast zone. It gave him just enough time for Shisui to hit the palm of his hands against the ground. "Doton: Stone Plate Coffin!"

Large sections of the ground raised like walls on each side of Orochimaru, they arched around him, blocking off the exits as they closed in on him at high speed. With a rumbling collision they engulfed him inside with an echoing crash.

For a moment everything turned silent, the tremors running up the walls the only thing registering through Shisui’s steel focus.

"Did you get him...?" Kakashi trailed off doubtfully, and Shisui also felt pessimistic. There was no way Orochimaru of the Sannin was taken down that easily.

But there were no movements, and from between the gap of the earth plates blood was seeping out.

The silence continued, only to be broken by a pained moan from Anko.

Kakashi walked backwards, but he didn't take his eyes off the boulders for a second while backtracking to where Anko was still laying on the ground.

Shisui allowed the ANBU captain to sort out Anko while he kept his attention ahead. There was chakra there… But the signature was so much smaller than before. Was he weakened? Had they really hit him? Had Orochimaru been weakened before the fight started? There were bodies scattered around the hall, so there had clearly been fights already.

Did they just get incredibly lucky?

Something made Shisui peek over his shoulder. Kakashi was helping Anko sit up. He was going to secure her to a safer location, and Shisui was relieved to see her eyes were open, though she was bloody and completely boneless as she leaned against Kakashi's side. It looked like she had multiple fractures and probably a very serious concussion from a short glance. Not to mention the many bruises marring her face.

He supported Anko by keeping a secure hold around her waist while her arm was slung over his shoulder. Her feet only partly cooperating with her as she tried to stand on her own. The hit had been brutal, and Anko had been too direct in her attack. Normally she knew better, and yet Shisui couldn't blame her for losing her head this once. It could have been a lot worse. At least she wasn't dead.
Yet.

The ground broke from underneath Kakashi and Anko, and the blurry shape of Orochimaru shot up together with most of the floor. Rock spears erupted at all sides, and Shisui had barely enough time to jump blind straight up to avoid getting a spear straight through his leg.

The floor was transformed from a half crumbled snake pit to a rocky crater of spikes reaching up higher than Shisui was tall. There were crashes on all sides as the many tanks blew to pieces. Lilac liquid poured out and drenching Kakashi and Anko. The platform in the middle of the room crumbled above him, and Shisui could only focus on jumping from spike to spike in an attempt to get away from the falling boulders of concrete and metal.

He heard Anko scream from somewhere in the chaos as Shisui made it to the wall and started running upwards at once. Staying on the ground was absolutely not an option anymore, and once safely away from the collapse he glanced back to see the destruction.

Anko lay mangled between spikes, half burred underneath concrete, and if that wasn't worrying enough then Orochimaru had his hand wrapped around Kakashi's throat.

The Sannin only looked slightly dusted up from the explosion, while Kakashi was drenched in the weird lilac liquid, mud, snake fluids and what could only be freshly pouring blood.

It took Shisui a moment to see where the blood came from, but gasped as he noticed what Orochimaru had done. He was holding Shisui's tantō, and it stood pierced through Kakashi's stomach.

Orochimaru turned his head so their eyes met. His hand still gripped around Kakashi's throat, making the ANBU make strangled sounds and fight desperately against both the lack of air and the loss of blood.

A shout escaped between Shisui's lips as the Sannin twisted the blade.

All caution left him.

Shisui sprang towards them, not sure he'd ever run as fast as he had in that moment. With wild fury he body tackled Orochimaru to the ground, Kakashi being released by the brute force of the collision.

They rolled in a heap of limbs across the floor. Shisui kicking and punching anything he perceived as not himself while hacking with the shuriken in his hand instead of throwing it. His mind focused solely on getting Orochimaru away from the other two.

They untangled, Orochimaru struggling away but not before sporting several new cuts and bruises from the wild brawling Shisui had just forced him into. It was a far shot from the dignified academy style or the countless hours of proper taijutsu training Orochimaru had drilled into him. It had been wild, completely randomized and improvised moves, but damn if it hadn't been effective. Shisui also found a sick pleasure in the fact that it was everything Orochimaru would find completely useless too.

His breath was coming in pants, but so was Orochimaru's, though he didn't like the gleam in the Sannin's eyes.

The platform had collapsed on top of the spears, creating a half demolished floor for them to stand on without the spears to hinder their sight lines. The air stung his nose from the chemicals, and the dust had yet to set properly from the tank explosions and the fallen columns. Shisui wondered how many
of the bodies had gotten trapped underneath the concrete, and hoped to kami that if they had that they’d been dead before the implosion.

"It looks like you're on your own." Orochimaru said silkily. The faint show of exhaustion from before was absent as he spoke, and his eyes trailed to something behind him. Shisui wouldn't look, but he knew Orochimaru was at least telling the truth this time.

"I won't let you get away with this." Shisui spat. Annoyed at how heavy his breath was coming out compared to Orochimaru. He was getting worked up, and never had it been more important that he kept his cool. Just looking at his sensei was enough to get his blood pressure rising though, and he struggled to calm himself down. Shisui watched him like a hawk as Orochimaru's tongue came out to stretch to the top of his cheekbone and lick away blood from one of his new cuts. Shisui was pretty confident it was his shuriken that had inflicted that wound in their fresh brawl.

It looked deep and rugged, and he hoped to kami it hurt.

Orochimaru sighed and leaned back on his feet, the picture of confidence as he looked at Shisui through half lidded eyes. A satisfied sort of aura projecting through his stand. "I don't wish to kill you Shisui. Do reconsider. All you will achieve by continuing this is your death."

"Then so be it." Shisui replied coldly.

"If you join me… I won't touch them. I'll even save them." Orochimaru replied, and gestured towards the bodies behind Shisui. "Kakashi doesn't have long. He has not only ben stabbed but poisoned too, and unlike you and Anko he won't survive long without an antidote. Anko is half buried. We can stand here and chat, or we can continue fighting, but how long do you think it will be until they both bleed out?"

Shisui shifted, but forced himself to keep his focus ahead. To not look back. Cold sweat was gathering at his neck, but he couldn't listen to Orochimaru. It was the Sannin that taught him the value of pushing the right buttons. He knew very well that Shisui would go to extreme lengths for his friends. Just like Anko and Kakashi would. This was a feint. This was Orochimaru tricking him. Like he'd been doing all along. Everything he said was poison.

Shisui kept repeating this to himself. Otherwise he might actually do something stupid. Like take his eyes off the enemy.

"You could have been great." Shisui told him, and he was surprised how calm his voice came out.

"Now you're just a perverse result of your own experiments… a failure. I remember the first time you took me to your lab with Anko. You had been experimenting with chakra infusion into animals, but the cat you'd been working on was showing troubling side effects. Anko had named him Mister Backtrack, because most people usually stayed away the times he managed to escape his cage. It had been disfigured from the transfusion. It showed erratic and illogical behaviour. It was uncontrollable and had to be kept locked up in a very solid cage because the experiment had gone wrong. You told me to give it a swift and merciful death because it was a failed experiment, and you had no patience for failures. Maybe you should look in the mirror and see what your experiments has done to you."

Orochimaru chuckled and shook his head. "I am not a failure. I have evolved from mere humanity. This is progress, Shisui."

Shisui gave a mock smile in return, his feet itching further apart as he readied himself for the attack he knew was coming any second. "I guess that's a matter of opinion, Orochimaru, but since your judgement is deteriorating with every passing hour I'll do my best to follow the procedure of your other failed experiments, and like with Mister Backtrack, give you a quick and merciful death."
Orochimaru eyes met Shisui's with an eager and triumphing gleam.

Next moment the room felt so heavy it was suffocating. His mind screamed at him to get the hell away. To run, to hide and don't even consider this ridiculous battle.

The killing intent coming from Orochimaru was on a level Shisui had never truly felt before. He had never been on the receiving end on something of this magnitude.

He realized that there was no way they would win, because Orochiamru was much more experienced and dangerous. He was terrifyingly ruthless and what were they in comparison? What could they possibly achieve by dying at his hand?

Danzō coughed up blood. His body twitching on the floor of the dark lab.

"Are you trying to prove me wrong, Minato?" He croaked as the Yondaime walked slowly towards him with a long katana he'd picked off from one of his dead Root agents. "Prove you have what it takes to be Hokage?"

Minato didn't reply. He walked up to the destroyed body of the council member. Danzō was tough but far from the worst Minato had fought. The main problem had been the cheer number of attackers while preventing Danzō from escaping when it became clear Minato was winning despite the poor odds. "No."

Danzō sneered, his fist clenching on the floor, but he could no longer get up. Minato had cut his spinal cord and sealed off his chakra, there would be no getting back up for Shimura. "Why else would you be executing me? It's to show me you're not as soft as I claim is it not?"

Minato came to a stop in front of him. "I'm not proving anything Danzō, I'm showing you what I've always known. You sneak in and kill half blind in the dark, but unlike you I have the power to attack while looking my victim in the eye and see the whole picture. I'm showing you that to strike when necessary is not the same as striking too late. It's just on time." Minato told him quietly, looking down at him with a dismissive expression.

"It makes me think… Is it too much for you to realize what you've done Shimura? Do you kill your emotions so the pain of your actions won't destroy you? Because that's what a true leader needs to be able to. They need to know what it feels like to lose what is most important to you in order to know how your victim's loved ones will react. There's more to warfare than how many lives or dies, it's the aftermath of those deaths that determines the future. The son who lost his father. The sister who lost her brother… a man who lost his wife. Don't you see that your actions would have the world void of life with only yourself left to prevent retaliation?"

Minato exhaled deeply. "So at the end of the day which one of us is the soft one Danzō? You - who buried your emotions until there was only a shell of your old self… Or me? Who's mastered the agony and still have strength to protect?"

Danzō twitched, his brows furrowing as he looked up at him.

"You say I'm too soft because I give people a chance to explain themselves… to allow doubt into my heart… but in the end every death caused by a ninja of Konoha is blood on my hands. On my orders. What sort of leader would I be if I were you? You say you protect from the shadows… And maybe at one point you truly did. But the truth is that now you hide in the shadows, and from your hole in the ground you send your underlings up to kill without giving them explanation or reason. Too cowardly to even know who you doom to death…"
"To eliminate one if it means saving a thousand… then I don't need to know who they were."

Bending down while resting an arm on his knee and the other over the katana Minato studied Danzō closely. "Which shows I'm clearly not you. I will know who I'm killing and why I'm doing it. Because I'm just that powerful not just as a ninja, but as a person too. A power you evidently lack."

Danzō's eyes were wide as he stared up at him, his lips quivering from pain. "So speak now Shimura. Tell me all you've done and I will be your rightful judge. I will be your salvation if innocent and your executer if guilty."

The bleeding man didn't answer. His eyes saying enough, but Minato still wanted to know. Wanted to hear how he justified his actions. "If not… You will force my hand and your death will be a meaningless one."

"I only ever protected K-Konoha..." Danzō wheezed.

"I already know that. But I want to hear why you did what you did in the name of Konoha."

Not entirely unexpected Danzō refused to reply. He was tough physically, and the excruciating pain he must have been in didn't make him spill any of the secrets he'd crafted.

Minato guessed something though. "Do you still believe me inadequate, Danzō?"

"No..." Danzō whispered quietly.

Minato looked at him for a moment, reading the strange shine in his eyes. "...you are lying."

Danzō chuckled and blood spurted from his mouth onto the floor. Not once had Minato ever seen anything close to mirth on the war hawk's face.

Strangely enough - despite the gore and violence traced over his body – the smile suited him.

Minato got to his feet slowly and raised the katana so it hovered over Danzō's still beating heart.

This was not something done lightly. This death was not easy on any level. Minato had to kill someone who had sacrificed so much for Konoha, and it went against his instincts to destroy someone who genuinely only wished for his village's protection.

Maybe if Naruto had been here she could have made him see reason. Maybe she could have made Danzō remember his humanity. If anyone could make someone feel than it was her.

But she was not here, and Minato was not Naruto.

"Shimura Danzō... You served this village with your whole life, and for that Konoha owes you a debt." Minato said quietly. "The debt will be repaid through a swift death for the crimes against the village you swore to protect, and I will also make sure your betrayal is kept quiet. To Konoha and to the world… You will not be recalled for your crimes, but for the dedication you put into protecting the village."

Minato raised the katana, aiming precisely as Danzō's eyes closed. "Your duty to Konoha has come to a completion, Shimaru Danzō. I will protect the village in your stead."

The katana cut through Danzō's heart.

Shisui fell to his knees. His hands the only thing keeping him from collapsing onto the floor.
There were no way this intent was human though - what had Orochimaru done to himself? What could create this type of killing intent? It felt like… It felt like that night. The bijū's intent that flowed over the fields of Kiri years ago. But now it was centered and it was focused and blowing straight at him.

It was too much, Shisui wanted to throw up but his body had locked down completely, and even the act of emptying his stomach was too terrifying for the action to come through. He was knocking at walls of his own mind. Desperate to get away but forced in place by the killing intent of the man he'd always looked up to.

How could this be happening? How the hell would he get away? Why did the others have to be unconscious? Why couldn't Naruto be here? She always turned the tables around when all hope was gone.

But she wasn't here. Naruto wouldn't come. Shisui had to fix this himself this time, and stop walking in her shadow. Fuck, he would have to do a Naruto. Act brashly and completely disregard all danger.

And in that moment Shisui realized just how much that took. Even without the crushing killing intent it went against every instinct in his body. To leave all thought of self-preservation and survival behind and fight without constraint. Because to take on someone like Orochimaru you couldn't think of your own safety. If you played it safe he would die before he could blink.

Even the Kiri base had seemed less scary and daunting, but until she almost got herself killed Naruto had been there with them. From the beginning she had always given him courage. And not just her, they had been in it together and he hadn't been so terribly alone. This time he would have to fight all on his own. He had to fix it alone.

Orochimaru sprang forward, and with a scream Shisui threw himself sideways. Every inch of his body was against it. The killing intent was still thick in the air and he was heavily disorientated. But it was just enough, because he'd dodged out of Orochimaru's first attack, and now he just had to continue.

Focus on what he could see, not what he could feel. Focus on the target, and not his sensei. Focus on the actions instead of the consequences.

With effort Shisui sunshin over to Kakashi, picking up his katana as his tantō was still lodged in Kakashi's stomach. He turned back towards his sensei, who disappeared just as Shisui sunshin again.

They circled the room, both of them pushing their speed to the limit as they tried to get at each other. The killing intent never faulted, but Shisui was pushing through. He was getting out of the endless dark tunnel at last.

Orochimaru was fast, but Shisui was faster. They were moving at blinding speed all across the hall. Probably covering every surface in less than a second. Zigzagging between spears, columns, boulders and walls they hunted each other in a sick game of cat and mouse, Shisui unsure who was prey and who was the predator.

The Uchiha was gaining in on him though, and unlike Orochimaru Shisui could see. The Sharingan was a huge advantage when moving at such a blurring speed. It was the most common mistake the users of the sunshin that they had no idea where they were going because of the speed, and people could kill themselves if they hit an unexpected surface too hard.

Orochimaru had taught him that.
Pushing the fleeting thought away Shisui's feet connected with the underside of a beam along the ceiling just as Orochimaru took a sharp turn far below on the ground, jumping from the destroyed platform and straight up towards him. Shisui pushed down off from the beam, meeting Orochimaru head on.

Orochimaru's eyes widen in surprise, not expecting Shisui to meet him midair. The Uchiha sent fire up and down the katana, probably rendering it useless after that, but needing the extra power. He could see Orochimaru was trying to turn out of the collision, to sidestep him.

He wasn't going to get away.

Shisui twisted and his arm slashed downwards. He felt his blade connect, but Orochimaru had managed to bend out of the lethal shot so it connected with his shoulder instead of his chest. Orochimaru's uninjured arm was aiming towards his throat, but with lightning fast reflexes Shisui ducked under his unnaturally stretching hand.

He caught every detail as they blurred past each other, Shisui landing on the tip of a spear as he turned back to see where Orochimaru had ended up. The Sannin was standing upside down on the beam Shisui had attacked from. His arm was half torn off, and blood dripped down towards the ground.

"I might not have your experience or your powers, but don't underestimate the Sharingan, sensei." Hissed Shisui. "Our dōjutsu makes the Uchiha Konoha's strongest clan. I can see you."

Orochimaru chin jutted out while his head tilted as he held a hand over his bleeding shoulder. Shisui had almost cut his arm clean off. "Well, it was about time wasn't it, Shisui?" Orochimaru hummed. Shisui teeth gritted together as he noticed the chakra building up in Orochimaru's hands.

Leaving behind the roasted remains of Kakashi's Katana he flashed forwards, escaping the jutsu just on time. But he wasn't out of danger, Orochimaru was forcing him into defense, the jutsus were flashing at him at blinding speed and all he could do was dodge and run. Orochimaru had hellish chakra reserves, which to Shisui's credit he had never been stupid enough to believe was naturally inherited.

Suddenly pain shot through his leg, and Shisui couldn't muffle the grunt of pain as his leg gave in. A clean cut ran down the length of his shin, and panting Shisui looked up. Orochimaru had landed a safe distance in front of him. A small smirk on his snake like face that made his blood boil.

Orochimaru had targeted his legs. Of course he would. He realized Shisui had grown faster than him, so it was only natural he would take away that advantage.

"Mah, look at how you've grown Shisui. Trying to kill your sensei and everything. And you who were always such a good little boy too. Always following my instructions to a T."

Shisui's hand tightened into fists as the killing intent from Orochimaru grew. He was getting dizzy now.

It wasn't over yet though. If he chose to he could get up. His bone was still intact, even if the rest of his shin was oozing blood everywhere. He carefully forced chakra into his right leg, trying to stop himself from bleeding too fast.

But maybe…

If Orochimaru thought him unable to fight… Maybe… If he fell for it… with a bit of luck… he just might win.
Shisui stopped the flow of chakra, and immediately he felt his blood start flowing again. He let himself collapse to the ground, but couldn't make himself lay down completely. He kept himself propped up on his forearms and reluctantly allowed his Sharingan to fade.

Orochimaru huffed, his brow arching as he stepped closer.

Was it working?

Shisui continued to breathe heavy, not bothering to mask up his exertion as he would have in any other situation. Against any other opponent. Orochimaru was a predator, and right now Shisui was his prey.

At least he would let him think so.

Orochimaru slowly walked towards him, his smile growing as he came to a stop only a few steps away.

Holy shit, it was working. Shisui had severely underestimated the art of bluffing until now. That was not a mistake he would repeat.

Shisui looked down as if in defeat. Just a little closer... "What a disappointment. You were doing so well earlier too. I thought there was more in you, I honestly did." Orochimaru mused.

Shisui wasn't listening though. He was focusing on the movements, listening to Orochimaru's breathing while estimating exactly how fast it would be for Orochimaru to make a killing blow. A fraction of a second. Maybe a bit more, but Shisui could be faster. It all depended on if Orochimaru wanted to play with his food. Orochimaru might know almost everything about Shisui, but not all.

There was one thing he'd kept hidden. He had even hid it from his father, because the ability was too filled with guilt. A burning resentment for his own power which had made him tongue tied every time the subject came up.

Shisui glared up, black meeting yellow, and Orochimaru looked impassively back. He didn't have the Sharingan activated, so he would have to rely on his normal eyesight for this to work. To trick his old sensei, because who in their right mind deactivate their Sharingan on purpose against someone like him?

The Sannin's fingers twitched, and taking that as his que Shisui's hand smacked together while going through seals so fast the movements blurred to his normal sight. Orochimaru was coming towards him so fast - too fast - and as Shisui's left hand grabbed around the elbow of his outstretched right arm he hadn't even been able to finish the thought before the seal activated.

There was a blinding flash of green light before the black kanji encircled his victim. Chakra was draining out of him fast, but he had enough. Shisui had to have enough, and if not... he was dead.

Orochimaru was less than a step away when the cage activated, and Shisui exhaled shakily as he realized just how close he'd been from losing. A fraction of a second... It might have been less... The Sannin was frozen in place, and despite fighting the lock put on him Shisui knew it would take more than a bijū to break free from this.

It was why Minato had taught it to him in the first place. He was an Uchiha and Naruto's teammate; it was his responsibility to keep the Kyūbi down if everything went wrong one day. And as such, he'd been drilled in a lot of different sealing techniques. Both from the Uchiha clan repertoire and the Yondaime.
"Gah." Orochimaru wheezed, and Shisui was surprised he could even make a sound, indistinguishable though it was. The effort was starting to make him tremble, because the seal was one of a few that could hold back a bijū, though as an Uchiha it was by far not the most chakra saving technique for that task.

But then again; this was just a feint. This was just to keep Orochimaru frozen and in place.

The man was panicking. Shisui could see the sweat forming on his brow and the flush on his neck. The Sannin wouldn't even be able to clench a muscle in this state. It was a complete immobilization of chakra in all states. As long as there was even a trace of chakra in his muscles it would paralyze him. It was a technique Minato had invented in memory of Kushina about two years ago, and it had never been tested out in combat before now. At least he would point out to the Hokage that it was a technique better used at full strength instead of after hours of battling if he made it out of here alive.

"Damn you, sensei." Shisui muttered, hating what he was about to do more than he hated Orochimaru himself.

Lifting his arm he tilted the Sannin's chin up. To Shisui it was easy. It was only the prisoner himself that could feel crushing depth of fuinjutsu. He held his chin in a firm hold, forcing Orochimaru to stare straight into his eyes as a cold resolution calmed the storm of emotions rushing through his head.

There was a process involved. It wasn't something he could throw out without preparation, and thanks to Orochimaru's current paralyzed state he was given that time. His mind worked furiously, pushed to the limits of what he ever believed himself capable of, his control latching out as Shisui extracted all the chakra he could. It rushed up to his brain. It pulsed against his eyes as they morphed into the Mangekyō Sharingan.

He had two options now... But what would Orochimaru wish? To die fighting for what he believed in? Or live under someone else's will?

Orochimaru's skin turned deathly pale.

In the end this would all be on him. This was his revenge. And resolved Shisui spoke the name aloud for the first time, until now having only been a whisper inside his mind that had been known to him as easily as an infant knew how to breathe.

"Kotoamatsukami."

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To be continued...
Thank you so very much for reading! The chapter was beta'd by the wonderful AnjoRemix!

A whole chapter with no Naruto… that’s a first, but we’ll catch up with her in the next chapter. This one was solely for Kakashi, Anko and Shisui… and a little Minato of course. And Shisui gets to shine a bit here, because let’s face it; Naruto has stolen a lot of the prime light so far. And in canon neither Kakashi or Anko has ever been a match against Orochimaru, but like Itachi, Shisui has one hell of a jutsu to fall back on when all else fails.

For those of you who don’t know or don’t remember this, "Kotoamatsukami" is Shisui’s unique dōjutsu power from canon which only his unique Mangekyō Sharingan can do.

I have waited for this for soooo long, and been impatient to get here since I started writing this hellishly over long story. Shisui was always going to put Orochimaru through his brainwashing powers. It was half the fun with putting Naruto and Shisui on the Snake Sannin’s team to begin with, and I wonder if anyone saw it coming? Not if
Orochimaru is good or bad, that's unavoidable to wonder about considering his character, I mean Shisui's actions.

Orochimaru is such a complex character, but I wanted him to be trustworthy, though I don't believe him capable of that. In canon Naruto was never able to affect Orochimaru at all - instead Sasuke was. Though Orochimaru does have a soft spot for Naruto here in After the Rain. He always respects strength, and he can see that Naruto got that despite their complete opposite views, which was highlighted in the previous chapter. What he said wasn't a lie either, and his character is still developing.

He has always been one to question everything and turn every stone. It's his strength, but also what makes him unreliable to a military system such as Konoha. Which is why Shisui's Kotoamatsukami comes into play. Just know Orochimaru's role is far from over in After the Rain.

ANBU masks translations;

Kani - crab

Tonbo – Dragonfly

Until next time!
Chapter Thirty Seven – Frozen Leaves

"Either people change or they die before they do. It's one or the other." - Orochimaru

The strain of the two jutsu was too much, and the second the Kotoamatsukami had taken effect Shisui let go. The fuinjutsu released Orochimaru and Shisui gasped for air as he stumbled backwards on shaking legs.

Orochimaru's eyes rolled back in their sockets and his head fell forwards, his arms going limp as if he had abruptly fallen asleep. The Sannin sagged where he stood, and then abruptly collapsed all together.

Shisui wasn't far behind, and despite his best efforts his feet gave in and he sank to his knees in exhaustion.

Dazed he stared at the limp man on the floor for what felt like ages, his mind filled with a numbing buzz that made him incapable of thinking straight. For a while his mind was more preoccupied catching up with his own injuries than his actions. And with the adrenaline gradually ebbing out he started to feel worse every passing second.

There were dizziness, exhaustion, bruises and stinging pain that was probably the most worrisome. Especially the dizziness combined with his sudden and desperate thirst. It felt like he hadn't had a sip of water in over a month. The arching, dry feelings in his limbs were clear signs of dangerously low chakra levels. Even in his disoriented state he could still recognize the symptoms.

The room had come to a hush, and Shisui felt heavy with thoughts that just wouldn't stop popping up. He needed to be distracted, to black out, to do anything but be here.

Was this supposed to happen? Had it worked?

Yes… He knew it had worked as well as the pain from his injuries proved he was still alive. The unique power of his Mangekyō Sharingan was a strange thing. He had never used the Kotoamatsukami before, and yet he instinctively knew what it did and the consequences even without any experience. It had come gradually to him when testing out how to activate his heightened level of the Uchiha dōjutsu.

One thing he hadn't been aware of though, was that it would knock the victim out like that. Orochimaru was still showing no sign of waking up. Maybe it was because of the extensive changes he'd rewired in Orochimaru, or maybe it was a standard side effect. He couldn't gather his mind enough to care much either way.

Uncomfortable Shisui tore his eyes away, guilt building up in his chest and making his throat feel tight and painful. He couldn't believe he'd actually done it.

He covered his face in his hands, breathing deeply as he took in what this meant. What this would do to Konoha and his friends.
His friends…

Shisui’s head snapped around, his eyes landing on Anko, and made a pathetic jerk in hopes of getting up again.

But he couldn't. His chakra was dangerously low after the Kotoamatsukami, and his additional injuries and exhaustion was weighing down his body. He couldn't get up anymore.

It was then he felt his ANBU tattoo sting. From what he could tell with his muddled mind the small discomfort lasted for two seconds.

That meant the mission was completed. It meant Danzō had been captured or killed.

Shisui inhaled deeply. He could send a backup signal through the seal, but even the small burst of chakra it required might be too much for him. Shisui had no idea how long he could stay awake without medical help. And if he died… Then would they know? No, they wouldn't… He couldn't black out yet. He needed to warn Minato at once.

Gritting his teeth together he felt for his chakra. His whole body screaming in protest as he sent a miniature amount into his seal.

It burned, and for a moment black spots erupted in front of his eyes and with a crash he fell, face forward into the uneven stone floor. His arms limp at his side as he fought against the overwhelming need to close his eyes and let the exhaustion carry him to sleep.

Shisui could hear the faint echo of his own harsh breathing. It was the only thing keeping him company as he used all his energy on staying awake.

He’d succeeded. The others would all know and there would be backup on their way… Hopefully.

Minato felt numb at the sight in front of him. After his fight with Danzō he had set out to help the many distress calls he’d received while being occupied in battle. He was angry at their many losses, but at least he managed to get a few out of some really nasty situations.

As they were retreating he had felt a new call, this one from Shisui. So gathering up the ninjas he’d rescued so far, he teleported to the seal the young Uchiha had brought with him into the base, but what he found was not what he had expected.

There should have been a fight, but this one was already well over. Left in its wake was a perfect chaos.

The hall was torn and partly imploded. The exploded tanks, the fallen columns and spears littering the floor gave a post-apocalyptic look which Minato realized was what had caused the massive shakes that made the base rumble for several long minutes not long ago.

The two medic-nin he’d brought with him hurried to help the fallen. One of them swooping down to Shisui himself, but Minato was staring at the man lying opposite him.

Despite the obvious structural damage the hall was vast, and Minato instantly knew where they’d ended up. One of the twin halls in the heart of the base. There were scattered bodies lying randomly around. Fallen in battle or executed. Shisui was laying unable to move despite being awake, his eyes blurry and his breathing hard opposite none other than Orochimaru.

The Sannin was completely out. His eyes closed and his left arm mostly torn off.
What was he doing here? He shouldn't have been here. Minato looked back to Shisui. They had collapsed opposite each other, and between the spikes on the left side of a room was what looked like a decapitated summoning snake of Orochimaru.

With a sinking feeling Minato understood what had happened. He'd been fooled. Despite all his precautions Orochimaru had fooled him anyway.

"Uchiha-san? Can you speak?" Asked the medic after turning the boy around.

Shisui reply was a pained cough.

The medic was already working on him, his hand glowing green while Shisui seemed to fight against his own exhaustion. He was looking up at him with strained eyes and he fought of the urge to flinch back at the pain reflected in the dark orbs. Minato hadn't seen the boy look like this in years. There was this defeated helplessness Minato recognized only too well. "Relax, Uchiha-san. We've got you now." The medic said kindly.

"No." Minato interfered, bending down next to the teenager. "Did Orochimaru do this?"

Shisui gritted his teeth and managed a tiny nod. The medic's eyes widened and flickered nervously to the unconscious form of the Sannin only a step away. The Hokage immediately got up and moved over. He had to restrain Orochimaru now while he had the chance.

"Make sure Shisui-kun can speak as soon as possible. He's first priority. I need to know exactly what happened here right now." Minato ordered as he got out rope while planning which seals to use to keep the Sannin down. The medic nodded hesitantly, looking back and forth between the Sannin and the struggling Uchiha.

Wait… Minato glanced up.

Did this mean Shisui had won against Orochimaru?

The thought was halted in his track when the sound of one of his men shouted for help from a medic. Looking up he felt his heart sink in his chest as an unconscious Kakashi was dragged out from the rubble with a tantō sticking out of his stomach.

They'd gotten an early start that day, and though their sleeping prisoner was making it difficult to move at full speed they were optimistic for an early return to Konoha.

The road they picked was rarely used with bushes and grass growing over the tracks from carriages that had once used the path more frequently in the past. The sun was setting on the horizon and trees cast long shadows as they walked at leisure back towards home.

Ensui had their prisoner thrown over his shoulder, grumbling now and then about the weight, but had yet to actually demand a switch. Rin and Naruto were at the foot of their line. Occasionally talking but in general walking in an aware silence. The medic had taken out her medic kit and was re-organizing it as they travelled, while Naruto was keeping an eye on their last member.

Orochimaru was well ahead of them alone, and he was acting weird.

Earlier he had been in a discussion with Naruto and Ensui concerning their return journey. The jinchūriki wanting to speed up their pace while Ensui was all about taking it slowly. Orochimaru was somewhere in between. Both seeing the upsides of taking it slowly, that way they could pass through without being discovered, while at the same time getting impatient about returning home.
The discussion had come to an abrupt end when his head had snapped sideways, as if he'd heard something. Hours later Naruto was sure he hadn't, as they were yet to be ambushed by either ninja or robbers, but he'd remained quiet and set a pace the others very well had to keep with.

Yet Orochimaru remained quiet. He walked ahead of them with a distant demeanor. None of them were sure what was bothering him, but his silence were enough that none of them dared ask for a break. It might be why Ensui was insisting on keeping a hold of their prisoner too. He wanted to make sure the others would be ready in case there was an abrupt attack.

They hadn't eaten since breakfast, and Naruto's stomach was growling loudly for everyone to hear. She had swallowed down some food pills just to quench the worst of her hunger, but at her movements Orochimaru suddenly stopped ahead of them. The three halted mid stride as the Sannin just stood there.

"Orochimaru-sama?" Ensui asked quietly.

Orochimaru's head turned, his eyes landing on Rin with a speculative glint. The look in his eyes made Naruto's muscles clench, his expression was cold as steel and her thoughts were brought back to the war. When they'd been out on the battlefield and Orochimaru had picked out his next victim.

The look was gone as quickly as it had appeared, and his yellow eyes trailed slowly towards Naruto. She hadn't realized she had taken a step closer to their medic, the move had been instinctive, because for a moment she had felt like Orochimaru had been... The old Orochimaru. The one who had attacked her during the Chūnin exam and stolen Sasuke with promises of power.

But then he calmed, his eyes going distant as if he wasn't really seeing them at all.

"Orochimaru?" Asked Naruto carefully.

He didn't respond.

It started abruptly. It had been years since it had happened last, and the sudden pull in her stomach came completely out of nowhere, making her gasp as she clutched at her abdomen. Her seal activated, and Naruto felt a twinge in her stomach. Next moment someone appeared straight in front of her, almost on top of her toes, and before her brain could catch up to what was occurring she was being pushed backwards.

The Hokage stood like a wall in front of her, one arm outstretched at his side to prevent her from moving around him, the other clutching a kunai.

"Wha-!"

"Stay back." Minato's words were harsh and not to be mistaken. Rin had frozen next to her and Ensui had dropped their prisoner unceremoniously on the ground and was already prepared to attack at a moment's notice.

Orochimaru had turned slightly, angling his body so he had a better view of them. His head tilted down as he took in the newly appeared Hokage, who was standing as a barrier between him and the two girls. Ensui was in the space between them. His head turning back and forth between them.

Naruto noticed his white cloak had traces of blood and dirt on it. There was a tear in the sleeve and he looked fresh from battle. His outstretched arm had scratches on it and there was no doubt in Naruto's mind something dangerous was happening. She just didn't understand what.

"So you're here... That was quick." Orochimaru drawled and put a hand on his hip.
Minato didn't respond, he shifted slightly while his hand was tightly wrapped around his kunai.

"Are you all okay?" Asked Minato, his stare was intent on Orochimaru, but the question was directed towards the younger ones.

"What is going on Minato-sensei?" Asked Rin puzzled.

"Are you okay?" He repeated, and Naruto was about to step aside so she could get a clearer view of what was going on, but Minato's hand twitched the miniscule amount, halting her movement and keeping her behind him.

"We're all fine, Hokage-sama, we're ahead of schedule..." Ensui explained, his brow furrowed as he peeked pointedly at their unconscious prisoner at his feet.

"What is going on?" Naruto looked from Minato to Orochimaru and then over at Rin.

Orochimaru turned so he was fully facing them. "I haven't touched them." His tone was irritated. "Though they would have been proper pay back for what you just pulled. Your student and the legacy of your dead wife. Both gone like that." Orochimaru snapped his fingers. "And I've had plenty of opportunities. I saw what happened over there."

Minato straightened up. "Why didn't you then? You showed much less remorse when you attacked your other students."

Naruto gasped. Her eyes going from the back of Minato's head to Orochimaru who hadn't reacted to the words. "They were in my lab. It escalated I guess."

"No!" Naruto shouted, about to run forward, but Minato shot her a glare over his shoulder before his attention was back on the Sannin.

"Stay put, Naruto." He ordered before addressing Orochimaru. "You're a clone I take it."

Ensui was shaking his head in protest, and so was Naruto. That was Orochimaru. He hadn't made any clones since they left Konoha, and no mere clone could stay intact for almost a week. Naruto would know. She'd tried.

But Minato ignored them, slowly edging forward and putting more space between him and Naruto. "How long have you had this clone activated? That's what that chakra transfer stone was for right? I saw it down at the base. You should have a chakra collector on you right now. You used your prisoners chakra to sustain it and keep your cover, and then spent months down in that lab. How long was it?"

Orochimaru's smirk grew and he shook his head. "About six months."

Naruto's eyes widened, and she glanced up at Minato. Six months? Had everyone been fooled for six months? That meant Naruto hadn't seen the real Orochimaru since she left the village years ago.

"I see..." Minato murmured, the grip on his kunai tightening. "That is a very interesting clone... To replicate yourself by the use of others chakra."

"It's a very useful technique. Much more durable than any other type." Orochimaru drawled.

"You use blood?" Wondered Minato with a humourless smile. That made the Sannin huff, and if Naruto was to guess she suspected Minato was right. The Hokage straightened up, his face grim as his blue eyes pierced yellow. "What will you do now? Will you dispel yourself, run or attack?"
Orochimaru's eyes travelled from the Yondaime and over to Naruto, where they stuck. Naruto wasn't sure what she looked like. Maybe like a train had just collided with her face. He wasn't supposed to be like this anymore. She had honestly believed… This couldn't be true, and yet it could.

The Sannin's face became twisted, as if he was both furious and sad simultaneously. She'd never really seen him look like that. He took a shaky step backwards and broke the eye contact, his hands clenched at his side. It looked like he was fighting some invisible force.

"Fine." He snapped, his teeth clenched as they went up in a seal Naruto didn't recognize.

The clone didn't deactivate with a puff of smoke like normal. Instead it cracked. A big tear appeared over Orochimaru's face and down into his sweater, before the cracks extended outwards. Growing like a water drop on a dry paper. The tears elongated and grew like branches before every inch of Orochimaru was covered in it… Then he crumbled. Dust particles were caught in the wind, but the rest of him was imploding into a patch of dust.

Only his clothes left behind.

Naruto's heart was hammering in her chest, and she couldn't look away from the pile of dust where Orochimaru had been standing before. She had no idea what was going on or how it had happened, but she could read enough between the lines to understand the gist of what this meant.

"Minato." Naruto said, and she was surprised by how cold and icy her voice sounded. The Hokage's face turned towards her, and Naruto met his eyes. Her words came out closer to a hiss. "Where are Anko and Shisui?"

As an answer to Naruto's question the Yellow Flash had teleported them straight into the entrance hall. The moment the Hiraishin was over Naruto ripped herself free from Minato's grip on her shoulder and looked around. They were in the hospital.

"Which room are they in?" Asked Naruto and turned around towards their means of travel hundreds of miles in the span of a moment. He opened his mouth to answer, but they were interrupted by the front doors opening with a bang. Naruto stared in horror as medics came hurrying through with injured people strapped down to gurneys.

Feeling the blood leave her face she recognized the person on the second gurney, and Rin gasped in horror as Kakashi was wheeled straight past them, followed by a row of others until the disheveled Shisui and lastly Anko was wheeled past. Naruto made a move to follow them but a hand on her shoulder kept her in place.

Throwing a furious glare over her shoulder she found Ensui restraining her. The Nara stared unflinchingly back, his eyes void of anything but determination that trumped Naruto's building hysteria. "You'll get in the way. Let them do their work." He told her sternly.

Minato hadn't let go of their captive yet, Hiamo Naoki had yet to wake up and still laid limp over the Hokage's shoulder. He gestured towards the chairs. "I'll take care of the captive while you can wait here if you wish. However, I need a report of how the clone Orochimaru behaved during the mission along with the normal report. I won't be able to come back so schedule with my receptionist for a time to debrief in my office. This as a huge mess that needs to be sorted out as soon as possible." Minato said with a sigh.

All three of them looked at him with helpless expressions. He lanced away. "I think they will be fine. Kakashi is the worst off though… but he's strong. He'll make it." Minato murmured. Rin looked on
the verge of tears while Ensui made a "tsk" sound under his breath.

Naruto couldn't speak. What the hell had happened? She turned back as more people came in through the door. This time there was only body bags though…

Rin hurriedly lifted her hair and started putting it up a ponytail. "I'll go and help out." She told them fleetingly, before she jogged through the doors and left Naruto and Ensui to wait.

And wait they did. For hours. Which left Naruto feeling like her nerves were fried from her ever building anxiety.

Anko had come out of surgery and was now in post-op, and it had gone well. Shisui hadn't required surgery, but he'd been sedated and was dangerously low on chakra, so they wouldn't let them see him yet.

Naruto sat with her head resting against the wall, Ensui at her side in complete silence. This was killing her. What had happened? Who had done this? Why hadn't she been there? From what she had seen most of the people hurried through the door had all been in ANBU uniform, except Anko, who of course wasn't ANBU. She was in TIF, so why had she been with them? How was Orochimaru involved? What base had he been talking about?

It was driving her bat shit crazy.

They had to be okay… They just had to. Naruto couldn't accept any other outcome. Ensui rested a steady, warm hand on her shoulder, and she glanced up at him distracted. "Calm down, Naruto." He said reassuringly. His voice soft and comforting as he spoke. Like this he seemed so reliable and calm. Naruto momentarily felt herself relax, but only for a short moment.

"Calm down? How can I calm down!" Naruto said surprisingly hysterical.

"They're working hard, and we already know Anko and Shisui will be fine." Ensui replied assured.

"But what about Kakashi? We haven't heard anything! What if- what will... I can't even-." Naruto was too emotional to get a straight sentence out. Too much was building up inside her, and she felt absolutely useless. Her friends had been in mortal danger, and where the hell had she been? She'd been outside the country!

Ensui exhaled shakily and nodded. "I know. I know how you feel. I can't promise anything, but Hokage-sama is right. Kakashi-san is strong."

Swallowing Naruto nodded. Trying to believe in Ensui's words.

Just as she was about to start scaling the walls to work off some frustration a harried looking medic finally came out with an update for them. "Hatake Kakashi-san made it out of surgery." The medic said calmly. "You can also go see Mitarashi-san. She's not awake, but you can go into her room if you're quiet."

They made it to Anko's room in record speed, but someone had already beat them to it. Rin was standing at the foot of her bed with Anko's chart in hand as Naruto barreled into the room with absolutely no warning. A medic in the hallway screamed at her not to run in the corridors, while Ensui trailed behind her at a more acceptable pace.

Seeing Anko with her own two eyes was a huge relief, but also extremely disconcerting. Naruto had never seen her this frail before. She'd never been this quiet or lifeless, and it made her stomach knot
tightly with worry as she plopped down into the chair next to her bed.

"She'll have a long recovery ahead of her." Explained Rin with a sympathetic glance at the sleeping girl. "The most serious injury is to her left leg. There is a chance for full recovery… But she'll need help getting there." She looked from Naruto to Ensui who both nodded in understanding.

"What about the others?" Asked Ensui. "How many were there?"

Rin glanced tiredly down at the papers in her hand, a shadow crossing her face as the little energy in her eyes deflated before them. "There were more than I can count actually. The hospital is being turned upside down and everyone available is being called in. Not only have our ninjas been brought in, but a horde of injured civilians. But of our friends… Kakashi-kun is… he's still touch and go… He lost a lot of blood, and he almost died during surgery."

Naruto closed her eyes and covered her face in her hands. Rin looked pale just thinking about it, but with a small shake of her head she continued. "Shisui should be fine. His leg has been healed and bandaged up, though the more serious problem was chakra exhaustion, but he got help quickly and should be able to leave the hospital within a week."

Naruto and Ensui glanced at each other. The unmistakable relief in the Nara's face spoke volumes though. Something close to life entering his eyes at the confirmation that Shisui would be fine. Rin continued. "Raidō came in early with a few stab wounds, but they were none life threatening thanks to his ANBU uniform so he'll be good to leave in a couple of days. Ibiki however…"

Rin's eyes tore up as she diverted her attention away from Anko and out the window. She swallowed audibly. "They had to amputate the leg." She finished in a small voice.

Naruto gaped.

Amputate the leg?

Ibiki… Ibiki had been in on this too? She hadn't even noticed… There had been so many being wheeled in and she'd been distracted by Anko and Shisui. Not to mention Kakashi's still unknown fate.

"He crashed twice during operation… It's a miracle he's even alive, and it's not a given he'll survive yet." Rin continued, still watching the evening sky outside the window as she talked. "He was wounded with some very nasty jutsu they couldn't figure out. Most likely..." Her eyes shifted towards Naruto for a tiniest moment before flicking back out the window.

"Orochimaru. It was him, wasn't it?" Naruto asked breathlessly.

"I don't know. As the injuries were caused during a mission there's a privacy protocol involved." Rin answered hesitantly. "But the jutsu used reminded me of Anko's style."

"So he won't have a leg when he wakes up because of that damn snake face?!" Naruto stressed and got to her feet as Ensui gave a sharp "hush!" while glancing in Anko's direction.

"Well… Not exactly, the leg was crushed under rocks. A lot of the injured shows sign of similar injuries." Rin said quietly, and Naruto could only imagine the thoughts in her head. That was the second of her classmates that had been trapped under some sort of boulder. "But in Ibiki's case there was nothing of his foot to save."

They lapsed into silence. All of them wondering the same thing. What if I'd been there?
Rin didn't linger long, and soon she hurried out to work again. Anko slept soundlessly, and as evening settled outside Ensui left to go home. He squeezed her shoulder in comfort before leaving, and Naruto wondered what he was thinking.

He'd stayed with her all day in silence, but Naruto knew he was uncomfortable. Maybe it brought back memories of how he lost his own team. Naruto wasn't sure, but she hoped her friends hadn't felt this way the time she'd been the one in critical condition.

Personally she had no idea how they'd behaved or felt during the month Naruto had recovered in her prison cell, but she suspected Anko must have been crawling up the walls in fury at not even knowing if she was alive or not. Maybe Shisui too, though he'd never show it. He had exploded on her afterwards though, so there must have been some tension.

While the street lights lit up and welcomed the night no one had yet come to kick her out, which she was grateful for. In fact a medic came by and told her which room number Shisui was in, and that she was free to visit now seeing as he'd woken up.

They didn't mention Kakashi.

So with her head filled with all kinds of unpleasant thoughts she got up and walked through the corridor. It was almost at the other end of the hospital, but when she pushed open the door she was surprised to see someone else was already there. And not a medic either.

Two sets of eyes trailed towards her. Minato turned around, and with a nod to her he left the room. Naruto stepped aside to let him through the door and watched him half jog down the corridor in the direction she'd come from.

She looked questionably at Shisui.

He was awake and Naruto forgot her question in favor of feeling a surging relief well up inside her. "You're awake."

Shisui nodded slowly. He was paler than usual with bruises on his neck and cheek. He also looked exhausted. Completely drained and not entirely there behind glazed eyes. Maybe he was drugged with painkillers. Rin had told her people could get very sleepy from those drugs.

"What… what happened?" She asked before she could stop herself. As expected he didn't reply. It had been an ANBU mission, so of course he wouldn't answer. What freaked her out though was the unnaturally glint in his eyes.

He looked defeated.

"Did… Did Orochimaru do this?" She asked in a small voice. His lips thinned in a sneer and he glanced away. His breathing accelerating slightly while Naruto came closer. She sat down in the chair next to his bed. "Will you be okay, Shisui?" She asked instead. His reaction had been enough of a confirmation.

"Yeah. But it's nothing serious." Shisui replied in a little more than a whisper. He then looked back at her. "And you? You seem fine… You were on that mission right? Not in Konoha?"

Naruto's brow furrowed. "Yes… But Minato suddenly showed up and…." She trailed off unsure.

Shisui nodded. "It really was a clone… It sounded like you were-" He stopped himself mid-sentence and glanced briefly away. "Well, it's good that you're safe."
Naruto tilted her head. "I am perfectly fine Shisui. I didn't even get a scratch on me during the mission. It was easy. You however, are not fine. Is there anything I can do? Anything you need? I feel really useless here. I sat with Anko and they think there's a chance she'll be fine. But Kakashi... they're not saying much, but he made it out of surgery."

Shisui nodded again. "I see... Actually, there is one thing you can do." Naruto leaned forward. "Can you tell my father where I am? We originally planned to have dinner tonight, but I'm not sure he knows where I am."

Naruto hesitated. She didn't want to leave him alone, but Shisui wasn't budging. "Okay. I'll bring him here. I'll be back in ten minutes okay?" She promised and stood up, but the Uchiha shook his head.

"Actually... I'm pretty tired. Could you just tell father where I am and that I'll be fine? I just want to have some space... for now."

She frowned and her worry grew at how reclusive he was acting. But he was the patient. Maybe he really was tired. "Of course. I'll tell him, and I'll see you tomorrow, Shisui." She gently folded her fingers around Shisui's limp hand and squeezed it. He was cold.

Shisui nodded and leaned back into his pillows, his head turned away while leaving Naruto with little to do but to go inform Kagami of the state of his son.

Minato sighed as he rested his head against the cool surface of his desk. He could very well fall asleep like this. It certainly wouldn't be the first time. Instead he forced his muscles into action, and his head felt like a ton of gravel as he straightened up in his chair.

The reports lay spread all over the room. Usually he could contain it to the desk area, but there was now an explosion of occurrences happening at once, and he'd utilized the whole office as an archive to have everything he needed in immediate reach.

Danzō was dead along with over fifteen of his ninjas, and over twenty was in the hospital. Some with injuries that would take them out of the ninja occupation indefinitely. Orochimaru was locked up and he didn't know what to do with Uchiha Shisui. Minato had no idea his dōjutsu was that powerful, and it put the boy at a severe security risk if this information ever came into the wrong hands. Which it very well might be, because some idiot in his team had blabbered.

The rumour that Orochimaru had betrayed the village and that Shisui had been the one to take him down was already spreading. The only upside was that whoever had babbled hadn't known the details.

And then there was Kakashi.

His hand trembled slightly just thinking his name. The medic's latest report was back, and his student was still alive. He'd been poisoned not once, but twice. First from the snake summon, then from whatever was stored in those collapsed tanks, before getting stabbed. Out of the fifteen people who'd entered the twin halls, Orochimaru had killed eleven of his ninja.

Minato gritted his teeth in fury.

Then there were the prisoners... So many prisoners that needed to be sorted out, but the village was again reaching its limits. It was only five years since the war, and though the forces was slowly expanding this was not what they needed right now.
Even Jiraiya had ended up in the hospital. Many of the base inhabitants had tried to escape during the infiltration, but the outer patrol had been there to stop them. Jiraiya would be fine in no time though. He’d only suffered a broken arm and a concussion, but it still spoke volumes about how hard pressed they’d been.

Though the report that truly worried him was the chakra transition devise. It had been sucking chakra from the prisoners into the stone, before sending the chakra through space ninjutsu to the stone Orochimaru's specialized clone was in position of. That's how he'd gone months without running out of chakra. Looking over the notes Minato realized it was probably longer. Orochimaru had most likely spent more than a year in that base thanks to the device.

It was littered with Uzumaki fuinjutsu. The Sannin had cracked the code and it made Minato extremely uneasy. Because if he could do this, than how many others could too? Fuinjutsu was in fact not Orochimaru's favourite branch of jutsu after all. Both Jiraiya and Tsunade had more of a natural aptitude for that. Especially Tsunade.

In general it had been a successful mission. As far as Minato could see, no one in the base had escaped, but they now had a lot of crap to stifle through. And was not naive enough to believe a base that contained missing ninja from all five great nations didn't have outside contacts.

The door to his office opened, and Fugaku - now in charge of the base prisoner situation - came in. He too looked riled up. "We need more people." He demanded at once. "There is just not enough staff at the police force to handle all these prisoners along with the tasks we already have."

Minato sighed and nodded. "I can give you one." He replied automatically. In truth he'd been waiting for Fugaku to come to him for hours now. He knew the logistics very well, and the police force would be overworked even if none of them slept for the next month.

"What? I need more than one!" Fugaku protested.

Minato shook his head. "You get Naruto." He answered in explanation, but Fugaku's brow furrowed, still not seeing why that made a difference.

"The girl can make over a hundred clones that will last for up to eight or so hours. I hope that will be enough? She just came off a mission, but I'm pretty sure she's crawling up the walls from feeling useless right now. Just instruct her properly so she knows where to lead her minions." Minato muttered tiredly.

Fugaku made a surprised "huh" sound and considered it, before he shrugged and accepted it. He more or less ran out of the office to get back to work, and Minato's thoughts automatically drifted to the man's nephew. He sincerely hoped Shisui's claims were true about his Mangekyō Sharingan and what they'd done to his old sensei.

Looking between the mess of papers and the door Minato decided to go check for himself.

The next week passed both incredibly fast, and yet slowly. After the first day hanging out in the hospital her opportunities to return became few and far between.

Working for the Uchiha Police Force, or the UPF as most called it, was an experience in itself, and slowly but surely Naruto understood what had gone down right outside the village borders.

It took a lot of different sources, and no small amount of eavesdropping, but now Naruto spent most of her days in an uneasy tension. Because like her, the rest of the village had gotten wind of what had happened, and though the rumors had turned misleading, people were under the impression
Orochimaru was the master mind between the latest events. Danzō’s name never came up, though Naruto had specifically overheard Jiraiya talk about him with Minato. Somehow he was involved too, but she wasn't sure how.

All she knew was that suddenly everyone knew who she was.

Because Orochimaru was now under the suspicion of being a traitor, then what about his students? Seeing as Shisui and Anko were in the hospital, it meant Naruto was the one to take the brunt of the villagers finger pointing and whispers.

It had been a rude reminder, because it had been a very long time since Naruto had been under this type of attention. It made her recollect her childhood, and the constant fear and suspicion she'd been shaped under. Luckily it wasn't as bad as back then, but it was enough for Naruto to avoid public areas if she could avoid it. Fugaku had picked up on it too, and as he was her current boss while she helped out the Police Force he'd been kind enough to put her to work with the inmates, transportation and paperwork instead of the more public jobs.

She was even sent out on an escort missions with a prisoner to the Fire Prison by the capital together with Kagami and a younger Uchiha named Midori. Kagami had spent the majority of the mission in deep thought while Midori fired questions to both of them about what had gone down in the base. That mission had taken her away from the hospital for three days, so when she returned she camped out in Anko's room for the night.

The Uchiha was also seeing an upswing in popularity. The fact that someone as young as Shisui was rumored to have defeated Orochimaru gave a newfound respect for the entire clan, and during lunch break the officers seemed pleased with how well behaved the inhabitants of Konoha was acting these days, which helped with their massive workload.

Naruto imagined it was the fact that traitors had been discovered within the village, and therefore most was on their best behavior to prove that at least they weren't.

The crazy schedule Fugaku had set her was still not enough to keep her entirely away from the hospital though. And she made a point of breaking into her friend's hospital rooms before and after work every day. It wasn't during visitor hours, so Naruto had to be creative if she wanted to see them.

Shisui was recovering right on schedule and seemed mostly bored and detached whenever she visited. Anko spent the first four days asleep before Naruto got the opportunity to talk to her. Or more accurately talk at her.

Anko hadn't said a single word to her as Naruto tried to find out how she was feeling. She'd look apathetic ahead and while ignoring Naruto as if she wasn't even in the room. The uncharacteristic silence of her roommate was making Naruto freak out just as much as her injuries initially had. And worse of all; she didn't show much improvements from there.

Anko was in for a long hospital stay, and the medics estimated she wouldn't be able to leave for at least a month.

Ibiki was also awake, and though Naruto wasn't technically his friend she had been by with a few bowls of ichiraku ramen for him in the evenings. The young man had looked surprised the first time she barged into his room for a visit, but had accepted the gift easily enough.

Then there was Kakashi. Naruto had probably spent the most time in his room compared to the others. Not that he would ever know. He was still in a coma.
The immediate danger to his life had passed, but the medics were still not sure how he'd behave when... or if... he woke up. The poison had damaged several of his organs, and they still weren't sure how the poison had affected his brain. He would have to wake up for them to know for sure.

Naruto would usually sit by his bed and talk about her day to the unresponsive man until a medic realized she'd broken into his room again and chase her out.

It was during one of her break-ins into Kakashi's room that she realized she wasn't the only one to break hospital regulations to visit her comatose teammate.

"Naruto-chan?" Asked Asuma surprised when he spotted her in the window. It was almost midnight, so Naruto was just as surprised to see him there.

"Hey..." Naruto replied confused, looking between the box in his hand and Kakashi on the bed. Nothing seemed to have changed in Kakashi's condition during the day. He was still connected to tubes while monitors beeped in the background. "You here to visit Kakashi too?" She wondered and slid down from the window frame to step over to the bed.

"Yeah... In a way. I was out of the village and didn't get back before yesterday. I didn't hear what happened until a few hours ago." Asuma replied with a frown.

She nodded and eyed the box in his hand. "Brought him a present?" She wondered and sat down in the chair in the corner of the room.

"Well... I was trying to, but I didn't know... I didn't know he was in a coma, so this will probably go to waste." He muttered and placed the box on the nightstand. "I'm actually set to leave the village again tomorrow." He added with a hopeless look in Kakashi's direction.

Naruto nodded. "I'm swamped with work too. I'm helping the Uchiha Police Force since they're so understaffed."

Asuma hummed in vague agreement. "I heard... Actually it isn't for a mission though. I'm leaving for the capital." He explained with a frown. "Kakashi knew. We planned on having a go away dinner with the old gang, but since..." He gestured towards the bed a bit helplessly. "And with Ibiki and Anko..." He trailed off.

"You're going away?" Naruto asked.

"I'm starting my training as one of the Daimyo's guards." He replied.

Naruto made an "oh" sound. Remembering vaguely that Asuma had done something similar before too. He'd been within the guard for years if she remembered correctly. "That's too bad. We'll miss you around here, but I'm sure you'll kick arse over there. I can get Kakashi to send you a letter when he wakes up too."

Asuma snorted. "I doubt it. He's not the pen pal type of person."

"Well... maybe. But then I'll write you instead. I'll tell you when he wakes up." Naruto promised.

"And if he doesn't?" Asuma hesitantly asked.

She didn't want to even consider that possibility. "He will. Kakashi is one stubborn bastard. There's no way he'll give up yet. He's like a cockroach. No matter how many times you try to stamp him out, he still appears in your kitchen window and steals your food."
Asuma chuckled and shook his head. "I hope so." He picked up the package and sighed. "Well, I'll go give this to Ibiki instead then. He isn't too fond of nigiri, but I was planning on breaking into his hospital room next anyway." He muttered and turned towards the door. As he opened the door and peeked outside for any medics, but suddenly he faulted and looked back. "I'm sorry." He told her sincerely, and Naruto knew he wasn't referring to Kakashi anymore.

"I am too." She replied quietly.

Shisui exhaled impatiently while he leaned against the reception desk of the hospital. The bored lady behind the counter was going over his paperwork so he could get discharged. He had a box of pills clutched in his right hand which he would have to take three times a day for the next two weeks, his leg was still not entirely healed up, but otherwise Shisui felt more than ready to leave and had been for days.

He also had two weeks of leave he wasn't sure what to do with. From Naruto's visits he knew Anko was looking at a long and painful recovery, Kakashi was still in a coma and Ibiki would never be a ninja again, so all things considered Shisui didn't feel like he had a right to complain.

The old woman behind the desk pushed a document into his hand and babbled away about his payment plan while pointing out where he had to sign. After quickly reading through he signed his name and handed it back. The woman glanced at it lazily before saying in a nasal voice "Next." Which Shisui took as his cue to leave.

There was no one to help him home, but that was due to the fact that Shisui hadn't informed anyone he was leaving yet. He hated being in the hospital, but he wasn't quite up for any company yet either. During his stay he had a steady and constant stream of visitors in the form of his family and Naruto, and though he knew it was rude Shisui hadn't mustered up the will to be very conversational.

In fact he loathed the idea of going home at all. His father would be there, so Shisui opted to go for a walk through the forest instead. They told him to keep the weight off his recovering foot, but Shisui knew enough about his injury to know his limits.

As he made it outside Shisui inhaled the fresh air and felt relief at being able to stretch his legs again. Despite the sting of pain in his shin Shisui pushed it out of his mind and set out towards the borders. For a short while his worries went to the back of his mind while he took in how incredibly nice it was to have some freedom away from prying eyes, constant questions and prodding medics.

It was short lived though. As the forest branches stretched over him, engulfing him in their shadows as the forest welcomed him his mind darkened. Tracking straight back to last week and the source of his conflicting emotions over what he'd done.

He'd more or less taken away Orochimaru's will. Just like Danzō had done to his Root agents. What Orochimaru had done to his test subjects. What Kiri had done to Naruto by branding her heart with a cursed tag seal.

His feet moved faster of their own accord, but the pain in his leg reminded him to slow down, and limping slightly Shisui slowed down. He wasn't really paying attention to where he was heading. He rarely did when he decided to go for a walk in the forest surrounding Konoha. It was the beauty of walking aimlessly without a destination. Getting lost in here was like getting lost in your thoughts. Eventually he would find the path back, but until he did there would be nothing but winding tracks and time to gather himself.
He felt torn in two about his actions. On one hand Orochimaru had attacked ninjas of Konoha. He was a traitor and had wounded his friends and comrades. Those actions were an act of treason and enough to warrant an execution, and Shisui had known that from the moment he had first attacked Orochimaru inside that base. But then… the Sannin was also one of those Shisui had wanted to protect.

He had been running on adrenaline and panic for most of the battle, but he wasn't sure he would have acted any different if he'd been completely in control either. After all he worked in ANBU. They did a lot of dirty work there, and his emotional compass was slightly screwed as a result. He felt justified in putting Orochimaru under the Kotoamatsukami, because the alternative would have been death for the Snake Sannin. Or more likely his own death if he was to be more realistic.

And yet… The image of Naruto trying to commit suicide kept popping up in his head. How desperate she had been to be free of those controlling her. And what Shisui had done to Orochimaru was even worse. While the cursed tag seal only controlled her actions, the Kotoamatsukami was complete control. Orochimaru didn't even understand that his whole world view had been altered by Shisui. He had been forced into submission and brainwashed.

The power was terrifying, and Shisui found himself relieved the ability would take time to regenerate. He wasn't sure how long it would take, but the extensive work he'd done on Orochimaru had efficiently shut down the Kotoamatsukami for a long time. Months… Maybe years. Shisui would have to see to know exactly how long it would take.

The Hokage wanted to do tests to see how long exactly. There were jutsu they could use to find out, but he wasn't too eager to get a time limit. The power was ominous and if he was honest with himself; addictive.

He took some comfort in the fact that he hadn't resulted in using Susanoo or Amaterasu too. Fugaku had dug up all the information he could get about his dōjutsu's power, and the two Mangekyō jutsu would deteriorate his eyesight if he was to start using them. Eventually making him blind if overused.

He wasn't sure what Kotoamatsukami would do to his sight, but with the exception of how blotched and red his eyes had been for the first couple of days then otherwise there was no change in his vision.

He came to a stop in a small clearing in the forest. A Hashirama tree stood taller than the others, and he sat down at the trunk carefully. His leg throbbed but he ignored it easily. Instead he carefully stretched it out before him and picked out the pill box from his trousers. Opening the lid and fishing out a pill he swallowed it. He was due for one around this time of day, and he figured it was a good time as any.

He rested his head against the bark and closed his eyes. The sunlight was streaming in through gaps between the leaves, hitting his closed lids and warming his skin while the wind brushed gently against his face.

It felt peaceful.

Before he knew it he had fallen asleep to thoughts of how nice it would be if he could just stay here and leave his troubles back in the village a little while longer.

"You're not Shisui." Naruto pointed out the obvious as she stared confused at the startled old man in Shisui's hospital bed.
"Wha-! Who are you?" He said startled, his eyes wide as Naruto jumped in.

"My friend Shisui was here. Where did he go?" Naruto asked him.

"Ninja-san, this is my hospital room, please leave!" He said bravely despite his obvious fear of her. It was a ninja thing. Civilians really disliked it when you came into their homes.

"Sorry, old man. Didn't mean to disturb yah. I just... my friend was here. Where did he go?" Naruto muttered and left the way she came from. The old man staring in incredulity as she jumped through the seventh story window.

Naruto cursed as she mused over Shisui's sudden disappearance while tracking across the hospital roof before climbing down the wall until she reached Anko's room at the other end.

Her worry was for naught though, because Shisui was right there next to Anko.

"Hey!" Naruto cried, causing both her friends to turn towards the window. "There's an old man in your room. What are you doing here?" she asked accusingly. Eyeing him up and down for any sign of injury.

Shisui rolled his eyes. "I'm discharged Naruto. I left this morning."

"Oh... Why didn't you tell me?" Asked Naruto and slid into the room. Anko was back to staring at her hands instead of her roommate. She wondered if Shisui had any more luck getting anything out of her. She was becoming very concerned, and so were the medics. Her reluctance to talk was also agitating the Hokage, who had yet to receive a report from the mission.

Shisui shrugged instead of replying. He leaned back in his chair as Naruto sat down at the end of Anko's bed. Feeling the tense mood Naruto glanced between the two. "What's going on?"

"Nothing." Shisui replied, his eyes gliding between the two reluctantly. "Just visiting Anko."

"How are you Anko?" Naruto asked for the hundredth time, and as expected she didn't receive more than a scowl in reply.

"You can't continue being mute Anko." Shisui said exasperated. "I get that you're... sad. I am too, but don't let him do this to you." He told her calmly, leaning forward in his chair to glare hard at her. Anko snorted and shook her head.

Naruto shifted uncomfortably. She knew Anko's muteness wasn't from an injury. The medics called it PSD and shock.

Naruto called it heartbreak and fury.

"Orochimaru-" Shisui started, and Anko flinched while her none bandaged hand clenched. "betrayed us all. And this really, really suck. You're in pain, and he caused it. But please... just don't let this consume you. Bad things happen to ninja who let their hatred and hurt consume them. Don't let him injure you more than he already did."

Anko glanced up at him with storm filled eyes. "How?" She croaked, and Naruto nearly fell off the bed at hearing Anko talk for the first time.

"I... I don't know. But shutting us out won't help any." Shisui replied calmly.

"How did we get out?" Anko demanded. "They say you... that you defeated him."
He shook his head. "… A genjutsu.." Shisui replied calmly.

"Genjutsu." Clarified Anko in disbelief.

Shisui nodded. "One I'd never tried before, and it nearly drained all my chakra. But yes, a genjutsu."

She looked back doubtfully, and even Naruto wondered what sort of genjutsu could have trapped Orochimaru. "And now… Now we're supposed to forget the fact that the man who trained us… Who protected us and helped us grow stronger was a backstabbing traitor?" Anko asked monotonously.

"No. Don't ever forget," Shisui retorted angrily."But it won't help anyone if you keep being in denial. At least accept it"

"And you have?" Growled Anko. Wincing slightly as her breathing turned hard. She lay back in bed, her eyes growing glossy as she stared up at the ceiling.

Shisui opened his mouth, then closed it before shaking his head. "We didn't see this coming. I was shocked too you know. I lost half my team on that mission, and it was most likely Orochimaru who killed them. It was Orochimaru who..." He gestured towards Anko's injuries. "So yes. I have accepted it. I got a first row view of just how low he'd stooped too. It's the facts Anko. He cooperated with those people. He locked innocent people up, planned mutiny against the Hokage and who knows what else he's been up to."

"You just… you don't get it, do you?" Anko snapped, looking angrily up at Shisui with red eyes. "Sensei… He… I'm not… This isn't about what he did to those people. I don't even care about what Emi turned into. I've killed enough people in my life to understand how someone can get blurry on moral lines. There's a fuck-load of people out there incapable of empathy. For fucks sake, I don't even care if he betrayed the village!"

Shisui and Naruto's mouth snapped shut simultaneously, staring at Anko as if she'd grown a second head. "You don't care?" Asked Naruto in a low hiss. Warning bells going off in her head while Anko glared back.

"No, I don't care if he betrayed Konoha! I care that he betrayed me! Betrayed us. Don't you get it?" Anko shouted and slammed her fist into the covers and swallowing a pained moan from the action.

"Orochimaru was always there for us. He protected us and fought to make sure we came home. I don't care what his reasons were. If it was all an act and simply for the sake of keeping his cover intact - he still did it. All three of us always came home." Angry tears were running down Anko's cheeks, her lips quivering as she tried to make them understand.

"And he picked me. No one ever picked me before Orochimaru. Do you really think I would have befriended you Naru if sensei hadn't taken me on as a genin? We were three academy brats taking that genin test, but out of them I was the only one standing in the end. In the orphanage… In the academy, there were always others ahead of me. Either it was Emi or Akiko that Madam May accepted, or the endless line of sensei that preferred Kakashi at the academy, I was never anyone's favourite. I was talented - I was really good - but yet no matter how hard I worked I was always the second option."

She dried away the tears from her cheek while hissing in pain. Every move she made seemed to hurt her. "And all those guys… Those perfect ninjas with a heart of gold... they never did anything for me. They weren't tasked to, so why help the irritating, bashf orphan? It was Orochimaru who saw my value first, and for that I can never forgive him for leaving me behind! It's like being finally seen,
only to realize it was all just a play. The one person you truly looked up to... The one who saw you.... He just... By betraying us he left and took my value with him."

Naruto was shaking her head while she talked, not believing what she was hearing... It sounded similar to what she'd felt about Sasuke. He had been one of the first to see Naruto, and the reason he'd been a jerk had never been because of the kyūbi, but just because Naruto generally got on his nerves.

Hadin't his acknowledgement made her go to extreme length in her attempt to return him to Konoha? Was that how Anko felt about Orochimaru?

"Anko..." Shisui said gently, his eyes sad as he looked at her. "He does not define you... One person is not enough to define a person. He didn't make you who you are today, you did that yourself. It was your own skills that got you here, and we have always seen that. We see your value."

"Don't you fucking try it Shisui! I don't care about your sob story with your mum, you just don't understand what it is like to be no-one. You have your father, a respected clan and more cousins than you can count. You've never been alone, and have never had to fight tooth and nail to make it in life. Because that was what it was like for us. Look at what Akiko is working as now! That could easily have been me or Naruto. It would have been the easy option, because becoming a ninja while everyone around you say it's idiotic, dangerous and out of your league is not easy, Shisui. Unlike you no one highlighted the path for me, training me in private or helping me study. You had your clan and father, and Naruto had me."

Anko breathed hard, her eyes boring a hole into Shisui's head.

Anko's eyes shut, her tears having stopped by now. She massaged her temple with a trembling and bruised hand, her shoulders stiff and rigid. "When we met you two were just brats. You saw my value as Orochimaru's apprentice. You saw my value after it had been highlighted by him. But you never had the chance to see that without him I was nothing. So no. There's nothing to say. There's nothing to fucking share. There's nothing left."

Naruto sat at home that night not able to sleep. After Anko's meltdown the medics had come in to see what was going on. Shisui and Naruto were kicked out promptly, and they hadn't had anything to say, so the two had split up to go home without a word.

Which left Naruto in her unnaturally quiet apartment while trying to sleep. It had been a hectic week, and Anko's words were causing her a lot of concern. She could understand Anko's point of view even if she didn't agree with her. What she agreed even less with was why she seemed so angry at her and Shisui. What had they done? Was it the fact that they reminded her of Orochimaru? It was really unfair, but Naruto wouldn't let Anko's horrible attitude get to her. If she could deal with Sasuke almost killing her - several times – than she could damn well handle her best friend's breakdown.

Anger and hurt were two old friends Naruto understood only too well. It was just too bad that Anko had to take it out on her and Shisui. Especially Shisui. He did not deserve that. He had been trying to help her, but instead had gotten a metaphorical punch for his effort. Anko would very well lay off him at very least. Naruto could take her anger just fine on her own.

Getting up Naruto decided that sleep was futile, and instead went to go down and check on Kakashi's ninen. Since he was in the hospital Naruto had decided to keep them company as often as she could, and clad in her pyjamas she made her way to the living room and out the window.

Climbing in through his kitchen window she glanced around. Akino and Bull were snoring from the bed, while Pakkun was sitting on the kitchen counter, startled when Naruto made her appearance.
"Yo, Pakkun." Naruto said with a wave.

"Naruto." Pakkun replied and trotted over. "Any news on Kakashi?"

"I'm sorry, no. Just couldn't sleep so I figured I'd come down and bother you guys."

Pakkun frowned while his ears sagged in disappointment. "The little twerp better come home soon."

"He will." Naruto said assured and sat down at Kakashi's kitchen table.

"You sure are confident." Pakkun muttered and jumped up into her lap. Automatically Naruto started scratching behind his ears while the pug made himself comfortable.

"I have faith. Kakashi is strong, and they are hopeful at the hospital."

"Did they say that?" Asked Pakkun and glanced up at her with puppy eyes.

"Well... Not in those exact words, but I've never been good at explaining medical stuff very well. Rin told me there was a chance though."

Pakkun sighed. "She told us that days ago."

"Doesn't matter, it still applies. Until I hear otherwise that's what I'll believe."

A couple of days later Naruto was allowed to leave the Police Station early. They were slowly gaining some control of the situation, and they could finally see the light at the end of the tunnel. She wondered briefly who to visit first. Her hospitalized friends or Shisui? After a quick evaluation she decided Shisui might want to join her if she went to visit and she hadn't heard from him since Anko's breakdown a couple of days ago.

Mind made up she headed down the street towards Shisui's house. It wasn't far from the station either, so a few minutes of jogging found her in front of Kagami who had just gotten off work himself.

When she asked about Shisui Kagami smiled apologetically and shook his head. "I'm sorry Naruto-chan, Shisui isn't home. I don't think he's been home since before he ended up in the hospital actually. I was about to come over and check if he'd been staying at your place since he was discharged."

Naruto swallowed the disappointment. "No, I haven't seen him in days... I've been worried. Anko isn't doing very well."

Kagami stepped aside and held up the door. "Want to come in and have a cup of tea before continuing the search for my wayward son?" He asked half joking.

Naruto hesitated for a split moment before she nodded. "Sure, thanks Kagami-san."

She followed him to the kitchen where Kagami went to make their drinks. Naruto sat down by the table and looked out the window. The house was really nice and had a nice and large garden with a pond. It was peaceful and calm while still feeling undeniably homely. Her thoughts was interrupted when Kagami put down her cup and sat down opposite her.

"I'm worried." Kagami admitted after a sip of his tea. "I let him be at first, he doesn't really like to talk about the heavy things. Usually I give him time and then he'll eventually tell me, but it's the first time he's skipped coming home."
She nodded absent-mindedly. "He's probably cooling off. Shisui isn't one to bother others with his problems. Anko is the other way around. She's being a complete bitch. She can be rude and mean without much of a reason, but even I'm a bit scared of visiting her these days." Naruto admitted.

"And you?"

Naruto was confused. "What do you mean?"

"How are you? You might not have been where it went down, but you are not unaffected by this." Kagami told her kindly.

Naruto felt uncomfortable at once, shifting slightly in her chair as she shrugged. "I'm okay."

Kagami arched an eyebrow but didn't press any further. He lifted his cup and took a sip, and Naruto found herself mirroring him for something to do. "You girls are always welcome here, Naruto-chan. If a horse carriage comes through your wall, or something bad happens… Even if you just get into an argument with each other and needs somewhere else you should know Shisui and I are happy to have you over."

Naruto felt the corner of her lips lift as her head ducked down. Shisui was one lucky bastard to have Kagami, and she wondered if he was aware of that fact. "I know." Naruto replied and grinned up at him. "You always have ice cream though. I should bring over some instant ramen so I have something to snack on when I come over."

Kagami chuckled. "Actually," he said and stood up. He went over to the cupboard and opened it. On the top shelf was a row of boxes with Naruto's favourite ramen. Naruto's eyes widened and her grin grew. "I picked it up from the store since you voiced your opinion so loudly during your last stay. Any chance you're hungry, Naruto-chan? It only takes three minutes."

"Shisui!"

His head snapped to the side just as Naruto came to halt next to him, her worried blue eyes looking over in concern. "Sweet Kami! I've been looking everywhere for you! Where the hell do you hide?! I was worried, dattebayo! And then you go and disappear! I had to use sage mode to find you, you idiot!"

Shisui's eyes softened and he nodded once before looking back down the street leading to the Hyūga compound. No one would ever suspect him of hanging out in this area, which is why it had been picked for his little walk. His head was still too full when Naruto touched his shoulder, and glancing back at her she suddenly stepped closer. Her eyes were hard as she raised her arms and closed them around his waist, hugged him tightly.

Shisui bit his lips, suddenly feeling too much at once, and absently he pulled her closer by the waist. "I'm sorry..." Naruto muttered into his shoulder, and Shisui simply nodded into her hair, drawing on her warmth in the chill evening air. There was nothing else to really say. They were both sorry, and nothing could easily fix that.

Slowly Naruto pulled away and stepped back, her hand trailing up to touch the bruises on his cheek gently. "I wish every day that I had been there. How are you? Your dad says you haven't been home."

Shisui shrugged, suddenly feeling cold again as he exhaled. "Not sure… generally I just feel like an idiot." Shisui murmured.
Naruto's brow furrowed in confusion.

"For not seeing it. For not noticing… for…" *for altering Orochimaru's mind.* The Hokage had understood, but it didn't mean much. Shisui had done to Orochimaru what the kiri ninja had done to Naruto years ago. He was no better.

Orochimaru had betrayed them all, he had gone behind their backs and lied to their faces, but Shisui wished it hadn't come to this. What would Naruto think of him if she ever heard what he'd done? Would she ever forgive him for doing that to someone else? Naruto had gone so far as trying to commit suicide to break the commands, so if anyone could relate to this than it was her.

"We were all blindsided." Naruto muttered and leaned against the brick building, Shisui joined her silently, his arms folding as the guilt continued to eat at him. "But Orochimaru… Well, I'll enjoy it if I ever run into that bastard again. I have a few things I would still like to say to dear old sensei."

Shisui glanced at her quietly. Should he tell her? No… He couldn't. It had been a mission, and technically he had silence confidentiality, but seeing as Naruto was his teammate there was actually a loophole before the Hokage gave a direct order. But Shisui wasn't sure he could take seeing her reaction. Still… something told him Naruto would understand. He was pretty sure that if Naruto had been in that lab she would have killed Orochimaru instead of tampering with his head. What was more unforgivable?

Shisui liked to believe his way was better.

"What is it?" asked Naruto curiously.

"Hmm?" Asked Shisui distractedly.

"There's something bothering you, Shisui. We've been friends a very long time and I can tell when you're upset."

"How far-" Shisui stopped for a moment, unsure how to word his question. "What if someone did something really bad? What would be the limit?"

Naruto tilted her head in thought, her eyes turning up towards the rapidly darkening sky. "It depends… It depends on who it was and what happened."

"So… Orochimaru?" Asked Shisui.

"I can understand you and Anko… I get it, believe me. I might not always have liked Orochimaru, you should remember how it was at the beginning, but I really believed he was different now. I feel angry that I let myself… I was horrible in the beginning, but maybe if I'd just tried harder… I relaxed later on, but maybe I should have done more earlier. But still… Orochimaru was - is – not someone I ever fully trusted."

"However…" Naruto pushed herself off the wall and turned towards Shisui. "If it had been you?" A small glint was in her eyes. "I would have beaten you up and dragged you kicking and screaming home no matter what terrible thing you had done to make you see sense."

Shisui felt the corner of his lips twitch up. "Even if I did something unforgivable?"

Naruto nodded.

If he were to ever tell her, it would have to be now. After this there was no turning back.
But would it help any? It wouldn't change what had happened. It would only ease his own guilt if he shared this with her. He'd load her with his own problems, and if anyone had more than enough burdens, than it was Naruto.

This was just as big for her as it was for him and Anko. She might not have been in that lab, not seen the things they did, but she had been his student as much as them. But unlike them, she had so many other problems put on her shoulders. Shisui didn't get how she did it… This one thing felt almost unbearable, that his sensei had turned out to be a traitor. But Naruto… Would telling her really be about coming clean? Or was it just selfish?

"I'd do the same." Shisui told her quietly. He would keep this burden to himself. It was all on him, and she did not need to take his mess and make it her own. Her life was chaotic enough already.

They came back after dark, having wandered aimlessly around the streets for a while. They'd talked quietly about nothing in particular, and though Naruto thought her teammate looked tired he insisted he was still restless.

"Anko is still a mess." Naruto told him eventually. They sat on top of one of the taller roofs, watching the village covered in darkness and the many window lights blinking back at them.

Shisui nodded. "I can imagine… I didn't dare go back because I was scared she was going to start yelling at me again."

"I don't know… She doesn't yell much anymore. She just insults anyone who tries to interact with her. I mentioned Kakashi's ninken earlier and she called Pakkun a brainwashed, overgrown mouse with an annoying voice."

Shisui snorted and shook his head. "I see, I guess there is something in that saying; Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned."

She grinned. "Isn't that about love?"

Shisui shrugged. "Same difference."

They made it to Naruto's flat eventually, Shisui walking her home in hopes of prolonging having to go home a little longer. "You can take the couch if you want to." Naruto offered when she realized what he was doing. Shisui scanned the building for a moment before accepting. They made their way up by taking the stairs, seeing as Shisui's leg has yet to heal properly.

He collapsed exhausted into the pillows of the couch the moment they came in, and stretched out like a sleepy cat. Naruto busied herself with finding a blanket and a pillow for him, and as she returned it was to the sight of him already passed out. His head pressed into the corner where the armrest met the back pillows and curled up in a ball. One arm hung limp over the edge while the other supporting up his head.

She watched him for a long moment. Her heart sinking as she noticed how the worry lines became absent in his sleep. Shisui was rarely one to avoid his responsibilities, and she knew the police force expected him to help out during his leave of absence from the mission roster. Normally he would have grumbled and complained a bit before heading over to help anyway he could, yet now he had slept out in the woods to escape his own father. He might smile and keep it together, but she wasn't stupid enough to think Shisui had accepted Orochimaru's betrayal yet.

Right now all she could do was being there when he needed a friend. She was just grateful that unlike Anko, Shisui was actually letting her help.
She tiptoed over and laid the blanket over him. Hoping he'd be comfortable as he was. The couch was actually too short for him. She shook her head at the reminder that Shisui had grown like weed since they were kids, and recollect with fondness the times when Shisui had to climb up on the counter to reach the upper shelves in his kitchen.

She turned around, ready to go to bed herself when there was a knock on the door. Shisui shot up. His eyes wide and panicked for a moment while the blanket was shoved off in his haste. It was a testimony to how highly strung he was these days to see him fly up like that. Usually he slept heavier than a boulder.

"It's just the door." Naruto muttered and headed into the hallway and wondered who it could be. Very few people had the decency to actually knock on their door. Her friends had a habit of coming through the window while rendering the function of a door useless. It was a trend Kakashi had started. In the beginning everyone used the door, but these days it was only two people who usually bothered to knock.

One was Akiko, and the other was; "Hi Rin." Naruto said surprised as she opened the door. "What are you doing here so late?"

Rin looked haggard and exhausted. Her hair lay flat and dull around her face and she was dressed in her hospital uniform. Yet she smiled a tiredly, a genuine relief filled in her eyes. "Kakashi-kun woke up."

Though Naruto wanted to storm the hospital right away, Rin and Shisui managed to talk her down. Kakashi had woken up, but had only been awake long enough for a medic to check him over before falling asleep again. He was in pain and would not be up for any visitors before the next day.

Therefore Naruto found herself at the hospital after work the next day, actually during visiting hours for once, and was told by an annoyed medic he already had a few visitors.

She came upon a crowded scene indeed. Genma, Kurenai, Gai, Hayate and Ensui were already gathered in the room when she barged in. Kakashi sat propped up against pillows, but though the sight of him being awake made her happier than she'd been in weeks, the obvious traces of illness made her halt.

The fact that his mask was absent too was also very, very discomforting.

"Hey Naruto-chan. Come in and join the party." Said Hayate and waved her in. "We're updating Kakashi on what he's missed during his beauty sleep."

"Didn't help him much, did it?" Said Genma with a sly smile, eyeing his deathly pale skin and the bruises littering his visible limbs. He looked very, very bad.

A tired smile flickered on Kakashi's lips. "Pakkun is really offended that the hospital doesn't allow for ninken in the ward." Naruto told him pointedly as she stepped next to Kurenai. "Bull and Akiko are also getting bored. They say you promised to teach them how to play Go."

"Thanks for looking after them." Kakashi said in a hoarse voice.

Naruto studied him closely. He was putting on a brave face, but in truth her downstairs neighbour looked weak. She didn't like it. Kakashi hated hospitals, and for him to accept his surroundings made it all the more troubling.

"You had us all really worried for a while." Kurenai said with affection. "And you missed Asuma's
departure. He had to leave last week."

"I told him you would write once you woke up." Naruto pointed out. Kakashi arched an eyebrow. "Hey, he was really worried, and you've got nothing better to do in this bed. Why not send him a message and tell him you're alive, huh?" She pushed.

"I guess..." Kakashi sighed and seemed to melt into the pillows. He then found Naruto's eyes and held them. "Do you know where Shisui is?"

Naruto shook her head. "He slept on my couch last night, but he left when I went to work. I didn't see him at the Police Station so I guess he's gotten lost in the woods again. He might be visiting Anko though... Why?"

Kakashi shifted slightly, the effort looked like it pained him. "Wanted to say thanks. My memory is a bit fuzzy, but I think he saved my life. And also ask how on earth we got out of there. No one can give me a straight answer." He eyed everyone in the room in turn in explanation.

"As I understand it there was a genjutsu involved." Naruto answered, which immediately got everyone's attention. "That's all I know. He hasn't really told me any details. ANBU and all that shit." She added at the end in an annoyed huff.

"Yeah... I'm surprised how much people are discussing a classified ANBU mission actually." Genma added drily.

"Well, it's obviously because of Orochimaru." Replied Kurenai, before her eyes widened and she started fidgeting with her hands. All of them were suddenly very careful about not looking in Naruto's direction.

"I'm fine. You can all speak Orochimaru's name and the world will keep standing." Naruto spat. "I just wish I could have gotten my hands on him for what he's done."

Kakashi smiled tiredly, his eyes distant. "That would have been interesting to see."

"No it wouldn't. Can you imagine the collateral damage?" Muttered Ensui and shook his head. "We'd be lucky if Konoha still stood by the end of that meeting."

The others chuckled well naturally, though only half of them understood the truth of that statement. "Anyway, when will we have you back on the team, Kakashi?" Asked Naruto.

He exhaled shakily. "Don't know. They say a lot of things... But maybe three to five months?" Kakashi replied weakly. "I might be awake, but to be honest... I don't feel so good." Which was probably the understatement of the year.

Shisui joined her back from their short training session. The coward was still avoiding his clan duties and father, and had yet to actually go home. Naruto had actually been forced to go explain to Kagami that his son was fine but was being a wimp about going home. Kagami didn't get it, and if she was being honest; neither did Naruto. Shisui had promised he'd go home that evening though, when his father was off work and he could apologize properly, but that was hours away. And until then he was planning on lazing around in Naruto's flat.

When they entered Shisui headed straight for the couch and sat down with a heavy sigh. Naruto arched an eyebrow as he lay down and closed his eyes while his legs dangled over the armrest. He closed his eyes and looked half way to unconscious within seconds.
"Is that couch comfortable?" Asked Naruto.

"It's better than the branch I've slept on after getting discharged." Shisui replied groggly, adjusting slightly so his neck wasn't in such an awkward position.

"Why don't you go home? Your bed must be better than our couch." Naruto mused more to herself than to him.

Shisui smiled but didn’t open his eyes. "Dad will start nagging… Let me just gain some energy before my interrogation."

"Your dad? Interrogating you? He understands Shisui, and anyway; he's too nice."

"Oh, he's very pleasant towards guests, but you have no idea how creative he gets with punishment whenever I act up."

"He bans you from ice cream?" Naruto asked in a dry voice.

Shisui chuckled and nodded. "Not only that though. He also sends me do the garden work. Do you have any idea how horrible that is? I'm better at burning gardens than tending to them."

Naruto laughed loudly, causing Shisui's eyes to open as he snickered alongside her. "You can take my futon if you're tired, Shisui. You won't get any rest on that couch. You're way too tall for it."

Shisui considered it for a moment, but then shrugged. "Nah, my dad would skin me if he found out I'd slept in a girl's bed." He said and wagged his eyebrows at her.

Naruto rolled her eyes and turned back to the counter. Feeling kind of hungry, but not enough to make an effort. She opened the cabinet and looked over the shelf. It was thinly stocked, and Naruto remembered it been weeks since she had been to the store. Before this whole mess started. "Man, there's no food here at all, dattebayo." Naruto complained and then peeked at her teammate over her shoulder. "What sounds more appetizing? Flour mixed with water or sugar mixed with water?"

"I'd go for the sugar. Just remember to make enough for Anko when we stop by the hospital." Shisui replied drily.

"Man, maybe this is why she's so grumpy lately. She's been fed hospital food for weeks now."

"It could be a contributing factor."

"We are ordering in tonight. Or maybe Ichiraku."

"Or you could go to the store." Suggested Shisui.

"Nah, people are staring too much."

Shisui didn't reply to that one. It was perfectly true. She wondered if Shisui got any crap for it within his clan too.

"Just go under a henge then, no one will-" Shisui stopped mid-sentence as a knock on the door came from the hallway. Confused, Naruto went to see who it was. The door was unusually popular this month.

In the hallway outside the flat she found none other than Kato. "Oh, hi Kato..." Naruto told him. Kato was leaning against the wall and looked troubled, so Naruto took pity on him. After all, Anko could need some cheering up. "Um… Did you need anything? You know Anko is in the hospital..."
right?"

Kato hesitated for a moment, "Um, yeah I do."

And then he kept standing there. Naruto shifted her weight from one foot to the other, before she opened the door wide. "Uh, you want to come inside or something?"

He thought about it for a moment, before he shrugged and followed Naruto inside. He took off his sandals while she returned to the living room where Shisui looked more annoyed than before. "Hi." Kato said awkwardly as he spotted Shisui on the couch, and Naruto went over to the counter to make some tea.

"Want some tea, Kato? I was just about to make some." Naruto asked politely.

"Thanks but that's not necessary, Naruto-chan. Actually… I was just wondering when visitors hours starts?" Kato asked uncomfortably, still standing in the middle of the room. Naruto wondered if he was scared of Shisui or something, because Kato didn't want to sit down next to him.

"It's from one to four" Shisui replied for her, and Kato nodded in understanding.

"Actually… I think I should go, I have a mission in half an hour and I just wanted to tell Anko something, but it since visitors hours are two hours away..." Kato said uncomfortably.

"Oh?" Asked Naruto, curious about what was going on. Kato was usually not this… nervous? Not exactly the right word, but he was fidgeting a lot. Normally Kato was the picture of arrogance and pride. He could have given Sasuke at his worst a run for his money. "I can give her the message if you want."

"Uh… Well, just tell her I'll be out for a while. It's a C rank outside the village, and..." He trailed off, uncertain how to continue.

"And?" Asked Shisui, there was a glint in his eyes Naruto didn't see often, as he was suspecting something but didn't want to jump to conclusion. Naruto finished the tea and placed one cup in front of Shisui and the other on the table to drink once Kato was gone.

"Heh, it's not how I wanted to do this, but seeing as I'll probably be gone for over a month… Um, we have been fighting a lot lately, and… it's not going all that great." Kato started, and Shisui's eyebrows raised in understanding while Naruto was more confused than ever. It was true Anko was being more of a bitch lately, but she was that way to everyone.

"You know… just tell her... I don't know... She's been moody lately, and I get it you know. A traitor as a sensei isn't cool." Kato said with his hands stuffed deeply in his pockets and his shoulders tense. Naruto's eyes narrowed and from the couch Shisui leaned forwards, both hands folded while his elbows rested on his knees.

"Just um… I just don't think we really work together anymore, you know? She snaps at me all the time and I seriously didn't do anything wrong. It's all her shit. So I think it would be best if we took a break." Kato said in a stumble.

There was a long silence. Naruto was waiting for him to continue, hoping he wasn't saying what she thought he was saying. But that was it.

"Are you seriously telling me to tell Anko that you're breaking up with her?" Asked Naruto dumbfounded. Did people even do that? Wasn't Kato supposed to be the mature and older one?
"We just grew apart." Kato replied hurriedly.

"In two weeks?" Clarified Shisui disbelievingly.

Kato shrugged.

There was another beat of silence.

"You piece of shit!" Naruto growled, and next moment she'd dragged him forward by the collar of his shirt, her eyes flashing red for a moment.

Kato paled drastically and suddenly Shisui had sprung up from the couch, his eyes turning to the Sharingan as he probably sensed Kurama's chakra. "I'll do you one better! I'll tell Anko just how pathetic you are and how much better off she'll be without you. After all; you're the type who dumps their girlfriend after she's just been betrayed and stuck in the damn hospital! I'll even show you out, and if I ever see you here again I'll fucking kill you!"

With chakra enhanced strength she did a pirouette kick that hit the man hard in the stomach, the impact was so violent he flew backwards straight through the room and out the open window. And as he fell Kato's falling shout echoed through the street.

Shisui stood up slowly and peeked out of the window. Naruto didn't care if Kato had landed on his fucking head. The jackass deserved it and she still couldn't believe what had just happened.

There was a long silence, before it was broken by a cough from Shisui. Naruto looked up and found him with his hand covering his mouth. He glanced back at Naruto, and for the first time in weeks there was actually mirth on his face. "You... you kicked him out the window." Shisui stated disbelieving, the corners of his mouth lifting just from saying the words.

Naruto was pursing her lips to stop herself from mirroring Shisui's expression. Shit, Kato's sandals were still in the hallway, and she'd just kicked someone out of a fifth story building... Hopefully Kato didn't press charges... Shisui father was in Uchiha Police Force after all, but maybe this time he'd actually lie for Naruto's sake. He had never liked Kato much.

"You are amazing." Shisui muttered, his grin widening and then he was laughing. Naruto cracked up seeing Shisui laugh so hard, and before she could stop it she was chuckling along too.

In a secret base outside Konoha Minato was inspecting their latest inmate. His eyes were hard as he watched the second member of team Orochimaru sit inside the dim cell of this god forsaken base. He hated this place, there were too many horrible associations with it, and yet he had to come down here every two weeks. By now he'd gotten past the numbing feeling of walking through these halls, but the feelings were -emerging thanks to their new captive.

Opening the doors he stepped soundlessly inside, Orochimaru watching his steps like a cat hunting its next meal. Ironic, seeing as it was the Sannin that was the trapped one.

"You understand why you're here?" Minato asked quietly. There was no need to delay this. Unwittingly Shisui had handed them the perfect candidate for this. The boy was becoming frightfully efficient and he wondered how Orochimaru thought of being surpassed by his own student at such a critical time.

The Sannin nodded.

"Good. Then I won't have to go into detail. What do you feel of your actions then? What do you
wish to happen now?"

"I… I regret my disobedience… I can see now. It was a mistake. I wanted to better the village with my inventions in the beginning, but all I accomplished was to shed myself of my humanity. It made no difference..."

"No, unfortunately it did make a difference. A lot of people went through a big difference thanks to your actions, and your students are most upset with you." Minato said quietly. Orochimaru's eyes narrowed and he looked away.

"I know."

"So you will accept whatever punishment I see fit?" Asked Minato firmly.

"Within reason. I do not wish to die, and my abilities will be wasted in a prison. I know I'm of too much value to Konoha for you to throw me away."

Minato stiffened in annoyance. "You are partly right..." He took a slow step closer, drawing the Sannin's eyes back to him. "But you betrayed the village. You performed experiments on others without approval and without informing us. Often going directly against your orders, undermining the system and causing harm and death to innocent citizens of Konoha and Fire Country.” Minato told him to miniscule effect. Orochimaru stared impassively back with a sneer on his mouth.

"Though it's true that it'll be a waste if you're executed. As you very well know, there are certain things only you can do." Minato paused, his arms folding in front of him.

"So I now assign you a new mission. You'll be leaving Konoha under the pretense that you broke out of captivity, and from today be branded a traitor of the leaf village." Minato explained, watching the frown deepen on Orochimaru's face. "Then you will do everything within your powers to gain access to the terror organization named Akatsuki, and you will be our spy within their ranks."

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so very much for reading! The chapter was beta'd by AnjoRemix!

Another one finished, and Orochimaru is being sent on his merry way again. I also had fun kicking Kato out the window.

I know people are conflicted about Anko, but she has a lot of reasons to not be entirely sane at this point in the story. She has gone through a lot of shit in her life. No parents to set an example, raising herself from the age of eight, been through a very bloody and traumatizing war only to get dumped with this shit. People can act horribly for far less emotional baggage than what Anko is currently packing. Just look at Sasuke. I still say Anko is dealing better than he did.
Until next time!
As he gaped at the Hokage in disbelief Shisui felt like hitting his head against the wall. Repeatedly.

Couldn't they get one damned break? How on earth was he supposed to explain this to the girls? One thing was Naruto, he knew she'd be furious, sure, and might even charge out of Konoha after Orochimaru, but he was confident he could rile her back in with a bit of an effort.

But the other, and far worse of the two, was Anko. Even if he looked away from her very painful injuries that made her crankier than a dieting Akimichi, Naruto had also just told her about Kato, and the girl had not taken it well at all. Another betrayal so close to Orochimaru made her almost unbearable to be around. But if he had to tell her that their genin sensei had escaped on top of everything else she might never get over this.

"But… that shouldn't even be possible." Shisui denied. It really was. He was sure the Kotoamatsukami had worked. Orochimaru was now loyal to Konoha, and shouldn't have even been trying to escape in the first place.

Minato nodded and looked over the horizon. They were standing side by side looking over the village from the Hokage monument. The change of location was thanks to the state of chaos at Minato's office, and he'd wanted to meet Shisui away from prying ears. "You're right."

Shisui's eyes narrowed as he looked suspiciously up at the leader of the village. "Wait… Is this just a cover? Where is he really?"

Minato peeked at him from the corner of his eyes without emotion. "He's been dealt with."

"Did you- was he… executed?"

Minato shook his head. "No. Your Kotoamatsukami made it possible for Orochimaru to take on an unusual type of mission. He is a traitor, and will live that way until the situation out there changes. I'm only telling you this because it was your actions that led to this solution, and beside myself you're now the only one who will be able to see the holes in this story. You will not breathe a word of this to anyone Shisui. I take it you haven't told anyone exactly what you did to defeat Orochimaru either?"

Shisui shook his head. He'd almost told Naruto, but luckily changed his mind. Minato nodded in approval. "Good. This is now an S-rank secret. Orochimaru has been sent on a classified long-term mission where his status as traitor will actually aid him. The escape was just a set up."

Shisui gaped. "Oh..." There was really not much to say to that. The idea of Orochimaru being a missing nin was ludicrous. It didn't sit well with him at all, but then this was better than leaving him useless in a prison cell. He was too powerful to be wasted that way.

Then he remembered what Minato wanted him to do. "And you want me to inform the girls?" He
asked weakly. The Yondaime Hokage hummed in affirmation, which made Shisui's shoulder droop in defeat. "Ah… this will get messy, won't it?"

Kakashi was slowly recovering, and for every passing day he gained more strength. Like Anko he had also started physical therapy, but not to the extent she was at.

But despite the positive healing curve, he was also growing extremely bored, so Naruto was constantly sent to rob Shisui's home library. Kakashi was well on his way to reading his way through the entire kenjutsu book collection Kagami owned, which was no small collection at all, and was now switching to genjutsu topics. If this kept up he would run out of reading material before he was halfway through his stay at the hospital.

It was during one of her book deliveries Shisui showed up in the hospital, and then preceded by giving Naruto a freaking heart attack.

"WHAT! How?! How could that happen?! How did Orochimaru get out?!” Naruto shouted her head off, hitting her fist on Kakashi's hospital mattress. The jōnin didn't even notice, his eye strangely empty of emotion after Shisui's statement.

Shisui met her eyes with an impassive expression. "During transfer. He was being moved."

"Inside help?" Guessed Kakashi frostily.

"Yes." And there was no room for doubt in the steely tone of Shisui's voice.

Naruto jumped to her feet, and while pacing around the hospital room she strung together a long line of profanities and curses under her breath, her whole body steaming with frustration. Kakashi had sunk into the pillows and looked dejectedly up at the ceiling, while Shisui waited to let the information sink in.

Eventually a groan emitted from Naruto's throat. "Kami… Anko just started getting better too. How the hell do we tell her this?"

Shisui grimaced. "It's sort of why I came here first actually. I was wondering about first telling her about Orochimaru and then distract her with shit ton of dango. Think it will work?" He asked with a humourless smile.

Fugaku was planning how to escort some high risk prisoners all the way from Konoha to Hōzuki Castle, better known as Blood Prison in Kusagakure. The task was easier said than done, seeing as the time of departure needed to be carefully planned on both sides.

That's why Fugaku decided to send a scroll to the prison ward with the intended time of arrival for a few specific high risk prisoners they wanted to keep under wraps from any third party who might aid the prisoners. The mission to deliver the scroll was given to a newly recovered Shisui, and he received no less than three Chūnin to go with him. The information was classified and the security of the scroll was highly prioritized. And that was how Naruto found herself on a team with Itachi and another Uchiha named Midori under Shisui's leadership.

Naruto wasn't sure how much she liked having Shisui as a superior, it felt very unfair somehow. Logically she knew the guy was a jōnin, he had been since he was ten for kami's sake, but trying to eclipse the image of a six year old academy brat with the feared jōnin Shisui had become was still something she struggled with.
She had worked with Midori a few times at the UPF. At the office the girl seemed calm and carefree most of the time. Naruto had heard her crack a few jokes with Kagami at one point, so she knew the girl was okay. She was fourteen years old and Midori remembered Naruto from the first few months she had spent as a first year in the academy before being bumped up.

But she was also a blonde.

Naruto still couldn't believe the girl was blonde and yet an Uchiha. To Naruto the two facts just didn't go well together. Stupidly she had always assumed all Uchiha had dark hair, but Midori's long, sandy blonde strands were proof to the contrary. She had the same black eyes and pale skin as most of her kin, and Naruto was pretty sure she'd activated her Sharingan, but she still couldn't fathom the fact that she was blonde.

At the station she was likeable enough, and was actually pretty fun for an Uchiha, but as they started the trek through Fire Country Naruto's opinion of her was slowly dwindling. She wasn't even sure why, but the girl almost completely ignored two of the four members of their team.

For hours Naruto and Itachi walked in silence while Midori bombarded Shisui with what could only be described as obsessive conversation.

"You should really have seen it, Shisui-kun! Because then he tried again, but suddenly his hair caught fire! It looked scary for a moment but I managed to put out the fire before he got hurt. Though he had to cut it all off, there really wasn't any way to save it with such a bald spot. Oh, that poor sod."

"Shisui-kun, what do you think of the new filing system at the UPF? I came up with it all by myself! Fugaku-sama is really pleased with it."

"My aniki just got promoted to jōnin just like you, Shisui-kun! Maybe you two can spar sometimes? Maybe we could train together too?"

"Did you hear that Yuuko-san got engaged, Shisui-kun? To Inabi-san? Isn't that great, Shisui-kun?"

Itachi and Naruto kept sharing exasperated glances behind their backs while Shisui did his best to answer her never ending questions.

It got so bad Naruto and Itachi decided to stay at a distance. It was getting a bit tiresome being excluded so much, and they ran a distance behind Shisui and Midori to get some peace. "Neh, Itachi, are you part of the UPF full time, or are you like Shisui?" Asked Naruto eventually.

The boy ran closer so they wouldn't have to raise their voices too much. "More like Shisui. I help out when I have the time."

"So you have a team? Do you still work with your genin team?" She wondered.

Itachi shook his head. "No, I'm part of a new one. My genin team was disbanded." He replied, and something in his eyes told her it hadn't been a very nice disband either.

"But Midori works full time at the USP, right?"

"Hn." Itachi replied, and Naruto grinned widely.

"Is she usually like this?"

"No, she is very professional, so unfortunately this is a new development." Itachi murmured so low
Naruto had to strain her ears to pick up the words.

Naruto grinned. "Neh, at least it's more than squeals. I remember an old pack of fangirls, and they barely managed to string two words together in the presence of their crush."

Itachi grimaced the tiniest amount, which made Naruto's smirk widen. "Oh-ho, so you have experience with it too, eh? You poor Uchiha, you're all too damned attractive to fend off the fangirls."

"I don't have… fangirls." Itachi denied, but Naruto didn't buy his lie at all.

"Don't worry, Itachi. I have the perfect counter attack. Just bring Shisui with you next time. With his newfound fame, puppy eyes and the status as an older boy, your fangirls will start fawning over him instead."

Itachi's eyes widened, and Naruto could see his brain start working. A small unconscious smile grew on the boy's lip, and the grin was far from innocent as he looked hard at Shisui's back. "Now there's an idea." Itachi muttered conspiratorially.

Naruto started laughing, which caused Shisui to turn around and wave at them. "Maaah, what are you two doing?" He asked loudly so his voice carried.

"Nothing." They answered in unison.

Shisui arched a brow while Midori tugged at the sleeve of his shirt impatiently. "Shisui-kun, I wasn't finished. Fuuko-san then told me to use the extra thin ninja wire instead of the medium one, and then-"

The team leader cast an exasperated look at Midori and sped up. Maybe he hoped to tire her out of talking if they ran fast enough. Itachi and Naruto shared another glance, and they both snickered before they followed.

With the exception of a pack of bandits that had tried to rob them - the poor souls had spotted Itachi, and therefore assumed they would be a weak team - they'd made it to the prison without trouble. The prison Ward had accepted the scroll from Shisui and the group had left for the return journey. Since they were ahead of schedule no one was in a particular hurry, and therefore decided to take a slight detour on the way home.

At Shisui and Naruto's insistence they stopped by Hachō village. It was on the route home, and they would only be there for a short while. Naruto had heard of the annual festival that was happening that day, but had never seen it for herself. Shisui agreed, and was eager to check out the festival as their mission was already completed, and they were due for a break from running anyway.

None of them actually knew what sort of festival it was. Naruto had only heard it referred to as the Hachō festival. They had draped the village in colours for the occasion, and just about everyone was wearing masks as they trampled through the streets to join in on the fun.

Most of the shops were closed for the festival with the exception of the restaurants and anywhere they sold food. Itachi got an extra-large box of dango, and Naruto bought one too to take back to Anko. She could need a little cheer in her hospital room.

While Itachi and Naruto got everything they wanted, Midori dragged Shisui off to go get masks at a booth, and came back ten minutes later with one of each of them. They were all in different colors, purple, pink, orange and turquoise. Shisui handed Naruto the orange one, knowing very well she
would have fought whoever tried to take it, and threw the purple one to Itachi.

"Why do you get to have the turquoise one?" Muttered Itachi and eyed the mask in Shisui's hand.

"Because I paid for them." The older Uchiha replied and stuck out his tongue childishly which earned him a giggle from Midori and a sigh from Itachi.

They all altered in appearance and Naruto's had two bunny ears sticking up. Itachi's was a purple cat, Shisui's was turquoise panda while Midori had a pink fox. Shisui found the last one endlessly amusing and kept looking between Midori and Naruto.

Naruto rolled her eyes and whispered, "It looks nothing like him." under her breath. As the only one to hear her words Shisui pouted. "In fact, my mask is pretty spot on. He has these really cute and fluffy ears." She added matter of fact.

"Oy!" The words had been shouted inside her head, and Naruto jumped in surprise, causing all three Uchiha to look at her in question.

"Uh, sorry." Naruto muttered sheepishly before they set off to find a table to sit down at.

The streets were incredibly crowded, so they found themselves sticking to the roofs while trying to maneuver through the village. There would be a street show in an hour, and they decided to find a roof with a good view of the square to watch the show from.

Itachi looked extremely stressed by the whole ordeal, and when asked why he answered plainly how it couldn't be right of them to have fun while on a mission.

"Correction," Naruto interrupted. "We're on our way home from mission, and we'll only be a few hours late."

"But-" Itachi protested, but Shisui patted him on the back.

"Don't worry, Itachi. We won't get in trouble. We would have had to take a break on the way back anyway and make some food. We're just doing it here instead."

Itachi wasn't convinced though, so the three eldest did their best to distract the workaholic the best they could.

Soon enough the theatre starts, and Naruto found herself emerged into the tale displayed before them. They were puppeteers, and had lavish puppets a lot larger than the ones she was used to from Suna. It was what the story that made her giggle though. Which immediately made Shisui eye her wearily. Probably because he had never heard her make that sound before. Maybe Midori was rubbing off on her, but in Naruto's defense, the play was titled; The Samurai and the Two Tailed Cat.

Even Kurama was amused.

The puppet playing the cat was enormous too, which impressed her, and for an hour they sat with their feet dangling off the edge of the roof while gasping and cheering as the play went on. By the end they gave a standing ovation. Naruto cheering loudly for most of the market to hear.

It was as the actors did their second round of bows that her eyes swept across the crowd. Almost everyone was wearing masks similar to her own, so there was a rainbow of colours shining up at her. What made her pause though was one very bright orange mask faced the wrong direction.

Everyone was facing the stage, but the person with the mask, and not a half mask such as Naruto
wore with bunny ears, was looking straight up towards them. He wasn't the only one, a lot of people had turned at Naruto's loud carrying voice, yet this one made her halt.

"Who... is that?" She heard Kurama suddenly say inside her mind.

She looked away almost immediately, turning towards the others who were still clapping. Itachi had forgotten his worries during the play and wore a small, happy smile that lit up his entire face. "Hey, I have to go get something before we leave." She made up.

"Oh?" Asked Shisui distracted, still watching the actors bow.

Naruto nodded. "Yeah, I'll be five minutes. I'm still a bit hungry."

"Can she buy and eat it in five minutes?" Wondered Midori aloud.

"You'd be surprised." Answered Shisui wryly.

Naruto didn't listen though, she'd already made her way down from the roof and headed for the booths on the other side of the market. It was harder to spot the man in the crowd, there were so many people — so many masks — but she kept going, her eyes trailing the people as she took a path that would lead her through the approximate area of where the masked man had stood.

"Be less obvious." Hissed Kurama. "Don't stare at everyone, you'll make it obvious that you're looking for him."

Naruto tried, and she kept her head down while she pushed a path between the mingling crowd. Her whole being on alert as one orange mask after the other passed her by.

It was then she saw him, and he was coming straight towards her.

The mask was bright orange with a red flame pattern, his hair was dark and spiky. But what had her attention was the cloak. A black cloak with blood red clouds.

He wasn't looking straight at her anymore. Merely making his way through the crowd like Naruto seemingly was, his head turned sideways as if he was looking for someone.

Maybe her.

She was a few feet away, only a few steps and they would pass straight past each other. Naruto made sure the kunai hidden underneath her sleeve was ready at a moment's notice.

He looked straight ahead, but the one eye hole in his mask only graced past her before looking down. His tempo neither slow nor fast. Through the buzz of chatting crowd she could now hear his footsteps, and with her head tilted down she reached him... And then she had walked past him.

Naruto stopped.

The masked man stopped behind her.

Madara.

Without warning she whirled around, her kunai clutched in her fist as she swung it with all her force. Madara had done the same, but with a katana that was aiming at her head. Her kunai flew out her grasp, headed straight for Madara as the katana was about to make contact with her cheek.

The kunai flew straight through Madara's chest as his katana did the same with her head.
It was him!

Naruto had already made the rasengan in her free hand, and she was on him the next moment. Her hand reaching out, but where it should have made contact with his chest there was nothing substantial anymore. Her body fell through the man just like her kunai had done before, and made a crater in the brick tiled ground on the other side.

On all sides people started screaming, but Naruto ignored them and turned around while Madara jumped a safe distance away.

For a prolonged moment he stared back at her. "Mah, mah! That was rude! Do you make a habit of attacking strangers at festivals, or am I particularly lucky to have drawn the attention of such a pretty thing?" He asked in a high playful voice. He was using that annoying persona he'd taken on to throw them all off first time around. She knew it was an act, but damn if the guy wasn't excellent at playing an idiot.

And stranger? Naruto knew perfectly well who she was attacking.

"Like you don't know who I am!" Naruto shouted back furiously.

Madara stiffened. "Oh?" And Naruto was pleased to hear his voice had lowered, a slither of uncertainty had momentarily thrown off his acting voice.

"Don't play with me you bastard." Naruto growled, and she could feel Kurama vibrating with the need to attack. But she was worried. People were being smart and were running away, some screaming, but they were still in the middle of a civilian village.

This was not an ideal place for a battle, but she had needed to know. He was wearing a different mask than the one Naruto had known, and from a distance she hadn't been able to make out the details of his cloak while he was mingled between civilians. Now she knew without a doubt, but it had done anything but reassure her.

She heard her comrades come up behind her, and not a breath later Shisui was at her side while Itachi and Midori had their backs. Three pairs of glowing red eyes surrounded her, and for once Naruto appreciated how threatening the mass effect of several activated Sharingans could be. "What is Akatsuki doing here?" Asked Shisui calmly and took step forwards.

Both Naruto and Madara turned surprised towards Shisui. He knew? He'd been told?

"Ooooh, the little Uchiha likes to play with secret organizations, huh?" Madara twirled his katana around playfully and took a step back, his head tilting sideways as he considered them all in turn. His eyes lingering between Itachi and Shisui.

"It was nice playing with you today, but Tobi's tired now. Festivals always makes me oh, so tired. I guess I'm down for my nap." Madara replied, and as Naruto and Shisui flew forward, both of them attacking while knowing it was futile, he teleported away.

"Damn!" Naruto screamed in frustration. "I should have just-!"

"We're going. Now." Shisui interrupted her and took a hold of her wrist. Naruto looked up at him, her eyes darting around the square in similar fashion as he considered them all in turn. His eyes lingering between Itachi and Shisui.

"It was nice playing with you today, but Tobi's tired now. Festivals always makes me oh, so tired. I guess I'm down for my nap." Madara replied, and as Naruto and Shisui flew forward, both of them attacking while knowing it was futile, he teleported away.

"Damn!" Naruto screamed in frustration. "I should have just-!"

"We're going. Now." Shisui interrupted her and took a hold of her wrist. Naruto looked up at him, her eyes darting around the square in similar fashion as Shisui was. "He can come back anywhere at any time. We're not stopping until we reach Konoha."

He then dragged her after him, Itachi and Midori following without a word. Naruto could see their confusion, the question they wanted to ask, but Shisui was now so tense he looked like he would put
buildings ablaze if someone so much as looked at him wrong, so they followed without a word.

Shisui didn't let go of her wrist until they were outside the village gates where he immediately turned towards the other two. "We're returning in close formation. I'll take the lead, Itachi to the left, Naruto to the right and Midori at the tail. We'll head directly for the Hokage office. No breaks." He ordered, and without Shisui telling them the meaning of the formation Naruto knew what he was doing. She was his priority now. Minato must have briefed him on the Akatsuki situation. He probably realized exactly who that was too. It made sense actually. Kakashi and Rin probably knew too, they were her teammates, so it made sense that they knew of possible risks of going on missions with someone like Naruto.

"He might be in the area." Naruto muttered.

"And we're not getting into a fight with him like this." Shisui replied at once, his eyes flickering towards Itachi and Midori. "There are too many civilians and we have no way of evacuating them. This isn't Konoha, and we have no say here. It can lead to conflicts with the village and Konoha does a lot of trade here."

Naruto nodded, still on edge as the situation finally caught up with her. Kami, Madara had been right there.

Her mind whirled with different scenarios. Wondering why exactly he'd been there to begin with. Had he come for her? Already? And in that case, for which bijū? Did he even know which bijū she was in possession of at all? Did he think her the jinchūriki of Isobu? Of Kurama? Of both? He must have noticed that they stole Kurama five years ago along with Isobu, but did he know where they went? Was Isobu even safe anymore?

As they sped down the road and towards the mountain her head kept spinning with possibilities. And though Midori kept sending questioning glances between Shisui and Naruto neither decided to inform them of the situation. Which made her think of another possibility.

Her eyes glided towards Itachi. Unlike Midori he was not just confused, he was almost as tense as Shisui, and looked ready to battle at any given moment. Though she'd already seen him in training and battle, he'd never looked quite like this.

He was on guard.

Which begged the question; had Madara been there for her at all?

They more or less threw out the genin team about to get their first C-rank mission upon their return at dawn. All of them were tired from running through the night at such high speed, Midori nearly swaying from exhaustion where she stood as they burst into Minato's office through the window.

"Hokage-sama, we request an immediate debriefing." Shisui said at once, cutting off the jōnin sensei of the team mid-sentence.

The man huffed at his rudeness, but Minato understood the seriousness of the situation. "Accepted." He replied and turned towards the team of pre-teens. They were probably older than Itachi, but Naruto could almost smell fresh meat off them. "We have to cut this short I'm afraid. You'll meet your client at the reception desk instead." Minato informed the team and handed the sensei a scroll.

Shisui and the other three made their way into the room and knelt. Shisui ahead of the other three as his position as team leader required. "Discretion should be maintained, Hokage-sama." Shisui hinted politely.
Minato nodded in agreement, and as he finished he gave them a short "Stand." Before he sat down behind his desk. They stood up while Shisui took a step forward. "We ran into an S-rank missing nin during our mission for the Uchiha Police Force, and Naruto briefly confronted him before he escaped. It was code B-firefly." Shisui summarized efficiently. Naruto had never heard of that code before, but she assumed it meant either Akatsuki or Madara or something related to the two.

Minato's eyes widened and he seemed stunned into silence. He forced himself to relax and inhaled deeply before replying. "Continue."

"No injuries, except property damage to the village marked ground in Hachō village from a rasengan. Naruto approached the target alone and confronted him right before we were to depart. I assume she spotted him in the crowd. The rest of the team came to back her up, but the target left almost immediately afterwards by the means of time-space ninjutsu."

"Report Naruto." Minato ordered, waving Naruto forward as Shisui took a step back to fall in line between Itachi and Midori.

"We were watching the festival theatre during a break on our way back from our completed mission for the Uchiha Police Force, and as the play came to an end I spotted… him. He was wearing a different mask and was surrounded by people, so I didn't get a close look at his clothes from such a distance. I excused myself to get a closer look. I knew they would be able to see me from their position if it came to a fight, and could back me up within seconds. I scouted him out in the crowd, and we attacked each other at close hold, causing the damage Shisui reported. It was without a doubt… him." Naruto finished lamely. Not sure how much she was supposed to say in front of Itachi and Midori.

"I see." Minato replied. "That is the first time he's been spotted…"

Itachi shifted behind her, drawing everyone's attention. Minato waved him forwards, and Naruto stepped back as Itachi was given permission to speak. "I can't be certain, Hokage-sama, but I believe I've encountered that man before."

"When? Why wasn't it reported?" He asked a tad too harshly.

"It was." Itachi replied calmly. "He killed genin Izumo Tenma two years ago during the Fire Daimyo's annual trip to Konoha."

The Hokage nodded slowly, seemingly remember what Itachi was talking about. "I see… You're unsure though?"

"Yes, Hokage-sama. The man wore the exact same mask during the confrontation with Naruto-san, but two years ago his hair was longer and he wore different clothes, which is why I can't be positive in identifying him as the same man. However, the man we encountered during this mission also had the same hair colour, height and used the same weapon. A katana." Itachi explained.

"Thank you. If he is spotted again… do not engage if possible. Report to me immediately." Minato stressed, his concern obvious as he glanced between Naruto and Itachi.

"Excuse me Hokage-sama?" Midori asked in a small voice.

The switch of placement went quickly, though Midori seemed very out of place as she stood in front of Minato. "Who are we dealing with here?"

"He's an S-rank missing ninja. However; the details are confidential." Minato explained seriously. Midori nodded and stepped back so she was standing next to Naruto.
Minato sighed and sat down on his chair. "Please keep on guard, if he's seen anywhere in the village it's crucial that you inform me… the code word is B-firefly. Naruto and Shisui, you stay behind, the rest are dismissed."

They left through the door instead of the window, while Naruto and Shisui waited impatiently for Minato to gather his thoughts. "What do you believe Madara wanted?" He asked directly to both of them.

Shisui and Naruto shared a worried glance. "I… I presume it was Naruto. She was under minimal protection. Just me actually. It would have been a good opportunity to take her." Shisui replied.

"I'm not so sure… He was surprised. He didn't expect me to know who he was." She argued. "And I was not the only target there."

Minato and Shisui both looked at her questionably. "It's…. It's too early. I'm not even sure he knows which bijū I'm jinchūriki to. And even if he is under the impression it's Isobu he is not only misinformed, but also very, very off count. As far as I know both the one tails and second tails are safe with their current jinchūriki. He wouldn't start at number three." She explained concerned. "I think it's more likely that he was looking for requites to Akatsuki." She explained the obvious. "Like Itachi."

"Or Shisui." Added Minato with a flickered glance at the stunned Uchiha.

"What? Why… How could he believe either of us would join Akatsuki? If anything was shown today it was where our loyalty lay." Shisui argued.

"That might be so, but he's good at manipulating people." Naruto replied quietly. "Don't underestimate him."

"Oh. I'm not." Shisui replied wryly. His nose scrunched up in a grimace.

"I don't just mean his powers, I mean his ability to manipulate situations." Naruto snapped back, knowing Shisui didn't really understand at all. "He isn't one to ask for permission. If he wants someone within his ranks he finds a way. No matter their loyalty. There are many ways of forcing ones submission, and Itachi has a very defenseless little brother he cares a great deal about."

Shisui looked possibly sick at the explanation. His eyes widening as he realized the truth of her words.

"I agree with Naruto. Out of the two given possibilities that was the most likely one." Minato agreed with a shake of his head. "However, this might have been a coincidence too."

Naruto looked at him skeptically. What were the possibilities of both Naruto and Itachi running into Madara at a festival during a random mission outside of the village?

"I'm not sure about Itachi though. He might be after Shisui." Minato replied calmly.

"Then he's an idiot." Naruto hissed back, Shisui nodding in wholehearted agreement next to her.

"Still, the news of Orochimaru has spread. Shisui is now internationally known for defeating an S-rank ninja. That's the type of ninja he wants. The fact that he knows you so well is only a bonus from his perspective." Minato replied with a casual wave in Naruto's direction.

"In that case I'd assume he would go for Orochimaru now that he has escaped." Replied Shisui with a raised eyebrow. Naruto wasn't sure, but something unsaid went between Minato and Shisui at that
moment. If anything, it seemed whatever it was cheered Shisui up slightly.

"Orochimaru will definitely seek them out." Naruto spat.

Minato nodded in agreement, his expression carefully controlled. "Probably."

Shisui remained quiet as he looked down, his fingers fidgeting. "How did he even manage to escape anyway? Did he have people on the inside?" Naruto grumbled, remembering the old Mizuki and Kabuto. Were there more like them within the village? Probably...

"Yes." Minato replied simply. "But, to the more concerning news, you mentioned his clothes." Minato said and pointed at Naruto. She was jostled from her thoughts and nodded.

"Yeah. The normal ones. The Akatsuki cloak." Naruto replied matter of fact.

"Which confirms he has successfully infiltrated Ame and taken over the organization." Minato explained pointedly. Naruto suddenly realized what she'd missed. That was true... How... How had he managed that? Nagato had been warned, they all had! "And that means Nagato is no longer an ally, but a deathly enemy. We've been looking for confirmation for months now." Minato exhaled heavily.

She swallowed to soothe her suddenly dry throat.

"What about Isobu? Is he safe? How many knows where he is? Did Orochimaru?" Asked Naruto pleadingly, her fingers fidgeting with the hem of her flak jacket in worry.

Minato shook his head with a wry smile. "No, only those involved with his placement knows his exact position. No one else." He then looked pointedly at Shisui. Naruto's mouth shut close with a clap and she peeked up at him from the corner of her eyes. The teenager rolled his eyes exasperated.

"I don't get what you just said, so don't worry. I don't even know who Isobu is." Shisui said with a wave of his hand.

"It's nothing for you to worry about anyway, Shisui. Isobu is and will remain safe." He said and sat down behind his desk. "Madara might just have been gathering information, and the Suna jinchūriki is at home as far as I know, but I will send a raven with the news of what just occurred. It's better to be safe than sorry. If Madara is going around recruiting members the other villages needs to hear about it." He mused to himself.

He looked from one to the other. "Be careful." Minato told them quietly, before he pointed to Shisui. "And you are coming in tomorrow for a new session at six on the dot. We have more to get through."

Naruto looked confused between them. Not sure what that was about. They were dismissed soon after, and they left the office in silence side by side. "What did he mean? About the session?" Naruto asked as they trotted down the morning rush of the main street of Konoha.

"Let's get some breakfast and go to your place?" Shisui asked with a pointed glance. It worked as a good distraction. Instead of worrying about the re-emergence Madara she was suddenly curious about what Shisui was up to instead.

"Sure. Ramen?" Asked Naruto with a hopeful smile.

Shisui laughed and shook his head. "No way. We'll have proper breakfast, okay?" He shot back and they headed for the store.
Shisui wanted omelets. It wasn't actually something Naruto fancied all that much, but if it meant getting answers faster she allowed him this one. They were in and out of the supermarket quickly, both of them ducking out of the few people pointing at them when they were recognized as "Orochimaru's students" before hurrying to Naruto's apartment.

They were unloading the bags when Naruto's patience ran out and she demanded answers. "It's just my guard training." Shisui explained with a shrug of his shoulders.

That didn't really explain anything though. "What guard duty? ANBU?"

Shisui shook his head with a wry smile. "No... Yours." He said and nodded in her direction while he placed the eggs on the counter.

"What?! Me?" Asked Naruto startled.

Shisui looked confused back at her, seemingly as lost at her answer as she had been to his. "Yes...? You know I'm your guard right?" He asked eventually.

Naruto shook her head vehemently. "No. What the hell does that even mean?"

The Uchiha looked back incredulously before combing his fingers through his hair. "I'm your guard Naruto. It's that simple. It's my responsibility to make sure you stay safe and that nothing happens with... um... Kurama."

There was a ringing silence after that deceleration. "Eh?! Since when?"

"It's not something new. I've been trained for this task since you left the village years ago. Did you really not know?" Shisui asked puzzled, leaving the food on the counter to face Naruto who was still holding a package of cheese in her hand. He fished it out of her hand and placed it on the counter while Naruto struggled to remember anything like this ever being mentioned to her.

She came up blank. Kurama too for that matter.

Shisui read her pretty well, because he started explaining when Naruto didn't find her words. "Wow, you really don't know, do you? No wonder you're confused." He huffed and placed cooking oil next to the eggs and cheese. "It started decades ago, back when the first jinchūriki of the nine tails Uzumaki Mito was alive and the Second Hokage had just come into power. Her seal was not as strong as yours is, but it was enough as long as the jinchūriki was kept safe. Until then she had been married to the First Hokage, and he had the powers to suppress a bijū with his mokuton. However; when he died and his brother took over the position, they now had a problem concerning the jinchūriki's safety, and by extent the entire village if the seal was to break. So he went to the Uchiha."

Naruto blinked stupidly. What the hell was this about?

Shisui gestured towards the kitchen chairs, and they sat down opposite each other before he continued his tale. "It is well known to some that the Second Hokage had no love for the Uchiha, but he realized there was a need for us. You probably don't know this, but I guess I can give you a crash course in my family history here..." Shisui tapped his chin in thought and leaned his weight on his elbow.

"You know that one of the two founders of Konoha was Uchiha Madara, right? And he had a younger brother named Uchiha Izuna who was killed right before the founding of our village. By the Second Hokage incidentally. But that was while the two clans were still at war with one another.
Izuna had two sons, though both were toddlers when he died, and when Madara later defected the village while childless, the older of the two sons of Izuna became clan head. The direct line from him goes down to Uchiha Fugaku, our current clan head, however, the youngest son of Izuna is my maternal great grandfather."

Naruto nodded hesitantly. She thought she understood the relations okay. Both Fugaku and Shisui were descendants of Uchiha Izuna, but through different sons.

"However, when Madara defected, Izuna's oldest son was still too young to be clan head, so until he became of proper age the responsibility was shared amongst the elders of the clan." Shisui threw in causally and glanced towards the blonde to make sure she still followed.

"The Second Hokage was the one who gave the Uchiha the responsibility of the Police Force, but he also took in a couple of Uchiha as his own students. My paternal grandfather was one of them, Uchiha Kagami, and another was the youngest son of Izuna, which was grotesquely ironic I guess, seeing as he was the one to make the boy fatherless. Anyway, my maternal great grandfather still became a student of the Nidaime, mostly because he was still young and he showed the signs of having a very powerful Sharingan which could help with Mito's protection."

Shisui closed his eyes, and when they opened again they were bright and red. Naruto leaned forwards and looked curiously into his eyes. Wondering what it felt like.

He pointed to his eyes. "Our Sharingan all varies, and there's one way to measure their accuracy quite well. You see; there is such a thing as a better Sharingan within the clan. If you had a few of us standing in a row you would be able to see the slight difference in the shade of red and that our tomoe isn't always perfectly symmetrical. The size of each tomoe can also factor in. Mine are pretty good though. It's symmetrical and I have a very vivid red colour in my Sharingan. The duller they are the less strength they hold. At least that's what our research tells us so far."

"Whoa, really?" Naruto asked. Her blue eyes widening at this new trivia fact.

Shisui nodded. "Yes, but back to the story; My maternal great grandfather had a decent Sharingan, and was therefore trained to take over the position Senju Hashirama had first filled in protecting the jinchūriki. While working with Mito he grew up and had a son of his own, and then trained him to take over in case something happened to himself. His son – my maternal grandfather - too had a decent pair eyes. We think it's a genetic trait, so it stood to reason that he was able. He had two daughters himself, and it was around then Mito died and Kurama was put inside Uzumaki Kushina."

He paused and made sure Naruto could still follow the explanation. She hummed in understanding and recapped quickly. "Your maternal great grandfather protected Uzumaki Mito, before he had a son who he trained to follow in his stead. Right?"

Shisui smirked and nodded. "Right. Now, logically it should have been my mother who took over the task of protecting the new jinchūriki, after all she was the oldest and she had proved herself very skilled. But my aunt Mikoto and Kushina were the same age and friends from the academy. When they graduated they were put in separate teams though, but my grandfather became Kushina's sensei so he could make sure she stayed safe."

"What? Your grandfather was Kushina's sensei?" Naruto asked shocked. She had always known Jiraiya was her father's sensei, but she'd never even wondered who had trained Kushina. Not once. She hadn't even thought to ask...

Shisui nodded seriously. "But he couldn't be there forever. He died when his daughters were young, but luckily aunt Mikoto had shown that she had strong sharingan too, so the task of protecting
Kushina was given to Mikoto by the Sandaime after she made chūnin. My grandfather had groomed her for the task ever since he realized they would be classmates. But then Mikoto became pregnant, and she was taken off active duty all together and couldn't continue. That's when Minato-sama came into the picture. He had the abilities to protect her in an Uchiha's stead until someone suitable could be trained or Mikoto could get back to her duty. It was now his job to keep Kushina safe. But because of the thinning lines of our forces during the Third War he couldn't be with her at all times, and Minato-sama failed in the end thanks to being sent on separate missions…"

Shisui sighed, both of them hearing the distant sound of a chidori in the back of their minds.

"Which leaves us to Kushina's death, and the switch of Kurama between you and Kushina. Normally it would be more natural that one of Mikoto's sons were your guard, seeing as so far it had gone from parent to child, but I was just as qualified. More even, seeing as we were already friends and teammates. I have the Sharingan, hell, I have the Mangekyō Sharingan, which none of the other protectors did. Anyway… My aunt understood the moment she heard Kushina was dead and you had been injured without being allowed visitors that you were the new jinchūriki. So she approached me about the matter. I didn't reveal anything, but she still insisted that I train with her in the power of our kekkei genkai. I'm not sure if anyone has yet confirmed it to her, but she knows you're a jinchūriki even without anyone telling her."

Naruto swallowed nervously. Mikoto knew? "Does everyone in the Uchiha clan know?"

"No." Shisui answered adamantly. "Only aunt Mikoto and I. Uncle Fugaku has no idea, because this is not a clan matter – it's a village matter - and Mikoto didn't even tell him about her own task as Kushina's guard, just like none of the other protectors did before her. However, my aunt wasn't the only one with this idea to make me your guard, and soon after aunt Mikoto started training me, Minato-sama approached me too."

The more Shisui talked, the more Naruto couldn't believe she hadn't been told. Why on earth hadn't anyone said anything about this?

"I was trained by Minato-sama in sealing so I would be the best rounded for the task. I don't know for sure but I suspect he trained Kakashi in a similar way, though unlike me he doesn't have the chakra reserves for the heavy fuinjutsu techniques, and though he's good with ninjutsu, I'm better at fuinjutsu than he is. I guess that's one good thing about being a lab experiment though. My chakra reserves are now unusually large even for an Uchiha, and I can stop a bijū if I have to… At least in theory." Shisui added at the end with a twitch of his nose. He obviously wasn't too eager to test the theory out anytime soon.

"Wait… Are you saying they made you take the job? Did you even have a say in all this?"

He turned to her with an indignant expression. "Of course I did, Naruto. Don't worry, I agreed on the spot. I don't pretend to know what it is like to be a jinchūriki, but I knew that I could help. I could make a difference for you, so of course I said yes. It's not like I would have allowed anyone else to take my stead." He said in a mutter at the end, pouting slightly as he subjected her to the full force of his puppy-eye-no jutsu. She had no idea how, but Shisui just made her feel incredibly guilty and stupid for even asking the question.

And he said it in such a matter of fact way that Naruto was lost for words. The fact that Shisui thought it an unquestionable decision meant more to her than any effort he'd put in afterwards. She swallowed back a rush of warmth. How the hell did she get so lucky to have a friend like him?

Shisui continued, and though she was still wrapping her head around all this she realized it was all very logical. "Though I now have to train someone else in case I'm killed or can't continue. The most
obvious choice would be Itachi, but seeing as he's the heir to the clan it would be impractical. He will never be available enough. So that leaves Sasuke-kun. I can't be sure though, I can't really say if he'll fit until he's activated his Sharingan, but aunt Mikoto is very eager for me to pick him, and I will if he has the potential. The alternative would be if I have a kid of my own, but I think he can manage. Don't you?"

Sasuke? Sasuke!? They were… really? What were the chances?

And then her mind connected a few pieces she hadn't really seen before. Shisui's explanation made sense. To have a jinchūriki under an Uchiha's protection made perfect sense if there was ever a problem. Not in her case of course - because Kurama was very willing to stay with her now. But it still seemed like a reasonable precaution. Though what really made her stop and think wasn't the obvious logic presented in front of her, but the pieces she had missed in the past.

Naruto thought back to the team dividing system their graduation class had in her original time line. Had she really been placed with the last Uchiha thanks to their grades in the academy, or had there been something much more cunning going on behind the scenes? How else could she explain having the only two Sharingan wielders within Konoha - if you looked away from Danzō of course - as her teammates from the beginning? Two of the very, very few people in the entire world who carried a kekkei genkai that could hold Kurama back when they had not been partners?

By thinking about it that way it became painfully obvious that Sasuke's top scores and her dead last position had absolutely nothing to do with their team placement at all. Naruto would have needed someone with the Sharingan to control Kurama when she couldn't, and Sasuke had needed someone to train him to use his Sharingan when it activated. It was that simple.

She stood up and started pacing back and forth, wondering how she could have been so damned blind for so long. All her sensei in the past had been able to subdue Kurama in one way or another. Kakashi with his Sharingan, Jiraiya with fuinjutsu and Yamato with his mokuton. The old Kakashi had more or less explained it to her at one point too when she was developing the Rasen Shuriken while Yamato was constantly suppressing Kurama's chakra.

"What does this mean? You being my… guard?" She asked at last. Shisui stood next to his chair, but Naruto hadn't noticed when he'd stood up.

Shisui's lips twitched upwards. "Does it have to mean anything? It just means we continue being teammates and that I got your back. I would have done that anyway, just like I know you would do for me. Nothing has changed, Naruto."

She smiled despite herself, and Shisui slung his arm over her shoulder and pulled her to him. Clumsily she fell into his side and caught herself against his chest. Shisui was grinning widely as her cheeks heated up in happiness. "Aw, are you blushing, Naruto?"

"No, I'm not…"

He snickered at her denial. "Don't think so much about it. We've always been teammates, now I just got some really awesome techniques to work out on the side. Damn, do you have any idea how complicated fuinjutsu actually is? It's such a headache sometimes…” Shisui grumbled theatrically, causing Naruto to chuckle.

He perked up at her brightened mood and grinned back. "Come on, I'm starving. Let's see if we can get this wreck of a stove to heat up." He said and released her as he picked up the package with eggs.
And despite being forced to help out with the cooking, Naruto wasn't able to stop smiling all that
day.

Two months had passed since Danzō's hideout had been taken down, and Naruto was still dutifully
visiting her friends at the hospital as often as she could.

Though he was improving rapidly Kakashi was well on his way to being bored into a depression,
while Anko had reached new heights of being an unbearable bitch.

Naruto was having more problems every passing day remembering why exactly she put herself
through Anko's hellish behaviour. She'd made no less than eleven medics run out in tears, on top of
three physical therapists. The numbers would have been impressive if the situation wasn't so awful.
Shisui and Naruto were the only two who still dared go visit her, and she was never happy to see
either of them.

Naruto wasn't sure how much more of this she could take, and when the medics talked about sending
her home to recover in a more comfortable environment it made Naruto panic at the mental image it
created. Anko stuck in their flat without being able to get anywhere was about as terrifying as…
well, Naruto couldn't really picture anything scarier than that. Madara, Kurama and the Akatsuki
were much less frightening than her roommate was these days.

Shisui agreed, but like Naruto he still made the effort.

After the escort mission where they ran into Madara, Minato had been reluctant about letting Naruto
outside the village. Naruto had confronted him about Shisui's supposed "guard duty" too, but the
Hokage had simply shrugged and explained it had slipped his mind. He had sort of assumed Naruto
already knew.

But as she spent more time within the village, and the work at the UPF was more or less back to
normal, Naruto found herself with much less work and a lot of free time. It was mostly used training
with Rin and Shisui, but sometimes she'd also go hunt down Ensui whenever he was within the
village. The Nara was such a loner these days, it couldn't be healthy at all.

The rest of her time was spent hunting old friends.

After meeting Sasuke Naruto would be straight out lying if she didn't admit to being curious about
the rest too. So far she had caught a glimpse of Choji at the Akimichi restaurant, seen Neji dangling
from his father's hand down the street, watched as Ino and Kiba play hide and seek in the playground
and TenTen sitting on her mother's shoulder while they bought food at the supermarket.

She had yet to catch sight of Shikamaru, Hinata, Lee and Sakura. Once upon a time she could have
simply hung out around the corner from where they lived, but doing that close to the Hyūga
compound was just asking for trouble. Especially considering the Hyūga's power to literally see
through walls. The Nara clan would also get suspicious if she hung out by their gates, and their deer
herd was hard to slip by too. But Lee and Sakura no longer lived where they used to. Naruto had
checked.

At first she had been very confused, not to mention scared shitless that she'd done something to erase
them too, like with Shino, until she remembered one crucial piece of information. Konoha had not
been torn apart by a Kyūbi attack this time around. No one had been forced to move at all, and the
changes Naruto remembered from her old timeline didn't exist here. They'd never been necessary.
Which meant that Sakura and Lee probably lived somewhere else in this time line.
That made her think of something else too. The Uchihas good reputation these days. She remembered distinctly how Madara had told her about the Uchiha's planned coup d'etat, and how it had started.

With the Kyūbi attack.

Since there had been no such attack, it meant no suspicion against the Uchiha, which meant they hadn't been relocated to the border of the village, which again meant they were… quite content.

This revelation had made her stare numbly at a wall for over an hour, until a shopkeeper came over and asked her if she needed medical attention. After that she'd doubled her effort into finding her old friends, but had yet to find the four. Shikamaru was probably using his childhood to get away with sleeping. Probably using excuses such as; I'm a growing boy. I need enough sleep. While Sakura… well, she would be shy, and therefore less likely to be found around the other children. Lee had also been less exuberant as a kid than later in life, but maybe he used his time training? He would be five years old, and yet to start the academy. The last one, Hinata, she knew where was. She had overheard talk about the Hyūga hime plenty of times amongst the gossip in the Chūnin lounge. She was safely locked up tight in her own home, and that was the main reason Naruto had never caught sight of her.

She didn't give up though, and was reluctant about taking the easy option. Namely asking Minato.

He would definitely know. He had seen her memories, seen them, and she knew he would have checked up on them. Especially as he knew Shino no longer existed in this time line. She wondered what he made of that little fact. Minato had been on the mission where Shibi had died, effectively erasing Shino with him, only to later find out how that had affected Naruto and the future.

But Naruto didn't, and she didn't plan to either. She wanted to find out herself… It was a private matter, and Minato had already taken so much of her privacy, she didn't want to give him this too. She was pondering this while returning from yet another disastrous visit to the hospital when she found an unexpected figure standing outside her apartment building.

And talking about the sun….

"Eh…? What are you doing here?" Asked Naruto surprised, and looked up and down the street for any signs of what the Yondaime was doing standing at the entrance staircase of her building.

Minato scratched his neck nervously. "Um… I was wondering if you were busy?" He asked uncertainly.

"Oh. No, I'm free. Is something wrong?" She asked, going through different scenarios that could force the Hokage away from his office. The man was crazy busy, and seemed to have problems finding time to eat, far less come all the way here in person instead of getting someone to fetch her for him.

"No, nothing is wrong… I just… um… I was.. eh-" Minato looked more uncomfortable than Naruto had ever seen him in life. He was fumbling and looked deathly pale. Maybe he was sick? "Can I come inside?" He asked at last.

Naruto nodded, her eyes narrowed in suspicion. Maybe what he was going to say needed privacy? Maybe it needed a privacy seal to activate? That was the only logical solution for all this. Well, not really, but it was the closest thing that made any sort of sense.

For once Naruto decided to take the stairs instead of climbing the wall, and Minato followed her
example.

All of a sudden she found herself very aware. She glanced around the hallway, and for the first time noticed how dusty and dark it was. The caretaker only came by once a month, and he was never very thorough when he cleaned. The building had seen its share of hardship, and it showed, which for some reason made Naruto flush with embarrassment. Unless he'd been in battle Minato was always so well groomed.

Naruto loved the building. The thing was sturdy and had survived its own types of hardship. From the cracks in the wall to the missing step between the third and fourth floor. The thing had history, and Naruto fit right into this place.

But Minato didn't.

Yet he said nothing. From the corner of her eye she saw him glance curiously around as he followed her up the stairs. He jumped over the missing step just like Naruto had done, and when they arrived at her door – the paint was peeling off and a hurriedly scribbled piece of scroll with "Mitarashi Anko & Uzumaki Naruto" on the front, - he had yet to make a comment.

She let him in with a casual "just put your sandals by the door", before she continued into the living room. She felt herself grow hotter as she remembered she didn't have any slippers to spare for guests, and tried her best to push down her embarrassment.

Naruto stepped aside as Minato came into the living room. Her hands were clamped together in front of her, feeling slightly on edge at having him here.

In her home.

He looked absurdly out of place in their humble flat with simple furniture. She became super aware of the stain on the counter from when Aoba had dropped ink that would never go away no matter how many times Anko had scrubbed it. The tear in doorframe from when Obito had tumbled headfirst into it. The layers of scratches on the floor from when one of them were too much of in a hurry to take their sandals off before fetching something.

Minato was spotless. Even his headband looked new. If there was anywhere he should stand it would be in front of their brand new wall, because it was more him. He didn't really fit into her flat. Not in her life.

"It's nice. The view is beautiful." Minato commented quietly.

"Thanks… We sit in the window most of the time. It's especially nice to see the sun rise. The flat is angled to get a perfect view of it." Naruto replied awkwardly. "Um… do you want some tea?"

Minato nodded. "That would be nice."

Naruto turned at once, busying herself with the task of making tea while she could hear Minato walk around in the small room. Because of the furniture there wasn't much space left to move around on. There was a spike of chakra when Minato activated a privacy seal, but otherwise he seemed like he was simply checking out the flat with open curiosity. She glanced over her shoulder when the sounds stopped, and found him holding their genin photo.

Naruto had completely forgotten about its existence. It had been up for so long it felt like it was merged with the wall, but she really had to take that down before Anko came home. She didn't want to know how the girl would react if she saw it.

Soon Naruto was finished, and saw Minato had made himself comfortable on the couch. Swallowing slightly she walked up and put the cup down on the coffee table. The one they had glued together
after the storm. "Thank you." Minato said with a small smile. Naruto opted to sit in the window instead of on the couch with him.

They turned quiet, both of them concentrating on drinking their tea for something to do.

"Um.. Why did you come by?" Asked Naruto at last, and Minato gave a breathy chuckle as some of the tension was temporarily lifted.

"Well… I wanted to see where you lived. I, um… I've been curious for a while now." Minato told her while studying his own cup of tea with the same intensity he would study the most intricate fuinjutsu seal.

Naruto's head went blank. Whatever she had expected it was not that. Why would he-?

And then it finally clicked, and she could hear Kurama grumble in the background as he finally realized why Minato had show up too. Minato wanted to get to know her. He wanted to see where she lived. No matter how damaged whatever bond there was between them, he had acknowledged that biologically, they were in fact father and daughter.

"Oh." Naruto muttered, too dumbstruck to find anything more to answer.

"You like living with Anko-chan?" Asked Minato, interrupting the huge revelation going on inside Naruto.

"Eh? Oh... Yes. Anko is cool. At least… before the… eh, she's very clean, and she's a really good cook. I'm not good at those things, so it's good she is."

Minato nodded, his hands shifting their grip on his cup. "When did you… move in together?"

"When I was eight… Or well, eight in body." Naruto told him with a shrug of her shoulders.

"And… in the other timeline? You were seven right? When you moved from the orphanage?"

Naruto nodded mutely and looked down at the brown liquid swirling lazily in her cup. "Yes, I had my own place, but this one is a lot better thanks to Anko."

"That's good." Minato stated awkwardly.

Naruto wracked her brain for something – anything - to ask, just so the silence wouldn't start up again. "Uh, where do you live?" She came up with eventually.

"An apartment. It's on the other side of town. I'm not there much actually." Minato answered, a small, uncertain smile on his lips.

Naruto tilted her head. "Oh, I thought you had a house? I remember- " And then she stopped herself and gulped audibly. Kushina had told her about their house, and mentioning her was not helping right now.

There was a painful silence this time.

"Yeah… Kushina picked the house. We bought it right before we got married." Minato said eventually, his voice barely audible and yet soft. Naruto's head snapped back towards him in shock. She had expected another silence, maybe anger or awkwardness. Not for him to actually be willing to talk about Kushina. Less of all with her. "But I moved out a few years ago. It didn't feel... Well, I'm so busy most of the time and I'm rarely at home, so the place was just gathering dust. Kushina
picked it though. If things had been different I'm sure you would have loved it."

Her eyes grew wide as Minato continued talking. "I think we looked at twenty different houses, but I had no idea what we were looking for. Until that house. It wasn't that large. Two floors and three bedrooms with a living room and huge kitchen. I think it was the kitchen she really liked. She was an amazing cook and could make anything taste delicious. I actually wanted something a bit further away from the main street, but Kushina loved living in the heart of things. She liked the constant activity out on the street and hated the silence further away."

Minato kept on talking, and soon Naruto moved closer until she sat on the armrest of the couch, listening with rapt attention as Minato described Kushina and their life together.

He didn't stop for over an hour, and kept on telling her stories about him and Kushina and their adventures from their childhood. Both sad and funny. And slowly the tension was only a vague memory as she finally learned something real about the man who could have been her father.

Two hours later Minato was forced to leave. After the horrible start they'd managed to keep a conversation going constantly until his duties called the Hokage back to the office.

It was surreal talking to him, and Naruto was very aware of just how little she had known about the man who'd fathered her. After he left there was a hollow emptiness in the flat, the traces of his visit lingered behind and mocked her of his absence.

It made her feel both happy and furious. After everything he had done. After everything that had happened between them she was still so absurdly happy that he'd come by to have tea with her for a few hours. She recognized it for what it was; an attempt to get to know her. But in truth Naruto was the one who'd gotten to know him a little more instead. The many stories and tales from his youth were still playing on repeat inside her head, and she couldn't help but cling to them like a child who recalls a bedtime story.

The complex relationship between them were layered with obstacles and memories best left alone, but this meeting had done the impossible. It had given her hope. And that was the cruelest thing of all.

She washed the dishes thoroughly while turning every word and gesture inside her head, she scrubbed the table and when that was done she continued by cleaning the apartment until she ran out of surfaces. And then she jumped in the shower herself, knowing that was one more thing to clean in this place.

Dressed and out of anything to do she left the flat, this time through the window, and was surprised by how busy it was outside. Naruto was lost in her thoughts as she followed the street aimlessly, her feet carrying her down a road she had once known all too well, but had now been years she'd threaded regularly.

She walked down One Legged Parade, past the Akimichi clan compound until she reached the Orphanage.

It looked similar to how she remembered it. The garden was not as green, it had most likely taken damage during the storm, and the roof was clearly new, but otherwise the sounds and smelled were just how she recalled.

There were kids in the muddy yard, some climbing on fallen trees that were used as temporary playing equipment. Maybe the old ones had been destroyed in the storm? And then one figure made
her straighten.

Madm May.

She walked slower than Naruto had ever seen her do before, now with a cane clutched in her right hand and with a slight limp in her left leg. Her hair was pure white instead of the soft grey, and her face more lined.

She called for one of the boys, who turned around and grumbled something in reply. Naruto didn't pay attention to the exact words. Instead she marveled at the gravelly sound of the old matron's voice.

"Madam May?" Naruto called before she could stop herself, her feet already heading for the yard filled with children. A few looked surprised, and a good portion scurried away as they recognised her as a ninja.

The woman turned confused, but her eyes lit up in recognition as Naruto stopped in front of her.

Naruto was taller now. The woman had to look up to meet her eyes. "Naruto-chan?" She asked surprised.

"Madam May…" Naruto breathed, for some stupid reason wanting to cry at the sight of her. She was so old and frail, yet she kept working in this place. No one would ever thank her, no one would ever show appreciation for the effort she put in. Yet she kept doing her best. It would never be enough, because the task was all too much for her. It always had been.

The woman opened an arm in invitation, and next moment Naruto hugged her. She was careful not to hold her too hard, afraid the bony woman would snap if she did, and she was biting her lips to the point of bleeding to hold back her tears.

Why hadn't she come sooner? When had she stopped visiting Madam May? How could she have forgotten the only one who had looked out for her the first few months in Konoha? Jiraiya might have brought her to Konoha, but he - like everyone else - always had an ulterior motive. Madam May was an overworked, underpaid and underappreciated old woman who had still found it in her to look after brats who only complained in repayment. It broke her heart.

"My, you grew up beautiful, dear." Madam May murmured as Naruto stepped back. "I was wondering when you would come back for a visit."

Naruto only nodded in reply. Afraid she'd start sobbing if she opened her mouth. She knew a lot of her raw emotions were not about meeting Madam May. They were about Minato, and Kushina, and the stories of a time when things had been happy and full of hope. But it was still wonderful to see the old matron again.

"Come in. I think I have some time before dinner is being served." Madam May said, and together they made their way slowly inside.

They talked about the damage from the storm at first. Then about the new troublemaking kids at the orphanage.

Madm May insisted no one was as bad as Anko had been before or since, but that there were a few who had tried. They moved on to how Naruto and Anko were doing these days, and she replied honestly. Telling her that everything was wrong. That Anko was under a painful recovery and that their sensei was a backstabbing bastard who had put her in that state. That Naruto felt completely
useless because she couldn't help her, and that she didn't know what to do anymore. That Orochimaru had hurt more than just one orphan, and that several of the missing children had been stolen in the night from this very orphanage.

Madam May turned deathly cold when they came to this. "I know." She hissed. Her old fray voice gaining a harsh volume to it. "Hokage-sama told me in person. I was absolutely distraught when I heard… But at least some of them are alive still."

Naruto looked up confused. "Really?"

Madam May nodded. "Yes. As I understand it a few of the kids were taken into a secret organization. The ones that showed potential were kept alive for different purposes."


Madam May sighed and shook her head. "I don't know. Hokage-sama wouldn't give any names. He just explained what had been happening. I complained so many times about the state of this place, but no one ever listened…" She huffed and shook her head.

"Anko ran into Emi." Naruto admitted in a squeak. That certainly got the woman's attention. "I think… I think that's part of the reason she is so bad right now. I think… I think Emi is dead though. I wasn't there, and I'm not allowed details. But Shisui and Anko had argued loudly about her several times, and they always talk about her in past tense. I think she died during the mission somehow."

Madam May looked gravely back. "Those two… They were really good friends. Mitarashi was so much better behaved back then. Emi-chan was like her older sister, always looking after her and making sure she didn't get into too much trouble. When Emi-chan disappeared Mitarashi became… horrible. There really is no other word for it. On top of everything that needed to be done she was not easy to deal with… at least until you came along."

Naruto already knew, but she hummed in agreement. "I think this is the same as back then. Anko is being a nightmare. She's angry at everyone. Not just at Orochimaru, but at me and Shisui too. At the medics and our comrades. She even cursed the Hokage." Naruto admitted and shook her head.

Madam May was scandalized at her last admission, but then she chuckled. "Oh, kami. That girl doesn't change, does she?" She mused exasperated. "Yes. That does sound like the girl I knew. I don't know what to say to help you. I always wondered how you managed to get through to Mitarashi the first time around, and I'm no wiser today."

Naruto chuckled. "We usually argued and started fighting. I can't really punch her now though. She's already hurt." Naruto pointed out and rolled her eyes. "I wish I could though… She deserves it, dattebayo."

"I don't know much, but I do know orphans." Madam May said carefully and leaned forward. "They feel all alone in the world, and we matrons don't have the time or energy to care for each one as much as they deserve. The kids find friends amongst each other, and most of the time they hold onto those for dear life. They create a network between each other that children with parents can never really understand, because they've never had to live with the uncertainty orphans do. So just show her you won't leave. That no matter what you're still there, even if Emi isn't. Even if Orochimaru isn't. You still are." She finished.

Naruto was nodding along. "But I already am. Shisui and I are the only two who still goes to visit. I don't even blame the others for keeping away. She's that bad." She argued.
"Continue doing just that, and eventually she'll get the message, dear."

Her talk with Madam May, while much more somber than the one with Minato, had actually cheered her up. Naruto walked out of the orphanage as dinner was being served with a smile on her face. Feeling a lot more optimistic about life in general.

She felt emotionally drained, yet strangely peaceful. Minato and her had a long way to go still, but it didn't feel as impossible as it once had. There was such a thing as forgiveness, and Naruto had never been a person to hold grudges. Not really. And it was about time to let the past go. It had been years, and she was no Sasuke. Naruto promised herself she would move on and live her life without being hindered by her past. If she could survive the loss of all her old friends, her old identity, then she could certainly survive this too.

Moving up the street she noticed a few people walking casually towards her. Coming closer she felt butterflies erupt in the pit of her stomach. This day kept on getting more and more crazy. After Minato and Madam May she didn't know there was anything more that could tilt her world on its axis, but here was the proof to the contrary.

Because there, with the sun setting behind them, were Shikaku, and on his shoulder was a child with spiky dark hair pulled up in a ponytail. Even from a distance she recognized her old troublesome friend.

Shikaku gave a casual wave of one hand when he noticed her approach, and Naruto eagerly jogged up to them. She was bursting with energy all of a sudden. The dull emotional overload disappearing as she found herself with only happiness at seeing the half asleep Nara heir propped on his father's shoulders.

"Good afternoon, Shikaku-san!" Naruto said, probably too loud, because the kid on his shoulder stirred.

"Good afternoon, Naruto-chan." Shikaku drawled back. They were in front of the Nara compound, and had probably been returning home from somewhere. She felt bad about stopping them right before they made it home, but right now she was selfish, and she wanted to get a proper look at the kid too darn lazy to even lift his head.

"Who is this?" Asked Naruto eagerly. Shikamaru looked adorable. Even at four years old the kid looked too lazy to be considered normal. Despite what he grew into later, even Sasuke was a bundle of energy at this point in time. The same couldn't be said for the Nara heir though. He was a gangly kid who looked like breathing was too much of an effort. He'd been laying with his chin resting on his father's head, one eye open to scrutinize her for a moment, before they closed as if he was dozing off again.

Naruto's grin widened.

"This is my son. Shikamaru, say hi to Naruto-chan." Shikaku drawled and pulled lightly on his son's leg to jostle him awake.

"Hello." Shikamaru said in a high, childlike voice, yet unmistakably disinterested at the same time.

"Oh kami, he's just like you isn't he, Shikaku-san?" Naruto said excitedly, almost jumping up and down at seeing Shikamaru again.

"Be polite Shikamaru!" Snapped a voice from behind them, and a woman came up behind Shikaku and his son. Naruto tried to place the woman, she looked vaguely familiar, and she suspected it might
be Shikamaru's mother. The one he always referred to as "troublesome".

"I apologize for my son's behaviour. He knows better, don't you Shikamaru?" The woman said in a sickly sweet tone. This was a woman you didn't want to cross. Not at all. Naruto wondered vaguely if Shikamaru had inherited even a single gene from his mother. She couldn't see a shred of his mother in the boy's behaviour or looks.

"Hi. I'm Uzumaki Naruto." She replied and extended a hand towards the dark haired woman.

"Hi, Naruto-san. I've actually heard about you from Ensui-kun. Only good things of course, I promise. I'm Nara Yoshino."

"Nice to meet you Yoshino!" Naruto beamed and looked between each of them in turn. It was then she noticed a fourth little person with them. A boy was standing behind Yoshino's leg and peeked nervously back at her with large dark eyes. He looked to be the same age as Shikamaru, but his skin was paler, and his dark hair fell flat from a ponytail. His eyes were bigger than Shikamaru's and framed with dark lashes. He was probably even cuter than Shikamaru.

"I see you already know my husband here," Yohsino sent her husband a suspicious look, and they had a silent conversation with their eyes alone that Naruto couldn't hope to decipher even if she tried. She then smiled brightly back at Naruto and gestured from Shikamaru on his father's shoulder to the boy peeking shyly out from behind her legs. "And these two here are our twins. Shikamaru and Shikamo."

To be continued...
Thank you so very much for reading! The chapter was beta'd by AnjoRemix!

Phew… A lot of context here. Meeting "Madara", what Shisui was up to while Naruto travelled, Minato finally taking a step to heal up their relationship, Madam May, and… well, who guessed I was giving Shikamaru a twin? I certainly didn't.

The idea is relatively new, but I really like it. There just isn't enough Nara around… Though I already put in Ensui (but he's a canon character, so that doesn't count).

Btw. Shikamo looks like his mother, unlike Shikamaru who takes after his father (see sketch above). I obviously chose the name Shikamo because it starts with Shika – and then I just put in a random ending, completely without any thoughts to it, which is -mo. Then I noticed 'Shikamo' sort of sounded like 'Sakumo', and then I instantly liked it. Then later I looked up Shikamo, and it actually has a meaning in Japanese. It's a word and not a name, but… I don't really care. If anyone is Japanese, I hope you can live with it. It means; moreover/furthermore/what's more.

And I find having a twin called "what's more" only too ironic to change it. And it's totally something a lazy Nara would do. After all the clan heads keep calling their children Shika-something.

If you take their names together, you get; "What's more As a deer" I just wish "As", was "like", then it could almost be; "what's more like a deer?" Those Nara do like their puzzles after all.

I apologize for my rambling everyone…. Until next time!
Chapters

Chapter Thirty Nine – Bite the Hand That Feeds You

"The weaker you are, the louder you bark." - TenTen

It had taken her time, planning and a pinch of luck, but eventually Naruto had tracked down and cornered Yamanaka Inoichi at the outskirt of the village. The clan head was understandably confused by her urgency, not to mention the privacy seal activated around them, but had so far allowed her to kidnap him. Unfortunately she was less efficient in starting the conversation than she'd been in the kidnapping, and Inoichi eventually asked her what was going on. "This might be one of the more pleasant hostage situations I've been involved with, but I'm still curious what you want, Naruto-san?"

She wasn't sure how to start, and instead of laying out her dilemma in a professional manner, the question that had been mulling around in her head for days - despite the obvious answer - came blurtling out. "Shikamaru has a twin?!

Inoichi was startled at the exasperated confusion in her voice, but then he started chuckling. Chuckling. Naruto didn't see what was so funny at all.

"Oh, I'm sorry Naruto-san, I'm not laughing at you, I just forgot you wouldn't know." Inoichi said while swallowing down his mirth. "But yes, Shikamaru has a twin. They're fraternal though, and there's a sixteen minutes difference between them. They actually have different birthdays. Shikamaru was born six minutes before midnight, while Shikamo was born ten minutes after."

Her mouth hung open in surprise. Did that happen often? Twins born on different days? "When exactly are their birthdays?"

"22 and 23rd of September." Answered Inoichi patiently, an understanding blooming in his pale eyes. "In fact, Shikamo and my daughter Ino share a birthday. Both born on the 23rd."

Naruto nodded numbly. Shikamaru's birthday had been on the 22nd of September in her original time too, so at least that remained the same. "That is… weird. I never expected…" She mumbled and dragged a hand through her hair. "I'm sorry for cornering you like this, I just needed to know… more."

Inoichi waved a hand and smiled understandably. "I get it Naruto-san, it can't be easy. Seeing them all so young and different from the memory you have of them."

Naruto swallowed down the bile in her throat that had been present ever since her meeting with the Nara family. "No… It really isn't."

Inoichi studied her for a moment. "You know… If you need to talk to someone, I'll gladly listen. I am one of the few who actually knows what has happened to you."

She stepped back while shaking her head in from side to side. "Oh, no. That's fine. I'm fine. I just keep getting blindsided." Naruto objected with a sheepish smile.

Inoichi waited a beat while studying her. The Yamanaka was known for their analytical abilities born
from their obsessive interest in the human mind. There was no other way they had developed jutsu such as the mind body switch and mind reading techniques. Naruto often wondered - if her secret hadn't come out from the violent events five years ago - if the biggest threat to her secret coming out wouldn't have come from the Yamanaka.

While the Nara was far from unobservant, their specialty wasn't the human psyche. The Yamanaka was usually much quicker in picking up on lies and body language than the Nara. What she had going for her before had been her limited time spent in their presence. Only Ensui was really around often enough to pick up on her oddities, and though he was a true Nara, he lacked that lethal sharp edge people like Shikamaru and Shikaku had. Subconsciously Naruto had always known that Ensui would get flatten if he ever had to cross wits with his clan head and the heir. While smart, he wasn't at the same level she'd observed in Shikamaru so many times in her past.

Inoichi reached out and placed a careful hand on her shoulder, as if testing if the contact was accepted. When she didn't shrug the hand off or reacted to the touch he smiled sadly. "No, it's not fine. What happened to you is not fine on any level, Naruto-san. Konoha is extremely lucky you're such an exceptional person to have you as one of our own, but remember that you're not alone in all this anymore. You can always come to me if the changes between the time lines became too much. Even if it's good news, such as Shikamo, it's enough to make you question everything. Kami knows I did. I was really shocked when Shikaku told me he had twins… For a long time I wondered if the boy they had named Shikamaru was even the same boy I had watched in your memories… It really makes you question what is meant to be and what isn't."

His words stuck a cord in her. While Shikamo's existence had been shocking and unexpected, it was also undoubtedly a very nice change. So far the alterations to the time line had been mostly negative. There had been so many deaths, but for the first time, Naruto's presence had... in a way… created a life. And though she'd initially been shocked, this one made her happy.

And that made her feel guilty.

It was a strange mix of emotions. The boy was an innocent little thing, and yet Naruto felt guilty about being happy that he had come to be. It wasn't so much guilt over the fact that he existed, more that so many bad things had to happen for him to be born.

Naruto nodded absently, her head still full with the consequences of her continued existence out of time. "Yeah… It really does, doesn't it?"

All Shisui had to do was deliver the message to Naruto, and though he usually had no problem tracking her down she remained surprisingly evasive that day. Shisui had already checked her flat, the training grounds and Ichiraku ramen stand. Yet he hadn't found her.

It wasn't before he started aimlessly walking through the streets he found a clue, in the form of Ensui who pointed him in the right direction. "Naruto? Oh, she's babysitting." Ensui answered when asked.

Shisui's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "What?"

The Nara chuckled and pointed down the street. "She's babysitting Shikaku-sama's twins this afternoon."

Shisui shook his head, and wondered fleetingly if he should check for a genjutsu. The words "Naruto" and "babysitting" in one sentence didn't really go well together. He knew for a fact the girl had never done this before. Even when they were genin they didn't get stuck with those kind of missions, though that was mostly thanks to Orochimru's influence and his intense dislike of D-rank
missions. It wasn't that Naruto had anything against children, of the three of them she was usually the one who connected most with them, but he'd never expected her to go out of her way like this.

"I see…?" It came out as a question, and yet his body had already turned in the direction of the Nara compound. Ensui was holding back a laugh at how confused he was, but managed admirable to hold it in until Shisui was out of sight.

A few minutes later he stood outside the Nara compound, asking to see Naruto with a message from the Hokage. The Nara man had nodded and led him into the grounds.

They knew who he was of course. When he was young Shisui had been in the compound regularly. Ensui had been a close friend in the academy, and it was shame they had drifted apart during their genin days. Sometimes it saddened him that he had allowed Ensui to become so distant. At the time it had been natural though. While Shisui had connected with Naruto, and somehow replacing Ensui with her, the Nara had done the same. In the years after the academy Iruka had elapsed Shisui's spot as Ensui's closest friend until his untimely death. By then it was too late. They had both been changed by the war to go back to the friendship they once shared. Shisui assumed some of it was part of growing up, while another part of him said they were both just too damaged. While Ensui was the one people could point to and say; "man, did the war screw him over", it didn't mean none of the others didn't struggle with similar emotional wounds.

Shisui was still astounded Naruto wasn't stuck in the psyche ward in the hospital. She wouldn't have been alone if she had. Quite a few ninja who had escaped the Third War with their body intact couldn't say the same for their minds. The sad truth was that their occupation made for hard and short lives, and it could be argued that the ninja who reached an older age wasn't necessary the lucky ones.

Sometimes living could be far crueler than death.

Despite not having exited his teens yet Shisui was well aware of that fact, which spoke volumes of just how much his occupation had affected him.

The dark thought that was never far from his consciousness whenever he met Ensui was pushed back as he was escorted across the entire compound. Shikaku's house was the one furthest in, and the building closest to the Nara forest.

He heard them before he saw them though. A high childlike laugh washed over him, and his attention drifted towards the patio of the admittedly modest house of the Nara clan head. Though not shabby or inappropriate for someone of Shikaku's status, Fugaku had been more elaborate with his own house compared to the Nara.

Outside the open entrance door Naruto lay on her back with a dark haired child perched on the heel of her outstretched feet and supported up by her arms. Another kid sat resting his back against the wall and seemed content with watching. Despite knowing who the twins were Shisui still didn't know which one was Shikamaru and which one was Shikamo.

"You have a visitor, Naruto-san."

The three on the patio looked over, Naruto grinning as she lowered the kid she had been balancing on her feet back to the ground. "Hey, Shisui! Come to join us?" She asked while the kid shuffled closer to his brother while keeping him within sight at all times. It was a sudden change. The child had seemed really outgoing and happy just a moment ago, but apparently he was the type that was unsure about strangers. Did this mean Naruto came here often? Had she been doing this for a while, and yet he hadn't noticed?
"Ah, as fun as that would be is not the case this time. I only came to inform you to meet up at the Hokage office this evening. Minato-sama wish to speak with you."

The first person Naruto took note of when she entered the Hokage office that evening was Ensui who stood leaned against the wall right by the door and gave her a nod in welcome. In front of the desk Uchiha Fugaku had his arms folded in front of him, and Minato was sitting in his chair watching them all in silence. Jiraiya was leaning out the window and glanced absently over his shoulder upon her entrance.

The strange turnout was puzzling in itself, and Naruto was struck by the fleeting though that she'd never been in a room with this peculiar crowd at the same time before today.

"Ah, Naruto." Minato said with a welcoming smile and gestured for her to come forward. "Now that everyone is here we can get down to business."

Jiraiya pushed himself off the window and grinned at her while Ensui came up next to her. Fugaku only gave a stern half nod, which she suspected might have been a polite welcome. It was hard to read Fugaku, and not for the first time Naruto was reminded of where Itachi's emotional control came from.

"Congratulations Naruto. You've recently been nominated for promotion by three jōnin." Minato explained. He gestured towards the three men in the room. "Jiraiya-sensei, Uchiha Fugaku and Nara Ensui all think your abilities are well above Chūnin. Which is true, in most cases." Minato gave a small smile while Naruto let the information sink in. Promotion? She was finally getting promoted? The thought of climbing in the ranks had not even entered her mind since well before her exile from Konoha.

"Now, to become a jōnin you need to fulfil a few requirements." Minato started and picked up a document from his desk and handed it to Naruto. It was her stat file, and curious about the official grading Naruto skimmed through the first few lines.

*Official Stats:*

*Intelligence: 3*
*Stamina: 5*
*Hand Seals: 1.5*
*Ninjutsu: 5*
*Genjutsu: 1*
*Taijutsu: 3.5*
*Strength: 3.5*
*Speed: 4*

*Total: 26.5*

Personally Naruto felt the score was alright. The two major weaknesses on her official stats were Genjutsu and hand signs, which she knew all too well was true. It was nowhere near Kakashi's, who she knew had scored an impressive 33, but then again these documents wasn't all that reliable. The
scoring system left a lot to be desired, as Naruto knew for a fact that if she ever had to fight Kakashi she would stand a good chance at beating him.

"The problem concerning your promotion doesn't come down to your strength. If it was you would have been promoted a long time ago." Minato replied with a nod of respect to her. Naruto swallowed and looked up from her file. "However, being jōnin isn't solely about power. You need abilities in the other fields too. Now, your apprenticeship with Tsunade certainly helped, because you have sufficient knowledge in first aid, medical treatment and herbs. However," he paused and looked at her seriously. "You need more than that for a jōnin promotion. The jōnin of Konoha are the best, and need to excel in at least three specialities and with acceptable knowledge of the rest."

He glanced briefly from her face to the document still clutched in her fingers."As it stands, you fill out two of the three expertise slots. You're jōnin level in ninjutsu and senjutsu, and you need to come up to speed with a third specialty, hopefully something noncombat related, because if you don't it will make you less usable for noncombat missions. You have adequate knowledge in medicine, taijutsu and kenjutsu. You can use fuinjutsu to a lesser extent. And though you can break genjutsu, you have... well, no genjutsu techniques. You are categorized as a front line battler with sensor abilities. You are a good tracker, but a bad infiltrator, two things that doesn't work well together. We want trackers who can stay disguised without being discovered, which is why you are purely sensor and not a tracker, and why it's not classified as a specialty. Yet." He stopped talking and looked at her with clear blue eyes.

"The fastest way to a jōnin promotion is if you're able to hone your tracking abilities. Another field you could specialize in is fuinjutsu, though from Jiraiya's explanation that's already been tried and tested, and you show very little patience with it." He glanced at Naruto who nodded.

While fuinjutsu was cool and she would love to do it herself, there was something very... tiring about it. Her kanji was abysmal, and she still hadn't perfected it to the standard fuinjutsu required. It was also a ton of hand signs involved in almost the simplest fuinjutsu techniques, another ability Naruto had never excelled at naturally. It really proved that you didn't automatically inherit your parent's talents.

Kushina had been a natural, and though personality wise Naruto and Kushina were similar, Kushina must have had a better memory than Naruto. While she did have the chakra for it and was an Uzumaki by blood it didn't automatically make her awesome at the clan techniques, something that had stung when Jiraiya had tried to teach her.

Maybe her problems with fuinjutsu were the reason she's struggled so badly with the chakra chains too. Something Kushina had managed almost instinctively. It was like Obito trying to cast genjutsu. You'd think that would come naturally to an Uchiha, yet the boy had been awful and struggled with the simplest of illusions. It didn't mean Naruto was incapable of fuinjutsu, just that she would never be a fuinjutsu master. She'd leave that to Minato, Jiraiya and maybe even Shisui would get to that level in the future.

Minato continued on listing her abilities as they stood today. "On to other qualifications. While you have good scores with impromptu strategy, you're not a planner. Not a strategist. You have little experience in leadership, but have good charisma, which is a handy tool for a jōnin as you're expected to lead missions without help. You have subpar diplomacy knowledge, poor infiltration skills and no interrogation abilities. The more I look at your file the more I believe that tracking is the area you will gain the most from at this stage. It will help with your chakra control to train in suppressing that mountain of chakra you have, and learning subtlety will also help in numerous other fields. If you turn your file over there's a more detailed stat overview of your abilities."
Minato gestured to the paper in her hand, and Naruto turned it over and read.

Jutsu:
Ninjutsu: 5
Genjutsu: 1
Taijutsu: 3.5
Kenjutsu: 3
Senjutsu: 5
Kinjutsu: 3
Iryō ninjutsu: 2
Total: 22.5

Fields of Expertise:
Offence: 5
Defence: 4
Tracking: 3.5
Infiltration: 2
Assassination: 3.5
Medicine: 3
Strategy: 2
Communication: 3
Total: 26

"If you can get better at suppressing your chakra you will fill out the requirement to lead a tracking team. Your time with Jiraiya taught you the ropes of spying and infiltration, so you know what it entails, but because of your chakra reserves you're easily discovered. Get this under control and it will raise your scores in both tracking and infiltration, and you'll have the requirements for a jōnin promotion." Minato explained while Naruto was still reading.

When she'd finished Naruto nodded, well aware he had a good point. Minato smiled mischievously, a look Naruto had never actually seen him wear before. "You should also start reading. If you wish to rise to jōnin you have a lot to learn. I know you find this type of work extremely boring," He gestured towards a stack of books he'd placed on his desk. "These are all about the strategy and the security protocols of Konoha. All jōnin are required to know the information in these books inside out." He then met her eyes. "And these are just the first volumes. There's five more collections."
Minato sighed lightly and glanced between the ninja around him. "However, I can't ignore your current abilities, which is well above Chūnin. Few can go up against you in combat and hope to win. I have therefore decided to promote you to Tokubetsu jōnin, effective immediately. Though if you catch up on the information," He gestured towards the books. "and try to improve your tracking I'm more than happy to promote you to Jōnin."

Naruto's ears perked up. Tokubetsu jōnin? Those were the people who were promoted because they were elite specialists in a specific area. She was a combat Tokubetsu jōnin. She wasn't up to standard in other fields to be well enough rounded for a Jōnin promotion, but she knew for a fact that Tokubetsu was paid more than Chūnin. Anko had the same title, which meant from this moment her roommate couldn't pull rank on her anymore.

Summer was slowly approaching, and with it came the Chūnin exams. Naruto had never spent much time thinking about the effort that went into organizing the exams, and was therefore both eager and a bit confused when she was placed in the group organizing the second task.

As the relationships between the villages were still tense, only Suna was expected to have some participants coming into the village. It would be the first time since before the Third War that anyone from another village was allowed entrance to Konoha, and Naruto was eager to help out.

The one in charge of the second task was a highly paranoid Hyūga Hizashi who was absolutely sure Suna would attack while they were within the village. Naruto couldn't fault his concerns, as there was always a possibility, but she had faith in their neighbour village. As she understood it Minato had worked hard to patch up the relationship between Konoha and all the other great villages for the last five years, but especially with Suna.

He had even helped Gaara, who according to Minato should have a much more sturdy seal than original if the Kazekage had actually taken his advice.

They started preparing the exams months before the actual thing took place, and Naruto had therefore the pleasure of finding out just how many meetings went into planning such an arrangement. She was also not impressed. There were so many security risks to take into account she couldn't keep track anymore.

But luckily she wasn't in the security department. Ensui had been unfortunate enough to be placed there though. In Naruto's group there were seven people led by Hizashi, and the only ones she knew were Gai and Genma who were also amongst the ones picked for this.

And while Naruto's days were filled with never ending meetings, arguments and trying to calm down Hizashi from storming up to the Hokage office and demand that Suna was banned from the exams, Anko and Kakashi were finally seeing results of their long recovery.

Unexpectedly enough Kakashi was the one to leave the hospital first. Even though he'd had more severe injuries than Anko he still showed tremendous motivation in his recovery, which couldn't always be said about Anko.

She would be hit with periodical efforts, before losing it completely and refuse to even get out of bed. It could take weeks before Naruto and Shisui were able to drag her over to the gym, where she was supposed to strengthen her legs and get them back to full function again. The physical therapists had long since given up on treating her themselves, so Naruto and Shisui took turns overseeing Anko's training, and could instead come with questions to the therapists if there were any difficulties.

Aside from Anko's attitude of course.
But after Naruto and Shisui managed to force her to the gym several weeks in a row, Anko herself realized she had actually made progress. Seeing that her efforts were giving results gave her a proper outlet for her never ending anger, and soon she could be found most days working out in the hospital gym with vigour.

It didn't stop her from being horrible to her two friends, and sometimes rather venomous, but at least she tired herself out every day which made her too exhausted to yell afterwards.

Naruto's work at the UPF had come to an end, so her days were spent divided between working on the Chūnin exam, overseeing Anko or on the training field with Rin.

However, if Naruto believed Anko was bad at the hospital, it was nothing in contrast to having her back home.

It was only days before the Chūnin exam started when her roommate was discharged from the hospital. Shisui had been the one to help her home, seeing as Naruto was stuck at work, but she received quite the welcome upon her return to the flat.

"Where the hell have you been?! There's no food in the fridge, and I can't fucking get comfortable here! And has this shit hole always been this warm?" Anko said from her position on the couch. She was laying down, her back up against the armrest and dressed in all black. It was weird, ever since Orochimaru's betrayal Anko was constantly wearing black. It was as if she was dressed to a very long, dragged out funeral.

There were two glasses on the coffee table and a plate with crumbles from an earlier meal. Normally Anko would have cleaned up after herself, but Naruto suspected these had been out since Shisui had helped her home.

Her roommate might be well enough to leave the hospital, but that didn't mean she was recovered. She still stumbled around on crutches, which now lay uselessly next to the couch.

Naruto swallowed down the comeback, knowing there would be a lot more of this to come. Instead she tried to answer calmly. "Sorry Anko. I've been at work. You know the Chūnin exams are coming up right? And I'm sorry there's no food… I'll go to the store tomorrow. Anything you want me to pick up?"

"And what about the heat Naruto?" Anko snapped back, ignoring the question in favour of complaining.

Th jinchūriki sighed. "It's summer. I can't turn off the sun, Anko."

"It's fucking warm!"

"Then wear less clothes! Kami, you're wearing a sweater and pants. Use your shorts instead."

Anko huffed and shook her head. "I'm hungry." She said, but from her tone of voice it was an order for Naruto to make her food more than a statement.

She trotted over to the cupboard and fished down two instant ramen cups, which earned her a scoff from her hellish roommate. "Really? Ramen? What are you? Five years old?" She heard Anko mutter under her breath.

"Are you hungry or not? This is what we have at the moment. I haven't had time to go to the store." Naruto replied, only barely keeping herself from exploding in anger.
"Make the damned ramen then. It's not like you can make anything else. Even hospital food is better than the crap you make." She said snidely.

Ripping off the lid with a bit too much force Naruto decided not to answer. Anko was determined to be a bitch, and no matter what sort of comeback Naruto came with it would lead to an argument.

"Oh, wow. Not even talking now? What a wonderful roommate I have," Anko taunted.

Naruto filled up the cups with scorching water and fished out chopsticks from the drawer without answering. Anko was sneering when she turned around.

While keeping her own anger bottled up Naruto dropped one cup on the table and went over to the window to eat her own. Anko sniffed the ramen and made a grimace. "Tomorrow you take something with you home from a restaurant. I'm not eating this shit every day." Anko told her.

Naruto pursed her lips while staring at her ramen. Hoping the three minutes would go by faster. If Anko ate her mouth would be too busy to keep insulting her. These streaming insults were hardly anything new though. Anko would not receive any friend of the year award anytime soon with the way she was trying to annihilate everything and anyone she came in contact with.

Naruto had blown up so many times over the months while trying to help Anko, she knew by now it was futile. Anko wanted her to snap back, so by becoming angry she was only feeding Anko's twisted need to inflict a similar fury to what she herself was feeling.

It was Shisui who had pointed out that Anko was probably constantly feeling furious, which was why she continued being such a bitch. When you are constantly angry, constantly in pain and constantly sad it can turn ugly. He had implored how important it was that they stuck by her. He'd seen similar things in one of his clansmen after the war, and also hinted it could lead to any sort of unexpected and unwanted development in Anko's psyche.

His own mother hadn't been able to deal with grief, and ended up dead in the end. Some of his clansmen had gone completely out of control, and had to be dealt with by the clan. What exactly that meant Naruto wasn't sure, and no matter how many times she asked about it Shisui hadn't been willing to share.

Still, he had landed on the same conclusion as Naruto. There wasn't much they could do for Anko except be there for her. No matter how nasty or hurtful she got.

The two went to bed that evening in a horrible mood, and by morning it wasn't much better. Naruto made sure to wake up early. She ran to the store and bought food without really paying attention to the products she put in the basket. All she knew was that they needed food at home, and that the sooner she made breakfast the quicker she could stay out of Anko's way.

She ended up eating while she cooked, and was in such a hurry she hadn't even noticed that Anko was sleeping in. It wasn't before there was a knock on the door that she noticed the time.

Rin was coming by around ten that morning to see if Anko was settling in. She wanted to know if she had the right pain killers and that the flat was sufficient enough for Anko to get around in despite her injuries.

"Hey! Anko isn't up yet, but there's still breakfast out if you're hungry." Naruto said while Rin was slipping out of her sandals. Rin politely declined to breakfast, but was happy to be served tea instead.

They were into their second cup when they finally heard from Anko.
"Damn it."

The sound came from Anko's bedroom, and Naruto contemplated just ignoring it all together. Rin however was headed for the door at once and knocked. "Something wrong Anko?" She asked professionally from the other side of the door. Aside from Naruto and Shisui, Rin was the one who'd dealt with Anko. As a medic she'd been helping from day one, but unlike the other two she had more than one patient to take care of. She was also used to rude patients, and according to her Anko - though a right bitch as of late - at least didn't try physical violence. Which was not as unusual as assumed. According to Rin's stories it was amazing how much damage an injured and paranoid ninjas could manage.

It took a moment before Anko replied. "Yes."

"Can I come in?"

Anko didn't answer, so Rin took it as an invitation to open the door. Naruto came up next to her and peeked inside, wondering what Anko needed this time. Maybe someone to fluff her pillows?

Anko was sitting on the bed in a T-shirt with the covers over her legs. The crutches were propped against the wall next to her futon. "I can't reach the drawers." Anko muttered without looking at either of them and pointed up at the wall.

That was true, and Naruto hadn't even though about it. The drawers were installed high up on the wall and connected with the ceiling. Usually they walked up the wall to get their belongings in and out of their drawers, but as Anko's legs were still injured the medics had forbid her from any wall walking.

It wasn't because of the chakra use, but because of the strain to her legs. Standing horizontally was not as easy as ninjas made it out to be. Your feet might be stuck to the wall, but it was your muscles that kept the body from following the pull of gravity.

Rin smiled and walked in. "What do you need?" She asked brightly.

Anko huffed. "My underwear and some new pants. Those are dirty." She mumbled and nodded towards the pair on the floor.

Rin nodded and went up the wall while Naruto stood in the doorway. From the futon Anko was looking up while Rin took out one garment after the other while trying to find the right pants Anko was after. Once she had the right pair she simply dropped down to the floor. However, she landed next to Anko on the futon, dragging the covers away, and Naruto caught a short glimpse of Anko's right leg.

There were deep scarring marrying her upper thigh and down to her knee. A lot of the skin seemed raw and agitated, and the sight shocked her. It was first then Naruto realized she hadn't actually seen Anko's injuries even once. At first she was bandaged from top to toe, and afterwards she was always wearing sweaters and pants. Efficiently hiding the wounds.

Anko covered her legs up hastily, before snapping at Rin to watch where she landed, before ordering them out so she could change without the two of them breathing down her neck.

Quietly they did as told, Naruto now speculating if the reason Anko dressed like she was going to a funeral had more to do with the fact the garments covered up her new scars.

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It was becoming the norm for Naruto to tip toe out of her bedroom, terrified she'd wake up Anko.
She was seriously considering sleeping at Shisui's as Kagami had offered, because there was a limit to how much more of this Naruto could take. Even walking too loudly could set Anko off.

Unfortunately Anko was already up.

She sat by the dinner table eating breakfast, and upon sighting her she cast a short dismissive glance, and then continued eating without a word.

"Morning." Naruto said, testing out the water.

Anko replied in an indistinguishable sound instead of words.

"What are you doing today? Anything fun?" Naruto was pushing her luck. Though Anko hadn't yelled at her yet, which she took as a good sign.

"Oh yes," Answered Anko in a sickly sweet voice, her eyes cold as she glared at Naruto. "First I've been asked to go over his lab, seeing as there are some snakes there that refuses to let anyone through to some valuable research material, then I have a meeting with the Hokage. Just fantastic right?"

Naruto swallowed. "Oh..."

"You are probably pleased aren't you?" Anko spat.

Naruto's head snapped towards her, confused by Anko's statement. "Why the hell would I be pleased?"

Anko looked haughtily away, not heeding her words as she "Oh, maybe because you got what you wanted? I'm still waiting for you to say; I told you so. Orochimaru was so horrible, and your face says it all. You're smug about this whole thing, because it proves you were right for once."

Hurt flared up inside her, and Naruto took an angry step towards her roommate. "I never wanted this! How dare you! You're the one making everyone miserable, including yourself, so stop whining! I'm getting sick of you blaming everyone else for what Orochimaru did. Can't you at least be civil?"

Anko's eyes flashed angrily and she stood up abruptly. "Why don't you just move out? Then I don't have to deal with you and we'd both be better off!"

Shocked Naruto stepped back. Anko wanted her out? She shook her head angrily. "Tch. Unlike Orochimaru I won't abandon you!" And then she marched out of the room and into the hallway, shouting over her shoulder as she headed for the door. "I have a Chūnin exam meeting to get to, so get your act together while I'm away but tonight we're going to have pleasant dinner together! Like we used to!"

There was a crash from the other room, but Naruto didn't bother to turn and see what it was, already decided on letting Anko calm down and hoping she wouldn't suddenly move out just to be stubborn.

To Naruto's smug satisfaction and Hyūga Hizashi's relief, the second round of the Chūnin exam went by without an incident. In the end three Konoha Genin and one from Suna were promoted during the exam, and Naruto even kidnapped Anko to go watch the final round in the arena.

She remembered her first life and how her own third round had gone down. The intense training beforehand and her never ending nerves had burned the memory into her head. Of the few rounds that had taken place before the invasion started she remembered Shikamaru's the best, though Sasuke's had certainly been flashier.
In contrast, Naruto was surprised by how... boring... it was to watch this time around. Either she had unrealistic expectation to their skill level, or Naruto was remember the level of fighters differently. Gaara had been something of a nightmare back then, and Neji had been daunting. But then... Even her second Chūnin exam was more interesting than this, wasn't it?

Anko apparently agreed - for once. She had a running commentary throughout the rounds.

"These brats are pathetic, even Gai can make a better genjutsu than this tosser."

"I don't know which one is worse, the blonde who thinks that sort of strategy actually work, or his dunderhead opponent for falling for it."

"Kami, I could throw better than that during my first year in the academy than that fucker."

"Well, aren't you a ray of sunshine." Said a voice drily from behind them, and both Anko and Naruto turned in unison. Shisui had been the one to talk, but next to him Kakashi stood with his hands in his pockets while looking back at Anko in disappointment. Clearly not impressed with her insults.

"They're pathetic, and these are the future soldiers of Konoha. I'm scared for the village if that's the case."

"You were just as pathetic once upon a time." Shisui replied with a roll of his eyes.

"I think she's just as pathetic right now." Muttered Kakashi.

"What did you say!?" Anko growled and stared murderously back at Kakashi.

"I live right under you. I can hear you moan and bitch every day. Naruto is like your errand dog and all you do is complain. It's pretty pathetic." Kakashi replied without batting an eye while Anko turned a strange shade of red.

"Um..." Shisui said and took a discreet step sideways and out of the danger zone. Even Naruto wondered about getting up and running away before the inevitable fight started.


"Mah, good, because I don't give a damn what you think either. If I did, I'd probably be stuck relying on my crutches. Oh, wait. That's you." He said cheerily and looked out at the battle still going on down in the arena.

"WHAT!" Anko screeched, causing a good portion of the row to send them glares and hissed words of "shut up".

"I'm just saying, my own injuries were worse than yours Anko, and yet now I'm nearly recovered. While you..." He looked her up and down with dissatisfaction radiating off him. "Well, it's just amazing how you treat everyone like crap and still expect them to cater to your whims. Who knows, one day it might be too much."

"Maybe I want them to stop. Ever considered I just don't give a fuck?" Her tone was haughty and biting, making Naruto instantly think of a very prissy version of Ino for some reason.

"Right... Because you don't care about your friends or the village right? You always looked up to Orochimaru, so why should I expect you were different in this aspect either."
For a horrible moment it felt like the sun had stopped shining and the temperatures lowered to freezing. Naruto wanted to shout "Abort! Abort!" While waving her arms wildly to get him to shut up, but she doubted Kakashi would listen to her. Outside of missions he was far from a confrontational type of person. He hated personal drama, and let others deal with it most of the time, only stepping in when things were about to boil over. Which was actually too late most of the time, but at least he gave a damn.

"You can go drown Kakashi. No one but your damn fangirl would give a fuck if you just laid down and died." Anko hissed, her words hard to distinguish. "At least your comrades would have a better chance of getting home alive without you."

"ANKO!" Naruto shouted furiously. Hitting her hard in the shoulder. "Take that back. You don't mean that."

"When are you going to get it through your head? I don't give a damn. I wish I didn't have to deal with any of you!"

"Well, no matter how annoying I found Obito my biggest mistake is that I'm never going to deal with him again. I would think you would have learned from my mistakes at least." Kakashi answered. His voice dead and his expression had closed off. A blank mask devoid of emotions. Naruto could only watch as Kakashi turned on his heel and headed up the stadium. Shisui was now several seats away, and exhaled in a low whimper.

Naruto stood up and glared murder at her best friend. "You know, I don't give a damn what you say to me, but the least you could do is have some empathy. The world doesn't revolve around you Anko. At least try to distinguish between who are your friends and who your enemies are, because it seems Orochimaru bashed that information out of your damn skull!"

And then she stormed away after Kakashi. Several rows of people watching her departure instead of the battle down at the stadium. Darn. Now they just started a new round of rumours… And things had only just quieted down too…

As the Chūnin exam came to an end, there was the debriefing meeting. Basically, every single one who'd been in on the organizing and execution of the exam was stuffed into one meeting room with poor ventilation.

Naruto left the talking to Hizashi. There had been one mess up from a Chūnin in their team, when he'd misplaced a team. Yes, misplaced.

They had been sent out from the wrong gate during the exam, but no matter, they had had an easier time in the forest, but still hadn't been able to pass despite the advantage. On the other hand, the Chūnin had simply misread a message. The misplaced team were supposed to leave from gate nine, but had left from gate six instead. The damage of reading a note upside down…

It wasn't before the end of the meeting that the Hokage came with his own views. Congratulating everyone on a successful exam who for the first time had competitors from another village since the war. He then continued by dropping the bomb of the decade on them.

"I have a goal. To strengthen the relationship between the villages, I want to – within a year – be able to have our Genin participate in a joint Chūnin exam with the other four great villages."

The deceleration was met by a shocked silence. Gai and Genma shared a horrible glance between them and Naruto felt like her breath had gotten stuck in her throat. That was suicidal. The
relationship between the five great villages were still strained and only a stumble away from a new conflict. To gather them all for the Chūnin exam would be asking for trouble. Even in Naruto's time when she'd originally been twelve she hadn't competed against any other Great Village but Suna. Of course, smaller villages such as Otogakure and Kusagakure had been there too, but Kiri, Kumo and Iwa hadn't even touched the invite even over a decade after the Third War.

Then all hell broke out.

"What?!!"

"You can't mean to invite the other four great villages to Konoha all at once?!!"

"This isn't wise Hokage-sama!"

"We'll get killed!"

And so on. Naruto sat quietly at the back of the room, and for a moment Minato's eyes met hers. He was the picture of calmness, which gave her a momentary reassurance. Minato didn't seem fazed with his subordinate's reaction at all. After a few moments of outrage he slowly raised a hand, and the room quieted as if he'd shouted.

"I know it seems unwise, but there will never be results from standing idly by. We need to start up a dialogue with all the villages about a shared finale. It won't necessary be in Konoha, that will be decided during the planning stages for the exam. I'm confident we can count on Suna, as Kazekage-dono and I have already been discussing this during the current exams. The next Chūnin exam in six months will be held in Suna, and I myself will observe the final round in Sunagakure as a show of goodwill. The topic of today however is about the exam in a year, and my orders are to make it possible to have Konoha, Suna, Iwa, Kumo and Kiri all participate without conflict."

Naruto came home and collapsed on the couch. After Minato's announcement she was unsure of her own emotions. Was there one thing that had changed it was her apprehension of strangers. Before she got stuck out of her own time Naruto had been easy to trust, but the Third War had caused quite an emotional upheaval for her, and the idea of being sent straight into an enemy village sounded horrible.

Her paranoia and distrust in the other villages were probably unavoidable after experiencing the things she had, and the rest of team Kasai wasn't pleased either. Hopefully Minato hadn't lost his mind and for all of their sake; he knew what he was doing.

Another person she was paranoid about these days was also living in the same flat, and she could hear Anko coming down the hallway. She was too tired to fight. Every word out of Anko's mouth was an attack, and she was just so sick of it.

She pressed her face into the cushions. Wondering if she feigned sleep then Anko would let her be. Of course she was taking up the entire couch, and as Anko was learning to walk again there was a good possibility she'd be yelled at for being inconsiderate. Still, Naruto kept her eyes closed and let her breath even out. Hoping Anko would just turn around and go back to bed.

From the shuffled sounds Naruto gathered that Anko was moving around the room, and then the sound of the sink made her know she'd gone to the counter. Naruto carefully moved her head so it lay sideways, and squinting slightly she spotted Anko with her back turned in the kitchen.

She was fully dressed and was leaning heavily against the counter. It was then she realized what was different. There were no crutches! Anko had made her way from the bedroom to the kitchen without
any support help at all! That was huge. Naruto hurried to close her eyes again. She was sure if Anko wanted to sit she would kick Naruto out. Able to walk or not, the girl could certainly be creative.

Anko continued pottering around the kitchen for a few minutes, and then to Naruto's surprise, she left for her bedroom without disturbing her at all.

Hesitantly opening her eyes Naruto found herself alone but with a fresh cup of tea on the coffee table. It was made just the way Naruto preferred it.

A couple of weeks later Shisui stopped by. Unannounced he arrived by jumping in through the window before deciding he was making them dinner that evening. Though Anko had been gradually tiring herself out with training, it didn't mean her mood had miraculously grown better.

Naruto hadn't seen her use her crutches even once that week, so it appeared as if Kakashi's taunt had pushed Anko to finally take her recovery seriously. Naruto thought it was a miracle, but the girl could still be unpleasant despite her newfound motivation.

So Shisui made them dinner, which Anko had a lot of complaints about. From how overcooked the fish was to the boring seasoning. Shisui was growing increasingly annoyed, but like Naruto he had learned his lesson early on, and basically choose to answer in vague sounds which could be interpreted in numerous ways instead of words.

The meal ended in Anko shuffling back to her room and slamming the door a bit too hard. Leaving Naruto with the dishes and Shisui with a blooming headache.

"I'm tired of this. She can't continue brooding in her bedroom. She's downright depressing." Shisui mumbled while Naruto gathered up the plates.

"Yeah, but there's not much we can do. If you suggest having her go out for a walk she'll get really angry. And don't try throwing her down the stairs. I tried and she retaliated with switching out all the seasonings in the kitchen. Having salt in my cereal instead of sugar was not a pleasant breakfast." Naruto shuddered at the memory.

He chuckled weakly and stood up to help her with the dishes. While checking the heat of the water as it filled the sink Shisui fished out a towel and soap from a drawer. Naruto put on her wash gloves and took the bottle of soap from Shisui so she could start washing. "It was nice of you to make dinner though. Anko gets a kick out of complaining about the meals. At least it shows she's still passionate about some things."

"As much as I love getting insulted every time I come over, I still think we should try something to improve her... uh, temper." He answered sarcastically. He only received an arched eyebrow from Naruto. "Anko loves to have fun. Before she would go out and dance. She isn't much of a dancer in her current condition, but she can still go out. We could take her to the bar."

"I don't know..." Naruto mumbled skeptically.

"No. I think it's a good idea. That way she can get her mind off her injuries and Orochimaru. All she does is try to get better while plotting sensei's murder. I think it will be good for her. Tonight we're all going out." Shisui declared firmly.

Naruto sighed "We are?" She asked dejectedly.

"Yup. Keep up, Naruto. This is for Anko. Your best friend remember? And she's sad. We cheer up sad friends, don't we?"
"But we're sad too!" Naruto protested. "We'll be three sad people at a bar!"

Shisui shook his head seriously. "Sadness is one of the main reason there's so many alcoholics out there, so we'll hardly be alone. And this is where our acting skills comes in play. Treat it like a mission, Naruto. The get-Anko-out-of-her-stupor mission is now in progression."

It had been a good idea in theory, thought Shisui while watching as Anko sat detached on the stool while browsing through the crowd.

He shared a glance with Naruto, hoping she knew something they could try to cheer her up. If this place couldn't do it, than what could?

But the blonde looked lost too. Anko hadn't even smiled yet.

Sighing he ordered them another round while stewing over his disastrous idea. Naruto was bobbing her head to the music at least, her long hair loose for once.

"Finally," he heard Naruto whisper under her breath and Shisui looked up. The entrance door had just opened and he spotted Kakashi and Rin followed by Kurenai, Genma and Aoba come in. "I called for backup." Naruto explained in a low whisper.

Shisui grinned, meeting Naruto's eyes in the dimly lit room. "Good idea. Maybe she wants to torture Rin again. That should be too tempting for her to resist." Shisui pointed out.

"Exactly my idea. And Rin is all in too, she knows Anko needs this."

"What are you two whispering about?" Asked Anko sourly, her grumpy face peeking in between them. Naruto and Shisui straightened up at once, giving her innocent smiles.

"Look! More people." Naruto replied as a distraction, pointing towards the group heading for them. Anko finally noticed and arched an eyebrow.

"This was so planned." She stated while rolling her eyes.

"Of course! We're here for you, Anko." Naruto replied and hit her on the back, almost knocking Anko off her seat.

No matter how many drinks or jokes presented to Anko she wasn't cheering up. Naruto was already considering this mission a failure. They'd tried their best, but it was getting late and at this rate all Anko would take away from the night was a nasty hangover.

Rin was even pushing Anko to make fun of her inexperience, but she was just not taking the bait. Only answering in short terms such as; "Too bad" "Sucks for you." and "Next time remember lip gloss."

Shisui had already consumed a considerable amount of alcohol too, but where Naruto was losing fate he was gaining it. His jokes had turned considerably more direct, and he was now making snide comments at Kakashi while ordering a new round for them all.

But even that didn't work, and Naruto was about to call it a night and drag Anko home when Shisui slammed his hand hard on the table.

"Okay, that's it. There's no other way around this. I'm going all out." Shisui said resolutely. And
throwing his head back he emptied his glass with a grimace. He then snapped Naruto's barely touched drink out of her hand, emptying that one too in another swallow.

They all stared at him in shock. Aoba blinking at Shisui's sudden action.

With tightly shut eyes Shisui shuddered as the alcohol hit. "Gah, that's nasty." He shivered again before looking up. His eyes glossy from the sting of the drinks.

For the first time in months Anko's lips twitched.

"Okay, so we're not leaving this place before we're all cross-eyed." Shisui stated and gestured to everyone's drinks.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea. I have a mission tomorrow." Kurenai argued uncertainly.

"So what? I do too," Shisui declared happily, before he shouted for the bartender for another drink. "Don't be a wuss, Kurenai-chan. We're supposed to have fun, and though I know you're bummed about Asuma leaving the village you can't stop having fun." He explained seriously, his words growing a bit slurry though he put on a good show of being unaffected by the alcohol.

"I'm not… bummed." Kurenai hissed, her cheeks heating up as she glared at Shisui.

"Then don't be a downer. You don't need Asuma here to have fun do you?" Shisui taunted with an angelic smile. Kurenai glared, but picked up her glass and drank. Probably to prove Shisui wrong.

"Uh, Shisui. Don't you have guard duty tomorrow, maybe you should slow down?" Wondered Naruto, trying to take the drink out of his hand, but Shisui twisted out of reach, the silly smile staying intact the whole time.

"Mah, don't be boring. I know you can't get drunk Naruto, but that's okay. You can just sit there and look pretty. It's entertaining enough."

That caused several of them to snort as Naruto huffed in annoyance. "Shut up you brat! You stay quiet and look pretty. I think we voted once, and you came out the pretty one!" She snapped back.

"Uhu, uhu." Shisui nodded in agreement, completely ignoring the jab at his appearance. "It's an Uchiha thing. But it's nowhere near the struggles Itachi will probably have in the future. That guy is doomed."

"I know very well that all Uchiha men are secretly fifty percent girl. But shut up before you die of embarrassment tomorrow." Naruto hissed, and to her astonishment she heard a giggle from Anko.

"I'm not a girl." Shisui whined and reached out for the bottle the waiter had placed on the table. Naruto tried to wrestle the bottle out of his grip, she was sure Shisui was about to make complete fool out of himself. She'd been around Jiraiya enough to know where this was headed.

"You've had enough!"

"I'm not drunk, I'll just have a little."

"Shisui!"

"You're not my mum, I can do whatever I want!"

"Damn it, Shisui, you're forcing me to be the grown-up one! It's not a good look for me!"
The next morning Naruto woke up to a delicious smell in the air, and still too tired to register what it was she made her way into the living room. Following her nose she found Anko standing by the stove making omelets for breakfast.

She was a wreck. There were dark shadows under her eyes, her hair was a mess and she had fallen asleep with her make-up on from the day before. But while the girl wasn't smiling there was a hint of her old liveliness back in her movements. Her eyes a bit brighter than before.

"Good timing. I was about to wake you up." Anko replied quietly, a huge contrast to the usual snapped demand Naruto had been greeted with for months. Her roommate gestured to the ready made table while she lifted the pan from the stove. Naruto watched silently as she put their portions on a plate each and sat down opposite her.

"How are you feeling? You drank a lot last night." Naruto pointed out before taking a bite of her breakfast. "Oh shit. This is delicious, Anko!" She moaned.

Anko smiled calmly and nodded. "My head feel like post-apocalyptic battlefield, but otherwise I'm fine."

Naruto smiled, but were too busy eating to do more than nod at her words.

Anko sighed; her movements slow as she ate. "Thanks by the way." She added and reached for her glass of water. "I don't think I'll ever forget what happened, but I will move on. I have the best of friends anyone can ever hope for to make sure of it."

It was the nicest breakfast Naruto had in what felt like years. Though she wasn't back to normal, Naruto could finally start believing she'd get better. The meal was eaten in silence, but the nice kind, of two girls who'd yet to properly wake up. Naruto was also free that day, and was only planning on heading to the training ground that afternoon. Anko wanted to come with her, so going late would help her recover from the previous night.

They spent the day catching up on reports and cleaning their bedrooms, and it wasn't before after noon someone disturbed the silence. When Naruto opened the door she was met by a masked ANBU, and she momentarily froze to the spot.

"Who is it?" Shouted Anko from the living room.

It took her a moment, but suddenly she recognised the messy, dark hair that was even wilder than normal. "Shisui?" Naruto asked confused.

"Hey… Have you guys by any chance seen my wallet?" He asked in a worn and apathetic tone. "I lost mine last night..."


Shisui didn't answer for a moment, and as Anko came into the hallway he touched the mask on his face. "Oh..." He muttered surprised. As if he hadn't known the mask was still there. With sluggish movements he slid the mask up, clearing his face for the world to see.

It was astounding just how awful he looked.

Anko burst out laughing and Naruto had to hold a hand over her mouth to stifle her chuckles.

He looked absolutely terrible. Naruto let him into the apartment, and his movements were slow as he...
headed straight for the couch without taking his sandals off. He sunk into the cushions, a hand dragging down his face.

Shisui's eyes were bloodshot, his skin pale and almost bluish from how ill he was. His expression was one of painful discomfort. "I'm never drinking again." He swore in a whisper. "I just got off duty, but I've never had such a challenging mission in my life, and I was just standing on guard duty."

Anko was getting a hold of herself while Naruto dried her eyes. "It's good you have to wear a mask at work Shisui. Kami you look repulsive!" Anko said, shaking in her effort to stop laughing.

"Shut up… You're speaking too loudly." He moaned. "And what the hell happened last night?"

Naruto couldn't stop it. She burst out laughing so hard she was clutching her stomach. "You really don't remember?"

"This is priceless. I wish we had a camera. You're even worse than the first time I brought you there." Anko gasped between chuckles.

He groaned and looked pleadingly at Naruto for answers. Getting a hold of herself she forced her laugh down. "You drank. A lot."

"Well… at least Anko seems better." He muttered, barely lifting his arm from the couch when he tried to point at Anko.

"It was a fun night." Anko agreed, sitting down next to him on the armrest. "How can I possibly stay angry when I get to watch you get corrupted, Shisui?"

Naruto walked up to the table, looking down at them without being able to stop smiling. "Do you remember anything at all?" She wondered thoughtfully.

Shisui gave a frustrated whine. "I have twisted both my ankles, and I suspect I might have been dancing. I remember… Naruto? Yeah, I remember you were… somewhere… did we dance?"

Chuckling Naruto replied. "Yes. We danced for quite a while actually. You started up a group dance last night Shisui. You all but dragged us from the booth one at a time."

Shisui's eyes widened in disbelief as he tried to recall this. "I did? I don't remember at all. I just recall… noise. And a song. And Naruto and… wait a minute… fucking hell, did I try to dance with Kakashi?" He finished horrified.

Naruto burst out laughing while Anko toppled over in a fit, Shisui winced in pain from the volume.

In preparation for the dreaded exam next year Minato had decided to start up correspondence with several villages all at once. As the topic was sensitive he didn't trust messenger birds either, and he felt it showed more respect to deliver messages through the forces.

And that's how several teams were tasked with a village each, and for the next year would be responsible of getting messages back and forth between the village leaders.

Minato had used his time planning which team would be sent out where. He had to send ninja who knew how to protect themselves and their team in case they were attacked, yet they needed experience or have abilities in diplomacy. Not to mention that the ninjas sent out couldn't be too hated by the village they were sent to. No Hyūga or Uchiha could go to either Kirigakure or
Kumogakure. As they couldn't expect Kumo not to try and steal their dōjutsu, or Kiri to attack them for having a kekkei genkai. The Aburmae had made Iwa very angry during the war, so anyone there had to be sent somewhere else, and it went on and on and on.

It took him a month to find suitable teams for each village, and though some picked a long straw and was given easier villages, such as Kusagakure or Sunagakure, team Kasai was not one of those. Naruto was actually shocked they were sent out to one of the other four great villages in the Elemental Countries. Especially considering one of Kakashi’s missions had been a low blow to the country they were going to.

So it was as the chill of autumn settled over the village that team Kasai were sent on an A-rank delivery mission, with possibilities of getting bumped up to an S-rank. All the delivery missions to Iwa, Kiri and Kumo were labelled A-rank from the start, which didn't help their nerves about the upcoming mission.

The journey took five days, but it was the end destination that had them all nervous.

With their nerves frayed from the upcoming meeting, Kakashi had to be given a prize for coming with the least uplifting pep-talk of all time. "I hope this goes without saying, but so we're all undoubtedly on the same page; proceed with extreme caution." Kakashi murmured quietly as they came closer to the group of ninja waiting by the gate.

"What on earth would we do without you to remind us of the obvious?" Shisui hissed in reply, but was careful to keep his volume low.

The rest of team Kasai nodded absentmindedly, their attention on any sudden movement. They were walking straight into a hostile environment, and though they hoped with everything they had it would go smoothly, no one knew for certain what would happen.

Kakashi took the lead, followed by Naruto, Rin and lastly Shisui. It had taken them five days to get here, and though they had a short scuffle with a group of bandits they were child play compared to the challenge in front of them.

To convince the Tsuchikage of Iwagakure that a joint Chūnin exam would better the relationship between the five great nations.

Iwa was cold, harsh and hard. Despite being late summer the high altitude had all of them huddle into their cloaks. The rocks were bare of vegetation and the people's frosty attitude fell in line with general impression they already had of Iwagakure. These people took the saying; "heart of stone" a bit too literally.

"Team Kasai of Konohagakure is here for an audience with Tsuchikage-dono." Kakashi said formally as the group of guards came towards them. Naruto saw their emotionless expression, but could still feel the tension right underneath the surface.

"Names?" One man said and stepped forwards.

"Jōnin Hatake Kakashi, team captain." Kakashi answered and gestured towards himself before pointing out the rest. "Tokubetsu Jōnin Uzumaki Naruto, Chūnin Nohara Rin and Jōnin Uchiha Shisui." They all fished out their ID cards and handed them over. The man read every line carefully, probably twice, while the others were checking for genjutsu or other traps.

They were then required to hand over all weapons and equipment. Even Kakashi's brushes were confiscated.
Admittedly this had been expected, and they hadn't brought along any of their expensive weapons for the journey. Naruto handed over her one kunai and two shuriken without much hassle, but when she insisted she didn't have any more weapons the Iwa ninja didn't believe her, and then had her stand through a body search.

The man felt her up a bit too much for her liking, but she bit her tongue, not eager to start a fight over some low life touching her boobs one time too many.

The others noticed, and though Kakashi found it amusing more than annoying Shisui and Rin did not, and kept sending the guard sceptic and suspicious glances.

"Finished yet?" Inquired Naruto after the fifth time the guy's hand fluttered over her rear.

"We're thorough with security sunflower." Was the guy's leery reply.

Rin huffed and crossed her arms, which drew the attention to the rest, and then all of them had to be searched too. Thirty minutes later they had been felt up from head to underneath the toe.

They had to follow the guard group throughout the entire village, with a close formation circulating them. Naruto knew there were several guards further away too. They followed at a distance, but Naruto could still pin point roughly where they were located.

The journey took ten minutes, and though they went at a civilian pace the trip went both too slowly and all too fast. In the end they stood in front of the Third Tsuchikage at last, and he was not what Naruto expected at all.

First of all he was short. So short he would probably reach around Naruto's hip if they stood side by side. His white hairline was retreating but his eyebrows were in full bloom, which were the only features that could compete with his oversized nose. He had a constant scowl that twisting his face, which seemed to intensify as his eyes landed on them.

All of them kneeled in respect. This might not be their own Hokage, but Onoki was still a Kage. A man feared throughout the nations for his lethal and rare Kekkei Tōta. On each side was a row of guards stationed for his protection, but on the right end was someone she had seen before. It took her a few moments to recognize him, because he was just so damn young compared to their last meeting. It was Deidara. And he was tiny.

He couldn't be more than seven or eight years old and stood out because of his short stature. Though he was still taller than the Tsuchikage. The sight caught her off guard. She hadn't expected to see anyone she recognized, as she had never really interacted much with Iwa shinobi outside the Third War. And everyone she'd come into contact with there hadn't made it out alive.

Naruto forced the thought away. This was not the place to reminisce about her fallen opponents during the war. She was just relieved Minato hadn't sent them to discuss with Kirigakure. That would have been a very awkward meeting indeed.

Kakashi looked up as the guard handed over the scroll they had delivered by the gate. The formal request from the Hokage to the Tsuchikage for an international Chūnin exam where the Kage from the participating villages would be present. The Tsuchikage already knew why they were here, but the formalities had to be preserved. The scroll had also been tested and retested for any traps, which was why they hadn't been allowed to deliver it in person.

"So the Hokage is still on about international relations and peace reinforced actions." The Tsuchikage grumbled and closed the scroll. "Why on earth would I agree to this? What could Iwa
possibly get out of such an agreement?"

Kakashi answered. "Better relations and more clients. If Iwa makes a stand during the exams the country will attract more business."

The ancient man hummed in thought. "The day Konoha thinks of the welfare of Iwa is the day hell freezes over. Give me a real argument tree hugger. You have thirty minutes to give me a convincing reason for me to agree to this blasted arrangement."

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so very much for reading! The chapter was beta'd by AnjoRemix!

I'm so, so sorry for the late update, but I can promise on thing; the next chapter will be out within the end of the week. I promise!

This chapter was hell. Not one part flowed smoothly when I was writing this, and the transition between Anko's recovery to the next story arc was hell. I planned on getting the other villages into the story for a while now. We've already seen a bit from Kumo and Kiri earlier in this story, and now I'm making the jump to Iwa and the rest. Not sure how well this will go, because though I have a plan, making that plan interesting is really difficult. Politics isn't my strong suit, and though some writers can make a single meeting interesting, I'm not one of those. The Chūnin exam is supposed to be a pretext for Minato to start patching up the relationship between the major nations. He's desperate to create bridges between the countries after the war because of Naruto's knowledge, and it has taken this long to even get a meeting with Onoki (who detests Minato btw.)

Have a nice day everyone!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Chapter Forty – The Gentlemanly Thing To Do**

"It's not a matter of can or can't – I'm doing it!" - Yamanaka Ino

The silver lining was that despite the hell they were forced through, every member of Team Kasai made it out of Iwa alive.

Ōnoki was playing the waiting game, and after hours of discussion they left Iwagakure with a scroll for the Hokage but no definite answer.

Kakashi believed Ōnoki wanted to see if the other countries were participating first, and if they did Iwa would probably participate too. To be the only village of the Great Five to not go would be seen as a show of weakness. The Chūnin exam attracted a lot of business, and one on this scale would gain an unbelievable amount of attention. If all the other villages participated without them it would be like Iwa was telling everyone they couldn't keep up.

Thanks to Ōnoki taking his sweet time it led to team Kasai being abused as messenger birds that constantly trekked back and forth between Iwa and Konoha for months before they got anywhere. The only upside was that they were far from the only ones in that situation. Ensui and his assigned team had ended up having to travel to Kumogakure, and had a few curse words for the eccentric A and his Kumo ninja every time he returned from a delivery.

Naruto wished she could have gone to Kumo instead of Iwa, though she understood why they couldn't. Both Kakashi and Shisui had a sought after dōjutsu which would unavoidably prove too tempting for the Raikage not to steal if team Kasai showed up in Kumo.

But it didn't defer Naruto from getting wistful. If they could have gone there she would at least have seen Killer Bee again. The old rapper was actually someone she missed. In the short time they'd worked together she'd grown rather fond of him, and from Ensui's rants he hadn't changed in this time line. Though of course, Ensui didn't actually know he was a jinchūriki.

Instead team Kasai had Ōnoki to deal with, who was not afraid of throwing a tantrum in the middle of a meeting that had them all preparing to call on Minato in case it escalated to a fight. If the team was threatened they had a good fail safe. Naruto would activate the Hiraishin seal on her stomach, and Minato would arrive and basically teleport them the hell out of there. It was a last ditch solution though, because the absolute last thing the Hokage wanted was another reason for Iwa to hate Konoha at such a crucial point in the Chūnin exam negotiation.

It wasn't before February that they got a final answer, and only because if they didn't give an answer they would have overlooked the deadline and therefore automatically not participate.

The Tsuchikage was not pleased, as he still couldn't be sure Kumo nor Kiri were attending, but in the end he caved and decided to send Iwa Genin to the summer Chūnin exams, which after a lot of discussion would be held in the Land of Iron.

That had been an unforeseen development. After months of the Kage arguing about exactly where the exams would be held, the samurais had gotten involved. Like Minato they saw it as a step to
reconciliation between the countries, and offered to host the exams in their country.

Naruto was not looking forwards to it though. Land of Iron was cold, far away and not very interesting. It also reminded her painfully of the Kage summit which Sasuke had crashed midway through. The upside to the agreement was that there was an ancient pact amongst all ninja villages to stay out of Land of Iron. The country had never been involved in a ninja war and they had a very good samurai force that kept the peace. The reason no ninja village was interested in the land might be because of the sheer boredom of it though. It was a snowy tundra, and the location held no military advantage.

Minato was ecstatic though. Alongside the Great Five Villages, six minor villages had decided to enter the exam too.

With these participating villages it would be the largest Chūnin exam in ninja history. With eleven participating countries, and a headache of an organization party with ninjas across all the countries having to cooperate to make it happen.

It was a milestone Naruto had doubted they’d reach, and wasn’t sure if she was happy or not that she would continue having to make the trip between Konoha and Iwa. To say they weren't welcome in the village would be an understatement.

"How can we be assured of our genin's security? Land of Iron is a samurai country, they wouldn't understand ninjutsu even if those ninja-dropouts were used as target practice themselves! The facility isn't up to standard either. There's just no way an arrangement of this scale is plausible over there. And it's cold. Half the contestants will have to withdraw from frostbite." Ōnoki grumbled as he looked through the latest documents the Hokage sent along with team Kasai.

"Tsuchikage-dono, we have already sent out teams from Konoha, Kumo and Suna to start constructing a proper arena for the fourth and final round in cooperation with Mifune's samurai."

Mifune was the general of the Land of Iron, and a very respectable man. Naruto had yet to find any problems with him. The fact that the samurai had even agreed to host a ninja exam within their village said quite a bit about them. Like everyone the samurai were sick of ninjas never ending conflicts. There had never been any great samurai wars, while the ninjas were currently up to three. Potentially four in the future.

When Minato had approached him about the exams he had been far easier to convince than any of them had expected. The fact that the Land of Iron was getting new establishments built for them was an added boon of course. That and the business they would receive from so many visiting nobles and ninjas who would attend the finals.

"I know of your attempts at getting a whole arena built within six months. The thing will probably fall apart while the audience is still getting to their seats… And what is up with the number of rounds? Who voted for four rounds instead of three? The old ways were more than sufficient."

Kakashi held in all resentment over Ōnoki's blaring disrespect and answered. "The Raikage, Kazekage and Hokage felt that with the expected number of participants we would need an extra round to filter out contestants not up to standard. If not there's a possibility of getting too many genin through to the finals."

"But there are only eighteen spots in the finals." Ōnoki objected.

"Yes, but to make it fair between the villages we'll have an extra task for the genin so we can be assured only the best Genin make it through, instead of a stroke of luck."
Ōnoki grumbled something under his breath. "Uzumaki, what's the status with participating Konoha teams. What's the current number?"

Naruto cleared her throat and looked down at the file in front of her. Ōnoki loved to single people out. He had early caught on to the fact that Naruto wasn't always on top of things. It was Kakashi who did most of the talking, and unlike him Naruto couldn't automatically remember all the trivia facts. "The minimum amount of teams going is currently at nineteen." She explained, and briefly browsed through the rest of the numbers on the scroll. "But we're expecting over twenty participating teams from Konoha. The exams are still months away, and there can be up to ten additional teams who might decide to take the exams."

"Ten? Ten! Why can't Konoha get a handle of the number of ninja they have?"

"It depends on the amount of missions the village is receiving. Some teams might be on missions. The fresh rookie genin might not be ready for the exams. That's why the set number is currently at nineteen." Naruto replied, her voice a tad more steely than appropriate.

Ōnoki glared, before he moved over to the next point on their agenda. "Well, Iwa has order at least. We're sending forty two genin, fourteen teams in total and their Jōnin sensei."

At the corner of the table Rin was taking note of everything said while Shisui went through a folder on the table. Kakashi took over. "So we can expect fifty six Iwa ninja for the entirety of the exams?" Asked Kakashi while Rin dotted down the number 56 almost a second after Kakashi had said the number aloud. She made one hell of a note taker. Naruto had seen her written records, they included almost word for word of the entire meeting. "Then we need to make sure the accommodation is appropriate. And on that note..." Kakashi hesitated for a moment "Mifune hopes it would be acceptable to have the Iwa and Suna ninja share the same building."

There was a moment of silence, before the table cracked underneath Ōnoki's clenched fist. "I'm not sending my ninja into a house filled with sandcastle building, airheaded Suna scum!"

All of team Kasai and quite a few guards leaned away as Ōnoki continued shouting his head off at Kakashi for passing on the message from the general of Land of Iron. "We are only the messengers, Tsuchikage-dono." Kakashi tried to placate him, but Ōnoki was spitting in his hissy fit. Suna and Iwa had a worse relationship than even Konoha and Kiri did. The two countries were neighbours, and had a long history of bloody conflicts.

"You tell that Iron head it is unacceptable!" Shouted Ōnoki in the end, and to Naruto's never ending astonishment Rin was still taking notes, getting every curse word and insult Ōnoki had just sprouted down on paper so quickly her hand was blurring from the speed of her writing. Naruto wondered when she had time to dip her pencil in ink.

"We can try to accommodate the Suna ninja with Konoha perhaps? They're not sending as many Genin as Konoha, Kumo and Iwa." Suggested Naruto weakly.

"It'll be a tight fit. Konoha will most likely send more participants than all the other countries." Answered Kakashi. "But we'll figure it out." He added as Ōnoki looked close to losing his lid yet again.

"You better see to it." He hissed.

"Um, out of the other villages, which village would Iwa find most acceptable to house throughout the duration of the exam?" Asked Shisui carefully.
The Tsuchikage thought for a long moment before turning to the man on his left. Kitsuchi was a strict and calm man. He was Ōnoki's son in law, and father of Ōnoki's granddaughter Kurotsuchi. If the girl had been a few years older she would have been going to the exams herself, but as a seven year old she wasn't even a ninja yet, despite her lava Kekkei Genkai.

Kitsuchi leaned over and whispered something to Ōnoki who took his time giving an answer. "Iwa will be willing to share with the ninja of Kibagakure or Kagakure."

Naruto stopped herself from letting out a sigh. The two villages were only sending a handful of ninjas each, so this was really Ōnoki pretending to give leeway while basically telling them they wanted as much space to themselves without foreign ninja too close. Yet Kakashi nodded and peeked over at Rin's notes.

"I believe we have covered all the agendas then." Kakashi said pleasantly. Ōnoki got off his chair, and actually lost height because of how tall the table was. But when the man could fly it wasn't like he would lose height in a battle.

"Fine. You have the normal rooms." Ōnoki replied and walked around the table while team Kasai was still gathering up their documents.

"Thank you, Tsuchikage-dono." Shisui replied respectfully, though all of them were fighting a moan of displeasure. They hated when Ōnoki used his time getting together the reply to Minato. He would take his sweet time, and leave team Kasai to fend for themselves in a very hostile village. Sometimes Naruto wondered if he wanted a conflict to break out.

Thanks to these missions she was rarely home anymore. It took five days to travel to Iwa, so if they left right after delivery they used ten days per message. Which wasn't always the case. Now and then the Tsuchikage would take his sweet time to write up his reply, making team Kasai stay in Iwa for days to wait for the message which would be returned to the Hokage.

These days were tense and spent constantly on high alert. They slept in shift, and two people had to be awake at all times. It also didn't help that none of the shops would sell merchandises to anyone wearing a Konoha emblem, which usually left them with a week old soup since starting an open fire to cook on could be seen as an attack.

One wrong move and the Tsuchikage would order their execution. It was… well, it wasn't very pleasant, and the stress of these deliveries were growing on Naruto. They had yet to get into any fights with a single Iwa ninja, but not from the lack of provocation. Maybe if there actually was a fight she could let out some steam, but that could — and probably would — be seen as a deceleration of war if it happened within Iwa.

Their usual guide and guard – an Iwa ninja seven years her senior named Shibito Azuma – led them out of the office and through the stone building. The first couple of visits they had Deidara show them around, as a fresh apprentice of Ōnoki the kid was being taught how to interact and deal with foreign ninja, and Naruto never thought she'd miss the little brat with a cheeky mouth. But compared to Azuma, Deidara was a little angel.

He was a nasty man, and Naruto hated him with a passion. Azuma looked innocent enough, with classical good looks and dark hair, but he lived to provoke them.

He felt safe within the village even when he was in the presence of Konoha ninja. Like team Kasai, he knew there were eyes on all sides watching their every move, and didn't give one damn what Azuma said either. Most Iwa ninja had more tact, and the majority managed to stray from provoking them, which is why it sucked that they were constantly being led around by Azuma. He was simply
a horrid human being. It had nothing to do with his status as an Iwa ninja and a former enemy of war. Like all Jōnin in Iwa he had fought in the Third War, and he was only too happy to share his battle stories with them. Especially the ones including all the Konoha ninja he had killed.

If possible Azuma never went for the fast kill, and was amongst those despicable beings who played with their food before killing them. He knew the name of most of those he'd killed, and liked to give them a play by play of their last moments of life. The torture he put them through for being Konoha scum, and how he imagined he would kill team Kasai one day.

Kakashi and Shisui had both kept a hand on her to stop Naruto from attacking the man on more than one occasion.

"And then he screamed. I don't know if you've been around a lot of burnt victims, but they scream a lot. Especially those with third degree burns. The nerves are all raw and exposed. But he could still have survived, but I couldn't allow that. So I held him down – on top of the burns of course. It hurts like a bitch when someone hold the burned skin, and I was sure he was going to pass out from that alone, though luckily he didn't. It would have been too easy, so I made sure to keep it light to prolong it. He didn't pass out before I had cut off most of his fingers. Kurou was no fun after that, so I cut open his artery and let him bleed out."

"Kurou..." Kakashi said slowly, interrupting Azuma from changing to his next murder story. "He was a red head right?" He mumbled quietly.

"Yes! A friend of yours? I'm sorry, but he didn't mention you. He was too busy begging for his life. Or maybe it was death he hoped for? Either way, you never came up during our short meeting."

"Oh, I'm sure you were busy." Kakashi replied. "He died in the battle at Midori fields. I believe Minato-sama took down most your forces that day. Maybe if you didn't waste time torturing your victims you could have been more help to your own forces."

Azuma stopped, his whole body going rigid, and for a tense moment Naruto was convinced he was going to attack Kakashi, who only looked pleasantly back at the older man. His mouth twisted, probably trying to find which insult would hurt the most, but only managed a few strangled sounds.

Naruto was more caught up in the implication of this wretched person having survived that battle. Because team Orochimaru had been there too.

Naruto couldn't say she remembered that day clearly. There were flashes of blood and dirt, and sometimes the sounds of explosion and metal slicing into soft tissue would still wake her up at night, but she'd blocked out most of the battle where Minato gained his S+ rank threat from all the other Great Villages. Shisui was shifting next to her, and she was sure he too was recalling the unpleasant memory from their early Chūnin days.

Of course, the more pleasant Kakashi got, the more sadistic he became, and this was no exception. He had to be really fed up with Azuma, because he kept going. "Of course, Naruto and Shisui were going to attack Kakashi, who only looked pleasantly back at the older man. His mouth twisted, probably trying to find which insult would hurt the most, but only managed a few strangled sounds.

Naruto was more caught up in the implication of this wretched person having survived that battle. Because team Orochimaru had been there too.

"Hid at the back of the lines then." Azuma finally spat.

"Oh, I'm not so sure about that. I wasn't there so I didn't see it myself, I was blowing up a bridge to stop the supply line to Iwa, but I'm pretty sure that's when Naruto got her first page in the Bingo book." Kakashi shared cheerfully. "Right?" He asked and smiled innocently.
Naruto snorted and shook her head. No matter how much it would burn Azuma for Naruto to go along with Kakashi's masochistic monologue, she really didn't want to reminisce about the war more than she already was.

"Yes." Replied Shisui instead. "She was ranked a level B threat in Iwa's bingo book back then." Shisui explained silkily.

Azuma sped up his pace, and Naruto wasn't complaining. The faster they got to their room the faster she could be away from the man.

They were at the border of the village minutes later, and were let into their regular bare single room to stay in until the Tsuchikage had written the letter for Minato and they would be able to leave. Azuma stayed long enough to give Kakashi a death threat before storming away.

"Was that necessary?" Hissed Rin the moment the door closed.

"The guy's a sadist." Shisui replied with a sneer. Shisui never sneered, which proved how much he detested the guy.

"Yes. But you painted a huge target on Naruto's back!" She snapped back.

"We didn't. They know who we are and what we've done. They needed to for us to even pass the front gate. We didn't share anything they didn't already know. If Azuma was unaware and is currently over at Ōnoki's office to share the conversation he won't be informing him of anything the Tsuchikage doesn't already know." Kakashi replied and sat down to the floor.

"Just... Don't take the bait. I know this is awful, but we've worked so hard to get this far. Don't blow it when we're so close." Rin begged as she sat down next to Kakashi.

"You're right." Kakashi sighed. "I'm sorry."

"Fine." Mumbled Shisui before they looked over at Naruto.

"Just because he's a Jōnin B-level threat at twenty three himself and can't stand the thought of a kid beating him doesn't mean I have to give a damn. I don't care about hurting his feelings. He had it coming."

It was a few weeks later, on yet another delivery mission after only a day of rest, when the first real attack came quite unexpected. They were alongside the border of Suna when they were rudely interrupted during their evening meal.

To shield them from the sand carried on the insistent wind from the desert they had set up their tents and made ready for the night before the darkness set in, and were well into their fire heated dinner when the attack started. A group of ninja led by a furious woman attacked the moment the sun set on the horizon.

In the spectacle that succeeded they manage to destroy the bowl with miso soup and pulverize Kakashi's and Naruto's tents in an explosion set up by one of their enemies.

Naruto was not pleased at all. Her tent was only a few months old, and it left her without her own personal shelter for the remaining of the trip.

Rin had been the victim of a shallow stab wound to the shoulder, but she was healing it up without visible trouble. Shisui and Kakashi had dragged off the remaining survivor of the ambush group to
interrogate him, but were not pleased when they returned two hours later.

"As we thought. The idiots were Iwa shinobi." Shisui told them the moment they returned. The hostage were nowhere in sight though, and both Kakashi and Shisui had come back. Naruto looked at them questionably.

Kakashi understood the unasked question from her expression alone. "We killed him. Do you have the rest of the bodies?" Kakashi asked, and Naruto nodded before she handed over the body scroll. While Kakashi and Shisui had been interrogating the enemy and Rin was healing herself up, she'd been cleaning up the clearing of dead humans and getting rid of the worst explosion damage to the area.

"Why? That wasn't a very well planned attack." Mused Rin while tightening some of her bandages.

"It wasn't. From what we got out of that man they acted on their own. They had a vendetta against Konoha, and especially Minato-sama. They believed they could take us out during the journey to Iwa in hopes killing the Yellow flash's students would revenge their dead." Kakashi huffed and pocketed the body scroll.

"We can't remain here. We need to bury the body scroll. If Iwa knows we killed off their ninja it won't bode well for the exams." Shisui said severely.

"What's the plan?" Asked Rin while getting to her feet. She had already healed up the worst of her injury, and was already heading for her tent to pack it down.

"We need to dispose of the bodies somewhere, but we can't let Iwa know Konoha was responsible for their deaths. These weren't missing ninja, they were part of the active Iwa forces, and I suspect the guy who blew up our tents were part of the explosion corps." Kakashi replied and shook his head. "We can't make them disappear without a trace either, that would be too suspicious, so we have to make it look like someone else did this."

Naruto pursed her lips but didn't say anything.

Shisui was nodding along with Kakashi's explanation as he was packing down his own tent. "They were Chūnin level, though not weak they weren't the strongest. I say we bury the body scrolls and return for them after our meeting in Iwa. We definitely can't show up at their border with that body scroll."

Rin and Kakashi agreed at once, while Naruto hesitated but did the same. It was dirty and unethical, but they couldn't risk the fragile treaty with Iwa after months of negotiations and meetings. The Chūnin exam was only three months away, and if Iwa backed out now it could risk the relation with the other nations.

"Then we'll clean up here and make sure all traces of the battle are gone, then find a place to bury the scroll and then set camp. We leave for Iwa at dawn tomorrow and come back for the scrolls during our return journey." Kakashi thought for a moment. "If possible we have to set up a scenario where the Iwa ninja got into a battle with another village. We can't risk Iwa getting tense with Suna or Kumo because of the exams, so it has to be a minor ninja village who are not participating in the exams. Maybe Ame?" Kakashi mused. "If the bodies are found close to Ame instead it will throw them off."

"First we need to make our appointment in Iwa though. And Rin," Shisui said and looked at her pointedly. "Put on a sweater, you cannot reveal that you've been injured. If they think for even a second we ended up in a battle on our way they will start asking questions. The bodies will be
several days old at the earliest when they're discovered. This is one of those incidents where we don't want Iwa to put two and two together and get four."

The meeting with Ōnoki went as expected. Though they were a far cry from friendly, Iwa had come to expect team Kasai these days. The team was so regularly in and out of Iwa none of the inhabitants even blinked as the entourage were escorted from the village gates to the Tsuchikage office.

The return journey home was different though. To get rid of the bodies they ventured into Ame, a bit too close to the main village for Naruto's comfort, but managed to successfully rid themselves of the bodies on the borders between Ame and the Kusagakure.

After finishing the scenario the team was sure Iwa couldn't automatically pin point exactly who had killed off their ninja. Any good soldier would also question if it was well disguised body dump too, which could mean anyone in all the nations could have been the real culprit, but at least Konoha wouldn't be the obvious answer.

Upon their delayed return home Minato was not pleased with the obstacle during their mission, but appreciated their actions to prevent hostility this close to the Chūnin exam. Because team Kasai had refrained from giving notice of their delayed return Minato had been on the verge of sending out a recovery team for them. Luckily they were only about a day late, and the Hokage hadn't sent anyone after them yet.

They were left discussing the ambush with Minato, the council and the jōnin commander to plan what their next move would be. Seeing as they had been ambushed on their way to Iwa but had later managed to get in and out of the Rock Village even after killing off some of their ninja, Minato believed that the information they had extracted from their captive was accurate, and that the attack hadn't been on Ōnoki's orders. If it had been they might have been killed inside the village instead.

"I'm giving you a week off duty, but afterwards I wish for team Kasai to continue the correspondence with Iwagakure." Minato decided in the end. "Ōnoki is used to Kakashi doing most of the talking, and I don't wish for another team to take over at this point in time. However..." He was thoughtful for a moment. "I think I'm splitting you up for the next mission. Kakashi and Rin will be joined by another ninja for the delivery, while Shisui and Naruto will go to Suna. I'll brand the inside of Kakashi's forehead protector with my hiraishin seal for the mission in case they need to get out."

"Why?" Asked Naruto. "You just said you didn't want to change the team going into Iwa. Wouldn't they react to two missing members and a new teammate?"

"Maybe. But Kakashi has done most of the talking. He's the one who has led the communication, and therefore he's the one required to show up. You will leave together and take the route through Suna where Shisui and Naruto will split up from the rest and deliver a message to the Kazekage before meeting up with the rest." Minato pointed to the map on the table, and all of them looked curiously at where he was gesturing. "Shisui and Naruto will wait at the border between Kusa and Iwa for Kakashi and Rin to return before going back. I want you to return as a team. That way you will make the majority of the trip as a team instead of staying apart for too long."

Team Kasai agreed easily enough, especially Naruto and Shisui since this meant they got to skip a meeting with the Tsuchikage, and was dismissed soon after.

They discussed the upcoming mission while relocating from Minato's office to Ichiraku ramen stand. Kakashi hoped the new addition to the team would have some diplomacy experience, while wondering just exactly where they should meet up after their respective meeting in Iwa and Suna.
"I wonder who we'll be teamed up with." Rin said while they waited for their bowls of ramen to be served.

"Probably someone we've worked with before. I just hope they'll be level headed and calm under pressure." Kakashi replied with a shrug.

"Surprise!" Anko shouted as team Kasasi reached the village gates a week later, and Kakashi instantly cursed at the sight of Naruto's roommate.

Anko had been back on active duty for the last five months, since late autumn, and had only recently finished her trial period. While still rude she wasn't hurtful anymore. Considering how she'd been before Anko was more or less back to normal, the most obvious change was how she never wore anything but pants anymore. She hated her scars too much to show them to the general public, and draped a very familiar beige coat over her top to hide the ones on her arms too. It was a new quirk of hers, but she was in a much better mood as long as she covered up the physical marks Orochimaru left behind.

"You? Why didn't you say you were going with us?" Naruto asked and grinned widely as Anko smirked smugly back at Kakashi. The man looked like he was far from reassured of the last addition to the team.

"What's life without a few twists and turns, eh? And anyway, I knew the scarecrow would object if I'd said anything." Anko added and pointed at Kakashi.

"Why would he object?" Asked Rin confused.

"Because our last mission together ended terribly." Anko replied with a shrug.

"Last mission? When was- oh." Rin blushed and shifted uneasily from side to side, all of them remembering the aftermath of the infiltration.

"This one will be better. Come on, let's get a move on." Anko said and turned towards the gate guards with a salute as she started marching out of the village.

"I hate missions with Anko. Every single time something bad happens." Kakashi mumbled and followed after at a significantly less motivated pace.

The trek to Suna was surprisingly lively, mostly thanks to Anko and her obvious excitement about going on a mission with Naruto and Shisui again. It had been years since all of them were together on the same mission. It made Kakashi and Rin in better spirit just soaking up Anko's happiness.

As they reached the beginning of Suna's desert they decided to camp together one last night before splitting up. While they ate an early dinner they planned the rest of the mission and how they would meet up again in a weeks' time.

"The Kazekage has allowed Naruto and I to stay in the village for a few days until you can send us a message about your return." Shisui told them. As Rin, Kakashi and Anko still had a two and a half day journey ahead of them it was self-explanatory that Shisui and Naruto couldn't just pop in and out of Suna and expect to meet up with the rest within a day.

"Can you send a crow?" Asked Kakashi tiredly. "The Tsuchikage won't let us borrow as much as a brush, so I doubt he'd be willing to let us use one of his messenger birds."
Shisui nodded with an easy smile. Unlike the other three Shisui and Naruto were quite pleased their upcoming assignment. Anko still didn't know the hell she was about to walk into, and Naruto was sure she'd be a lot more temperamental the next time they met.

"Then you'll wait in Suna for three days. Even if the Tsuchikage gets a message written up within a few hours it's better to have time to leave the village before the crow reach us," Kakashi said. "I think it would be good to meet up at the border between Kusa and Iwa if possible. Do you believe that could work? You'll need a day's run to reach the area."

"Yes I think so, we'll work around your schedule on this one." Shisui answered between bites of his onigiri. Kagami had made it for the whole team, and they were all ecstatic to be eating something else but cold soup. "Send a message with the crow if something changes. We'll do our best to get to the right place at the right time."

The next day Naruto and Shisui stood in the corridor outside the Kazekage office. The Jōnin Naruto remembered well from her own time, Baki, who looked a bit younger but just as stiff, had met them at the gates. He had been the one to take care of their visa permit for their stay in the Village Hidden in the Sand.

The current Kazekage was Rasa, who was also Temari, Kankuro and Gaara's father. Naruto was apprehensive about the upcoming meeting. She knew the man had attempted to murder Gaara on several occasion in the other time line, but as the one tail jinchūriki was supposedly a lot more stable this time around she didn't know what to expect. The man had been killed by Orochimaru before she had ever seen him.

The door to the office opened, and a man stepped out. "Kazekage-sama will see you now." He told them and left the door open for them to pass.

Inside the office were four people. Two guards stood in plain sight on each side of the Kazekage, and by the window a woman looked at them curiously as they entered. The first thing Naruto noted was just how much Rasa looked like Gaara. Unlike his son Rasa didn't have the signs of insomnia marking his eyes, nor Gaara's short stature, but otherwise they looked a lot alike.

"Welcome Uchiha Shisui and Uzumaki Naruto of Konohagakure." Rasa said pleasantly as the two bowed in front of the Wind Kage.

"Thank you for your hospitality, Kazekage-dono." Shisui replied with a lot more genuine sincerity than he ever shown Ōnoki.

"We are allies. You've helped a lot of my ninja over the last years. Ever since Minato-dono came into power Suna has benefitted from Konoha's efforts." He turned as the woman by the window walked up next to him. "This is my wife, Karura." He introduced. Naruto's eyes widened for a moment. She was alive? The thought made her almost fall over in shock.

"An honour to meet you, Karura-san." Shisui and Naruto chanted in unison, Naruto a lot more happy than Shisui by a long shot. All of them noticed, but despite the puzzled glance Rasa shot her he moved passed it and got down to business as his wife left.
"You two are part of team Kasai, correct? And have been part of the team tasked with corresponding with the Tsuchikage?"

"Yes, since the end of August we've been travelling between the two villages to ensure a successful joint Chūnin exam this summer."

"Hmph." Rasa replied, some suspicion clear in his eyes, but not hostile. "I have to admit I'm impressed with your work. To have convinced Ōnoki to yield to your request could not have been easy."

Naruto couldn't hold in a snort, which caused Shisui to glare at her. Rasa was polite enough to not react outwardly. "So what news does Minato-dono bring from Konoha? What is Iwa's latest demands?" Rasa asked and moved on from the awkward moment.

After the audience with Rasa, they were showed the hotel they were allowed to stay in. Unlike Iwa they weren't barricaded in a single room at the border of the village. And even if everyone was curious about two Konoha ninja wandering around the village, they experienced far less hostility. They weren't warmly welcomed, but the stiff politeness was a huge step up from the usual treatment team Kasai had gotten in Iwa.

They could even buy food at the restaurants. The thought of attempting that had never even crossed their mind while in the Rock village. Baki checked in on them several times a day to make sure they stayed where they had said they would be at. That was the required restraints they had to accept for staying within the village. They had to write down where they were going within the village at what times, so Baki could pop up unexpectedly to make sure they kept their word. Neither Naruto or Shisui saw a reason to break their promise though. With the exception of the government buildings they weren't restricted from going anywhere else. They were even allowed to try out one of their training grounds.

The heat of the desert made them sweat like pigs, and the weak shower spray in the hotel bathroom didn't help them cool down afterwards, but it was an experience.

In Suna they rationed water, and for each day they had a limited amount of water. Thanks to the scorching heat most went to drinking, and the rest was used to wash. They decided after the first weak shower that they had to wash themselves with a cloth instead. The shower wasted too much water, when they could instead gather water in a bucket and take care of the worst dirt the old fashion way.

Suna didn't have many restaurants either. Only five major ones and a few bars. Because of the weather and location the village didn't see a lot of tourism, and most of the inhabitants made their meals at home to save money. Though different and stricter, Naruto found herself enjoying the stay in the village. Especially after two days when Naruto and Shisui was strolling past the playground close to the library, and she spotted four blond and familiar ponytails at the backs of a child's head.

Naruto stopped mid stride, but Shisui hadn't noticed the abrupt halt and continued walking. Temari was around eight now. Her face was round with baby fat and her large teal eyes had yet to get that sharp edge. She was playing with several boys by the swings, and was currently shouting at one of them that is was her turn.

Her staring was interrupted by Shisui who was poking her shoulder. "I know Suna have been more accepting of us than Iwa, but even in Konoha standing on the edge of a playground to spy on strangers children is considered creepy." She flushed and glared up at him. "What is it with you and children anyway? Have your maternal instincts kicked in? First you babysit the Nara twins, and now
you're staring at random children on the playground?"

"Wha- no! Jeeze, Shisui." Naruto said, her cheeks heating up in embarrassment while shaking her head. "I just thought… uh, that girl look like Karura-san, doesn't she?" Naruto explained while nodding her head in the direction of the swings.

"Maybe it's her daughter." Shisui replied after a quick examination of Temari. She was currently tugging a boy down from the swing while demanding her turn. "I still don't get why you would stop and stare. It's impolite. And if it really is little Temari-hime, than it's all the worse. They'd start thinking we're plotting a kidnapping if we stay here trying to figure out who she is."

"Fine, let's go then." Naruto snapped and stormed past him. Shisui chuckled and strolled leisurely after with his hands in his pockets.

On the third day in Suna Shisui sent one of his crow summons with a blank scroll, brush and ink for Kakashi. It wouldn't be odd if the remainders of team Kasai hadn't been given their equipment back when they left Iwa. Five of the times Naruto had been there their belongings had never been returned after the search at the Iwagakure gates. She had lost seven kunai and nine shuriken to Iwa by now, and she silently promised herself that she would one day demand it back. It always depended on which guard was at the gates when they left. Some were less petty and actually gave back the things they took, but there were always exceptions.

The crow took two days before it returned, and Shisui and Naruto were revealed to see Kakashi's handwriting on the returned scroll, but less happy about the change of plans. Originally they planned on meeting close to Kusa, but thanks to some unforeseen circumstances Iwa was doing drills on the route to the neighbouring country.

Kakashi, Rin and Anko were stuck. The main route would be suicidal to take, and the other option was to pass through Ame, which Minato had forbidden all Konoha ninja to take if they could avoid it. This left them to take one hell of a detour, and they would head east towards Kumo, but turn south before they reached the country border. This meant Naruto and Shisui would have a longer trek to reach them, and were suddenly in a great hurry to leave Suna.

To reach the destination they had to travel through Land of Rivers, into the northern borders of Fire Country and up to no man's land of future Otogakure where they would meet up with the rest. A one day's trip had turned into a three day journey.

Kakashi, Rin and Anko would have to get through Takigakure, who were currently not under any peace pact with Konoha. It could be dangerous, and it was wise of them to take it slowly through the country.

Within two hours they had thanked the Kazekage for his hospitality, praised Baki for being such a great guide and gone through the motions of getting out of Suna.

The moment they stepped outside they took off at sprint. If they managed to leave Wind Country before nightfall they could be careful when they travelled through Land of Rivers. While not directly hostile against Konoha ninja, quite a few farmers lived there, and they had lost a lot of their hard work during the war thanks to their fields ending up as battlefield between Suna and Konoha against Iwa.

Naruto just hoped they wouldn't get in trouble with one of them, and shared her thoughts with Shisui. "I hope we'll be allowed to pass through some of the fields. I heard Genma had problems getting across a few months ago when he was headed south of Wind Country. But it'll be fine, right?"
"We'll cross over the northern part of the country anyway." She mumbled through gasps of air. It was just so damn hot.

"Don't jinx it." Shisui replied between pants.

It shouldn't have surprised her, it really shouldn't. Yet here they stood, and Naruto was pissed she had jinxed them. A little after nightfall the two Konoha ninja had made it into Land of Rivers and quickly set up camp for the night on the soft grass to get some rest before dawn. When the sun rose on the horizon they'd eaten a hurried meal before leaving, hoping to get out of the country and into their own before they had to put up camp again. They'd only been running for a couple of hours before they were stopped by a very pissed off farmer.

"The plants are extremely chakra sensitive. If I see even one of them witheringly I know who's responsible! And I don't mean you can't use chakra, I mean you can't even activate your chakra! Not a drop, I won't have my long and tiring work ruined. I have just gotten the farm back in flourish after the war. Years and years of work were utterly tarnished because of you ninjas using my private fields as a short-cut. I'm sending the bill straight to the Hokage if even a leaf on one of my flood yin lilacs start changing color, it turns from rich midnight maroon to a light crepe when it as much as senses chakra. And they grow widely spread, so if you step on them-"

The old farmer was on a roll. He had said the same thing twice already, but for each repetition he was growing increasingly energetic with his language. Shisui and Naruto nodded seriously while they listened to the man ramble. They had been about to walk over a piece of land which apparently was private property, but had been stopped by the old farmer before they could do so.

They had apologized profusely, expressing their unawareness that the land had been private, and then asked permission to cross it, since taking a detour would cost them four more hours.

It was a large piece of land the man owned…

Naruto wondered if maybe they should have taken the detour, since it might now save them time instead. The man didn't look anywhere close to finish preaching the importance of no chakra use on his property. Apparently the plants were used for medicine, and chakra influence during growth ruined some of their properties.

Which meant it would be slow going. Part of the land was covered in an extensive swamp, which they had originally intended to cross with chakra use. But they would have to make their way over the old fashioned way instead.

"I can assure you that if you allow us to pass over your land, not a single plant will be affected. I swear it on my honour as a ninja of Konohagakure." Shisui assured earnestly when the farmer paused his exhort to take a few breaths of air.

He squinted from Shisui's sincere expression to Naruto's impassive one. She wouldn't step on any purple flowers, but she was making Shisui do the work. She had no idea what sort of plants they were supposed to avoid, and thought it better if he led them.

"I want both of your names first, so I know who to report in case there's any damage to my plants!" The farmer demanded and pointed at Shisui with a shaky hand.

"My name is Uchiha Shisui, and my partner here is Uzumaki Naruto. We have our ID's with us if you wish to see them." Shisui answered without hesitation. Fishing up his ID from the pocket of his flak jacket and holding it up.
The man's squinting intensified as he tried to see the name to confirm the picture, while Naruto tried to locate her own. There was a lot of pockets, and she wasn't sure exactly where she'd put it this morning. After some fumbling she found it in her trouser pocket and showed it to him just as he was finished inspecting Shisui's.

"Hmmm… So you're an Uchiha, eh? No Sharingan! Those eyes use chakra!" He half shouted, half spat, before turning towards Naruto. His face changing from grumpy and cold frown to a sickening sweet smile so fast Naruto hadn't seen the transition. "Uzumaki Naruto-chan, what a pleasure to meet you. The Uzumaki once helped my great, great grandfather acquire this land, and we had standing business with them all the way up until the tragic events. I am delighted to meet a living Uzumaki again. It has been a decade since I last met an old gentleman. I don't know if you're related? His name was Uzumki Mitsue?" He asked.

Shisui was startled at the change of demeanour, and looked away to hide his grin when Naruto stumbled to answer the farmer. "Really? Oh, that's… nice. I'm sorry though, I don't know who Uzumaki Mitsue was. I grew up in an orphanage.” Naruto said uncertainly.

The man grew sympathetic at her answer. "Oh, I apologize. I didn't mean to bring up unpleasant memories dear. In fact, I won't keep you. Unless you want to come inside? The weather is getting worse and my little girl is making dinner for when I come home. I'm sure she can make something to fill your stomach before the long march."

"Thank you for the offer, it's very kind of you, but we are short on time I'm afraid. We really need to start walking if we're going to reach our appointment." Naruto explained, Shisui was letting her do the talking, since the farmer was much more cooperative with her then he ever would be with him.

"Of course, I'm sorry for keeping you. Just be careful. The swamp is deep, and once you get stuck it's almost impossible to get out again. Thread carefully and please do not use any chakra." He said kindly. Almost too kindly.

"Thank you so much." Naruto said in relief.

"We need to leave now, but we thank you profoundly for allowing us access." Shisui added genuinely. Or at least it appeared genuine. His eyes were almost sparkling with amusement.

"Humph… No mess ups, Uchiha." The farmer snapped, pointing threateningly at Shisui who simply nodded.

They left as quickly as politely possible, and Shisui broke into laugher once they were far enough away from the farmer. "What's so funny? What was up with him?"

"I can just picture it. Him sitting at home eating dinner with his daughter, talking her ear off about the beautiful Uzumaki who is currently passing through his land." Shisui said between chuckles.

"Huh?" Naruto asked confused. Shisui turned to her smiling from ear to ear.

"He was smitten, Naruto. And he absolutely loathed me because I was travelling with you. Didn't you see his expression when I called you my partner?"

Naruto's grimaced. "What? Oh… That… is unsettling."

"Uzumaki Naruto; the queen of obvious." Shisui muttered and shook his head.

"Hey! I just thought it was the Uzumaki thing, and I thought he didn't like you because you're an Uchiha, dattebayo." Naruto whined frustrated.
"Hah, he was being a cranky bastard to me from the moment he saw us. He had no idea which clan I belonged to before the very end. It's good though. Now you know you have options if you ever decide to settle down. And look around, this isn't the worst place to grow old, is it?" Shisui said and ducked as Naruto's fist swung at him.

"As if I'd ever leave Konoha." Naruto muttered to herself, making Shisui laugh again.

The swamp met them earlier than they had anticipated, and Naruto wondered how she had ever been able to function without the ability to walk on water.

The swamp stank of a heavy, rotten smell so intense Naruto was surprised any plants sensitive to chakra couldn't pick up on the stench as well. But according to the farmer, the swamp was what made them thrive so well.

Shisui was leading them slowly, careful with each step he took to make sure he didn't fall through the uneven ground. Mud was running up their feet after two seconds, and Naruto wished she was wearing something more covering than sandals. It would have made no different if she'd walked barefoot.

"Maybe the detour was a better option after all." Naruto was longing for chakra use and fast speed.

"I thought girls were all about mud baths. Isn't this like a spa weekend for you?" Shisui replied.

"What are you talking about?" Asked Naruto.

"Forget it." Shisui answered with a wave of his hand. He stumbled, and his hands shot down to steady himself when one of his feet started lowering into the wet moss. Quickly he was out again, but the leg had been buried to above his ankle before he had gotten out. "Damn it. This is ridiculous. How on earth does that old guy get through this terrain? He had to be over sixty years old."

She had actually been wondering the same thing. "Good question. Maybe he has some fancy jutsu?"

"No chakra, remember?"

"Maybe he just has steadier footing than you do?" Naruto taunted.

"Defending your boyfriend?" Shisui shot back.

"Are you being a sore loser? It's you who are clumsier then a seventy year old farmer without chakra." Naruto retorted at once.

Shisui winked. "Well, at least he's not my boyfriend."

Naruto rolled her eyes. Shisui wouldn't let it go and it was growing a little annoying. "Stop with the boyfriend comments. I've seen the old ladies around you too, Shisui. They bat their eyelashes and say what a sweet little gentleman you are, but I know better."

Her teammate laughed. "Oh, I'm a gentleman alright. Who of us is leading right now? I'm currently helping a defenseless woman over a very large puddle, aren't I? Making sure you don't fall in and all that crap." Shisui replied cheekily and quickly grinned over his shoulder.

"You walk first so we don't thread on any purple, pooh water roses or whatever they're called. I could have led us through here blind if I wasn't afraid to break our agreement with the old farmer, dattebayo." Naruto gestured to the swamp, coming off much more confident than she actually was.
Shisui paused and looked around, scouting for something Naruto wasn't sure of. "This area has none of those plants he listed up. Why don't you lead us for now?" Shisui suggested in a sickly sweet voice. Turning while stretching out his arm like a butler inviting guests into the house he was keeping.

Naruto halted. Unsure if she really could find the dry path through the swamp like she'd just bragged about, but hell would freeze over before she lost face. At least she would have to try. "No problem! Watch and learn, kohai." Naruto declared and took a sure step forwards.

Only to drop straight through the ground like a stone.

Shisui burst out laughing, crumbling where he stood while he clutched his stomach. Naruto grabbed for anything of solidity. She was covered to her waist, and could feel her sinking even more. It was freezing, and water and mud was everywhere it shouldn't be. "Gah! What the hell! Stop laughing and help me before I drown, dattebayo!" Naruto bellowed in alarm.

Shisui dried his eyes and moved slowly forwards, his shit eating grin so wide Naruto hoped his jaw hurt. "Only if you say please, senpai." He taunted.

"Screw it! I'm doing it myself." Naruto hissed, and wiggled to try and loosen her legs. It was like she was trapped in a mound. They were being held in place with pressure from every side, and when she moved the mud only got a better grip than previously. Making Naruto sink in further. "I'm sinking, dattebayo! I'm gonna' drown, Shisui! And you'll just stand there and watch while I'm drowning! This isn't funny! Hey- stop laughing you idiot!"

"This is instant karma, and I'm appreciating the moment." Shisui said through gulps of air. He'd laughed so hard he hadn't been able to breathe.

Naruto fisted a handful of mud and threw it at Shisui, but he dodged while she sunk another step into the swamp. It now reached her chest.

Still chuckling under his breath, Shisui bent down and reached for her. "Fine... I guess I can save the damsel in distress. It's the gentlemanly thing to do after all."

Naruto's hands were wet and slippery, and it made it hard for Shisui to get a proper grip around her hand. The swamp was deep and it felt like her feet was being sucked down. "Help me a little won't yah? Try reaching with both hands." Shisui muttered, his smile still in place while Naruto attempted to adjust her grip.

Shisui was more successful this time, and with a tug Naruto felt herself being stretched in two opposing direction. The swamp swallowed her from her feet to her waist, but Shisui was strong, and with gritted teeth Naruto was slowly emerging from the smelly substance.

When he had hoisted her up on to firm land, Naruto tried to rinse herself off the best she could, but the mud was everywhere. Shisui was laughing as loudly as he dared, finding the whole situation hilarious.

"You could help me, you know!" Naruto hissed, running her hands up her shins in an attempt to scrape some of the mud off.

"How? I can't do water jutsu - that's your area. And we're not supposed to use chakra around here." Shisui said with undisguised glee.

"Don't you have something stored in that scroll of yours that could dry this off? Like a towel?" Naruto snapped back, but the corners of her mouth was tilted upwards. Shisui's smile was infectious.
"Oh, right. But it takes chakra to unseal that, so no can do, sweets." Shisui replied and flicked her wet ponytail.

"Sweets? That's the best you can come up with? I think even damsel in distress was a better suggestion than that." Retorted Naruto with a wry smile.

"Here, you can use my mesh shirt." Shisui suggested and started taking his vest off.

Naruto grew quiet, thinking she knew what he was about to do, but still unsure if he'd actually do it.

He did it.

After the flack jacket came off the sweater followed, and underneath the sweater was a mesh top which he removed as well.

He was too busy stripping to notice Naruto's reaction and she could only be thankful for that.

Shisui was slim like most ninja but he was far from scrawny. As far as ninjas went Shisui had a compact built body. He had square shoulders and defined muscles ran up his arms. Her gaze trailed his abs running down his stomach, before zooming in on his hip bones.

When did he grow so... hot? Shisui was the thin little shrimp who always liked to pretend he was the perfect little Uchiha, when in all honesty he was a mischievous rascal underneath.

And she was not supposed to ogle Shisui like this. It wasn't right. He was her friend, and friends didn't think of trailing their fingers down the contours of the other friend's chest to see how firm his muscles felt. No. That was not right.

Shisui handed her something and on autopilot Naruto found her hand outstretched to take it. It was his mesh shirt. She wasn't entirely sure what she was supposed to use that for though. She caught a whiff of his smell from the garment, but the distraction had made her forgot how this situation had started to begin with.

As Naruto studied the mesh shirt in her hand Shisui pulled his shirt back over his head to get dressed. Naruto wasn't sure which emotion was winning at the moment. The one which wanted the show to continue or the other side of her that told Naruto it was good for her brain activity that Shisui was fully clothed again.

Damn the teenage hormones.

"Are you going to use it?" Asked Shisui slyly, and Naruto looked up to see him standing crossed armed with a devilish smile. His flack jacked on but not zipped up, and his hair a bit more rumpled than usual.

"Eh?" Naruto asked before she could filter out her traitorous mouth.

"I know I'm not bad to look at, but I didn't expect to render you speechless. This is quite a boost for my ego." Shisui replied and cackled loudly at how Naruto's face heated up.

"Idiot! I wasn't speechless! I was just surprised we're at the stage where we just start stripping in front of each other! Give a girl a warning next time, alright?" Naruto snapped back, again looking down at Shisui's mesh shirt. "Why did you give me this?"

Shisui burst out laughing, his hand shooting up to stifle the sound before snapping his shirt out of Naruto's hand. "For this." He answered and quickly ran the shirt down her thigh. It sent a shiver
down her spine.

Shisui’s hand wasn't directly touching her. There were two layers of fabric between their skin, but the movement of his hand over her thigh was enough to set off one hell of a reaction.

Kami… Naruto wasn't sure if this was normal or not. She couldn't remember reacting like this to anything the first time she'd been sixteen. But then again no person had ever ran their hand up her thigh like that either. Especially not one as attractive as Shisui.

"I can do it!" Naruto squeaked and tried and failed at snapping the mesh out of Shisui's hand. His eyes were dancing as he looked back at her, and Naruto wasn't sure why she suddenly found his gaze so hypnotic. They were so big and dark. His face was kind. His energy was like a magnet. It sucked her in.

"You sure?" He asked cockily and ran the cloth back up her leg, taking a layer of mud off her thigh.

Oh... That's what the cloth was for. To towel off.

Naruto almost felt disappointed she would have to ruin his shirt to get clean. She'd like to see him have to put it on again, but that wasn't very likely now that it was filling up with mud and grimy water.

"I can do it just fine. Or are you that desperate to touch a girl you'd take advantage of this?" Naruto asked with one eyebrow arched. Shisui's cheeks heated up, and his hand let go of the shirt as if burnt. While Shisui was excellent at teasing others, he was easy to mess with in return.

Naruto took over, and quickly got the worst of the mud off while Shisui looked around. Maybe checking for destroyed plant life as a result of Naruto's embarrassing rescue.

Satisfied Naruto straightened up and handed the shirt back to Shisui. He didn't take it and instead looked disgusted down at it. "You hold onto that until I can seal it, okay? It's your fault you fell in the swamp." Shisui responded and leaned away from the smelly shirt.

"I don't want to be carrying it either, dattebayo."

"You're the one who got it all swamp filled."

"You're the one who came up with the suggestion to use it."

"Because you asked for a towel!"

"I'm not dragging this with me for hours. I'd get even more wet than I am."

"You're already wet. I'm barely wet at all. Which means you should carry it since you already stink of swamp."

"Gah! You're such a wuss, Shisui." Naruto muttered sourly, retreating the stinky garment and tying it to the hoop of her pouch. At least it wouldn't be inside the pouch, and if it happened to fall off, she wouldn't feel sorry for the loss either.

The rain continued for the remaining of the trip through the swamp, but Naruto didn't mind. The water washed away some of the stench - which was extremely welcoming - and by nightfall they were out of the resort and back in Fire Country. Finally they could put in some serious speed.
They made it to the vast canyons north of Fire Country before the second nightfall, and by then they were both drenched to their skin. Naruto had originally intended to take a bath in the river before bed, but thanks to the spring shower she didn't see the need anymore.

After unpacking the tent and getting supper they talked animatedly. Laughing and joking about the old farmer, and discussing all the things they would do once this blasted exam was over. Shisui was most excited about not having to talk or see Ōnoki in the foreseeable future.

It wasn't before they went to bed that Naruto experienced something she hadn't before. She felt awkward. Almost… shy. It was a strange emotion. Naruto never felt shy, and wondered why she would start feeling that now.

Shisui didn't seem to notice anything, he was acting as always. They had shared a tent plenty of times before, but never had Naruto felt shy about it. Or maybe shy wasn't the right word. She was… nervous? Nervous about sharing a tent with him… She suddenly wished she'd taken the time to buy herself a new tent back in Konoha. At the time it had felt like a waste of money when she could just share with Rin or Shisui, now however she was cursing her own stupidity.

Maybe it was the realization that Shisui wasn't a little kid anymore, or maybe it was her teenage body acting up. She didn't like going through puberty a second time, but this was getting a little ridiculous.

It took her another few moments for Naruto to understand what she was feeling. It was attraction. She was attracted to Shisui… When just a day ago she hadn't been. Or maybe she had been, but not really aware of it.

And it wasn't as if she'd never seen a well-built male before. The ninja occupation was dominated by guys, and as a girl who had a lot of guy friends accidents were bound to happen during missions. Hell, she'd walked in on Jiraiya naked once. Not that either said a word about it to anyone. Including each other.

But it was different with Shisui. She liked Shisui a lot. He was funny and smart. He was kind, generous, sweet, and he was a good person. Though he was a bit of a tease too in the sense that he liked jokes. He was one of her closest friends. Her teammate.

It was bad that she had to start noticing these things about him at a time like this. She'd known about his traits for years, but it was only now they were making her stomach knot up in butterflies.

Shisui went into the tent first - which Naruto didn't like. That meant she had to go in afterwards, which meant she had to maneuver around him to find her spot inside. Which again meant close contact. Shaking her head she tried to calm down.

It was just Shisui.

She had to get a grip on herself. For kami's sake he was not that fucking spectacular. She was in an occupation with top athletes at every corner. There were plenty of men for her to ogle instead of her friend.

Repeating this to herself Naruto crawled into the tent after him.

Shisui was already in his sleeping bag when Naruto entered. His eyes trailed her movement while she moved to her side of the tent, avoiding coming in contact with him at all cost.

It was a difficult feat. The one man tent was far from spacious.

She nestled into her bag at last. Pleased with not bumping into Shisui in the process and sighed
happily.

Looking over she found Shisui grinning at her.

"What?" Asked Naruto. That look usually meant she'd just screwed up.

"Are you… Nah' forget it." Shisui replied and chuckled to himself.

"Am I what?" Asked Naruto confused.

"You were being very careful coming in here, and tried very hard not to bump into me. Which I appreciate by the way, since you usually have very little grace and I've had bruises after some collisions with you. But… Are you uncomfortable? If I had known, I would never have subjected you to my handsomeness earlier." Shisui said. In the darkness it was hard to make out his expression, but she would bet Iruka's forehead protector he was grinning like a mad man.

"..." Naruto inwardly cursed Shisui perceptiveness. He was far too observant for his own good.

"Hah! You are. That's priceless." Shisui chuckled and shook his head from side to side.

"Hey! How would you like it if I suddenly started taking my clothes off, huh? I've seen the effect the orioke no jutsu has on you, and I bet you wouldn't be so flippant if the roles were reversed." Naruto muttered and folded her arms on top of her chest.

"True. But I'm a guy." Shisui responded as if that explained everything.

"And I'm a girl. Good we cleared that up. I was a little confused about our genders here for a moment." Naruto responded darkly. Her face feeling scorching compared to the light chill in the air.

"You know I'm flattered." Shisui told her, turning on his side and propping his elbow against the ground and his chin in his hand. She could barely make out his eyes, but she could easily imagine his expression right now.

"Good for you. Now sleep." Naruto snapped back. She was mortified at this whole incident and she wasn't sure how to get out of it. Maybe she should just sleep outside? Screw wind and rain. She'd dealt with worse.

"I mean… How many guys have you seen half naked? It must be some..." Shisui mused to himself. Naruto huffed and tried to block him out. He was teasing her again. "And yet I'm the one that get that kind of reaction. It's good to know I can affect even someone like you." Shisui continued, making it impossible for her to ignore him.

"I could so get you flustered too, Shisui. Don't act all high and mighty because of this."

"But you manage it when you try! I wasn't trying, Naruto. That's why it's awesome." Shisui explained slowly and clearly. As if he was talking to a toddler.

"Really? Let's see if you do any better then." Naruto answered heatedly and scrambled to get out of her sleeping bag. Shisui leaned backwards at once.

"What are you doing?" He asked cautiously.

"I'm drenched. I was going to get undressed underneath the covers, but since apparently you think you own so much more restrain over your thoughts, I figured I'd do it the more practical way!"

Shisui's eyes widened comically, and he stumbled to respond with a counter argument, but it was
only sounds of protests that came out.

Naruto finally got both legs out of the sleeping bag, and crossing her hands in front of her she grabbed the hem of her sweater. With one pull it was over her head and she was left in nothing but her chest binding.

Without looking at Shisui she reached for her pants. Dragging them off unceremoniously and tossing them to the edge of the tent. Leaving her in only panties. The night air was cool, and goosebumps broke out on her skin while she reached behind to start loosening her drenched chest binding, but was stopped by a firm grip around her wrist.

Shisui was sitting up. Her eyes had adjusted better to the darkness, and she could see clearly the embarrassed expression he wore. No one could pull off the deer in the headlight expression better than Shisui.

For a moment they just looked at one another. Naruto hadn't actually thought this through properly. All she'd wanted was to shut him up.

Well, mission accomplished...

Though now she was sitting well on her way to naked in front of a guy she found attractive.

Naruto stared intently into his eyes. Forcing her gaze to stay above his neck and not start checking out how he looked without a shirt again.

"Okay… I get it." Shisui said with a rough voice. His eyes broke away from Naruto's and peeked quickly down at her body before flying up again. Clearly a mishap on his part, since he flushed deeper than he already was.

"Good… Now that's all cleared up. Should we just… Forget this ever happened?" Naruto suggested quietly. Her whole being radiating the embarrassment she was feeling.

"Yeah. I think that would be the best. I'm very… confused right now, and for the sake of our friendship and all…." Shisui said with a strained voice.

"Um… of course… Yeah… But, you have to let go so I can get back under the covers." Muttered Naruto mortified. This was not going the way she wanted to. Quite the opposite.

Shisui jerked his hand back and hurried under the covers.

Naruto used more time, again trying very hard not to touch Shisui but also not to bend in a way that gave him too much of view of her arse. Safely back under the covers a ringing silence fell between them. Naruto tried very hard to come up with something that could break the tension, but came up blank.

In fact it was Shisui who broke the silence. He groaned.

Naruto glanced curiously over. He had dragged his sleeping bag over his head and gave a pained huff inside his little cocoon. "You just couldn't let me beat you could you, Naruto? You just had to beat me at that stupid game..." He groaned and turned around so his back faced her. The sight was so comical Naruto snorted.

"You know how I react to a challenge." Naruto said off handedly.

Shisui rolled back towards her and peeked out from under his sleeping bag. His eyes were half
lidded and they looked appreciatively at her. "You have to know what you look like right? That was just cruel." He said quietly.

Naruto's brow furrowed. What was that supposed to mean? "… Well… I just know that I felt uncomfortable when you started taking your clothes off. So I tried the same to get back at you."

"But it's so not the same." Shisui said frustrated.

"How was that not the same? It wasn't like I was doing some seductive dance while undressing. In fact I was mortified so I was trying to be quick." Naruto replied. Feeling the oncoming of anger to back her up.

"Because you're a girl, Naruto."

"Hey! That's sexist." Naruto shot back.

"… Not exactly… Do you not realize I…"

"That you what?"

"… No forget it. Goodnight Naruto."

"Eh? What is it now?! I was being perfectly fair!"

"Shut up and go to sleep, and when we return to Konoha you are going to buy a damn tent. Or I'll get one for you."

Shisui couldn't sleep, though some of his desire had been quenched by trying to picture Orochimaru in a polka dot swimsuit and a sun hat while running on the beach. It worked well at first, but somehow the mental image was so revolting he started thinking of Naruto in the same outfit, and it wasn't nearly as bad then.

He still couldn't get the image of tanned smooth skin and bare legs out of his head. Not the arch of her back nor how the feeble bandages had been the only thing separating her breasts and the cool air. He was also extremely aware of the fact that there was just the two of them, sharing a tiny tent hundreds of miles away from anyone else.

Naruto was… beautiful. He had already known that, but right now he wasn't sure how to stop thinking of her in some very wrong scenarios.

Shisui had never had sex, and he was quite sure Naruto hadn't either, but in his head he'd already deflowered her in about fifteen different positions.

This was getting ridiculous. He had to get this fixed before he did something stupid.

Fresh air would do him well, just like some distance from the girl asleep right there next to him in his narrow tent. Silently he got up and left, almost holding his breath in an attempt not to wake her up and cringed at the sound of the fabric flapping. It was still pitch dark and he appreciated that greatly.

Maybe he would just sleep outside in the rain.
Thank you so very much for reading! The chapter was beta'd by AnjoRemix!

I know a few people have been impatient for this to begin, and here you have it. Shisui and Naruto have ignited the first spark. Hope it didn't suck… Seriously, I've worked to have their casual intimacy increase since the time split between Part One and Part Two. They are already good friends, and they already love each other in a platonic way, but to take it further there had to be some physical attraction too. That's not a problem in Shisui's case. He's a sixteen year old and hormonal boy, and probably finds a lot of girls attractive. Naruto however has always seen him as a "little boy". She was mentally around seventeen when she met Shisui the first time, and he was six years old back in chapter three. I needed Naruto to realize he'd actually grown up.

So I had him strip, and I'm not even sorry. I always imagined Shisui was an early bloomer anyway.

And by the way, Azuma (not Asuma) from earlier in the chapter is a minor canon character. In canon he died in the third war fighting Minato, but as there's so many changes to the time line (and I needed some random Iwa ninjas) he survived this time around.
If there's any confusion over current age, I'll add it here:

Rookie nine(seven?): 5

Itachi: 11

Naruto and Shisui 16

Anko 18

Kakashi and Rin 19

Until next time!
The next morning it was awkward.

Neither were sure how to get over yesterday's event, and it resulted in uncomfortable looks and the two walking in circles around each other. Literally.

They were quite careful about not being too close to one another. A peculiar development, since neither of them were ordinarily averse to physical contact or had any intimacy issues to speak of. Not of the tactile type at least. Overnight the two had turned skittish, the atmosphere charged with a sudden awareness neither could ignore but choose to leave unsaid. The unavoidable breaking point arrived when Naruto finally reached her limit. "Alright, that's enough! I'm sorry about yesterday, okay? Can we just forget about it soon?"

"Sure…" Shisui replied, clearing his voice before taking another bite of his breakfast. He hadn't looked at her when he spoke.

"Oh, come on, Shisui. We're friends. Teammates! You can't go the rest of your life without ever looking at me again. If it makes you feel better, I won't ever take my clothes off in front of you again, dattebayo."

Shisui rolled his eyes and sagged where he sat. His head falling down to press against his knees. "Please don't create more mental images, alright?" He answered in a mordant laugh.

"I'm not!"

"Keep telling yourself that."

"At least I'm grown up enough to do something about it. I refuse to allow some missing clothes get in the way of our friendship! Sure, now we know a bit more about each other than we both would prefer, but let's just see it as… knowing each other better."

Shisui finally looked at her, but his expression was highly sceptical.

"Come on. It's normal. I travelled with Jiraiya for years, and I've seen too much by now not to be anywhere near innocent. Heck, I walked in on Jiraiya with a prostitute in our hotel, and I wish I could say it was a singular occurrence, but that would be a lie. I'm just saying… uh…” Naruto wondered what she was trying to say. It sounded more and more like rambling even to her own ears.

"That… uh… it's normal, we're older now, and since I'm a girl and you're a guy… Eh… it's probably not that strange that."
"Shut up!" Shisui begged. His eyes had grown impossible wide and he was shaking his head from side to side. "I already got the talk at home, thank you very much. So you do not need to explain, Naruto. Really, I'd rather you just… uh, not talk about it."

"Eh? The talk? I'm sure you and your father talk all the time Shisui, but this isn't about that, this is about yesterday and how it's bugging the both of us! We should talk if it means fixing our friendship!"

"Our friendship is fine Naruto." Shisui replied, his cheeks heating up while he fidgeted with his hands. "We'll be back to normal soon. Promise."

"I guess you're right... Forget I said anything." Naruto replied after a moment. But she didn't feel like they were okay again. There was this tension that never let up, which had never been there before. Naruto didn't think she'd ever felt something like it, and though not outright unpleasant she wasn't sure if she like it either. In fact, she was certain she didn't like it. The tension kept making her think of awkward things and distracted her from their mission.

"The bar of things to block out from this mission is growing pretty high at the moment, Naruto."

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Naruto liked orange.

Naruto liked orange.

Naruto liked orange.

Shisui kept up that mantra while he trailed after her on the narrow forest path. They had almost reached their destination and were trying to track down the others. They shouldn't be far away, but the exact location required some scouting. That was what he was supposed to be focused on, yet his attention kept jumping between the figure walking in front of him and the task at hand. It was getting stupid. As a distraction Shisui tried to focus on things that weren't so flattering about her to keep his jumpy emotions in control.

Like the fact that Naruto liked orange. And not a calm shade of orange either. Neon coloured, bright orange. A horrible indiscreet colour that was so eye blindingly ugly it should be a crime to wear it while on duty. Yet somehow wasn't.

He scowled to himself when Naruto started braiding her hair up in a ponytail, exposing the back of her neck. Tan and smooth… not orange at all. Her neck was nice… Elegant. Though little less of her was elegant.

Orange. Think of all the orange.

But the orange was a little endearing on her. She took to the colour because it was so bright and warm. Like she was.

Backtracking almost immediately he reminded himself of how much he detested the colour. Orange was bad. Shisui had always thought orange was bad, from the first moment Naruto broadcasted her love for everything of that shade he'd disliked it, and that wasn't about to change. Why was he suddenly thinking good things about orange? Bad, bad, bad… This was bad.

Another thing that was annoying about her was her volume. She talked so loud it was a miracle Anko still had her hearing intact after years of being roommates. He'd even give credit to Kakashi for still holding out as their downstair neighbour. Hmmm… She was also not very well mannered. She didn't know the proper etiquettes. Naruto never offered to do the dishes if she could get away with it,
and she was sloppy. Her room was always in need of a tidy up. There were always orange clothes all over her bed. Always.

What else? She was a little much. She had too much energy and always needed to be explained things twice. A bad combination in their occupation. She was… Naruto.

His friend Naruto. His teammate Naruto. A close friend, sure, probably his best friend ever, but nothing else. This was hormones wasn't it? His father always talked about teenagers having hormones going out of control. This was that, wasn't it?

There were plenty of girls around. If Anko had been the one who started undressing he'd probably react the same. This had nothing to do with Naruto… Probably. It was all teenage stuff. Stupid stuff. Things he should ignore stuff.

But Naruto was pretty, and when she was walking in front of him he had problems looking away from her arse. Especially since she couldn't see him checking her out. But he'd done that before too. He'd checked out all of his female friends. Anko, Rin, Kurenai and so many others too. He was always discreet about it, but he had looked.

And there were plenty of girls in Konoha. In fact, there were more females then males currently residing in the village. Shisui knew because he'd seen the statistic and read every boring trivia fact available in the Hokage office.

The most common cause of death in Konoha was old age in the civilian population and being killed on duty for ninjas. Not long ago they'd been through a war, and since only one fifth of the ninja corps were women, the mass casualty had mainly been men for the last ten years. In fact only thirty five women had died during the war out of the one thousand eight hundred and ninety two Konoha lost in total. Which was only a little under two percent of the deceased, the rest had been men.

That was why the village had a sixty to forty percent difference between women and men. They had the civilian population where men didn't die like flies to make up for the short life spans of men on active duty. Which meant there were plenty of girls. More girls then there were guys.

So why the hell did he have to keep thinking of Naruto?

This was hell. Shisui couldn't wait until the mission was over and he could flee away from Naruto without being reported for neglecting his duty.

"Missed me?" Asked Anko and came jogging up to them. Her snake summon Hebimei trailing after eagerly, and then pounced on Naruto the moment the reptile was close enough.

The snake had grown in length since Naruto’s Genin days, and could now wrap herself four times around her easily, which she never failed to try whenever they met. The snake was attracted to warmth, and to Naruto's dismay her high body temperature made her sought after amongst most of Anko’s summons. Naruto sighed and looked pointedly down at the reptile now wrapped around her, hissing in content.

"Not at all." Shisui replied and came up next to the blonde who tried to pry off the clingy serpent.

"You shouldn't lie, Shisui. You always miss me when I'm not around." Anko stated and pushed playfully at his shoulder. Naruto followed the movement. Not sure why her stomach knotted at the act.

"Of course. You see right through me." Shisui answered drily.
"Where's Kakashi and Rin?" Asked Naruto, looking around for them.

"By the camp. We just had lunch." Her roommate replied and gestured to the rocky hill behind her. "How did it go? You two were faster than we expected. The note we received said you would be here in the evening."

"We just kept a quick pace. Keeping up with our training and all. There's been a lot of missions without much physical strain lately." Shisui answered causally, careful not to glance at Naruto.

She wasn't sure what to do. They hadn't really talked much the last day, and every time they tried to have a conversation Naruto felt awkward. Which hasn't given Shisui much to go on when he tried to talk to her. But now he had Anko to speak to, and they were falling into their usual teasing. Which for some reason wasn't as funny as it usually was...

"That eager to see me, Shisui?" Anko asked and wagged her eyebrows. Shisui chuckled and shook his head.

"I was, dattebayo!" Naruto replied, smiling when Anko burst out laughing. Naruto got distracted from their conversation when Kakashi came into view, followed closely by Rin.

"You two are early." Kakashi commented.

Anko whirled around and gestured with a lazy wave in her genin teammate's direction. "They missed me too much so they sprinted all the way from Suna just to see me as quickly as possible."

"What happened to you?" Their team leader wondered, his brow arching as he looked Naruto up and down.

"I fell in a swamp." She explained and rolled her eyes. "I washed it, but it's all ruined. I don't have anything else, but as long as I don't smell like a walking mud pit I'm okay."

"I have a sweater if you want to borrow it?" Offered Rin helpfully.

"That would be great! Thanks Rin!" Naruto said relieved.

The brunette turned towards Kakashi, a sheepish smile playing on her lips. "Uh, Kakashi-kun, I think you still have my sealing scroll. Could you get it for her? She should change before we head out." Kakashi nodded and turned on his heel, waving for Naruto to follow.

"So how did it go? Any problems?" Asked Naruto after a few steps. Behind her she could hear the girls ask Shisui the same question.

"Nah, it went better than usual actually. Ōnoki managed to get a reply for Minato-sama together within an hour after our meeting. Thank Kami, I don't think Anko and Azuma would have found much in common if they'd been introduced. We also got to see the progress Onoki has made on the winner podium. They're currently decorating it with silver. He's awfully proud of it, though I still don't get why Iwa are willing to drag that thing from their village to Land of Iron. I guess it's a very visible piece that will get a lot of attention though. Might be good for business if they appear well off. The only problems came on our way back. We took a detour which luckily paid off. Had some trouble with a Kiri ninja though. And..." Kakashi fished out a scroll with a red string tied around it. "We've been redirected. Sorry, but we're not heading home quite yet."

"Why? And what was a Kiri ninja doing all the way up here?" Asked Naruto.

Kakashi shrugged. "Not sure, but we managed to get past him without being spotted. He was on the
lookout for someone and I didn't want it to be us. We've also been redirected to the Land of Hot Water by Minato-sama. We got this scroll by a messenger bird just last night. One of our Genin teams is currently stuck on a mission way above their rank."

"Huh?" Naruto asked. "Did the client lie?"

A huff escaped between his lips, which Naruto took as an affirmative sound. "Yeah. It's now an A-rank instead of a C-rank mission, and the jōnin sensei Yuuta felt the whole mission is above their head. Minato-sama didn't want to include any details in the scroll so for now we don't know anything specific. We've only gotten our coordinates and are heading out as soon as possible."

"We're all going? That's two extra jōnin, two Tokubetsu jōnin and a chūnin." Naruto clarified baffled. "Isn't that a bit overkill?"

"Maybe, but it's in the Land of Hot Water, only half a day's run from here, and we're therefore the best response team for the mission. As we have no idea what we're getting into it's better to be safe than sorry." Kakashi replied while leading Naruto further over the rocks. There was a cave cut into the foot of the mountain where the traces of a burned down fire was visible by the opening.

Kakashi went straight for the corner, picking up a rucksack and looking into it. He fished out the scroll a moment later and handed it to Naruto.

"Thanks. Shisui was being an arse and wouldn't let me have one of his spares." Naruto muttered while unsealing the clothes Rin had brought with her on the mission.

"Why don't you have a spare?"

"I did. Everything is already dirty. I went through clothes like they were meals in Suna. It was just so damn hot, and since they are strict about water use I haven't had the time to wash my laundry yet." Naruto replied with a shake of her head and unfolded the scroll. A quick unsealing later revealed a few sets of clothing.

"Right."

"Turn around so I can change." Naruto ordered while picking up one of the standard dark turtle neck sweaters.

"I don't mind looking." Kakashi retorted teasingly and chuckled when Naruto growled.

"Pervert, turn around. I've had enough of strip teases lately." Naruto muttered under her breath.

Kakashi's head tilted to the side. "Really?"

"Shut it! Just turn around you old pervert." Naruto barked, pointing threateningly at Kakashi.

"Mah, so touchy. And I'm not old. I'm just nineteen… And if you've been doing strip teases I'm not a reluctant audience you know."  

"Do you want me to tell Minato you said that?" Asked Naruto with one eyebrow raised.

Kakashi paled, and without a word he turned around. As of late Minato had been complaining to Kakashi about his new porn reading habit, and felt his student was isolating himself by having a fictional girlfriend instead of going out to meet someone in person. Naruto found the whole thing hilarious, and she'd fallen off the couch laughing as Kakashi explained how Minato had taken him aside after guard duty while trying to convince him that he should try dating.
So now, threatening to tell Minato that Kakashi was checking her out would only increase his efforts to make Kakashi try getting a date. Though Naruto wasn't all too sure if Minato would be pleased to find out his student checked out his daughter… No matter how much it would show that Kakashi’s emotional maturity had evolved.

"Suits you right… I should tell Minato anyway." Naruto muttered while stripping off her ruined jacket.

Kakashi kept his back turned to her, but his hand twitched at Naruto's words. "I have blackmail material on you too, Naruto. If I'm going down I'm taking you with me."

"Hah, as if!" Naruto answered while she forced the sweater over her head.

"I can make him give you D-ranks. All I have to do is correct some previous reports. Show him just how close you've been to have all of team Kasai return to Konoha in a body-scroll by messenger bird from the Tsuchikage." Kakashi mused while studying his fingertips.

"Then I'll tell him exactly where to find your porn collection! In the loose floorboard by the kitchen!"

"I'll tell him about the time you dragged me to a brothel."

Naruto gasped. "I'll tell him about the sake bottle you stole from the secret cupboard at the office!"

"I'll tell him about the night time visitor in your apartment."

"What! Are you crazy?! That was Anko bringing Kato over! Not me."

"You live with her don't you? And who knows, maybe Anko is just your cover story. I live underneath you, and I could always correct that impression." He said causally.

"Oh, that is low, Kakashi."

"Is this foreplay or something?" Asked an annoyed voice, and both looked up to see their teammates watching them with various expressions. Shisui looked emotionless after speaking, Anko was grinning like a cheetah and Rin was highly uncomfortable.

Naruto blushed and shook her head violently. "Of course not! Kakashi's the pervert!" She snapped and folded her arms.

Kakashi scowled. "Mah, I thought you said something about strip-"

"Shut up!"

"Such a sweet, little girl." Kakashi mused and chuckled at how frustrated Naruto had become.

"I won't tell him if you don't." She said after a few calming breaths.

"Deal!" Kakashi replied and his hand reached out for hers. Naruto grasped it and they shook on it.

"Tell who what exactly?" Asked Shisui.

"Nothing..." Naruto answered and waved her hand dismissively.

"Did you brief Shisui about the changes?" Asked Kakashi and stepped towards them. Staring down Anko when it looked like she about to keep asking.
"Yes, and we have an idea actually." Said Rin instead, steering the topic onto safer grounds.

Kakashi looked sceptical. "Already?"

"You'd be amazed how quickly we can plan when someone is not constantly shooting down our ideas." Anko drawled.

They reached a small village hidden away in a valley right before nightfall. The landscape surrounding the village was strangely bare of trees and tall growth even though it wasn't located above the tree line.

It was odd, because otherwise the village reminded Naruto greatly of Konoha. The mossy ground, the rivers floating down the rocky mountainside and even the shade of green of the vegetation was just like Konoha's landscape, but it was as if someone had removed all the trees. It made it windier than Konoha was, who naturally gained shelter not just from the mountain surrounding it, but also from the tall trees.

They'd tracked down the jōnin sensei Yuuta of team six, who was currently explaining what had gone down in the last week and a half since their leave from Konoha.

"We set off from Konoha Tuesday last week. This is my team's third C-rank, so they know what to expect, but aren't experienced enough to have a routine for this yet. The clients were a couple and their son who needed escorts from Konoha to Land of Hot Water. There's a cult prone to random murders further south that has made it difficult for some travelers." Yuuta sighed and shook his head.

"That was all we expected actually. Maybe some difficulties with this cult or robbers, but otherwise we didn't expect any attacks from ninjas. We never saw any cults as far as I know, but what we did run into was two ninjas out for blood. We were attacked just half a day's march from here four days ago. They were after the family, that much was obvious from the beginning. One of them used a crazy jutsu I have no experience with, and for everything he hit, it turned extremely heavy. I used a kunai to deflect one attack, and when I tried to pick it up later it weighed more than a ton." Yuuta dragged a steady hand through his raven black hair.

"Well, the son was hit and killed by it. I managed to kill one but the other who was shooting off that jutsu ran away injured. I interrogated the couple afterwards, and they explained the truth. They were all under heavy disguises. Not a henge, but wigs, eye contacts and pads to change their looks, weight and height. They had lied about their names to Hokage-sama too. They're actually the Omura family – rich from a timber business they run, who got in trouble with a group of ninjas calling themselves the Hollow Stone. A bunch of missing ninjas from Land of Fire. The couple usually lives in a village south of Konoha, but needed to travel to Land of Hot Water. The son actually had some ninja training, and he was the one who suggested that they leave in disguise and use a genin team escort to throw off suspicion from the Hollow Stone. Not only would it be cheaper, but he assumed the Hollow Stone wouldn't recognize their identity. These guys are loaded, and can easily afford a jōnin squad. Which in hindsight they should have."

Kakashi pursed his lips as Yuuta finished his explanation. "What did they do to get these ninja angry at them?"

"Apparently the son killed one of their own. The Hollow Stone makes a living as robbers and tried to steal from the Omuras. The son caught them red handed and killed one of the robbers, and now the Hollow Stone wants revenge. At least that's the explanation I got."
"The son is dead now. Haven't they got their revenge then?" Naruto asked for clarification, though still seeing where the explanation was heading.

Yuuta scoffed. "I killed one of them, so there's a good possibility they'll come back. The mission isn't over before we have escorted the family back home. If it's an eye for an eye these guys go for, I'd prefer to have some extra security."

"The Omura is paying for the upgrade though?" Kakashi clarified, which Yuuta simply nodded to.

Shisui had been passively listening before now. "And where do you have them now?" He asked with a sweeping glance over the alley they were located in.

"In a house down the street. It's not the safe house they usually use, but there was a man willing to rent out two rooms for a week on short notice until we can find something more secure. Right now my students are there keeping watch, but tomorrow we have to escort them to the next village. The Omuras has a meeting with one of their business partners there."

Kakashi hummed in understanding. "I see. And your students are okay? Is anyone injured?"

"Yes, two of my students has injuries, but nothing too serious. Then there's Mr. Omura who got a nasty cut on his forehead."

"Then Naruto and Rin will go with you back to the safe house. Rin is a medic nin, and can heal most injuries. In the meanwhile the rest of us will keep watch and try to find some information."

Yuuta smiled weakly. He looked exhausted but happy that the backup had arrived, and gestured for the two girls to come with him. "I'm glad you could come on such short notice. Especially since you had to be redirected. I hope you still have some energy left?"

"It was no problem. Our last mission didn't involve any fighting." Rin replied with a smile and followed. Behind them Kakashi, Anko and Shiusi disappeared up unto the roofs, already starting their lookout.

It didn't take long for Yuuta to guide them through a web of back ally streets and arrive at the safe house the Omura and the three genin were staying at. It was a normal family house but slightly on the bigger side, and the whole of the second floor was reserved for the Omura.

The Omura both sat pin straight and formal on the couch. They looked to be in their forties with age lines around their eyes and mouth. The man still had some dark strands in his hair, but most had grown silver, while the woman had pure white hair tied in a tight bun at her neck.

On the floor sat two tired kids while the last and only female on team six was gazing steadily out the window, but turned as they entered the room.

"Sensei! That was quick. Uh... are those the backup?" Asked one of the kids, a boy with spiky brown hair was looking between Naruto and Rin with narrowed eyes.

"Yes. These are Naruto-san and Rin-san. They're part of the team sent from Konoha. The rest is keeping watch outside. Unless something happens we are unlikely to see much of them. Rin-san is a medic ninja, and will be able to look over your injuries." Yuuta replied with a fond smile before turning to the two girls in the doorway.

"These are my students. Kenji and Hibiki are the ones on the floor and Izumi is keeping watch by the window." He said with a proud smile. Rin stepped forwards before giving a short bow to the Omura.
"On behalf of team Kasai allow me to say that we are sorry for the loss of your son." Rin said politely but sincere before straightening up. "If you allow me, I will try to heal you."

While the wife stiffly allowed Rin close enough to patch up Mr. Omura's wound, Naruto's attention was drawn back to the kids. They all looked around eleven or twelve, and she presumed they were still rookies.

"What's the plan now, sensei?" Asked Izumi and stepped away from the window. She had long, dark brown hair that reached to her hip and a small beauty mark under her left cheekbone. Then she turned so her back became visible to most of the occupants of the room and Naruto spotted the Uchiha emblem on her shirt.

"For now it's to stay low. Team Kasai is currently keeping watch and will try to gather information about the enemy. Our duty is to protect the Omura while gathering strength for the next journey."

The boy Yuuta had pointed out as Hibiki groaned and lay down on the floor. "It's getting boring."

He moped and glanced over at Naruto with dark green eyes. The boy had sandy brown hair and was the tallest of the three genin.

"Better boring than dangerous. But now that we have some extra eyes and ears I was planning to train you guys. Once Rin-san has cleared you we can get started." Yuuta explained and glanced back at Rin who was still looking over the cut at Mr. Omura's forehead.

"Really?" Hibiki exclaimed and shot up from the floor, a wide smile on his face. Izumi and Kenji shared a glance but both looked interested too. "What will you teach us sensei? Oh, maybe a cool ninjutsu? Like the water jutsu thing you used?!" He rambled, almost bouncing where he sat in excitement.

Yuuta chuckled and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Hibiki, but that's still a technique above your capabilities. Elemental manipulation takes months or years of practice."

That wasn't what Hibiki wanted to hear, and the boy pouted before giving a rather sulky reply. "Gah! But I want to learn!"

"Let's try water walking before any water jutsu, okay?" The sensei answered and winked to his student teasingly.

Naruto peeked up from her bowl. Finding Shisui standing off on the side of the road with Kakashi. They were sparring, and Naruto found herself studying their practice with rapt attention. It was their second day in Land of Hot Water, and in a few hours team six would be escorting the Omuras to the next village. Until then Naruto had sent out clones to keep watch, while the team shared a meal for the first time since the mission started.

That night they had taken turns to keep watch, Kakashi and Naruto being the ones to take the hours before morning, but now that everyone was awake they decided to make a proper meal instead of buying anything in the village.

While the boys worked out Naruto noted that Shisui had a very distinct way of carrying himself in battle. Slightly hunched forwards. His center of gravitation was always kept low and it made him look like some wild and lethal creature when he attacked. Like a tiger stalking its prey.

He was working up a sweat. Kakashi was a good opponent, and he was trying to find a way in through his defenses. He stood sideways and slashed out with his tantō, Kakashi sidestepped and Shisui struck out lightning fast while his opponents was in movement. Their feet were fast, and
Naruto missed the finer detail of their movements before Shisui struck out with his fist this time. Kakashi blocked it with his forearm, but it was a near thing.

Naruto found herself noticing things she didn't usually focus on. Like the way Shisui's hair fell into his eyes when he moved. His full attention on the spar. He moved with purpose, never leaving any openings for his opponent and not wasting any energy while he forced Kakashi backwards.

"Naruto… You're missing your mouth." Anko whispered with an evil cackle.

Naruto looked down, noticing her chopstick were pressed against her cheek instead of her mouth. The rice had partly fallen back into the bowl, with the exception of the few pieces stuck to her reddening cheek.

Naruto lowered the chopsticks back down and hurriedly wiped her face to prevent any more embarrassment. "Their spar is interesting." Naruto replied in her defense.

"I know. I'm also on the verge of drooling when watching boys get physical." Anko said and peeked over her shoulder.

Rin shifted uncomfortably, her chopsticks hacking into her rice repeatedly. This was dangerous territory and Anko was completely ignoring the warning signs. "Which one are you looking at? I have to admit I have no idea what your type is. It should be a crime, I'm your best friend and should know these sort of things."

Kakashi was on the offence now, using a kunai in each hand to force Shisui back towards his side of the field. Shisui dodged and blocked, but Kakashi still had the upper hand.

"I'm not looking at either of them. I just appreciate their… dedication… to training." Naruto muttered.

"Sure…" Anko replied with a snicker, taking a bite of rice and wagging her eyebrows suggestively.

Rin almost pierced her chopstick straight through her bowl. The force knocked the bowl out of her hand and into the grass. Luckily it landed with the bottom down, and barely any rice spilled out. She went red and quickly picked the bowl up again. Naruto wasn't sure what was agitating Rin so much, but she was sure it had something to do with their conversation, which she wished Anko would drop. Immediately.

Anko looked at Rin with a snide grin, clearly more aware than Naruto about what was going on, and then peeked over her shoulder just as Kakashi won the spar.

"Ah man..." Shisui whined and shook his head to get dust out of his face and disarrayed hair. Kakashi had kicked some up to blind him before he went for the winning blow.

Hurriedly Anko turned back to Naruto. "But seriously, which one?" She inquired curiously.

"Stop it. Neither. And they're coming here so shut up." Naruto hissed.

Shisui and Kakashi chatted animatedly while they came back to the camp, both out of breath while analyzing the better decisions made during their spar.

Of course Shisui just had to sit down next to Naruto. She noted how he was radiating more heat than normal. Especially from so close. He smiled winningly at her before dragging a towel up his arm and over his neck. Naruto had the strangest urge to grab his towel and do the job for him.
"Good spar guys. Why the hell did you lose, Shisui?" Anko asked off handily between chewing.

"No chakra use, and Kakashi got lucky."

"You got unobservant and walked into a spot filled with sand to kick up." Kakashi retaliated with a cocky grin.

"Maybe we should move on soon?" Asked Rin insistently.

"Let us catch our breath first. And some food… I'm starving." Shisui muttered and turned towards Naruto. She was hit with the full force of his eyes at close hold, and suddenly all she could really focus on was the fact that she'd never really appreciated how dark his eyes were. She had to blink to get her thoughts functioning again, but Shisui was still looking at her expectantly but she had no idea why.

"What?" Naruto asked when he didn't look away.

"Can you hand me the pot? It's right next to you." Shisui replied.

Naruto glanced to her other side, and sure enough, the pot was right next to her, and by all means it was the most logical for Naruto to hand it out. "Oh, sure..." She bent down and put rice into two bowls. Making sure she wasn't excluding Kakashi since he was probably also hungry, and she didn't want to single out Shisui in front of Anko.

Despite the fact that Shisui had been the one to ask directly for the food she felt like an open book with block letters printed on the pages. So she went for equality, making sure each bowl have exactly the same amount of rice and that she handed them out at the same time. And if she was being extra careful that no skin came in contact with Shisui than that was her own business.

"Thanks." Shisui said and smiled warmly. Naruto swore internally when her stomach erupted in butterflies.

"Leaving." Naruto burst out saying, and turned to look at Rin who was much less of a distraction to her stupid teenage hormones. "We should leave soon right?" She asked.

"Yeah. I think we should pack up and leave soon too." Rin answered at once while nodding eagerly.

"What? Something happened? What's the hurry?" Asked Kakashi, his chopsticks half way up to his mouth while looking between Naruto and Rin for answers.

"You two have used an hour just sparring. I'm getting restless." Rin replied, her cheeks suspiciously red while finishing the last of her food and packing it away so fast you'd think someone had reversed summoned the bowl from her hands.

"You said it was fine. We don't need to be there before three, and it's now..." Kakashi looked at his watch. "Eleven."

"I'm restless too." Naruto interjected, backing up Rin and her plan to do something productive instead of just sitting around trying to not look at Shisui. Which was very easy to do when she was bored.

"I'm not surprised." Anko replied with a wry smile. Naruto glared at her, promising death and pain if she even gave a hint of their previous conversation. Luckily she took the hint. "If you two are so bored, why don't you have a sparring match too?"
"I… I'm not up for sparring right now… We have a long day in front of us and I want to be at full strength." Rin replied and cast a nervous look in Naruto's direction. Who would win between those two was fairly obvious.

"Hmm… Kakashi? Do you want to spar against Naruto?" Asked Anko with a sweet smile. Kakashi looked uncertainly between the girls, trying to figure out what was happening.

"Let me just… eat up?" The reply came out as a question, but Naruto was pleased. At least Anko hadn't set her up to spar against Shisui. Skin on skin contact was not the best idea right now.

Shisui wished he had agreed to leave when Rin and Naruto suggested it.

His morning had started out just fine. He'd eaten a quick breakfast, chatted with Kakashi for an hour until the others woke up, and then sparred until lunch. It had been a little annoying he had lost, true, but Shisui wasn't one to hold grudges.

The day had plummeted after that. First the fact that he and Naruto was still not back to normal, which was mainly his own fault. He kept biting his tongue every time she looked at him, and it was making it hard to think of his next comment when they were talking.

Then Naruto and Kakashi had started sparring to pass the time, and now Naruto was being pinned down by Kakashi.

He had her literally writhing underneath him.

So Shisui decided that was not something he wanted to watch, because he might do something stupid. Like shout at them to cut it out.

They were perfectly allowed to do that. They were sparring! It wasn't like they were an item or anything. And even if they were it wouldn't have been any of Shisui's business anyway.

Though they were pretty good friends. In fact… they were very good friends. Unusually good on Kakashi's side. Few people got the guy to speak as bluntly as Naruto managed. They just clicked, though it hadn't always been that way. Once upon a time Kakashi had fully ignored Naruto like an annoying fly buzzing around his ear, but over the years that had changed.

In fact Kakashi went to the girl's apartment for meals all the time. And sometimes Anko wasn't there…

Then it was the conversation they'd partly overheard. It had sounded like flirting, and it made Shisui so mad he had problems controlling his expressions.

Though he really didn't have a right to be, nor even a reason to be. Because he did not like Naruto that way. At all.

Naruto kicked Kakashi, and the boy was thrown back. Shisui would never admit that the sight of Naruto kicking Kakashi away cheered him up more than it should have. Rin was watching their spar with narrowed eyes while Anko seemed just as engrossed.

"Who's winning?" Shisui asked just to break his own thought process.

"No idea." Answered Anko.

Naruto's cheeks were heating up, and Shisui found his focus trailing her neck down to her shoulders,
before forcibly moving his eyes over to Kakashi. He was already sweating, though he hadn't had much of a break since he had sparred against Shisui.

They collided again, using a combination of taijutsu moves to force the other back. Kakashi was a lot taller than her and he was using it to his advantage, but Naruto was quicker.

Some of Naruto's hair loosened from the ponytail, and she dragged her bangs back with her hand, grinning challengingly to her opponent. Red cheeked, smiling and happy. She looked beautiful.

Shisui turned away, yet again trying to find something else to occupy his mind. Trying not to picture himself sparring with Naruto. Have her looking at him instead of Kakashi.

So much for a distraction...

Naruto felt much better after sparring with Kakashi. Some of her frustration had left her, and while they trailed after team six and their clients through the open landscape she was smiling absently the whole time. With the exception of Rin who was walking alongside Kenji down with the main party, the rest was keeping out of sight while circling the group.

They were the outer perimeter, and wanted to intersect any incoming attack in case the Hollow Stone tried to ambush them.

Since the Omuras were civilians they estimated it would take a day and a half to get to the next village, and they were planning on walking throughout the night. That was why they had allowed everyone to sleep and rest before starting late during the day. If nothing happened they expected to reach the village the next day at dawn.

For being rich civilians and in their forties the Omuras were surprisingly fit. They had made the whole journey by foot, and had nothing against losing some sleep in hopes of getting to their destination without incident.

So far Naruto had barely heard them speak at all, but she didn't blame them. They were going through their own personal tragedy, having just lost their son days ago, but she saw the heavy looks in their eyes from time to time. They were grieving, but they choose to do so in private and without random ninjas prying into their lives. For all Naruto knew they had already had some outlet before team Kasai arrived. Yuuta hadn't shared any details of the fight except a summary of the enemy's abilities and injuries.

For most of the day they didn't run into any ambushes. There were only one path to the village, and though the Omuras were in good shape for civilians, they were still not ninjas, and the two were not willing to struggle and stumble through the wild scenery to find an alternate route.

They stopped for a meal at nightfall, and team six managed to get a fire running efficiently while Rin stood for the actual cooking. They had to use branches from bushes and smaller vegetation for the fire, as there still wasn't any trees to cut from. Naruto still couldn't fathom how a country that was so fond of timber constructions didn't have a single natural grown tree, and faintly suspected they had hacked down every tree within the borders at some point.

The place they had chosen for their camp was at the side of a mountain, thanks to its uneven surface. It made it more difficult to move around, especially for the Omuras, but it gave good coverage and shelter from the cold spring wind. There was a lake at the top of the mountain, and waterfalls and rivers fell along the path. Privately Naruto thought that if they'd made the journey during daylight the sight would be pretty spectacular.
The rest of team Kasai ate their cold crackers and food pills hidden behind boulders and bushes in solitude while scouting for enemies. Making sure to move without sound in hopes of catching any attackers. Despite the lack of trees and taller vegetation to obscure the sight lines, the uneven counters of the mountainside made it impossible for them to see one another while they patrolled around the clients.

The moon was creeping up over the horizon and the night was turning crisp and clear. It was a perfect night as the temperatures had dropped though it never grew cold.

It was while team six was finishing up the meal that Naruto noticed the first sign of enemies. She had her own perimeters to check, and hers inter looped with Anko's at a certain point. The two kept meeting one another while they moved between check points, and yet Naruto missed Anko on her seventh lap. She knew it wasn't her who was delayed, it had to be Anko, and so she stopped and waited.

A low hum rang gently through the air. So silently, Naruto normally wouldn't have picked up on it if she hadn't been so on guard. Then she saw Anko's signal. A fire flared out from around a boulder far down the mountainside and became visible for miles in the darkness.

Naruto set off her own signal at once, hoping at least Kakashi would notice. He was stationed closer to her than both team six and Shisui was at the moment. Without wasting time she set off back towards team six. If Anko had needed immediate backup she would have set off an explosion instead of a fire jutsu. This was just a sign that they were under attack and the clients lives were at stake.

Naruto jumped down into the camp just as an enemy ninja arrived too. The two almost collided in their haste to reach the Omuras, and Naruto was on him before anyone on team six had even noticed they were there.

A scream of fright erupted from the wife as Naruto cut through the Hollow Stone ninja's neck, the man dropping dead right in the middle of their camp meal.

Yuuta was on his feet and ready for battle in a second, while his students were hurrying to get control of the situation. Hibiki had been holding a pile of dinner plates, but when a ninja came leaping up from the cliff side he reacted on instinct, throwing five straight at the enemy and miraculously knocking the man over in a spray of broken porcelain. Who on earth brought porcelain plates on a hiking journey anyway?

Yuuta finished the man while Hibiki scurried over to his teammates under his sensei's orders. Izumi and Kenji had gathered the Omuras and were already standing in formation to cover the clients from danger.

"There's more enemies coming in." Naruto explained, her eyes scanning the surrounding area with a sweeping look. From the corner of her eye she spotted a snake slither up into their camp, and next Anko fell down from a boulder and rolled to soften the landing on the mossy ground. The kids had almost attacked her, but Naruto held up a hand. "Don't fire! That's one of ours."

"I had two attack me, but they're both disposed of." Anko reported swiftly before their attention was forced ahead. Seven ninjas was sprinting towards them, none of which Naruto recognized.

She sprang ahead, deciding to intercept them before they got too close while Yuuta, Rin and Anko stood their ground. They formed a middle perimeter around the students who had their own circle around the clients.

Naruto barely had time to create a few clones before she collided with the enemy, using a simple
chakra string to trip over the first opponent before throwing her kunai into the shoulder of the second. While the man fell she jerked the blade out of his neck, but a couple of ninja managed to break through between Naruto's clones while the five others were quickly engaged in a battle.

Kakashi and Shisui arrived a moment later, the latter shooting off a shuriken that struck the ninja Naruto was wrestling with in the back. "There's more coming from all sides!" Naruto managed to shout between ducking and attacking, gesturing for them to help out the clients instead of herself. It would appear the Hollow Stone had a lot of ninjas, and it seemed they were all attacking as a united front tonight.

She allowed a single chain to emerge from her chest to intersect a man swinging a katana around like mad. The chain wrapped around his weapon and rendered it useless under Naruto's pressure. She jumped between her attackers, trapping two within the chain before she tightened it with a violent jerk. The two ninja was pushed together, both struggling fruitlessly against the chain while Naruto slowly cut off the air supply. Around her the clones had taken down the rest, and soon the two she had trapped within her chain fell unconscious under the strain.

She could hear shouts from behind her, and a flash from ninjutsu lit up the rocky hill as the fighting intensified. She released the ninjas and ran for the camp next, finding a complete disarray of battlers around the slowly dwindling camp fire, which still had a very burnt piece of meat slowly turning into coal.

Naruto sidestepped a ninja by falling into a sweep kick, catching the man's right leg and making him topple over his comrade before her clone kicked him hard in the head, snapping his neck before stabbing the other wobbly man in the chest.

Straightening up she found her next target. Not far away Kakashi was struggling against a man shooting off streams of something… weird. It looked like a thin string of ninjutsu, but it had a powdery substance and was not an element Naruto recognized. Her downstairs neighbour kept on dodging or throwing weapons to intersect it with such acute urgency she knew getting hit would be bad. She guessed he was the guy who had been part of the ambush that killed the Omuras son. The one who could make things heavier.

Naruto pumped chakra out through her hands, quickly forming a glowing rasengan that lit up the clearing much brighter than the campfire ever had. The man noticed her at the last moment, throwing himself sideways as Naruto dived for him with the rasengan outstretched.

The ground cracked underneath her as the rasengan drilled into the ground instead of human flesh. She rolled over as a jet of the powdery jutsu was sent at her and kept rolling sideways again and again, not being allowed to get up between attacks as the enemy tried to finish her off.

Kakashi took the opportunity, and as the man focused on killing Naruto he managed to come in from the side, his chidori making contact straight through his ribs. She looked up to see Kakashi’s chidori plunged through the man's arm and into the side of his chest. An odd but very efficient angle.

Kakashi gave her a short nod before hurrying to help Rin, and Naruto followed his example. The Hollow Stone had at least twelve ninja still standing, but unlike team Kasai they were not combat specialists. With the exception of the man Kakashi had just killed they were all less efficient.

Since the battle had been pressing in on the clients, the Omuras had been relocated further in by team six. She barely caught a glimpse of their expression, and the couple looked close to hyperventilating while they could do nothing but watch and wait. Yuuta was up against no less than three ninja at once, and he was switching between suiton jutsu and kenjutsu, but he was keeping up admirably.
Noticing a new presence Naruto jumped onto a boulder, before speeding up a steep part of the mountainside. A shuriken came flying at her from above, but she deflected it easily with her kunai and charged ahead. The man gave a squeak when she didn't show sign of stopping. "You ambushed the wrong squad, mate!" Naruto growled, her kunai shooting towards the enemy, who had no choice but to get out of the way. He decided to jump over Naruto's head and fall down to the camp instead of meeting her one on one. Naruto dropped down after him, and the man hadn't even had time to land before Naruto was on top of him, knocking him out with a crushing punch to the face.

Glancing up she found herself in a new situation. The students covering the Omuras were no longer three. Izumi was several steps away from her two teammates, and though Naruto had no idea why or how she ended up there, there wasn't any time to figure it out.

Shooting up from the ground Naruto forced chakra into her feet, each step created thunder as she pushed away from the ground, her eyes were locked onto the frozen girl about to get her skull cracked in two by a Hollow Stone ninja. Naruto dived, her arms circling around Izumi's waist as she collided into the girl's side, the speed alone pushing her out of the way from the incoming attack.

The blade connected with Naruto's shoulder instead of Izumi's head, but the speed she'd used made them both roll out of the way in a ball of tangled limbs. When the tumbling ended Izumi was firmly grasped in her arms, Naruto laying as a human shield over her. The girl was safe for now, but the enemy had just been given a wonderful opening, and she barely had time to glance over her shoulder before he attacked again.

Next moment Shisui blocked the path, appearing in a sunshin as he leapt onto their attacker.

"Are you okay?" Naruto asked quickly, looking back down at Izumi who was shaking in fright.

"You're bleeding." Izumi stated in a weak voice, and Naruto noticed she indeed was. Blood oozed from a tear in the borrowed sweater and dripping down onto Izumi. It hurt badly, but there was nothing to do for now. Applying pressure with her left hand Naruto got to her feet swiftly. Izumi scrambling up after, her guilt etched into the frown on her lips.

"It's fine. If you're okay then get back to the clients Izumi-chan." Naruto replied and winked at the little Uchiha.

The katana had cut deeply, and her right shoulder ached, which meant her arm would be inefficient for the rest of the battle. Gritting her teeth together she switched the kunai from her right hand to the blood covered left one and Naruto rejoined the battle.

"Back me up Naruto." Shisui ordered, already having taken down the man who'd cut into Naruto's shoulder with a bit too much brutality.

Naruto placed herself to his right while getting an overview of the situation with a short glance around the area. "Yes."

Yuuta had returned to stand guard over the Omuras with Kenji and Hibiki in a shallow circle around them. Izumi was running back to them, a little roughed up from getting tackled by Naruto, while further up Anko was making the enemies lives their own personal nightmare with her snakes. Naruto could see Hebimei wrapped around a man's neck and squeezing so hard he was writhing on the ground and turning blue. Her fangs stuck into his shoulder to paralyze him with her poison. Kakashi was down the field, and was fighting together with one of Naruto's clones while Rin stood her ground against two ninja with her chakra whip.

Shisui and Naruto efficiently managed to corner three ninjas into a corner, and with a futon – katon
combination later the three was down for the count along with the majority of their comrades. The enemy lines had drastically thinned in a very short amount of time. So much so that when they finally noticed how badly they were losing, the remaining five took off. Running like mad in a desperate gambit to get away.

No one on team Kakasi would allow them to get away though, and Kakashi’s barked orders were followed without question. "Shisui, Anko and Rin are following me. The rest are to stay and protect the clients!"

Naruto wasn’t too happy about being left behind, but since she was injured it was the only reasonable thing to do. Team six made space for her in the circle they formed around the two pale and terrified clients. "Your shoulder look bad, Naruto-san." Yuuta observed worriedly, but kept his eyes firmly ahead for any signs of attacks.

"I'm fine. It's just a flesh wound." It wasn't, but there was no need to notify them of that. Kurama was already healing it up. "Rin will take a look at it later."

Yuuta nodded firmly and let the matter drop, but Izumi kept shooting guilty glances in her direction. "Focus Izumi." Naruto told her sternly. Izumi's cheeks heated up, and she focused ahead of her with her shuriken ready in her right hand.

They heard the sounds of fading battle in the distance, and the lights of a jutsu carried over the fields from time to time. Naruto thought she recognized Shisui’s fire jutsu a couple of times, then came distant shouts, before everything went quiet.

Her team came back at a jog after fifteen minutes, Rin heading straight for Naruto while Kakashi told them that the danger had passed.

"We got them all and should be able to continue as soon as we clean up here."

"Not before I get to look over your wound Naruto!" Rin demanded and forced the blonde to sit down on the trampled ground.

"Rin!" Naruto whined, but caved, knowing there was no arguing with the medic when she got like this.

"Take the flack jacket off." Rin added sternly. Her foot tapping impatiently while watching her like a hawk. Naruto did, using her left arm for most of the work, as her right arm still felt numb and painful. Of course the team medic noticed, and Naruto caught how her eyes narrowed at her awkward movements.

When it was thrown to the ground Rin pushed her sweater down over her shoulder to get a clear look, ripping the material further, her sight trailing over the long stab wound reaching from close to Naruto’s neck and to her shoulder blade. Rin knew Naruto's body well by now. After their travel with Shizune and Tsunade she had documented Naruto's healing abilities in detail, and knew how to treat her properly.

Without a word she started fishing up equipment from her pouch, and Naruto knew she could only sit there and wait for it to be over. Shisui strolled over, taking a look at the injury and wincing at the sight. "He got you good there, Naruto. Kami, he could have taken your head off." He mumbled worriedly.

"It's cool. I took a calculated risk."

Rin and Shisui snorted in unison, and she saw Anko roll her eyes while she hung out in the back.
Meanwhile Kakashi and Yuuta were dealing with the clients. The two were sitting down. Getting dirt all over their expensive clothes while the woman was crying from fear and distress after the battle.

She'd put on a brave face for the entire mission, but Naruto could understand she was finally breaking. It couldn't be easy for her. She was a civilian at the mercy of ninjas, and she had just lost her son. They hadn't even been given time to grieve in private, as they were always being watched by someone for their own security.

"Gah!" Naruto screamed as Rin poured some stingy liquid straight at her wound before covering it with a cloth. Next moment she was rubbing the skin around her wound, making Naruto grimace in pain for each flick of her wrist. She was being uncharacteristically brutal. Acting more like Sakura when she was annoyed with Naruto's injuries than herself.

"I need to clean it! Stay still, Naruto, or I'll get out the brush for a deep cleansing!" Rin threatened, making Naruto freeze completely.

"Agh, but it stings like a bitch." Naruto complained while Rin continued working the liquid into her skin. When she dropped the cloth into a bowl Naruto noticed it had turned from pale grey to deep red from the blood. Rin inspected the wound again, making Naruto wonder what it looked like. She couldn't really bend her head far enough to get a proper view.

"Luckily your ridiculous healing abilities are working its charm." Rin observed drily, and placed her right hand over her shoulder. The green glow of iryō ninjutsu seeped into her skin, and the infiltrating chakra made Naruto have to suppress a shudder. Medical ninjutsu always felt weird. After all it was jutsu that tampered and manipulated flesh and bones. You had to be nerve dead not to feel the effects. It could be downright painful if your injury was serious enough, but for fixes like this it only felt foreign and uncomfortable as her wounded flesh reacted to Rin's demand.

"There. That should hold it all together so it'll heal properly. I'll just bandage it so it won't be reopened or annoyed." Rin said pleasantly as her hand left her shoulder. She washed her hand with some disinfectant before grabbing bandages to apply over the swollen wound.

"I hate it when you get into nurse mode." Naruto pouted and glared lightly at her teammate. Rin carefully applied the bandage and ripped it to fit snugly around the wound. She chuckled and patted Naruto patronisingly on the head with her free hand.

"If you didn't get injured you wouldn't have to deal with my nurse mode at all." She answered teasingly, grabbing some tape to secure the bandages while gesturing for Naruto to keep the bandage in place so she could use both hands. "Someone has to make sure you keep your limbs intact, and the rest of our team knows your track record."

"That's not fair! I've been really good lately!" Naruto objected at once, her hand keeping the bandage in place while Rin worked on securing it. Naruto hadn't had any worse than a sprain and sore muscles since her return to Konoha a year and a half ago.

The medic glanced up with twinkling eyes at her indignation while making sure the wrapping was tight and secure. Stroking over the light material with a steady and gentle hand several times to make sure there weren't any wrinkles. "We know. It's why we're getting nervous. One day your suppressed recklessness will rebel against your common sense, and it might manifest itself in a shower of bad judgements and broken bones that I then have to repair."

Though the battle had ended in their favor, it was not a happy group that travelled through the night.
The genin were all in varies states of shock. It was the first large scale battle they'd experienced, and the swift deaths and brutal fighting had left them unnerved. In comparison the Omuras were taking it better.

After the initial shock the older couple had managed to get control of their emotions, and had agreed to continue travelling to reach the village in time. Anko had to give them some credit, the two were a lot less shocked about team Kasai's actions than the genins were.

After the Third War blood and death had very little effect on Anko. She'd been bathed in it too many times, seen too much to really let it bother her anymore. In contrast the three brats had never experienced anything like it. Their first death had been the dead client and enemy from earlier in the mission, but the count of murders they'd witnessed had gone up drastically after the night's events.

Kenji had become mute, Hibiki twitchy while Izumi was more jumpy to sounds and fast movements. They held up well enough though.

The graduates from the academy were older now than when Anko had finished. Back when she had been eleven herself she was in the middle of a war and years out of her schooling. Death and battle had been something unavoidable most of the times their team left the village. These kids didn't know that reality yet. Never felt or lived under such pressure. Since the war was over children were allowed to stay innocent a little longer, but unless they grew tougher skin these brats wouldn't survive long as ninja. They might not be at war, but the Elemental Countries were still riddled with conflicts.

While they slowly made their way down the mountain none of the genin dared speak a word, only casting suspicious looks at the members of team Kasai who had decided to travel in close proximity to the clients for the remains of the journey. Yuuta looked downtrodden, but brushed it off the best he could. Anko figured he was more worried about the kid's mental health than the actual battle though.

The night passed uncomfortably slowly. The Omuras might have strong stomachs, but their exhaustion arrived a few hours past midnight, and the pace slowed considerably.

Only after dawn and well into the morning hours did the tired and somber group reach the village. The Omuras were staying in a bath house in the middle of the village, and on the way there they ran into at least ten other signs advertising different bath houses. It was the Land of Hot Water though, and Anko wasn't sure what else she had expected.

Tired, sad and roughed up they stumbled into the right bath house which also rented out rooms for their guests, and after quickly checking in the clients, team Kasai and team six decided the next plan of action. They were pretty sure all of the Hollow Stone had attacked that night, and was therefore all dead, but in case someone else decided to attack they had to stay close at hand.

The genins were dead on their feet and needed a break, so they quickly explained the plan. Team six would check in as the Omura's guards, while team Kasai would wait before checking in themselves. The girls would book a room as three friends staying at a bath house, while the boys would sleep outside that night to keep watch, and then check in the next morning under the same pretense. So Shisui and Kakashi were stuck with the first watch while the rest got a room.

When Anko lay down on her futon while the sun still glared through the dusty windows she fell asleep so quickly she wondered in hindsight if someone hadn't knocked her out. Her sleep was so heavy that when Shisui woke her five hours later she was struggling to remember where and how she got there. While Shisui clamber out the window he'd come from Anko quickly shook off her drowsiness. On missions no one got enough sleep. It was an unwritten rule, and after years of this
type of schedule Anko was well used to it.

Still, she was never at her best when going on little sleep, but it was her and Naruto's turn to keep watch until Rin and Yuuta took over. They would constantly switch every six hour for the remaining of their time in the cozy village.

It could have been a lot worse. As they pretended to be costumers at the bath house it left them with required visits to the Hot Springs, and Anko was not hard to convince. It certainly was a nice change to soak in the smooth, warm water of the Hot Springs and go to bed inside four walls with a roof compared to sleeping on rocky hills and taking baths in the freezing mountain rivers.

During their second day the genin were sent into Anko, Kakashi and Naruto's iffy care, which didn't end up with the desired results. Yuuta had politely demanded them to teach his brats for the day while he, Shisui and Rin kept watch over the clients. Feeling it would be enlightening for the kids to gain some knowledge from other ninjas.

After meeting up with the kids far outside the village the three started out badly, and it continued going downhill from there. Proving once and for all that none of the three ninja would ever make good teachers. The three vastly different approaches to being a ninja alone would easily confuse the simplest souls.

"If you want to be a ninja, you need to believe in yourself, dattebayo! No matter what anyone tells you, no matter how much things goes wrong or how badly you're beaten, always get up, and never back down! You are ninja of Konoha, and we never give up!"

"The most important thing you can ever learn is to keep your head down. Misconception is one of ninja's strongest tools. Don't be obvious, you're still just midgets, and your opponent's first impression is that you're weak because of your age. Use it to your advantage. Don't listen to Naruto, sometimes backing out and returning with comrades is actually the best way to be victorious. Always have a backup plan to fall back on."

"Just don't be stupid enough to die. I don't give a shit how you go about it. Rules are made to be broken, and if someone pisses you off kill the fuckers. Konoha has no need of another rotting corpse buried in the graveyard."

Naruto, Kakashi and Anko continued talking across one another for the next two hours before actually giving training tips. Again, their teaching methods varied.

Naruto, who was enthusiastic about actually teaching, proved herself to be horrible at articulating her instructions. Though she tried to make it up with hand gestures. "It's easy, dattebayo! It feels like a pang, and um, you just sort of… Whoooa! And then you just swish it. Go boom or not, yah' know?"

And then she almost knocked over Kenji with a wildly gesturing arm. It was a narrow thing, but the boy luckily managed to dodge. When he straightened up he pierced her with a glare that seriously doubted her intelligence, and he still didn't get the principles behind the shadow clone technique.

Anko started off a lot better. She first gave a demonstration of how to use the summoning technique, before proudly presenting the poor kids to Hebimei and her cousin. Izumi and Hibiki were awed by the technique, showing obvious fascination with the concept, but it turned sour quickly afterwards when Anko took on the personality of a drill sergeant, barking out orders while she set her snake summons to chase the two genin for miles. Claiming it was to train them in evasion, trapping, stamina and speed.

Naruto recognized it as Orochimaru's favourite training method when he'd been in a bad mood for
their team meetings, but wisely choose to remain quiet about it.

And while the girls put the kids through their own well intended torture, Kakashi sat down and read. Claiming that as Naruto and Anko were fully qualified to teach the kids themselves his interference really wasn't necessary. Naruto rolled her eyes, getting various flashbacks to her own genin days and how the copy ninja preferred to let his students figure things out on their own. It was one of the few lessons he managed to teach them all. Things wouldn't fall into their lap without some serious effort from each of them individually.

By the end of the day the genin were more confused than ever, and couldn't actually claim they had learned much from the day's event except a newfound fear of snakes.

When Yuuta asked them how the day went, the three kids had looked at one another, none of them sure how to answer, and Anko could have sworn someone sounding suspiciously like Shisui snicker from the direction of the window.

Yuuta never asked for a repeat, but of the three stand-in sensei it was Kakashi who was probably the most pleased with that. So while the genin went back to their bodyguard duties the Omuras spent their day going to and from meetings. As the owners of a very large company that shipped timber to the almost tree barren Land of Hot Water, their schedule kept them occupied for most of their stay. Anko only saw them during her own shifts when she tailed them at a distance.

They were almost finished though, and after four days they were ready to leave. On their last night team Kasai gathered in the boy's room for a quick meeting while the genin and Yuuta made sure the Omuras were well guarded during their late running business meeting.

"So we need to follow them all the way back home? That will take weeks." Rin mumbled and leaned her head against the wall.

Shisui nodded. He was sitting on his futon, the covers wildly spread around him from being woken up by the girl's impromptu entry into their sleeping quarters. "They are now paying for a jōnin squad and a genin team to escort them for the duration of their travels. So yes, we have no choice but to escort them home."

"Where exactly is this village? It sounds familiar..." Naruto wondered aloud.

"It's south of Konoha. Almost on the southern borders of Fire Country." Kakashi answered easily.

"Damn, that will be a long walk, 'ttebayo. We are almost at the northern borders of Land of Hot Water, and we have to get all the way down to southern Fire Country... How long should that take?"

"At a civilian pace with three meals and sleep each day... Two or three weeks?" Kakashi guessed with a casual shrug.

Anko was nipping at her water container, sipping loudly and making Rin annoyed with her lack of manners. She sat down the water container and swallowed audibly, again making Rin fume in annoyance. "At least we can ditch the brats when we reach the village. They promised to stay for the son's funeral, which means we can put in some proper speed for the last stretch before Konoha."

"It will only save us a few of days at most." Shisui replied.

"And that's a few days I'm going to spend in my own home, in my own bed." Anko snapped back.
Shisui gave a wry smile and dropped down with a flop on his futon. "Speak for yourself. When I return I have to report for ANBU duty. I haven't been able to fill enough time slots because of all the delivery missions to Iwa."

"Quit ANBU then." Anko suggested.

"I don't believe anyone can ever really quit ANBU." Shisui murmured with a grimace.

"We'll also be really late with the next letter to the Tsuchikage." Said Rin, changing the subject from ANBU duty when Shisui seemed to be spiraling down a dark rabbit hole of thoughts.

Naruto stood up and stretched her hands over her head. Her neck was killing her after sitting hunched over in bushes outside the bar the Mr. Omura had been spending his last "business meeting". "I don't care. Let him wait, Kami knows he has let us stew around while he took his time to get a reply ready. The negotiations are almost finished anyway. There's not much left for us to do in Iwa. We'll probably start going to Land of Iron soon instead, to make sure the facilities are ready and that everything is going according to plan."

The others nodded vaguely, most only partly listening. "Do you think team six will participate?" Asked Shisui curiously.

"Hah! Those brats? Do you really think they are ready for the chūnin exams?" Anko laughed and shook her head.

"Even if they don't make chūnin it will probably be a good experience for them." Shisui stated objectively. "It's a shame the chūnin exams were so secluded when we took it. It would have been good to test our abilities against foreign ninjas."

"There really wasn't a need back then, Shisui. You got to test your abilities against foreign ninjas more than enough during the war." Anko said drily.

"Can we get back on topic soon?" Asked Kakashi with a huff.

"Sure, when you can put down your porn so we'll take the meeting seriously." Naruto said and stuck out her tongue at Kakashi.

The copy ninja gave a one eyed smile and shut his orange colored book before laying it neatly down on the wrinkled covers. "There. See, I can be good, now you need to be good too."

"Stop talking to us like we're one of your puppies, Kakashi!" Naruto barked.

"Mah, maybe when you stop misbehaving, Naruto-chan. Pakkun has much better table manners than you."

"Okay, let's focus everyone!" Shisui said frustrated, sitting up with a grumpy expression on his face while dragging a hand through his messy bed hair. "We're not here to make small talk right now."

Rin jumped on Shisui's advice at once. "I agree, when do we leave tomorrow?"

"At dawn. Let's get out of here early."

"Should we travel with the clients? Or do we keep staying hidden?" Naruto asked.

"With them. The Hollow Stone is most likely destroyed. None of us has seen or heard a trace of
them since the battle, and I would rather avoid overconfident robbers on the road. If they see such a large party travelling they will probably think twice about attacking."

"Oh Kami, we will have to make small talk with all of them for the next weeks don't we? They're so airheaded. Especially the little Uchiha. Her voice just grinds me the wrong way." Anko moaned.

"You don't like Izumi-chan's voice?" Wondered Naruto confused.

"Yes. It just annoys me." Anko snapped back. "It's all high and squeaky. You'd think she was doing a squirrel impression half the time."

"She's not that bad. You're just pissed she likes everyone else more than you." Shisui mumbled under his breath, a small smirk lifting the corners of his lips.

"I just think she's very unobservant. We all protected them during that battle, but just because Naruto got injured saving that worthless little girl she thinks she's somehow the Kami of kunoichi. You should have heard her go on the other day. 'When I get older I want to be as strong as Naruto-san.' 'Naruto-san said the most important thing is teamwork.' 'Naruto-san, Naruto-san, Naruto-san! I thought Uchiha were supposed to be smart. Of the three kunoichi that came to their rescue she somehow thought Naruto was the strongest!' Anko complained, exaggerating a fair amount, but feeling it was justified anyway.

Izumi might have been in awe of Naruto the first few days after the battle, but after the catastrophic training session her respect for the blonde had been reduced considerably.

"Well… She is." Shisui pointed out with an arched brow. "Even you aren't petty enough to overlook that, are you Anko?"

Anko's glare could have burned fire. "Izumi doesn't know that! She's forming opinions without all the information."

Naruto had a very satisfied smile on her lips, and she was radiating smugness. "I think Izumi-chan is brilliant. You're just jealous that she shared her dango with me yesterday instead of you."

"You don't even appreciate dango!" Anko whined, knowing Naruto's words were spot on and actually the real reason she had started disliking Izumi. The brat had bought six dango sticks from town and after sharing one with all her teammates she had given one to Shisui - which wasn't all that weird since they were from the same clan and the Uchiha had bad sweet tooth too - but the last one was given to Naruto. *Naruto*. She had actually refused Anko when she had asked for one, and gone down to hunt down the blonde. "It wasn't fair!"

"You set Hebimei on her. How could you ever expect anything from her after that?" Mused Kakashi thoughtfully.

"It was for her own good."

Naruto rolled her eyes. "It was for your own sadistic pleasure."

"Gah, you guys need to quit getting off track! We're not getting anywhere." Rin moaned and put her face in her hands.

"We'll behave, Rin." Naruto and Anko chored in unison, sharing a quick and mischievous grin between them that promised nothing good to anyone else. Shisui smiled nostalgically, his eyes trailing between them with a knowing grin. Anko had to admit it was nice being on a mission with the two. It wasn't exactly the same as before, but she didn't mind.
It was interesting seeing how Shisui and Naruto interacted with the two ninjas of the former team Minato. Naruto worked seamlessly with them, especially Kakashi, while Shisui took a more relaxed role than before. In team Orchimaru Shisui had always needed to be the voice of reason, mostly because of Anko and Naruto had a habit of following their instincts instead of pure logic. Orochimaru had sometimes interfered, but only when the situation was dire. The rest of the time he allowed Shisui to keep the girls in line, not bothering to discipline them as long as they weren't blowing others or each other up.

On team Kasai Shisui didn't need to take on that role anymore. They were older, Naruto had a bit more self-preservation than before, and cooperated with them better than she ever had on team Orochimaru. Maybe it was because Kakashi and Shisui were more reliable now than before.

Anko would never admit it, even under the threat of death, but Naruto had always impressed her. From her days in the academy to these days Naruto kept surprising her. It was obvious from their first scuffle that the blonde was born to fight, and she fought good.

Back when they'd been teamed together, even though Anko was older and with more experience, she hadn't been able to keep up with her. Both Shisui and her had been left behind when the situation turned dire, and Naruto had been relying more on Orochimaru for help during a battle than her two teammates.

It had been a sore point for Anko which she never said aloud, and never would. But as the others had been given time to catch up, Naruto calmed down. She actually followed instructions now. She didn't need to lead an attack, and would instead follow Kakashi's lead. Anko had yet to see her go against Kakashi's instructions, which said a lot. Naruto had disrespected Orochimaru's orders more times than she followed them.

The result was actually a pretty well balanced team, except Anko had noticed some oddities she suspected weren't normal during this particular mission.

It started with the strange vibe from Rin, and Anko knew almost immediately what it was.

You had to be blind to not notice how the medic pined after Kakashi. You also had to be stupid not to see that the copy ninja didn't return those emotions. And after Naruto's rather obvious ogling of the boys earlier in the mission Rin had gotten the idea that her female teammate was a contender for Kakashi's affections.

During the mission Anko had tried to figure out which one of the boys Naruto had been checking out, but was so far unsuccessful. She was more playful with Kakashi, but they had always shared a weird and teasing interaction. They cared about one another, but Anko got the feeling it was more out of familiarity than romantic interest.

And when it came to Shisui… Anko didn't have a clue. She actually suspected the two must have had a fight, because they hadn't interacted much during the mission, which in itself was weird. There was some unspoken tension whenever they were forced to interact, but not obvious enough for Anko to properly interoperate it. She leaned more towards them fighting though. They always walked in circles around a problem when they fought, until Naruto caved under the pressure and demanded that they squared up. Anko gave it a couple more days until Naruto had enough.

But no matter if Naruto liked one of her teammates it really annoyed Anko that Rin was so highly strung because of Kakashi. Rin didn't allow it to affect her work, she didn't even talk about it, but maybe she should have, because the result was Rin falling into her own thoughts while glaring between Naruto and Kakashi when she got careless. Being under the belief that Naruto liked the same guy as her.
It was getting pathetic too. It wasn't as if Kakashi didn't know what Rin felt, he was just a jerk for not making his standpoint clear. He was allowing Rin to keep hoping he'd one day suddenly wake up in love with her.

Anko held in a snort at the thought. She highly doubted Kakashi would ever fall in love with anyone ever, and if it hadn't happened yet between the two, it never would. Rin wasn't stupid, she knew this herself, yet she was idiotic enough to keep hoping instead of moving on.

At this point Anko wasn't sure who she disliked the most in this stupid quarrel. Rin for being a gullible fool, or Kakashi for being a bastard who couldn't even be straight with his best friend.

"No, I'm not discussing this. We're not delaying our departure so you can take one last dip in the Hot Springs. You've been there more than enough this last week. And you should know you went over our mission budget with your last two visits, and that money is coming out of your own pocket." Kakashi snapped after Naruto whined about taking one more turn in the Hot Springs. Anko couldn't understand how she enjoyed the warm water anyway. Her natural body temperature was ridiculously high, and she had to be boiling over whenever she went into one of the geothermal pools.

Anko shook her head while she observed the members of team Kasai's unnatural behaviour.

Instead of putting a stop to the bickering Shisui sat studying his hands, using a lot of effort on not minding their business. Rin was sulking in her corner of the room, jealous or annoyed that Kakashi appeared more eager to argue with the blonde than pay attention to her, while Naruto was more vocal to diffuse some of the passive aggressive tension constantly lingering in the room.

The atmosphere was getting on Anko's nerves, and she knew herself well enough to know she would probably make a scene if something wasn't resolved soon. She just hoped it wouldn't be in front of team six and their clients.

One thing was clear. If this sort of drama was normal for team Kasai, Anko wondered how on earth they had managed to keep such a good track record.

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To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so very much for reading! The chapter was beta'd by the great and reliable AnjoRemix!

So a bit trivia to begin with; I know that the Land of Hot Water has trees in the anime, but I sort of compared the country to Iceland instead.

Of course, the main reason I wrote Land of Hot Water in Iceland’s image is because the country is known for their natural hot springs (geothermal pools) spread around the country. But while Iceland does have trees, there's not many of them. A lot you see around populated areas and tourist places are planted trees, though there are some areas
with natural growing trees too. (If anyone are from Iceland, I'm sorry if I'm offending someone, that was not my intention here at all.) However, if you take a drive through the country you will find surprisingly few trees.

Anyway; the trees should be growing just fine on Iceland, but the story goes that the vikings who arrived in Iceland cut down (a lot) of trees and afterwards let their sheep graze everywhere, efficiently destroying the soil and making large parts of the island forest free. So that's why I made the Land of Hot Water barren of trees as far as Naruto could see. (She's a visitors and could hardly search the entire country for traces of forests though) And I find the whole "tree situation" in Iceland so freaking fascinating, (It's really absurd that the vikings could have cut down that many trees!) and I wanted to give Land of Hot Water some recognizable details for the mission.

And now that my little history lesson is over, I can get back to the chapter. It was almost impossible to stop this one…. This chapter could have been 10 000 words longer, but I just had to stop here, as it would feel like the chapter was just getting prolonged for the hell of it. The next chapter will continue where this left off, so there will be more drama to come. I apologize in advance for my attempt at writing in this genera. This is NOT my area of expertise… For some reason I'm really uncomfortable writing teen drama and romance. I just feel awkward while writing it and strangely nervous about posting it.

Once again; sorry for my rambling… Until next time everyone!
Chapter Forty Two – Butterflies and Cotton Candy Bullshit

*to his father* “If women made you a better person, I wouldn't want to know what you were like before.” - Shikamaru Nara

The day of their departure everyone was up at dawn. When Naruto exited the room she'd shared with Anko and Rin she was almost run down by Hibiki getting chased down the corridor by an angry Kenji. He was shouting at his teammate for not having packed yet while throwing random pieces of garments after the tall boy. It was the most expressive Kenji had been since Naruto met him, and damn if the boy didn't have a temper.

With the exception of Hibiki, everyone else managed to be ready at five sharp. The lanky kid came hurrying down the stairs fifteen minutes later, his rucksack slung haphazardly over one shoulder and a cracker hanging out from the corner of his mouth.

After Yuuta had scolded him, making them ten more minutes late, they were off. The group walked through the village as the inhabitants were just waking up, and Naruto decided the village was somewhere she wouldn't mind returning to in the future.

Their last task was to escort the Omuras from north of Land of Hot Water to south-east of Fire Country, and the journey would take them around two to three weeks walking at a civilian pace. Because of the long trek team Kasai wouldn't be able to hang around for the funeral, and would say goodbye to the genins and the clients at the village gates instead.

Though they'd been off to a shaky start the Omuras and team six were slowly getting used to their presence, and the same in reverse.

By now Naruto had a firm understanding of the genins at least. Kenji was the quiet one, even a bit shy, while Hibiki was the most outgoing one. Izumi was also a very social person, but less so to strangers.

As they followed the road through Land of Hot Water the chatter filtered in and out, but it was the genins who kept the conversation going for the most part. Hibiki asked Rin a lot of questions concerning いりょう ninjutsu, Kenji was questioning his sensei about the different species of birds they saw and why they were so different from the ones in Konoha, while the oldest Uchiha had been hogged by the youngest for various and often clan related discussions.

The two hadn't known one another before the mission, and Shisui didn't even recognize her upon their first meeting, which said a lot about the size of the Uchiha clan.

It started one afternoon while they walked over a long corn field and Izumi started up a questionnaire about the one person they had in common. The hours that followed were filled with an endless amount of enquiries about Itachi, who at one point had been her classmate before he graduated early. Her two male teammates hadn't been too fond of the topic though, especially Kenji.
Even if he was reluctant to answer at first, Shisui found her questions increasingly amusing, and eventually started sharing various trivia facts about the boy named Uchiha Itachi. His evil smirk becoming more and more apparent for each ridiculous question Izumi came with.

Naruto highly doubted Itachi would be okay with all the information Shisui was sharing though.

"His favourite color? Red of course. Like his bleeding heart. But to be honest; sometimes I think he might be color blind."

"I'm ninety nine percent sure I am his favourite person. Though that last one percent is probably reserved for his little brother."

"What he likes to eat? Not sure, but last time I checked he would sell his soul for a box of dango."

Naruto was snickering behind her hand as he continued to share with Izumi the secrets behind Itachi's daily routine. His answers getting more and more wild, and Naruto suspected inaccurate too. The game was unfortunately up after Naruto burst out laughing when Shisui claimed Itachi's secret ambition in life was to grow a mustache so tidy and long it could rival his hair.

Izumi caught on after that, but it had been amusing to see how far Shisui could take it.

Though miffed about being made fun off, Izumi had brushed it off and changed the topic instead. This time to their own history instead of Itachi's now questionable past time hobbies, which may or may not include collecting dried rose petals and only being able to take walks between nine and nine thirty if Shisui's claims were to be believed.

"My father isn't an Uchiha, but my mother is." Izumi explained and smiled up at Shisui. It was the most friendly she'd been since the older boy had fooled her earlier, and Naruto and Kakashi who wasn't far behind them picked up bits and pieces from their ongoing conversation.

"So that's why I haven't seen you around the compound." Shisui said with an "aha" sound at the beginning.

Izumi chuckled while brushing away some strands of hair from her face. "We don't live far away, but as my mother married outside the clan she had to leave. I'm still an Uchiha, even if my father wasn't happy I couldn't take his name. But it's the rule. The clan comes first." Izumi nodded to herself, and Mr Omura turned towards her curiously.

"I didn't know clans were so strict. There was no question about whether or not my wife took my name when we married."

"The Uchiha aren't a fan of mixing bloodlines." Shisui told him and looked suddenly down on the ground, before he smiled sheepishly. "There's a higher possibility of children born without the Sharingan when an Uchiha marries someone without the same kekkei genkai."

"Really?" Asked Rin and turned around, she hadn't really been paying attention before now, but Izumi beat Shisui to the answer.

"Yeah, about thirty percent of children born from a parent without the Sharingan never activates the bloodline. It didn't affect me though, I activated my Sharingan... earlier on this mission." Izumi's eyes trailed nervously towards the Omuras before pretending she was watching the road instead.

Thinking back Naruto realized she had been too caught up in the battle to really notice it at the time, but Izumi's Sharingan had been activated during the battle against the Hollow Stone. They had probably awakened when the son had been killed earlier on the mission...
"What are the chances when both parents have the Sharingan?" Asked Kakashi, finally paying attention to something else but the book in his hand, while Naruto wondered how many read throughs he'd done on this mission alone.

"A hundred percent. There's never been a child born from two Uchiha who didn't activate their Sharingan." Shisui replied with a shrug of his shoulders. "It's why most Uchiha who decides to marry outside the clan… Well, they have to give up their place. If they have their Sharingan they have to keep the family name, but they no longer have any say in clan matters. Their children become members though. Like Izumi-chan here, she is part of the clan even if her father isn't an Uchiha by blood. It's her mother that doesn't… Well, she can't work for the UPF and isn't considered a clan member. Right?" Shisui asked and turned curiously towards Izumi.

She nodded and opened her mouth to reply, but the words were cut off by Anko's exclamation from the front of the entourage. "Clans and their stupid rules. You guys really kick people out for marrying someone the elders don't approve of?"

Izumi protested at once. "No, it's not like they're banned. They just… leave the clan. It's their choice in the end, and they can still come visit whenever they want. I spent a lot of my childhood at the Uchiha compound because my mother's family is a lot larger than my father's. So they'd look after me when my parents had to go on missions. In fact I basically lived there until I was four because of the war."

"It's true. It's not an easy decision for most though. You can't really wear the Uchiha emblem anymore if you leave, and I know some struggle with loosing the security having a clan provides." Shisui told with a sigh. "Which is why it's mostly Uchihas without the Sharingan that marries outside the clan these days. They never have children with the Sharingan. At least as far as I know that has never happened. Izumi's mother is a rare exception as she has the Sharingan and yet married outside the clan. It was more usual before, but as the Uchiha has so many members now it's become more normal to marry within the clan."

"What would happen if an Uchiha and a Hyūga had a kid?" Wondered Anko curiously.

"That has actually happened once." Shisui said pointedly. "Everyone thought one dōjutsu would dominate the other, but instead it resulted in a kid who had one Sharingan in one eye and a Byakugan in the other. It sounds cool, but in reality it just resulted in a lot fainting. The person didn't have enough chakra to sustain the two dōjutsu for very long, and died young from chakra exhaustion from overusing it once. Both clans agreed to not cross blood again after that." He hummed to himself, his lips pursed in thoughts.

"Poor kid..." Mumbled Rin and shook her head. "There is a higher chance of dying from chakra overuse within kekkei genkai clans actually. Some just aren't born with the chakra reserves to sustain their own abilities."

"I'm actually at a risk myself." Izumi mumbled, her cheeks heating up. "My father isn't one for much ninjutsu either, and I think my chakra reserves comes from him. I still can't have my Sharingan activated for more than a couple of minutes before I get dizzy."

"If you're talking of risk you should see Kakashi. He can never deactivate that Sharingan he received. I've lost count of how many times he's been in the hospital because of chakra exhaustion." Shisui mumbled, causing Kakashi to glare at him fleetingly.

"Maybe it's better to not have a kekkei genkai like Anko and Rin… or me." Naruto grinned widely, before Anko's hand landed on her shoulder to draw her attention.
"You have the Uzumaki chakra chains, remember? They're classified as a kekkei genkai. Not a ninjutsu."

"Oh… Right." Naruto muttered and rubbed the back of her neck sheepishly. Shisui glanced at her over his shoulder with a teasing smile before shaking his head.

Though it was slow going they made their way through Fire Country, for each passing day steadily getting closer. And the closer they got to their destination, the more eager everyone got for the journey to end.

Their breaks became fewer and further between, and Naruto was pretty sure both clients had lost a few pounds from all the walking. There had been a few arguments, mostly between Hibiki and Kenji, who like most children got whiny when they were tired or hungry. Yuuta was a good peace keeper though, so things never got out of control. At least for the genin.

The rest of the ninjas were another matter.

Anko's slowly rising temper was making her increasingly rude, which showed whenever a discussion came up, no matter if it was about timber production and shipping or weapon maintenance. Naruto couldn't be certain about what exactly was bothering her roommate so, but she assumed it had something with the never ending strain between specific members of the team.

Though some of the awkwardness had been forced down by sheer willpower between Naruto and Shisui, she still felt nervous whenever they ended up walking side by side, and it made her seek out other members of the team that didn't cause such a strong reaction in her. Specificity Kakashi, but that was for various other reasons too.

Rin wasn't talking much with her anymore, and Naruto had no idea why. She answered to direct questions, but even if she tried to act as normal it still seemed as if the medic was avoiding both Kakashi and Naruto these days.

Another development that puzzled her was how Anko was boycotting Kakashi and Rin, which only left Naruto even more confused than ever, and also resulting in her roommate working with Shisui for the journey. The division was kept up for days.

If the others noticed, and Naruto thought they did, at least they had the curtesy to remain quiet about it.

The conclusion was obvious though; this mission couldn't be over soon enough.

It was the middle of the night when they stopped for their last camp together. The clients and the three genin had fallen asleep almost instantly, forgoing food in favour of sleep. It was Yuuta's turn to take the first shift, and he would switch with Rin four hours later.

So to allow the ones who'd gone to bed some rest, team Kasai walked a distance away to start up a fire and make a late night dinner. Unlike the others team Kasai would have a long and tiring time ahead of them the next day when they started the journey home.

While they prepared dinner Yuuta staid with the sleeping figures to keep watch over them, but asked if they could make extra food for him to eat later.

Despite the added tension things had run smoothly for weeks, but the day had been tiring, and it was well past midnight when they sat down to eat. Since lunch they had gotten by on food pills, and were starved for something that would fill their stomachs.
Kakashi quickly made logs from branches, while Shisui got the fire going. Naruto dealt with the food while Rin and Anko either watched lazily or got the cutlery out of their messy pouches. It was amazing how disordered their carefully packed supplies became after weeks away from the village.

Naruto found a comfortable spot between Anko and Rin to eat dinner, even though the latter tried to discretely move further away. It didn't need to be said for everyone to know that there was an elephant in the room, but no matter how hard she looked Naruto just wasn't sure where. So in an attempt to not make everything worse she followed the others example and tried to pretend everything was okay by letting Rin's action slide. Even if it hurt her that Rin was avoiding her.

The conversation started in tired grunts and airy question, before going to the only topic everyone could agree on; namely how much they wanted to get home and what they'd do once they did.

Kakashi wanted to get some peace and quiet. The consistent conversations of the group was exhausting him, and he preferred his ninken's chatter to human chatter. Naruto wanted ramen again while Shisui missed getting a full night sleep, but everything got livelier when Anko shared her own plans for their return to Konoha. "I'm so going to get smashing drunk. I don't know why, but after so long with the stuffy Omarus and having to keep everything child friendly for the three genin I just want to go wild." Anko mused to herself, catching Rin's attention.

"Be careful Anko, too much alcohol is harmful and it leaves you vulnerable." She scolded gently and took another sip of her soup.

The snake summoner scoffed and waved dismissively at Rin's comment. "It's not about getting drunk really, I just want to get some action."

Somehow that comment rattled Rin so much she got *soup* stuck in her throat, making her cough repeatedly into her fist while Naruto smacked her hard on the back to help her breathe again. "Y-you can't..." Rin wheezed and coughed again to clear her throat. "You can't just go out and have... *sex...* with a *stranger.*" She said, stammering and blushing furiously at the word; "*sex*."

"I'm ready to date again." Anko answered airily, as if that explained everything.

"But it's not safe! What if you go home with some homicidal murderer?!" Rin shouted alarmed, making Shisui shush her so she wouldn't wake up the others.

The words didn't affect Anko, who simply glared back. "You know, a lot of civilians would argue that *we* are homicidal murderers."

"But what about diseases? You shouldn't have sexual intercourse without knowing that your partner is healthy! You shouldn't have sex with anyone without there being trust and love between you." Rin argued heatedly, her eyes narrowing.

The reply finally got a reaction out of Anko, who burst out laughing, clutching her stomach while cackling so hard she almost fell over. "Love? Why on earth would I need to love them? Can't I just be attracted to them and get what we both want out of each other?"

"No! You should date first, like you and Kato did." Rin argued stubbornly.

"Well, look how well that ended. At first I was realistic, knowing we were just having fun and dating, but then I deluded myself into thinking that the bastard actually cared, and when I needed him the most he bolted at first possible opportunity." Anko answered snidely. "I haven't been with anyone since then, but now I'm ready to get out there. Love is so fucking overrated."

"Obviously Kato wasn't the one, but there is someone special out there for you. You should wait
"Oh give it a rest, you sound like a sex-ed pamphlet given out by the academy nurse. And on what planet would I take relationship advice from you? You are even less experienced than anyone here. What the hell do you even know about these things? There isn't any; "the one" waiting out there. You find someone, and you make them "the one". It won't just fall into your lap." She sounded like she was reciting the rule book while she tried to reason with Rin, who was struggling to keep in her arguments to allow Anko time to finish speaking.

"I-… Well of course you have to work to make a relationship work, but I don't think you should be intimate with anyone without some emotional stability. And there is someone special for everyone! I think… That when you meet someone special, you'll know. Right away." Rin said carefully, but of course Anko didn't like that.

"That's bullshit." She muttered and shook her head. "It's always really intense at first, and the first few months are wonderful, before something happens, and the feeling just… goes away." Anko shrugged in a; "what can you do about it?" kind of way.

"Goes away?" Asked Naruto uncertain. Not sure exactly what she meant by that.

"Yeah.. Suddenly you see everything you've been ignoring. Like the fact that Kato had no ambition. At first I thought it was fine. He thought different then all the other guys. He valued different things, and it was great to have a guy who valued his relationship more than his occupation. It contrasted me, who would rather die bloody on the battlefield instead of in my husband's arms. But in the end it just turned out he was lazy. No ambitions to get anywhere. All he wanted was to be cool and fun with no future aspects. I didn't realize it was not what I wanted until after he'd dumped me. What you think is perfect isn't necessary the perfect thing for you before you've tested it out." Anko explained, gesturing with her hands while she spoke.

"Maybe you just didn't feel the right thing. I don't mean a crush. Some people you're attracted to and that's normal, but then there's the one who stands out. The one you see and just… know. Know he's the one from the very beginning, and the feeling doesn't go away." Rin said seriously.

"Can we change the subject?" Interjected Shisui carefully, but he might as well not have said anything from how Anko and Rin completely ignored him.

"Hah! That's the biggest load of bullshit I've heard in years. Love at first sight? Seriously? Are you really that naive, Rin? Love at first sight is not real. You're just in love with the concept of love. You don't know a guy before you've lived with them. Before they take their shit out on you instead of their parents. Before you find out all the things they hide in public. Before you've found out all those annoying habits and you constantly have to deal with them."

Rin frowned, disagreeing but not bothering to word it. Kakashi was looking increasingly uncomfortable while Shisui had started rummaging through his weapon pouch for something to do.

Naruto was listening, but wasn't sure what she could add to the conversation.

"It's different from person to person, you might be a pessimist in this matter, but for most-" Rin said, but was cut off by Anko.

"So you think it's just me who thinks like that? Well I'm not. Many think about relationships that way. You need to be a less gullible, Rin. Love isn't some magical fairy tale where you're hit by cupid's arrow and stay madly in love for the rest of your life. Maybe the first three months are like that, but then you need to work on the relationship to keep it going. I've yet to find someone who's
worth that effort, but I'm trying. I don't pretend to be in love with the guys I go on a first date with - because I'm not. It's naive to think there's such a thing as love at first sight. Maybe attraction at first sight, I've done that a lot of times, but you can't love someone you don't know."

Naruto tensed along with Kakashi, and Shisui peeked nervously up from his bag.

"... Not everyone-" Rin started again, but was completely over ridden when Anko burst with frustration.

"Stop it! You're making me so mad, Rin! You're letting your imagined love story affect your judgement. You have for years! You can have almost anyone Rin. Have you ever considered that maybe it just isn't worth it? That there are plenty of other guys out there?" She said with emphasis on the word 'other', her eyes flashing to Kakashi fleetingly before she continued. "Someone who can... I don't know... return your feelings for example? Just... stop chasing ghosts."

Rin gritted her teeth and her fist tightened until her knuckles were white. "Of course I know. But it's not like you just... stop. It's not... It's not something you can just turn on and off. I mean, when-"

"You're not even trying, Rin! Until you give it an honest try I won't listen to another word of you talking about love at first sight and other cotton candy bullshit!"

"Okay, that's enough. Stop being a bully, Anko." Shisui said quietly. Rin was looking down, hiding her face by letting her hair fall around her face.

Naruto looked confused between them. "That was a little harsh, Anko."

"She needed to hear it!" Anko burst out furiously. "And why didn't you back me up? If I was being so harsh you should have said something instead."

"I had nothing to say. And it's not like you gave us much room to interfere." Naruto replied hurriedly.

"You suck." Anko said and shook her head. "And since when did you not have an opinion?"

"I just... Don't. I don't know what's right here. I just know from others experiences - not my own. I don't know. But..." She looked at the fire more intently, thinking about all the conflicting emotions inside her. Shisui's face popped up in her mind, and she tried in vain to get it out.

"But what?" Asked Anko sourly.

"I'm thinking about Jiraiya..." Naruto said slowly.

Anko coughed, Rin gaped and Shisui looked like he'd been hit in the head with a brick.

"What?" Kakashi exclaimed.

"No! I don't mean... Gah! Okay... when I hear Jiraiya speak about Tsunade, I keep thinking; she's the love of his life." Naruto clarified. Anko became confused, she had never spent much time around neither Tsunade nor Jiraiya and she didn't know any of this. So Naruto continued, hoping what she said would make some sort of sense.

"He has loved her since they were just kids and they're still amazing friends. They get each other and trust one another, but it just so happens that the love of Tsunade's life wasn't Jiraiya. It was Dan." Naruto put weight on the last sentence. Punctuating the injustice of the situation.
Rin's expression changed to comprehending while Anko had turned thoughtful.

"But he let her go, despite the fact that it hurt. Even if it wasn't right for him. And he doesn't regret that, because for a little while when Dan was alive, Tsunade was so happy. Then Dan died and now she's a mess. But Jiraiya still won't try for her, because he loves her enough to let her be. In the end no one got a happily ever after. At least not when it comes to romance…” Naruto explained clumsily, trying to figure out in her own head what she said. If it backed up Rin or Anko, or neither.

"I think… I think a lot of people find love, and sometimes I think it's almost better that the person you love isn't the love of their life… or whatever you call it. Because people die or is lost every day. Especially ninjas. Tsunade and Minato… Just look at them, and compare them to before and after they lost the one they loved the most. They're both hurting." Naruto finished, feeling a little down at her own conclusion. From someone like her it was an unusually pessimistic answer.

Kakashi and Shisui didn't look like fish out of water any longer, and both Rin and Anko's anger had subsided during her little speech.

"Well… That wasn't exactly what I meant when I said I wanted you to back me up. Of course it sucks when someone you love die. But I guess you have a point…” Anko said and shook her head. "I'm sorry I was a bitch, Rin."

"It's fine…” Rin stopped and shook her head. "I just…. I think I'll take a walk." She said and got up, leaving them behind while Kakashi looked after her.

Shisui turned concerned to Naruto. "Should someone go after her?"

"I don't know." Rin did look upset, but everyone needed space from time to time.

Kakashi spoke up for the first time, his words firm. "She wants to be alone."

"Of course she does. You should have told her a long time ago, Kakashi. What the hell are you even doing? She's your best friend. Let her move on, won't you?" Anko bit out. Kakashi turned away shamefully, while Naruto and Shisui exchanged an uncomfortable glance.

"Fine. Be an arse. I'll tell Rin about the girl you had over just a few months ago. Maybe she'll get the message then."

"I'll speak with her." Kakashi snapped.

"Good. Seriously… Why she's in love with you is a mystery to me."

No one had an answer to that. Kakashi least of all.

The next morning they all managed to oversleep, and the breakfast was a hurried affair consisting of some crackers swallowed while they packed up their futons.

After yesterday's argument there was a constant weariness between Anko, Rin and Kakashi.

Ever since Shisui and Naruto had their unfortunate… accident, the two had pretended nothing had happened, expertly managing to hide it from the others that they were a bit on edge, but now they might as well not bother. Their three teammates were being awkward enough to easily overlap some uncomfortable looks between Shisui and Naruto.

Anko was still angry at both Rin and Kakashi. Her tantrums weren't that unusual, she would have
her periods of being annoyed at all of them, so if it'd only been her it would have been manageable. It was Kakashi and Rin who made Naruto want to rip her hair out in frustration.

Rin did a one-eighty, and went from avoiding her most of the time to be a shadow on Naruto's trail, strategically staying as far away from Anko and Kakashi as possible, and the copy ninja wasn't any better. The two didn't exchange a single word, and as they ran for Konoha they didn't even glance in the others direction.

Anko was oblivious to their unsaid conflict, too busy being annoyed herself, but how she couldn't notice Naruto would never know. Though when she was angry Anko could be very self-centered.

Naruto wasn't sure what had happened to make everything so tense. The conversation from yesterday couldn't possibly have made things this awkward, could it? When she went to sleep things had been a bit rocky but nothing like now, so she suspected something happened after she fell asleep.

A couple of hours later team Kasai, team six and the still physically intact Omuras couple returned to their home south-east of Konoha.

Team Kasai parted from the rest at the gates of the village. The Omuras had politely invited them all to stay the night at their mansion, but team Kasai was needed back in the village.

The farewell at the gates was mixed. Izumi had grinned widely, waving energetically as they left them by the village borders, Kenji was as expressionless as he was at the beginning of the mission, but managed a halfhearted jerk of his hand Naruto assumed was wave too. Hibiki nodded seriously, while Yuuta gave a bow of thanks along with the Omuras for their help.

And finally they were free to leave and get in some speed as the five ninja flew past the familiar trees of Fire Country. For a moment forgetting about the traces of drama still lingering within the team. If they kept a quick pace they would return to Konoha in a little over two days, including a couple of overnight camps.

Anko shuddered at what might happen that evening, after the previous night she knew she had released a can of worms. And though she'd been pissed at Kakashi for being so immature he couldn't even be straight with his best friend, and at Rin for being so incredibly naive she was giving her a headache, Anko was finally picking up on the atmosphere between the two.

As her own anger subsided she noticed the distance they were constantly keeping, and Shisui and Naruto's shared grimaces whenever their last two teammates somehow caught each other's eyes.

The tension continued all day, and since Shisui and Naruto were jerks, they left Anko with the duo from hell to get the camp up, while they themselves fled into the woods to gather logs for the fire. Using an unnatural long time with the task too.

Between a mute Rin and a slightly more high strung Kakashi, Anko felt on edge. Kakashi was preparing their dinner while the medic was showing an unusual amount of concentration while patching up a rift in the sweater Naruto had borrowed.

"What's going on?" Anko asked at last, directing the question towards Rin. The girl looked like she was trying to merge with the tree she was leaning against.

"Nothing." Both of them replied in unison. Anko huffed and finally managed to catch Rin's eye. She just shook her head and continued stitching up her sweater with renewed concentration.
"So… everything is like always?"

"Yes." Again both answered simultaneously.

Anko arched an eyebrow. "Nothing to worry about?"

"No."

Anko shook her head and hoped Shisui and Naruto would be back soon.

"Are you okay?" Asked Naruto at last, looking at Rin with concern. She had been quiet for a very long time now, and Naruto just couldn't deal with it anymore. She was actually proud she'd held out this long.

Rin looked at her with tired eyes, but nodded with a small smile. "I'm fine."

"You're being very quiet. You know how Anko is, she just speaks brashly but she means well." Naruto explained.

"I know… I'm fine, Naruto. Really. I'll be okay."

"But you're not okay now?"

"…"

"Kakashi-kun… rejected me."

Naruto's eyes widened and her gaze snapped to up ahead, where Kakashi and Shisui were walking together in the distance. She wasn't sure what to say, and instead squeezed Rin's shoulder in a sign of comfort. "I'm sorry."

"It wasn't a surprise… I guess you were right. Sometimes the ones you love just can't love you back." Rin said and shrugged. Too casually to be anything close to reassuring considering the topic.

"You… are taking this very calmly." Naruto inquired, tilting her head. Had Anko been in Rin's situation she'd be raging mad. Bad mouthing the guy who'd rejected her and making sure everyone was as miserable as she was. Rin and Anko were wired very differently.

"I don't like making a fuss. And it's been long coming, I just needed to get it out. I'll try Anko's tip now. I'll try to find someone who can return my feelings. Once I'm finished… feeling like crap." She said and chuckled darkly at her own joke.

"He's an idiot, Rin. And I think he's got intimacy issues." Naruto said for good measure. Anko always loved talking crap about people who didn't let her get her way. It probably applied to this situation too.

Rin gave a short laugh and smiled true. "He does. He really, really does. But even if he didn't it doesn't mean it would have changed things. It was time I saw that."

"There are plenty of guys Rin. You'll have them lining up before you know it."

Rin snorted at that, before looking uncertainly down at Naruto. "You know everything now… You know about my crush… You know too much about Anko's romantic history and probably Shisui's too. But does anyone know about yours?" Asked Rin and tilted her head to the side.
"Uh… I don't have any…"

"You have someone you like. You have to. At least someone you notice. Or at some point you must have had a crush on someone." Rin pressed, folding her arms in front of her looked pointedly at Naruto.

"Well… When I was very young I had a crush on a girl named Sakura." Naruto said and laughed as Rin's eyes widened.

"Wait… You're a lesbian?" She asked astonished.

"Nah… I don't think so. I had a crush on Kakashi too, ages ago. That passed rather quickly though." Naruto said and thought back to her genin days. She had a crush on Kakashi-sensei, but it was the same type of crush she'd had on Shikamaru and Gaara. They were all nice people who were not bad to look at.

"I wasn't raised the way you were. I didn't have parents. I didn't know where babies came from or the difference between a guy and a girl. So I've always been attracted to… I don't know for sure, but I think its confidence. Or their will. Or something. Sakura was pretty and shy before she managed to get over her own fears and turned confident. I admired that. I admired that she turned her insecurity into strength. But I grew out of it." Naruto said and shook her head, thinking of when she'd gotten over it. Sakura had been very in love with Sasuke.

Naruto wondered what would have happened if she hadn't fallen back in time. If Sasuke had come back. Would they have ended up together in the end? Or would it be like Kakashi and Rin?

"I see. So you're not… secretly in love with Anko?" Rin laughed at Naruto's expression. And soon they were both chuckling, causing the people in front of them to look back curiously. They ignored them, and went back to their low spoken conversation.

"No. Unfortunately I only love her like she was my sister. If not we would be all set. Living together and all." Naruto said eventually.

Rin chuckled at the idea. "You'd have very loud kids."

"Girls can't have kids together."

"I know, I'm just picturing how it would be if it was possible."

"Hmm… They'd be very rowdy… And I'm not sure where we'd put them. It's a small flat we live in."

"I'm sure Kakashi wouldn't be opposed to help out. He lives right underneath you and could babysit from time to time," Rin suggested, causing Naruto to break down in a fit of giggles.

"… and that's why the female population outweighs the male population." Shisui finished explaining. They were taking a short break to drink and gather themselves before setting off again. It had led to various random subjects that wouldn't cause anymore drama, so of course Shisui had pulled out some trivia facts from his brain he found interesting before explaining them to the group at large.

"Huh… I haven't noticed that before. How come?" Asked Rin curiously.

"I can't speak for everyone, but it's more common within the ninja occupation to have a large
unbalance in genders. But most female ninjas aren't killed, so I guess that evens it out a little, doesn't it? Since more guys dies, while fewer females does. It sort of adds up. It's in the civilian districts its more of a problem." Shisui specified.

"How did we get onto this topic again?" Asked Anko bored. She was sitting on the boulder above them, staring out over the horizon while the rest had sat down at the foot off the rock to rest their backs against surface.

"Huh… Not sure." Shisui shrugged.

"Why does so few kunoichi die? That's strange… I mean, only thirty five died during the war? And that doesn't include Kushina-sensei or Hitomi-chan who died afterwards? That's not much." Rin asked thoughtfully.

"I know. It's… well, honestly it's because girls usually doesn't reach the highest ranks and choose on average less dangerous specialties. They are therefore put into less dangerous situation compared to men. In our class Naruto was the only girl who is specializing in combat. Hitomi dealt with poisons and planned on going into research, while Chou is currently training to become a medic. So Naruto was one out of ten girls, though we were almost thirty pupils in total. Of the guys only four did not wish to specialize in combat." Shisui continued.

"In our class two girls specialize in combat. Kurenai and I!" Shouted Anko while pointing at herself.

"Well, that's frankly very uncommon." Shisui replied drily. "Normally there's one or none. Most goes into research, medicine, scouting or tactician theory. They're the only fields where there's a fifty/fifty division between girls and guys. Most men usually pick between interrogation, tracking, infiltration or combat."

"I thought we had evolved in society since the founding area… But girls still stay nursing and cleaning the village while the guys go out and knock heads together?" Asked Rin frowning.

Shisui snickered at the analogy. "Pretty much."

"With those numbers I still can't figure out how you ended up with two females on your genin team. Both specializing in combat. What's the probability of that?" Muttered Kakashi and peeked over at Shisui.

"I don't know either. Statistically it's a-"

"Okay! Enough number talk!" Exclaimed Naruto and groaned into her hands.

"Do you have a better idea?" Asked Shisui with a sceptic smile.

"I do. Let's not go through the Shisui-clopedia, and instead do something productive."

"… did you just call me an encyclopedia?" Asked Shisui and looked up affronted.

"Well, if I as much as mention a word in passing, you will tell me the word's origin, meaning and common properties. So yes, I'm calling you an encyclopedia." Naruto answered while rolling her eyes.

"That's closer to a dictionary. They explain a word's origin, usage and meaning." Shisui corrected.

Naruto narrowed her eyes. "See, you did it right now."
"That wasn't-" Shisui stopped himself, noticing how almost everyone was grinning at him. "Okay, I do like having the facts straight. But I only tell you corrections, not the definition of every word coming out of your mouth." Shisui shot back grumpily. "It would have been a freaking full time job if I did."

"Was that another correction?" Asked Naruto.

"It was a specification. And this is an answer to a question, not a correction." Shisui muttered while looking down at his hands. He reached out to grab his water container for something to do the same moment Naruto did, the back of their hands brushing against one another at the action.

Naruto bit her lip and retracted her arm so sharply she almost knocked Shisui over. He glanced at her startled, before a glint of humour entered his eyes. He didn't say anything and instead simply reached out again for the container.

He had his lips pursed together, as if he was fighting a smile while he opened the lid. Leaning back against the tree he took a sip of water while Naruto felt like an idiot just sitting there. Her face heated up and she wished she could punch herself unconscious at the knowing little smile at the corners of Shisui's lips that had quite suddenly appeared.

She got to her feet hurriedly, marching over to Rin to gain distance between them. The conversation started up easily without her, and it took her a few minutes before she dared glance back at Shisui.

His eyes met hers instantly, and her head whipped back at once, again feeling completely mortified he'd caught her peeking. Though not before he had the time to send her a wink.

They were only a day away from Konoha, but team Kasai needed to stop for the sake of sleep and food. They had found a nice spot alongside a river for the evening. After all the drama on the mission Shisui was exhausted too.

First the situation with Naruto, and then later from being the unwilling witness to Kakashi rejecting Rin.

Poor girl. Shisui had been asleep at first, but had woken up from voices, only to hear Kakashi stammer out that he didn't see Rin that way.

What way Rin saw him didn't need explaining, as the resulted awkwardness made it more than obvious. The fact that Shisui felt just as weird around Naruto these days didn't help the situation either…

"I hate this mission..." Muttered Shisui and leaned over the low stone wall. They had stopped close to an old and crumbled windmill. It had once stood proud in bricked stone but now lay in ruins, probably a result of the war, though it created a nice stone railing for Shisui to support his elbows on.

Kakashi was reading his Icha-Icha book next to him, his back to the wall while he used it to lean against. Like Shisui he needed a break from the girls and had trailed after him while the girls stayed by the camp.

"So much for a carefree mission..." Kakashi agreed without taking his eyes off the pages.

"I should have accepted the C-rank to babysit Tora for a week that Minato-sama was desperately trying to get someone to do."

"You would have fought me for it."
Shisui laughed and turned his head towards Kakashi. "Why are girls so dramatic? And why do I have two of them as my teammates?" He wondered aloud.

"Well, Anko is your former teammate."

"True, but I wasn't referring to Anko this time. She is a former teammate, but it's not like I can just cut her out. Personally I still identify her as my teammate." Shisui answered, feeling it was both a bad and good side to that.

"True. They will always be your team in some regards."

It was accurate enough, and he suspected it would always stay that way. Even when his own thoughts were messing with his mission performance and relationship with a specific teammate… The last few weeks had really messed up his mind.

He wasn't certain what was happening between them. All he knew was that Naruto never left his mind for long anymore. That in itself might not be a new thing though, ever since meeting Naruto he'd often thought about her. It was unavoidable when you worked so closely with someone, and Naruto had always been a consistent part of Shisui's life. Even back during the years she'd been travelling he'd kept her in mind, but it was different now. He just knew it couldn't be ignored for much longer.

If he was honest with himself he'd had a small crush on Naruto as long as he could remember, but it had been the type of crush he could ignore. The type most people got when they were around someone they were attracted to. And Naruto was kind, funny and brave to boot, so of course he had that crush on her. A lot of boys did, but it didn't have to mean anything. Crushes came and went, it always had for Shisui.

Though Naruto drew him in again and again. It was her smile and expressive eyes. The fact that she was pretty by anyone's standard. Her unbeatable will to be better and that she cared so much – sometimes too much. How could he not have entertained the thought? But they had been fleeting before this mission. A curiosity. A pulse of lust and random fantasies. Something he could easily distract his mind away from. He'd written it off as simply being curious like most guys his age was. Girls too if Anko was any indication.

Naruto was one of his closest friends and someone he never wanted to lose. He'd come too close too many times already, and his father had preached this issue to him countless times. Especially since he was paired with two girls on his genin team. He couldn't act on something as shallow as lust by taking advantage of their friendship.

But this didn't feel anything like platonic friendship anymore.

It was less pure. It was obsessive and distracting, and his head wouldn't give him rest. It was too intense to be anything close to friendship.

Though he'd spent the better part of the last weeks reminding himself of her bad habits he'd come to realize it didn't matter to him. Maybe this was what they meant when they said love is blind. Because though he could find a thousand reasons why they shouldn't be together, he just didn't care.

The fact that she was a jinchūriki. That his clan would not appreciate him picking a girl who wasn't an Uchiha herself. That she was messy, loud and not very well mannered didn't matter to him. It was those things that made her who she was today, and no matter how annoyed he got at her at times, the last thing he wanted was to change her.
And if he confessed she might feel the same way.

Shisui was a keen observer, and though the idea made him nervous as hell he was quite certain he wouldn't be rejected. What scared him the most was that she did feel the same way, but then in the long run it wouldn't work out.

What if they broke up like Anko did with Kato? Anko and Naruto were similar in many ways, though Naruto hadn't had any boyfriends as far as Shisui knew. What if they broke up and then he lost her as a friend too? That would be unbearable.

She'd been with him through lessons in the academy, dinners with friends and family. They'd been through war and death together, and seen each other at their best and their worst.

For crying out loud, Naruto had awakened his Mangekyō Sharingan. By now Shisui considered her as precious as family. So was it worth the risk of losing all that history? Even if this felt more serious, was there a chance this was just a crush that would pass?

How the hell was he supposed to know?

There was an old saying his aunt had used to say from time to time. "It's easy to fall in love, but it's hard to stay in love."

"Can I ask a personal question?" Asked Shisui reluctantly, feeling like he needed some sort of advice to get control of his ever straying thoughts.

Kakashi looked fleetingly up before turning a page and continued reading. "You can ask, but depending on the question I might not answer."

Shisui took that as a yes. "Why do you not want Rin?"


Shisui hurriedly looked away. He understood what Kakashi had been trying to say, but he messed up when he used Naruto as an example. If he'd used Anko it would have suited the purpose better.

"Well… Naruto doesn't like me like Rin likes you." Shisui said instead, not sure if that was strictly speaking true.

"I'm not interested in a relationship. I have friends, I have a job and I have comrades. That's all I need. I need Rin too, but I don't see her that way, and if I was to get her hopes up just because of an attraction it would be bad. It would be downright cruel, and I care about her enough to not make that mistake." Kakashi said to his book.

Shisui looked back over the railing, feeling the wind rustle through his hair. A nice and cooling draft in this horrid heat. "So… it has nothing to do with the fact that Obito loved her?"

He heard the book snap shut, and when Shisui looked back Kakashi was walking away.

Naruto closed her eyes, but even with all her conviction on sleeping, her mind kept turning. She imagined what it would be like if Shisui touched her hand. If in the darkness he shifted closer to her, without anyone noticing, and took her hand in his.

She would be startled. It would be not something "they" did. She would scold him wordlessly for
being so forward, for pushing his luck, but secretly she would be thrilled. And what if they were alone? What if only they were sleeping around the camp fire? Like back in the tent? Where no one was prying? No one but them would question what was happening between them.

Naruto couldn't fathom that it had only been weeks since that day. It felt longer… And somehow her feelings for Shisui hadn't changed. They had just… evolved. The things she liked about him had just become more pronounced.

"This idiotic new habit of yours is growing alarmingly obsessive very quickly. Even for you. You do remember what clan he is from, don't you?" Kurama rumbled from the back of her mind. Naruto almost jumped where she lay, because the fox's input had come out of nowhere. Usually she noticed when he was paying attention, but this time it had taken her by surprise.

"I'm not obsessed! I don't get obsessed!"

"You are mrs obsessed." Kurama grumbled back. "Remember the other Uchiha? Sasuke? You were pretty obsessed with him too."

Naruto sank into her mindscape, as she had nothing better to do than to give the fox a piece of her mind. She was met by the sight of Kurama laying on his back in the sewer, his enormous legs up in the air and he peeked curiously over at her when she manifested. The doors of his cage were wide open, as they'd been for years now. "I wanted him to come back home, but that has nothing to do with this!" Naruto insisted.

Kurama rolled over on his stomach and stared at her as if she was an idiot. "So you do admit this is something then. Your constant anxiousness over the dilemma is disturbing your chakra network, and therefore me too. Stop this ridiculousness right now. What is it about you humans and your constant need for companionship anyway? And why an Uchiha? That Uchiha who is supposed to be my… guard." The last word came out as if it tasted bad by just saying it. "I would prefer the crazy snake girl instead."

Naruto blinked, taken completely aback by his little tirade. "I...why do you even care?"

"I didn't before, but now I can't sleep with your chakra fluctuating every ten minutes. And I have to admit that of all my jinchūriki you have now proven to have the worst taste of them all." Kurama grumbled back.

"Excuse me?" Naruto growled in an imitation of Kurama himself.

"I said the male you can't stop fantasizing about is a rotten choice. Maybe not right now, but all Uchiha are the same. Eventually they decay from within, and we have enough Uchihas to deal with already to not add another one."

"You have no vote in this matter!" Naruto argued back. "I can very well choose who I like or don't on my own!"

"Don't come whining to me when it all goes to hell then." Kurama snapped back, getting to his feet while his tails swished annoyed. "But if you had any sense you would pick someone less of a threat to us. Someone who doesn't have a dōjutsu basically designed to overpower me."

Naruto took an angry step forwards, not backing down from the fox's red stare. "Shisui isn't Madara. You can't judge them all for the actions of a few."

Kurama growled, his teeth flaring. "I have yet to be proven wrong, Naruto."
"But you once said all humans were hopeless, not worth for anything but killing."

"They still are!"

"Then why are you still bothering with me?" Naruto asked with a tilt of her head. Kurama's mouth snapped shut, and a low grumble sounded from the back of his throat.

"Fine. Do what you want. Just stop waking me up. I don't want to watch you nesting. It's incredibly tedious."

Naruto smiled brilliantly. "Thanks for understanding, Kurama!"

"Shut up! And get out, brat."

Next she was forcibly pushed out of the mindscape and back to reality.

Naruto shook her head. The fox had turned grumpy the last few days, but he always had something to complain about. In a way she found a lot of similarities with her two roommates. Both Kurama and Anko could be extremely self absorbed.

Instead of dwelling over Kurama's crazy misunderstanding of her emotional state, Naruto went back to her previous musings. In a way he was right. She really did need to figure this out soon.

Was this wrong? She had never been one to shy away from her own emotions. Back when she had a crush on Sakura she'd asked her out constantly, showing no restraints. Now she felt guarded. It was much harder to admit not only to Shisui that she was attracted to him, but also to herself. She felt like she shouldn't be. But why she couldn't be was a little fussy.

What exactly was she scared of? Rejection? She'd been rejected so many times she couldn't keep count anymore. Sakura had rejected her in love. Minato had rejected her as family. Sasuke had rejected her as a friend. And Konoha had rejected her as a citizen.

Rejection wasn't something that scared Naruto anymore.

But the idea of Shisui rejecting her was agonizing. It wasn't like with Sakura. She thought of Naruto as a joke when she'd asked her out.

Shisui never thought of her as a joke. He'd always had her back. Always been her friend. Always… Would he still have her back if she told him, but then he didn't feel the same?

Because the honest truth was that Naruto couldn't picture another outcome than rejection. Though Shisui was neither cruel nor unsympathetic. It was ridiculous that he'd do something cruel. If she confessed he'd let her down easy. He'd be kind and honest. He'd probably make a joke to make her feel better. She could almost hear the conversation inside her head.

"Ah, hehe… I'll keep my clothes on from now on, Naruto. And I'll reel in my charm, who knows what sort of accidents just my presence causes when walking down the street? Maybe someone stumbles and hit their head on the curb. Now that would be bad. Don't worry, we're still friends. And you'll find someone better soon. And if not, I'm sure the old farmer will be more than willing."

Yeah… he'd say something like that. He made jokes when things got socially awkward. It went hand in hand with his increased babbling when he got excited.

Naruto opened her eyes, staring up into the star filled night sky and took a deep breath. She had the urge to cry. Which was silly. It was such a stupid thing to cry over. She tilted her head towards the
fire burning low next to her. Sparks were glowing calmly like twinkling lights on the black burnt logs. And across from them lay Shisui. His eyes meeting hers.

He smiled.

A small, tired smile. The one he used whenever he was exhausted but still in a good mood. Naruto felt her own lips lift up at the corners while her heart beat slightly faster inside her chest. Shisui looked away when Rin shifted in her sleeping bag, and Naruto too hurriedly turned back to watch the night sky.

The stars were amazing to watch away from the village. She could see more stars than she could ever count, the different shades of black and dark blue illuminated a lighter patch, a type of belt stretching from one horizon to another. It was enticing and mesmerizing, and Naruto felt tiny and insignificant watching them. Her mind always started spinning when she watched the stars, because she couldn't comprehend the size nor the depth of it. She couldn't picture infinity. It was just a word, not a thing. Not something that even the Shisui-clopedia could properly explain.

Naruto didn't look at Shisui again, her thoughts strayed to her other life. The one with Sakura and the rest of her old friends. It was a twisted reality she pictured though. Because Anko and Shisui was on her team together with Sakura, Sasuke and Sai with Kakashi as their sensei.

The thoughts were absurd. It wasn't logical, because Shisui was dead in her old life, and Anko was the crazy snake lady who'd once licked her cheek.

Naruto wondered what she would pick. If she was offered to return back to where she'd left off in her old life. To the cave inside the giant turtle preparing for a war which might cause the end of the world… Or here. Where everyone was wrong and right at the same time. Where Naruto was more accepted but less honest. And she hadn't found Madara. The end might come for her a second time too.

If she ever confessed she would have to be more honest with Shisui. Naruto had to tell Shisui about Minato. He deserved knowing he was her father. In fact, her whole team deserved to know that little trivia fact. Minato had said it was okay, but only if he approved of the ones she chooses to tell the truth to and they swore to never repeat it under oath.

She would tell them when they returned to Konoha, and in a perfect world, she would have told them the rest too.

When Naruto woke the next morning she was in a very good mood. She got up first, and started preparing breakfast for everyone right away. Bursting with energy and feeling ready for anything.

She was in love. It had dawned on her slowly, but she recognized it now. This was what it felt like. It was exciting and terrifying, but it gave her meaning somehow. And having done a complete one-eighty since the previous night, she now couldn't wait to tell him.

Naruto could keep secrets, she could lie and deceive. Those traits had become part of her from an early age, but the one thing she had never been was someone who lied to themselves. She was in love with Shisui. It wasn't more complicated than that.

Even if she was rejected, if it ended in heartbreak just like with Rin, it was better than keeping quiet. She was already keeping so many secrets that the idea of holding more than necessary seemed idiotic in the morning light. Life was short, and she liked feeling like herself.

"You're in a good mood..." Muttered Anko tiredly, sitting up in her sleeping bag while watching
Naruto skip around preparing their breakfast.

"It's a nice morning." Naruto replied while putting more logs on the almost dead fire. Hoping it would catch if she put small splinters of wood and bark in the sparks to get the fire burning again.

"I guess it is." Anko replied and yawned behind her hand.

Shisui smiled when Naruto handed him his portion. He looked down at it, and grinned when he saw Naruto had remembered to put jam in his porridge. She usually didn't remember that, so Shisui always made sure to bring his own jam.

It was stupid that his stomach did a cartwheel by the fact that she had remembered.

He glanced up and met Naruto's eyes at once. She'd been watching him. But this time she didn't hurriedly look away. Instead she grinned.

His throat closed up a little. She looked really pretty this morning. Naruto was always beautiful when she was happy. Then Anko distracted her with a question, and their eye contact broke when she turned to answer.

"Can you hand me a bowl?"

Shisui looked startled around, and found Rin with wild bed hair and rings under her eyes. He decided she didn't look nearly as pretty as Naruto that morning.

"Sure." He answered with a wide smile. If Naruto was so happy he certainly didn't want to drag her good mood down. There were more than enough people around to do that job already.

"Almost home… Almost." Shisui muttered under his breath dejectedly.

"Just half a day's march..." Naruto agreed sourly.

"… And now we have to stay here." He grumbled with a shake of his head.

"At least we'll definitely be home tomorrow." Naruto replied, trying to find a silver lining.

"I can't wait. No more drama." Shisui said and exhaled deeply.

"At least Kakashi didn't dump you." Naruto said pointedly. "Imagine having to be with the guy who rejected you for days afterwards. Rin is awesome."

He looked oddly at her, and Naruto realized what she'd just said. Her cheeks heated up before she snapped her head back towards the others who were still arguing with the border guards. Shisui cleared his voice and turned to look where Naruto was staring. "Yeah… That can't be easy."

"Nope..."

"..."

"Maybe… I should… help out over there." Naruto said lamely, pointing towards Anko and the rest. Without waiting for a reply she left him, feeling his eyes on her while she walked.

"This is just because the stupid platoon got gassed. Gassed! They're all in the hospital. At least one of those idiots should have stayed back to check the situation." Anko muttered and turned towards the
rest of the squad.

"What do you mean?" Asked Shisui, who hadn't heard any of the discussion Anko had with the border patrol ninja.

"The patrol who was supposed to be here got trapped dismembering a weapon at the south boarder. They're all in the hospital. So we'll stay here until next shift arrives tomorrow morning." Anko fumed and marched back and forth on the spot.

"We should split up. We only need three out at the same time, so two can get some sleep in the meanwhile. Who wants to get their shift done with right away?" Kakashi asked tiredly. Everyone raised their hands simultaneously, and he groaned at the display.

"Anko, Rin and I will take the first shift. Shisui and Naruto will change with the girls in five hours." Kakashi said, making the call for all of them.

"Who will you change with?" Asked Naruto.

"I'll do a double shift and change with either Anko or Rin when they get off their break, and one of you two will have to take a double shift too. It's about fourteen hours until the next shift arrives. Maybe less." Kakashi explained.

"I can do it." Naruto volunteered. Shisui was crankier when he was tired.

"Great. You two should stay back. Rin can stick to this spot, while Anko and I go to spot C3 and C5." Kakashi said and pointed in the different directions. The girls nodded, and all three was gone a moment later. Disappearing into the trees for cover. No good scouting if you were scouted first.

Shisui and Naruto looked at each other. The tension coming back full force now that they were alone again.

"Well, at least it's not raining. I'm tired of being constantly wet." Naruto mused while looking up at the sky. Shisui didn't reply, so she looked over to see him snickering to the ground. She smacked him over the head. "Pervert."

"Hey, that hurt." Shisui moped while touching the spot she'd hit.

"You deserved it, dattebayo." Naruto replied.

"Oh, come on. It's not like I... swamped you with and unwanted memory." He answered coyly, causing Naruto to go red again.

"Gah! Stop it. I thought we were actively not remembering that incident anymore." Naruto pointed out meaningfully.

Shisui tilted his head, his eyes sparkling. "I don't know what you mean. I was referring to the situation with Rin and Kakashi."

Naruto narrowed her eyes, glaring at Shisui's pretend innocence. "Riiight. Remember that no one likes a liar, Shisui."

Shisui smirked secretly, and as he walked past her he lightly flipped Naruto's hair over her shoulder, his fingers barely brushing the skin of her neck at the action. It sent shivers down her spine. "Hn, I can think of one."
While the others stood watch Shisui and Naruto had a very lazy afternoon. It was so warm it made them lazy, and they took to the forest for some shade. After a short discussion they decided to stay off the ground and found a group of trees with branches large enough to sit on. Naruto sat on one of the higher branches while Shisui sat in a tree opposite her.

The forest was dense, which gave them good cover and shadows to take refuge in. Naruto had peeled off her flack jacket and used it as a cushion between her head and the tree trunk as she dozed in and out of consciousness.

From the other tree Shisui watched her, thankful she was too tired to really notice his staring.

If he was being perfectly honest with himself he was going a bit insane second guessing things. Shisui was going over and over all the reasons he should leave. Use the time before his shift to explore the area and maybe get some food. Or at the very least sleep. But he could do neither of those things at the moment.

Instead he stayed. Watching as Naruto's head fell sideways onto her shoulder in an awkward position before snapping back up again. Her eyes glossy with sleep and confusion. Shisui felt the corner of his lips tugging up. "Wha-" Naruto combed a hand though her hair as she straightened up. "How long did I sleep?" She mumbled drowsily.

"Half an hour?" Shisui guessed, not really sure but knowing it hadn't been long.

"I had the best dream, dattebayo. We were in Konoha eating ramen and -" Naruto released a yawn and stretched her hands over her head, causing her sweater to ride up while giving him a glimpse of her tanned, flat stomach. "It was nice." She finished.

"You'll have to wait another day I'm afraid." Shisui answered and made sure to keep his voice down. Naruto had very good hearing so she wouldn't miss it.

"Man, I'm hot." Naruto moaned and dragged the back of her hand over her brow. Shisui shifted and hurriedly looked away. "I'm glad we have the night shift, at least it'll cool down."

He only nodded in reply, and leaned his head back against the trunk of his tree, staring up at the leaves and glimpsed clear blue sky up above. When he glanced at her again Naruto's eyes had closed once more, and he assumed she'd fallen asleep.

He swallowed soundlessly. Considering if he should leave for the umpteenth time. He was voluntarily agonizing himself by sitting there staring at her while not being allowed to be noticed doing so. To voice what he wanted to, or touch her the way he imagined to.

Instead he was letting himself prolong the sweet anxiety swelling inside him. The thoughts that he wanted to act on – but couldn't.

Shouldn't?

Shisui was also distracted by her lack of a flack jacket. It showed her curves off better than normal. The gentle swing of her waist. Her hipbones leading down into her trousers. Her chest rising and falling for every breath she took. Bright hair lay in a mess around her head, trapped at the base in a loose ponytail. The sun warmed her cheeks, and a faint smile was on her soft lips.

He wanted to kiss her.

And he wondered… if maybe Naruto wanted to kiss him too.
He bit his bottom lip, wondering if he was letting his imagination get to him again, and looked up at their scenery instead. It was a warm day. Sunny but with faint clouds passing by high up in the sky.

She was distracted around him and had blushed more than normal these past weeks. At first he was sure it was embarrassment after what had happened at the start of the mission, but every day he grew less certain.

Naruto watched him. She was being helpful and polite. She was careful not to come in contact with him though before she'd never had any problems doing that. And he did the same in return.

And why exactly was he hesitating? If he was to feel this way for someone, he was glad it was Naruto.

Shisui glanced over at her again, and was startled at seeing her eyes open. They looked very blue in this light. Cerulean and clean like river water.

They kept looking at one another, hardly blinking.

Slowly Naruto smiled and Shisui returned it. What was she smiling at? Was she smiling because of him? Was she smiling because the weather was nice? Was she smiling because she simply was happy?

He should say something funny or random. Casual. Anything! But his mind couldn't come up with anything of interest.

So Shisui blinked, breaking their contact. He was growing restless from keeping his thoughts to himself. And while he had his internal meltdown Shisui studied the contours of the bark with a sudden intensity for something to distract him.

But when he felt something warm graze against his knuckles, he temporarily stopped breathing when he realized it was Naruto's hand. She didn't move it away though, and he looked up to find her standing on his branch straight in front of him. He hadn't noticed her movements at all. Not her getting up, not her jumping from her branch to his, and it proved once and for all that he was well beyond the stage of being "a little" distracted.

She bent down, and Shisui's eyes widened as her face hovered right in front of his.

"You know, Shisui – I've been meaning to tell you something, but since I want to do this in private and we'll be home soon and be surrounded by our friends at all times I think I'll come clean now."

Shisui glanced from her eyes to her lips, and then back up. Kami, what was she doing? Did she have to be this close? He was getting unbalanced by the close proximity between them, and his brain had stopped functioning. He couldn't predict what she was about to do anymore. All he could really focus on was that if he just leaned a little bit forwards he'd be kissing her.

"You are awesome Shisui, I always knew that, and I'm not sure how long this has been dawning on me, but since the incident at the beginning of the mission I've become aware of my own feelings for you. I wondered if I was temporarily insane at first, or just really confused, but I want to be honest. It's not a bad thing after all, it's kind of great actually, I'm just really in love with you."

Naruto had said it so easily, as if she was giving him a summary of what she had eaten for dinner.

Shisui's heart had already been beating fast, but now it was up in his throat. Stopping him from being able to form words. He opened his mouth to reply but nothing came out. Damn, she'd rendered him literally speechless.
She was starting to straighten up again, and before he'd made a conscious thought his hand found the crook of her neck and then he dragged her back towards him. Naruto's eyes widened as his lips molded against hers, a soft and warm embrace that made his stomach knot tightly. Naruto sank into him, sitting on her knees in between his legs while her chest pressed against his own.

She was eagerly responding, and he could feel the smile on her lips. Shit, he loved her. It was so obvious as they got familiar with this new level of intimacy. Her hand slid up his face and into his hair, and she pushed herself up against him. Shisui helped her by putting a hand on her back, securing her firmly against his chest.

Then it wasn't calm anymore, and it became maddening to keep his desire in check. The kisses grew less clumsy and longer, more passionate. Naruto shuddered and she shifted until she was sitting in his lap. His breath quickened, and blood was rushing away from his head and further down. But he was at his limit. He leaned away, separating their lips.

Naruto made a small sound of protest before looking up and meeting his eyes. There was lust there. An intense energy that whirled when she looked at him. It made him feel bold. It made him feel amazing and wanted.

"You-" Shisui wasn't sure exactly what he was going to say, but his mouth was already forming words. "You better mean it." He said earnestly, mouthing his conflicted emotions the best he could. He couldn't get himself to word his insecurities though, because how could something that felt this good be a mistake?

Naruto used a moment to take in his words, before she smiled widely. "I've never been one to go back on my word."

Shisui kissed her lightly, not sure if he'd ever resurface from the high he was currently on.

"We should never tell Anko about this." Mused Naruto, their close proximity making her breath brush against his mouth when she spoke. Her eyes were half lidded and with her unruly hair, flushed cheeks and slightly bruised lips he felt an irrational pride. He was having the weirdest reactions these days, and it took him a moment to register what she'd actually said.

Shisui's brow furrowed, wondering how they'd keep this a secret. He was planning on kissing her again, preferably as often as possible. Did she not want Anko to know? "Oh?"

"Yeah, we are literally making out in a tree. We'd never hear the end of it, 'tebayo..."


He closed the distance and captured her lips, Naruto responding with enthusiasm. Her fingers grasped the collar of his sweater to pull him closer, and now he was the one to shiver.

While the majority of his focus was on keeping Naruto pressed against him, a small corner of his mind was in full swing figuring out a proper excuse to skip guard duty later and just do this instead. He hated the thought of having to stop.
To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

First, please take a look at this great fanart of Shisui and Naruto by Mutterdrachen:
http://its-eh-secret.tumblr.com/post/167655630724

Thank you so very much for reading! The chapter was beta'd by the great AnjoRemix!

Well… you just had to read through 400 000 words to get to Kakashi and Rin crashing and burning, while Shisui and Naruto share their first kiss… I apologize sincerely to those of you who wanted some action - a lot - earlier. Romance is, ehem, awkward to write and share. Especially the sharing part. Pointers are always appreciated though. I try to combine it with the plot, but to get through this I just had to take a few chapters to focus on romance. The story is already detailed, and it would be weird to skip over such a huge change in Naruto's life.

And hey, that's four updates within a month, I just managed it on time! I feel oddly proud of myself right now, though some of the credit must of course go to AnjoRemix too for taking the time to correct my mistakes :)

Have a happy Halloween everyone!
They'd barely been home in Konoha for two hours before duty called again. Shisui wasn't sure why exactly they'd been summoned to the Hokage office. It felt like he'd barely stepped across the threshold of his home before an ANBU had showed up at his door, demanding he return to the Hokage office pronto.

His father had looked worried after him as Shisui left without having time to sit down for lunch, but right now all he wondered was why team Kasai and Anko had been dragged back after being promised to get the rest of the day off.

Inside the office Naruto stood next to Minato's desk, her hands fidgeting in discomfort as she glanced back and forth between the Hokage and her friends. She'd stayed behind after the debriefing of their long mission, and Shisui could only assume the reason she remained behind was also the reason he were back here instead of eating Kagami's homemade sake bentō.

The Hokage looked carefully blank, and if anything it just made him seem just as uncomfortable as Naruto. He had already made them swear under oath that the information about to be given would remain secret, and it only resulted in more questions for Shisui. Especially since Naruto hadn't made any such promise as far as he'd seen.

"If what I'm about to tell you ever comes out, there will be severe consequences. This is never to be repeated in public, never to be mentioned to anyone." Minato stressed, his right hand firmly grasped around a scroll. He stood up and walked past Naruto before handing the scroll to Kakashi. "Read it, and pass it amongst yourself. You won't get to read it a second time."

The simple exponentiation was followed by Kakashi opening it swiftly without any outward sign of anything else but boredom.

That changed quickly.

As his eyes trailed down the document his shoulders stiffened, his eye widened and suddenly his head shot up as he stared at Naruto, then over at Minato and back again. His mask covered half his face, but Shisui suspected he was gaping. With effort he forced himself to read on, and when he finished he handed the scroll to Shisui without a word.

Dying of curiosity Shisui read the first line.

It was Naruto's name.

It took him a fraction of a second to realize this was Naruto's file. Her information sheet which was not only highly personal, but usually kept strictly private.

It took him five lines for his brain to temporarily malfunction. Because under the line stating family connections there were two names listed, and for a long moment Shisui was sure he was reading the
"Your father? He's your… father?" Shisui clarified again. Naruto sighed and nodded for the fifth time in a row. Shisui still hadn't been able to digest the information, and she worried if he ever would.

But it was time they knew. Naruto trusted them and so did Minato. They'd been sworn ten times to the sky and back that the information would never get leaked to a living soul, but it didn't change how shocked they were.

"How is that even possible? You lived in an orphanage! You came from outside the village! You don't have parents!" Anko shouted, her arms flapping wildly up and down and almost knocking over Rin.

"They must have been young… Wow… Just wow..." Rin mumbled and dragged a hand through her hair in a daze.

Kakashi was staring at the floor and had yet to say anything at all.

Minato had left the office for Naruto to talk with her friends in private. The office was secure with privacy seals, so it was the best place for them to unwind. He also guessed accurately that they wouldn't actually speak much with him present for this specific conversation.

"I mean, yeah you two look like one another, vaguely, but still! How can you never have told me this before, Naru?! I can't believe it." Anko whined and sat down in a heap on the chair in the corner.

"He was considering having you executed… even when he knew who you were..." Kakashi said quietly which drew all eyes towards him with that unnerving deceleration.

"What can I say… My father isn't one to allow personal bonds to come in the way of his job." Naruto replied drily.

"Clearly." Anko said, while Shisui's eyes remained unnaturally wide as he sat down in the seat next to the snake summoner.

Rin placed a hand on her shoulder with an understanding little smile. "I'm glad you told us, Naruto. I know that can't have been easy."

"What the hell do you mean? It's her parents! Why would this be difficult to admit? Because Minato is a crappy dad?" Anko asked annoyed.

Rin sighed and glanced down unimpressed at Anko. "No, because of the implications. From what the file said Naruto was adopted right after her birth. I know Kushina was a jinchūriki, so it must have had something to do with that right?" She sent a quizzical look in Naruto's direction, who chose to remain silent while the medic continued. "Because they didn't raise her themselves Minato didn't find out who Naruto was until the aftermath of the whole rescue mission fiasco. It must have been a shock to both of them. Then Naruto left the village for years, and it can't have been easy to know something like this and not be able to admit it to anyone. It must have been a horrible situation to be in... I'm glad you trust us enough to tell us though. It shows how much you trust us."

"That Minato is her father isn't nearly as huge a secret as the fact that she's a jinchūriki, and we
already knew *that*. You should have told us already." Anko argued.

"I'm sorry." Naruto snapped, her nerves highly strung from the reveal she'd requested from Minato. "I didn't know how. It's not really something that pops up in a conversation is it? I've told you now, and it's... It's not something I can change. It just is what it is."

"I get it. I just... I can't believe I didn't know..." Kakashi replied and stood up. "And believe me, this says more about Minato-sama than it does about you, Naruto."

"Don't... Don't judge him too harshly on this. Yes, he didn't raise me, but he didn't have much of a choice. That document doesn't go into detail. It is just a list of facts." She said as Kakashi headed towards the door, he paused and glanced over his shoulder. "We were at odds for a very long time, but we're getting better. It's good. Really. I just wanted you all to know."

"I see... Thanks for being straight with us, but I just need to go home. My ninjen are probably restless, and... well, it's been a long few weeks." He opened the door and left quietly. Anko stood up too.

"How can you stand it?" She asked confused. Naruto looked at her puzzled.

"What do you mean?"

"You weren't an orphan, and yet you... they left you with strangers. You grew up without parents when you could have. That... I don't get it. Why aren't you more angry? Why aren't you furious?"

Anko was being uncharacteristically serious, and it forced a tired smile to tug the corner of Naruto's lips up. "I'm tired of being angry. This wasn't just Minato's choice. I'm sure he would have been a great dad given the proper opportunity, but really, we're just two people who share DNA and try to make the best of the situation we ended up in."

Their medic nin was nodding in understanding. "I think you're tired Anko. This doesn't change much, it just means you're better informed. The important thing is that Naruto is fine. Right?"

"I guess..."

"Good! Now, let's go home. You're dead on your feet and this information overload will probably make better sense after you've gotten some rest." Anko nodded numbly while Rin took a hold of her shoulder and steered her out the door.

Shisui and Naruto were left in the office while Anko protested weakly, but followed Rin's instructions anyway. When the door closed Shisui turned towards her with growing panic on his face.

"I'm dating the Hokage's daughter?" Shisui asked in a tiny voice, his hands covering his face. "I'm so dead."

"Get it together, that's not an issue." Naruto huffed and folded her arms in front of her.

"I get it. You're a target and so on, so this isn't common knowledge as you're the Hokage's daughter." Shisui said pointedly. "But he is scary, Naruto. What if... I'm doomed. I'm royally screwed."

"Oh, come on. He's not going to care." Naruto replied confused. He wasn't reacting how she thought he would. She had expected anger or at least annoyance over the fact that she'd never told him. That she'd kept it a secret.
"Why wouldn't he care?" Clarified Shisui just as puzzled. "Even if he didn't raise you, you're still his daughter. His daughter. He has to care."

"Are we talking about the same man? Yes, Minato does care, more now than before, but have you completely forgotten that I barely know him? That he never raised me, and that a few years ago he considered offing me if I was a threat to the village? Minato is not going to care about who I date, Shisui. We're not that close. We're trying to have a better relationship but we'll never be like you and your own dad."

The words gave him some understanding, and suddenly his eyes focused closely on her face, some of the initial shock ebbing out of him as the words registered in his mind. "I do remember… I just… I guess I'm not thinking properly. I guess who you date isn't the most pressing issue, I just don't wish to screw this up before it even begins."

"I don't either. Which is why I made Minato tell everyone. I've been putting it off, but it was about time I told you all the truth. It's not like it changes anything, but it's a secret that I don't need to keep from you if I didn't want to. And… I'm really tired of keeping secrets." Naruto admitted, feeling tired and drained.

"There's more you're not telling me isn't there?" Shisui asked. Naruto's mouth opened, but no words came out. "It's fine. You don't have to tell me. I already knew you were keeping secrets. But we're ninja, and part of our job is to keep our mouth shut. It isn't like I can share everything with you either."

Naruto sat down next to him, staring at the opposite wall without really seeing. "I'm sorry, but there are some things I can't ever speak of."

"I know that already. Thanks for telling me this though..." Shisui said, his eyes growing distant, before a slight panic entered his eyes again.

Naruto's hands wrung in her lap, and she peeked up at Shisui. "Are we still going out tonight?" She asked quietly.

"Yeah… at seven. You don't have to look so nervous. If anything I'm the one who should be having a crisis. But I'm not cancelling our date because of this."

They both looked up as movements drew their eyes towards the doorway. The problem with privacy seals was that the silence went both ways. You couldn't hear outside jus as how no one could hear inside. Which meant unless you had barriers around you it was easy to be snuck up on.

So of course Minato stood right there, within the perimeter of the privacy seals, staring back at them with an unreadable expression. "If you're finished discussing, maybe you two should take this somewhere else? I'd hate to make you late for your… date."

A drawn out and awkward moment followed his words, before Shisui high tailed out the door.

With her cheeks heated up Naruto followed a little slower without meeting Minato's eyes, and outside she caught up with Shisui halfway down the corridor.

"Why does that keep happening?" He muttered in frustration.

A few hours later Shisui had another issue to deal with, one much more urgent than whatever the Hokage might think about the latest news or the knowledge of Naruto's true parentage.
His father would be gone for work that evening, but his cousin had come over, though instead of being useful he sat idly on his bed and read instead of helping out with Shisui's latest crises. He held up another T-shirt. Comparing it to the varies shirts he'd already picked out.

This one was wide collared, but the sleeves were shorter than some of the others he'd tried on. It was also a slightly lighter shade of black. In frustration he turned towards his younger cousin who carelessly turned over a page in his book on the history of tea ceremonies. He had brought it with him from home, and Itachi had started reading it about half an hour ago.

"I have nothing to wear. What the hell? Everything looks identical! Black with wide collar. How come I have nothing else?" Asked Shisui frustrated, rapidly growing ill-tempered as nothing was going according to plan that day. He couldn't even pick a shirt without some sort of problem.

"Because you think practically when you choose something to wear." Itachi answered without looking up from the pages. The kid could read fast and he was already half way through the book. Granted, it wasn't a thick book, but still. "You also wear what your aunt buys you, and she thinks dark colors suit you."

"Ha. Ha. This is serious… What the hell do you wear on a date? It's not like I'm trying to give off a good first impression or anything. I've known Naruto for a decade now. She's seen me covered in mud, intestines and grime. And she knows what I usually wear. In fact she used to inherit my outgrown clothes when she was low on money so this is just a waste of time, isn't it?" Shisui muttered under his breath. Though his ever observant younger cousin heard it anyway.

"If you want to impress upon her that you have serious intentions you should show it through a well thought out representation of yourself. A date is a practice arena where two individuals come together to find common qualities and interests to decide if there's chemistry between them which can be used as a base to build a potential future relationship on. Chances of succeeding will improve if your partner finds you attractive, and an outfit which is complimentarily for the wearer will better the chances of the potential partner finding you appealing. It will help even out differences in opinions, since you and Naruto already have divergent temperaments and hobbies. You prefer swimming and board games, while the girl you have a romantic interest in prefers eating ramen and growing plants. You prefer swimming and board games, while the girl you have a romantic interest in prefers eating ramen and growing plants. Neither which you enjoy much. You two don't work on the same energy level on daily basis either, as you are calmer while Naruto-san is much more vigorous. A trait which has made you feel inadequate to Anko-san who is better equipped at keeping up with the girl you fancy, and that is another reason which you should use your appearance to even out the differences. All in all it is perfectly natural you should worry over what you wear tonight because you are hopeful it will take away some of the dissimilarity between you which may cause Naruto-san to move on to a person better suited for her." Itachi explained in monotone voice. Shisui only keeping quiet throughout the whole explanation out of sheer incredulity.

"Thank you so much. That's really what I wanted to hear right now." Replied Shisui sarcastically, turning back to his mirror to hold up a third T-shirt. This one was navy blue, but was identically cut to the short sleeved T-shirt on his bed. "Why the hell did you come over again, Itachi? I thought you had a brother you could play mind games on instead of me." He muttered distracted and threw the black T-shirt on the bed next to his cousin. Itachi turned a page, coming to chapter eight titled; 'Secrets of timing.'

"I prefer seeing you squirm." He answered honestly.

Shisui huffed in aggravation. "Please help me, will you? Do you think the blue one is good? At least it's different from what I always wear. Less tatty, you know? There's no holes in it either. Which has magically appeared overnight on all my other shirts." Shisui rambled and held up the blue one.
Itachi finally looked up. His eyes trailing over the dark navy, wide collared shirt which surprisingly still looked brand new. Shisui couldn't remember exactly when he got it, but was sure he had never worn it before. "It looks representable." Itachi agreed with a nod. "Though I doubt in this case your clothing will matter. Naruto-san isn't the type of person who cares much about appearance. At least not fashion. Her love of orange garments is adequate proof of that. Pick whatever you want." Itachi suggested, his eyes dancing with mirth.

Exasperated Shisui turned away from the mirror towards his cousin. "Perfect! What the hell was that speech for then?"

"Payback. You said Sasuke's striped sweater was ugly." Itachi fired back with scowl.

"It is! It was green, red and yellow, and he looks like a clown wearing that thing."

"I picked it out for him."

"I'm not surprised… But I'm not wearing this shirt anymore if that's what you prefer." Shisui said and threw the shirt on top of the pile.

"Do you want to order dinner today? I can't be bothered to make food… I know it's my turn but I'm just so tired…" Anko moaned from the couch. The long mission, though easy enough, had still been long, and after the reveals of the day Anko felt mentally drained. Naruto looked around and smiled at her from the counter. Anko noted it was similar to Kushina's, but her eyes were all Minato… Maybe a bit larger, but they did look very similar.

She'd been doing it all day. Trying to pin point all the similarities between Naruto and her parents. It wasn't that she'd never seen them before, but she'd always dismissed it as a coincidence. Plenty of people resembled others without being related. But from now on Anko swore to take these sorts of peculiarities with a grain of salt.

"Uh… You can, I'll just take instant ramen if I'm hungry later." Naruto replied while washing the counter with more vigour.

There was a knock on the door, and Naruto instantly looked up. "Can you get it? I don't want to move right now." Anko replied lazily. Naruto was already on her way though, and she heard Shisui's voice from the hallway a moment later.

"Hey Shisui! Is your dad making something for dinner tonight?!" Shouted Anko, not even bothering to turn her head in their direction. They came into the living room, but no one had answered her, so she found herself forced to turn her head all the way around to see if something was keeping their attention.

She found them both looking at her with odd expressions.

"What? Was that rude? I've said much worse before." Anko asked confused.

"No, it's just… Um… We have plans, so you'll have to figure out dinner on your own, Anko." Naruto explained uncomfortably and peeked quickly up at Shisui.

"What? I can't tag along? Or are you leaving right away? I don't want to move right now, but if you'd just wait an hour I'll come too." Anko said with some annoyance. She'd waited so many times for them. Not to mention all the times she cooked their meals. If they took a total tally she was bound to come up on top with a large margin.
"Eh… The thing is..." Naruto swallowed and grinned sheepishly at the floor. One hand roughing up the back of her hair. Was Naruto nervous? "We're sort of going on a date." She explained, her cheeks heating up a little while Shisui grinned apologetically.

Anko blinked. Not sure if she got that right, before she nodded slowly. "Oh, I see… That makes sense. I think..." She said slowly, before her eyes raked them both up and down. "Why haven't you dressed up then? I mean… You should dress up for a date. That way people know if you're on a date or just grabbing dinner after mission. And no one should go on a first date in neon orange. There should be a law prohibiting it."

Shisui chuckled and looked down at Naruto, a soft smile on his face.

That idiot.

How could she have missed this? It was obvious now… How long had Naruto been crushing on Shisui? And how long had Shisui done the same with Naruto?

"We don't care. It's not like we're meeting for the first time. We're just going out for a dinner date." Naruto answered and shrugged, Shisui nodding next to her.

He was being suspiciously quiet. Usually he'd make a comment at least. He also looked piss nervous now that she took a closer look. It was sweet. They were so naive and innocent Anko could puke at the sight.

"Have her home by eleven thirty, and no funny business on the first date. It's tacky. And that's what one night stands are for - not dating. Don't go to Ichiraku ramen stand either, that's just lazy for a first date. You do that every week anyway. First kisses should happen after dinner, not before. And if I see you two start making cuddly eyes at each other during training I'm prohibiting you from staying in a relationship together." Anko growled and turned away, making herself comfortable on the couch again but feeling a lot more awake than before.

"Uh… Sure." Shisui muttered, "See you."

"Yeah, see you later, Anko." Naruto said, and they were out of the apartment within a second.

Anko grinned. Her previous drowsiness a distant memory. Those two were morons if they didn't expect her to milk this new development for all it was worth.

"So you've never been on a date?" Asked Shisui with a small smile.

"No, have you?" Asked Naruto while playing with the strands of her hair. Feeling nervous again after leaving the apartment.

Shisui shook his head. "Nope. First time here too." He answered, before adding teasingly. "On a positive note; even if it sucks it will still be the greatest date of our lives."

Naruto laughed. "I guess, I only have Ero-Sennin many "dates" to compare this to, and I'm pretty sure it can't be worse than that."

Shisui grimaced, his ears turning pink while he hummed agreeable in answer.

"Maybe I should have asked Anko for some more tips?" Mused Naruto, grinning slightly as Shisui sputtered.
"No, no, no! Anko is definitely not the one to go to for dating advice, Naruto." He insisted while making a cross sign with his arms. "She has a deluded picture of how dating should go most of the time. I've seen her in action you know. You've just seen her in relationship mode. And I hope if we become something we'll not be anything like Anko and her boyfriend."

"Hey! She's my friend!" Naruto exclaimed and punched Shisui on the arm. It wasn't hard, and Shisui only grinned in return.

"Anko's my friend too, but it doesn't make it any less true. I was there to see all the pathetic pickup lines used on Anko. In fact; I'll demonstrate them." Shisui stated and smiled brightly. They reached the end of the street and Shisui reached out and grabbed her hand in his. "How am I supposed to know if they're bad pickup lines?" Asked Naruto teasingly, adjusting their fingers so they interlocked. "I haven't dated before remember?"

"I guess you don't, but that just makes things all the easier for me, doesn't it?" Shisui answered, causing Naruto to chuckle heartedly.

"And I was just kidding. I've known Ero-sennin for years, and I doubt you can get worse than him. So let's hear some bad pickup lines." Naruto bumped her shoulder against his arm, causing the small smile on his lips to widen ever so slightly.

"Do you know what my shirt is made of?" He asked curiously. Naruto looked him up and down and shook her head confused. "Blood, sweat and tears of the old Uchiha maids?" She guessed flippantly.

Shisui chuckled but then gave her the sleaziest smile while he wagged his eyebrows. "Almost, it's boyfriend material."

Naruto laughed at the show, finding his acting to be much more fun than the pickup lines themselves.

"And Naruto," Shisui continued. "Maybe you could tell me if you sat in a pile of sugar?" The smile had yet to fade from the last pick up line, and all she did was arch an eyebrow. "Cause you have a pretty sweet arse." Naruto snorted, smacking her forehead at the terrible pun while Shisui enjoyed her exasperation. "I've heard a million of these over the last few years. Anko goes to the weirdest of places you know."

"Sure it's just from hanging with Anko too much? For all I know you've been preparing these for years and years. A secret weapon to woe me when my guard was down!" Naruto chuckled as Shisui squeezed her hand.

"Ah, you got me, Naruto. Now I just have to make sure you don't find out who my secret secretary is. He's the one with the ideas you know."

They looked at each other for a moment, and then Naruto started snickering uncontrollably at the idea of Itachi writing pickup lines with Shisui in secret.

Shisui continued his little tirade of awful lines all the way to the restaurant. From the shameless; "My love for you is like diarrhea, I just can't keep it in."

To the really cliché; "I must be a snowflake, because I've fallen for you."

As they sat down the waiter looked curious between them when Shisui said; "I wish I was cross eyed, so I could see you twice."
Naruto was whistling on the way up the stairs, her steps lighter than normal as she came into her hallway. Shisui had kissed her goodnight just a moment ago, in fact he'd kissed her a handful of times that evening, and Naruto thought she could easily get used to that.

Things hadn't changed all that much actually; they just... kissed and might be a bit more attentive towards the other compared to before. It was nice, not to mention easy. It wasn't difficult at all to be with Shisui, and a part of her wondered why she'd been so nervous before. Confessing had been the best decision she'd made in years. Was there one downside it was the sheer amount of time she spent thinking about him, and in truth she found it very distracting.

Unlocking the front door Naruto entered the flat with her head still in the clouds, her mind filled with Shisui and the fun they'd had that evening. While taking off her sandals it took her a moment to register the sounds she'd already heard in the hallway, but now the noise finally managed to penetrate her daydreaming.

She straightened up, listening intently in the direction it was coming from. It was... moaning?

Naruto froze, all the pleasant butterflies in her stomach taking flight as the pieces fell together.

Of all the welcomes Anko could have orchestrated... She had expected to be interrogated, maybe even be made fun of while Anko shared her own opinion about the whole ordeal. This however hadn't even entered her mind. Secretly she'd hoped it wouldn't happen again.

It looked like Anko had been busy that evening too.

Sighing heavily Naruto turned away from Anko's door while trying to block out the sex noises.

Naruto rolled her eyes and headed for the bathroom. She and Anko would need to have another talk about the new set of rules concerning bringing people home. Couldn't she just go back to the guy's place? Kato was no prince charming, but at least he had manners enough to realise Naruto didn't like his constant night visits.

Anko made a high pitched sound, and Naruto banged hard on the door. "Keep it down!" She shouted, pissed off that Anko had to ruin her previously good mood.

"Go sleep at your boyfriends place, Naru!" Anko snapped back from the other side of the door. Huffing she went into the living room and turned on the radio. Hopefully it would drown some of the noise.

The following day Shisui had to get up early, and his good mood from the day before still lingered as he skipped down the stairs. The date had gone very well, and he would see Naruto again later that day.

Downstairs his father was up and was making breakfast when he entered the kitchen. Grinning brightly he helped Kagami set the table before sitting down.

"You're in a good mood..." His father stated questionably.

Shisui shrugged, but was still smiling when he replied. "Yeah, it's nice to be back in the village."

"What did you do yesterday? I thought you and Itachi were training, but the boy stopped by the station to deliver Fugaku his dinner and he said you were too busy."
Shisui only shrugged. "Yeah, I was with Naruto yesterday. A follow up for some of the things that happened on the mission." Technically not a lie, this whole dating thing had started on the mission, and he was planning on following up thoroughly.

Kagami's brow arched before he shook his head. "If you say so. You're leaving soon right?"

"Yup. Not a lot of downtime these days. I need to catch up with my ANBU duties." Shisui responded and grabbed bread and butter the moment his father was finished with it.

"Did you have time to eat dinner yesterday? I noticed you didn't eat the food I left in the fridge."

"I grabbed dinner with Naruto. Don't worry." He replied while buttering his bread absently.

Kagami sat down opposite him and readied his breakfast too, a lot slower than Shisui who had to be out the door within the next four minutes. "You've been stretched thin lately… Going from one mission to the next without much of a break in between. I'm surprised you're in such high spirits. I thought you'd be more exhausted after such a long time out of the village."

"Nah, the mission was easy enough. It really didn't take much out of us." Shisui replied, still unable to stop smiling to himself.

There was no wonder his father was getting curious.

He wasn't even sure why he was dodging the questions. Shisui doubted his father would mind, but he wanted to keep this to himself a little longer. The secret wouldn't last anyway, not with Itachi already knowing. He also dreaded the unavoidable discussion he'd be faced with because of the simple fact that Naruto was not of Uchiha blood. He'd tell the truth when there was something more solid to discuss. Right now they had only been on a single date, so there was a lot that could still change.

"That's good. I worry. I hardly see you at all these days." Kagami answered with a sad smile as Shisui got up from his seat after inhaling his food.

"I'm sorry dad, it's been hectic with all these delivery missions. It'll calm down in a few months." Shisui replied while heading for the hallway. "I really need to leave. I have seven minutes to get to work, so we'll catch up tonight okay?"

"I thought your shift ended at five?" His father asked puzzled.

"I promised to eat dinner at the girls flat tonight. I'll be home tomorrow though." Shisui called from the hallway while putting on his sandals.

Kagami followed after him just as he reached for the door handle, and Shisui knew that his father realized something was up. He just had to. Kagami was too good at reading his son, and Shisui wasn't even trying to hide his bizarre behaviour. "Really? Well, I guess I'll see you tonight then. Be careful okay?"

Shisui waved dismissively as he opened the door. "I don't think I'll be doing anything dangerous today, dad. I'm just on guard duty."

It was very early in the morning when movements from the hallway woke Naruto from her peaceful sleep. Stifling a yawn while rubbing sleep from her eyes she turned lazily over on her stomach and pushed her pillow over her head, drowning out Anko's voice from the other side of the door.
Someone answered her, and Naruto recalled the late time caller her dear best friend had over the previous night, and hoped they would quiet down soon. Luckily the front door shut only minutes later, and she suspected Anko had gotten rid of her… friend… for now.

Next, the door to her bedroom was slammed open.

"Good morning sunshine!" Anko called loudly, and next she jumped onto the foot of Naruto's futon. Grumbling Naruto peeked out from underneath her pillow.

"What? I was sleeping, Anko." She grumbled and tried to press the pillow over her eyes in hopes of blocking out her roommate's existence. "You kept me awake for long enough."

"How can you sleep when I need details!" Anko demanded and grabbed a hold of her blankets before pulling them clean off her. Squeaking in shock Naruto jumped up from the cool air hitting her skin. The pillow falling off the futon and onto the floor.

"Hey! Give me back my cover!" She demanded.

"Hohoho, are you grumpy? Didn't go that well last night after all? What is it? Was Shisui a bad kisser? Did he use too much tongue? Oh, I know, was it dreadfully boring maybe? Or-"

"Stop it!" Naruto barked and pushed Anko's shoulder. Her roommate laughed loudly as Naruto's cheeks heated up.

"This is huge news Naru. I need details. So spill. Now!"

"Why? You don't see me trying to figure out who you had in our flat or what you did to him."

"Oh, I sent him home. There's really not much to tell, though maybe I should give you some tips. I doubt you and your boyfriend have done it yet, but it's probably only a matter of time, so what you should know is that-" Anko started saying before she was forcibly stopped by Naruto covering her mouth with her hands.

"If you finish that sentence I'll throw you out the window."

The older girl smirked evilly, and for a moment Naruto was comparing her to an annoying wasp, swarming around her head and threatening to sting her at any moment. "Still shy about it? Come on, Naru. You have been on a date now, and from the gooey eyes you two made at each other yesterday I'm guessing you've been keeping secrets. When did this start? How did it start? Why didn't you tell me?! Man, you've been keeping an awful lot secret actually. Your parentage, your boyfriend, what else don't I know? You don't have any secret siblings I'm not informed about, right?"

"I don't." Naruto muttered sourly. Giving up on trying to go back to sleep. Anko was all too focused on getting answers. "And during the last mission. That's when the thing with me and Shisui started. Happy now?"

"Not even close." Anko replied happily while Naruto looked for her pants. "First of; why didn't you tell me?"

"I did tell you. Last night." Naruto answered with a sigh. "We had our first date then. How much earlier did you want to know?"

"You should have told me the moment you started liking him." Anko scolded her and picked up Naruto's shirt that had somehow ended up stuffed between the futon and the wall before handing it to her. Naruto put on her shirt while repressing the urge to shake her head repeatedly at Anko's
"It's new okay? Shisui and I just… It was nice yesterday and we have a lot of fun… I just want to figure this out myself before I start talking about it. It's not much to tell yet anyway."

"But this is huge, Naru! You and Shisui! I can't believe I've been so blind actually. I'm usually really good at picking up clues, but I was under the impression you two were fighting during our last mission, not hooking up behind our backs."

Naruto blushed scarlet. "We weren't hooking up!" She insisted.

"Oh really? So that weird no-talking-or-interacting-if-you-could-get-away-with-it, was what…? A disagreement over favourite music?"

"No… It was… I didn't know I liked him before this mission, and it hit sort of hard and sudden, so I wasn't sure how to act around him. It was stupid really. I just needed to figure out what the hell was going on before I started broadcasting it. And Rin and Kakashi were having their own drama so we didn't want to add any more." Naruto replied and headed for the door, Anko hot on her heel.

"But now? You're together right? Like… is Shisui your boyfriend?" Anko asked, almost jumping up and down in excitement.

Naruto halted and had to think for a moment. "Uh… I guess? It's not like we've talked about… that."

"But you have kissed?" Anko clarified.

"Yes."

"And been on a date?"

"Yes."

"And it was a good date? Which ended in a goodnight kiss?"

"Yes, Anko!"

"He's your boyfriend!" Anko squealed loudly, causing Naruto to take a step back in shock. Anko was in a scarily good mood because of this, and she wasn't sure how to deal with this turn of events.

She didn't care how much she was unnerving Naruto, and instead continued her tirade of questions. "How many knows?"

"Uh… You." Naruto said with a shrug of her shoulders. "It's not like we've been declaring whatever this is for everyone. Oh, and I think Itachi knows… and maybe Minato?" She said the last one as a question.

"What? The Hokage - your father! Knows?" Anko asked while her eyes bugged out in shock. "What did he have to say about it?" The question was lazed with a discreet contempt.

"Nothing… Why would he care?" Naruto wondered and headed for the counter. Since she was up she might as well eat some breakfast.

"I guess he doesn't have a right to. I just wondered." Anko said and sat down by the table. "But this will be fun. I think I like you two together."

Naruto looked over her shoulder with an arched eyebrow. "Thanks?" She asked uncertainly.
Anko winked at her. "You're welcome! Now, give me every detail. I want a complete summary of last night. I know you, and you don't understand romance at all, so I need to know if Shisui treated you right or if I need to have a serous talk with him."

"… which means the west post gate will be relieved within the next two hours, and the next seal switch happens on Tuesday. Team Ira should be back sometime this afternoon, and after that you don't have any pressing appointments." Finished Raidō after reading off the day's agenda. He closed the scroll and looked back up at the Hokage.

Minato nodded with a smile. "Thank you. Good work, you should catch up on sleep." He then looked to the corner of the office. "I assume you won't need that, Kawauso?" He asked with an edge to his voice.

Shisui swallowed but answered as quickly as he could. "Of course not. I just… came in. I slept like a baby." Shisui replied hurriedly, noticing Raidō's curious look in his direction behind Minato. Kakashi also halted and glanced between them.

"Like a baby? I hope that was because of your long mission." Minato added, leaning back in his chair while picking up his scroll. "You two are dismissed. Good work." He said with a nod.

Shisui couldn't help the look of desperation he sent Kakashi, who raised an eyebrow in question but still left the office without a word. Traitor.

"Yes. I was out for weeks. It was refreshing to sleep in a bed again." Shisui answered with a thick voice.

"You slept in a tent with Naruto on that mission…" Minato said slowly, taking up his pen and starting to scribble on a piece of parchment.

"Uh… We've done that before too. Since we were genin."

"You were genin when you were eight years old. I don't care about that. It's different now." Minato muttered and his pen stopped moving.

"I know. And… as you informed us… yesterday, I mean. I didn't know before, but I do now. And… I wouldn't… I respect Naruto. She's one of my closest friends and I've always had her back. I would never… disrespect her." Shisui forced out in a stutter, feeling very relieved that he was currently wearing a mask to cover his burning cheeks. He would be surprised if he didn't die of a heat stroke from how much he was blushing these days.

Minato gave a dry look over his shoulder to the corner Shisui was still stationed in. "I guess you can understand then, when I say that if you ever hurt her... Well, I am the Hokage aren't I? And I can make your days very uncomfortable." Minato told him pleasantly with a small smile on his lips.

Shisui's eyes widened, and silently he nodded.

"Good. We understand each other then. Next time I want to know when and where you're taking her out. And from now on you bring separate tents to a mission."

"Of course, Hokage-sama."

"Also, you won't be going on missions alone anymore. Just for the sake of decency." Minato added.

"Of course..."
"And no public indecency. In fact, no indecency." Minato added with a thoughtful tilt of his head.

"Eh, no public… indecency. But Naruto really should have a say..." Shisui squeaked.

"I guess she does… But nothing public." Minato replied pointedly. His demeanor still as calm as ever.

"I really like her, Minato-sama. I would never hurt her." Shisui stuttered red as a tomato.

Minato turned quiet, his eyes still boring into Shisui. "Fine. I'll allow it for now, but don't do anything stupid. You're young, and I do like you. But Naruto… She's a jinchūriki. She's my daughter. She's Kushina's daughter. And she's been through hell. She's not allowed to speak of a good chunk of her past, and that's on my orders. Your clan might have some objections too as she's not of Uchiha blood. Are you sure you can handle all that?"

"Yes." Shisui answered at once. He'd thought about this before, and he could understand why Minato was so afraid of Naruto dating.

Minato's brow furrowed and he gestured for Shisui to take a step closer. Despite his better judgement Shisui did.

The Hokage stood up, his hands resting on his desktop while he pierced Shisui with such a steely look he momentarily felt as if Minato was trying to split open his head with his stare alone. "Even if it ends? I know it's easy right now. Young love and all that, but if this relationship doesn't last, are you still able to be friends? Or at the very least be civil? Because Naruto isn't just anyone. She carries a bijū inside her, which in itself gives potential partners pause. Or they would if it had been commonly known. But you know. You've been in the known since the beginning, and it might be a good thing. But if you and Naruto break up I can't allow personal conflicts to endanger this whole village. I've trained you to be her guard, and I expect you to continue that duty no matter what personal issues you're brewing in private." He said slowly and severely.

Shisui swallowed, but nodded despite the chill of fear crawling under his skin. Minato was deadly serious. He hadn't seen the Hokage this way since the war.

"I will never betray Konoha. Even if we don't last I wouldn't… I would never endanger her." Shisui said, unsure if he ever would go back to his normal colour. Could blushing become chronic?

Minato simply sighed and nodded. "I believe you, Shisui. You're a good kid. I always liked you and I guess Naruto was bound to find someone eventually. I'm just glad I had a few years before I had to start worrying about this." He muttered and went back to writing.

"Thank you, Hokage-sama. I'm glad you're not opposed."

Minato's was still scribbling, but a cheerless smile raised the corner of his lips while he glanced back at Shisui. "For now."

Naruto opened the door and smiled widely when Shisui waited on her on the other side. He was still in ANBU gear, and Naruto's eyes raked over him. He was too handsome. How could he be so handsome? "Hi." She said shyly, and stepped aside, letting him in while not being able to contain her smile.

"Hi, I just had the most awkward day ever. Ten hours of guard duty inside Minato's office. Do you have any idea how terrifying he can be?" Shisui moaned and took off his sandals.
When he straightened up Naruto kissed him on the mouth. A quick peck that was both an apology and a welcome.

Shisui stopped moping and a smile grew on his face. "I'm sorry. Should I talk to him?" Naruto asked, taking his hand and leading him into the apartment.

"Nah, his concern were well founded. He just wants to make sure you're alright and that I won't… disrespect you." Shisui answered hurriedly.

"Disrespect me? What does that mean?" Naruto asked confused, dragging Shisui with her to the couch.

"Uh… That I don't… tarnish your reputation in any way." Shisui explained with an absent nod to himself. Naruto still didn't get it, but nodded along.

"Well, I think he'll be better once he get used to it anyway." Naruto answered.

"I think so too, but in the meantime I have to report every time we go on a date and where we're going." Shisui said with all the seriousness he possessed.

Naruto burst out laughing, and cupping Shisui's cheeks she kissed him again. She liked kissing Shisui. It was pleasant and did funny things to her stomach.

"He put the Hiraishin seal on you, Naruto. This is very serious. He could just pop up to make sure I'm telling the truth." Shisui whispered frantically once they parted. Naruto grinned.

"Come on Shisui, he wouldn't use the Hiraishin for something so stupid. You're making too big a deal out of this. He just means well… But we can't be expected to hand in a report card about where we'll be at all times. I mean, did you tell him you were coming here?" Naruto asked, unable to stop grinning.

"I did in fact do that. I asked permission to go over the terms of agreement with you in private after my shift was over." Shisui informed her drily with humour. Naruto chuckled and shook her head.

"How will I ever have a steady boyfriend if he goes around scaring off anyone willing to date me? You're not… Is it… too much?" Asked Naruto, suddenly feeling something else but happy.

Shisui shook his head. "No." He answered and leaned in for another kiss.

Naruto pulled away just as he was about to kiss her, one side of her lip looping up. "Good, because you spend so much time in my mind; I should charge you rent."

Shisui barked out laughing. "How long have you had that one prepared?"

"Since this morning after Anko kicked out her one night stand she told it to me."

"Oh damn it, I created a monster… And wait- What one night stand?"

Minato shifted through his stack of papers, double checking the lists to make sure he had everything under control. In just a week the fourth and final round of the Chūnin exams would start, and he was expected to be there.

"We have four genin in the finals, which is more than any other village managed." Tsume said while glancing down her list. "Though Iwa and Kumo have three finalists each. Kiri only managed one and Suna has two. Overall our genin did pretty well. After all there were two hundred and fifty eight
participating contestants in this exam, the highest number ever, and Konoha got the most finalists into
the final round." She placed the list on his desk while brushing away a few strands of hair from her
eyes.

"Thank you, Tsume-san, do you have the list over all the finalists?" He asked distracted, and Tsume
handed over another piece of paper, this one with the names and nationalities of the eighteen finalists.

"Only Kagakure didn't manage to get anyone into the finals. Every other village has at least one."
Tsume said with a shrug of her shoulder. "I'm surprised actually. I was sure the Great Five would
dominate the smaller villages."

"Me too. This is a pleasant surprise." Minato replied and read down the list curiously. "The smaller
villages will have a harder time complaining about the arrangement now. The larger villages sent a
lot more contestants than the rest, so it's only natural the smaller countries has less finalists."

Tsume nodded while her ninkens barked in agreement. "Have you decided who you're taking as
your entourage to the exams yet?" She asked curiously, tilting her head to the side just as Minato
sighed heavily.

He peeked up at her and made a grimace. "No. I keep changing my mind..."

Tsume chuckled. "No surprise there, Namikaze. Just do like you did in the academy and pick the
underdogs. That way no one will expect much, and it will therefore be a surprise when they kick
arse. You should know. You were the underdog yourself once."

Minato grinned, knowing the incident she was referring to. Back in their first year at the academy,
before Minato was known as anything but a random student with no particular advantage, they had
to pick teams for a day exercise. Minato had been chosen as leader for one of seven teams. He'd
picked Kushina (of course), Tamako and Tsume for his own team, all three who were known as the
losers in the class with the lowest grades. Everyone had been surprised when they won the whole
competition. Themselves included.

"I think I'll stick to more proved and tested data than who has been nice to me in class this time
around, Tsume-san." Minato replied with a crooked smile.

"Nice? I was nice to you? Sure you're not confusing me with someone else there, mister Hokage?
And Uzumaki definitely wasn't nice to you. She called you a girl well into our genin days."

"Okay, so I might be exaggerating. But Tamako was very nice, and Kushina had pretty hair. She
didn't need to be nice. You however, scared me too much to be on an opposing team." Minato
replied flippantly.

Tsume was still laughing on her way out the door, her ninkens tails wagging excitedly as Minato was
left alone in his office.

Tsume's question did bring up a pressing issue though. He really did need to pick his guards for the
Chūnin exam. As the Kage of Konoha he had promised he would meet up for the finals. It was
crucial he picked right, because if things went bad the ninjas chosen to come along would both need
to work as team while also have individual strengths.

He could only take three ninjas, and exactly who it would be was still uncertain. The only one he
knew for sure was Kakashi. Minato knew his abilities and how he worked. Kakashi wouldn't make a
blunder and he was good under pressure.

Of the other potentials there was Shikaku, Choza, Shisui, and Naruto he had to pick from.
It was tempting to put Shikaku on the squad, but as Shikaku's strengths went alongside his own. Minato wasn't sure his addition to the team would be as efficient. Shikaku and Minato were actually very similar. He didn't pretend to be as good at strategy as Shikaku, but Minato wasn't far behind him either. It would be more of an advantage to take someone else. Choza was also a good choice. He worked well with almost everyone and was a very good fighter. The problem again was that he wasn't as versatile certain other options.

That left the younger members on his list. Shisui and Naruto worked well with Kakashi. Bringing the members of the same team had an obvious advantage, as they knew one another and could quickly respond in case of danger.

However… Minato really didn't want to bring Naruto anywhere near so many enemy ninjas. Though he was hopeful that the tournament would go off without incident, he wasn't naive enough to ignore the danger.

On the other hand… If trouble arose Naruto would actually be perfect to accompany them. She was an army on her own, and would give obvious advantages even Minato couldn't find a replacement for. The other reason he was unsure of bringing the two young ninjas was their new… relationship.

He didn't know what had come over him.

By all account this was none of his business, but Minato hated the idea of Naruto dating. Even with someone like Shisui, who was actually very decent as far as the male species went. The threatening conversation he'd unleashed on Shisui was proof enough that the whole ordeal bothered him. He hadn't meant to sound like an over protective dad, yet that was undoubtably what Shisui had experienced. He'd just wanted to make Shisui realize how the situation stood. Heck, Hiruzen had taken Minato aside when he had started dating Kushina too. That was when he'd learned about Kushina's status as jinchūriki and warned about the risks, yet he was pretty sure his own conversation had been less sinister than the one Shisui had been subjected to.

Minato didn't have the right to question Naruto on this. He didn't have a say when it came to who his daughter dated or was interested in. He had never been there for her before, and she surely wouldn't appreciate it if he started acting like a worried father now.

Still, he couldn't stop worrying how this would turn out. Shisui might hurt her. Naruto was just as pretty as Kushina had been, and he couldn't say he was surprised males had started to notice her. It had to happen eventually, but with everything that had happened over the years it had never even crossed his mind. Not really.

He was shocked over his own emotions about the topic too. Minato had always tried to make Naruto's life easier from a distance. He had worked hard on making sure no one leaked the jinchūriki information outside the council and the few trusted individuals who already knew or needed to be informed. That way Naruto would be safer both outside and within the village, and able to continue living a life as normal as possible.

Of the human species no one but he, Jiraiya and Naruto herself knew where Isobu was currently located, and though Hiruzen still wanted to know Minato refused to tell him what exactly had happened to the bijū. It was out of respect for Naruto's choice and for the sake of the village's security.

He had worked hard to improve the relationship with Suna too, because he'd seen the friendship between Naruto and the Suna jinchūriki Gaara in her mind. It was proof that it was possible to mend bridges, and he was proud of the progress he'd made in a relevantly short amount of time. He allowed her space and privacy, he had also checked to make sure all her old friends were okay. With
the exception of the people Naruto already knew didn't live anymore, the other children had been born and currently happy with their families.

The thing was, Minato did all these things quietly. Naruto had no idea how much effort he'd put into making sure she would be safe and happy within Konoha when she returned, and he would be lying if he said it had been done purely out of duty.

He wanted her to be happy. Even at his worst he had never wished her pain at any point in his life. But now when she had started dating, he was left in a difficult position.

Had anyone ever given Naruto the talk? He hadn't seen any memory of it within her mind. Sure, she had picked up comments and actions from Jiraiya, but he was hardly the right person to take relationship advice from.

Did she even know what sexual diseases were and how to avoid them? Did she even think about having… sex… with her partner? Just the thought made Minato shudder, but he couldn't stop worrying. He knew Naruto was less innocent than preferable thanks to the influence of Jiraiya and Anko, but being less innocent didn't mean she was properly informed of what a romantic relationship should entail.

Naruto needed to know that it was okay to say no if Shisui pressured her for things she wasn't ready for. Where babies came from and what a healthy relationship was built on. She didn't have any proper role models when it came to these things. She only had an idea of what it meant to be committed through the various tales she'd been told of Minato and Kushina's marriage. But that was hardly enough. They were just random stories told second hand.

The most influential parental figures she'd ever had were the older version of Iruka, a single man who though well-meaning, had never shown any signs of settling down. Kakashi when he'd been her sensei, who read porn books and couldn't commit if his life depended on it. Jiraiya, who was unhappily in love with Tsunade and was trying to sleep his way through the elemental countries. Hiruzen, who also had an unhealthy appreciation of Jiraiya's books, and lastly Tsunade herself, who Naruto only knew as a drunken gambler with anger management issues.

These were the parental figures while Naruto grew up the first time around, and had undoubtedly given her an irreversible twisted view of how a relationship worked!

Her friends hadn't been any help either. She had watched Sakura pine over Sasuke, and that definitely wasn't a healthy obsession to have. All in all Minato couldn't think of a single relationship Naruto had witnessed firsthand that was actually a proper role model. Not one. Except him and Kushina, but Naruto had never really experienced it. She'd only been told stories, but never seen them interact together.

It left him extremely frustrated and worried. Who knew what Naruto thought was normal. Maybe Shisui would take advantage of her gap in knowledge? He was a guy, and though he appeared decent, one never knew what teenage boys could come up with.

Shaking his head Minato tried fruitlessly to get back to work, but the damage was done. The rest of the evening was spent with little progress with his work pile, as his mind whirled with one thought more disturbing than the last.

Naruto had just come from the Hokage office, it was late in the afternoon but still warm, and though what she really wanted was to drag Shisui into a dark corner and make out, he unfortunately had a night shift in front of him and needed to get a few hours of sleep first.
They had come out from a meeting where they'd been picked to escort Minato to Land of Iron for the Chūnin exam, something all of them had mixed feelings about. It would be exciting but unavoidably dangerous too. Shisui was probably the most nervous, which Naruto didn't understand.

Personally she was excited. This exam was an important step in the right direction, and though she'd been uncertain in the beginning Naruto couldn't believe Minato had managed to pull it off. He took this issue very seriously, and it was the first, she started understanding just how much effort he put into mending the relationship between the nations.

On her way home Naruto decided to stop by the market, they needed food at home, and Anko would appreciate it if Naruto took care of the groceries.

Entering the small shop she usually didn't go to because it was too far away from her flat, Naruto started hunting down the basic groceries first before starting with dinner ingredients.

She stood in the fruit section when she spotted a familiar figure across the store. Her long brown hair lay messily around her face and she was wearing relaxed clothes. It was such a strange look on her, as Naruto had never seen Akiko in anything but the best she could manage. Even at the orphanage Akiko had always looked unusually well groomed.

Today she looked downright unkempt.

Naruto hesitated. Since their argument almost a year ago Akiko had been avoiding her. If Naruto showed up at her place she would refuse to let her in. If they saw each other on the street she would turn around and walk away. Akiko didn't want anything to do with her anymore, and Naruto didn't understand why.

She just wanted to help.

Making up her mind Naruto walked up to the girl and patted her carefully on the shoulder to draw her attention.

Akiko startled, turning around in fright at getting interrupted. "Wha- oh..." Akiko said, but Naruto's attention was on the blue marks peeking out from under her messy hair. It was covered up with makeup, but Naruto was too used to Anko covering up scars to not recognize the signs.

Akiko was injured.

"What happened?" Naruto asked breathlessly, her hand shooting out to touch her, but Akiko jerked backwards. Afraid.

"I- um… That's not your business." Akiko mumbled and turned around to get more food. Completely ignoring Naruto again.

"I get that you're mad at me, though I don't understand why, but you're hurt, Akiko. Please don't run." Naruto replied angrily.

"I'm fine! I just fell."

"That is not from a fall. I'm a ninja, Akiko, and though I won't pretend I'm an expert with injuries even I can tell when a bruise comes from someone's fist. I would have to be blind not to with the work I do."

"Just let it go. Please, Naruto." Akiko answered in a whisper. Her eyes shooting around the store nervously.
"No. You never let me know anything, and the only way I can help is by butting in. Just tell me who I'm going to beat up. Who did this to you?"

Akiko whirled around. "You can't. The one who beat me up, as you so kindly put it, was a ninja too. So no, you can't go there and start a fight. Just drop it. I won't give you a name, so leave me alone. It's for your own good as well as mine."

She dropped her bag of groceries on the floor before hurried out of the store, leaving Naruto by the toiletries aisle. Just as she was about to leave out the front doors Naruto spoke up before it was too late. "Akiko!"

The girl halted with her hand on the door handle. "I'm always here. You know where I live and you can always come to me if you need help. Even if you're pissed or angry at me, I've still got your back. I'm in your corner." Naruto said quietly.

Akiko glanced over her shoulder with an unreadable look. She swallowed once and nodded before leaving out onto the street.

Naruto sighed and glanced between her two teammates. Kakashi looked more tense than ever, while Shisui was pacing back and forth.

They were all dressed in new Konoha uniform handed out to them the day before. They had a whole set of brand new clothes to wear during their relatively short stay in Land of Iron. From the new flak jacket, the travelling cloak to the shiny pair of boots on her feet. Naruto wasn't complaining. She could keep the outfit later, and was there one thing Naruto appreciated it was free stuff.

Finally Minato came out of his office, his Hokage cloak hanging off his figure with the normal uniform underneath. An easy smile lit up his face before he caught sight of the two boys, and if anything his smile widened.

"I hope you're prepared. This will be an interesting week and it's not only our genin's who're about to be tested." Minato murmured quietly and gestured for the three guards to follow him down the corridor. He glanced over his shoulder, his eyes lingering on Shisui for a moment, who strangely enough turned pink around the ears.

Shrugging it off as a weird guy thing Naruto straightened her turtleneck sweater. It would be an interesting stay when they reached Land of Iron.

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To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so very much for reading! The chapter was beta'd by AnjoRemix!

Sorry for the long wait. The story arc is making my head hurt, and it's a bit hard to map
out. I have a lot written, but it doesn't flow very well, which makes it a nightmare to put together the chapters. I'm doing my best though, but as I have exams on top of everything it's very hard to make the time to write regularly.

Until next time!
Chapter Forty Four - Walking on Eggshells

"When people have different opinions, you should apply the majority vote." - Uzumaki Naruto

The Land of Iron was as cold and unpleasant as Naruto remembered, but as nightfall fell over the frozen tundra they were currently passing the clear full moon and thousands of stars lit up the terrain. The snow covered ground reflected a hazy shine from the starlight, so even without a torch the group could see enough to walk.

It had been a long night's trek, and in just over ten hours the Chūnin exam would start. They were still on the road though, crossing over the mountains leading to the village hidden high up in the chains of peaks. Naruto was freezing, and the group had been quiet since midnight had passed a few hours ago. Focusing on getting to their destination instead of making small talk.

They had timed it so Minato would reach the village during the morning of the day of the fourth round. There would be a Kage meeting first, around six in the morning, and the tournament itself would start at noon. The fourth round of the exams would last for two days, and they would leave right after the winner had been declared.

This way Minato wouldn't actually be sleeping within the village for more than one night, and yet be there for everything that was needed. They knew the Kazekage had arrived the day before, but the other Kage was doing the same as Minato, staying as far away as possible until he was needed.

"I can't feel my toes." Mumbled Shisui from behind her.

Naruto turned around and smiled weakly. How much he could see in the darkness was questionable though. "I can't either. It's not much left though. Only a few mountains and we'll be there." Shisui sped up and fell in step next to her. His hand peeking out from underneath his cloak and flushed fingers brushing her shoulder, making snow fall from the hood she'd drawn up over her head and down onto more snow. "I can't believe its summer, what do you think winter looks like here?"

"Unbearable." Shisui answered with a wry smirk, his nose and cheeks rose tinted from the low temperatures.

"Hurry up you two. You're lagging behind." Minato called from ahead, and Shisui took an instinctive step away. He was still certain Minato would kill him if they were spotted too close, which Naruto found utterly ridiculous.

"Coming." Naruto called back, steam obscuring the air in front of her as warm breath hit crisp and cold air, and the two youngest sped up to reach Kakashi and Minato.

"How are we doing on time?" Asked Shisui and looked around at the vast landscape. Despite how uncomfortable and cold she was, Naruto could admit it was beautiful. There were mountains in every direction framed by an endless night sky. There were no clouds, and it helped their visibility while trekking up and down mountain after mountain. They were still travelling under the radar, and hoped to stay hidden until they reached the village.
"We should be there in about four hours. That gives us half an hour until the meeting starts." Kakashi replied causally and took another step. The snow reached him to his knee, which meant it was a lot worse for Naruto, who was covered to her thighs. It made everything a lot heavier, and she tried to make sure at least one of the guys were in front of her to make a path.

"We'll have a long day ahead of us, and you can't afford to run out of energy despite not being allowed to sleep tonight." Minato murmured.

"We know." Naruto replied. They knew only too well as the journey, stay and return to Konoha had been drilled into their heads by Nara Shikaku before they left.

The start of the journey had been as any other. They travelled during the day and slept at night with one person on guard at all times. This was the first night they wouldn't be sleeping, as the cold weather didn't make for a good camping spot anyway.

The sleepless night would be followed by a full day of guard duty while mingling with the ninja beasts of the other great five villages and six minor ones. And that was not including the Samurai who'd be everywhere. In simple terms the next couple of days would be extremely tense and filled with restrictions.

To get this arrangement off the ground there was a thousand and ninety different rules set in place to keep things peaceful. Yet some had already been broken if the reports they'd received was accurate. The exams had technically already started. This was just the finals, and a lot of Konoha ninjas had been stuck in Land of Iron for a month already.

That was one comfort. All the Jōnin sensei who had been sent along with their genin contestants, so the Kage guards wouldn't be the only ones to fight if something went wrong. Of course she hoped it wouldn't be necessary, but she wasn't a complete fool ether. A lot could go wrong.

On a mountain in the far distance Naruto could vaguely see a blurry outline of what might be a wall, and she felt her heart speed up. They would be crossing a wall on the last mountain before they reached their destination. It looked like they were closing in on their target indeed.

"This is cozy." Murmured Kakashi and looked around curiously. Naruto glanced up at him in disbelief.

"What? What about this is cozy? It's freezing… and sad." She mumbled, her eyes sweeping over the street. The only ones awake at this hour were Samurai guards who were visible at every street corner in all possible directions.

But Shisui seemed to agree with Kakashi. "It has its charm." He agreed, though unlike her he was looking over the roofs.

Bushigakure wasn't large, but then again it was at the side of a very tall mountain, and Naruto doubted a lot of people would pick this as their first choice of dwelling. They had been through a lot of security checks, and now waited patiently for the meeting to begin. They had actually arrived ahead of schedule, the last mountain having been smaller than anticipated.

The samurai village was located close to the peak of a shallow mountain. At the very top was the newly constructed stadium, with a path leading down the shallow sides to the village. The top was one huge snowy field with a round stadium in the center, surrounded by threatening sharp and taller mountains on all sides.

The village itself was built on the slope down from the field, so the houses grew taller when you
entered the village from the bottom, and the building grid followed the contours of the terrain instead a set formation. It left the whole system very confusing yet mystically organic, and Naruto suspected only the natives really understood the reasons for their pick of construction locations.

They had crossed over the closest neighboring mountain not far away, which was very visible from down in the village. There was a large wall up there where the samurai had greeted them an hour before, and unlike Konoha, where the border was where the houses ended, here the village ended far, far away on the neighboring mountains than around the constructions making up the village.

Apparently the wall stopped avalanches though, so maybe it was to beat two flies with one stone to put it so far away.

"I just hope they have heating." Naruto whispered quietly, not wanting their samurai tour guide to overhear her.

The samurais all wore the same uniform. A very clunky armor that had to constrict their movements. They were all heavily armed, but Naruto couldn't fault them. They took a large risk inviting ninjas into their safe hold, and it was their right to defend themselves in case something went wrong.

The guide they had been assigned to by the village wall was a quiet man Naruto couldn't describe because of his helmet covering his face. If she met him again she'd never recognize him, because beside from a grunt in agreement half an hour ago he hadn't spoken since, which left him very mysterious. In fact she couldn't even be sure he was male, because though taller than Naruto he was shorter than Kakashi, Shisui and Minato. But something about his stand made her think male.

He led them through the village while the three guards making sure to cover Minato at all times, their eyes scouting over every corner as they made their way to the meeting hall.

Because as if a Chūnin Exam wasn't enough, the first Kage meeting since the time of the Shodai was about to commence, and Naruto felt as if it was just asking for trouble.

Less interaction was probably better in this scenario. Baby steps. But the opportunity was too good to pass up, as the five Kage would be in the same village at the same time, which meant Naruto just had to bite her teeth together and do her best not to screw up.

They were heading towards a larger building, this one in stone. It was the only building not made of wood in this area, and larger and more demanding than any other construction she'd seen in the country too.

It was a kind of fortress, square but intimidating in its architecture. The samurai led them to the dark double doors at the foot of wall, and as he opened one of the doors it creaked ominously.

"It's through the green door at end of the corridor." The samurai instructed, the voice very deep, which finally made Naruto decide it had to be a male they'd been following.

"Thank you." Kakashi said politely before heading in first, a precaution in case there was an ambush on the other side, and Shisui went after before Minato and lastly Naruto entered the hall.

The morning light lit up the entryway, but the corridor leading into the fortress had a line of torches that cast a warm glow. Though nowhere near as warm as Konoha, it was still a great difference from the chill outside. The heat hit her face like a warm hug, and though they were about to walk into a pit of monsters, Naruto couldn't help but let her shoulders sag from the heat.

Nervousness had been coming on steadily since they first glimpsed the village from the neighboring mountain, and as they headed down the hallway Naruto felt the pressure grow for each echoing step.
The door to the final room was freshly painted green and stood out from the other grey ones. Kakashi turned the handle and headed in without hesitation. For all appearances sake the guy didn't seem uncomfortable at all. It took someone who knew him inside out to see the way his little finger was slightly tense, that he stood so the door would cover his body where he couldn't see, that his walk had grown increasingly lighter the closer they got to the door. Naruto knew, and she probably had similar tells that showed how alert she was.

Following after the boys through the door Kakashi held up for them, Naruto was met with a tall square room in the same stonework as the exterior of the building. Alongside the walls on each side were arching tables with three comfy looking chairs placed with wide and even margins. They stood strategically so the people who would occupy them had their backs against the wall while simultaneously have a good view of everyone in the room including the only exit.

Currently there were only two visible people in the room, but Naruto knew there were at least six others hidden up in the gallery above which was used as the guard station.

The shortest of the two men, and the one she didn't recognize, greeted them with a nod in the middle of the room while the other stood behind his chair at one of the corners. Naruto already knew the seating arrangement, as it was another security risk. Rasa didn't show any response to their entrance, but his eyes followed Minato from the moment he'd become visible in the doorway.

Naruto didn't show any reaction to the two men herself, but her focus was drawn to the one she didn't recognize on sight. The one she presumed was Mifune.

He had bandages covering the top of his head like a turban, with grey hair falling straight to his waist. His moustache was neatly trimmed into two thin pieces that fell on each side of his mouth to the same length as his equally straight beard. He was wrinkled and small in stature, but yet of all the heavily armored samurai Naruto had spotted at every corner so far he still had a quality about him that made her instantly take notice. Despite his vastly less equipped appearance, his almost friendly face and none threatening posture, Naruto was certain he was a man who had seen his fair share of battles.

She didn't get to stay and observe for more than a second before Minato gave them a nod, the signal that he wanted them to take their place in the gallery above.

All three chose to use the sunshin, because the faster they were out of sight the better. Their spot was up in the gallery alongside the same end as the other six guards were currently standing. They would stand right behind Minato's chair, the one closest to the exit. Three samurai stood stoical next to them, and on their other side were three Suna ninja. Naruto recognized one, namely Baki, who nodded to her when their eyes met.

Kumo, Iwa and Kiri had yet to arrive, but Naruto could already hear footsteps coming down the hall.

Minato had just walked behind his own chair when the door opened again.

The first person she saw made her have to suppress a groan. Because it was none other than Azuma. He was serious, his eyes darting to the closest threat in the room, which unfortunately was Minato. His step halted for a split second before he continued. Pretending he was completely fine with this even though everyone knew it was all a mask. It was all pretense, and Naruto wondered who would crack first.

Instead of a second guard he was followed by Ōnoki himself, before the remaining two of the group entered last. She knew who all the men were, because she'd had the displeasure of meeting them all at various points in the last year. After Ōnoki came the stone faced and big nosed Kitsuchi and lastly...
Rōshi… The four tail jinchūriki. Naruto suppressed the urge to blink owlishly. She knew the man was a jinchūriki thanks to Iwa's hopeless ability to keep quiet about it. He was known publicly as a jinchūriki, even Konoha's bingo book stated as much, a lot like Naruto had been in her first time line, and could use lava release. Which meant he had the Yonbi as a bijū according to Kurama.

Ōnoki's seat was in the middle on the opposite table, and the guards were only visible for about two seconds before they disappeared up in the gallery on the other side of the room.

No one spoke a word, and Naruto used the time to wait for the last two expected groups by taking another sweeping look over the room. Finding a few others occupying their time in the same fashion.

After a whole minute of staring intently the door opened again and this time the first to appear was both extremely satisfying yet a bit disturbing.

Killer Bee swaged into the room with a large grin on his face and without a care in the world. Humming under his breath to boot. The singing ended quickly though, as he was shoved hard in the shoulder by the Raikage who followed him.

Naruto held in a small laugh at the sight. They sure knew how to make people underestimate them. The almost casual interactions spoke of scolding, of A wanting to discipline Killer Bee and somehow showing an unkempt front amongst military elites, but the ones who could guess as far would know it was from both overconfidence and a front to make people underestimate Killer Bee.

Not that he needed a front. He was carefree in general, at least from what Naruto knew of him, and yet a lethal opponent. A lot like Ōnoki he trusted in his own power enough to never bother with much of a front. Once upon a time Naruto had been the same, but after so many close calls, after so many defeats, she had learned to value a good bluff.

One of the other guards was also vaguely recognizable. If she didn't remember wrong his name was Darui, and had been A's guard the first time she met the man. Ironically that had also been in the Land of Iron on their way to a Kage summit back in her original time. The last guard was older and shorter, and Naruto didn't recognize him.

The guards had just disappeared up into the gallery and A had barely reached his seat, the one opposite Minato on Ōnoki's left side, when the door opened again.

Naruto held her breath as the first person came in, only to blink repeatedly.

It was a child.

He was so young in appearance he wouldn't look out of place amongst a group of graduating academy students. He had dirty blonde hair and light purple eyes. A scar ran down from underneath his left eye to his jaw, badly sown up from the looks of it. After him came someone incredibly tall, which just made the comparison all the more amusing, until she felt the air leave her lungs in shock when she recognized him.

It was Itachi's Akatsuki partner. Kisame.

She couldn't help but stare at him, noticing the blade on his back was different and so was his outfit. Then again, the last time she heard Konoha was still in possession of Šamehada, and had no plans of ever returning it. Unless Orochimaru had managed to take it with him when he fled the village… Naruto really hoped he hadn't.

She had been so focused on Kisame she almost didn't pay attention to the two remaining men. Only registering that one looked somehow familiar at a first glance, even if she couldn't place the white
haired teenager. He was also young, but maybe a little older than the purple eyed boy, and lastly came another young man who she completely overlooked in favor of staring at Kisame.

Because in all honesty; at first glance it really looked like Kisame had brought his genin team into the Kage meeting.

Finally she was forced to take in the remaining of the group when something hit her senses. A pressure of sort… and in confusion her eyes landed on the last member. He was dark haired, lean, and about the same age as Naruto herself, and now that she looked at him, she realized she knew who the boy was.

Utakata?

Of all the groups expected for the meeting Naruto had dreaded Kiri the most. She was afraid of her own emotions concerning them. They were responsible for Iruka's death. For Kushina's death. And though it was now years since that occurrence, it still hurt. Yet the surprise of the group overpowered her seething fury for a moment.

She was even more puzzled when Utakata stood behind the last seat opposite Rasa, and only one question could really register within the jumble of impressions still whirling inside her mind.

Since when was Utakata the Mizukage?

And why on earth could she feel bijū chakra from him?

The only one not standing behind a seat was Mifune, who still stood as relaxed as when Naruto had entered herself. Once Utakata had taken his place he finally looked up. From his position against the opposite end of the door, with two Kage on one side and three on the other, he spoke.


"I am Mifune, the captain of Land of Iron." He continued and gestured towards himself. "We've had an exciting month, and your genin has all grown stronger within the borders Bushigakure. I expect the fourth and final round of the Chūnin Exam will go off without problems, and I'm pleased to see you all made it here without incident. But first we have business to attend, and I expect we will keep a civil tone for the remains of your stay."

He finished the little introduction with a sweeping glance at all of them and headed for the only remaining open seat. The one between Minato and Rasa.

Naruto caught herself before she gave a deep exhale. Because the tension in the room had just skyrocketed.

The first point on the agenda had been the exams themselves. All the security measures had been read aloud, and some points had been discussed in greater detail. All the Kage had been informed beforehand, and as Jōnin from each village had been wandering around the village for a month the security was now tested and tried several times.

Ōnoki took the time to brag about the winner podium he'd dragged along with him from Iwa, which was currently being placed in the stadium. From the way he behaved it seemed he expected a standing ovation for his efforts too. The one who came closest to such a reaction was Mifune, who gave an approving nod at most.
So the topic changed to security again, and the only complaint came from Rasa, who insisted more security checks at the village gates. Privately Minato didn't agree. There were already a lot of samurai guards checking the visitors, but if the visitors who arrived managed to fool five separate samurai than one more wouldn't help. They weren't knowledgeable enough in ninja arts to work around it, and if there was a threat it would undoubtedly be from a ninja in their current setting.

Minato said as much when the topic came up, and the others agreed he had a point. After a small discussion the conversation turned to international matters, and the reason they were gathered at all. Each Kage would bring up their own agenda for the meeting, starting with the Kazekage, which in hindsight might have been stupid, as the animosity in the room instantly rose because of his claims.

"Those fields belongs to Suna, what right do you have to that land?" The Kazekage said with forced calm. The discussion was some of the land which had been taken from Suna by Iwa at the very beginning of the Third War.

Ōnoki refused at once, his large nose wrinkling as he sneered. "The spoils of war is free for the taking. If you couldn't keep it during the war than it no longer belongs to you."

"You're ruining the land by taking perfectly good fields and creating factories for your weapons. A clear violation of the agreement you signed upon the end of the Third war." Minato interjected.

The Tsuchikage straightened up, his lips quivering for a moment as his eyes met Minato's, who imagined the old man was holding back a real growl just from having to look at him. "We have done no such thing."

"Lie all you want, Ōnoki, but it doesn't change the fact that you're rebuilding your forces. You lost, and to spare your country from any more unnecessary pain Land of Fire allowed you a peaceful end to the war. We were lenient with you, and don't think for a second we would expect the same type of grace if the roles had been reversed. We know perfectly well you would have plundered our homes to the ground if you'd been given the opportunity. If you won't allow Suna to take back the land you occupied during the war you will at the very least shut down your weapon production, or something has to be done."

"We want our land back." Rasa interfered, some of his fury showing on his face. "It has been ours since the first Kage meeting, and you violated that treaty before the war even started."

"You lost it, we took it, I have no qualms about keeping what you were too weak to hold." Ōnoki snapped angrily.

"Then you will shut down your production." The Raikage said, his enormous fist hitting the table and making papers quiver and fly off the edge. "It is a violation to the rules set in place. If Kumo could keep to the rules than so can Iwa, or are you still so wounded after the war that you're desperately holding onto this piece of leftover land? If you refuse you'll be required to give compensation for the rules you've breeched, or potentially start another damn war."

Ōnoki bristled angrily, his face having turned a strange shade of reddish purple from his suppressed reaction. Minato wondered what it would take to break the man's patience. He got the impression it wasn't much.

"No one wants another war." Utakata said calmly, his hands still folded neatly on the table. As the youngest and least experienced he was also the calmest within the room, followed closely by Mifune. Both had preferred to observe and listen than to make claims so far. Minato himself wasn't planning on being unreasonable, but the other countries would not leave this room with the impression that Land of Fire was a country they could walk all over either. "But Ōnoki is right in his claims."
Sunagakure lost the land, and we all keep spoils of war to ourself. You don't see Kiri trying to reclaim one of our legendary swords despite Konoha stealing it." He agreed with a small nod.

Minato gave a jerk and his eyes flashed angrily. "You stole our jinchūriki." He hissed, "So of course we took her back along with the weapons you used to keep her locked up."

"Kiri stole your jinchūriki?" Ōnoki said, a small twitch of his lips and clear gleefulness radiating in his eyes. "Mah, Konoha certainly must have lost its touch then. Does this mean you no longer are in the possession of the Kyubi?"

Minato leaned back in his seat, his face going blank as his eyes swept over Ōnoki and A with calculating eyes. "Do you really think I would admit to losing our jinchūriki unless we got her back, Ōnoki? Konoha didn't suffer for Kiri's impulsiveness in kidnapping a jinchūriki they hadn't even planned on taking in the first place." He then let his eyes rest on the Raikage for a long moment. "Though of course they are not the first village to try kidnapping Konoha inhabitants, and none of you've been successful so far."

Rasa sighed and shook his head. "Let us decide about what matters. Ōnoki is producing weapons on occupied land, which Sunagakure demands back on the claims that he has been breaking the peace treaty." He declared.

Ōnoki shook his head. "Iwa is not producing weapons on that land, but if you're growing so nervous over some corn factories than Iwa is willing to move the business elsewhere."

"And the land?" Minato asked with pursed lips.

"It's spoils of war. It's moot point. Rasa can bitch all he wants but Ōnoki is within his right to keep it." A said with a lazy wave of his hand.

Rasa's face twitched dangerously, but after taking a calming breath he leaned back and accepted it wordlessly.

Minato sighed and dragged a hand through his hair.

"You will shut down whatever you're producing. I don't believe you're making corn in there Ōnoki. You'll have month." Rasa said.

That threat didn't sit well with the Tsuchikage at all. "Where do you get off ordering Iwagakure, Rasa?"

"Calm down everyone." Mifune interrupted, holding up a hand. "He is speaking for everyone. If you are going against the agreement you signed they are within their right to take actions against you Tsuchikage-dono."

Ōnoki huffed but didn't argue the point, and Mifune turned over a paper on his desk. "Now that's been discussed we can move to Hokage-dono's agenda for this meeting."

Minato had been leaning forwards, but straightened with a nod as Mifune gestured for him to speak. "You all already know of the topic I'm concerned about, which most of you've been ignoring. Namely Madara."

Ōnoki spluttered. "What!? You're still going on about that? I thought you would have grown out of such stupid games by now!"

Minato sent the Tsuchikage such a nasty glare everyone actually froze for a moment, before the
Hokage continued. "It's not without reason, Ōnoki. I have every right to be concerned. We have lost all communication with Amegakure recently, a village I've informed you about would be one of his targets. Ame was hit hard by both the second and the third war, and it's been used as a middle ground in petty conflicts between larger villages for years. The population is fed up with bigger village's constant need for conflict, making it an ideal target for someone of Madara's standing to take advantage of."

"They're dirt poor. What threat would they be?" A asked with a shake of his head.

"They might be poor, which is why they are desperate enough. Are you all arrogant enough to think Uchiha Madara is a threat to be ignored?" He looked at Ōnoki now. "You are old enough to remember him in person, is he really something that can be dismissed?"

The Tsuchikage shook his head. "We have enough to deal with after the war than a hypothetical scenario where Uchiha Madara may or may not have risen from the dead!"

"He never died in the first place." Minato hissed. "And by allowing him to go unchecked across your borders you're allowing him time to gather allies. Dangerous allies. And their target is our jinchūriki. I say that makes him a very urgent threat that needs to be eliminated. After the war we all had to raise our mission prices, some more than others, but I suspect he has gotten himself an already established organization to work underneath. A cover to blind you all to what is truly going on." Minato said and took out a folder from his stack of papers. On the front was the name Akatsuki.

"They are a peace organization from Ame who wished to stop the internal fighting within the country and make a treaty with Hanzo. It was led by a man named Yahiko the last time we managed to make contact. We no longer can. Something has happened, and the organization has changed. We suspect either Yahiko is dead or he has been converted by Madara. Yahiko is a strong shinobi himself, but he is nothing compared to his teammate Nagato. His best friend. Who could destroy an entire village with one jutsu if so inclined. So far they have worked for peace without violence for the sake of their home village, but now I'm not so sure." Minato sighed in frustration.

"Whatever has gone down has happened within the borders. Hanzo is extremely dangerous himself, but Akatsuki is just a big of threat if Madara has managed to convince them to join him. And I know for a fact they were his first priority because of Nagato. He will continue recruiting S rank ninjas for this organization, no matter their previous loyalties. I have it on good authority that Orochimaru has joined them too."

There was a long silence followed that declaration, and Minato felt a small pang of pride that Naruto was shouting in the gallery behind him. She hadn't been informed of Orochimaru's new organization yet, but still managed to keep her emotions in check despite how much of a shock this had to be for her. Someone else did shout though.

"Orochimaru? OROCHIMARU!" A roared furiously. "What is it about you Konoha ninja being unable to eliminate your own damn missing nin! If what you say is true than you have Madara and Orochimaru working together! Is that what you're trying to say?!" He ranted.

Minato nodded. "I've been trying for years to make you see what a danger they are, but you keep dismissing my warnings. They are after jinchūriki, or more accurately the bijū inside them, though I doubt they'll make a move anytime soon. Their first priority is funds. They will need to gather money through taking low paying, high ranked missions from various smaller villages. They might even make contact with yourself. They'll keep low and sneak in like a snake. Attacking abruptly and suddenly, leaving us quite unprepared to counter attack unless we do something about it now. Once upon a time Madara created great damage to Konoha with only the nine tails. Imagine what he could do with all nine under his control."
"He will never get our bijū." Ōnoki said with narrowed eyes. "Unlike Konoha Iwa can actually protect our jinchūriki."

Minato shook his head. "Not if you don't start taking this threat seriously. Madara can use a very flexible space-time ninjutsu which isn't restricted to seals. Some of my ninja actually encountered him a few months ago, quite unexpected, but it was in the proximity of several high ranked ninjas and a jinchūriki. If it was to map out the jinchūriki's movements, or him having ideas about recruiting people with sensitive information is unknown. As far as I can tell he's been breaching even my own village's defenses without getting caught. He works in the shadows, and what's to stop him from teleporting into your jinchūriki's bedroom at night and snapping him up in his sleep, Ōnoki? You need to raise your defenses. Suna has taken my warnings to heart and are taking steps to secure their jinchūriki. I'm willing to help you too with defenses if it means keeping the jinchūriki out of Madara's reach."

"Preposterous." Ōnoki mumbled and shook his head. "How stupid do you think we are, Minato? Iwa don't need any help."

"You're not coming anywhere near our jinchūriki Minato." A agreed with narrowed eyes with Utakata nodding along.

"I'm not questioning your defenses, I'm just making you aware of a new threat and how he might attack." Minato said exasperated and leaned back in his chair.

Mifune hummed in concern. "So you've actually seen him, then?"

"I myself haven't. But a man fitting his description and with the powers we have concluded he is in possession of, clashed with some of my most trusted ninjas. He was also wearing the Akatsuki uniform, which leads us to believe he truly has infiltrated the organization despite our efforts to keep them safe from his influence. What exactly happened is still unknown to us. The last report from Ame said that the leaders were dead, but I don't believe that."

"You seem to believe a lot of people have faked their deaths, Minato." Utakata pointed out skeptically.

"If only that had been the case for the Shodai I wouldn't have been so concerned." Minato replied harshly.

"We still haven't been given any proofs of this. I will be the first person to be concerned if anything indicated that Uchiha Madara was actually alive, but so far we only have your word for it. And I don't find that good enough." Ōnoki growled. "It sounds more like scheming. Madara had the flashiest fighting style I've ever seen. Probably only bested by the Shodai Hokage in how much destruction it caused, and I never saw him playing with time-space ninjutsu. You could just as easily be staging these "sightings", as you called it, as you yourself is the most famous user of time-space ninjutsu Minato."

"I take offence to that, Ōnoki. Uchiha Madara is not someone I would use as a prank to give you some sleepless nights. I believe I can handle that all on my own." Minato replied pleasantly, causing the Tsuchikage to scowl.

"What do you even hope to gain from bringing this subject to the table today?" Asked Utakata curiously. "It's not like he is here."

Minato paused and looked at Utakata with a tilt to his head. "I hope to make you all more aware of a growing threat that in a decade might have grown too powerful for us to overthrow. Even with
combined powers. My goal is to stop him before he ever gains that amount of strength. Madara working in the shadows could only mean he is too weak to take us on in his current state, and I'm gambling on that being the case. I'll rather get rid of a weak Madara now than a strong one in the future."

All of them turned quiet, and to Minato's surprise the only one who actually looked like he was considering his words were Ōnoki. He knew the man would never admit it, but out of everyone the Tsuchikage was the only one in the room to actually have met Madara before. Well, with the exception of Naruto. He must have left an impression if Ōnoki was actually listening to Minato's words. No matter how reluctantly.

"Anything more we should know then?" Asked Ōnoki at last, his eyes still narrowed in thought.

"Not at the moment." Minato replied politely, knowing it wouldn't help to press further. He didn't have any solid proofs, and as long as he didn't they would continue questioning his honesty, but at least they would be aware.

"Then we'll move on with the agenda." Mifune said and turned over to the next sheet of papers in front of him. "Raikage-dono, if you'd please bring up your subject next."

Naruto was picturing stuffing all five Kage's heads in the snow to relieve some of the pressure that had been stifling them during the meeting. So she couldn't be blamed for letting out a tiny moan of relief as the cool outside air hit her face when they excited the fortress, despite Shisui sending her a tiny glare for showing weaknesses so close to enemy ninjas. It didn't matter. She was free! It had been so dreadfully spent in that room it was a miracle no one had snapped.

Outside they were met by a large group of ninjas all around the courtyard. Exactly how many was impossible to count at a sweeping glance, but five of them were indeed from Konoha.

They came forward at once, and without a word took formation around team Kasai as they were led out of the building.

Naruto knew the village was already filled with Jōnin from each village. As the genin who had already been eliminated hadn't been able to leave yet, their Jōnin sensei had remained too. It actually took off a bit of the pressure on team Kasai, as a few of the Jōnin could take over guard duty for them that night so all three could get some sleep.

"We are pleased to see you made it to Bushigakure without incident, Hokage-sama." Said one of the Jōnin happily as they headed down the street.

"The trip went well." Minato replied. "How is the situation here?"

"The disqualified genin are restless and displeased that they can't watch the finals, but all things considered the arrangement has gone better than expected."

As all the villages had sent an uneven amount of genin each, and therefore an uneven number of Jōnin, only the Kage and the guards were welcome to actually watch the finals. Konoha had 23 extra Jōnin within the village while Kirigakure only had six, so to make it fair they were banned unless they were escorting a contesting genin. The rest of the contestants were stuck in their safe houses. The building they had slept and ate in for the last month until the exams were over. They were only allowed out of the house at certain parts of the day, and tardiness had been punished hard. It wasn't that they didn't trust their genin, but the tension was too high to take the chance of a pre-teen starting a petty conflict that could quickly escalate.
"Here we are." The Jōnin leading the small entourage said pleasantly and gestured towards the snowy cliff edge. He walked straight off and disappeared from view.

As she reached the edge herself Naruto got stuck with a faint sense of vertigo. She couldn't spot the bottom below, as it was obscured by snowy fog and the sense of endless grey. The Jōnin was walking vertically down the mountain on a set course, and obviously expected them all to follow.

When Naruto had heard about a "safe house", she had pictured an actual house, but it seemed they had constructed something a lot more obscure for this exam.

The group followed down without a word, accepting the abnormal route as if it was a forest path in a particular closely grown forest instead of straight down an abyss. They walked down until Naruto spotted a landing protruding from the mountain, and soon realized what it was. The platform led into the mountain, which undoubtable had a construction dug into its rocky side.

"Welcome to the Konoha camp." The Jōnin said pleasantly and opened the door at the end of the platform.

It was… cozier, than what the exterior gave impression of. It was a lot darker than the endless white outside, but pleasantly warm all the same. There were a few small light sources from small windows leading out into the surface of the mountain, but otherwise reminded her of one of the Konoha bases back during the Third War. There was a food station, even a room with a toilet sign, and so many people scurrying around. They all stopped at the sight of the group who had entered, and smiles erupted all around.

Naruto's eyes were still adjusting from the sudden change from light to dark, but still caught the relief in the room at the sight of the Hokage.

Minato stepped forwards, gesturing for his guards to let him through, and looked at all of them while pride radiating off him. It was obviously infectious if the suddenly raised heads and puffed chests of certain genin was any indication.

"I'm so glad to see you all here today. You have done a wonderful job so far." Minato said evenly. "This exam has been harder than any before, and you've all done Konoha proud, no matter if you went through to the finals or not. You've shown the other nations that our village still stands strong, and that the future generation of Konoha is worthy of continuing our village's proud legacy."

Naruto dozed off a little as Minato continued giving everyone a pep talk. He had a way about him that made everyone feel included, even the ones who'd lost or were disappointed. She guessed that was the most important part, to never leave anyone behind…

She paid attention again as the four finalists came forward at Minato's initiative. There were two girls and two boys of various ages, and smiled widely as the youngest locked eyes with her. Naruo knew well who the finalists were, as it had been reported back two weeks ago after the third round, but the girl had still managed to grow a little taller since she saw her some months ago.

Izumi was as focused as ever, and didn't return her smile and instead focused on Minato. She could see Kenji, Hibiki and Yuuta amongst the crowd too. The two genin looked wistful at the line of finalists, and she could sympathize with their disappointment. The fact that Izumi had managed to get through to the final round would mean they had been close to a spot in the tournament too.

Next to Izumi stood a Hyūga a year older named Ko, followed by a tall purple haired girl Naruto knew was named Yugao and lastly a strawberry blonde Yamanaka named Santa.
Naruto couldn't help but grin at the lineup. They ranged from eleven to sixteen years old, and though Izumi still sported some bandages on her left arm they all looked more than eager to prove themselves in the finals. Especially the older ones. Santa was the same age as Naruto and Shisui, and she actually remembered him from the few months they'd shared classes in the academy.

They looked like they could do some damage on their own, but it remained to be seen how they'd preform against their upcoming opponents.

The exams started in two hours, so there was still time to kill before the events took off.

Naruto, Shisui and Kakashi were all a bit weary from travelling through the night, and weren't looking forward to standing guard for the upcoming hours, but there were still a job left to do. One of them had to go and check the arena. It had been seen by around ten of the Jōnin already in Land of Iron, but as a last safety check a Kage guard would look over it too.

So they flipped a coin. Kakashi and Shisui went first, and Shisui lost, so he flipped against Naruto, and there Naruto lost.

Naruto was shocked. She usually always won when it came to chance play, but this time she was stuck with the bad luck.

Shisui grinned innocently as Naruto huffed and headed out into the cold snow outside. It was better to get it over with. She wouldn't be able to come back until the exams were finished for the day, and she secured her scarf and cloak closer around herself before she braved the weather.

She couldn't wait for the night. Naruto was sure she'd sleep like a baby.

Heading up the mountainside Naruto arrived to a very crowded street. Compared to a few hours before, when only samurai had been guarding the village it was now filled to the brim with excited visitors.

She spotted only a few ninjas, as most appeared to be civilians. She would bet her right hand that some were disguised ninjas though. It was naive to believe some of the villages wouldn't try to smuggle in a few extra Jōnin simply for security's sake by having them act as distant travelled spectators to the exams.

Naruto had her pass around her neck, visible for everyone to see, and didn't bother trying to hide the fact she was a Kage guard. Quite a few gave her a wide girth, but she didn't let it get to her.

They had pointed out the arena on their way to the safe house, and she'd gotten a beautiful view of it from up on the mountain in the morning sun, so she knew she would have to cross through the village to get there.

Her eyes were insistently jumping from each and every person passing her by. Some were excited, while others were impatient. There were already a line of people waiting to be let into the arena, but for security reasons people wouldn't be allowed up to the stadium before an hour before the start signal of the first round.

She was surprised so many had actually bothered to show up. Land of Iron was hardly an easy country to travel to nor stay in, yet the streets were packed with excited tourists. Even the Daimo's of various countries were somewhere in the village. Their own security wasn't Naruto's business though, even if Minato had been involved with it.

"My toes are freezing off."
"Mum, can I get a wooden samurai sword too?"

"I can't believe how remote this place it. You hear the "Land of Iron", and you don't really expect something like this do you?"

"I wish it was held in Land of Wind right now. At least the water I drink wouldn't have instantly frozen on my tongue!"

The clipped words from around made Naruto smile to herself. It certainly was cold, and she hoped they had dressed well enough to sit through a tournament that would likely last for hours.

"Oh stop whining already! I don't care! I have a lot of money riding on this bet!"

The last words made Naruto's head swing around in disbelief, and her eyes widened at the familiar figures at the end of the street.

Tsunade stood with her hands on her hips, clearly just having told off a very nervous Shizune.

Her direction had changed without any conscious thought from Naruto. She was almost right behind them before either woman noticed her presence.

"Naruto?" Shizune said startled as she spotted Naruto.

Tsunade whirled around surprised, before a wide grin spread on her lips. "Mah, brat! Look at who is still alive. I was sure you'd blow yourself up by now."

Naruto chuckled. "What are you two doing here? I didn't even know Land of Iron owned a bar, or a casino…"

"It doesn't! These samurai have too strict rules for establishment such as that." Tsunade replied mischievously.

"So you're here because…?" Naruto wondered absently.

"Because I have a bet riding on the outcome of the exams!" She declared proudly. She then noticed the pass strung around Naruto's neck. "And I shouldn't be surprised to see you here I guess… Kage guard, eh? That is one hellishly boring job. I hope it remains that way."

Naruto sighed. "Of course… but I have to report this to Minato. It might be a problem if you're in the stands."

"Why the hell would it be a problem?" Asked Tsunade confused.

"Because you're a sannin. We're trying to balance the power between the countries in this exams, and that includes the manpower from each individual village present at the exams. You being in the stand can be seen as a breech."

"I'm not a ninja, so it matters squat!" Tsunade barked back.

"But Shizune is still a ninja. On an extended leave of absence, yes, but undoubtedly still a ninja of Konohagakure." Naruto muttered and dragged a hand through her hair.

Tsunade glanced speculatively down at Shizune. "Then it's time to get the wigs out. This might be for the best anyway. We'll go watch this dick measuring show undercover. I need to see the outcome of this as soon as possible."
"Why?"

"Because the man she bet against is ruthless, and more importantly very well connected. If this
doesn't go her way she'll be banned from every casino between Iwa and Kiri. And the faster she can
run when she inevitably loses, the better. I'm not even sure why we're here, Tsunade-sama." Shizune
mumbled. "If we're just going to end up running out of here… again."

"I have a good feeling about this! Kumo has this in the bag!"

"Wait, you bet on Kumo? Where is your sense of loyalty?" Naruto exclaimed and smacked her head
in exasperation.

"Kumo has a strong line up." Tsunade replied with a shrug. "Konoha has more contestants, yes, but I
doubt they'll win the tournament."

Naruto tilted her head unimpressed. "So if a Kumo ninja win you're off the hook with your money
sharks?"

"Some of them." Corrected Shizune in a whisper.

"No, no. It's if a specific Kumo ninja wins." Tsunade added thoughtfully.

"Really? Then they'll probably go out in the first round with you betting on them."

"Ah, but I was careful and I studied the line up before picking a horse to bet on. There is no way this
Kumo ninja loses in the first round. They're up against Kusa, Naruto. is no doubt this is going my
way."

"Did you just compare a hopeful genin contestant to a horse?"

Tsunade swiped out a bottle of sake from underneath her cloak and took a long sip of it. Her lips
released the bottle with a small pop after several mouthfuls. "Sure! It's almost the same. I'm actually
excited about this."

"You know there might be blood, right?" Naruto inquired worried. "They are fighting."

"I know, I know, I've got it covered. I'll hardly see any details as we'll be seated far, far back in the
stadium."

"And closest to the exit." Shizune added.

Her first thought upon entering the massive stadium was how different it was to the one back at
home. Unlike Konoha's stadium, where you entered at ground level and took the staircase up to the
stands circling the arena below, here they'd done the opposite.

A colossal hole must have been dug out in the ground to make room for the stadium. From the top
level, and also the entrance level, there were three levels down purely for spectators to watch the
arena which was located at the very bottom. The entrance doors were wide and could easily have
twenty people standing shoulder to shoulder in length, but they probably needed to be so wide to
allow such a crowd easy entrance.

The construction was oval shaped, and she could spot the Kage box hanging out from the top level at
one of the short sides. Down in the arena, placed towards the edge of fighting ground, was the over
ornate podium Kakashi had told her about and Ōnoki had bragged of. It was just as lavish as he
claimed, with glittering gems of various kind decorating the three platforms, and Naruto wondered who of Ōnoki's guards were unlucky enough to carry that thing. It looked neither light in weight nor easy to manoeuvre in shape.

Wistful Naruto hoped it had been Azuma, and that he had thrown out his back on the journey.

With a last glance at the winner podium and a heavy inhale, which agitated her throat from the cold air, she instantly turned and headed in that direction.

There were already other Kage guards at work upon her arrival, they were going through the gallery with painstaking accuracy, making sure not a screw looked out of place.

Ignoring a sneering Azuma in favor of nodding politely to Baki Naruto got to work too, trying her hardest to stay on the opposite end of the Iwa ninja for as much time as possible. The man had a similar mentality, and as they worked not one of them bothered saying a word.

During the meeting that morning several guards had flown past her head in favor of the faces she recognized. It wasn't before now she realized one of them looked more familiar than she had expected.

It was one the Mizukage's sword guards. The young man - or was it a boy? - because he was undoubtedly younger than Naruto herself, had white jaw length hair and pale skin. He looked bored, but she guessed he had a similar expression control as Kakashi. His sword was strapped to his back over his winter coat for easy reach, though Naruto sill couldn't figure out exactly why he looked familiar. And it bugged her.

"What are you staring at." It was a question, but his wording didn't make it sound like one. It wasn't like Azuma's harsh insults or the Kage's spitting superiority. His voice rang no bells, and Naruto straightened up and looked searchingly at the boy. How old was he? Fourteen? Not that Naruto was much better. She was technically sixteen herself.

"You look familiar. I'm trying to place you." Naruto replied with a shrug.

The boy arched an eyebrow in answer, but didn't offer a name. Instead he turned and got back to work.

Naruto huffed. "I'm Uzumaki Naruto of Konoha. Who are you? Clearly one of the swordsmen, but I want your name."

The boy halted and gave a quick assertive look over his shoulder. "I know who you are, Uzumaki." He replied causally, but a small smirk raised the corner of his lips. It changed his entire face, from the blank canvas to a person with a lot of suppressed malevolent mischief. And suddenly a memory appeared in her head. It was of... Sasuke? Why did she think of Sasuke? "Everyone who arrived from Kiri knows who you are."

"Why?" Asked Baki, who hadn't even bothered to disguise his eavesdropping while Darui glanced over from the corner of his eyes.

Naruto had stiffened at the implication, but refused to back down. She didn't bother to answer Baki. He could wonder all he wanted, but this wasn't any of his or Suna's business.

"There was a clash." The boy replied easily. Eyeing her up and down. "She got herself kidnapped a few years ago."

The other three men on the gallery looked tense to and from Naruto and the Kiri guard. "I also
escaped and killed everyone in my wake." Naruto replied and folded her arms in front of her. Her mouth set in a stern line.

"Oh, I know." The smile widened on his face. Maybe it was supposed to look innocent, but if so he failed with flying colors. It only made him even creepier.

Naruto didn't allow anything to show on her face. Ninjas talked shit at one another all the time, it was an overused strategy, and this boy - despite being unnerving - had nothing on Ōnoki. Ōnoki was threatening, not in the silent creepy way, but by the mere hint of his abilities. He simply didn't need to resort to underhanded threats to be taken seriously. This boy was merely a kitten testing out the bath water in comparison.

"I wonder if it still hurt?" The boy continued causally and tilted his head curiously. "I hear you're a waking ghost. The kunoichi who continue fighting without a heart. They're big claims, and I wonder if I'll get the chance to test it out for myself."

Naruto simple looked back. Proud of herself for keeping her face completely blank through his monologue. Idiotic fool. What did he even think he'd achieve with that? Well, there was a saying; if you can't beat them, join them, and this boy didn't stand a chance in hell against her. "You know I only wanted a name, right? Which I still don't know because your fame still hasn't reached Konoha. Though please, do continue that little monologue. It was getting interesting." She drawled and put her weight on her left hip.

Then she smiled, bright and happy like an eight year old child who'd been given a puppy for their birthday. But underneath her skin there was pure hate cursing through her bloodstream. Kiri had killed Kushina. Killed Iruka. This boy… though not involved with the events had no right! No right at all to talk about her or any of them.

He wasn't there, and it was all she could hold onto to keep her cool. She wouldn't fall for the bait. So instead she smiled. It was an action that sat so easily in her muscle memory it could fool anyone. Because for all intent and purposes Naruto appeared like she didn't have a care in the world right now.

The white haired boy didn't react at all to her biting sarcasm, and instead grinned wider, showing a pearly row of small and too sharp teeth.

"He is from the Hōzuki clan." Baki explained testily, his eyes narrowed and on guard now. "Bat shit crazy all of them. Don't bother with him. You can stay there and chat or help me work."

Naruto nodded and left him while the boy glared fleetingly at the Suna guard. Annoyed Baki had stopped his fun.

She knew why he looked familiar now. Team Hebi – Taka - whatever they had called themselves, had included an Hōzuki too. One who looked suspiciously a lot like this boy. She noted the sword on his back wasn't Zabuza's. But she had little doubt this boy could have been Suigetsu's twin if it wasn't for the age difference.

The five Kage were escorted into the Kage gallery one after the other, separated by a guard in front and two behind each. They sat in a line, with Utakata at one end with Ōnoki at his side, followed by A, then Mifune, then Minato and lastly Rasa at the other end.

The arena was filled up to the brink with an excited crowd, and Naruto wondered where exactly Tsunade and Shizune were hiding. She had informed Kakashi about her presence, as she hadn't
found a moment to tell Minato alone, and hoped he would have a better chance to pass along the message.

The finalists stood in a row down in the stadium and a Kumo ninja had been assigned as judge for the day. It had been drawn at random from a hat at the end of the Kage meeting, and tomorrow they would draw again to see who would be judge then.

Eighteen Genin had made it to the finals out of the original two hundred and fifty two contestants. The four Konoha finalists looked nervous and kept glancing uncertainly over at the three Kumo contenders along with most of the other finalists too.

There were two guys and a girl amongst the Kumo genin. Taking a quick peek at the contest sheet Naruto found out their names to be C who was fifteen, Nurui who was eleven and the last one was Nii Yugito who was seventeen.

The name echoed in her head, and she looked back at the girl. Where had she heard that name before? She stood with Kumo, so most likely it must have been once she'd been in contact with a Kumo ninja, yet Naruto couldn't really remember any specific Kumo ninjas from the war at all with the exception of the one who had almost speared her to death in Land of Frost.

"She's a jinchūriki."

Naruto's eyes widened at Kurama's explanation.

"You can tell?" Naruto asked shocked.

"No, but that horrible rapper talked about her before I sent us back in time." Kurama answered. "She was Matabi's jinchūriki. The two tailed cat. She was captured and killed by the immortal duo."

Well, Yugito was still alive here and looked very confident. Naruto wasn't surprised. She was of the older contestants, though not the oldest, and the two tails jinchūriki attitude reminded her of how Temari had acted at times.

Glancing up at Minato she saw his eyes had just left Yugito too, before he sat down in his seat.

Knowing things were about to kick off Naruto took her position right behind the Hokage. She knew Kakashi was stationed on the roof above, and Shisui was further back Minato's chair. It was going to be a long day, and Naruto already knew her patience would be tested to the limit.

The first round of the tournament had Yamanaka Santa of Konoha against Yaoki of Suna. Yaoki was short and young, whereas Santa was tall and looked a lot older in comparison even at sixteen.

"Good luck, Kazekage-dono." Minato said politely.

Rasa nodded back "You too, Hokage-dono."

Naruto found it funny that they were all suddenly being painfully polite. Like they hadn't been bitching at each other like teenage girls just a couple of hours ago.

From the corner of her eye she felt someone staring at her, and looking discretely to her right she met Hōzuki's gaze head on. His face had fallen back into a blank mask again, but he didn't bother averting his eyes once he'd been caught. She wanted to ask him what the hell his problem was, but figured it wouldn't be taken lightly if she did. Instead she suppressed the urge to roll her eyes and looked ahead. Hōzuki's eyes still boring into the side of her face just as the tournament started.
They heard the judge shout all the way from down in the arena. "Hajime!" And the two contestants jumped backwards.

Santa attacked first, but Yaoki managed to block. It was clear the two were testing the waters. Naruto couldn't say she was surprised that Santa was being so cautious. He was a Yamanaka and they rarely underestimated their opponents, even when their opponents were as tiny as Yaoki.

Still, the win was predictable, and after five minutes Santa had defeated Yaoki with his clan technique. While the crowd cheered or roared, Rasa remained stoic, neither showing annoyance or acceptance of Suna's defeat. The Land of Wind had only two finalists, so it put a lot of pressure on the remaining genin to preform now.

To her left Ōnoki snorted. "Not much punch in that one, Rasa." He said snidely.

"He's younger than all of your own finalists Ōnoki. I'm sure he learned a lot during the exams." Rasa replied calmly.

Ōnoki snorted and waited for the next contestants to get onto the arena. This time it was Kumo against Yaga, and A looked less confident about this matchup. Yaga had only one finalist, but unlike Kumo's tiny participant Yaga's was huge. He was only seventeen but looked like he was closer to thirty. Naruto glanced over at the A as he leaned forwards.

The battle was surprisingly long. Kumo's ninja was at a disadvantage from the beginning. He was not as fast, not as strong, and could barely keep up with ninjutsu. But damn if the boy wasn't good at dodging. And that's what he did for forty five minutes.

He was chased around the arena while trying to get a hit in, without success, and in the end Yaga came out the winner.

"I'll hand it to you, A, your genin sure knows how to run." Ōnoki said with a chuckle. "That must come in handy. Even if it wasn't enough to outrun a Yaga ninja." It wasn't meant as a compliment, but the Raikage didn't allow himself to react to the taunt. Instead grunting a few sentences into Darui's ear so no one overheard.

Next up on the program was Hyūga Kō against a Yuki ninja named Dao, and Naruto swallowed soundlessly. The ages really didn't match up in this tournament, but she still sent her hopes for the young Konoha genin.

Minato was already leaning forwards in interest, and the audience was split about who to cheer for. Konoha had a lot more support than Yuki did, and yet the age difference made people lean more towards the foreign ninjas victory. Still, Naruto would be the first to attest that age didn't always matter. One look around the Kage gallery made that more than obvious.

As she took another look around the crowd, she found Shisui standing with tense shoulders. He was not looking at her though, instead he was eying Hōzuki suspiciously. This time Naruto really did roll her eyes.

As the break between round four and five finally arrived, team Kasai was relieved from their duty as three Konoha jōnin, one of them Yuuta, came and took over guard duty for the hour so they could eat. In fact all the Kage guards were sent off to the cafeteria, which was only used by the staff while the Kage stayed in the Kage gallery and got waiter by others.

Naruto followed after Kakashi with Shisui close behind her. She was by far the only one to have noticed Hōzuki's on and off staring during the matches, and her boyfriend had immediately placed
himself between them when the Kiri guard went to follow them out of the gallery towards the cafeteria.

They reached the underground food hall after maneuvering though the halls for five minutes, and sat down at one of the few open tables in the room to eat their packed lunch. There were opportunities to buy food, but most of the guards were too paranoid to buy food which may or may not be poisoned.

The only guard who actually bothered was actually Hōzuki, who decided to stop staring at her long enough to go buy food, which instantly made Naruto release a sigh in relief.

"What's his problem?" Mumbled Kakashi and picked up a broccoli with his chopstick. They sat together on a modest table with four chairs by one of the long walls, trying to keep an eye on any foreign guard who might incidentally walk too close.

The cafeteria was empty with the exception of the Kage guards and a couple of sweating servers behind the counter. The new atmosphere had gone from looking out for their Kage, to being constantly vigilant for their own lives. Part of the job was to stay alive long enough to make sure their own Kage made it home after all.

"No idea. The guy's just a creep." Naruto muttered back while focusing on her lunch box with dry rice and vegetables.

"What did you do?" Asked Shisui with an arched eyebrow.

She huffed and glared back. "Nothing. He just looked familiar and I asked him who he was. I hadn't actually heard of him though, it was simply a mix up."

"He's been staring at you all morning." Shisui said with a sneer.

"Maybe he has a crush." Kakashi guessed with a tilt of his head.

"Then he is certainly doing a lousy job as a Kage guard." Naruto pointed out. "The job description is pretty clear. Look for threats to their Kage, not stare at foreign ninjas who wants to be left alone."

Kakashi snickered while Shisui sent an apprehensive look in Hōzuki's direction. "I'll be back soon." Kakashi said and pushed his food over the table so Naruto could guard it. Next he stood up and disappeared in the direction of the toilets.

"I don't like the idea of a crazy Kiri ninja showing you so much attention. It wasn't because of what happened back then is it? Why you asked his name?" Shisui asked quietly, still not having touched his food as he leaning closer over the table towards her.

Naruto shrugged. "I wondered the same at first. He looked familiar, but he's too young to have been present during my capture, so he couldn't have been there… I'm pretty sure I've never actually met the guy before."

Shisui pursed his lips in thought, before he changed the subject to the latest and most exciting match so far. Which coincidently had been Yugao of Konoha against a Kiri ninja named, typically enough; Kiri.

Kiri of Kiri was no slobber, though he had looked like he was unsure how he'd managed to get into the finals at first. As the only Kiri ninja to make it to the fourth round he had a lot to prove. And though the battle lasted thirty minutes, it was between two ninja who refused to lose.

Yugao was a bit of a hot head. The purple haired girl preferred kenjutsu and was damn fast, while
Kiri preferred brute strength in his taijutsu and water ninjutsu.

In the end Yugao scraped a win by remorselessly cutting off three of Kiri's fingers. Effectively making him unable to use hand signs, and therefore no ninjutsu. It was probably the fight with the most animosity too.

While you could taste the tension on your tongue up in the top box, the participants were mostly too young or too lowly ranked to have been in the Third War themselves. Which is why Naruto was puzzled over the absolute hate between Yugao and Kiri. Maybe something had occurred earlier in the exams and Naruto would never know.

Shisui bit down into his sandwich and moaned quietly in appreciation. Naruto smiled and picked up her glass of water when a new presence appeared behind Shisui.

Naruto knew Shisui had noticed, but he continued eating without showing signs of being bothered by the person behind his chair.

"Is this seat taken?" Hōzuki asked silkily. Pointing to the chair next to Shisui.

"Yes." Naruto replied.

"Well, until the person comes I'll hang with you guys." He said with a wide smile, his eyes boring into Naruto. She was feeling extremely uncomfortable now. Why the hell did he keep staring at her? Was it some ploy to psyche her out?

"You're not welcome." Shisui said just as Kakashi returned.

"Mah, mah. This exam was proposed by the Hokage to better international relationships." Hōzuki said with glee and placed his tray on the table. It was all raw fish. "We should make a good example, Uchiha-san."

Shisui's Sharingan was activated as he looked up at Hōzuki, and for the first time the Kiri kid actually looked hesitant about something. He was too stubborn though, and went through with his plan as he sat down properly and picked up his chopsticks.

Naruto's mouth was set in a thin line while the occupants of several tables around them were now staring openly. She saw the rest of the Kiri guards on break sit at the other end of the hall with identical grins.

"It must be disappointing to your Kage that your only finalist was defeated in the first round. By a Konoha genin none the less. It's a shame about his fingers." Shisui said casually, placing his food on the table while staring down Hōzuki. "That will put a pretty large dent in his career."

"If the brat couldn't keep his fingers intact he is of no interest to us. It doesn't matter that a Konoha brat did it. If she could than anyone could." Hōzuki replied with a shrug.

Suddenly Shisui's hand reached down at lightning speed, and the whole hall tensed. She wasn't sure what had happened, but then Shisui forcibly wrenched Hōzuki's hand up on the table top. "You should refrain from stealing. Unsuccessfully pickpocketing kunai like some street rat reflects… badly, on your village." He hissed loudly for anyone in the hall to hear.

Hōzuki grinned widely and laughed. "Chill, Uchiha. I'm just testing." He replied causally and waved a hand, his attention returning to Naruto.

"Maybe you should refrain from such hobbies in our current setting." Kakashi replied calmly,
reaching over to grab his food from Naruto.

"Oh, I just wanted to know if it was true that the Sharingan was as effective as they said." Hōzuki replied with a wave of his hand. "This is a golden opportunity to gather information. I'm just being more open about it than the others it is all."

"That's a given, but from what I've observed you're not a lot to report back about anyway." Naruto told him calmly.

Shisui smirked and slowly released Hōzuki's wrist.

"You recognized me." Hōzuki said. "And I'm just dying to know from where. Because I honestly think I would have recognized you if we ever met before."

"You look like someone else." Naruto replied. "My mistake. In the end it turned out I hadn't even heard of you before."

"You are gutsy. It's amusing. Do you really think a little girl like yourself should be so bold?" He asked with a wide spiky teethed smile.

Shisui snorted while Kakashi shook his head. "You would do better not to speak. You're embarrassing yourself and your village." Kakashi said and leaned back in his chair.

"No, I mean I get she's a good medic, and I'm sure you need someone to tape up the cuts from all those branches you stumble over every day, but in this place… she is out of her league."

"Even if that was true why on earth would you tell us that?" Wondered Kakashi.

"I'm just pointing out that girly here is standing out amongst the crowd." He gestured causally around the room, where sure enough, Naruto was the only female. In fact, with the exception of herself all the other Kage guards were men. "I know Konoha tries to play up their kunoichi, but there are just certain limits little girls shouldn't be playing with."

Naruto burst out laughing. The sound made everyone in the room tense up even more. She clutched her stomach as she tried to get a hold of herself.

Even Kakashi seemed to find the comment funny. "For your own pride's sake, you really should stop speaking, Hōzuki-san."

"I'm full guys. Should we leave?" Naruto asked, still chuckling to herself.

"Sure." Shisui replied easily and stood up along with Kakashi.

"Though we're flattered that you seem so concerned about our teammate you should be aware, Hōzuki, Second Coming of the Demon, that if you get any ideas you might find out you're only a house cat in comparison to the real monsters in this world." Kakashi told Hōzuki with a pleasant eye smile as he shuffled after Naruto through the door.

To be continued...
Thank you so very much for reading! The chapter was beta'd by AnjoRemix!

I hope you guys understand the twists to the time line. As Isobu is currently vacating on Mount Myōboku he can't be trapped inside Yagura, and he's therefore not considered the strongest Kiri ninja anymore, which means he was never picked to be Mizukage. Instead that role was recently given to Utakata instead.

I have to admit that character is a mystery to me. I haven't even seen the filler episode with him in it, so if he's out of character I can only apologize. From the impression I got I just assumed he was calm and collected personality wise. And Yagura has shown up here even if he isn't Mizukage. Because I really, really wanted to make a guard duo with Kisame and Yagura. The height difference itself is just too fun not to have them team up, with Hōzuki dangling after them as the annoying third wheel.

Until next time!
Chapter Forty Five - The 'Lies' in 'Allies'

"I just feel that, you know, if it ain't broke, don't fix it. And even if it is broke, just ignore it and maybe it'll be ok." - Hatake Kakashi (In a nutshell)

"Hey kid, you're blocking the doorway." Naruto said impatiently, the question directed towards the Kiri guard who looked like an academy kid. So far Naruto had always found him only a couple of steps away from Kisame at all times.

Purple eyes narrowed annoyed, his left brow twitching, and he turned slowly around to face her. "Who are you calling kid? I'm older than you Uzumaki." He snapped in a barely audible hiss.

At full height the guy reached her shoulders, his pale face looked rounded with youth and his sandy blonde hair truly made him appear closer to Itachi's age, which is why it took her a moment to realize the boy was being truthful. Naruto's eyes widened and she tried to smile to hide her shock. "Ah-Uh… what? Really?"

He sneered at her in reply, his nose sticking up in the air as he left after Kisame. Too offended to give a feedback.

She watched helplessly as they disappeared onto the street and out of sight, before a huff drew her attention back to her team captain. Kakashi was pinching the bridge of his nose in exasperation before heading out the door. "Ah, Naruto… How do you manage to offend people without even meaning to? And his name is Yagura. Probably a better way to refer to him than "kid"." He mumbled tiredly.

"But- but he looks like a kid!" Naruto defended herself, her arms flapping up and down.

Even with his mask Naruto could still see Kakashi's mouth twist up in a smile and he shook his head. With her mind still focused on figuring out just how old Yagura was, she became distracted while she trailed after Kakashi. Her foot lost traction from an ice patch on the ground, and to steady herself Naruto's hand shot out, catching the railing before she could tumble over sideways. As she straightened her fingers flinched away from the ice-covered metal, it was so cold it felt like needles piercing her skin.
"Watch yourself." Azuma said silkily as he walked by with the two other Iwa guards, his eyes glinting with malice and his mouth tilted up in a patronizing smirk.

He passed too quickly for Naruto to reply, instead Baki came to a stop next to her, his arms folded in front of him as he watched scowling while the three Iwa guards turned around a corner and out of sight. "Unpleasant fellow, isn't he?"

"He's a disgusting piece of filth." Naruto replied spitefully and got an elbow in the ribs for her honesty from Kakashi. Shooting the Copy Ninja a frustrated glance she only got an austere look in return. Unsurprisingly he wanted her to keep her opinion to herself in their current setting, no matter how much he might agree with her. She rolled her eyes.

In all honesty Naruto felt she deserved a medal of effort, considering just how nice she was behaving. Far from anyone else following the rules. So far Azuma was keeping things tame compared to what she'd dealt with during their missions to Iwa, and had only delivered a few barely audible nasty comments and the rest had been hateful glares reserved specifically for the three Hokage guards and anyone wearing a Suna emblem. But at least he didn't walk around asking for a fight.

Hōzuki was a different matter. The guy was a creep and liked to play with fire if their lunch had been any indication. He wasn't the only one. Naruto had spotted tense confrontation amongst all the guards. Kiri and Konoha were clashing, Suna and Iwa couldn't stand one another, Kumo had it in for Konoha and that was only what was being shown openly. None of the guards across nations trusted one another. And in the case of Kiri Naruto wondered if there weren't some trust issues within the guards themselves.

Kisame and Yagura stuck together while Hōzuki was mostly drifting around the other two, never really interacting with them. And the reason Kisame and the kid stuck together looked more out of apprehension to leave the other to their own devise.

Publicly the Suna and Konoha guards were the best at cooperating, but even Naruto knew that if things started going downhill there would be no help to be found from their sandy neighbours.

"Come on, we're supposed to be there in ten minutes." Shisui reminded them, drawing Naruto's attention back on track. Her tempo increased. She didn't like the idea of the Kiri guards reaching their Kage before team Kasai reached theirs, and from the looks of it her boyfriend was thinking the same.

At half past four in the afternoon the final battle of the day wrapped up with a win for a vaguely familiar boy named C from Kumo who took out Ittan from Iwa through sheer deception and tactic strategy.

Naruto thought Shikaku would have been impressed, and suspected Minato was too. Like with some others, Naruto had the impression she'd met C at some point, either during the war or back in her original time, but for the life of her she couldn't remember which. His fighting style was unfamiliar though, which made her lean more towards the latter. Every Kumo ninja she'd met during the war had usually demonstrated their attack repertoire when they came in contact with her.

The Kage took their time departing, continuing their passive aggressive interaction before finally leaving to their individual Safe Houses.

In all Konoha had done well during the first round, as three out of four contestants were moving on to the second round, and the first battle the upcoming morning would pit two Konoha genin up against one another. Hyuga Kō against Yamanaka Santa, while Yugao - the Kiri finger cutter - was
to fight an Iwa boy in the second set.

The only one who hadn't moved onwards was very disappointed and displeased about being beaten by an Iwa Genin. Still, Naruto felt it was only polite to congratulate her for even making it into the finals. So, the moment Minato was securely within the Safe House she set out to find the dark haired Uchiha girl.

It wasn't hard. Every Konoha genin was currently stuck inside the Safe House, and most of them were gathered in the large multi-use room, which might have been intended as a dinner hall, or a meeting room, or a large gym. It was hard to figure out.

Naruto located her sitting around a table in one of the corners with a group of kids around her own age, all of their heads leaned towards one another while Izumi was giving a summary of the day's matches to the ones who hadn't been allowed to watch.

"Hi Izumi, you fought well today. I'm sorry it didn't go your way." Naruto said when there was a pause in Izumi's monologue. Her two teammates, Kenji and Hibiki, who neither had made it into the finals, where fuzzing over the new head wound she'd received during her battle.

"Sagan was a tough one." Naruto replied with a shrug. "He was also really fast, I hope your head's better. And I hope the medics did a proper check-up. You took a nasty hit with that last jump kick."

Izumi scowled at the reminder of how Sagan had kicked her into the wall. Too fast for her to avoid and ending in Izumi losing consciousness upon colliding against the arena stands. "They did. I also had some of the Konoha medics look at it too when I came back here." Izumi answered gloomily. "I just can't believe I lost to him! He's from Iwa!" She growled and her hands fisted where they lay upon the table.

Naruto cocked her head sideways, studying the Genin. "Why do you say it like that? Had any run ins with him earlier in the exam?"

"We did." Replied Kenji, lifting his bandaged right arm before pointing to the faded bruises on his face which must have hurt to receive.

Hibiki gestured to Kenji with a frown. "His teammate did that in the Third round. He was really slippery. It was that Ittan dude who just lost to the Kumo boy. At least he's out of the finals too."

Naruto grimaced in sympathy. "I'm sorry Kenji."

"All the Iwa Genin have been fighting dirty since day one!" Exclaimed Hibiki furiously, his fist hitting the table hard, and making three water containers topple over while the kids tried to catch them. His two teammates were nodding in agreement, especially Kenji, though he kept his mouth shut.

"Yeah, especially Ittan. He was cheating and backstabbing at every turn. Even against other Iwa Genin." Izumi mumbled and shook her head. "The Kiri crowd weren't much better though."

"Did you hear about the fight?" Grumbled Kenji reluctantly.

Naruto shook her head, as she was pretty sure Kenji wasn't referring to any of the tournament battles.
He lowered his voice, as if sharing a secret. "There was a girl from Kiri who snuck into the Kumo Safe House and tried to kill one of the other Genin between round Two and Three." He explained with a grim smile. Naruto's eyes widened in shock, and despite herself leaned forwards to hear more.

"Don't know exactly who she was trying to kill, but she was apprehended before she could go through with it. There was a big commotion, and we were just on the other street when it happened. Don't know what happened afterwards, we just saw three Kumo Jōnin dragging her towards the town house with a horde of Samurai guards in tow. We haven't seen her since."

She hadn't heard of this, but Minato would already know. It had to have happened a while ago. "That's bad news... When was this? Between round Two and Three, so that must have been about three weeks ago?"

The three Genin nodded in unison.

"Has there been any other incidents like that?"

They shared a glance amongst one another, before Izumi answered. "Not outside of the exams. During the tasks there has been an "every team for themselves" mentality, and open season on attacking anyone with a different village symbol on their headbands. But as far as I know there hasn't been any fights outside of the exam rounds."

"At least there's that." Muttered Naruto, feeling tired just thinking of how fraught with danger the tasks must have been for the Genin. "I'm proud of you though. All three of you made it to the Third round, and Izumi even made it into the finals! You should be proud of yourself. You've barely been a Genin for half a year, and you're competing in the largest Chūnin exam in history. The competition has never been more fierce, and yet you've done really well."

She could see all three of them perk up at her words, Izumi's cheeks flushing in delight at the praise. "And hey," Hibiki said, his voice filled with mirth as he turned towards Izumi with a comforting pat on her shoulder. "That stupid Sagan will be up against the Kumo girl in the next round. There's no way he'll defeat her. She's a freaking beast. I think it's just as well you didn't have to fight her."

"Who?" Asked Naruto, trying to remember the pair up for the next rounds of battles.

"Nii Yugito of Kumo. She's really scary." Hibiki muttered embarrassed. All the eavesdropping Genin around the table were nodding unison though.

A boy Naruto didn't know agreed aloud. "You should have seen her during the Third round! She completely walked all over that Suna guy. He lost an eye and his puppet was nothing but fire logs when she was finished with him."

"Nii Yugito, huh?" Naruto asked with a wry smile. "I can imagine she's tough. She didn't have much problem against that Kusa ninja today either."

"That must have been embarrassing." Grimaced Izumi with a shudder. "I talked with Midori right before his fight. He was really worked up and gave it his all, but yet got beaten so easily it looked like he was a complete amateur."

"Well..." Muttered Kenji with apprehension. "You can't deny he was incredibly lucky in his Third round matchup. His opponent was barely standing when he went out to fight. He was no one's favourite in the finals, while Nii Yugito is quickly becoming the favourite to win the whole thing."

Everyone had a comment or two about that, some arguing against it, a few naming a Suna ninja named Otokaze as a strong contender for the champion title, or even their own Yugao from Konoha.
Which led to a long rant about how she'd been merciless against her Kiri opponent that day.

"And despite being about to get a water jutsu in her face she just swung her katana! It was so fast I didn't really see her move at all, and then Kiri's fingers were cut clean off his hand, stopping the jutsu from activating at the last moment! It was amazing." Izumi said excitedly, using hand gestures to illustrate the action sequence to the others.

"Serve's him right!" Exclaimed another heatedly.

Kenji was glancing between Izumi and Naruto with a frown. "What did you think of the match, Naruto-san?"

She scratched her neck uncertainly, thinking back to the most hostile fight of the day by far. "There was a lot of temper running high during that match." She summarized with a tilt of her head. "Yugao is very dangerous in close combat, and she did excellent against a long range fighter like Kiri, but I think her smartest move was to get Kiri so worked up. She was using his anger against him, making him sloppy and over emotional to get through his defenses. I think she'll have more problems against someone as mellow as Nii Yugito though. From what I saw today it probably takes a lot more than a few well aimed insults to make her lose her head. The two kunoichi actually remind me of each other, so Yugao-chan will have to be very careful if they have to face one another."

"Makes sense." Muttered a boy further down the table. "How would you defeat Yugito anyway?"

"Me?" Asked Naruto, blinking twice at the unexpected question. "I'm better at working in the heat of the moment. I come up with plans on the go, and I haven't really seen Yugito fight much. Her battle today was the shortest of them all, and I suspect she didn't really get to show off her best moves."

"Naruto-san is really good with ninjutsu." Izumi explained with a bright grin. "You can use Hokage-sama's signature technique right? The Rasengan? I remember from the fight during our mission. And the chakra chains were really cool too."

Naruto nodded, and the awed expression on everyone's face made her preen with satisfaction.

"But why are you here anyway?" Izumi asked, as if suddenly remembering to be curious. "I didn't know you had a Genin team."

Naruto laughed, shaking her head at the absurd thought that entered her head. "Oh no, I don't have a Genin team. I'm here for security. I escorted Hokage-sama here and guarded him during the matches, which is why I got to see your fight today."

"You are a Kage guard?" Mused Hibiki surprised, "I didn't know you were so high up in the ranks."

"I'm good in a fight, which you brats might recall. But I hope I'll only need to observe for the remaining of this exam. It'd be sooo troublesome if something went wrong here." Naruto answered and winked playfully.

"Naruto?" Called a voice across the room, and all of them watched Shisui come strolling towards them, hands in his pockets and his scarf still hanging loosely around his neck despite having removed all his other outer gear. "Debriefing should have started five minutes ago. We're waiting for you."

"Oh, darn… I forgot. Alright, I'm coming!" She said and stood up from her seat in a hurry. She glanced down at the kids with a mischievous smile. "See you guys later. Be nice and don't cause problems for Konoha while I'm not around to get you out of trouble." Naruto said and pointed at each of them in turn. Hibiki stuck out his tongue childishly and Izumi chuckled.
Shisui glanced at the kids, his eyes lighting up in recognition and waved sheepishly while waiting for Naruto to join him. Izumi waved energetically back, perking up when she recognized her fellow clansman.

"Did you give her your condolences?" Teased Shisui, too low for anyone to overhear.

Naruto scoffed and pushed Shisui's shoulder gently. "Please, Izumi's fine. Just annoyed about losing. She's taking it better than you did when I kicked your arse during our own Chūnin exam."

"Hey! I was a gracious loser. I took it like a champ." Shisui scowled.

Naruto laughed aloud at his expression. "Riiight. Which is why you still have to remind everyone how you had to help me through the first round to justify your loss to me in the third."

Shisui chuckled and held open a door leading into an empty corridor. "Well it's true." He teased before walking towards one of the doors furthest down the hall.

Instead of heading inside he stopped in front of the door, glancing back at her with a wily smile lingering on his lips. Naruto peered back at him, bemused by his suddenly playful mood. His smile widened and unexpectedly he grasped her hand, pulling her to him before leaning down to kiss her cheek. It was a surprisingly intimate gesture, and Naruto felt her face heat at his daring. They were technically not allowed to act this way. After all they were on an A-rank mission and about to report to the Hokage.

Shisui winked at her before turning back to the door and grasping the handle, opening it smoothly and allowing Naruto to walk in first. She exhaled deeply as the two figures in the other room looked up at their entrance, sad she and Shisui couldn't find a private corner for themselves before they returned to Konoha. It would have to wait. Right now they had debriefing to get to.

Minato and Kakashi were relaxed and looked in no hurry despite Shisui's instance that she was late. They were debriefing in what Naruto thought was Minato's room for the stay, as his coat was hanging over a chair with several scrolls spread over the seat. Kakashi was leaning against the wall while the Hokage was sitting cross legged on the floor with his kunai in front of him, cleaning his already shining equipment.

Following their example Naruto sank together in a heap on the floor. "Ugh, this day has been brutal." She moaned, while Shisui came over and sat down next to her.

Kakashi glanced at her unimpressed, but Minato nodded in agreement. "I say this has gone as well as we could have hoped, but we can't expect sunshine and roses from the start. If we can get through the tournament without incident though..."

"I know, I know, but holy cow is this taxing! Gah, I can't believe it's only been a day, it feels like a freaking month! And there are so many jinchūriki here." Naruto pointed out and glanced over at Minato. He had been using a specialized brush on his kunai, trying to get to the hard corners, but at her words his hands stopped working and his attention turned slowly in her direction.

"How many?" Minato asked, the slight tension in the corner of his eye giving away some of his anxiety despite the rather lax way he phrased the question.

Naruto bit her lip. This had worried her too. "Five in total."

She could feel Shisui tense next to her and Kakashi gave a barely audible groan under his breath.
Naruto started counting on her fingers, listing them up in order. "There's me, Killer Bee, that Genin Nii Yugito, Ōnoki's guard Roshi and the Mizukage."

"Wait, Utakata is a jinchūriki?" Asked Minato surprised.

She nodded. "Yeah, and his seal isn't very chakra proof. He's leaking some bijū chakra. Kurama say it's Saiken in there, the six tails. Nii Yugito has the two tails, Killer Bee has the eight tails while Roshi has the four tails."

Minato dropped the brush to the floor, his brow furrowing in apprehension. "You can tell that easily? Can they tell you are a jinchūriki too?"

Naruto shook her head. "No. I wouldn't have known at all if it wasn't for some pre-knowledge. You already knew Killer Bee was the eight tail jinchūriki, and I've heard about Nii Yugito. I couldn't tell that either of them were jinchūriki unless they had started using bijū chakra."

"Then how do you know?" Asked Kakashi.

Naruto glanced meaningfully at the Hokage who understood and waved a hand dismissively at his old student. "Classified." He replied simply. "What about Roshi? Does he have a leaking seal too?"

Again, Naruto shook her head. "No. But we've been to Iwa a lot over the last year. All of team Kasai know he's a jinchūriki, or at least that people have the unfortunate habit of referring to him as "a demon"." She explained while Kakashi and Shisui nodded in agreement to her statement. "He uses lava release, and only one bijū use the same, which is the four tails Son Goku."

"How likely do you think it is that anyone know of your own status?" Minato asked seriously, putting away the kunai and brush.

"Well... Only Kiri should suspect that, right?" Naruto asked humourlessly. "And they would probably assume I was the jinchūriki to the wrong bijū too."

Minato hummed in a none answer, but from his expression he wasn't entirely sure. "I still don't like having five out of nine bijū in the same place."

"There's nothing we can do about it now. Sending Naruto home would only leave us and her in a vulnerable position." Kakashi argued.

"Why is Utakata Mizukage anyway? He's awfully young, isn't he? A lot of the Genin are older than he is." Naruto wondered.

Minato gave a wry smile and glanced at her. "He's sixteen, so yes, very young indeed. But Kiri has always picked the strongest ninja, despite their age, rank or experience, as their Kage. As a jinchūriki Utakata suddenly makes a lot of sense to me. I was curious myself. Internationally Utakata doesn't have much a reputation you see, but... Well, I guess I got my answer."

"But having a bijū inside you doesn't necessarily make you strong..." Naruto grumbled, thinking of her own abilities when she was young and the mess she called a fighting style. She'd been hard to kill, but not necessarily hard to defeat.

"Perhaps Utakata has come to an agreement with his bijū, like you and Kurama has." Minato speculated. "I suspect he's able to draw on the bijū's chakra at the very least, with or without the bijū's help. Otherwise there are several candidates more infamous for their powers within Kirigakure who could have taken the mantle as Mizukage. As far as I know Utakata has never been one of the seven swordsmen, unlike two of his Kage guards."
"Kisame and Hōzuki?" Kakashi came over to lean against the wall next to Naruto, folding one leg over the other as he rested his back against the wall. The Hokage gave a vary nod.

"Kisame is ruthless, and if the rumours are true then so is Yagura. I have heard of Hōzuki, but I admit I don't know much outside of his reputation. No Konoha ninja has reported back about him."

"He's a brat." Kakashi filled in helpfully. "And either he's playing us, or he is really unobservant. From what he said during lunch he was of the opinion Naruto was a medic because she's a girl."

Naruto grinned widely. "You know, I almost feel like I should be insulted, except Konoha has some scary arse Iryō ninjas, so I should probably feel flattered instead."

"Kirigakure has reasons to believe you're a medic though." Kakashi said, his brow furrowing in thought. "Some of the Kiri ANBU who was there during your kidnapping must have escaped to report what happened. Hōzuki hinted as much, and you really shouldn't have survived your injuries. The fact that you travelled with Tsunade-sama, the most famous iryō ninja ever and incidentally someone known for her regeneration abilities, would help those rumours along too. Especially for Kiri, who probably tried to find out as much as possible about you after the Sanbi fiasco." He scratched his chin thoughtfully, before giving a sarcastic smile to no one in particular. "Or maybe Hōzuki's just full of shit and is trying to get us to lower our guard around him. To make us underestimate him is probably in his own self-interest."

"You think he was faking?" Asked Shisui sharply.

Kakashi gave a helpless shrug of his shoulders, and then slid down the wall to sit. His shoulder bumping against Naruto's as he got comfortable. "For his sake I hope so. The carefree act was definitely a front. You don't grow a reputation such as Hōzuki's without having anything going for you. Luck only brings you so far. Hōzuki seems unhinged and immature but still capable… Though I'm more vary of Yagura, despite the fact he looks like he could be at the academy. Kisame is even more threatening."

Minato made an agreeing sound. "That was my opinion too. Still, appearance and behaviour can be deceiving, we don't know their capabilities, so be on your guard at all times."

"Don't need to tell us twice." Mumbled Naruto, fighting the urge to roll her eyes.

Minato looked at her sharply. "Be careful, Naruto, and unless there is no other choice, don't use any of Kurama's chakra while you're here."

She held his gaze for a long moment. "Okay." She agreed and leaned her head back against the wall. The cold and rough surface uncomfortable against her scalp.

They continued discussing what had happened that day, all of them assessing the danger level of each Kage and their guards according to what little they'd observed.

An hour later Naruto was growing light headed and dizzy. She was sleep deprived, and the inactivity and dry conversation wasn't helping her stay awake. Before she knew what had happened her head fell to rest on Shisui's shoulder. She felt the Uchiha stiffen, probably because she was being so openly affectionate right in front of Minato, but she was too tired to care. She'd been up for almost forty-eight hours, and her brain had officially shut down after such a mentally straining day.

She fell asleep within seconds, the smell of Shisui's hair and the low murmurs of Minato's gentle voice drifting into her dreams.
The sun was lighting up the sky from behind the western mountain, and Kakashi was huddled into his coat, moving restlessly to keep his limbs functioning. The early morning chill could be felt to the bone, and Kakashi was constantly rotating chakra through his system in an attempt to keep warm in tempo with his aimless walk through the village.

He needed a better understanding of the Bushigakure. Thanks to the intense schedule the day before Kakashi felt uninformed about his current surroundings, and it had affected his sleep the night before. The tournament was set to start in four hours, and technically Kakashi wasn't scheduled on duty before the actual exams and could be back at the Safe House sleeping, but he was too restless for that.

He had already been out for an hour. Using his self-appointed task as a way to keep warm in the freezing morning weather by taking a lap around the perimeter of the village and tracking up to the arena. He had been polite to all the samurai stationed around the village, and he was reluctantly impressed with their ability to stand stock still while guarding outside in these temperatures throughout the night.

They all looked at him suspiciously for moving around, but he was within his right to do this. He was only doing his job after all – making sure no traps would spring when it was least convenient.

Apparently, he wasn't the only one either. He had already seen Hözuki moving around half an hour ago, hanging around the town square. Another was Darui of Kumo, who like him was currently wandering around the arena stadium, his eyes trailing up and down the facade, probably looking for hidden devices or other such traps.

Everyone's paranoia was palpable in the air even this early in the morning, and the pressure was starting to get to him. Things had been stiff the previous day, but despite the tension things had gone as well as anyone could have hoped for. With the exception of Hözuki crashing their lunch and Baki getting into an argument with Azuma while they left the Kage gallery the previous day, things had almost gone... smoothly.

It worried him.

He would almost feel better if a brawl had broken out. Because with so many ninjas who hated each other's guts, forced together in this icy tundra, it was only a matter of time before someone lost their temper.

Kakashi would put his money on Azuma. Every time he'd seen the guy he looked one hairbreadth away from trothing either Baki or Naruto. Why Ōnoki even brought him as a guard worried him. In Iwa he hadn't seen the guy as a main threat at all, but to be chosen as a Kage guard Azuma had to be more powerful than he appeared. But then again Naruto didn't look or act as much of a threat either, and from the way the guards continued to dismiss her she was not seen as a problem. In fact, Kakashi and Shisui were the two who was constantly under supervision.

When he finished a complete round of the stadium a couple of Suna ninja became visible coming up the path from the village, they had been heading straight for the main entrance, but was now angling their path towards him instead. Coming to a stop Kakashi stuffed his hands into his pockets, leaning his weight against one hip as he waited for them. For all the world looking as if he had all the time in the world.

"Hatake-san?" Asked Yūra, Baki's fellow Kazekage guard, in greeting.

Kakashi nodded back. "Have you checked the entire exterior?" Asked Baki in a brisk, no nonsense kind of way - like with everything else. The man always came off as serious.
"Yes, and I haven't seen any disturbances."

"Neither have we. Checked the arena after everyone left yesterday too. No tampering as far as we know. Hopefully it'll continue like this." Yūra added. "Konoha's up in the first round today right?"

"Mhm, two Konoha genin are first up." He explained.

"Yamanaka against Hyūga, right?" Baki added with an arched brow, while Kakashi hummed in agreement.

"Care to make it interesting?" Wondered Yūra with a half turned up smirk. "The Hyūga is young, but that clan has a strong line up. The kid wasn't bad yesterday."

"Mah, I'm not much of a gambler. You should try Naruto instead." Kakashi replied with a wave of his hand while repressing the urge to smile. It was a bit uncanny how the Uzumaki never lost a bet. Ever.

"The Yamanaka was no slouch either." Mused Baki before turning back towards the stadium. "But we have more pressing matters at hand than gambling, Yūra."

"Aye, you're right." Grumbled the Suna guard at an exhale, and the two were already heading for the stadium. "See you later, Hatake-san."

Kakashi watched them leave before turning back towards the road. He would check out the village too. When he'd left the Safe House that morning Naruto had come out to eat breakfast, and if he knew her right she would be too restless to remain inside until the exams started. As a Kage guard she was within her right to wander freely through the village and stadium for signs of foul play, and if nothing else she'd use it as an excuse to stretch her legs.

Who knew, maybe she'd stumbled upon something important while she was at it. The girl had a knack for finding trouble.

She was at the bottom of the village, tracking alongside the outer border while familiarizing herself with the area. Naruto was set to leave with Minato that evening, but she had nothing better to do but wander around. Sleep had remained elusive after she'd woken up at five, and they couldn't be too careful.

Not ten minutes earlier Naruto had jumped behind the corner of a building, trying to evade Hōzuki, who she had spotted jumping over the roofs. She hadn't succeeded, because she was ninety five percent sure the bastard had noticed her, but at least he hadn't felt the need to stop to have a chat. That was one conversation she'd been happy to miss out on.

Nothing looked suspicious so far though. The samurai were patrolling the streets day and night, showing no fatigue despite the cold, and some of them even bothered to be polite and acknowledge her existence when she greeted them a good morning when passing by.

She was wandering further out of the village. Leaving the buildings and tracking a path down the side of the mountain. From the trampled snow a lot of people used it, though she wasn't sure what the destination was. Maybe it was one of the roads that led out of the village? When team Kasai and Minato had arrived, they hadn't taken the trodden path, but stuck to off road routes. It made the journey harder but safer from any unwanted attacks.

She was still speculating about the end of the road and where it might lead when faint noises caught her attention.
Her head snapped up, her brow furrowing as she turned in the direction she thought the sound came from. It was off the path, but because of the steep cliffs and endless whiteness Naruto didn't see anything. She strained her ears, trying to figure out exactly what was happening. It had sounded suspiciously like...

Her feet were running before she made a conscious decision to do so, carrying her off the path, leaving deep tracks in the snow as she headed down the uneven terrain of the mountain. Barely keeping her footing she turned around a traitorously slippery corner and stopped in her tracks.

Two men were fighting for their life right next to the edge of the mountain. Snow was sliding under their feet, shooting over the side and free falling into the fog below, while the sound of kunai meeting a wakizashi echoed off the rocky terrain.

"Oy!" Naruto shouted, drawing the attention of the fighters. The Suna ninja took advantage, and next moment the other man dropped, taking a wind ninjutsu to the kidney from what Naruto could make out. Wide eyed Naruto leapt forwards, finding Baki watching the dead man at his feet warily.

"What- who is-?" She stopped, her brow furrowed as she studied the man on the ground.

It was the one she'd seen earlier, lurking around not long ago.

"I didn't have a choice. I was attacked. Do you know this guy?" Asked Baki and turned to her, brushing off snow from his pants.

Naruto shook her head. "No… But I saw him standing by the gate earlier."

"Naruto?"

They both turned and found Kakashi jogging towards them, coming from the same direction Naruto had taken when she arrived here. Not a moment later they felt a presence coming from the cliff above them too. Glancing up Naruto was immensely displeased to see Hōzuki look down at them. The Kiri guard jumped off the cliff, landing softly next to Naruto just as Kakashi reached them.

From the looks of it the earlier commotion had drawn anyone who recognized the signs to them. Any experienced ninja knew what a battle sounded like, so she wasn't really surprised to see that Kakashi and Hōzuki had come to find out what was going on.

"Causing trouble? And of my favourite kind too?" Taunted Hōzuki.

Naruto ignored him, instead crouching down to turn the man around to find out who Baki had just killed. "Could't you have kept him alive at least?" She growled, her mood worsening thanks to the latest arrival. "We really don't need this right now."

"I had to. If not we would have drawn more attention and he was stronger than he looks. This guy's been trailing me for half an hour. I led him here where it's remote in hopes he'd show himself while I was alone. The last thing I wanted was to lead him to Kazekage-sama."

Naruto searched the dead man, emptying his pockets for clues. She fished up a wallet, a lighter, some exploding tags and a scroll along with other random objects while dropping them on the ground for later and more thorough inspection.

"Ah, nothing like a refreshing assassination attempt before breakfast, is there?" Mused Hōzuki with a tilt of his head, before his eyes narrowed and he stooped down next to Naruto.

"Hey!" She growled as he picked up a small square box which had previously been in the man's pouch and turned it around in his hands.
"This is etched with the Ring of Tenko emblem." Hōzuki mused and turned it around so everyone could see a symbol scratched into the wooden surface. It wasn't a large box at all, but long enough to hold a few senbon of high quality.

"Ring of Tenko?" Asked Kakashi, and his tone of voice had Naruto instantly on the alert.

"So you've heard of them, eh?" Hōzuki replied while still grinning.

"Hired ninja mercenaries, right? Expensive ones too." He replied drily, which had Hōzuki nodding. Kakashi bent down and yanked down the scarf wrapped around the dead man's neck, revealing a green tattoo showing a multi tailed fox engulfed in a circle of flames that matched the design on the box.

As Kakashi got to his feet Hōzuki whistled appreciatively. "I ran into a couple of them a year ago. Tough bunch of bastards the lot of 'em. They're freaking suicidal. 'Don't care what they have to do as long as they're paid enough."

"Are you trying to make us believe your own morals are better than that?" Wondered Naruto, folding her arms while her voice dripped with sarcasm. The Kiri ninja couldn't quite suppress his answering smirk.

"Shut up you two. We've got bigger problems now." Kakashi interrupted and turned to Baki, who was eying the box in Hōzuki's hand with distaste. "It looks like someone hired him to attack you. Do you know why? I find it hard to believe this has anything to do with a personal grudge. One thing is to pay the Ring of Tenko to have you assassinated, but to have you assassinated today and here of all places, makes me think someone wants to cause trouble."

"I don't know." Baki replied vexed, and Naruto couldn't see any obvious misgiving. He was studying the man himself. "Like you said, I figured it was someone looking to create trouble for the tournament. Tension is running high right now. A dead Kage guard turning up out of the blue wouldn't go over well."

"At least he didn't get you." Mused Naruto.

"I recognize him." Hōzuki added with a tilt of his head. "He was hanging around the road up to the stadium. Watching people. Yagura went over and chased the guy away."

"I saw him earlier today. But that was down by the north gates." Naruto filled in.

"Where's Yūra?" Asked Kakashi. "You were with him earlier."

"He's still at the stadium." Baki replied, his scowl intensifying as he looked from Hōzuki to Kakashi and over at Naruto. "We need to get a handle of this right away."

Her eyes narrowed in worry at the implication. "You think there's more of them?"

Baki shrugged. "Could be. Haven't had any other suspicious behaviour though. If there are they haven't shown themselves yet or they're tailing someone else."

"Did you see anyone else?" Asked Kakashi, the question directed at Hōzuki while he gestured with a hand at the corpse. "Last night?"

The swordsman scratched his chin, looking theatrically up against the cliff he'd come from while he thought. "Well, there were people going up and down to the stadium. Samurai, a few ninjas, but all of them officials as far as I know. He was the only civilian in the wrong place at the wrong time. The
"How forthcoming of you." Baki muttered under his breath, making Hōzuki glance up and smile widely, his sharp teethes making the expression every bit as threatening as he wanted it to be.

"Now what are you insinuating camel rider?" He asked with a mocking tilt of his head.

The Kazekage guard sneered in reply. "What do you think you damn mud puddle?"

"Mah, calm down everyone." Kakashi drawled. "There's no need to point out the lack of trust between one another. That's obvious enough without comment. Let's try to do our job instead of throwing accusations around, eh? First thing first we need to seal this guy up. We can't leave him here for anyone to stumble over."

Baki was already taking out a scroll from his back pocket, but Hōzuki stepped forward, causing all of them to freeze when he reached for the hilt of his sword. He didn't draw it, but everyone else already had their hands on a weapon a split second later.

"I don't think so." Hōzuki said, his voice turning smooth and silky, his earlier mirth evaporating as he glared at the scroll in Baki's hand. "Why should Suna run away with this guy? I think I'll take him instead."

Baki bristled, rearing up to his full height. "It's me he tried to kill. I who got rid of him."

"I don't give a shit. You said he was no slob, so you'll probably go home to your sandcastle and use his corpse for your doll collection."

Kakashi was growing increasingly fed up. "I'll seal him then."

The Kiri guard's head turned and gave an unimpressed glare. "And that's better how?"

"Kami!" Naruto exclaimed angrily. "Get a grip guys! We're wasting time here. If you can't agree I'll damn well seal him myself and hand him over to the samurai, dattebayo! He did die within their village borders, and this is the Land of Iron, so if anyone has any rights here it's them. If you're all so freaking paranoid of what the others will do to his corpse we can go together right now. Fair enough?"

All three men turned slowly towards her, before they in tandem let their hands drop from their weapons.

"That would be fair..." Hōzuki mused. "But I'm not sure that's the best strategy just yet though."

"As much as I hate to agree, Hōzuki has a point. Right now, the less who know the better. The Samurai might react badly to this, and we don't wish to increase the tension today." Baki added.

Naruto huffed. "Oh yeah? Do you have a better solution then? Unless one of you can make his body turn to smoke and blow him away then we have to do something. Even if we are off road people will find him if we leave him here."

Hōzuki's eyes drifted over the terrain. He pointed to somewhere behind them, and Naruto glanced over her shoulder and towards the view of the vast mountain range. "Well... Since we can't agree who's getting him, we could just drop him over the edge instead. It'll take a search party to find him again at the bottom of that drop."
"We can't just-" Naruto started, but stopped abruptly as all four of them noticed the latest arrivals. Looking up they saw both the large built figures of Killer Bee and Darui coming towards them.

"Yo, yo, yo, four guards and a corpse, no? Causing mayhem, broh?"

But with their attention drawn towards the two Kumo guards running towards them, Hōzuki took the opportunity to hook his foot under the corpse. A quick but powerful jab of his leg had the corpse rolling over several times, and before Naruto could stop it the dead guy tumbled over the side of the cliff. All of them staring in bafflement as he disappeared down into the abyss below.

Naruto burst. "Gyah! What the hell did you do!?"

The Kiri guard looked at her as if she was the stupid one. "Solved our problem, goldilocks."

"That solved nothing! Someone else might have recognized him and could have told us more! Now we have to go down there and fish him up again!"

"Or we can use a henge and not be stuck dragging a corpse around." Hōzuki replied drily.

"What is going on here?" Asked Darui, his body language indicating he was ready for a fight. Killer Bee was hanging back, his arms folded in front of him while he took in the scene.

The four guards shared a quick glance amongst each other, before Kakashi turned to explain to the Kumo ninjas, his jaw flexing in annoyance about the whole situation.

Three minutes later Naruto cut off her henge and turned back into her normal appearance after showing Killer Bee and Darui the appearance of Baki's victim. Kakashi had already caught them up to speed on the scene they'd walked in on.

"Does he look familiar to you?" Asked Kakashi while lazily waving away the excess smoke from the henge.

Darui pursed his lips, eyes narrowed. "He does actually. He was outside the cafeteria yesterday when we went to get lunch."

"Really? Was he talking to anyone?" Asked Kakashi wide eyed.

"Yeah, he was talking with the lunch server." Darui said, his already deep voice dropping an octave.

Kakashi was immediately glad he had opted to bring his own food the day before and not to eat anything from the cafeteria food selection. From the corner of his eye he knew that Hōzuki was less pleased about this discovery, as he had quite publicly bought food from there.

One look at everyone there and they all remembered that fact too.

"Well, I'm not poisoned." Hōzuki said affronted. "I know how to check my food for poison, and I'd never be stupid enough to eat anything I wasn't sure about. Obviously, I'm also still alive and well, so that should be proof enough."

"It was Baki he was after, so why poison you anyway?" Naruto wondered.

"For all we know right now he went there for the cafeteria food. But in case he wasn't, what do you guys say we have a chat with mister lunch lady?" Asked Kakashi pleasantly. "He seems a good of place to start as any."
It was three and a half hours until the exams started, and Shisui already had a bad feeling. He sat with a group of Jōnin sensei eating breakfast inside the Safe House. A few of the Genin had woken early and was scattered around the room, but otherwise it was a subdued and quiet crowd gathered for their meal.

Shisui was curious where Kakashi and Naruto had gone off to. They'd fallen asleep in the same room, but their sleeping gear had been packed up when Shisui awoke that morning, and according to Yuuta they'd left right as he'd come in to eat. But Shisui couldn't help getting jumpy picturing all the ways Naruto could get in trouble here and had to hold himself back from going out to look.

He was being paranoid. Naruto had grown out of her self-destructive ways. She had barely gotten a scratch on her since her return to Konoha, and this was simply old jitters waking up because of their setting. She was probably out doing a checkup of the stadium with Kakashi. He could count on the latter to be the voice of reason if nothing else.

"Not long until the exams, right?" Asked Nara Suzaku, he was Jōnin sensei who'd been stuck in the village for a month despite the fact that none on his Genin team had made it further than the Third round. He was getting antsy to get back home, and Shisui couldn't blame the man.

Shisui nodded while his mouth was full of cereal. Suzaku grumbled something under his breath before addressing Shisui again. "I'm relieved we'll be able to leave tomorrow. It's been a long month, and the brats are all annoyed they're stuck in here while tournament is running. Before yesterday they were free to wander freely at least. Having sixty-five Genin, most of them pre-teens, stuck inside for one day was torture yesterday. I doubt it'll be much more fun today."

Yuuta chuckled from next to Suzaku, grinning knowingly. "At least we can sign up for security and stretch our legs if they start crawling up the walls. I know my student Hibiki is about to do so. He's been green with jealousy after yesterday's stories about the finals."

"Just keep them under watch. We've almost reached an end to this whole ordeal." Shisui replied with an uneasy smile. "And talking about ordeals, has either of you seen if Naruto or Kakashi returned yet?"

Both of them shook their heads in the negative. "They're checking the stadium, aren't they?" Suzaku asked.

"Probably. I'm sorry, my nerves are just getting to me. You should have been there during the Kage meeting yesterday. Someone could have held a barbecue with how high emotions were running in there." Shisui grumbled and took a sip of water. "And the Kage guards are almost as bad as the Kage themselves. You should try staying in close quarters to those Kiri bastards. It's not pleasant trying to remain civil."

Suzaku whistled. "I can imagine. I'm not envying your job. I'm impressed Minato-sama managed to pull this off in the first place, and I'm downright amazed nothing too bad has happened."

"Let's hope it stays that way, eh?" Yuuta added, raising his glass in a toast. "Only twenty-four hours to go, and we'll all be out of here."

The six Kage guards managed to find out who the server was and where he lived forty-five minutes later.

A quick run up the stadium, a few careful questions asked by Kakashi to an unsuspecting Samurai who went to Bingo with the server every other Saturday, and the guards were heading together for a
small house at the edge of the village.

Unfortunately, they had picked up a couple of unwanted additions to their company.

"This is none of your business! We're just checking up on a... a thing!" Naruto exclaimed angrily, but Azuma followed after them, his fellow guard Roshi the four tail jinchūriki trailing behind. The two Iwa ninjas had been doing checkups back at the stadium when they'd noticed the odd mix of guards enter the arena as a company, and now refused to leave before they knew what was going on.

"Like I'd trust anything coming out of your mouth, scum." Azuma growled. "I find it hard to believe you six are taking a morning stroll together for the sake of pleasant company."

Kakashi looked on the verge of laughing at his remark, and even Naruto could see the humour in the statement.

"This has nothing to do with the exams." Baki growled angrily. "It's simply a case of a bought mercenaries making trouble."

"Mercenaries?" Roshi asked, his red brows disappearing underneath his overly ornate forehead protector in surprise. "The qualified kind or the shitty ones?" When none of them answered it seemed like confirmation enough for the two Iwa guards to tag along on their little morning excursion.

"It's not like there's a problem anymore. Baki here killed him. We're just trying to figure out who bought him." Hōzuki muttered under his breath, not any more pleased about the additional company than any of the others were.

"Do we really think this guy bought him though?" Wondered Baki aloud. "I'm just saying, ninja mercenaries are expensive. Especially this one. Not exactly within the price range for a simple lunch server."

Kakashi knew what he was getting at. The Ring of Tenko was the type of mercenary only the powerful and the wealthy could afford.

Like a Daimyo.

Or like a Kage.

"We won't know unless we check." Kakashi replied flippantly. He then glanced over the gathering of mismatched ninjas. The group consisted of three jinchūriki, one of the swordsmen of the mist, the Copy Ninja and one of the Kazekage's advisors plus Azuma, who Kakashi suspected was more than he appeared. And all were currently heading to question this poor bastard. It would be quite the wakeup call for the guy. "Though I must say this must be the most overqualified squad ever to go check up on such a thing. Personally, I think any one of us could have done this alone and it would still be a mission underneath their usual standard."

Naruto grinned, glancing over the crowd too. "Might be a bit of an overkill, I'll admit. But I doubt any of these guys are backing out now."

They came to a stop in the middle of a narrow street. The houses were built close together, like everything else in the village, but the district had a distinct private property feel to it. There were no stores for several streets, and everything had a personal feel to it.

"Number seven, right?" Asked Hōzuki, looking up and down the street. "It should be on the right side. They're all odd numbered."
Kakashi had already found the correct house and was heading towards one of the smaller buildings. Naruto caught up to him just as he reached the gate and opened it for him. She held it ajar so the guys could pass through, giving a sarcastic smile as she held the door open for the boys.

"Maybe we shouldn't flock his front porch?" Baki suggested, as all of them were pressing towards the front door. Kakashi nodded and stepped back, allowing Baki to go first. The others reluctantly allowed the Suna ninja to knock. They could all admit Baki was one of the less eccentric ninjas in the group. The poor waiter would probably have a heart attack if Hōzuki or Killer Bee knocked on his door.

Baki raised his fist and knocked steadily three times in short succession before taking a step back. They waited in silence for several moments, straining their ears for sounds on the inside. None of them heard anything for several seconds, and Baki went to knock again. Nothing happened.

"Maybe he isn't home?" Naruto wondered aloud.

"At seven in the morning?" Asked Killer Bee.

"It's actually half past seven." Roshi corrected.

Kakashi sighed. "Then we have no choice. We're going in. There's a window ajar up there." He pointed to the second story, where true enough, a window was left slightly open.

"Who the hell needs to air out their house in these temperatures? It has to be freezing in there." Asked Naruto horrified.

The question seemed to make all of them halt, but Hōzuki took action and fished out a senbon. A moment later it shot precisely towards the house, hitting the security chain keeping the window from flapping back and forth and cutting it in two.

He held out a hand. "After you, Hatake." He said with a leer.

Kakashi didn't hesitate. He leapt up the wall and up to the window, which he opened wide before disappearing inside, Naruto right on his heel and the rest catching up after them.

Kakashi landed in a bedroom and quickly walked forward to make room for the rest. His eye swept the room, from the neatly made bed to the dresser to the pictures lined up. He noticed the last occupant of the room had been reading Jiraiya's Icha-Icha book, as it lay on the nightstand with a bookmark.

Dismissing the signs for now he kept his steps light and was pleased that everyone else was of the same mind. His nose twitched slightly. There was a faint smell in the air he couldn't place.

Carefully he reached for the door, opening it silently as the last Kage guard entered through the window. Trusting Naruto to cover his back as he focused on any threats ahead of them instead of the obvious ones behind him.

The door opened with a silent moan of protest, but all that met him was dusty air and a dark corridor. He neither heard, saw or sensed any immediate threat in the other room. In fact, he was starting to wonder if Naruto wasn't right, and that the server was in fact out.

He opened the door wide, walking out into the hallway with the others shadowing his steps.

"We should split up to cover this place faster." Roshi said quietly, looking up and down the hallway.
Kakashi nodded. "Naruto and I can go with Baki downstairs, the rest of you can check all these rooms."

"I'll come too." Hissed Hōzuki, not pleased about being left behind with four Kumo and Iwa ninjas as his only company. Kakashi suspected that his reasons weren't only about self-preservation though.

He was always around, and Kakashi wouldn't be surprised if Hōzuki wasn't tasked with gathering information about Konoha. His apparent interest in annoying Naruto wasn't genuine. And he sure as hell didn't trust them anymore than he did any of the Iwa or Kumo guards. Maybe Kiri was planning on getting their bijū back? It was a scenario Minato had already been worried about. Kakashi simply nodded in return, allowing Hōzuki to walk first down the stairs.

Once they were on the ground floor they split up. Hōzuki headed for the entrance corridor while Baki went towards the kitchen. The Konoha guards headed deeper into the house towards the living room. Naruto reached the door first, and it squeaked open with a simple wrist action. From upstairs Kakashi could hear the others rummaging through cabinets while someone was opening a second window down on the ground floor.

As the door to the living room opened the strange smell grew a little stronger. It bothered him, as if a memory was right at the edge of his consciousness. Teasing him. It was…

"Oy!"

Kakashi and Naruto swung around, the sound of Baki's shout drawing their attention away from the living room.

Wanting to find out where the smell originated from Kakashi gestured for Naruto to go check out what Baki had found while he went to investigate the living room.

Once inside he had to admit it was nothing special. Sparse but liveable. He walked leisurely over to the coffee table, taking note of a cold cup of tea sitting forgotten. His finger traced the table surface lightly, pushing up a thin sheen of dust from the surface, before brushing it off with a flick.

All the clues left to only one reasonable conclusion. No one had been here for several days. He heard the other guards rushing down the stairs on their way to check out what Baki had found, but Kakashi was still more interested in the smell.

It was coming from somewhere on the left side of the room, but he couldn't figure out what. He allowed his hand to travel over the surface of the wall, suspecting something was being hidden in plain sight. There was no uneven surface, no obvious trap doors or hidden cracks. Except…

Kakashi glanced at the modest window with blue curtains drawn back neatly to allow light through.

There was a window… And the bottom frame piece was a bit too bulky to be considered normal or proportional with the rest. He studied it closely, a smirk lifting his lips up at the corners. If he wasn't much mistaken then a hidden drawer was constructed into the window. Soon after he had broken it open, revealing several scrolls squeezed into the tight space.

At that moment Naruto came running into the room. "Kakashi! We found another dead guy!"

Kakashi turned around, honestly not having expected it. "Really?"

"Yeah, and from the picture in the bedroom I think it's the guy who lives here. Azuma- what is that?" She had finally spotted what he had located.
"Not sure yet. Help me carry these will you?" Kakashi asked and picked out a handful of scrolls and threw them to Naruto. She caught them easily, while Kakashi took the rest. Together he followed Naruto into the kitchen and then out the open window above the kitchen counter. Outside the rest of the guards were gathered in the backyard, standing in front of a shed.

"He's in there." Naruto nodded towards the shed, her nose scrunched up in unease. "He was wrapped in plastic though, and with the cold he's frozen to the bone. It's not a pretty sight though."

Kakashi believed her. Roshi, Darui and Azuma looked uncomfortable, standing several feet away while watching the other guards huddled in the doorway of the sad looking construction.

Without a word he dumped his own scrolls into Naruto's arms and headed for the shed. The others allowed him inside, where Hōzuki was sitting bent over a bloody and rotting corpse. From a single glance Kakashi could easily see that the guy had been tortured for a bit before killed. Some of his fingers were missing and several cuts ran in strategic places up and down his body. However...

"Either this guy broke and talked quickly, or whoever did this was an amateur." Mumbled Hōzuki with a sneer. "The guy must have bled out pretty quickly."

Kakashi agreed. He leaned back and glanced out at the guards. Baki was watching the corpse with displeasure, Killer Bee had gone to stand next to Darui and Azuma was firing questions at Naruto about the scrolls.

Well, that was interesting... Wasn't Azuma a fan of this kind of past time activity? In the past he had never failed to describe what he did to his own victims during the war. Maybe the guy was better at deception than Kakashi had given him credit for. The more he saw of him the more he was certain Azuma was actually a long-range fighter. He even looked a bit sick at the obvious signs of torture up close.

He was more curious than ever how Azuma ended up as a Kage guard, and what his position within Iwa was. He made Naruto look like a calm and collected diplomat, and so far, hadn't shown any obvious specialty.

"What do we do with this one? There's no cliff to drop him off anywhere near here." Naruto asked grumpily. Holding the scrolls out of the reach of the other guys.

Kakashi put his hands in his pockets while figuring out the best course of action. No one noticed his hesitation before he replied, his voice leaving no sign of his unease. "We'll leave him where we found him and check out the scrolls of course. The guy has been dead for long enough to freeze, which means no one has looked for him in a while. Let's see what's on those scrolls instead."

"We can use the kitchen. It's not like we'll be disturbed here." Roshi suggested with a disgusted look at the corpse in the shed. Hōzuki jumped to his feet, looking animated and eager as he followed after Naruto.

There was something seriously twisted with that guy, Kakashi thought darkly while watching his white hair swing with each step the Kiri ninja took. Blood and violence was definitely exciting him.

On his way out Kakashi took a second look around the shed, noticing the equipment lined up on a high shelf. Ink bottles, brushes, a few scrolls and several metal cans. Deciding to keep this to himself a little while longer Kakashi made sure to shut the door on the way out, hoping no hungry animals broke into the shed for an easy meal.

When he reentered the kitchen, Naruto had already started unsealing the scrolls, throwing them out
on the table lazily once done while talking. "-but what I don't get is who our lunch server was yesterday. If that's the same guy our mercenary was talking to yesterday, but the guy in the shed has been dead for days, so that means there was someone else doing his job, right?"

"Maybe another Ring of Tenko?" Killer Bee suggested, sitting down to unroll the closest scroll. "Though I'm surprised none of us noticed a guy wearing a henge."

Kakashi frowned. Bee had a point. All of them had been on guard the previous day, especially during the tense lunch. There was also a matter of fact that Kakashi hadn't been fooled by henge since he was a first year Genin. Shisui had even activated his Sharingan yesterday, and though his focus had been on Hōzuki trying to pick his pockets, he doubted the Uchiha would have missed a henge with those eyes.

"Let's deal with these scrolls first, alright?" Azuma interjected while unrolling a scroll himself, laying it flat against the table top. "I want to finish this crap as fast as possible."

Soon all the scrolls were laid out carefully, but Kakashi wasn't sure what he was looking at or what it meant.

"These are… maps?" Asked Darui confused. "Why would he go to such lengths to hide a bunch of maps of his hometown?"

"They're not just maps… These are the construction drawings of the arena." Baki stated, pointing at one of the scrolls in particular. Kakashi raised his forehead protector to reveal his Sharingan. He wanted to document these drawings in detail and couldn't be too careful anymore.

"Yeah, one of the scrolls are, but the rest are just… Plain overview drawings of the scenery." Hōzuki muttered and pointed out the six other scrolls which document the surrounding mountains around the village "Maybe he was mapping out good hiking spots?"

Kakashi looked up once he was sure he had documented every inch of the scrolls. "There might be more here. And there's a… smell. Am I the only one who notice it? These scrolls..." He picked it up and smelled the parchment carefully. It was faint, but definitely there. It was something… It reminded him of the war, of… caves. His memory was working hard to put it together.

All of them watched him curiously while Naruto sniffed loudly at one of the other scrolls. "Huh, they do smell a bit off, but nothing obvious."

Kakashi gritted his teeth in frustration. He couldn't believe he was blanking at a time such as this. "I've smelled this before."

Hōzuki had picked up a scroll himself, trying to smell whatever Kakashi was referring to, but looked as blank as Naruto. Killer Bee also noted something off, as well as Roshi, but it was Azuma who reacted the strangest way. He blinked a bit too quickly once he smelled the scroll.

"What?" Asked Kakashi, his eyes narrowing at the careful reaction. "Can you identify whatever that is?"

"I can't be positive." Azuma said slowly, obviously thinking very hard and very fast as he looked over the drawings with an unreadable gleam in his eyes. "But I think that someone has been keeping these scrolls close to... I can't be sure, but… this smells faintly of some chemicals..."

"Well that's helpful." Hōzuki mumbled sarcastically with a roll of his eyes. "I say we tear this place apart. Hatake found those hidden in a window frame. The guy might have had more careful hiding places for the more sensitive stuff but his tracking paths."
While the rest spread back into the house, Kakashi remained with Azuma by the documents, now more alert than ever. His head tilting to the side as he took in the Iwa ninja. He had wondered about this before. Why Azuma had always been placed as their tour guide whenever available within Iwagakure. It certainly hadn't been for his easy going demeanour or patience with strangers.

Because frankly, to the naked eye he wasn't very impressive looking. He was much more talk than action. Handsome enough, wearing a bandana with dark hair. But equipment wise he didn't look to favour any specific field.

Kakashi had at first taken him for a ninjutsu user. It would explain his lack of obvious weapons. He still believed so, but he had noticed that Azuma's pockets were filled with scrolls, not shuriken or kunai. His movements made it obvious he was no taijutsu specialist either. He would have stood no chance against Gai in hand to hand combat. In fact, on short range Azuma didn't appear very impressive at all. Which didn't correspond with almost any of the stories Azuma had told. And now… his reaction to the corpse. It was the same as Naruto's. Someone who fight wide range, someone who can cause great damage, but not on close hold.

"How did you bypass Kurou's combo jutsu defense, again?" Asked Kakashi casually, pretending to search the maps for clues. There were dozens of paths marked up and down the mountains, and Kakashi figured it wouldn't hurt to have a second look anyway.

"Huh?" Asked Azuma confused.

"Kurou. Konoha shinobi. You bragged about how you tortured and killed him when we were in Iwa. I was curious how you got through his combo defense. He was very good at it. He integrated taijutsu, kenjutsu and ninjutsu in his stance. It was one of the strongest defenders in Konoha at the time."

Kakashi looked innocently up when Azuma still didn't answer. "Some sort of katon ninjutsu perhaps? You mention his burns."

"Is this really the time to go looking for tips?" Huffed Azuma, his sneer coming up again. "Want a play by play of his screams? I can-"

"No, I want to know how you got to him, not what you did once he was down." He interrupted while picking up the scroll closest to him, sniffing it again. "Because I just recognized what this smells like. It smells like my Kannabi bridge mission. It smells like my best friend's death. It smells like Iwa ninjas blowing up a cave to bury my team alive. It smells like getting my Sharingan transplanted." He looked pointedly at Azuma.

"Outside the standard curriculum, you have no idea how to torture anyone, do you? I've been comparing notes between your stories and the tales I've heard from one of my friends in the Torture and Interrogation Force back home. I must say your way, as far as you've explained, is neither optional to cause long term pain nor to gather information. Which makes me think you're either really bad at torture or you're lying. Though you probably see a lot of injuries from the aftermath of your work, right? The ones who stood outside the immediate blast zone I gather? Not the actual targets, just the ones unlucky enough to be too close to get away in time? Because you are actually specialized in instant kills and optimal wide range attacks. Let me guess..." Kakashi tilted his head with a patronizing grin on his face.

"You Azuma, are part of Iwagakure's Explosion Corps, which, of course, on the record doesn't officially exist. Which is why you know exactly what this smell might mean, especially toppled with the equipment stored in the shed. Dead mercenary. Maps of the area. Chemicals which is used in mass destructive explosion jutsu. The Chūnin exam." He listed off while casually counting the points
on his gloved fingers.

Azuma grew very quiet, no longer smiling while Kakashi waited patiently for him to find his voice again.

"So, were you ever going to fill us in? Or were you just going to watch us flounder until we blew up?" Asked a voice from behind Kakashi. He didn't need to turn around to know Darui had overheard his entire speech.

"Damn it!" Kakashi swore and only had a second notice before he was forced to duck. Darui's kick went flying over him while Kakashi struck out with an open palm, effectively tripping the Kumo guard over and into Killer Bee who caught him at the last moment. Azuma was finally free of the hallway wall rubble he'd ended up engulfed in, staggering to his feet and swearing up a storm.

Hōzuki had his sword out, and the bandaged blade named Hiramekarei was glowing blue with building chakra while Naruto stood opposite him, two of her chakra chains wrapped several times around the blade to stop Hōzuki from unleashing the true power of his sword. It looked like they were having a yanking constant, seeing who could rip the sword out of the other's grasp.

A few steps away Baki went hurtling over the kitchen table, scrolls flying high in every direction as two Naruto clones jump after the scrolls, snapping them desperately out of the air in an attempt to save whatever she could in the commotion.

The second clone had to turn midair, its leg kicking out and hitting Roshi's in the jaw to stop whatever jutsu he had been about to spit at her to face the window instead. Scorching fire warmer than anything Shisui had ever thrown erupted from his mouth. It was closer to heated gas, leaving the room in a blazing and hazy fog which did not help the situation in the least.

The Naruto clone furthest away from the mess activated a wind ninjutsu, clearing out the fog just as Kakashi set off a loud flash of light, momentarily blinding everyone from the simple but very efficient lightning release jutsu. "Calm down and shut up! No one is leaving!" Barked Kakashi, his Chidori crackling around his hand in anger and readying himself to strike.

An answering shock of electricity erupted from Darui's hand, while Killer Bee was drawing out several blades.

Hōzuki tugged at his sword again, his teeth gritting in frustration as Naruto's chains clung to it without budging. Azuma had pulled out a scroll filled with explosives, Roshi next to him with his hands ready to attack again, and Kakashi suspected there would be actual lava coming at them next. Baki had his hands clapped together with his back against the kitchen door, while Naruto stood half covering Kakashi, her hand clutching a simple kunai while all ten chains were shot throughout the room. The hooks at the end stuck to ceiling and walls and creating a glowing copper web that all the other guards were reluctant to come in contact with.

It had all escalated rather quickly.

The moment the threat of a bomb became clear, the fragile truce between them had broken like shattering glass. Starting with Darui's fist which had blown Azuma through the wall, and it had become a bit chaotic afterwards, but luckily Kakashi finally drawn their attention before it could get any worse or they drew more attention. The eight-way battle had barely lasted five seconds, but the house was already under strain. Parts of the hallway wall were missing, two windows blown out, scorch marks from whatever Roshi's jutsu was and the holes from Naruto's chains had left the previously cozy kitchen in a wracked mess.
The clone that had saved the scrolls from burning into a crisp peeked in through the window, trying to figure out if it was safe to come back in.

It had been risky move, using the Chidori for attention, but these guys were too stubborn for their own good.

"I have to report this to Kazekage-sama!"

"Tsuchikage-dono needs to be informed!"

"We need to fucking evacuate!"

Baki, Azuma and Hōzuki spoke on top of each other, but Kakashi still caught it all. "You can't!" He snarled back.

"Why not? Because Konoha is behind this?" Asked Roshi suspiciously.

Kakashi glared ferociously at the four tail jinchūriki. "No, Konoha is not behind this, but someone is. For Kami's sake use your brains just for a second. If there is a bomb and we evacuate now, what is to stop them from blowing us up the moment the alarms goes off? Evacuation protocol includes a very loud, very noticeable alarm that will gain everyone's attention. No one can leave. You're all in this now, and it's up to us eight to fix it."

Naruto glanced back at him surprised.

"Someone? Don't you mean Iwagakure?" Asked Hōzuki, glaring at Azuma who hissed back.

"We can't prove that." Kakashi replied calmly, allowing his chidori to ebb out as the guards were finally listening and not brawling. "However..." Kakashi looked at each of them in turn. "Someone here might be in on it. In fact, there's a very high probability of it. If we all leave to each our own to warn our Kage, what's to stop them from notifying their boss about being discovered? Which can result in a similar result as setting off the evacuation protocol. A bomb might blow then too. So no, we all stay together. We talk to no one until we have no other choice. I don't trust any of you, and you don't trust any of us. We are therefore in a lockdown."

No one spoke for several passing moments. The eight guards eyeing one another warily. In show of faith Naruto deactivated her chains, freeing up the space around them and revealing several new holes in both walls and ceiling.

Roshi was the next to stand down. Slowly he straightened up, nodding in agreement to Kakashi's words. Baki, Darui and Killer Bee followed soon after, while Azuma and Hōzuki reluctantly lowered their weapons last.

Naruto released a sigh of relief. It had looked dangerous there for a moment. If the fight had escalated ninjutsu would have started being thrown around, and then all pretense would be up.

"You're forcing whoever of us is the guilty part to cooperate in the rescue?" Asked Darui with a slight grin. "Ballsy."

Kakashi didn't heed the words. "I don't see many alternatives right now. I'll also consider the first to take off to be the guilty party. I'll kill them before they get far."

"But it's so fucking obvious!" Hōzuki shouted, pointing from Roshi to Azuma. "It's those two!"

"It sure as hell isn't!" Screamed Azuma back, his eyes bulging in wrath while he dried away blood
from the corner of his mouth.

"Let me see if I got this right. These scrolls smell of explosives? Not the explosion tag type of explosives either? But the big destructive types that blows mountains apart?" Growled Hōzuki furious while watching Azuma like a hawk. "And we just happen to have an Iwa explosion expert here on hand who decided to keep that trivia fact to himself? That is quite a coincidence, isn't it?"

Azuma stepped forward, his teeth bared in frustration. "Iwa has no knowledge of whatever the hell this is! For crying out loud, we don't even know if there are explosives here. The smell is similar, Hatake is correct about that, but all we have is two dead guys and a few drawings. There's nothing here indicating an actual attack! And if there is, Iwa has nothing to do with it! We are not the only country that can blow things apart! It's quite common in fact."

"But Iwa specialise in it like no other village. No one can make a place blow up quite like Iwa." Hōzuki replied in a dangerous silky voice.

"Azuma has a point though. So far, we have no proof of any bombs. There have only been two personal attacks on a civilian of Land of Iron and at a Sunagkure guard, and the attackers were probably in both cases done by the Ring of Tenko."

"Hey, do they blow things up too?" asked Naruto with a tilt of her head.

"No." Kakashi replied flatly. "They specialize in silent assassination. The kind that can't be tracked to specific individual."

"Then why the name? And why use flames in their emblem?" He heard her mumble under her breath, but decided to ignore it in favour of Baki who was barely holding onto his temper.

"What do we do though? We can't just let a suspicion of explosives lay to rest and cross our fingers it will be okay!" The Suna ninja snapped.

"Too true." Kakashi dragged a hand through his silver hair, glancing over at the angry crowd crammed into a dead man's crashed kitchen. "You found nothing more? You've checked everywhere?"

It was Roshi who answered. While his fellow Iwa ninja had been grilled he'd remained quiet, only rebutting whenever any accusation came his way. "No. This place is empty. We can start tearing up the floorboards, but honestly I think that's a bad place to hide notes you need to use."

"So, all we have to go on are these maps." Kakashi replied thoughtfully. He then glanced at Azuma speculatively. "You want to prove Iwa's innocent in this mess? Then you better help us. Assume there really is a bomb threat. Where, according to these maps, would it cause optimal damage?"

"Well that's obvious too!" Exclaimed Hōzuki, his finger pointing at the scroll with the construction plans for the arena. "If there's a bomb it's obviously inside the stadium."

"It all depends on who is behind the explosion and who the target is." Azuma interrupted, holding up a hand to stop Hōzuki from talking over him.

"If this is the work of outsiders, yes, the stadium is an obvious choice. The problem is if someone on the inside is the culprit. If the stadium is the target and the bomber wants to cause ultimate carnage they'll set it off while it's packed, but then they'd be blowing themselves up in the same swoop if it's an insider. And to be honest, this whole thing stinks of inside information. If, and that is a careful if, there are plans to blow something up, someone on the inside is behind it. This whole tournament has been packed with security for months, and I find it hard to believe any outsiders can have managed
to put such a job into motion without already having access." The man looked pointedly around, receiving nods from Kakashi and a more reluctant one from Darui.

He continued talking, his voice rushed as he tried to explain. "Which makes me think the stadium isn't the main goal. It's chaos. Disrupting the peace. And there's plenty of ways to go about doing that. Also..." Azuma pointed to the other scrolls, the maps of the surrounding mountains. "Some of these mountains could cause damage to the village itself. Precisely set explosions can cause avalanches. Burying the village in tons of rock, snow and ice, which can be just as destructive."

Kakashi smirked. "Nice of you to share at last, Azuma. Now tell us, what do you see when reading these maps with your background as an explosion expert?"

Azuma looked at the maps again, before pointing to one of the drawings. "This looks like a demolition map." He said at last. "You can see the markers." He pointed to red dots following one of the drawn lines. "All of these are placed strategically for the avalanche effect. If someone set these off correctly there's going to be a lot of rock and snow coming down upon this village. Probably enough to bury everyone within Bushigakure alive but leave the stadium, which is further up and out of the avalanche path. Which again, would suggest an inside job."

"How would anyone go about setting these off?" Asked Kakashi. Azuma gritted his teeth. "It's not explosion tags, because they're activated individually. This is an interconnected system. There would be a detonator, and the detonator would be connected with chakra transmitters to the explosives to set the bombs off in a timely matter. Timing is everything. And with something of this scale it's much safer to use a switch detonator."

"And where exactly... is this switch?" Asked Kakashi. Azuma closed his eyes. "I'm not sure. As long as it's within range it doesn't matter. It depends on the quality of the chakra transmitter though. How far its range goes. It can be anything from a few feet to miles away."

"Okay, let's assume these guys will be up in the stadium and wants to survive themselves, they can't have someone else push the button while safe and sound in their own country, right?" Kakashi asked urgently.

"No." Azuma replied at once. "No, it will be somewhere here within range. On one of these mountains is actually perfect, because the chakra signal will have an undisrupted chakra range. Or..." Azuma swallowed.

"Or?" Asked Kakashi.

"The stadium." Azuma said. "If the goal is to bury the village and leave the stadium, the stadium is good place to have the detonator. It's within range, but not within the path of the avalanche."

"Hey now!" Argued Hōzuki. "We don't know what the goal is. For all we know the stadium is the goal. Don't rule it out just yet."

"I highly doubt there's any bombs within the stadium. There are ninjas and samurai walking inside there day and night. How on earth would that go undetected? This is not like putting up one of your frilly explosion tags on the wall and activate it. This takes time and planning over time. Days if not weeks. Someone would have noticed. I sure as hell would have noticed. Actually..." Azuma trailed off as if suddenly hit with a new thought, but clearly very reluctant about what he was about to say next. Kakashi waited patiently for him to find his words. This had to be killing him. Spilling jutsu
secrets to a bunch of outsiders like this. "A detonator with the range we're discussing here… It's traceable."

Kakashi straightened along with all the others. "Traceable?"

"Yes. Short range requires smaller amounts of chakra to pass through, therefore they're much harder to find because there is less chakra loss on the way from the switch to the detonation, but with long range detonators… They're not easy to find, but yes, they are traceable." Azuma trailed off again. "We basically need a chakra sensor. A good one. If there are explosives planted up the other mountain, it will already be connected with the detonator, and therefore traceable."

"But can't someone just take the detonator and move it if they see us coming?" Asked Darui. "It's just a switch of a sort, right? A chakra detonator?"

Azuma was shaking his head before he was even finished speaking. "We're talking about highly volatile chakra explosives. You don't move the detonator unless you're asking for a disaster. The detonator can be just as dangerous as the explosives if handled carelessly. And something of this size? No, that detonator would already be connected to the explosives, and moving it could cause incorrect explosions, wrong chakra transmissions and other blunders. It won't be going anywhere until it's set off."

"So, we have to find a detonator then. Find the detonator and we stop the explosion and find the culprits in one go?" Roshi asked for clarification.

"In theory yes, but did you not hear the part I mention where we need a sensor? And I'm not talking about the ones fancying themselves chakra sensitive either. This place is huge, and unless we somehow miraculously walk directly into the path of the chakra signal we need someone who can trace chakra from far away."

Kakashi grinned, his head turning expectantly towards Naruto, who was sitting cross legged on the floor with her eyes closed. Red markings were already formed around her eyes. "Oh, that won't be a problem."

The rest of the group turned to see what had drawn his attention just as Naruto's yellow eyes opened.

"Yosh, I'm ready. We only have a little more than two hours left until the exam starts, and we need this sorted before that stadium is full. Now Azuma, explain to me exactly how this chakra signal acts like. In sage mode it shouldn't be too problematic to find, dattebayo."

To be continued...
Thank you so very much for reading! The chapter was beta'd by AnjoRemix!

I'm so sorry for the "delay". I have no proper excuse, except that the story was killing me and I needed a break before I could come back to it. I am back though. The next two chapters are finished and I'm getting my mojo back. I've simply written too much and spent too much time on this story not to finish it! It's a point of pride for me by now. This story has to be finished, or all those hours of writing this far would have been for nothing, and that's just unacceptable.

And I must say, these chapters have been killing me. There are so many characters to keep track of I just want to cry. And worse off all, none of them are OC's except Kenji, Hibiki and Yuuta, and they're not even very important to the arc. I just needed some Konoha genin present for this exam. A short trivia fact: All the genin contestants in the finals are actually from canon along with all the named Kage guards. I think I'm juggling around twenty to thirty "new" characters in this arc alone. It's just exhausting…
"Stop talking crap and give the girl a break,
finding a chakra signature is no piece of cake,
let her do her thing or she'll make a big arse mistake, ooooh yeah!"

Killer Bee certainly put a lighter spin on the whole situation. His raps had not improved since Naruto last interacted with him, but in this case, he was a refreshing change from the other's hyper paranoia and suspicious glares.

Every now and then Hōzuki would look at Killer Bee as if he wasn’t certain how to deal with him. The white-haired teen just couldn’t seem to make up his mind if the Kumo ninja was pulling a prank or not with his constant rhymes. Kakashi was appeared relieved someone was allowing Naruto time to work, but the rest was growing impatient at her slow progress.

"There are thousands of chakra signatures in this area, sorting through them all is difficult, and you lot hovering over me doesn't make it easier to focus!" Naruto snapped, her eyes closed as she felt for something that felt off.

Azuma had explained it the best he could, but as the Iwa guard was not a sensor himself he had no way of giving a proper description of the signature she had to trace. Apparently, it would be a lot fainter than what a normal human would give off. Naruto compared it to threads spreading across the mountain. One end tied to the detonator while the others end stuck to the bomb. It would be no more than a thread, but the detonator would have many threads protruding from it while connected to the bombs up and down the mountain. The difficult part was finding one of the threads.

Naruto had managed to track Pein by using one of his chakra rods, finding the accurate path through the chakra signal Pein had given out, but it had taken direct contact with the rod for it to work back then.

Finding a chakra signal - that very well could be hanging hundreds of feet up in the air - was another thing entirely.

To make the job easier the eight guards had left Bushigakure, heading for the mountain they suspected held the bombs. The map had marked off small dots going up and down the mountain, which could indicate the placements of each explosive, and if she could just pick up a signal from one of the bombs, finding the connected detonator would be no problem.

They had only made a single stop on their exit out of the village, which was by the gates where two samurai were stationed. Kakashi and Baki had requested that a samurai was sent along with a message to each Kage, explaining that the eight Kage guards heading out of Bushigakure were busy checking the security outside the village, and to not worry.
The pros and cons of giving notice of where and what they were doing had been argued heatedly for ten minutes, and in the end, they had voted, coming to an agreement that a casual message from a samurai was the most diplomatic way of letting the Kage's know where their missing guards had gone off to. The fact that they didn't show up to explain in person would be very suspicious, but it was better than going MIA. That would without a doubt have set off a few alarms.

The Samurais on guard watched them leave, unsure what to make of this development, but as ninjas had their own code of conduct there was little they could do without proper cause. There were no rules against leaving the village.

It had taken them half an hour to run from the village and get to the mountain in question. The tall snow made it harder to run, but they were ninjas in the end. Snow wasn't really a problem unless you let it be. Though strangely enough Baki was the one most adapt at getting through the terrain. Maybe the sand dunes of Sunagakure held a stronger similarity to snow than Naruto had first assumed.

"Ugh, this is taking too long." Naruto grumbled to herself and crossed her hands into the tiger formation. With three clouds of smoke clones popped into existence. All of them complained their annoyance about the cold before they sat down, exclaiming in horror as their behinds came into contact with the freezing snow.

"What are you doing?" Asked Hōzuki puzzled, observing as one of the clones pushed the other away to have more room to get comfortable.

"We'll have four sensors looking around once they're done." Naruto explained and gestured casually to the clones.

Baki made a strangled sound in the back of his throat, while Killer Bee glanced back and forth between the clones and the jutsu caster.

"Fool, yah, fool! You tellin' me your clones can use sage mode? You must have a shit ton of chakra ready to explode!"

"What is wrong with him?" Mumbled Hōzuki, staring dubious at Killer Bee, just as Darui said; "Try not to talk about explosives right now, Bee".

"Let's continue the search while the clones gather chakra." Naruto suggested, pointing up the steep slope. "They'll get to work once they're ready."

The others agreed, most of them apprehensive with the exception of Kakashi, who if anything seemed preoccupied watching the endless whiteness of their scenery. Unlike the other guards he was well informed of Naruto's sage talent, and her casual use of the skill didn't make him nearly as nervous as the other guards. "You're being all silent and thoughtful, Kakashi. What's bothering you now?" Naruto asked as they started up the hill, leaving the three clones to their job.

Kakashi huffed, reprimanding himself over being caught distracted. Worse of all that Naruto had pointed it out in front of the others. "I'm wondering about the dead man in that house actually."

"Oh?"

"Yes, but more precisely who took his identity yesterday, and why." He put pressure on the last word while picking up his feet for each step. The snow was tall, which made this kind of terrain not made for maximal speed on foot.

Baki glanced towards them. "You think he was up to something? Not just tampering with food or
planning explosives?"

Kakashi nodded. "I'm wondering why he was there of all places... The lunch room was reserved for the Kage guards specifically during that hour. If this attack has been planned in advance as Azuma explained, whoever is behind it has had access to the village for an unknown amount of time. It worries me that one of them decided to play waiter yesterday. One answer is that as a waiter he had access to parts of the arena during working hours, but another answer could be he was there for us."

"But I wasn't poisoned or anything." Hōzuki pointed out. "I would have noticed."

Kakashi eyed Hōzuki briefly, thinking over his answer before the mouth covered by both a scarf and mask started moving. "Mah, if you'd suddenly dropped dead from unknown causes the one serving food would be the first suspect. Well, considering your choice of lunch mates he would be the suspect right after all us other Kage guards of course." He gestured flippantly around at himself and Naruto. "But still, these guys have been careful when planning this. They have probably been observing all the foreign ninjas since they arrived to Bushigakure. That includes all the jonin sensei and the Genin who has been housed within the village for the entire month. The only unknown in this setup arrived yesterday or the day before. Namely the five Kage and us. We were the unknown."

He broke off temporarily, his brow furrowed as they climbed a particularly steep cliff. "He might have been spying to figure out who he had to deal with. For weeks it's been known to all the Five Great Villages that each Kage would bring three guards each, but the identity of those three guards wasn't known before they showed up for the Kage meeting yesterday morning."

"That makes sense. He might just have been gathering information." Realized Darui. "They could have been trying to find out who would be allowed to walk around the village unsupervised. As Kage guards we have free reign during the tournament, unlike all the other Jonin who's confided to specific areas to certain time periods. Even the Kage is constantly being watched and guarded, restricting their movements. If anyone would catch on to them it would be us or the Samurai."

"So, they know who we are?" Clarified Naruto, not liking the idea of how meticulous these men had been.

"More or less." Kakashi replied. "There's only so much you can tell from a single lunch and the bingo books, but yes. If I'm right they'll be prepared for us."

Roshi sped up, falling into step next to Naruto. "What do we even know about these guys? Are we sure the Ring of Tenko are not behind the explosives?"

It was Hōzuki who answered. "Well, in theory I guess they could be, but it's not all that likely. Ring of Tenko are expensive mercenaries for a reason. One, all the members are of Jonin level, and two, they are all but impossible to catch. They almost never leave a trace of themselves behind, which makes it almost impossible to know just how many assassinations they've even been a part of, but without a doubt there's a lot more than we know."

"Which speaks of well-planned attacks." Darui interrupted. "You're right, I've also heard they're hard to catch, and I think a lot of preparation goes into every mission they take on. They might not be the ones making explosives, it's too loud and flashy for their style, but they might be preparing the stage for whoever is."

"That's what I'm worried about." Kakashi added. "If the man hiding behind the server's identity was indeed a Ring of Tenko member, it means they might consider the possibility of facing us in battle. They'll be prepared for being discovered."
"So… basically we could be walking into a trap?" Summarized Roshi.

The Copy Ninja made an agreeing humming sound in the back of his throat. "We can't rule it out." Hōzuki kept glancing at Kakashi thoughtfully, making him to arch an eyebrow in return. "What?"

"You're a brainy one, aren't you? How many scenarios are currently juggling around in that head of yours?"

"Currently? About seventy-two." Kakashi replied flatly. "Some more probable than others."

"Where the hell are you going?" Asked Azuma, interrupting Hōzuki's answer and drawing the attention towards Naruto who with no warning had suddenly taken an abrupt U-turn. She was now marching determined diagonally down the mountain.

"Did your clone find the chakra signal?" Kakashi called after her.

"Yes. I know where we're going, but we'll need to run. We're on the wrong damn mountain."

Minato glanced from Shisui who'd just come out of the dormitory, to the front door and then down at his watch. "Still no sign of them?" He asked, already knowing the answer from the Uchiha's grouchy expression.

Shisui shifted uneasily, shaking his head. "No."

"The tournament starts in an hour, and no one has seen Kakashi and Naruto since dawn. If they're not back in thirty minutes I have to find replacements." Minato muttered, the words uttered more like a curse than a list of facts.

"What do we-" Shisui started, but the door had opened behind them. Yuuta entered, face hidden behind a gigantic scarf made of a fluffy rainbow yarn while dripping snow all over the floor. He was followed by a heavily armed samurai who somehow didn't leave a trace behind him, despite coming from the outside too.

"Hokage-sama!" Yuuta exclaimed at once and came over. "This man has a message for you."

The samurai stayed calm and nodded politely as Minato gave him his full attention. "At eight o'clock this morning I was approached by Hatake Kakashi. He was in the company of Baki of Suna and several other Kage guards, amongst them another Konoha ninja, Uzumaki Naruto. They left Bushigakure to check up on the surrounding terrain. He said there was nothing to worry about, but requested we inform the five Kage of their whereabouts."

"Why wouldn't he come and tell us himself? Why make you go?" Asked Shisui.

"He did not say why. The message was brief, but from personal observation none of the Kage guards were hostile. Perhaps suspicious, as eight Kage guards from all the Five Great Nations were travelling together, but otherwise… That's what I was told."

Minato and Shisui exchanged a look, before turning back to the samurai. "I see… Thank you for informing me." was all Minato said at length. The samurai gave another nod and dismissed himself.

"They left the village? What does that mean? What do we do now?" Asked Shisui in a strained tone that was barely keeping its cool.

The Hokage sighed and dragged a hand through his hair. "If they're not back within half an hour I'll
need replacement guards. I can't be late, and apparently both Naruto and Kakashi is out doing something. We don't want to act prematurely."

Shisui didn't bother to express how much he doubted those words, and instead kept his eyes fixed on the Hokage. Minato turned to Yuuta. "Why don't you go find Nara Suzaku and prepare for duty. I need to be on the safe side. Be quick, as I'll need you both to fill in the two empty spots until my waylaid guards return." Minato said with a bland smile.

As Yuuta hurried into the dormitory to do as instructed Shisui glanced back to Minato. "Is this wise? Shouldn't someone at least go look for our waylaid guards?" Asked Shisui with forced calmness.

Minato's voice was just as easygoing as if they were discussing the Bushigakure yogurt selection when he replied. "Not yet. I trust Kakashi and Naruto to fix whatever is going on unless the situation changes. For now, we'll pretend this was always the plan."

It had taken them too long to reach and climb the mountain. Naruto knew where she was going, but reaching their destination was a tedious task.

Kakashi was intimately aware of time ticking by. Minute by minute. The exams started in less than an hour and they had yet to reach the detonator.

The closer they got the slower they moved. Naruto had picked up on several chakra signatures in the area, and the last thing they wanted was to alert any waiting enemies to their presence.

According to Naruto the detonator was located towards the top of one of the mountains furthest away from Bushigakure. It was still a neighbouring peak, but it ran wider and slacker than the others and stretched into a mountain chain leading south out of the country. It ran parallel to the mountain the Konoha party had used when arriving only a little more than a day earlier.

The mountain was sharply uneven, going up and down with no even planes from the moment they had started the climb. Kakashi doubted any travelers would ever prefer crossing this way. It was a treacherous terrain, and they had to watch each step they tread on the steep cliffside.

Which is how they ended up huddled a little too close for comfort in the crack of two cutting, ice covered boulders. Trying to keep quiet while the wind howled unforgiving in their ears.

Kakashi adjusted his scarf, attempting to cover the slight gap where freezing wind kept sneaking in to tickle his neck. By this point he wouldn't be shocked if someone told him the entire mountain was really one big glacier. Naruto stood crouched in front of him, angling a hand mirror in her gloved hand as she tried to find sign of movements around the corner. No matter how much she tweaked it, from his position Kakashi could only see endless whiteness in the reflection.

"I think… Yeah, there's an entrance leading into the mountain here." Naruto whispered quietly, her voice nearly drowned by the wind.

She handed him the mirror and angled his hand in the correct position to see. Kakashi spotted a faint, darker outline that might be a cave of sorts.

"The chakra signal comes from inside, which means there has to be an opening somewhere." Naruto continued while Kakashi tried to make out what exactly he was looking at.

Agreeing Kakashi handed the mirror to Darui who stood closest. "I think Uzumaki is right." The Kumo ninja said after a short glance. "But how do we proceed here? Can we simply barge in through the main entrance?"
"There are ninjas around." Naruto pointed out. "Most of them are inside, but the other signatures were further away. Higher up." She pointed towards the peak arching over their hiding spot.

"I say we just get inside. We already agreed not to split up." Hōzuki suggested with clattering teeth.

Naruto looked ready to act at once, but Kakashi halted her. "How much longer can you keep the sage mode up?"

She frowned. "Um, since I haven't used any nature chakra it's draining slowly. If I don't gather more I should have enough for ten, maybe fifteen minutes?"

He nodded, "Okay, I think fifteen minutes could be enough. Your sage mode is good for tracking, and we'll want to avoid fighting if possible until the detonator is secured. Take us as close to the detonator as possible while staying away from any unknown ninja. The last thing we want is to alert them to our presence and make them activate the bombs prematurely."

They spread out, Kakashi going with Naruto, Baki and Hōzuki to climb further up the boulders, while the other four snuck around the corner. They were within reach of one another, but it would be suicidal to walk in all at once.

The group on the ground reached the entrance first, and when Naruto gave the clear signal - a hand waved twice from side to side - Kakashi watched them disappear in blurred flashes through the small, dark entryway. Baki gestured for them to follow, and together they jumped from the boulder, landing lightly around the ice-covered rocks surrounding the entrance.

Naruto went inside first, her movements like a cat sneaking through a street alley. Kakashi did another check of his chakra, making sure it was so snuggly suppressed as humanly possible as darkness engulfed them.

The wind and the white light of the cloudy day outside dimmed. Though it was not as dark or sheltered as Kakashi had expected. He squinted to adjust to the change, taking in the details of their new surroundings.

The ground had a light sheen of snow that left footprints, wooden beams followed a repetitive pattern and the rocky walls were intricately engraved in the same designs as what he'd seen around Bushigakure. Beautiful imagery worn with age and decay followed the stretch of the corridor.

As a first assessment Kakashi guessed they were inside one of the samurai establishments. Though it wasn't clear what type of activity it had been used for. From the deserted atmosphere it very well have been abandoned some time ago.

Kakashi sped up at the end of the group. Naruto had caught up with the first four to enter and were signing direction instructions up and down the line of ninjas.

Despite what he'd thought Kakashi couldn't really describe it as a cave anymore. It was as if someone had dug a tunnel into the mountain, but then got claustrophobic and started punching out holes at sporadic distances between one another, allowing the outside elements into the corridor.

Some of the gaps were so narrow Kakashi's closed fist would have difficulties penetrating through, but other openings could fit three men standing shoulder to shoulder quite comfortably both in height and width. There had to be a lot of ways to enter, which explained how there had been no security outside the entrance they'd taken. It might not have been an entrance at all - just one of the openings.

Several passages split up from the one they were following. Some out towards the mountainside while others went deeper in, but Naruto knew where she wanted to go. She had made her way to the
very front of the group, deciding to navigate them by going first. The passage twisted and turned, and Kakashi could not remember ever having seen anything quite like it. The structure was almost organic, following the contours of the mountain, sloping up and down while remaining spacious.

Naruto came to an abrupt stop, her hand shooting out to halt the company.

"Someone's coming." She signed rapidly, and then pointed into the wall on her left with her thumb to show which direction.

"Fight or hide?" Asked Roshi.

Naruto was signing back clumsily in her haste. "They're not running, I don't think they know we're here. Hide."

Instead of jumping through one of the holes leading out into free air, Naruto continued down a side passage. It was the opposite direction from their enemies, but would still drive them further into the mountain and away from the many exit routes up and down the corridor.

As he was at the back of the line Kakashi didn't have time to point this out before the others were following after her. They were running as quickly and quietly as possible, the new passage leading them downwards and deeper. Quite the opposite of the direction of the detonator.

Kakashi glanced down at his watch. The exams would start in thirty-five minutes.

For a while the tunnel grew steadier darker and narrower, relying solely on the remaining light from the edge of the corridor far behind them, before it gradually switched. The walls tilted outwards, giving more room the further down they went, and Kakashi was sure it was getting lighter. The walls became clearly visible instead of vague outlines, and soon he could see something bright ahead of them.

Suddenly he heard a gasp, and he was instantly in attack modus. Naruto had stopped again, this time at the end of the passage, and was looking at something in front of her. Kakashi couldn't see what it was, but she looked ready to fight.

The others had reacted not a moment later, but pressed to the back of the group Kakashi had no idea what had happened. He pushed his way forwards as the others moved forwards before he finally reached Naruto, ready to back her up.

His breath caught in his throat, and Kakashi fought the urge to jump out of his skin. At first he thought they'd been completely surrounded, and couldn't understand how Naruto had led them into such a large assault, but a second glance showed that the ones staring back at him were in fact multiple distorted versions of themselves.

His image was reflected back at him several times on the various angles of blank ice.

He searched their surroundings curious. Far above them the wind howled and the foggy sky gave a shadow-less light that reached them. It was like they were walking in between two tall glaciers on each side, but instead of feeling claustrophobic Kakashi felt as if he was inside a cathedral.

Kakashi wondered what this had been used for once upon a time. The abandoned equipment, the treated walls and floors that so clearly showed signs of wear meant that inhabitants of Bushigakure had probably once used this place a lot. In fact, maybe they still did.

"Whoa..." It was Killer Bee who'd spoken, his voice echoing softly around the room, and Darui, Hōzuki and Roshi shot glares at him for talking.
"It's fine. Keep your voices down, but we're a far away from anyone else." Naruto whispered.

"I think this is their training ground." Murmured Baki quietly. "I've been told stories of the samurai training fortresses. They build their strongholds into the mountains instead of on top of it. It's richer on the inside than outside."

"It's beautiful." Naruto said in awe, and Kakashi quietly agreed.

The crystal clear ice floor, the reflective but disorienting surfaces of the walls, the tall frost covered columns and hard rocky arches crossing and uncrossing across the span between the glaciers gave an almost regal appearance to the structure. It was a stark contrast to the minimalistic but cozy wooden village the samurai inhabited down in Bushigakure.

"If the samurai does their training in here it's no wonder they can stand outside for days without freezing their toes off. If they have any left that is." Hōzuki complained absently.

"How is it so light down here? We're far below the mountain, yet we're getting decent daylight." Asked Darui mystified as he peeked up.

"It's the angles of the walls." Kakashi replied softly, his gaze slowly travelling over the arches above them. "They transfer sunlight from the outside down into the mountain. The sunlight hits one surface, that reflect it to the next, then to the next, and so forth until it reaches us down here. It's quite sophisticatedly done."

"It's so cold it could break a thermoscope, but even I'll admit that's pretty dope." Killer Bee rapped as silently as he was able.

Hōzuki groaned under his breath, sending another exasperated glare at the eight tail jinchūriki.

"Come on, we're not here to admire the architecture." Roshi reminded them and turned towards Naruto. "Where do we go now?"

"The detonator is right underneath the peak of the mountain." She answered absently, her eyes still trailing the arches above them. "There's a small chamber of sorts there where the detonator is located. We'll need to find a passage up again, but the one we used have ninjas patrolling it."

"So upwards." Summarized Baki, looking around at the several entryways leading out of the hall. From only a fleeting glance there had to be a dozen to pick from.

"Um… am I completely off or..." Started Darui, he was looking down over the edge of a railing, and first now did Kakashi realized there was a level below the one they were standing on. "But does that look like a detonator to anyone else?"

Startled they hurried over to where Darui stood, glancing down to where the hall continued one story down. It looked strangely like an icy ballroom. It definitely looked ceremonial, and right by the wall not far from where they were, a black box was placed on the ice. It looked complicated and filled with fuinjutsu and wires. Kakashi swallowed and turned confused towards Naruto. Had she gotten the location wrong?

"It could be a detonator..." Azuma agreed slowly, narrowing his eyes as he studied the devise from afar.

"No," Naruto disagreed. "Let's continue."
"But it's right there." Hōzuki disputed. "We can defuse it right away. They could have moved it since you tracked it."

Azuma made a sound of protest at Hōzuki's suggestion, but it was Naruto who argued. "That's not the detonator I tracked. I don't know what that thing blows, but it's not the one connected to the bombs up the mountain."

"Oh kami, does that mean there are more detonators in here?" Whined Darui exasperated.

She shook her head hesitantly. "No… I don't think so. I can't feel any chakra signal coming from the device down there."

"A decoy?" Mused Kakashi suspicious. "Or just spare parts? It would explain why it's been left unguarded..."

"You're certain, Uzumaki?" Darui demanded.

Naruto met his eyes and tried to convey her conviction. He held her gaze for a couple seconds longer, before he exhaled in resignation. "Okay, then we'll ignore it. Let's continue searching for the real detonator. We can come back to check on this later."

Hōzuki and Azuma showed reluctance, but followed as the rest returned back into the corridor.

Naruto's pace had slowed, her movements even more feline the further they walked. They had made it back up several levels, backtracking only twice when they came to dead ends, but had now followed the same corridor for a while.

Kakashi's sense of urgency was growing for every ticking second, feeling as if the watch on his arm was burning. They were almost right underneath the peak of the mountain, where Naruto was certain the detonator was located.

She stopped as the corridor split into four different direction. One led back where they came from, one followed a staircase upwards, another passage led sideways into a narrow dark corridor and the last was a wide opening in the wall, where wind flowed through and blew Naruto's ponytail into her face. Brushing away the hair she stepped out onto the landing of the opening to give space for the rest.

Her hands came up in front of her, and she started signing. "The decoy is right up that staircase, but there are two ninjas there too. Probably guards. They haven't left the area since we arrived." Her brow furrowed. "I doubt we can all barge in at the same time. It looks like a narrow staircase, and we don't want them to sense any of us coming."

Kakashi frowned and glanced around at the huddle of ninjas. "We'll split up, and the rest remain here. Azuma will have to go, he's the one who can defuse the detonator."

Azuma agreed, but couldn't help scowling as he did so.

"But how can we take the guards out without notifying the rest? A fight would draw attention." Asked Roshi.

Baki answered, his sign movements sharp and precise. "Who has experience with infiltration or assassination? Who can take out targets quietly without causing a ruckus?" He ended the question by raising his hand, indicated he could do such.
Kakashi and Darui both raised their hands too. "Then the three of us should take out the guards. Azuma will come with us but stay behind until it's clear and defuse the bomb. The rest of you stay here and remain out of sight."

Naruto's hands were moving sloppily now. "I don't have much nature chakra left." As she signed it Kakashi noticed how the marks over her eyes were faded compared to an hour before, though her irises remained as bright as ever.

"It's fine. We'll deal with the guards and the bomb. Your job is to keep watch. We've found the detonator, so we won't need you to track it anymore." Kakashi replied, and before they could waste any more time he turned around gesturing for Baki to go ahead first.

He glanced back one more time and saw Naruto's eyes transform from their bright yellowish orange to the more familiar cerulean. The red markings faded without a trace and she shook her head. She waved at him as if to say; not to mention it and just get it over with.

Baki snuck forward soundlessly, Kakashi, Darui and Azuma staying close behind while the rest remained out of sight.

Stealthily they climbed two spiraling staircases before they heard muted sounds. Voices drifted down the staircase from an open doorway on the top landing. "-says I'm away too much, but I don't know what she expected when she married me. She knows the assignments take me away from home for large periods of time."

"Your wife is constantly complaining, mate. I've always questioned your taste in women." Another answered, this voice sounding younger.

The first one replied annoyed. "Shut up, you're one to talk. The last one you took home was nuts. You'd sleep with anyone as long as they're of the female population. No, she's just stressed about the kid. He's being difficult lately."

"Aren't all kids difficult? Your wife shouldn't complain because your kid acts his age."

The conversation continued in low murmurs, and Kakashi listened attentively to every word in case the unknown men noticed the oncoming danger. He snuck closer, keeping his body flush with the wall as he carefully placed his feet, making sure to not make a sound.

Kakashi had slinked over to the doorway, and discreetly peeked inside for a short moment through the open crack. A man sat cross legged on the floor with his back to the wall, looking sideways towards someone Kakashi couldn't see from his limited angle. The one on the floor would be taken out first then.

There were no other options. There were no holes or windows to enter into the chamber, so they would have to barge in through the door, which meant speed was paramount.

Kakashi clutched his kunai tightly in one hand and lay his other flat against the door with featherlight gentleness. Ready to push.

He met Baki's eyes and the man nodded, indicating he was ready. Darui stood a few steps below and gave his own clear signal.

Getting his head in the game Kakashi allowed a second to pass. Then, with lightning force he smacked the door open as he threw himself into the room.

His target's head snapped towards the noise, his arm darting frantically to his pouch, but before he
reached it Kakashi was upon him and his kunai had pierced into the ninja. Next Kakashi covered his victim's mouth and nose while twisting the blade lodged into the man's kidney, stifling any sound as he made sure the man bled out as quietly and quickly as possible.

There had been a rustle of activity close by where Darui and Baki had cornered and taken down the second occupant of the room, and when Kakashi dropped his kill to the floor he found the other one just as dead by a deep cut to his throat.

"Well done." Baki murmured, gesturing towards the man at Kakashi's feet. He didn't react outwardly but pushed away the thoughts of the man's son and wife who would never see him again. This was just another day on the job.

He walked briskly back to the door while wiping away blood from his kunai. He peeked down the staircase where Azuma was still waiting and waved the man in.

"Your turn." Kakashi whispered once Azuma got close, gesturing towards the box at the side of the room radiating a small amount of chakra.

Azuma stepped across the threshold, his eyes fixed on the detonator and completely ignoring the dead corpses cooling on the floor. He sat down in front of it and got to work without a word.

After a minute of tinkering he looked up at the others. "This will go faster if you're not breathing down my neck. Do something productive and get rid of those instead." He suggested and gestured towards the dead with a careless wave. Then his eyes trailed over to Baki. "Especially you. Don't stand behind me."

Baki rolled his eyes but did as instructed, heading for the doorway while Kakashi and Darui took his suggestion to take care of the dead. They rummaged through the men's pockets, storing anything that looked useful or suspicious before Darui heaved a corpse each over his shoulders. "I'll find an opening and drop them through it. It's a free fall straight downwards on the backside of the mountain."

"Taking a note out of Hōzuki's book, now?" Asked Kakashi teasingly. Darui's lip twitched up for a split second but then he headed out the door while the copy ninja found a spot by the wall to wait.

Azuma wasn't happy they hadn't left the room like Darui, but accepted the leeway they'd allowed. His head stooped down to the device, and soon he was lost to his work.

Kakashi watched apprehensively and curious, noticing that Azuma was far from careful. He'd expected the detonator would be a delicate thing, but the way Azuma handled it showed both a certain lack of self-preservation but also familiarity. Like he handled devices such as these with such regularity the movements were engraved into his muscle memory.

Azuma knew what he was handling like any ninja knew how to hold a kunai. Knew where to add pressure and where to be mindful. Still, it was a detonator, and as Azuma tore off a piece of the detonator haphazardly and threw away the material as if it was no more harmful than a teddy bear Kakashi couldn't help but wince.

"Stupid… Crude thing… what's that doing there..? Such an unnecessarily… How did anyone ever think that was a good idea… would be so much more effective if….

Azuma's mutters came sporadic but frequently as he worked, a barely audible commentary which illustrated how unimpressed he was with whatever he was taking apart. It didn't take long for Darui returned, which left them all waiting for Azuma to finish.
"Can you hurry up?" Asked Baki, having caught Kakashi glance at his watch for the third time. The exams started in thirteen minutes.

Azuma didn't even take the time to look up. He simply ignored the comment and continued. His callous fingers prying carefully apart two small objects Kakashi couldn't identify. His eyes intense while submerged in the task.

"Let him concentrate." Darui warned quietly, shooting Baki a reproachful glare. It was kind of amusing watching the teenage Kumogakure ninja scold Baki, who had to be in his late thirties.

While Azuma continued working, his muttering growing increasingly frustrated, Kakashi's attention was split between watching Azuma, making sure they weren't discovered and inspecting the room. From what they'd seen so far, the area lacked all forms of personal belongings. The structure mostly showed traces of being abandoned, with the exception of this particular room.

Old boxes stood stacked on top of one another next to the door, a rolled up sleeping bag had been pushed into the corner. Ink, scraps of paper and bread crumbs littered the floor and there were visible footprints in the dust. A few bottles stood on a foldable table next to an open scroll which had drawings of the detonator.

While they waited Kakashi studied the scroll, trying to make sense of the explosive device. It looked complicated, and as a field these types of explosives was something Kakashi had very little experience in, and he could only partly make sense of it from a first look.

Thanks to Azuma's explanation he knew what to look for. There was a detonator, the explosives themselves, how much chakra needed to be stored and instructions for how to release. What he didn't understand was the many equations, or more accurately what they were used for. Did it measure how much chakra was needed? Or was it the chemical balance? Or the transfusion between chemicals and chakra? Kakashi could do one or the other, but mixing together chemistry and chakra was lethal if not done correctly, which was why Iwa's Explosion Corp was so feared during the Third War. They'd perfected the art of setting and detonating massive explosions that chakra and some fuinjutsu alone just couldn't achieve.

Looking up his brow furrowed. The detonator Azuma was taking apart looked little like whatever was crudely doodled on the sheet. Perhaps that was what annoyed the explosion expert so much too. But for whatever reason Kakashi had the distinct impression the bomb drawn was a lot less complicated than the bomb Azuma was working on.

At last Azuma stood up, a satisfied smirk lifting the corners of his mouth as he carefully put down the device where he found it and gestured for them to leave. Kakashi nodded and pocketed the scroll while Darui and Baki did a quick check to see if anyone had come upon them. Soon they were making their way back, quietly sneaking down the staircase while making as little sound as possible. They ran several steps down the passage, coming to a stop when they returned to the cross section where the others were still waiting. Naruto and Roshi were peeking out around the corner as they came closer, while Hōzuki and Killer Bee had somehow managed to take refuge between the beams in the ceiling, but dropped down once they saw who was coming.

Azuma stepped out to the large opening in the wall while Kakashi looked at him expectantly, his brow arched. "I take it went well? You didn't take the detonator with you though… Do we need to go back?" He signed now that they were away from the chamber.

"No, it's no longer dangerous. Because I got this out." Azuma replied, smirking as he held up a small, deformed and glinting object against the light which Kakashi didn't have a clue what was.
"This is a very important part of the frequency monitor." Azuma explained. "Basically, the detonator is useless without it. The job of a detonator is to change the chakra signal frequency in the explosives, which if done correctly will set off the blast. Without a faulty monitor you can't regulate the chakra – meaning they can't set off the bomb."

"And there's no way they have a spare monitor laying around that they can screw onto the detonator?" Asked Kakashi.

"Doubtful. But even if they do it'll take them a lot of time to get it back on. The detonator was crudely put together. They had the right idea and the right method, but they definitely lacked the mechanisms of a professional. The whole bomb was overcomplicated, which makes me think whoever put it together was simply following instructions. It is also why it took me so long to locate the monitor and safely disassemble it. Without this there's no easy fix for the detonator. It'll take them hours just to figure out what exactly is wrong with it, and even longer to correct it."

"Excellent." Naruto said in a quiet murmur and grinned mischievously, eying the dark object in Azuma's hand.

Azuma pocketed it with another satisfied smirk. "So, what's next? Do we attack or-"

Whatever Azuma was whispering was drowned out as Kakashi suddenly experienced a rush of adrenaline. It made the hairs on his neck stand on end. He whirled around just in time to see a faint shadow move at the far end of the dark corridor leading up the cross section they stood in. A shout of warning formed on his lips, but it was too late.

His hands had shot up of their own accord, barely covering his face as something hit them. Hard.

The air pressure ripped them off their feet, throwing them out of the corridor and through the air with the power of a tsunami. Kakashi kicked wildly with his legs but couldn't regain contact with the ground.

Colors flashed in front of his eyes and he couldn't hear anything but the rushing wind hammering against his eardrums while he flipped uncontrollable around and around, not knowing what was up or down anymore.

He locked his body, fighting against his fall in an attempt to gain control of his limbs, only to feel his heart shoot up in his throat as the spinning ended - because the fall continued.

A whimper escaped of its own accord when he realized they'd been thrown clean off the mountain, and were now in free fall without a bottom in sight.

He heard someone shouting - probably Hōzuki judging by the pitch - but he had more pressing issues. His hands formed into the kage bunshin seal, and he felt the clone appear behind him with another puff of smoke. The clone's feet bent and lifted up over its chest, the sole of the boots pressing against Kakashi's back, and next the copy kicked him away.

With force Kakashi was thrown forwards, back towards the mountainside.

Right before colliding with the rocky surface he fished out two kunai, clutching them in his hands before making impact. He sunk the kunai into the rock, seeing sparks flash while the metal screeched in protest as he slid down, down, down - but slowing.

His feet were slipping under him, not getting a proper grip because of the speed of his fall and the icy surface of the wall. He felt the sole of his left boot give out on a sharp edge, and the underside of his foot received a cut in process. Before - finally - he managed to come to a stop.
As the descent halted his feet finally managed to grip the wall with chakra while splintered pieces of rock and gravel sprinkled into his hair from the kunai tracks in the mountain. Inhaling once - deeply, horribly - his attention returned to the task at hand.

A groan of metal made his head snap upwards. Naruto was hanging from two chakra chains lodged into the mountain, while six other chains were wrapped around a ninja each. Making them dangle back and forth in the air like some oversized and absurd key chain. The only one not caught up in the tangle of whining and moaning limbs was Baki, who Kakashi found attached to the wall a little further down. Like Kakashi, Baki too had managed to use blades to cut into the mountain to slow the speed of his fall until he could get a proper hold with chakra.

"Neh, Kakashi, if you hadn't saved yourself I was just about to save you, dattebayo."

Kakashi couldn't help it, he chuckled. "I know."

"Fool, yah fool! That was really close, we almost turned to toast. Like a dry pressed primrose."

"Fucking hell, Darui!? Where the hell did you find this guy?! Is he capable of stringing a normal sentence together? His rhymes aren't even good." Hōzuki complained in a strangled voice, as if he was being squeezed.

"Ugh, let's talk about that later." Darui grumbled from the swaying pile above him. "And not that I'm not thankful Uzumaki, but can we stop chatting and start climbing up now? This position is a little awkward."

"Fine guys, you're heavy anyway. Hang on!" Naruto cried back at them.

But before she could do much but tug at her chains, something rushed above them, then another crack rang through the air. Kakashi's lips whitened as he watched something big and heavy come tumbling after them. It was coming down so fast he barely had time to act.

Above him Naruto had reacted faster and clones jumped out to meet the oncoming debris of rock, ice and snow. All of them shooting off powerful wind ninjutsu that cut through the larger boulders and spread out the falling mass.

The others tried the best they could, but their movements were severely limited while stuck to Naruto's chains. It happened so damn fast, and before he could blink they were gone in the cloud of the avalanche. Kakashi barely managed to power up his chidori, cutting clean through a long spear of ice and something that made a horrid screeching sound.

But it wasn't enough. The sheer pressure of the weight landing on him was too much. Too chaotic. He didn't know how to defend himself, as it felt as if the attack came from every direction.

Something struck him hard. It sent tremors through his entire body and in the split second of painful distraction he had lost his hold of the mountain.

Around him the air rumbled, voices were crying and ice shattered.

Kakashi was falling, flying, freezing.

He felt delirious, but still reached fruitlessly towards the only sound he recognized within the confusing crash - Naruto's voice. In the pandemonium something bright and glowing shot towards him, and the last thing he perceived was the cold touch of metal twining itself around him.

Then everything turned black.
Shisui watched vigilant as the five Kage and Mifune watched the finalists enter the stadium to the loud and excited applause of the audience. Nine genin stood nervous but fired up for the day's matches, and by the afternoon there would be a winner.

The quarter-finals would contain five rounds, with one genin having to battle twice to move on to the semifinals. Not that it mattered all that much who won. To be promoted you needed to be seen as a valuable and well-rounded ninja who'd reached a certain level of both power, focus and maturity, which a good Genin could prove just as efficiently in a single battle as in four.

First up were two Konoha genin, which Shisui might have been excited to see if it wasn't for the elephant in the room.

All the Kage had one or two guards changed from the previous day, yet somehow none of them commented on it.

To his immense displeasure Shisui saw Hōzuki had been swapped for a ninja in his thirties, while Baki was switched with a guy wearing a curiously tall turban who wore several boxes strapped to his back.

He also noted both the other foreign jinchūriki guards – Killer Bee of Kumo and Roshi of Iwa – had been changed for the day. That meant three out of five jinchūriki were currently missing the finals.

It took immense effort to keep his opinions to himself. He believed someone should have been sent out to look for the guards. Who knew what they'd stumbled upon. Minato knew the kind of trouble Naruto had a knack for ending up in, but the Hokage had reclined. As he had reminded Shisui of only half an hour earlier; if Naruto really needed him he was only an Hiraishin away. She could call for him and would if it became needed.

Shisui wasn't so sure that was true. There were still some remaining trust issues between the father and daughter, and he couldn't picture Naruto rendered to a state where she'd willingly call for Minato's assistance. It just wasn't her way. She was too independent. If she'd ever call him it would be to help others, not herself.

But that was only part of the problem. Minato was needed here. It was paramount. He simply couldn't leave.

It was of international importance that he was present during these exams, just as it was for the other four Kage. This was a political game and they were constantly measuring one another up. Probing for any perceived weaknesses, which meant leaving to aid a guard would not send a good message. It could be viewed as an act of cowardice, as a planned attack, a show of distrust and the list went on.

Which was why no one mentioned the missing guards while pretending nothing was out of the ordinary. Everyone knew something was wrong, yet all of them refused to admit it.

If they didn't show up soon it would be mentioned later, once the exams were done and there were less witnesses around, Shisui was sure. He just hoped they actually showed up at some point. He felt sick to think what would happen otherwise.

Seven Genin had headed off to return up to the stands, leaving two behind to face off in the first round of the day's matches. "First match will be between Hyūga Kō of Konoha and Yamanaka Santa of Konoha!" Called the proctor down in the arena. "Contenders, prepare for battle!"

"Good luck, Minato." Said Rasa politely while gesturing towards the Konoha Genin finding their
spots below. "It's never ideal to get two from your own village pit against one another."

Though Shisui knew most of Minato's mind was not on the match, the Hokage smiled easily without a trace of unrest. "They'll do fine. Friendly competition is never discouraged."

Kakashi could hear an insistent and repetitive scratching. It was incredibly annoying but was dragging him out his uneasy rest. He felt heavy and exhausted, so when he tried to ask whoever was making the sound to stop it, only a mangled groan came out.

"I think he's waking up!" Even half conscious and his thoughts jumbled Kakashi would recognize that voice anywhere.

"Don't sound so surprised. I told you I wasn't harming him." Answered an exasperated male voice Kakashi recognized, but was not familiar with.

"You never know." Replied the first sheepish.

The scratching continued, like nails tapping against a hard surface repeatedly. "What happened?" Kakashi slurred, opening his eye to an unfocused face peering back at him. "And whoever is making that noise… please stop."

The scratching faltered - thank kami - and he finally made out Naruto who was leaned over him, her blond hair falling over her shoulder and tickling his cheek. Winter blue eyes filled with worry examined his every reaction, before relief softened her expression. The girl was dirty and scratched, yet Kakashi found his memory lacking as to how she'd ended up in such a state. It took him several moments before it all returned to him.

"I didn't die?" He wondered aloud.

"Of course not!" Snapped Naruto. The careful concern wiped clean off her face to immediately be replaced by vexation. "Clearly you hit your head hard if you're thinking like that, but I saved you. I won't let my comrades die, Kakashi!"

"Oh… right." He mumbled, though his lips twitched up at her declaration. He lifted his head carefully while checking for other injuries other than his pounding headache, but was surprised by how few there were. He was bruised and had several smaller lacerations, especially around his right arm and shoulder. His cloak was torn, which was a shame since it had been brand new, but all in all he'd dealt with a lot worse.

Next to Naruto sat a disheveled Baki. He was turned away while packing up supplies in his pouch. It looked similar to the medic kit Rin always carried, though smaller and more compact. A field kit. But none of this explained what had happened. He didn't understand where they were.

"How… Where are we?"

"Underground." Naruto muttered. "We're… uh, sort of trapped."

"But alive." Baki added.

"Yes, luckily that too." Naruto agreed with a wide smile, before she looked shiftily to the side. "For now. We really should get out of here. You've been unconscious for a while, Kakashi."

"The bomb! The avalanche- we," Kakashi's was struck with a sudden urgency, and he jerked up too
fast, his forehead making contact with something rigidly compact, making him see stars as he fell back on his butt. "Ow..."

"Huh... he might still have a slight concussion." Baki surmised unimpressed.

Despite the fresh pain Kakashi felt his cheeks burn as he tenderly touched his now bleeding forehead. Squinting up he found out he'd made contact with the ceiling, which was unnaturally low and made of solid rock.

Naruto started fuzzing in a very Rin-like manner, and brought a cloth up to his forehead. For someone who usually could knock over a horse carriage because she waved her hands too wildly she could be surprisingly gentle. Naruto carefully applied pressure to the wound with one hand while fishing out bandages from her pouch with the other. "It's fine, Kakashi. There hasn't been any explosions at all. I think Azuma did his job right. We got buried with that monitor-thingy, and there hasn't been anything activated."

"But... There was an avalanche-" Kakashi tried to say, but Naruto cut him off with a shake of her head.

"Not really. That wasn't a real avalanche." She said firmly. "There were no explosions involved. We've been talking about this, and we're pretty sure it was some sort of jutsu. Most likely someone used a doton jutsu to throw out some large chunks of rock from the peak of the mountain, and the snow and ice located on top of that earth was thrown off with it. We are also far away from Bushigakure and on the wrong side of the mountain, so even if the few loose boulders and falling ice caused an avalanche it would be heading in the wrong direction. The village should be plenty safe."

"A few loose boulders? But it was complete chaos..." Kakashi muttered.

His teammate smiled weakly. "Nah, it looked a lot worse than it was. Since we were huddled together and it came at us so fast."

While Kakashi replayed the turbulent memory of the event, Naruto continued wrapping bandages several times around his head tightly before picking something off the ground. It was his forehead protector. It must've been taken off while he was unconscious to treat him. He accepted it gratefully and tied it over the fresh bandages while making sure his left eye was covered, suppressing a wince as it agitated the head wound. At least his mask had stayed on...

Once satisfied Kakashi glanced down at his watch, his stomach jerking as he registered the time. It showed it was a little after eleven. The tournament had started over an hour ago.

Naruto looked like she'd eaten something sour when she noticed what he was doing. "Shisui's going to kill us. We're going to be so late."

Kakashi chuckled without humor. "Obito would be proud."

Their eyes met, and before either could stop it they were snickering.

Irked Baki shook his head at their oddness while he crawled away on all fours. The ceiling was too low for any of them to attempt standing.

Kakashi had noticed them before, but it wasn't before now he got a proper look at the rest of the company. Leaning against the stone wall Hōzuki was clumsily bandaging his arm with his left hand next to Roshi who was eating rations. The four tail jinchūriki had a busted lip and his clothes were ruffled, but otherwise appeared well. Darui sat cross legged across from Killer Bee who had to bend his head low to not hit the ceiling. A lit torch crackled between them, the only source of light in the
"Were we the only ones knocked out?" asked Kakashi, gesturing to the still explosion expert who remained lost to his surroundings. It was the only explanation, as there was no way Azuma would allow a Suna ninja to hover over him while being in such a vulnerable state.

"Killer Bee, Roshi, Darui and I were fine." Naruto replied. She'd pushed back her winter coat to free her arms and was picking at the torn sleeve of her sweater, "But the rest of you took some hits to the head which knocked you out. Baki woke up first, and apparently he got some medical training, since he healed Hōzuki first then moved on to you. Don't worry, I watched the whole time to make sure he didn't try anything. And now he's healing Azuma too. I don't think Baki was very eager to treat him though. The Suna vs Iwa hostility lives strong in those two."

Kakashi tried to make himself comfortable by shifting, glancing around the darkness. They were underneath some sort of stone structure Kakashi recognized as a jutsu. Someone must have covered them inside to shelter them.

He wanted to get more information. How they'd survived the fall for one, because the drop alone could have killed any one of them, and then who had covered them, but his questions were interrupted by Hōzuki's bored musing.

"Have you guys ever thought about their choice of name?" Asked the Kiri ninja, watching Baki as he treated Azuma. "Ring of Tenko - it's based on the Kitsune myths right? The transformers."

"Huh?" Asked Naruto, stumped at what he was getting at.

"It's a fairytale." Darui shared, his head turning from Azuma to Naruto. "Probably based on the Kyūbi. You've heard of the Kitsune right?"

Naruto nodded, which made Darui continue. "There are many stories, and many variations of those stories, but one of the most common versions says that the Kitsune are spiritual foxes, known for being able to transform into humans. Most commonly women. The older and stronger they get the more tails grow, ending with nine tails at the final stage… According to legend it takes a thousand years. But there are several lower levels of Kitsune. Starting from Yako, the small fox possessors, to the Kiko and Kūko and so forth until they reach up to the nine tailed Kitsune; the Tenko – a heavenly fox."

"Huh… I've heard stories of course." Naruto said, scratching her neck absently in thought. "So why the name?"

"In legends the Kitsune are most known as shape shifters." Hōzuki told her. "And as Tenko is a type of Kitsune - the highest there is - means the Ring of Tenko are basically saying they're masters of shape shifting."

"Aaaah." Kakashi said as if he'd realized something. "Of course."

"Eh?" Naruto asked, not having caught whatever Hōzuki and Darui were getting at.

"The Ring of Tenko specialize in assassinations, but that includes a lot of misdirection and illusions. They have survived for a long time by deceiving almost anyone. They're tricksters." Kakashi explained pointedly. "Funny isn't it? How they managed to sneak up on us? I certainly didn't get a good look at our attacker before we were thrown off the mountain. That was-" He stopped talking as Azuma groaned from the middle of the room, and Baki backed off hurriedly.

The Iwa ninja sat up abruptly, wincing in pain while clutching his ribs in obvious still hurt him. "Oh
damn… What-?"

"You were knocked out. You'll be fine though." Roshi called out without much emotion. Azuma turned his head slowly, dazed and pale he tried to adjust to the new situation he found himself in.

"Great, now that Azuma is finally awake can we get a move on? This place is depressing." Hōzuki suggested. "Did anyone have any brilliant ideas in the last twenty minutes? I'm still a bit unsure what's safest."

"I say we blow ourselves out." Naruto replied. "Roshi can release us from the shelter and then we blow through whatever falls in."

"Blow through? You make it sound so easy. We have no idea just how much snow, rock and ice we're covered underneath. It might be too much and we'll just be buried. Again." Roshi replied with a roll of his eyes.

"Do you have a better idea? I don't think there is a risk-free way out of here. And in many ways this stone dome is a bit too good. Though it saved us from getting crushed we're also slowly running out of oxygen, so I vote we get out sometime soon." Darui replied, his lips curved downwards as he glanced up at the ceiling.

"What if we aim our strongest attacks upwards once Roshi removes the stone dome?" Suggested Hōzuki. "That should blow most of the debris away from us."

Naruto looked at Kakashi. "So… the rasenshuriken?" She asked him, but Kakashi shook his head at once.

"No! Not that. If you throw one of those and it explodes right in our faces you'll kill us all. Something long reaching but little less destructive perhaps."

"Um…. So, a wind ninjutsu?" She muttered to herself.

"Excuse me, but what the hell happened?" Asked Azuma frustrated, still confused about what was going on.

"We're buried underground and are apparently blowing ourselves out of here. One way or another." Baki replied skeptically.

"But what about the Ring of Tenko? If we do this won't they hear?" Roshi asked, still not convinced.

"They already know we're here. We were always going to fight them, but before we had a detonator to defuse, which is why we snuck in and avoided confrontation earlier. We'll be leaving a lot less silently than we arrived." Naruto replied smartly.

"Fine." Groaned Roshi, finally on board with the "blowing themselves to freedom plan". He crawled to the middle of the space and glanced up. "The stone dome will open from here and outwards. You should all aim towards this area, and your timing better be superb." He explained while pointing to where the opening would appear.

There was a scurry of movements as people crawled closer while making sure to have adequate space to work around one another. Kakashi sighed and looked apprehensively up. Soon they'd hopefully be back under the open sky. He went through several options for what would be most efficient, and the group did a quick discussion of how they would proceed. In the end they had a rough plan for how to force themselves out.
"Everyone ready?" Asked Roshi and glanced at Kakashi. He was crouched in the middle of the huddle next to the four tail jinchūriki, seeing as his attack would go up first. There were nods from all in turn, and Kakashi only raised his hands in the tiger seal, ready to start.

Roshi pursed his lips, eyes narrowing as he flashed through hand signs, and next the dome made a loud, grinding rumble as it was released.

Kakashi’s hands moved rapidly - tiger, hare, boar and dog, before; "Doton; Earth style wall."
Kakashi muttered under his breath, his hand shooting down towards the ground as a second tremble ran through the earth.

As an unknown amount of mass fell downwards into their shelter the defense wall Kakashi usually used to block attacks shot out of the ground, forcing a large boulder up and off along with large blocks of ice. He heard the others shooting jutsus from all sides.

Naruto ran up the wall at once, breaking through rocks with her chains while shooting off futon bullets to crumble the larger pieces. Darui was rendering rocks to dust with a unique lightning release that had to be a type of kekkai genkai, while Killer Bee had sprouted tentacles which smacked away anything that came too close. Baki was using a powerful futon jutsu to blow away falling snow and dust to clear their sightline. Azuma used smaller explosive bombs that pulverized while Hōzuki was using powerful suiton jutsu which pierced clean through the rubbles.

Their collected attack broke through, and they jumped upwards towards the light as it became visible.

In the chaos of smashes and collapses they sprang for freedom, and Kakashi could breathe in fresh air.

He landed in a cloud of freshly kicked up snow and dirt on a ground that was still shifting and uneven. He blinked several times and looked around for Naruto, finding her silhouette in the dust not far away. Coughing twice he located the rest, counting them while making sure they were all standing, spotting Darui was massaging his wrist, as if working out a chink in it. Maybe he'd been hit. "Everyone made it out?" Called Roshi.

They gave positive confirmations, and Naruto came over as the air cleared up. It was a lot windier now, and Kakashi took a moment to look around.

"Ugh, it was a lot warmer down there." Moaned Hōzuki, dragging a hand through his white hair to shake out the dust. "I hate snow..."

"Let's get back up there," Baki grumbled and pointed up the steep mountainside. "I'm not about to let them get away with throwing me off a mountain."

Kakashi’s eyes trailed the wall all the way to the top, feeling a twinge remembering how it had been to fall down. "I'm ready to spill some blood." Hōzuki agreed, fingering the hilt of his sword as if itching to use it. "I've been ready for days."

Kakashi glanced at him, noting his use of words. "Be cautious, from what I've heard and what we've seen these guys will put up a decent fight."

"Ring of Tenko signed their death warrant when they decided to interfere with the Chunin Exams." Darui replied, starting to walk towards the mountain while the others followed. "And we need to find out who hired them."

Kakashi hummed in agreement. "Still, that attack on us was masterfully done really well. If he wasn't
my enemy I would have applauded him for his tactic when he attacked us. It couldn't have been sneaker nor better timed."

"Geesh, I'm sure he'd be thrilled the infamous Copy Ninja - Kakashi of the Sharingan - thinks so highly of him." Roshi muttered with an arched brow.

"Aw, you've heard of little old me?" Kakashi asked with mock pleasure.

"But the Ring of Tenko is a group of mercenaries, right? Not just one ninja." Darui said, breaking off Roshi's retort as he reached the foot of the cliff they were about to climb. Kakashi glanced up. He hoped they wouldn't get any more dropped on their heads.

"I think I felt around nine ninjas moving around the mountain. Fast ones." Naruto shared.

"Nine? They take their name seriously then." Snorted Roshi.

"I don't care how many there are, when I get up there I'll slay them all! Sneaky, cowardly scum!" Hōzuki ranted, growing increasingly agitated the longer he spoke. "I'm not about to lose to a bunch of Kyūbi worshippers!"

"Relax, once we're up there you'll get to use your sword to swing, but what does the Kyūbi got' to do with anything?" Killer Bee asked.

"Their emblem perhaps? Their name, Ring of Tenko? Kitsune, and nine members? Do you seriously not see the connection with the Kyūbi? That demon is like an oversized Kitsune, right?" Hōzuki asked with badly forced calm.

Killer Bee rapped agitated in reply, and it looked as if Hōzuki would pop a blood vessel soon from the way he was reacting to the rhymes. "Yo, yo, yo, that crap means you're all misinformed, It's a fact all the bijū were individually transformed, the fox was only the inspiration for the nine tailed demon, he'll be pissed' you think he's some lowly kitsune peon."

"Darui… what the hell did he just say? Can anyone translate?" Growled Hōzuki.

Darui didn't so much as open his mouth before Naruto beat him to answer. "He said the Kyūbi is the real deal, not an actual fox nor mythical Kitsune, and that you shouldn't compare." She snapped at the Kiri guard.

Killer Bee gave her the thumbs up in approval.

"Did the demon tell you that?" Asked Azuma, sneering at Killer Bee while ignoring Naruto's explanation. "You are the jinchūriki of the Hachibi after all… That was its tentacles you used earlier, right?"

Darui tensed, but Killer Bee nodded unworried. Not bothered by the hostile way Azuma had framed the question.

"You talk to it? Willingly?" Asked Roshi, sounding disturbed at the very idea.

Killer Bee turned around, his brow furrowed when he answered Roshi. "Of course, Hachibi is my comrade in arms,
I'd be bored without his energy-giving charms.

You should try talking with the four tails,

I bet he could tell you a lot of awesome tales."

Roshi made an ugly grimace, looking ready to strangle Bee if given an opening.

"Kumo ninjas are all nuts!" Hōzuki declared, taking a cautious step further away from Killer Bee. He was looking between Bee, Roshi and Naruto, growing turmoil glinting in his eyes. With the exception of Kakashi and Naruto, it seemed he was the third to put it together, and it had finally dawned on him just how many jinchūriki he was currently surrounded by.

"And Kiri is the picture of a well-rounded mentality? Have you heard of your own village's reputation? The Bloody Mist? You're all a bunch of murdering drones. Ally or enemy doesn't seem to matter to the likes of you." Growled Darui through gritted teeth. "Don't mess with Bee, he'd destroy you easily kid."

"Oh, are you a sensitive soul standing up for your comrade, Darui? Calling on your inner tree hugger?" Taunted Azuma, casting a glance towards Kakashi and Naruto at the last words.

"Well, our philosophy to not leave our comrades to die won us the last war, Azuma." Naruto barked back.

"Maybe we should calm down a bit. We're under enough pressure not to add more." Kakashi suggested carefully.

"Shut up Hatake. This is all your fault anyway!" The Iwa ninja shouted back.

"How exactly is this my fault?"

"If it wasn't for you Konoha scum this whole tournament wouldn't have taken place at all! Look what happened because of you." Replied Azuma furious.

Naruto hissed in anger. "And if people didn't feel the need to cause mass casualties we wouldn't be here! Hadn't there been a war this whole arrangement wouldn't have been necessary either. If people stopped backstabbing one another none of this would be needed!"

"Oh, you would know all about being backstabbed, wouldn't you Uzumaki?" Drawled Hōzuki and crossed his arms. "I can't believe you're on such good terms with the friend-killer over there." He said and gestured towards Kakashi. "Didn't he literally smash your heart to pulp with his chidori?"

She was lost for words as she spun around towards Hōzuki, her vision going red with fury. But a whirl of movements happened so fast she couldn't make sense of how it happened.

Kakashi had leapt the distance between himself and Hōzuki, ripped the boy off his feet and smashed him into the stone wall. His Sharingan was visible, spinning as it met Hōzuki's panicked gaze straight on. "You shut your mouth, boy." Kakashi snarled, the hand gripped around Hōzuki's throat tightening.

The growing tension had finally snapped Kakashi's patience. He'd kept a cool head all day, but the mention of the Kiri mission had finally broken his remaining restraints.

As if suddenly remembering himself Kakashi's fingers loosened, and he backed cautiously away, allowing Hōzuki free and the boy stumbled sideways laughing.
"Touched a nerve?" He asked between gasps of choked chuckles. His eyes wide and his grin positively evil. "You'll pay for what you did that day, Hatake. You'll all pay." He wheezed.

"What we did?!" Naruto exploded, pushing Kakashi behind her as she stormed up to the low life waste of space. "Kirigakure kidnapped me. Kakashi and my comrades were only there to save me! You piece of shit asked for it! You killed our friends! Killed my…" She couldn't finish the sentence, her anger boiling too close to the surface. "Don't start whining because your own lame, backstabbing, peace breaking, shit faced plan backfired on yourself."

"The Three Tails belongs to Kirigakure!" Hōzuki shouted and pointed at Naruto, his eyes narrowed. "Don't think you're safe. We'll be taking it back one day soon. Screw this farce of a peace tournament!"

Naruto lost it, she couldn't help it. Iruka's face flashed before her eyes, followed by Kushina and even Hitomi, who she rarely thought about as much, and the broken relationship with Minato sent stabs of pains through her chests. Hōzuki represented all of it.

But before she could kill Hōzuki, Killer Bee stood in front of her, his hand outstretched blocking her way.

"Peoples temper are running sky high,
He's acting like a shit but he's still an ally,
we need to work together or we'll all die."

Kakashi dragged her back by the shoulder, "You're right." He said shortly but didn't let Hōzuki out of his sight. "Let's move. We've already wasted too much time arguing over nonsense."

Inhaling slowly through his nose, Shisui felt cold, fresh air fill his lungs before letting it out through slightly parted lips.

 Pretending to keep watch while following the matches down in the arena Shisui continued to count his breaths. He was up to fifteen before his eyes betrayed him yet again, and despite his efforts not to, they slipped in the direction of the Raikage. Next to him Darui's replacement guard met his eyes, his face an unreadable mask, just as Shisui suspected his own expression appeared. Drawing his eyes away, lazily swinging back to the arena below Shisui did his utmost to look unaffected. Just like everyone else.

On his left Shisui noted Kisame shift uneasily, while from the far right Onoki’s index finger flexed involuntarily. Ahead of him Yuuta swallowed once, and he could see a slight sheen of sweat at the nape of his neck. His nerves were getting to him.

Down in the arena Sagan from Iwa was losing to Nii Yugito of Kumo. The boy was doing his best, but the older girl had the clear advantage and was fighting smart.

It was like a sick waiting game, all of them stalling to see who would be the first to crack under the pressure and pointed it out. It would only be a matter of time before the dam broke.

"Sagan keeps a good distance." Commented Minato absently. If Shisui didn't know the situation he would never know how tense the Hokage truly was. He had one of the best poker faces he'd ever
Minato was leaning back in his chair, his arms relaxing against the armrests. His gaze alert while for all the world looked like he was analyzing the match down in the arena. Shisui suspected he did, but the Yondaime could probably multitask six different things in the exact same moment without breaking a sweat.

"Mhm," Answered Onoki with a head tilt. "He has a strong defense."

"Aye, but his offence isn't as effective." Commented the Raikage leaning forwards. "Yugito's got both areas covered."

They continued the monologue, taking vocal notes of the attacks as if nothing was amiss. Shisui counted twenty-seven breaths before his eyes wandered again. This time towards the entrance.

Kakashi and Naruto were still not back. Neither were any of the other missing Kage guards.

This couldn't go on for much longer. Someone was going to break, which probably would be followed by something shattering, and if he was honest with himself Shisui was not eager to be there when that happens.

They were back on one of the lower floors of the mountain structure, jogging fast through a passage leading them deeper. If anything, Naruto would call the place a fortress, except fortresses were usually harder to infiltrate than this.

They had only been halfway on the climb up when Killer Bee brought their attention to an opening leading into the mountain, and they'd opted to head inside instead of taking the risk of getting more boulders dropped on top of them.

Naruto was filled with cooped up agitation from the earlier argument, and rarely did she feel as ready to fight someone as she was now. Right then she wanted trouble and relished in the excuse to make these Ring of Tenko bastards pay. It wouldn't be as satisfying as driving her fist into Hōzuki's face, but it was a good second best.

They were being less careful now, because they were already discovered and this time around they were looking for a fight.

Darui was at the front, taking a sharp left as the passage split in two, leading out towards a familiar light. Naruto knew where they would end up before she was out of the passage.

The ceiling was elevated several stories and sunlight once again shone down upon them as they returned to the large ice hall they'd taken a detour into a little over an hour earlier. But this time, unlike last, they were not alone in there.

The moment they stepped onto the ice covered ground they were under heavy fire.

Shuriken was thrown down at them hard, and Naruto only just had time to sidestep, barely managing to avoid getting hit. She was one of the few who'd decided to get out of the line of fire. With the exception of Roshi the rest were redirecting the shurikens thrown from somewhere above them with kunai instead of getting out of the spray of shuriken.

Hōzuki had plunged his sword Hiramekarei into the ice to use as a shield to cover behind. The shuriken kept bouncing harmlessly against the metal before steering off. Naruto was jumping, dodging and twirling through the air in a series of acrobatics while simultaneously redirecting
shuriken that came too close with her kunai. They were well spread out before their enemies let up the fire.

"So, you all survived the fall. I'd hoped at least one of you would get crushed. But considering your reputations I should have known better." A gravelly voice drawled, casting echoes through the hall and drawing everyone's attention towards him.

From behind the arches crisscrossing up the hall, human shaped figures peered out. They were leaning over the beams, looking down at them as their silhouettes were outlined from the light above.

The same voice rang out again, and this time Naruto located the speaker. He was on one of the lower beams, sitting calmly with his feet dangling over the edge. "Though I believe your job titles are a bit misleading. Kage Guards – and yet you're all very far from your Kages. Doing very little guarding." He sounded amused about the whole thing.

The man stood up on the beam, balancing the majority of his weight on his right foot. "So many Kage guards gathered together, fighting side by side. How touching." He continued carelessly, his hand moving to rest lightly on his right hip.

The change in position made Naruto able to see him clearly. He was tall and lanky, and though he couldn't be much older than twenty-five his dark hair was streaked with grey and pulled back in a spiky ponytail that reached the middle of his back. Standing above them on the beam - with his neatly trimmed goatee, protruding cheekbones, bright yellow eyes and long narrow nose - gave him a sharp, almost bird like appearance. Naruto felt vaguely as if she had been caught in the sight of an eagle about to swoop down to catch their next meal. "How did you like my little welcome ceremony?"

"You're the bastard who threw us off the mountain?" Snapped Azuma.

"Well, in my defense." The man answered, his mouth tightening and his eyes flashing. "Your own welcome wasn't very nice either. You did kill two of my men."

"What did you expect? You've planted bombs to set off an avalanche that would bury most of Bushigakure. Killing civilians while creating chaos and distrust between the Five Great Nations during post war tensions. I believe taking out this team and finding your employers is the lesser of two evils." Darui answered calmly.

"That's the plan, eh?" The man replied, seemingly unconcerned. "But first you'll have to defeat us."

Snickers ran up and down the group, as if the very idea was ridiculous.

"Do you think that's such an impossibility? Mah, it looks like I gave you more credit than you're due then." Kakashi replied calmly, though his voice echoed effortlessly for everyone to hear.

"There's a difference." The man said, tilting his head. "Because your plan includes catching us alive."

"Oh no, we won't need you all alive." Hōzuki hissed. "One should suffice."

The man made a hum sound that Naruto couldn't read any meaning into, before speaking up again. "But us, unlike you, are prepared. Very rash of you wasn't it? To come running into this ambush?"

"Why make the effort to track you all down? When we can just have you come to us?" Answered Hōzuki, still halfway covered behind his sword incase he'd need to take cover again.
"I suppose that's one way of looking at it. Another is that you're fighting on our turf." The man then held up a familiar box in his hand. He'd been holding it the entire time, but it wasn't before now Naruto had really noticed it.

"Do you recognize what this is?" He asked with mirth. "Did you really believe we didn't have a backup plan? So, listen carefully. If I see one wrong move, we'll activate this and the whole stadium will go up in smoke." The man said silkily.

Naruto had frozen when she first recognized what the man carried. It was the detonator they'd found in this very hall earlier that day. Around her the others stood rooted to their spots, as rigid as she was.

"You take instructions well, don't you? Now here's what's going to happen, unless you want me to blow up the stadium with everyone inside it, I suggest you-"

But he didn't get any further. Naruto had acted, her hand shot out, and the kunai she'd been clutching for the last ten minutes went flying towards the speaker. His eyes widened and he tried to move out of range, only partly succeeding, as the kunai infused with wind chakra shot clean through the detonator, causing it to splinter into fractured pieces.

"Tsubasa-sama!" Several voices cried from up in the beams, but the man holding the detonator remained unhurt from Naruto's attack.

The others watched in morbid shock as the chunks clattered to the ground, as if waiting for an explosion Naruto knew wouldn't come.

"Puh, I told you that thing wasn't the detonator." She huffed unimpressed. "He's full of crap. He was just bluffing."

The man – named Tsubasa apparently – looked hard at her, his eyes narrowed, and Naruto was once again struck by his similarity to a bird of prey. "How rash you are, little girl."

"What can I say? I've never been the patient sort." Naruto snapped, tired of the exchange. She wanted this mission to be over with.

It was as if her words had been the start signal. Like someone had dropped the flag and shouted; "Hajime", just like they did during a match in the Chunin exams. Except this was nothing like a carefully monitored fight between over eager Genin.

It was Kakashi who had moved first, but it was hard to tell since everyone had acted within a split second. Naruto's chains had whipped out as the same feeling from before - the one of being picked off of her feet and thrown away like a rag doll - came over her. They lodged into the walls with a sickening crunch as Tsubasa had tried to throw her square across the room. The chains did their work, straining against the mysterious jutsu to prevent Naruto being pushed square through a wall.

Around her it was already pandemonium. With a short glance Naruto saw Kakashi fire up his chidori, running up the walls to meet an enemy square on close to where Killer Bee took out several blades to attack. Lightning beams were shooting from Darui's hands, even more menacing than Kakashi's chidori if Naruto was being honest, while Roshi and Azuma was already lost in a ball of smoke from the latter's explosions.

The hall, which at first had felt so large and spacious, suddenly felt too small. Everyone was battling, and many were using wide spread attacks, making it just as dangerous to engage an enemy as coming too close to someone else's battle.

Naruto kept a wide distance from Azuma and Darui, as they both had a thing for long range, and
tried to locate Kakashi in the mayhem. She saw him for a split second, dodging underneath Hozuki’s sword which was glowing blue with vibrating chakra on his way towards an enemy, before another explosion was set off by Azuma, and a column came crashing down.

"Azuma! Stop doing that! Don't bury us you moron!" Shouted a deep male voice Naruto thought might be Roshi’s. She couldn't tell because of the airborne dust and flashing lights.

Naruto was too busy with her own enemy though. She had finally found someone to fight in the chaos, and eagerly attacked. The man was fast, really fast, and she quickly realized his tajutsu could probably rival that of Guy. Naruto gritted her teeth as she tried to keep up, but the problem was just how fast her opponent was and the disarray of an environment. It made it difficult to get even a single hit in.

Something compelled her to turn around, only to throw herself sideways at the last minute as lava came sprouting towards her from another cloud of smoke.

She rolled several times on the cracked and melting floor before coming to a stop. Her cloak had taken a hit, and she hurriedly had to put out the fire with a water jutsu before she could think of anything else. Looking up she found out that mister speedy had taken a much more lethal hit than Naruto and was dead on the ground from the lava.

"Roshi! Learn to aim your lava!" Naruto cried outraged.

"I killed your enemy, didn't I?" He asked disgruntled from somewhere in the smoke. Naruto could only barely make out his stout outline next to someone taller.

"You also almost killed me too!"

"Collateral damage." Muttered Azuma dismissively under his breath.

"I heard that!"

It was suicidal for all of them to remain in the hall, so Kakashi had taken his fight into the passages instead. He was in a new hallway, a wider one than the previous types while fighting who he presumed was the leader of Ring of Tenko. At least he acted as the spokesman of the group.

He had already been thrown off his feet twice by the man named Tsubasa, but he couldn't keep firing them without a second thought. He was limited now, and Kakashi was sure that the attack the group had faced in the beginning, which had thrown them all off the mountain, had been a lot more powerful than the ones he was using now. He suspected they took too much chakra for Tsubasa to use carelessly.

Kakashi had managed to save himself just in time on both occasions. Being prepared for the attack made it easier to defend against, and Tsubasa no longer had the element of surprise. It was some sort of kekkai genkai. The jutsu made it feel like Tsubasa was controlling the very gravity in the space around his victim, making him able to pick up, throw and even spin them at his own leisure.

Tsubasa also had floating weapons, acting almost independently from their wielder. They attacked from all sides, making it impossible for Kakashi to do more than dodge and counter, because while he had to deal with the swarming blades trying to pierce him from all possible angles, Tsubasa himself remained comfortable at a safe distance.

Kakashi hated to admit it, but he felt severely out of his element. Despite the few limitations Tsubasa was indeed very strong, and there was no guarantee Kakashi would get out of this alive. So far, the
fight was not going in his favour.

A katana swung downward from his left, and Kakashi blocked at the same time a shuriken was shooting towards his ribs, which he only just managed to stop with his own katana. However, from behind he barely glimpsed a third blade coming, and he had no way to dodge while his hands stayed locked in place.

He was about to just jump, trying to break free by gaining more distance, when a clang echoed through the room. The blade that would have lodged into his kidney had been redirected, and Kakashi was relieved to see Killer Bee joining him in the hallway.

"Don't worry Hatake 'caus Killer Bee is here to the rescue, this shit looks like something for my type of kenjutsu!"

Tsubasa's eyes narrowed and using his blades as a distraction he tried to slow them down as he took off up the passage, trying to get away. Kakashi rolled away, already in pursuit with Killer Bee close on his heel. Behind them he heard more shouts, and Darui's low tones drifted up the hallway, followed by the sound of ninjutsu clashing. It looked like the fight was following them, and more people had taken their fights into the passage.

His suspicion was confirmed as Tsubasa was forced to stop, having ran straight into a battle that was ahead of them. How it had happened Kakashi wasn't sure, but Roshi and three Ring of Tenko members came stumbling out from a side passage, barely bothering to take notice of them in the heat of battle.

Killer Bee took the opportunity and shot forwards to attack Tsubasa. The enemy twirled around, managing to block the jinchūriki in time, and soon a full out battle was happening. Thinking fast Kakashi decided Roshi was in more need of assistance than their Kumo ally. Kakashi also realized Killer Bee hadn't been lying earlier either. What followed was perhaps the most absurd and unique kenjutsu fight Kakashi had ever witnessed.

The breakdance style kenjutsu the eight tail jinchūriki used against Tsubasa's floating blades was one for the books.

She wasn't sure how it had happened, but the fights had escalated so quickly Naruto wasn't sure who was winning or losing anymore.

It was difficult to see anything clearly just a few steps ahead of her, which meant it was downright impossible to get a clear overview of the hall. She had seen Roshi take several enemies on, disappearing up one of the passages. She suspected several others had done the same, but it was impossible to tell how many.

She had already almost attacked Azuma twice, thinking him an enemy before she recognized him in the smoke, and she had almost gotten decapitated by Hōzuki on one occasion too. He swore he made the same mistake as she had with Azuma, but with him it was impossible to tell.

The biggest problem of them all however, was that everyone had been fighting full on from the get go, and if one thing had become apparent, that it was that the Ring of Tenko earned their lethal reputation. Naruto was far less confident than she had been before that it would be a sure victory, mainly because their fighting area was currently collapsing around them.

Darui's lighting jutsu, which smashed through rock as easily as flesh, Naruto's unwise choice of using the rasenshuriken a few minutes earlier, causing half the hall to crumble, Roshi's freaking lava
melting everything and covering them in vapor, had quickly rendered their surrounding
unrecognizable in the relatively short time they'd been fighting. And that was not mentioning what
was being thrown back at them. One of the Ring of Tenko fighters had a very annoying doton
attack, which made boulders fly at them in their enemy's attempt to squash them. Another used wind
release too and had so far been having fun cutting down beams in hopes of hitting one of the guards.
It was amazing just how fast the hall had become a complete wreck.

Naruto hoped the samurai would forgive them for completely demolishing one of their fortresses, but
she couldn't see how it was to be avoided.

A thick column was tumbling over, and Naruto had to cover her ears as it crashed down onto the
floor, splintering and sending smoke, ice and rocks up into the air. The whole fortress was shaking
now, and it occurred to her, not for the first time, that it was about high time to get out.

Naruto looked frantically around again. "Kakashi! Where are you!?" She shouted as she ran
forwards and jumped, using the ice to slide forwards and away from another falling column. Her
eyes widened as she slid right into Azuma, tackling him over from behind as she tried to get out of
the way.

"They're gone!" Shouted Azuma. It was proof of how dire their situation was that he didn't bother to
snap at her for making him fall.

"They left up the corridor. Worry about us. We're trapped in here now!" Hōzuki agreed, and then
swore as they were forced to get out of the way of falling beams. It hit the ice underneath hard and
Naruto grimaced as the floor gave out. Leaving a crater where the beams had hit. The lava Roshi
used earlier had not been good for the ice.

"We need to get up!" Naruto shouted and bent her head backwards to peer towards what was left of
the ceiling. Her eyes narrowing as she tried to find a path to run that wouldn't have them knocked
down from the imploding hall.

"How? The fucking walls are crumbling!" Hōzuki spat.

"Hold on tight!" Naruto replied, her chains shooting out to twine around Azuma and Hōzuki. The
guys barely had time to look startled down at the chains fastening around their waists, before Naruto
prepared for lift off.

A free chain shot up. Drilling into one of the still standing beams above them while Naruto sent off a
short prayer for the beam to hold their weight. Then she reeled herself in, making Hōzuki and
Azuma dangle after her as they were lifted into the air. Just before she reached the beam another
chain shot out, this one towards one of the standing pieces of wall further up, where it made impact
with an unpleasant crunching sound. Soon they were being pulled in that direction.

Naruto continued like this, shooting her chains towards higher and higher areas while reeling them
in, getting further above the ground while the guys dangled from the chains underneath her, shouting
and swearing at being jostled around like insects stuck in a spider's thread.

It was working though. As the hall underneath them crumbled and became only a big space of falling
and crumbling rocks the three were far above it. Though still not out of danger Naruto had bought
them time.

She managed to hoist them all up onto one of the walls, her teeth gritted as she tried to find a way
out. When everything had started collapsing it had fallen in such a way daylight no longer got in.
"Now what?" Asked Hōzuki with trepidation. "Before we were buried under loose rocks and ice. That was bad enough. Now we'll be crushed inside the freaking heart of the mountain. There's no way out of here."

Naruto bit her bottom lip, her eyes sweeping back and forth as another crash made the whole room rumble. An unfamiliar shout was heard from down below, but it was definitely a Ring of Tenko member, so she didn't bother worry about it. They had been the ones to start a fight in such a place. The enemy should have planned for a better escape route as this outcome shouldn't have been a surprise for them.

There was only one solution that came to her, and Naruto held her hands up in the clone sign. "Kage bushin no jutsu." She said absent mindedly, and seven clones popped into the air. Because of the lack of space to stand on three of them appeared in free fall, who all had to catch themselves with chakra to the walls.

"What are you planning, Uzumaki?" Asked Azuma uncertainly.

"I'm getting us out of here, even if I have to tear this mountain apart to do so." Naruto grumbled and stood up. She nodded to the clones, and Azuma and Hōzuki looked on curiously as all the clones extracted their very own chakra chains. In the darkness the chakra covering the metal glowed, making it look like floating strings of light swirling through the air.

Naruto jumped up to the wall, the clones following after as all eight Naruto hung upside down, ready to break the mountain apart. "I have to make some adjustments for this particular use, but I can break us through the mountain. I'd stay close though. It's going to get a lot worse before it gets better." Naruto said and grinned sheepishly over her shoulder.

In unison Naruto and her clones went through hand signs, and it was too dark and too fast for either Azuma nor Hōzuki to read what she did. Her hands then shot out hitting flat against the rocky wall as her voice cried out eight times over. "Doton; chakra chain earth tear!"

"Gyah!"

He'd been worried about this since the fight broke out in the ice hall, but the unavoidable was finally happening. "Naruto!" Kakashi shouted down the long corridor, doubtful she would even hear him over the crash, but was forced to jump back as the ceiling came down, burying the pathway. It was lucky they hadn't been inside, if not they would have been completely buried in the collapsed passage.

Furious Kakashi turned towards Tsubasa, reacting fast as he attacked the man. The Ring of Tenko member staggered in surprise at his speed, barely preventing the loss of his hand to Kakashi's katana.

"Who's your employer?" Demanded Kakashi as he threw another punch too fast for Tsubasa to recover.

Tsubasa ducked under his outstretched arm, his free hand shooting out and hitting Kakashi in the ribs. The impact made Kakashi jolt back, his side stinging in pain from the force of the hit. "Perhaps you don't want to know." Tsubasa panted, his teeth gritted as he attacked again. "Perhaps you won't like the answer!"

Kakashi had stumbled back but gathered momentum before jumping into a backwards somersault as Tsubasa kicked, making his foot fly through thin air instead.

Tsubasa had been given too much space though, and the now familiar hand sign was ready. The
katana in Kakashi's hand was wrenched free, and he was so startled to have his own blade used against him that Kakashi did little more than duck down to prevent the first slash.

But while Tsubasa focused on Kakashi he hadn't realized Roshi had defeated his own opponent and was forced backwards as the four tail jinchūriki joined in the fight.

However, the crashing from the passage wasn't stopping. While he fought it dawned on Kakashi that it sounded like the implosion was getting worse.

Roshi met his eyes, and it looked like the jinchūriki was realizing the same thing he was. The ground had started shaking badly, the rumbling intensified, and the urge to fight Tsubasa was rapidly fading. The need to escape escalating at an alarming pace.

"Run! We're almost outside!" Roshi shouted, not caring if enemy or ally heard him.

Kakashi was fully on board with that decision.

Along with everyone else Kakashi sprinted towards the exit, fighting on pure adrenaline as he sidestepped another ninja, trying in vain to get there in time. He heard Killer Bee give a war cry while tentacles sprouted from his back. A lightning laser flashed past Kakashi, aiming at the mountain side in a desperate attempt to break straight through.

It worked, and Kakashi felt his heart pound in his chest as they made it outside. Several Ring of Tenko members looking just as relieved as he felt at having escaped the death trap the mountain proved to be. He didn't stop running until he was as far away from the exit as possible, relieved that they'd ended up at a flat terrain that allowed them to run away from the entrance into the tunnels.

Suddenly a rumble made them all halt. Mostly because most of them were knocked off their feet from the intensity of the moving ground underneath them. Kakashi's head swung around, just in time to see hundreds of copper chains drill through the rocks of the mountain as if it was made of butter instead of stone.

In disbelief he watched a handful of Narutos break free through sheer force, each of them surrounded in glowing chains, reflecting in the falling snow while pulverizing the falling boulders above them.

It was the last straw. The mountain couldn't take much more, and Kakashi threw himself to the ground as the side of the mountain gave in, his arms pitifully covering his head as it rained stone and ice. Behind him he heard Roshi's shout, and next the ground engulfed him.

Everyone heard it.

Even a portion of the audience quieted in confusion, as the noise had not come from the battle below, but from somewhere far away.

From down in the Kage gallery Minato couldn't see the mountains surrounding the stadium, but he was sure the faint bang that had carried on the wind had come from the southern direction. Even the two Konoha Genin fighting for a spot in the finals had halted.

The crowd screamed and clapped in delight as Yugao took advantage of the sudden interruption, jumping out of the range of Santa's attack just in time, all of them having expected her to go down but surprising them with lighting fast reflexes as she saved herself just in time. The Genin's fight was enough to draw the audience's attention back to the action in front of them, but Minato himself had never been less interested in a match. Dread was spreading through his stomach.
He glanced back at Shisui, who's attention was far away, no longer bothering to pretend he was watching the Genin.

It had sounded like a collision of hard surfaces. Something like an eruption or explosion, a big one, but still far away. Minato concentrated, trying to sense what was going on, but didn't have much luck.

One thing was clear though. A battle was taking place on one of the neighboring mountains. The rumbling sound added with the slight tremor in the ground that had just reached the arena, could mean a lot, but personally Minato suspected part of the mountain was probably missing by now.

All five Kage sat in tense silence, their eyes directed towards the Genin, but he doubted any of them were actually paying attention anymore.

At least Minato finally knew where Kakashi, Naruto and the other missing Kage guards were. He fervently hoped what caused the noise wasn't them fighting each other.

"Ah, Yaguo is slippery, isn't she?" Utakata said at last, his voice audibly strained. He uncrossed and crossed his legs; his hands clasped a little too tightly in his lap. As if he was forcing them to stay in that position.

Minato fought the urge to burst out laughing. This was like the longest game of musical chairs in history, all of them waiting for the music to stop so they could see who had the slowest reaction time.

"Very. I still think Yamanaka will get the better of her. His strategies haven't failed him so far. Even when faced with physically stronger opponents." Rasa said through gritted teeth. His hands were fisted on the arm rest.

"Ah, either way those two has bright futures." Minato replied with a casual wave that took a lot of effort to keep none threatening.

He couldn't prevent wincing as a second rumble rang faintly in the air. This one too low for any of the crowd to really pick up on, though the judge down in the arena was looking increasingly panicked while looking between the Genin and the Kage stand.

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Naruto panted, inhaling what felt like a mouthful of dust down her lungs. Hacking and coughing to clear her throat she realized she'd lost her sense of direction in the crumbling stone.

In the confusion someone grabbed her shoulder, hoisting her up to her feet. She was surprised as she saw the faint outline of Azuma through the fog. He had a cloth covering his mouth and was squinting fruitlessly to see through the chaos.

"That was fucking insane. The bingo book is pitifully lacking in regards to you, Uzumaki." Spluttered Hōzuki through a several coughs, drying blood away from the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand. Naruto grunted in reply and taking a note out of Azuma's book she ripped off her torn sleeve. Pressing the garment to her mouth like a mask to filter out the worst of the airborne earth and grime.

Stumbling on loose boulders they found their way out, following the light in hopes it led to open and dust free air. The view that met them had altered beyond recognition.

Boulders, snow and large ice shards was spread over the side of the mountain.

Naruto's attention snapped up as something rumbled again. Next to the boulders some ways away
were movement with loud groans of protest, and soon figures obscured in the dust came crawling out from a crack.

Naruto ran forwards as she recognized their chakra signatures. Kakashi looked relieved once he spotted her, while Baki was helping a bloody and bruised Darui up through the crack. Roshi and Killer Bee came last, and all of them were so full of dust they were barely recognizable.

"Thank you Roshi-san. Once again you covered us in time." Kakashi said, turning towards the four tail jinchūriki who simply grunted in reply. He glanced back at Naruto. "You too Naruto. I haven't seen that technique before. Something you just made up?"

"A variation of something actually. Usually I come out of the ground, not through a mountain." Naruto replied with a shrug of her shoulder.

"Crazy" Mumbled Hōzuki under his breath, making it sound like a compliment instead of suicidal, which is what Naruto had been thinking.

"Did you do this?" Azuma asked Roshi, pointing to the large rock underneath them. It was then Naruto realized that it was another stone shelter. Roshi must have protected them all when the mountain came apart.

Roshi nodded, looking exhausted. "Yeah, but we have more pressing issues, did Tsubasa and his merry men get crushed in this?"

They all looked around, trying to figure out if anyone else had survived the blow.

"There!" Cried Killer Bee, pointing down the mountain. They all saw it then. A small group of ninjas, perhaps four, were making their way at high speed straight down.

Next moment they were in pursuit.

Tsunade cheered loudest of all on her row as the final two contestants stepped onto the arena below. She couldn't believe it! This was above all expectation!

"Tsunade-sama! This is amazing!" Shizune exclaimed and clapped happily as Yamanaka Santa and Nii Yugito readied themselves for the final battle to determine the winner.

"You have won all your bets so far! It doesn't even matter if she win, you're already safe. You won back more than you owed already! The first knockout! The top six contestants! The top four contestants! The top two contestants and if Nii Yugito wins you'll be rich!" Shizune chanted happily.

Tsunade laughed heartily and took another swig of her sake with a broad grin on her face, when Shizune's words finally managed to penetrate through her drunken haze of winner ecstasy.

"Wait what?" She slurred and glanced at her student. "Every category? I won in every category I bet on?"

"Yes! It's amazing!" Shizune replied while beaming from ear to ear. She took up a piece of scroll and handed it to a befuddled Tsunade. She hadn't even been paying attention when she dotted down her bets. But sure enough…

The Genin who'd made it into the quarterfinals had consisted of Yamanaka Santa, Hyūga Kō and Yugao from Konoha, Taira and Sagan from Iwa, Nii Yugito and C from Kumo, Kazan from Yuga and Otokaze from Suna. All of which were the genin Tsunade had put in bets on would make it
through the first round.

She’d even guessed right who would get an extra battle during the quarterfinals round… She had already won enough to get even with her loan shark after the very first tournament round! That in itself was unheard of.

But it hadn’t stopped there. She had bet that Yugao and Yamanaka Santa along with Nii Yugito and Otokaze would be the final four in the semifinals, all of which had payed off.

Which meant two things; she was getting a lot of money soon, but also…

"Oh no." Tsunade whispered and looked shiftily from side to side.

Shizune glanced up, worried at the alarmed tone of her teacher’s voice. "What? What is it? Did I get something wrong?"

"No… I’ve won in everything so far. I’ve probably bet right on the next rounds too."

Shizune still didn’t get it. "Yes?"

The slug sannin swallowed. "Come on. We're getting out of here now. Something horrible is about to happen!"

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To be continued...
Chapter End Notes

Thank you so very much for reading! The chapter was beta'd by AnjoRemix!

I had a previous version of this chapter all written, and then when I re-read it I suddenly hated it. So 95% was rewritten but I'm not sure it's better or worse. Originally there wasn't a fight, and there were more arguments within the group. I then realized if they actually argued as much as I'd written one of them would have ended up killing another, and then everything would be screwed, so I changed it, and had them take out their frustration on each other on the Ring of Tenko instead. This is also a good bit longer than the previous version too actually.

And you should all know about the pains of writing Killer Bee. I am no rhymer, so I sincerely apologize for my attempts. It's the best I could manage...

Until next time!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!