

With Nothing On My Tongue

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With Nothing On My Tongue

by [sunshine_sparrow](#)

Summary

Naruto realizes the ability of the Kage Bunshin the night after being attacked by Mizuki. At first he just wants to use them to help him train; then the true usefulness of the jutsu begins to reveal itself.

Featuring baby badasses, Tank Team Seven, snarky dogs, a special guest appearance by Kakashi's Guilt Complex, and many, many fix-it cliches.

Notes

I love Naruto. Really, I do. The worldbuilding, the characters, the sheer richness and depth of the franchise thrills me on a daily basis. That being said, there are some incredibly huge plot holes in the canon, which is only to be expected when writing a 700-chapter behemoth over the course of more than a decade.

Usually, I can deal with plot holes. I am very good at suspending disbelief and merely enjoying the story as it comes. But sometimes they are so egregious that they really get my back up, and one of the biggest is the 'Oh Shit' plot hole that is Naruto's use of kage bunshin. By 'Oh Shit', I mean that Kishimoto-sensei and his creative team went 'Oh shit!' halfway through Part II when they realized that they had to figure out a way for Naruto to train really quickly and learn a ton of stuff in a short period of time. To do this, they tried to sell us the idea that Naruto was so stupid that he *didn't realize up until this point that he was receiving the memories of his dispersed clones*.

I understand why they did this. It was a quick, easy fix, and developed the world of Naruto a little more. But I've never bought into the idea that Naruto is stupid, or oblivious, or unobservant. Yes, he doesn't understand a lot of the stuff around him; I attribute this to him being an extremely kinesthetic learner, as well as having an absolutely shit upbringing with zero parental influence. I've studied childhood development, and there are empirical reasons to why children with supportive, educated parents do better in school than children whose parents spend less time with them and can't support them in their studies (not necessarily through any fault of their own). Naruto had zero support in his education growing up; that does not make him stupid.

Tl;dr I really wanted to address the massive plot hole of Naruto not realizing the kage bunshin's abilities until halfway through the series. Also, I wanted to write a self-indulgent fix-it. I have like three more of these sitting in my google docs waiting for me to finish them. OTL

WARNING! WARNING!

There will be yaoi, and yuri, and graphic sex (probably of both). However, that Slow Burn tag is there for a v. v. good reason. We will not be earning our Mature rating for anything other than violence for a loooong time.

Also, I speak Japanese. I use Japanese polite suffixes and will probably use Japanese words and terms in the future. If you ever have any questions as to why I'm using something in a specific way, drop me a line and I'll explain it to you. If I use anything that is not in common use in the fandom already, I'll leave translations at the bottom of the chapter.

In Which Naruto Learns a Thing

Chapter Summary

Naruto figures shit out, and gets Iruka to help him.

Naruto scowled thoughtfully up at his darkened ceiling, mind running frantically over the events of the past day. He had failed the Academy exit exam for the third time, been tricked into stealing a Forbidden Scroll, been told about the Demon Fox, nearly gotten his teacher killed, beaten up a traitor, and finally, *finally*, won his right to wear a Konoha hitai-ate.

And *then*, as if that wasn't enough, he'd been snatched up by the scruff of his neck by Boar-san and carted off to the Hokage's office like a sack of rice, despite his loudly voiced protests. He'd barely had time to see Deer-san and Crane-san bend over Iruka-sensei before he was taken away!

Then Hokage-jijii had asked him a lot of weird, serious questions, and then he'd been hustled off back to his apartment by Boar-san, who, although usually pretty willing to answer Naruto's questions, hadn't spoken a word except to order Naruto to stay inside.

All in all, it had been a very stressful day.

Naruto groaned miserably and rolled onto his front, burying his face into his pillow and wiggling around in embarrassment. He couldn't believe he'd fallen for something so *stupid*! In what universe does stealing a *Forbidden Scroll* make sense as a special graduation exam?

I guess I just wanted to graduate so badly, he thought despondently. *And Mizuki-sensei always just ignored me before, he never actually treated me badly like some of the other teachers. Because of the Nine-tailed Fox.*

Reminded of his unwanted tenant, Naruto rolled back onto his back and wiggled up into a half-reclining position against his pillow, pulling his shirt up to bare his belly button. He'd seen the seal before, of course; twelve years of living on his own and getting into stressful situations had certainly activated it several times. But he'd never known what it was, and he'd never had anyone to ask, and so he'd assumed it was just something normal, nothing to worry about.

When he'd been younger and especially lonely, sometimes he pretended it was a protection from his parents, something that proved he'd been loved by *someone* at some point.

And now he knew that it was actually containing the creature who had killed his parents in the first place.

Realizing that he was absently tracing his fingers in a circle over the place where the seal appeared, Naruto frowned and clenched his hand into a fist, letting it fall with a soft *flump* onto the bed next to him.

“Iruka-sensei was right,” he told the empty room, injecting his voice with as much surety and confidence as he could. “Just because I contain the Fox doesn’t mean I *am* the Fox. I mean, I didn’t even know about him until today! If I was gonna hate the village and wanna destroy it, I would *feel* something like that, right? Right.”

But he should probably learn more about the seal, and what it meant for him. He really didn’t want the demon getting out, after all!

Which brought him to his next point of confusion for the evening: the forbidden jutsu he’d learned. In school Naruto had always been quite good at ninjutsu, memorizing hand seals and patterns quickly and easily, although for some reason he’d always struggled with the actual execution, as though his chakra was uncooperative and didn’t want to do what he told it to do. But he’d mastered the Kage Bunshin in a matter of hours, the seals coming to him almost effortlessly and his chakra moving through his body like a river. He’d felt a little drag on his energy when he’d created the horde that had pummeled Mizuki-sensei, but he’d been too focused on protecting Iruka at the time to really give it much thought, and he felt fine now, so whatever.

Now, though, Naruto really wished he’d tried to decipher more than just the seals needed to create the jutsu, and actually read the description of what it *did*, because he had some very weird sense memories that should be impossible for him to have. For example, the crunch Mizuki-sensei’s nose had made as his fist connected with it.

But Naruto hadn’t punched Mizuki-sensei in the nose. One of his clones had.

He also seemed to remember *every* angle of that fight, as though he’d seen it through multiple pairs of eyes.

Brow knitted in concentration, Naruto brought his hands up into Tiger. With a puff of white smoke, a carbon copy of himself appeared, right down to the stocking cap on his head and the sleepy look in his eyes.

“Can’t we sleep already?” the clone complained.

Naruto scowled at his double. “Not yet,” he told himself. “Go into the kitchen and do something where I can’t see you, then dispel yourself.”

“Like what?” the clone whined.

Naruto sighed, frustrated. “I dunno! Anything! It doesn’t really matter what you do as long as I can’t see you do it!”

Grumbling, his clone slouched off into the kitchen, and Naruto waited impatiently for something to happen. Then he jolted, eyes going wide, and covered his eyes with a moan of

embarrassment. Of course. Of *course* his clone would strip naked and do a silly dance in the kitchen before dispelling. Well, he had told him to do *anything*...

On the other hand, this definitely confirmed that he received his clone's memories and feelings when they disappeared.

Naruto woke the next morning as soon as the sun touched the windowsill of his apartment, opening his eyes and rolling out of bed as if he'd gotten far more than four or five hours of sleep last night. He had so many ideas rolling around in his head, as if his mind had been thinking about nothing else other than how he could use his new skill while he slept.

"I learned a forbidden jutsu in a couple of hours," Naruto declared to his empty apartment, one fist propped on his hip while the other raised in a victory pose, "so if I use my clones, I can learn *anything* in a couple hours! I'm gonna get strong so fast, they'll *have* to make me Hokage, dattebayo!"

And, he thought smugly as he moved to his kitchen to look for something to eat for breakfast, he could use his clones to do all of the boring things that he never normally liked to do, like practice reading and do laundry and clean his apartment!

Naruto paused, staring blankly into his open refrigerator as a thought suddenly struck him with all the force of a chakra-powered kick.

I can be in multiple places at once, he thought slowly. *I can do multiple things at once. That means I can train and go to school—well, there's no more class now but I could have—and learn new jutsus and research my seal, all at the same time! And when my clones poof away, I'll have all of those memories without having to do the work myself!*

For a young boy with a notorious dislike for sitting still, Naruto's new jutsu was increasingly sounding like the best thing ever.

I can learn taijutsu! He thought suddenly, closing the door to his empty fridge and moving to the sink to get himself a glass of water. *It doesn't matter if nobody will spar with me now, I can spar with myself! And it doesn't matter if I dunno how to read, I can put a coupla clones on it and I'll be better in a few hours!*

Because no one had taught Naruto how to read. He'd picked up the basics in class, of course, but with no one at home to help him practice, no books of his own to practice *with*, and not even any writing utensils to practice that either, all combined with his natural energy and short attention span, writing and reading had fallen far to the wayside. His chicken-scratch writing and stumbling attempts to read the textbook had soon cemented his image in the eyes of his peers and teachers as the dead last of the class, too dumb to study properly and with no motivation.

Naruto downed the last of his water and scowled, setting his chipped glass down carefully in the sink. *Well, I'll show them*, he decided, heading back to his bedroom to get dressed. *I'll learn everything so fast, it'll blow their minds!*

Then he winced as his stomach, unhappy with its meager breakfast of a single glass of water, growled. *But maybe first I should go shopping.* Then he perked up. *Is there a way for my shadow clones to help me get more food?*

Naruto spent all day practicing with his clones. He'd left five in his apartment, studying hastily-borrowed books about reading from the library and practicing his writing as well. Then he'd sent a couple off to do shopping, and popped into a bakery for some breakfast of his own. The owner had sneered but taken his money, and Naruto had bounced along to the training grounds energetically, munching on his curry bread as he went.

When he found an empty training ground, one of the basic ones with no special terrain, he brushed the last crumbs from his hands and placed them into Tiger. "Right!" he said determinedly. "*Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!*"

And with a multitude of *pop-pop-pops*, twenty clones poofed into existence around him.

Naruto blinked, momentarily taken aback by just how much *orange* was surrounding him. "Huh," he said, cocking his head to the side. "Has my jumpsuit always been that bright?" Then he shrugged, disregarding it. "Well, whatever! Training time!" He turned to his clones and began barking out orders.

In short order, the field was filled with shouts and grunts and the sounds of flesh hitting flesh as some clones practiced the Academy taijutsu katas, some clones sparred against each other, and other clones practiced throwing kunai and shuriken into the posts at one end of the field. Naruto observed it all happily, fists propped on his hips and a grin on his face.

"I'm gonna be the best ninja in the village! Believe it!" he declared, and then dove in.

Any shinobi passing by Training Grounds 1 - 14 that day were drawn to stop by Training Ground 5, attracted by the burning chakra and the sounds of what seemed like an entire platoon of ninja practicing. Many of them blinked and watched with mild interest for a while before moving on, but some stayed longer than others, observing the flowing mass of orange with analytical eyes. One bandanna-wearing shinobi, a senbon clenched between his teeth, watched for almost an hour, dark eyes darting around the field, clearly wanting to say something. But even he too left after a while, giving up and ambling off into the maze of streets.

Naruto didn't particularly care about his observers. He'd actually not even noticed them at first, focused as he was on training, until one of his clones had brought it to his attention. Then he'd shrugged and redoubled his efforts, determined to show them how serious he was about becoming a ninja.

It wasn't until someone shouted his name over the noise that Naruto stopped, panting and sweating, and turned to look along with all of his clones.

Iruka-sensei was standing at the edge of the field, pale-faced and clearly in pain, leaning on a cane with one hand. “Iruka-sensei!” Twenty voices bellowed, and all of the Narutos converged on their beloved teacher, hovering around him and asking questions, tripping over each other to make sure he was all right.

“Naruto—” Iruka said, voice lost in the din. “Naruto! NARUTO!” he shouted, and the clones immediately cringed, recognizing that tone of I-am-*this*-close-to-losing-my-patience in his sensei’s voice. Silence fell, and Iruka said calmly, “I can’t understand you when you all talk at once. Where’s the real Naruto?”

“Ahahaha,” Naruto chuckled sheepishly, and dismissed his clones. He had just enough time to see Iruka’s concerned face before a sledgehammer slammed itself into his skull, and he passed out.

—

“Oooh...” Naruto groaned, lifting a hand to his pounding skull. That had *hurt*. He cracked his eyes open carefully, squinting against the sun. It seemed like he was lying on the grass in the training field, where he had passed out.

“Awake?” a voice asked, and Naruto turned his head gingerly to see Iruka sitting next to him, looking worried. “You were only out for a few seconds. Any longer and I would have taken you to the hospital. Are you okay, Naruto?”

“Yeah,” Naruto grunted, sitting up slowly. His headache was already receding, his brain busily rearranging the load of information he’d just received. “Sorry, Iruka-sensei. I guess I wasn’t prepared to get all of that information at once. Next time I’ll let them go in groups or something.”

“That would probably be for the best,” Iruka-sensei said dryly. “So, you’ve been practicing?”

Naruto perked up instantly. “Yeah! I figured out that when I let the Kage Bunshin go, I get all of their memories! So I can use it to train and stuff, and I don’t need anybody to practice with!”

Iruka chewed on his lower lip, gaze considering. “Well, Naruto, you certainly *can*, but it’s also a good idea to have a variety of opponents, otherwise you’ll only get good at beating one style.”

Naruto scowled, playing with the grass and not looking at his sensei. “Well, nobody wants to train with me, so I’ll just do it myself.”

Iruka let out a sigh. “And also, Naruto, it’s good to have somebody there to watch you, otherwise if you have a mistake in your form or something, you’ll just keep on making that same mistake over and over again, until you’ve memorized it.”

Naruto scowled harder, hunching his shoulders down sadly. “Nothin’ I can do about that,” he said quietly. “Don’t have a teacher, do I.”

“Yes, it’s not like you know any *teachers* who would be *willing to help you*,” Iruka said pointedly, and rapped Naruto gently on the head with his knuckles. “Silly.”

“Hey!” Naruto pouted, reaching up to rub his head. Then the penny dropped, and he stared at Iruka, mouth falling open. “Iruka-sensei, would you—would *you* teach me?”

“Well,” Iruka said, “I don’t have any classes now, but I am busy with the team assignments. We’ve got a week until you get your jounin sensei, and frankly, Naruto, you’re *way* behind the other students. You’ll have to work really hard if you don’t want to hinder your team.”

“I won’t!” Naruto shouted, bouncing in his seat. “I won’t hinder them, believe it!” He paused, and then asked sheepishly, “What does ‘hinder’ mean, sensei?”

“Silly,” Iruka said again, but it was fond. “It means to hold back or to make something difficult. If you hinder your team, it means you cause them problems and hold them back, rather than helping them.”

“I *definitely* won’t,” Naruto vowed, eyes alight. “So will you help me, sensei? Huh?”

“All right,” Iruka said, the corners of his eyes crinkling as he smiled. “I can’t spar with you, because I’m not healed yet, and I have to go to school in the morning—”

“That’s right!” Naruto shouted, aghast. He couldn’t believe he *forgot*! “Iruka-sensei, are you okay? Why are you out of the hospital—ow!” He rubbed his head again sulkily.

“Don’t interrupt people when they’re talking, Naruto,” Iruka told him sternly. “I’m fine, I was released this morning, I just have to take it easy for a couple days. As I was saying, I have to go into school in the mornings, but I should be free after lunch. Can you study by yourself in the morning, and then meet me in the afternoon?”

“Sure!” Naruto beamed. This was *awesome*! He was going to get Iruka-sensei all to himself!

“I’m going to work you really hard, Naruto,” Iruka-sensei said ominously. “You don’t know a lot of the stuff genin are supposed to know, so it’s a really good thing you know the Kage Bunshin, because you’re going to have to do a lot of catching up on theory too. Do you still have your textbooks?”

“Ah…” Naruto ducked his head. “Some of ‘em,” he mumbled.

“What do you mean?”

“Well. Well, some of ‘em kinda got destroyed, and I kinda…never had some?” Naruto stared determinedly at the grass, digging a little hole with one finger.

“What do you *mean*?” Iruka asked again, and his tone of voice promised Very Bad Things. Naruto cringed. “Some of them got *destroyed*?”

“It’s no big deal, sensei,” Naruto said quickly, as if saying it faster meant that maybe Iruka-sensei wouldn’t understand him and he wouldn’t get in trouble. “Sometimes people take my stuff, or they’d write on my textbooks and tear pages out but I learned real quick to hide ‘em

better so I still have the ones from the last couple years but just, uh, the first few years at the Academy I don't really know what we learned—”

“*What,*” Iruka said calmly. Naruto carefully edged back a few feet.

“—And sometimes I don't really understand the words and stuff but I'm practicing, sensei, I promise, I got five clones in my apartment right now working on reading so please don't say you won't train me!” he begged. “I promise I'll work really hard! Just—”

“Naruto,” Iruka said gently, “I'm not mad at you. Just slow down and tell me what happened.”

Naruto took a deep breath. “I don't have anybody at home to help me, so sometimes I don't...really understand the homework. And sometimes people take my stuff and I don't always get it back, so I couldn't always do the homework anyway. But it's okay, sensei, I usually figured it out—”

Iruka held up a hand, and Naruto fell silent. “I will give you new copies of the textbooks,” Iruka said quietly. “And if anyone *ever* takes your things maliciously again, Naruto, I want you to beat them up. You're a ninja, nobody should be taking your things. Now. What is this about having clones practicing reading?”

Naruto flushed a dull red, and immediately looked back down at the ground. “I told you,” he muttered, a hot swell of shame rising in his chest, “I don't have anybody at home to help me practice.”

“So you've been struggling with reading this *whole time*?” Naruto couldn't tell if Iruka-sensei was mad at him, or at someone else, but he was definitely mad about *something*. “Naruto, why didn't you tell someone?”

Naruto shrugged. “Didn't think it'd make a difference,” he said honestly.

Iruka's lips thinned. “Well, now you have me,” he declared.

—

True to his word, Iruka drove Naruto hard over the next three days, assigning massive amounts of reading for the genin's mornings and then quizzing him on what he'd read during their training in the afternoons. He didn't stint on the praise either, congratulating Naruto on his improvements, of which there were many.

In the first day, Naruto managed to finish all of the material from the first year at the Academy and improved his taijutsu and weapons-throwing remarkably. The second day, he finished all of the second-year material and progressed to practicing ninjutsu along with taijutsu. The third day, he finished all of the third-year readings, but they didn't get through all of the material because Naruto begged Iruka to start teaching him the basics of sealing, which had finally been mentioned in his textbooks.

Iruka caved after a brief resistance, and allowed Naruto to check out several scrolls on the basics of sealing from the library. Naruto set a few clones to study them as he and the rest of his small army began working on stealth and trap-laying...

...And got completely *schooled* by Iruka-sensei, who was apparently some kind of trap-laying, stealth-master expert!

"Iruka-sensei, it's not fair," Naruto whined, flopped over the trunk of a fallen tree where he'd landed after triggering a mild explosion trap. He was sweaty, panting, exhausted, and covered in brightly colored powders of all shades from where he'd triggered other traps. Most of the clones who were helping him had poofed out of existence, destroyed by various other traps spread throughout the training ground, and he just wanted to lie there for a little while and assimilate all of his memories. "How are you so good at this?"

Iruka chuckled lightly, landing silently next to Naruto's prone form and squatting down next to him. "I am a chuunin, you know," he said reasonably. "And I've been doing this for a lot longer than you have. Besides, you're quite good, too, Naruto. You've evaded top jounin and even some ANBU squads before. You just need more practice, and you'll be as good or better than I am soon."

"Not if I keep wearing this," Naruto sighed, plucking at his orange jumpsuit morosely, sending up a puff of purple powder. "I just make a *bigger* target of myself. I guess I should go buy some stealthier clothes, huh."

Iruka blinked, surprised. That was a surprisingly mature and self-aware thing for Naruto to say. And it was completely unexpected. Was this the effect of the shadow clones already, making Naruto smarter and more aware? Iruka *had* noticed a decrease in the time it took the young blond to assimilate the information he received, just over the past couple of days. Where he used to glaze over and stare into space for a while, clearly conveying that something was going on, now Naruto just looked off into the distance for a little bit, sometimes frowning or grimacing depending on the memories he was receiving. Iruka had no doubt that with more practice, Naruto would be able to receive and organize vast amounts of information very quickly and almost unnoticeably.

And what, precisely, did that mean for Naruto's brain development? Iruka thought suddenly. He was effectively experiencing exponentially more hours in the day than usual. Did that mean that all of that experience, all of the decision-making and critical thinking and mental processing, was making him mature faster?

It was definitely something to keep his eye on. If it was true, Naruto could potentially learn in a year what it took other shinobi ten years to learn, but he could mature too fast, learn too much, and not learn the other important lessons that went along with it, such as teamwork and relying on others and how to make the hard decisions that shinobi were inevitably forced to make.

"Iruka-sensei?" Naruto asked, and Iruka blinked, looking down at where Naruto had craned his neck around to look up at his teacher, brow furrowed. "You okay? You went really quiet all of a sudden."

Iruka shook himself out of his thoughts and smiled, ruffling Naruto's hair and ignoring the puff of green powder and the squawk this elicited. "I'm fine, Naruto, just thinking about some stuff. We're about done for today; do you want some help shopping? I can give you advice on good shinobi wear."

"Yeah!" Naruto cheered, getting eagerly to his feet and grinning brightly. "And can we get ramen afterward, Iruka-sensei? Pleeease?"

"I suppose," Iruka chuckled fondly. "Why don't you start dispelling your study clones while we walk, and I'm going to give you your homework."

"Aw, *maaan*—"

"This is fun homework," Iruka interrupted, giving Naruto a stern look that shut his mouth on the complaints ready to spring forth. "I want you to make three, four, or at max five clones, and send them out into the village. Their job is to find a jounin or elite chuunin, and then follow them unnoticed for as long as they can. They can use any methods they can think of, but they *cannot* be caught. If they are caught, the game is over and they should dispel. Observe their habits, observe their training, and if they manage to do so unseen until nine o'clock tonight, they win and can come back to you and dispel. Any questions?"

"No," Naruto breathed worshipfully, eyes wide with adoration. "Iruka-sensei, that's the best homework assignment *ever*."

Iruka smiled. "I'm glad you think so. We're not in a hurry; dispel your study clones first, take some time to organize their information, and then send out the homework clones when you're ready. Now, let's go buy you some proper ninja gear!"

In Which Team Seven Is Formed

Chapter Summary

Iruka meets Kakashi. Team Seven meet each other. These meetings do not necessarily go well for all parties.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Monday morning was greeted with great excitement by the recently graduated Academy genin, all of the young boys and girls chattering excitedly to each other as they filed into the familiar classroom where they'd spent the last few years of their lives training to become elite ninja. All of them wore their hitai-ate proudly, around their necks, their arms, their foreheads, their waists. All were greatly anticipating the announcement of their jounin-sensei and their three-man genin squads.

All of them stared, without exception, at the bouncing, blond-haired figure in one of the back seats.

Naruto grinned back, so, so excited to finally be here, about to become a true genin and be part of a squad. He noted the looks but dismissed them, not particularly interested in engaging his former classmates unless they spoke to him first. (A small wounded part of him that still craved their attention and acknowledgement wondered avidly what they thought of his new look and what they would think of his new abilities. Not that he was going to show them. A ninja always kept as much of his capabilities a secret as he could, Iruka-sensei said. The best attack is the one they don't see coming.)

"What the hell?" When the voice came, it was from an unexpected quarter; Nara Shikamaru slouched into the desk next to Naruto's, glaring at him longsufferingly. "What is *this*, Uzumaki? What are you wearing?"

Naruto grinned at the other boy, someone who he would tentatively call a friend—they'd skipped class together a lot, although the lazy Nara usually complained about Naruto's energy and ditched the boy as soon as he could.

"What, this?" Naruto said, his smile taking on a slightly sharper edge. "This is just ninja gear, Shikamaru. I can't hide from enemy ninja very well in orange, can I?"

Shikamaru stared at him, brown eyes trailing over the closely-fitted long-sleeved black mesh shirt, the black sleeveless shirt over it, the dark grey loose ninja pants belted tightly to his waist. The ankle- and wrist wrappings around his arms and legs. The pouches hanging from his belt.

“Troublesome,” he sighed wearily.

Naruto laughed. “What! Why? What’s troublesome?”

“You’ve clearly changed a *lot* over the past week,” Shikamaru told him, laying his head down on his folded arms on his desk, “and it’s going to drive me crazy until I figure out how.”

Naruto laced his hands behind his head and tilted back in his chair, grinning even wider. From Shikamaru, that was high praise indeed.

“Oi!” Someone else said, and Naruto looked up to see Haruno Sakura standing over him, fists propped on her hips. “Move, Naruto! I’m going to sit next to Sasuke-kun!”

Naruto blinked, and then looked to his left. Sure enough, Uchiha Sasuke was sitting on his other side, wrapped up in his usual dark cloud of broodiness. Naruto looked back at Sakura and beamed. “Sakura-chan, always lovely to see you. If you want something, generally it’s considered polite manners to *ask*, not demand. And no, I don’t think I’ll be moving anywhere.”

Sakura rocked back on her heels, eyes wide, and the rest of the class went dramatically silent. Naruto held Sakura’s gaze, letting her know how serious he was. He used the opportunity to look her over, wondering absently where his huge crush on her had gone. She was still pretty, still vivacious, still smart, but there was nothing...*there* anymore, no spark that told Naruto, ‘*I want to be close to her.*’ Naruto shrugged inwardly. He’d spent the last week with adults, following adults, taking note of adults’ mannerisms and reactions. He supposed that now, seeing kids his own age again, they seemed kind of...juvenile.

Weird, Naruto marveled, *am I actually more mature than I was last week?*

“WHAT!” Sakura shrieked, and Naruto winced, his sensitive hearing assaulted. Shikamaru let out a grumble of complaint, and even Sasuke cringed.

“That’s rude,” Naruto complained, rubbing one ear. “Honestly, Sakura-chan, I *always* sit in the back. Why should I move just because you told me to?”

Luckily for everyone’s eardrums, Iruka-sensei entered the room at that moment, calling out Sakura sharply for not being in a seat. Sakura flushed pink and whirled around, sitting at the closest available desk, and Naruto grinned, almost bouncing again as Iruka set a file on the desk in front of him.

“Congratulations to all of you,” Iruka smiled. “You are now genin of Konoha, and today you will learn the members of your four-man squads. Your jounin-sensei will meet you here after I’m finished, so please wait in the classroom until they come and get you. Now...” he cleared his throat and opened the file. “The assignments.”

—

Kakashi was really, really not looking forward to team assignments. He knew exactly why he’d been signed up yet again, despite never passing a team before; the last Uchiha was

graduating, making Kakashi the only person in the village who could teach the boy about his kekkei genkai and also probably the only person strong enough to control him if he went crazy like his brother.

It meant there was a lot of pressure on him to let the boy pass the genin test. And Kakashi hated being pressured into doing anything.

“Kakashi,” the Sandaime said as the other jounin-sensei began filing out of his office, and Kakashi stopped obediently, slouching back to the desk. He expected another lecture on treating his team fairly and giving them a chance, but the Hokage only said, “There's a request here for you to meet with your team's homeroom teacher before you meet them today. Umino Iruka-sensei is one of our best teachers, and it's rare for him to request something like this, so please be on time.”

Kakashi blinked his visible eye slowly. “Maa, of course, Hokage-sama.”

Sarutobi's mouth twitched, but he nodded. “Dismissed, then.”

Kakashi bowed and exited the room, pulling out his trusty orange book and burying his nose in the pages as his brain ran busily over the possible reasons for a homeroom teacher to request a meeting with only one of the new jounin-sensei. It didn't take a genius of Kakashi's caliber to know that it had to do with the kids on his squad.

The last Uchiha, the top kunoichi, and the dead last demon container. Kakashi suppressed the pang in his heart out of long practice. *Minato-sensei's kid. I wonder what he's doing now, besides pranking people and almost failing out of the Academy. Actually, I probably shouldn't be surprised that Iruka-sensei wants to speak to me. He probably wants to warn me about not letting them kill each other.*

Team assignments were at 10:00, so at 10:15 Kakashi ambled into the Academy and headed for the teacher's room. Sliding the door open, his one visible eye swept the almost empty room deceptively lazily as he said, “Yo. I'm here to see Umino Iruka-sensei?”

A dark head rose from a desk across the room, and Kakashi blinked slowly as he recognized one of the chuunin from the Mission Desk.

“Ah, yes! Kakashi-san! Sorry, I didn't realize the time—” Iruka-sensei paused as he looked at the clock and realized that Kakashi was actually fifteen minutes late, but continued quickly. “Let's go to the meeting room, we'll be more comfortable there.”

Kakashi followed the chuunin back out into the silent hallway, observing the slightly shorter man carefully. He seemed tense, worried about something. The team assignments? Kakashi couldn't imagine a teacher getting worked up about something that happened every year, no matter how attached he got to the brats. The upcoming conversation? Kakashi himself?

“Please, take a seat,” Iruka-sensei said, closing the door behind them and gesturing to the armchairs arranged around a low table. “I know you're busy, Kakashi-san, so I'll try to be quick.” He took the seat across from Kakashi, lacing his fingers together in his lap, and took

a deep breath. Kakashi raised one silver eyebrow. “I assume Hokage-sama has already told you your team members?”

Kakashi inclined his head silently.

“Good. Good.” Iruka-sensei took another deep breath. “As you know, Uzumaki Naruto has been assigned to your squad.”

Kakashi blinked once. This was about Uzumaki, not Uchiha?

“Naruto-kun has been consistently at the bottom of his class for years,” the chuunin continued. “Over the past week, I discovered that he’s been training himself using the Kage Bunshin technique, and for years he’s never received any help from teachers at the Academy. He was far, far behind the other students, but not from lack of desire, from lack of support. So for the past week I’ve been helping him train—”

“You’ve been helping him train?” Kakashi interrupted, surprised. He’d thought that most adults ignored the demon container; he hadn’t heard anything about permission to *train* him.

Iruka flushed. “It’s perfectly acceptable,” he said defensively, clearly misinterpreting Kakashi’s surprise. “He’s no longer my student, so I wasn’t giving him any special treatment, and he shows incredible potential. No favoritism has ever been shown during my class. But Kakashi-sensei, the boy could barely *read* before last week. He has no one at home to help him learn things that every other student takes for granted. He has Kage Bunshin to help him, but without encouragement it’ll be very easy for him to fall behind. I just wanted to make sure you’ll give him a fair chance, and not ignore him for things that he has no control over —”

“Ohhh,” Kakashi realized, grey eye widening. “I get it now!” He grinned sardonically under his mask. “This is a *parent-teacher* meeting! You’re trying to get me to go easy on your kid.”

Iruka-sensei went brick red. “I am *not*,” he said, mortified. “Kakashi-sensei, please be serious. I’m just concerned about one of my students not getting a fair chance—”

“Maa, don’t worry, sensei,” Kakashi interrupted, waving one hand lazily. “I judge everyone on their own merit. When Uzumaki Naruto fails my test, it’ll be because he wasn’t ready, not because I don’t like him.”

“*When* he fails—” the chuunin sputtered, face now flushing with anger. “He is *brilliant*—”

“Don’t care,” Kakashi said boredly, turning to leave the room. “There’s more to being a ninja than knowing a few jutsu. Gotta go, sensei, it’s terribly rude to be late when my new team is waiting for me.”

And he slid the door closed on Iruka-sensei’s angry face, mind already in a whirl as he headed back down the corridor. That was *odd*. An Academy instructor close enough to Naruto to want to warn his jounin-sensei about fair treatment? And not even a single mention of Uchiha or Haruno, the two top students of their class. Exactly what kind of training had Naruto received over the past week?

Maybe this team was going to be more interesting than he had thought.

Naruto fidgeted restlessly, picking at the support wrappings around his wrist before letting out a huffing breath. “He’s late,” he whined, splaying himself out over his desk and pouting. “Where the heck is he? He didn’t *forget*, did he?”

“He wouldn’t forget, idiot,” Sakura sniffed, edging a little closer to Sasuke until she was almost plastered against his side. Sasuke edged away slightly, a brief flash of annoyance crossing his stoic face.

“Yeah, maybe,” Naruto agreed, unconvinced. Well, he might as well do something useful with his time. With a puff of smoke, a clone appeared, sitting on the desk next to Naruto. Without a word, the two Narutos pulled out scrolls from their pouches and laid them out on the desk, putting blond heads together and beginning to read.

Sasuke and Sakura gaped at their teammate wordlessly.

“What the heck are you doing, Naruto!” Sakura finally gasped.

Naruto raised his head, the clone ignoring them and continuing to read. “I’m studying,” he said slowly, an unspoken “duh” following his words.

“But...but what is *that*!” Sakura pointed at the clone, who now raised his head to roll his eyes in perfect synchronization with the original.

“It’s a clone,” Naruto said impatiently. “You were the top of our class, Sakura-chan, come on.” Biting back a satisfied smile, Naruto waited for the obvious next question...

“But you can’t do clones, Naruto!” Sakura cried. “And clones can’t *read*, or, or *think*! What kind of clone is that?”

Now Naruto didn’t bother to suppress his smile. “It’s a Shadow Clone,” he said matter-of-factly. “I can’t do regular clones because I have too much chakra, but Shadow Clones are special. They’re literally a copy of me, so they can do all of the things I can do. I’ve been using them to help me train.”

“Oh,” Sakura said weakly, slumping back in her chair.

Sasuke eyed his dead-last teammate interestedly. That was a useful skill. Maybe he wasn’t such a dobe after all. He wished Sakura would keep asking more questions, so he could find out about it without having to show interest in somebody so beneath him.

Naruto went back to his scrolls, inwardly jumping with glee. Hah! Take that, Sasuke-teme and all of the doubters! He could do something very few other ninja could! And soon he was going to master sealing and ninjutsu and become the best ninja ever!

But soon he forgot about proving himself to his teammates, instead absorbed in reading about basic seal matrices and tossing ideas back and forth with his clone. This was how exploding

tags were made, and sealing scrolls, and lots of really cool traps. He couldn't wait to start practicing how to make them! But Iruka-sensei said his handwriting had to be a *lot* better before he could start writing seals, so now he was only allowed to study theory.

He barely noticed his teammates edging in around him, drawn in by their own curiosity, as he discussed changing up parts of the basic exploding tag with his clone. The ones available in ninja supply stores or received for missions were all basically the same strength, just a medium-sized explosion and a medium-sized bang, but if you changed the northwest quadrant, you could (theoretically) create smoke instead of an explosion, or if you strengthened the southern quadrant you could increase the noise to an earsplitting level.

Naruto was just trying to figure out how to increase the flash produced without increasing the explosion, when a pale finger tapped a spiral on the diagram. "Right here," an unfamiliar voice said. "If you reverse this spiral, it'll increase the flash without significantly increasing the force of the explosion."

All three (or four, technically) genin raised their heads to stare at the strange masked man peering over their shoulders. The man's one visible eye creased into a smile. "Yo!"

"WAAHH!" Four voices shouted, and all four teens jumped back, practically backflipping to get away from the stranger. In the confusion, Naruto's clone poofed out of existence, and Naruto landed hard on his bum as the memories set him off-balance. Grimacing and rubbing his head, he stared up at the tall ninja standing slouched in the middle of the room.

"What's the big idea, sensei!" he shouted, hopping to his feet. "First you're late, and then you scare us?"

The grey-haired man blinked his one eye lazily. "Maa, Naruto-kun, if you couldn't tell I was there, you must not be a very good ninja," he said reproachfully.

"That's bull!" Naruto defended hotly. "You're a jounin, right, sensei! We're just genin, if *we* could detect you then *you* must not be a very good ninja!"

Sasuke snorted, and Sakura let out a giggle before clapping a mortified hand over her mouth. The mask and the tilted hitai-ate concealed most of their jounin-sensei's expression, but Naruto thought he detected a bit of amusement in that grey eye before it became blank again. "You might be right," he conceded. "Well, my first impression of you is...maybe you're not as useless as I had thought. Rooftop, five minutes." And he disappeared.

Naruto scowled ferociously at the space where their sensei had just been, stomping back to his desk and rolling up his scroll on sealing. "Cagey bastard," he grumbled.

"Don't talk that way about our sensei, Naruto!" Sakura scolded, following Sasuke out the door and towards the stairs.

"You thought so too!" Naruto shot back, catching up to them easily. "Genin teams are all about teamwork, and the first thing he does is insult us? Does he *want* us to fail?" Though honestly, that advice that he'd given about the exploding seal might be right... Distracted, Naruto unrolled the scroll again, examining the diagram as they climbed the stairs to the roof.

Sasuke glanced over his shoulder at the blond head bobbing up the stairs behind him. The dobe was just getting more and more interesting, and Sasuke didn't like that. He had one goal right now, and that was to get strong. Teammates and other people were just going to get in his way. He didn't want to be interested in what the dead last idiot was doing.

Sakura's thoughts were following a similar, although less fatalistic, trend. Naruto was acting really strange, and the pink-haired girl felt off-balance, trying to regain her footing in a dynamic where she had been previously certain of her place. The loud, idiotic blond actually seemed... *smart*. It was incredibly disconcerting.

They emerged on the roof and Naruto pushed past his teammates, bounding toward the lounging figure of their sensei. "Hey, hey, sensei!" He waved his scroll around energetically. "Do you know sealing?"

"Not really," came the bored answer, the jounin straightening up and ignoring the bouncing blond in front of him. "Now then. Introductions! Tell me about yourselves, I guess. Likes, dislikes, dreams..."

"I'm Uzumaki Naruto," Naruto said promptly. "I like ramen, training, and Iruka-sensei. I dislike bigots and ignorant people. My dream is to become a powerful ninja so I can protect Konoha and prove people wrong about me!"

Sasuke and Sakura both frowned in confusion. What did that mean? Prove people wrong about what?

"That's why," Naruto continued, like a dog with a bone, "you should teach me more about sealing, sensei! Iruka-sensei doesn't know much more than the basics, he said, and there's no one else in the village who knows this stuff!"

"I don't know it either, kid," their sensei said boredly, planting one gloved hand on Naruto's spiky hair and keeping him at a distance. "Now, you, pinky. You go next."

Sakura flushed, suddenly put on the spot. Naruto's introduction had been pretty good. "Um, well," she started nervously, glancing at Sasuke, "my name is Haruno Sakura. I like, uh..." She glanced at Sasuke again and blushed even pinker, biting back a giggle. "Reading!" she yelped quickly. "I like reading, and, and training, I suppose. I dislike, uh..." What did she dislike? A few hours ago she would have said morons like Naruto, but that seemed... wrong, now. "People who are mean for no reason," she decided, remembering the children who had bullied her as a kid. "My dream is to, uh..." She glanced at Sasuke again. She couldn't say 'to become Mrs. Uchiha'. "...To become a good kunoichi, I guess," she finished lamely.

"Hm." Their sensei's grey eye was supremely unimpressed as it looked her over. "Right. Broody. You're up."

"My name is Uchiha Sasuke," Sasuke muttered in his best I-don't-care monotone. "I don't like anything. I don't dislike anything. I don't have a dream, I have a goal. My goal is to become strong enough to kill someone."

“...Wow. Morbid,” Naruto said, wrinkling his nose as he stared at Sasuke. “Don’t you like tomatoes, teme?”

Sasuke twitched.

“And I know you hate fangirls, and you’re not really fond of sweets,” Naruto continued.

Sasuke jerked.

“So why couldn’t you just say that kinda stuff?” Naruto finished, shrugging.

“How do you know that, dobe,” Sasuke growled, taking a threatening step forward.

Naruto shoved his hands in his pockets, apparently unimpressed. “Because, I dunno, I pay attention?” And he had used his classmates as stalking practice one day last week, but Sasuke didn’t need to know that.

“Right,” their sensei said, drawing their attention back to him. “Well, as fascinating as this is, let’s move on. You guys are not official genin yet.” Ignoring their cries of surprised outrage, he continued, “You’re not genin until you pass whatever test your jounin-sensei gives you. If you fail, it’s straight back to the Academy. So. Tomorrow morning, seven o’clock, meet at the bridge by Training Ground Seven. Oh, and I suggest you don’t bother eating breakfast. You won’t be able to keep it down.” He turned to leap off the roof.

“Hang on!” Naruto shouted, outraged. “You didn’t introduce yourself, sensei! We don’t even know your name!”

The tall man paused thoughtfully on the edge of the roof. “Ah. Well, I suppose I can introduce myself. My name is Hatake Kakashi. I have some likes. Dislikes...I don’t care to share. And dreams...I have those.” He smiled insincerely at the three young teens. “See you tomorrow!” And he dropped off the building, bounding across the rooftops. That had been, without a doubt, the most interesting first meeting he’d ever had with a genin team.

He still didn’t think they’d pass his test, though.

The three members of Team 7 stared after their teacher in silence. “So, basically, all we learned was his name,” Sakura finally summed up, scowling.

“Useless,” Naruto sighed. “He’s always lazy. Everybody around town knows him as lazy. He also reads these orange books in public, which I think are dirty books, because women seem to disapprove of it a lot. He’s also called the Copy Nin, and Kakashi of a Thousand Jutsu, so he’s actually really strong. But I’ve never seen him fight, so I dunno.”

Sasuke and Sakura stared at him again. Naruto blinked innocently. “What?”

“*How* do you *know* that!” Sakura shrieked.

“Hn,” Sasuke agreed.

Naruto shrugged. “I *pay attention*,” he told them. “And I *trained*. Did you guys spend our whole week off just lazing around doing nothing? If I wanna be an asset to my team, I gotta train hard! Iruka-sensei says that your genin team is really important, and it’s all about learning how to work with other shinobi and support each other as a team. That’s probably what the test tomorrow is about, seeing if we can work together as a team. I don’t wanna fail, so let’s work together tomorrow, okay?”

“That...makes sense,” Sasuke said reluctantly. “Why else would they test us when we’ve already passed the Academy exam.” He leveled a glare at his two team members. “Don’t hold me back tomorrow, you two.” He turned and headed for the staircase.

“Hey! Don’t hold *me* back tomorrow, teme!” Naruto shouted, following him off of the roof. Sakura hurried after them, unsure of who to support in this argument. The door to the roof thudded shut behind them.

Chapter End Notes

I will be updating on Mondays from now on. Drop me a comment and let me know what you think!

In Which There is a Great Deal of Character Building

Chapter Summary

Team Seven meets. Team Seven fights. Kakashi is not amused.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Naruto woke up at sunrise the next morning, rolling out of bed instantly as was his habit. Or, well, rolling off the couch, because he'd stayed at Iruka-sensei's place again last night, too excited to head home to his lonely apartment, and Iruka-sensei didn't mind. As a thank you (because Naruto was constantly wary of overstaying his welcome), Naruto always made sure to make breakfast the next morning, though his cooking skills were pretty limited to just rolled omelets, miso soup, and rice.

He put the kettle on for tea and hummed an upbeat tune as he pulled out eggs and spinach from the fridge. The soup dashi was already made, so Naruto put it into a pot and set it to simmer before he added the miso and tofu. He was so excited! He was going to meet his team and finally start training with a jounin—oh.

Naruto's hands stilled and he stared down at the block of tofu he was cutting up. Kakashi-sensei had told them to not eat breakfast this morning, because they would probably throw it up. That meant that their training would probably be really intense. But if he didn't eat, how would he have energy to train?

"Morning, Naruto," Iruka-sensei yawned, slouching into the kitchen and pulling down two mugs from the cupboard. Killing the heat under the kettle right before it began whistling loudly, he poured two mugs of tea and set one by Naruto's elbow, carrying the other one to the kitchen table and slumping tiredly into a seat. Iruka took a long, slow sip of tea, and then blinked at the young boy. "What's wrong?"

"Kakashi-sensei told us to not eat breakfast," Naruto replied, frowning at the stove. "He said we'll throw it up. But how am I supposed to have energy to pass the test if I can't eat breakfast?"

Iruka hummed, taking another sip of tea. "Well, it's up to you," he replied finally. "I don't want to tell you to go against your sensei's orders, but breakfast is a very important meal."

Naruto slowly perked up. "But he *didn't* order us!" he crowed, pleased. "He just *suggested* it! I remember 'cause I thought it was kinda strange. So I can eat breakfast, and *I* won't throw it up, dattebayo!"

"All right then," Iruka said, hiding his smile in his mug. "Don't burn the soup, now."

Naruto let out an “Eep!” of surprise and hurriedly turned back to the stove.

He left Iruka-sensei’s apartment at quarter to seven, bouncing through the streets excitedly even though he knew that their sensei was probably going to be late. Naruto had tailed him a couple of times for his ‘homework assignments’, at least until Kakashi-sensei noticed he was being followed and lost his clone—and he always, every single time, noticed he was being followed. Naruto had been reluctantly impressed by his new sensei’s skill.

He was the first one to the bridge, and settled in to make some clones and get some training in. Five henge’d into different disguises and set off for the library, and ten henge’d into different disguises and set off to gather information around the city. Naruto was becoming kind of addicted to information; he loved knowing what was happening in the village, and he loved finding things out about people. After so many years of struggling and constantly *not knowing*, it felt like the first clear breath of air after being underwater for too long.

Naruto turned and smiled as Sakura and Sasuke approached from different directions. “Mornin’, Sakura-chan, Sasuke-teme!”

“Morning,” Sakura said, subdued. Sasuke just grunted.

“Kakashi-sensei is probably gonna be late,” Naruto continued, “so do you wanna talk about how we can work as a team?”

“Who’d want to work with you, dead last?” Sasuke muttered, slouching against a tree.

Naruto scowled, hiding the sharp spike of hurt in his chest. “Well, if you *don’t* work with me, we’ll all fail!” he shouted. “One of the most important things for a ninja is teamwork! If we don’t pass as a three-man team, we won’t pass at *all*!”

“Really?” Sakura asked. “How do you know?”

Naruto waved a hand impatiently. “It’s obvious, isn’t it?” he said. “You ever heard of a team with only two genin and a jounin-sensei? And Iruka-sensei says getting along with your genin team’s really important—”

“Feh,” Sasuke snorted derisively. “You losers can’t offer me anything. I’ll pass this test on my own. You guys just try to not fail.”

Naruto swelled up with anger, cheeks puffing up as he tried to be mature and understanding like Iruka-sensei advised. Then, like an overfull balloon, he burst. “You shut up, teme, or I’ll punch you in your pretty face!” he shouted, pointing an accusing finger at Sasuke. “Just because your brother killed your clan doesn’t mean you can treat everyone around you like crap! You’re not better than anybody here, you’re on the same level as the rest of us!”

“Don’t talk about my family, dobe,” Sasuke growled, shoulders hunching angrily as he took a threatening step forward.

Naruto stepped up to meet him, squaring off against the other boy fearlessly. “You don’t scare me, teme,” he snapped. “Lotsa people have bad shit happen to them. My parents died the day

I was *born*. I grew up on my own, with zero help! At least you had a family that loved you!”

“I said *shut up, dobe!*” Sasuke shouted, and jumped him.

The two boys fell to the ground with a thud, making the wooden bridge shake as they grappled and swore. A quick twist from Naruto put him briefly on top, before Sasuke used a leg throw to overset him and accidentally sent the two of them rolling off the bridge onto the dirt path. Uncaring, the two boys wrestled in the dirt to gain control, all thoughts of technique completely forgotten as they threw punches and insults in equal measure.

“Stop it! Stop it, you two!” Sakura screamed, hovering helplessly on the outside, unable to do anything to stop them.

“You know *nothing!*” Sasuke hissed, managing a lucky hit to Naruto’s side. “I am an *Avenger!*”

“You’re a twelve-year-old genin!” Naruto shouted back, elbow catching Sasuke’s mouth and splitting his lip. “You don’t have to do everything on your own!”

“I *have to kill him,*” Sasuke shrieked rawly, grappling for a good grip on Naruto’s close-fitting clothes, knees bruising up the blond’s legs.

“But you *don’t gotta be alone!*” Naruto yelled. “Get off your high horse! We can *help you!* We’re *not worthless!*”

“*Suiton: Great Cannonball,*” a voice said, and without warning the brawling pair were deluged in ice-cold water, sweeping them up with its force and tumbling them along the ground. Coughing and spluttering, Sasuke and Naruto looked up through dripping hair to see the tall figure of their jounin-sensei looming over them.

“Well,” Kakashi drawled, for once not looking the least bit lazy or bored as he stared down at them, “this is a most interesting method of team bonding.”

Kakashi didn’t know what to do with this. He’d seen teams that didn’t get along, seen ninja who absolutely hated each other argue, even participated in some pretty epic grudges himself—but he’d never, ever seen two genin *who are supposed to be on the same team* brawling in the dirt, doing their best to maim each other.

The fact that one of them was yelling about teamwork while they did it was really the cherry on top of this huge, steaming, shit sundae.

Kakashi folded his arms across his chest, extremely fucking unamused and not afraid to show it. He’d known this team would fail—he’d *known* that—but as he watched Minato-sensei’s son sit up straight and try to push his soaked hair out of his face, a stinging ball of disappointment settled into his stomach anyway.

“So,” he said coldly. “I come to meet my potential genin team for their special test before they can become actual, functioning members of Konoha’s elite ninja force, and I find two

members brawling like common street thugs while the third just looks on, wringing her hands. Sakura. Why didn't you do something?"

Sakura flinched, eyes wet and round. Her bottom lip trembled. "I—I couldn't break them up, Kakashi-sensei, they were too—"

"I don't care about that," Kakashi interrupted. "There were plenty of other things you could have done. You could have gone and gotten help. You could have doused them with water like I did—there's a creek right there even if you don't know any *suiton* jutsus, which wouldn't surprise me. You could have literally done *anything* other than stand there and yell ineffectually at them, and it would have been better than what you did. A ninja does not wait for someone to come and save them, Sakura. Ninja are the ones who do the saving."

The girl's eyes overflowed with tears again, but Kakashi was unmoved. She was a silly little girl, and she needed to learn to not expect other people to solve her problems. She was soft, with her long hair and impractical dress, and if she wanted to become a ninja she had to *learn*.

"And you two," Kakashi continued, his voice growing even harder as he turned to face the two main culprits. Sasuke glared back at him defiantly from his place on the ground, but Naruto, he noticed to his surprise, was sitting up properly in *seiza*, hands fisted on his thighs and head bowed, ready to take his punishment. Did they teach that at the Academy? Kakashi had expected more of the 'it's not my fault' vibe that Sasuke was aggressively giving off, but Naruto's actions signified an acknowledgement of his misdeeds and a willingness to take responsibility.

It was far more mature than Kakashi had ever expected from a twelve-year-old. He wondered if this, perhaps, was what Iruka-sensei had been talking about.

"What did you do wrong?" Kakashi asked, wanting to see if they could even tell him why they were in so much trouble.

"Naruto insulted my family—" Sasuke started to growl, which was *so* untrue and not even remotely what had happened, and Kakashi cut him off right there.

"Liar," he said crisply, and Sasuke's mouth snapped shut with a click. "Naruto did not insult your family, Sasuke, and even if he had, your actions are still inexcusable. Now. One more chance. What did you do wrong?"

"We fought with our teammates," Naruto mumbled, still looking at his knees.

Kakashi nodded. That was a start. "And why is that wrong?"

"Coz we're supposed to support each other and, uh—" Naruto paused for a moment, and Kakashi could see his forehead wrinkle as if he was trying to remember something. "And never let our disagreements interfere with the mission," Naruto recited, the cadence of his voice suggesting that it was something he had memorized. "We don't gotta get along all the time, but we gotta support each other and know we've got each other's backs."

Kakashi nodded again, reluctantly impressed. That was perfect, actually. “Excellent, Naruto. That’s exactly it. The reason Konoha is so strong, the reason we have never lost a war, is because of the strength of our teams. Konoha ninja fight together, *always*. No matter your personal feelings, you will always, *always* support your teammates, because you are shinobi of Konohagakure and we are only as strong as our team. Ninja who disobey the rules are trash. Ninja who abandon their teammates, though...” Kakashi’s voice lowered to a growl, “are *worse* than trash.”

They fell into silence. Sasuke actually looked a little bit cowed, which Kakashi found encouraging. From what he’d heard while he’d hid in the tree across the road, Sasuke had a serious superiority complex, as well as some of the biggest trust issues Kakashi had ever seen in a preteen boy, and he remembered his own preteen days.

On top of that, Sasuke could now be confirmed as a huge flight risk. If ever it seemed as though the village, his teammates, *anything* was holding him back, Sasuke would leave Konoha probably without a single look back. He was fixated on the idea that he had to kill his brother, and apparently he thought that he needed to be alone to do it.

Kakashi needed some way to fix his allegiance to Konoha, to help him rebuild connections with other people (and yes, the jounin wryly acknowledged the irony in *him* being the one to say that), and he needed to do it soon.

“Have you heard of the Densetsu no Sannin?” he asked abruptly, acting on a gut instinct.

The three downtrodden students all shook their heads meekly, looking up at him with cautious interest in their eyes.

“They are three of the most powerful ninja ever to come out of Konoha,” Kakashi said, picking his words carefully, mind whirling ten steps ahead as he figured out exactly how he was going to spin this. “They were the Sandaime’s genin team, and they grew up together, fighting together, training together, almost living together sometimes. Senju Tsunade was the first ever frontline medic; she used chakra to enhance her strength so that she was enormously strong, able to devastate large groups of enemies with one punch. Her chakra control was legendary—she could perform miracles of healing that no one else in history has been capable of, and she was the driving force behind Konoha’s hospital and current medic-nin system.” Kakashi saw Sakura’s eyes light up with interest, and prevented his lips from curling with satisfaction.

“Jiraiya, on the other hand,” he continued, looking to the boys, “is a devastating taijutsu and fuinjutsu master. He could combine his attacks with his teammates for huge effects, or trick enemies and impede their movements. He and Orochimaru, their ninjutsu master, were unstoppable. The three of them were instrumental in the winning of the Second Shinobi War, which earned them the title of the Densetsu no Sannin. Individually, they were each Hokage candidates. Together, they were undefeatable.” Except for that one time against Hanzo of the Salamander, but Kakashi kept that to himself.

“So then where are they now, sensei?” Naruto piped up, eyes intent. “If they’re so good, how come we haven’t heard about them before?”

“For various reasons, they are all out of the village and have been for a long time,” Kakashi replied smoothly. “But they remain the pillar of exemplary teamwork and the ideal that every Konoha team strives toward. If you had become genin, I would have wanted you to look to them as an example as well.”

Kakashi watched, satisfied, as all three of the kids froze. “What do you mean, sensei,” Sakura said slowly, “*if* we had become genin?”

Kakashi shrugged, slipping his hands into his pockets. “Well, it’s clear that you three lack any semblance of teamwork whatsoever. I’m certain you would have failed my test, even if you hadn’t done this first. This kind of reckless, destructive behavior has no place in Konoha’s ninja and therefore no place for you. You have all failed. You can either go back to the Academy, or give up on being a ninja and find another job.”

“No!” all three students cried, talking over each other as they tried to convince him of their sincerity. “Sensei, we swear, we’ll do better—”

“I won’t fight the teme anymore, I promise—”

“I need to become strong, I’ll put up with them if I have to—”

Kakashi raised a hand, and his team fell instantly silent. “Fine,” he said, making sure to keep a fatalistic tone in his voice. “Fine. I’ll give you one chance.” He pulled out his other hand, and two bells rang sweetly in the air. “You have one hour to retrieve one of these bells. If you manage to do so, you will pass. If you don’t, you’re out—back to the Academy. Notice,” he said pointedly, “that there are only two bells. One of you will definitely be going back, no matter what happens. This team dynamic is a disaster, and I’ll find someone else to take the vacant spot.”

He shrugged, fastening the bells to his waist. “Honestly, I don’t think any of you will pass. But you can try. Your one hour starts now.”

Instantly, the three genin vanished. Kakashi let out a silent sigh, pulling out his orange book and slouching tiredly. This was really not how he had expected this to go. Would the bell test even be effective, with these changes and these kids? They had just been told that teamwork was important; would it make a difference?

Well, Kakashi had an hour to find out.

—

Naruto tried to keep his breathing as quiet as possible as he caught up to Sakura. He’d noted where Sasuke had gone, but he didn’t think the other boy would listen to him at the moment; better to let him cool off and get Sakura-chan on his side first.

“Hey, Sakura—” he began.

“Augh!” Sakura yelped, just barely managing to soften the sound to not give away their position. “*Naruto!*” she hissed. “Don’t sneak up on me like that!”

“Sorry,” Naruto apologized automatically, even though he was a little confused. He hadn’t been sneaking anywhere; he’d thought she’d known he was behind her. Hadn’t she sensed him? “Hey, Sakura—”

“What?” she snapped, crouching behind a tree and scowling.

“I don’t think we’re gonna be able to win against Kakashi-sensei,” Naruto said. “Not unless we work together.”

“What are you talking about?” Sakura said. “You heard what he said. I am *not* going back to the Academy.”

“Yeah, but—” Naruto waved his arms around, frustrated. How come he was the only one who could see this? He’d thought Sakura-chan and the Teme were supposed to be the top of their class! “But he’s a *jounin*, Sakura-chan, don’t you understand what that means? He’s the *best*. I’ve tried to follow him before and he *always* finds out and loses the tail. And he just told us that teamwork’s super important; I think he wants to see if we can work together even if the outcome seems really bad.”

Sakura stared at him, lips pressed into a thin line. “What do you mean, you’ve tried to follow him before?” she asked suspiciously.

Naruto froze, and then laughed nervously. “Ahahaha, nothing! I didn’t mean anything by it, I was just, y’know, practicing... Anyway, whaddya think? If we find Sasuke-teme and come up with a really good plan, maybe we can get the bells an’ convince Kakashi-sensei to let us pass!”

Sakura looked at him for a few moments longer, green eyes calculating, before she sighed. “Well, it seems like the best option we’re going to get,” she agreed grumpily. “I don’t have the faintest idea about how to take down a jounin. Do you know where Sasuke-kun is?”

“Yeah,” Naruto nodded, though he was again a bit confused. Sasuke was hiding in a tree on the other side of the training ground, couldn’t Sakura-chan tell? “C’mon, I’ll show you.”

—

“Well, well,” Kakashi drawled, crossing his arms and staring down at his three genin as the dust began to settle out of the air, “I’m actually a bit impressed.”

Naruto grinned, his foxy face covered in dirt and his dark clothes similarly coated. “Yeah! See, see, toldya we could do it, Sakura-chan, Sasuke-teme!” He danced in a little victory circle.

Sakura too was grinning triumphantly, despite the fact that her pretty red dress was ripped and muddy and her long hair was a tangled mess. She thrust her clenched right fist into the air, and the small bells dangling from their strings tinkled gently. “There, sensei! We did it! We got the bells! We win!”

“Hn,” the Uchiha grunted in agreement, trying to hide how hard he was panting. He was looking a little singed, too; that last fireball he’d set off had backfired when Kakashi had used a wind jutsu, and only some very quick backflips and the sacrifice of one of Naruto’s clones had saved Sasuke from getting crisped.

All of the genin, actually, were pretty worse for wear. But they had succeeded.

“Very good,” Kakashi told them, and their faces lit up. “How did you do it, by the way? Who came up with the idea to send Sakura in for the bells?”

“That was the teme’s idea!” Naruto shouted, pointing a finger at Sasuke, who didn’t even seem to mind the form of address too much. “He said that Sakura-chan was the least threatening, so if we distracted you enough, you probably wouldn’t notice her going for the bells! And it was my idea to use my clones for backup, and Sakura-chan told us how to combine our attacks! None of us know any jutsu yet ‘cept for Sasuke-teme, so we had to get creative! So whaddya think, sensei, huh? We’re good, right! We can work as a team! None ‘a us have to go back to the Academy!”

“Yeah,” Sakura said earnestly, “once we actually talked about it, it was obvious we needed to work together! We all helped each other, sensei, you can’t send one of us back!”

“We *did* manage to pass your test,” Sasuke added, going to stuff his hands in his pockets but then wincing and quickly withdrawing them again—burns.

“Well, all right,” Kakashi said grudgingly, feigning great reluctance. “You did show some pretty impressive teamwork. Which is astonishing, considering two of you—” he cast a harsh eye over the boys, both of whom winced, “—were trying to beat each other up not even an hour ago. Come over here.” He turned and began walking to the edge of Training Ground Three.

Breaking out in furious whispering, the three preteens followed him like ducklings, and Kakashi felt his mouth twitch under his mask. They were pretty cute, he had to admit. And they had *actually managed to get his bells*. They were the first team ever to actually succeed in the first part of the test.

Kakashi drew to a stop next to the Memorial Stone. “Do you know,” he announced, “what this is?”

Naruto peered at the many names written on the stone. “Some sorta list, sensei? Like...of great ninja or something?” He perked up at the idea.

“Exactly,” Kakashi said, and Naruto perked up even more. “This is the Memorial Stone,” Kakashi continued before the blond could start shouting about whatever. “Every single Konoha ninja who has fallen in the line of service has their name etched into this stone. We remember them, and we honor the sacrifice they made for this village.”

Naruto deflated, and the three genin examined the stone carefully. Sasuke, especially, seemed to pay particular attention to the more recent names, and Kakashi felt a pang of something like sympathy for the kid. None of the Uchihas massacred by Itachi had been put on the

stone, because none of them had been killed in action. He didn't know if that made it better or worse for Sasuke.

"My best friend is on this stone," he continued, and the genin looked back up at him. "He died saving the lives of me and our other teammate. He was loyal, honorable, and understood the most important thing about being a ninja: that you are only as strong as your bonds with your team.

"Naruto," Kakashi said, and Naruto jerked, standing up straight. "Why did I tell you that there were only two bells, and that one of you was going to go back to the Academy if they didn't get a bell?"

"Uh, well..." Naruto scratched his head. "'Coz you wanted t'see how we'd react, right? I mean, if only two of us can pass, that means we gotta fight each other as much as you, right? And, and," he continued, warming quickly to his subject, "and teamwork's really important! And there's no way we could beat you on our own, sensei, I mean, you're really, really good! So if we *wanted* to win, we had to forget about what you said and work together even though one'a us would get sent back. We had ta put the mission above our own aj—agenda!"

"*Very* good," Kakashi praised, once again surprised by the loud prankster's insight. Naruto beamed and gave him a thumbs-up. "Naruto is exactly right," he continued, turning back to Sasuke and Sakura. "This test was designed to evaluate how well you could work as a team in a situation that deliberately sets you up to fail. Konoha ninja almost always work in two- or three-man teams, because you are always stronger together than alone." His grey eye settled lazily on Sasuke. "Being on a team gives you a huge advantage, especially against a solo enemy. For example...a missing-nin."

Hah, Kakashi thought, as Sasuke twitched slightly. *Got you.*

"Sakura," he said. "Tell me again how you came up with the plan to get the bells."

The pink-haired girl bit her lip uncertainly. "W-well," she started hesitantly, "Naruto came and got me, and said that we had to work together to beat you. So then we went to find Sasuke-kun, and we started talking about your strengths and weaknesses. But none of us know anything about you except that you're strong, so we started talking about *our* strengths and weaknesses, and Sasuke-kun's the only one who can do taijutsu or ninjutsu, and Naruto has all of those crazy clones, so they could be really loud and flashy and distract you. Sasuke-kun said that I should grab the bells because I'm—I don't have any flashy abilities like that, and Naruto said that he could combine techniques with Sasuke-kun for more effect. So...we did," she finished a bit lamely.

Kakashi nodded. "Sasuke, what is Naruto best at?"

"Pranking," the Uchiha drawled immediately, dark eyes intent on the older shinobi.

"Indeed. Naruto's not particularly good at ninjutsu or taijutsu yet, but he can plan *excellent* pranks, so he's very versatile and very good at thinking on his feet. And he was the only one to realize the true purpose of the test and get you to work together. Sasuke is the best fighter, and Sakura has an analytical mind. You all made up for each other's deficiencies. Well done."

Kakashi folded his hands behind his back and observed them quietly for a long, long moment. “You all pass.”

“YES!” Naruto howled, jumping straight up in the air and spinning around excitedly. Sakura squealed and clapped her hands, and even Sasuke gave a slight smile of satisfaction.

“Yes, yes, well done,” Kakashi said long-sufferingly. “Well, no time like the present. Let’s get started. Ten laps around the village center, now.”

His one visible eye crinkled up in a smile at the simultaneous yells of outrage.

—

“Iruka-sensei! Iruka-sensei!” A dark grey-and-blue blur barrelled through the crowd, crashing directly into the chuunin teacher. Iruka *oofed* but caught the boy, looking down to see Naruto’s bright face grinning up at him. “I passed! I did it! We passed Kakashi-sensei’s test!”

“That’s—” Iruka blinked, honestly gobsmacked. “That’s fantastic, Naruto! Congratulations!”

“Hehe,” Naruto chuckled, letting Iruka go and looking behind him. “Hey, hey, here’s my team! I mean, you know Sakura-chan and Sasuke-teme already, but this is my jounin-sensei, Hatake Kakashi!”

“Yo,” the tall silver-haired man intoned, the fingers of one hand rising in a lazy wave.

Iruka smiled politely, gaze cool. “Yes, we’ve met.”

“Eh? Really?” Naruto asked curiously. “How come ya didn’t tell me, sensei?”

“It was recent,” Iruka replied, and bowed his head slightly. “Kakashi-san.”

“Iruka-sensei,” Kakashi returned. “Come on, Naruto. Time to go. You still have four more laps to complete.”

“Aw man!” Naruto moaned, then grinned at Iruka. “I gotta go train, Iruka-sensei! See ya later!”

And they were off, heading down the street at a jog—even Sakura, who had claimed loudly and often that she hated getting sweaty during her days at the Academy.

Iruka gave Kakashi a look. “Four more laps?” he asked lightly.

“Yep,” Kakashi replied, visible eye crinkling in a false smile. “They’ve already completed six. No time like the present to start team-building, and nothing builds team like shared exhaustion.”

“Mhmm,” Iruka hummed skeptically. Kakashi tapped a finger against his forehead in a lazy salute and ambled off down the street after his kids, who seemed to have stopped to argue a little ways ahead.

Iruka watched them go and sighed. He suddenly had a creeping sense of impending doom.

Chapter End Notes

I update every Monday. Leave me a comment and tell me what you liked!

In Which Team Seven Learns Some Things

Chapter Summary

Why aren't libraries more of a thing in Konoha? Naruto thinks they're pretty damn awesome. Kakashi concurs, for the most part. Sasuke and Sakura are not amused by what going to the library results in.

Also, I do a shit-ton of worldbuilding.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Hey, sensei, why are we here?” Naruto asked, in a surprisingly good whisper for the normally loud-mouthed blond. He waved at a random dark-haired girl across the room, who perked up and hurried into the shelves.

“We are here,” Kakashi said, “because the library is the best place to go when you're starting out. There are lists of ninjutsu, scrolls on taijutsu styles, books on fuuinjutsu and healing and genjutsu and strategy and just about anything you could possibly want to learn. Sasuke, your affinity is Fire, like most of your family, right?”

Sasuke shrugged. “I’ve never been tested, but I learned the Great Fireball Jutsu when I was seven.”

“Mm,” Kakashi hummed. “Well, we’ll test you all later, but for now I’ll start you on some new fire jutsu. Sakura, you’re a genjutsu type, right?”

“I—I guess so,” she replied hesitantly.

“We’ll get started on developing that as soon as possible. True genjutsu users are rare, and you’re smart and inventive enough that that could be a big asset on a team. You also have the best chakra control, so some low-level medical jutsu wouldn’t go amiss either. Naruto—” Kakashi turned to his last student, and stared.

A half-dozen faces grinned back at him. “Yes, sensei!” they all chorused back.

Kakashi blinked slowly, grey eye scanning the crowd of strangers. The girl Naruto had waved to when they’d come in was standing off to the side, presumably having gathered all of the others. There were tall people and short people and girls and boys and an entire mix of faces standing in front of him, but if Kakashi was not mistaken...

“Naruto,” he began slowly, “are these *all clones*?”

Naruto—the real Naruto—stuck out his hand in a thumbs-up. “Yup! I send a bunch of clones here every day to read up on stuff I don’t wanna read up on myself! I’m learning things *soooo* fast, sensei, you have no idea!”

“Why are they all wearing henge, though?” Kakashi asked. “Surely the librarians have seen stranger stuff than six of the same person wandering about.”

Naruto’s hand dropped to rub the back of his head sheepishly. “Yeah, uh, well, usually the librarians won’t let me in unless I’m wearing a henge. They, uh, don’t like me much.”

“Did you pull a prank in here or something, dobe?” Sasuke scoffed.

Naruto puffed up. “Teme! No, I didn’t! They just don’t like me, just like everyone else!”

“I see,” Kakashi said calmly, and his students immediately shut up and looked at him with wide eyes. Whoops, maybe some of his killing intent had slipped into his voice. “I will deal with that later. What do you have them working on now, then?”

Immediately all the clones raised their hands. Kakashi pointed to a random boy near the front. “I’m reading about chakra control!” he was told enthusiastically.

“I’m reading about fuuinjutsu!”

“I’m reading about taijutsu!”

“I’m reading about history!”

“I’m reading about mission protocols!”

“All right then,” Kakashi said faintly, when the last clone finished telling them about the maps they’d been studying. “It sounds kind of like you’ve just been pulling whatever caught your eye off the shelves, Naruto.”

“Aheheheh,” Naruto chuckled sheepishly. “Kinda. I mean, Iruka-sensei gave me a few pointers, places to start, but...I didn’t really know what I wanted to learn, so I figured I’d try and learn everything.”

“And you remember it all when they dispel?” Kakashi wanted to know. Just because he *received* all of the information didn’t mean that it was *staying*, after all.

Naruto scratched his head. “I mean, yeah, for the most part. In the beginning I used to get really bad headaches and forget a lot of the stuff, but lately I remember most of it.”

Kakashi blinked slowly. Well. Perhaps Namikaze Minato’s genius wasn’t completely lost, after all.

“Well, what have you found? What do you like best?” he asked.

“Fuuinjutsu!” Naruto answered immediately, eyes sparkling. “It’s *sooo* cool, sensei! And my family, the Uzumaki family, they were *really* good at it! I had a family that was good at

something! So I'm gonna study it super hard and get really good at it too!"

'I had a family that was good at something'...Oh, Naruto. I'm sorry. Kakashi forcibly pushed away thoughts of his old sensei and his wife. "Well, I know a little bit about sealing. I can help you practice. So we'll get you some scrolls on that." Kakashi clapped his hands together. "These will be your homework assignments!"

The three genin immediately groaned as if Kakashi had announced a special kind of torture. "None of that now," the jounin beamed, "or I'll be doubling your loads." Instant silence fell. "I want each of you to have mastered one scroll by the end of the week, when I'll test you on it. If you pass, great! You get to move onto something new. If not, too bad! You'll be doing an extra ten laps around the village, on top of our regular training." Kakashi dropped his hands onto Sasuke and Sakura's shoulders, who were closest. "Now, let's go pick you out some homework!"

"I'm going to die," Naruto moaned, facedown in the grass, arms and legs splayed out like a starfish.

"Me first," Sasuke panted, flopping onto his back next to his teammate and not even caring when one of his legs fell over the blond's.

"No, me," Sakura said, wobbling over and collapsing onto the ground as if her legs couldn't hold her weight anymore. "He has me *walking on water with weights attached to my legs and arms.*"

"My hands are going to fall off," Naruto told them, holding up his hands, which were in fact trembling as though he was having a seizure. "He has me practicing handwriting with *both* hands. *After* I practice taijutsu and ninjutsu. *And* do our normal warmups."

Sasuke snorted, still lying flat on his back. "My mouth and throat are practically burned away by all of the fire jutsu I'm practicing." And indeed his voice was pretty hoarse, his lips peeling and cracked.

Naruto leaned over and used both hands—because neither one could hold a grip on its own—to pass a water bottle to his teammate. Sasuke accepted it and began taking careful sips, wincing occasionally in pain.

The three of them were silent for a while, catching their breath, before Sakura mused, "I wonder if sensei would let me learn some basic burn medi-jutsu."

Naruto nodded his head weakly, slowly clenching and unclenching his hands. "Bet he would if you asked. He said if we finished this week's scrolls, next week was gonna be elemental training, right?" He perked up a bit through his exhaustion. "That'll be fun! Then it won't be only Sasuke-teme learning the cool jutsu!"

Sasuke lazily kicked at Naruto's ankle, but seemed too attached to his water bottle to really put up a protest to the nickname.

Their second week of training was, honestly, far different from anything any of them had expected. Naruto had imagined endless cool jutsu and his sensei being wowed and amazed by the things he had his clones doing. Kakashi *was* impressed by Naruto's clones, but he simply told Naruto where to focus them next, that he expected even more next time. To Naruto, who had had so little adult praise and encouragement in his life, the positive attention was like fuel to a forest fire.

Sakura had imagined a bliss-filled, pain-free existence, cheering on Sasuke-kun and looking gorgeous while doing it. She hadn't really thought about the actual *work* that went into becoming a ninja, the hard physical training and constant exhaustion. But that was okay, because she could already tell the difference in herself, and she guiltily admitted only to Inner Sakura that she *liked* it. Kakashi-sensei told her almost every other day how exceptional her chakra control was, and the idea of becoming a genjutsu user with medi-training really appealed to her. Besides, Sasuke-kun seemed to like strong people, no matter what Sakura's mama said about kunoichi.

Sasuke hadn't really thought much about his genin team at all, beyond as a negligible stepping-stone in his path to strength and vengeance. He'd been so focused on that for so long, ignoring everything else other than that goal, that Kakashi-sensei's metaphorical slap upside the head had come as a complete surprise. It was as if he'd shaken off a film clouding his vision, realizing hazily that yes, there were different paths to strength. His mother had told him that once, standing smiling in the kitchen of their house as she made dinner. "*There are a hundred ways to skin a cat, Sasuke,*" she'd said, eyes calm as she chopped up chicken cubes with blinding speed. "*And if you sit and think about it a bit, I bet you can come up with a hundred more.*" The knife in her hands had suddenly seemed much more ominous to the young Sasuke.

It wasn't that easy, of course; the scars from Itachi's Tsukuyomi ran deep in Sasuke's psyche, and he found himself slipping back into that tunnel vision frighteningly easily. He still preferred to be alone, preferred quiet contemplation to loud energetic groups, and found himself contemptuously thinking about being a solo ninja every time one of his teammates did something particularly stupid.

But Naruto was actually helping a bit, surprisingly enough. Sasuke hadn't thought the obnoxious blond would actually be useful in *any* way, but—

Sasuke blinked over at Naruto, who was using his hands to describe a particularly intense bout of taijutsu from his clones to Sakura, and demanded loudly, "Why are your hands already healed, dobe!"

Naruto and Sakura both jumped and turned to look at him. "Oh," Naruto said, and raised his hands. They were completely fine, no sign of tremors or red marks from sealing brushes. "Huh," Naruto said thoughtfully. "I dunno, teme. I've always healed fast, I guess."

"What do you mean, *fast*!" Sasuke said, and then coughed, eyes watering from the harsh pain of his throat. "No one should heal that fast," he rasped, taking another swig of water. "We've been sitting for what, five minutes? Sakura, how are your legs?"

Sakura stretched out one leg experimentally, and then winced. “Knotting up as we speak,” she replied, and Sasuke had never been more glad than when she had finally started speaking to him normally, about three days ago. “I’ve gotta stretch before I won’t be able to walk home.” She dropped into the first stretch in one of the stretching katas that Kakashi had taught them on their second day. “Sasuke-kun’s right, though,” she continued. “People don’t normally heal that fast, Naruto. Do you have a special ability or something?”

Naruto scratched the back of his head and shrugged. “Not really, I don’t think. I’ve always been this way.”

“Come to think of it,” Sasuke said slowly, speaking quietly to avoid irritating his throat even more, “you were completely fine at the end of our first day, even after fighting with me and the training Kakashi-sensei put us through. You didn’t even have any scrapes or bruises.”

There was a rustle of leaves—which, all three of them had painfully learned, was only a courtesy on their teacher’s part, the jounin capable of moving completely silently over any surface—and Kakashi-sensei dropped down out of a tree to stand next to Sakura. “Slacking, my cute genin?” he asked cheerfully, his visible eye crinkling into an upside-down smile at them.

“Sensei, why can Naruto heal so fast?” Sasuke asked, completely ignoring Kakashi-sensei’s question. “Is it something learnable?” An ability like that would be immeasurably useful for a ninja.

Kakashi’s grey eye slanted over to look at Naruto, and something in the atmosphere seemed to change the tiniest bit. “Unfortunately not,” he said lightly. “Part of his stamina and vitality is a family trait, which was exacerbated at Naruto’s birth by an unfortunate circumstance.”

“What’s *exa-ser-bated*?” Naruto asked, forehead wrinkling as it always did when he didn’t understand something.

“Compounded,” Kakashi clarified. When the confused look didn’t go away, he sighed. “Worsened. Well, in this case, since it’s a positive change, *increased* would be better.”

“Oh,” Naruto said, and he deflated for some reason. Why would he be upset about this? Sasuke wondered, confused. No matter how unfortunate the circumstance, those were some damn good results to come out of it. Then, inexplicably, Naruto perked up again. “But it’s originally a family trait, sensei? From the Uzumaki? Or—” he faltered for a second, then forged on brightly, “or my other family?”

Kakashi nodded, lazy gaze fixed with surprising intensity on the blond. “Yes. Your father was from a small newly-established clan, but the Uzumaki clan was well-known for its stamina and huge chakra reserves, as well as their vitality—they were uncommonly healthy, with higher natural resistance to poisons and a higher healing factor. They were notoriously hard to kill because of it.”

This, for some reason, made Naruto deflate again. “But I never heard of an Uzumaki other’n me,” he said quietly. “They’re not around any more.”

“No, they’re not,” Kakashi-sensei agreed quietly.

The clearing was silent. Sakura looked, stricken, between their teacher and Naruto, clearly unsure of what to say or do. Sasuke felt similarly stunned, though he hoped he was hiding it a bit better. To learn that Naruto, dead last good-for-nothing orphan, was from such a powerful family, and yet had *nobody* left... Sasuke had never heard of the Uzumaki clan before.

At least I knew my family, he found himself thinking bleakly.

Finally, Naruto visibly rallied. “Well, there’s still me!” he declared brightly, smiling. It looked just as bright as his smiles when everyone in their Academy class laughed at him, and Sasuke thought with a jolt that maybe there were *depths* to his teammate that he had absolutely no idea of. “And I’m gonna make the Uzumaki name famous all over the world again! Believe it!” He clenched one of his hands into a fist. “Promise of a *lifetime*!” he vowed, blue eyes burning with fire as he looked up at their teacher.

Kakashi-sensei blinked lazily, and Sasuke couldn’t read his reaction at all—any openness that had been there previously had suddenly become obscured, through some subtle shift of body language that *Sasuke wanted to learn, dammit*. “Maa,” sensei drawled, “if it’s you, Naruto, you just might manage it.”

Naruto beamed, hopping to his feet. “Right!” he said. “What’s next, sensei? More stamina training? More laps? Or are you gonna teach us something new? Sasuke-teme ‘n’ I are getting really good at tree-climbing!”

Kakashi-sensei shook his head, spiky grey hair bobbing with the movement. “No more training today,” he replied, and ignored both Naruto’s groan of disappointment and Sasuke’s and Sakura’s moans of relief. “It’s almost five in the afternoon, and I want you guys to all go home and get some good rest. Tomorrow we’re going to do some melee training.” Stuffing his hands into his pockets, the tall jounin slouched away towards the road.

“Wait a second!” Naruto shouted excitedly, and in seconds Kakashi was surrounded by all three of his cute genin, all of them bouncing enthusiastically. “You mean we’re finally gonna get to fight, sensei?” Naruto asked, all but tugging on Kakashi’s sleeve.

“Aa,” Kakashi affirmed, not stopping his stroll towards downtown but shortening his stride unnoticeably so that Sasuke and Sakura—both still suffering from training—could keep up without pain.

“But melee training needs a lot of people,” Sasuke rasped. “A melee implies a fair amount of people fighting against each other. How are you going to have us fight like that? I thought the point was to build our teamwork together?”

Ah, it was so good to hear words of teamwork falling from an Uchiha’s lips, Kakashi thought happily. “Very true, Sasuke-kun,” he told the little ninja, and watched Sasuke’s face screw up in a fascinating mix of pleasure at the praise and disgust at the form of address. “True, I want you three to work on fighting together,” Kakashi continued. “Which is why we will be joining up with the other two teams who graduated from your year. Their teachers agreed with me that some group training will be good morale. It’ll basically be three-on-three-on-

three, team against team. The last team with *all* of their members standing wins, so you'd better think about how to work together. Team leader will be Sakura." And Kakashi waited for that explosive tag to go off.

"WHAT!" Two male voices shouted, and then they immediately had to stop while Sasuke bent over his knees to cough.

"It's quite simple," Kakashi told them, reaching out with a chakra-heavy hand to place a finger against Sasuke's throat. The boy froze with wide eyes, and Kakashi withdrew his hand with the raw throat and burns soothed and well on their way to healing. "Sakura has the best strategy. She doesn't have either of your power, so she's had to sit back and think about how to use what she has to the best of her ability. Plus you two will actually listen to her, and I'm not entirely sure you'd listen to each other." Kakashi cast a gimlet eye down at his two male students; Sasuke looked away with a scoff, and Naruto shuffled his feet sheepishly but didn't seem very apologetic.

"Well, now you've got your mission parameters," Kakashi said, clapping his gloved hands together. "You've got until nine o'clock tomorrow morning to plan. Have fun!" And he disappeared in a swirl of leaves.

Or that's what it looked like, anyway; in actuality the shunshin had just carried him to the roof of the building directly across from them, and Kakashi clamped down on his chakra and peered over the edge, eager to see what his students would do with this information.

"Hey, hey," Naruto was bouncing again, filled with energy now that he'd been given something new to conquer, "d'you guys wanna come over to my place and eat dinner and talk about what we're gonna do? I'll cook!"

A brave move, Kakashi mused, considering that most of his meal invitations still get shot down by both of his teammates.

Sakura hesitated, glancing over at Sasuke, but surprisingly she was the first to answer. "Sure, I guess," she said shyly. "I told my parents I was going to be out late training anyway, because I thought Kakashi-sensei was going to keep us late again." She glanced over again. "Sasuke-kun?"

The little Uchiha's body language screamed discomfort, but Kakashi was pleased to note that he hadn't run away yet. "Hn," he grunted—and that had to be a grunt of agreement, because he still didn't turn around and head for the Uchiha compound! Kakashi was so proud of his dysfunctional baby genin.

"Yeah!" Naruto shouted, jumping up and punching the air. "Come on, it's this way!"

His teammates followed him down the road, their shadows stretching out behind them in the late afternoon light. "And it can't be instant ramen, Naruto!" Sakura's voice drifted back. "That's not real food!"

"Ahehehe," Kakashi could hear Naruto's nervous chuckle. "Maybe we should stop by the market first..."

Their voices faded into the distance, and Kakashi rolled onto his back, staring up at the blue sky. Having genin, he mused to himself, despite the many (many, many, *many*) potholes, wasn't so bad after all.

“So,” Naruto said through a mouthful of *hot hot hot* nabe, “Wassa plan for t'morrow?” He reached into the simmering pot for more meat and cabbage, avoiding the weird mushrooms as best he could. Sakura-chan had insisted that you couldn't have nabe without mushrooms, and Sasuke had just grunted and ignored Naruto to toss them in the basket. But even with the mushrooms, it was really good! Naruto had never had nabe before; it seemed really easy to make! He bet it'd taste even better if it had ramen noodles in it!

Sakura slurped up a mushroom thoughtfully (Naruto repressed his shudder of disgust). “Well,” she said, chewing slowly, “Kakashi-sensei said we're going to be up against the two other genin teams. That's Hinata-chan, Kiba, and Shino, and then the Ino-Shika-Chō team.”

“What's the Ino-Shika-Chō team?” Naruto interrupted, curious.

“Oh,” Sakura blinked. “You don't know?” But her tone was curious rather than derisive, and she continued before Naruto had the chance to feel more than a twinge of defensive embarrassment at not knowing something again. “The Yamanaka, Akimichi, and Nara clans have been allied for a long time, and whenever three of them end up in the same academy year, they always get placed on the same team. Their skills balance each other really well, or something. The Nara are really smart and fantastic strategists, the Akimichi are taijutsu experts, and the Yamanaka are mind jutsu and intelligence experts.” She emptied her bowl and reached for the ladle, spooning more of the nabe into her bowl. “I think I heard Ino-pig say that her father's team is the best intelligence and strategy team in Konoha.”

Naruto's forehead wrinkled, but he nodded slowly. That made sense. “How 'bout Kiba's team, then?” he asked. “What do they specialize in?”

“Scouting,” came the answer from an unexpected source. Sasuke had been pretty quiet up until that point, eating silently and ignoring Naruto's and Sakura's banter while the nabe cooked, but now he joined the conversation as if he'd always been a part of it. “The Hyuuga have the Byakugan, which can see through any barrier and map any chakra in the area. The Inuzuka noses and tracking abilities are the best in the village. The Aburame's kikaichu can be used for any variety of things, from sucking out chakra to poison to infiltration to active combat. Hyuuga-Inuzuka-Aburame teams are generally sent on search-and-rescue, tracking, or scouting missions. There's always at least one team on patrol in the forest surrounding Konoha, guarding our perimeter.”

“Huh.” Naruto chewed on that (and the delicious cabbage in his mouth) for a moment. That sounded pretty cool, actually. “So then what about us?” he asked. “What does our team specialize in?”

Sasuke and Sakura both turned to look at him. It was clear that they'd never even thought about it. “Guys...” Naruto said slowly, the real meaning of his question sinking in. “What do we specialize in?”

"I don't know," Sakura said quietly, realization hitting her too. "Why were we put together as a team? Why put the three of us together, and not some other kids?"

They were all silent for a moment, thinking.

"I think," Sasuke said slowly, after a long while, "that we're supposed to be an attack team."

Naruto and Sakura both turned to look at him. "What makes you say that, Sasuke-kun?" Sakura asked.

"Well, think about it. The top shinobi and top kunoichi, with the dead last student." Sasuke ignored Naruto's automatic and, to be honest, token protest. "I'm an Uchiha, with the Sharingan and an unlimited capacity for learning jutsu." Then he scowled. "Well, I *will* have the Sharingan. Then there's you," he continued, pointing at Sakura, who looked both pleased and nervous by the attention. "You're smart, and have good chakra control, even if you can't do much else. And Naruto's got *ridiculous* amounts of chakra. In our graduating year we already have a strategy-defense team and a tracking team. That leaves us to be the attack team."

All three genin thought about that. "Cool!" Naruto finally declared, grinning. "We're gonna be an awesome attack team, believe it!" He stole the largest piece of meat from the nabe pot in celebration.

"But that's not really good," Sakura countered, frowning. "I mean, maybe we'll be able to be that one day, but we're not *now*. And we have to go up against the other two teams tomorrow, and Ino-Shika-Cho have been training together for a long time, and I don't know anything about what Hinata-chan's team has been learning but I bet they're really good too, and we've just barely started working together—"

"Hey, hey, it'll be okay, Sakura-chan!" Naruto interrupted. "You're our team leader, and you're really smart, and we've got all night to figure this out! Bein' an attack team just means we don't have to sneak around and stuff, right? We can just go fight them!"

"Idiot," Sasuke snorted. "How do you expect to fight an Aburame's bugs, or the Nara's shadow jutsu? That's what planning's *for*."

"Don't call me an idiot, teme!" Naruto fired back. "I know that! I just meant we don't really have to worry about what we're gonna be in the future, we just have to focus on the fight tomorrow! Besides, I bet Sakura-chan knows how to fight them, don't you?" He turned and stared expectantly at Sakura, who went a little pink.

"Well, I do have some ideas," she said hesitantly. "Let's talk about them after dinner, though."

"Okay!" Naruto said cheerily, and then squabbled with Sasuke over who got the last of the nabe until Sakura got fed up and walloped Naruto on the head, shouting about how *she* was the one doing all of the thinking and planning, so *she* should get the last of it.

Chapter End Notes

Nabe is delicious gloriousness and can be eaten in an infinite variety of ways. It's also healthier than ramen but equally hearty and filling. Look it up and drool over the google images.

I update every Monday, barring real life shenanigans. Such as moving halfway around the world, as I am doing this coming Saturday. 10-hour flights are theoretically very good for my ability to write, but spotty internet is not good for my ability to post. Therefore, next week's update is very much up in the air. (badum-tss)

Leave a comment and tell me what you think!

In Which Team Seven Kicks Some Butt

Chapter Summary

The melee. Team Seven surprises some people.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Don’t forget,” Asuma said, “don’t underestimate the other teams. They’ve been training hard just like you have these past few weeks, so their styles—”

“We *know*, sensei,” Ino said, rolling her eyes as she surveyed the bare field of the training ground where they were waiting. Neither of the other rookie teams had arrived yet, and she couldn’t *wait* to see Sasuke-kun and beat Forehead into the ground. See who was the best kunoichi then!

Shikamaru yawned, slumping over even further and scowling at the early morning sun. “Why did we have to do this melee thing so *early*,” he complained. He looked half-asleep on his feet.

Ino ignored him, and Chouji (as the other boy passed Shikamaru a consolatory chip). She’d just spotted a tall lanky figure with a tuft of silver hair coming down the road, and her whole body tensed, arrowed in on her target.

There, around him! Three smaller figures walked at the jounin’s side, and Naruto’s bright yellow hair was recognizable from almost any distance.

“SASUKE-KUN!” Ino shrieked, and shot down the road.

“Whoa—!” Sasuke spun to the side so quickly Ino could barely see it, before she felt a hammer blow strike her in the back and send her crashing straight into the dirt. For a moment all of her senses were filled with the dirt of the road, and then her lungs seized and she coughed weakly, rolling over and wiping at her face. Dust filled her nose and made her eyes tear up, and Ino blinked madly, staring up at four blurry figures around her and trying to figure out what had just happened.

“—Job, teme, are ya trying to *kill* her?” Naruto was saying loudly, gesticulating wildly at his teammate.

“Shut up, dobe, it was an accident, she just came flying at me,” Sasuke grumbled, but his tone wasn’t nearly as biting as it usually was when he spoke to Naruto. In fact, it might have even sounded a bit...guilty?

The third small figure bent down and helped Ino to her feet, brushing her down. Ino sneezed three times in a row and finally managed to clear her eyes of the dust, only to find *Sakura* patting her back gently to remove dirt. The two boys were still arguing, and their tall jounin-sensei was just standing off to the side, reading a bright orange book as if all of this was totally normal.

“Hey, sorry about that,” Sakura said sympathetically, and Ino turned wide, shocked eyes to her former friend. “Hurts, doesn’t it? Sasuke-kun’s kicked me in the back before too, you’ll probably have a nasty bruise for a couple weeks. It doesn’t look like he cracked any of your ribs or anything though, so that’s good. Get one of your teammates or parents to ice it, or it’ll take a lot longer to heal.”

Okay, Ino thought, Sakura had clearly been replaced by an imposter. And not even a very good one.

“What the heck, Forehead!” she managed to cough out, her lungs still not totally convinced that they could work properly. “What was *that*?” She batted Sakura’s hands away, not liking how comforting they felt.

Sakura drew back, a little frown flitting over her face. “Well, Sasuke-kun’s been training hard, you know, we all have. He’s gotten a lot faster, hasn’t he?”

“I’ll say,” Shikamaru said, his usual drawl gone. Ino turned to see that her team had caught up with her, all three of them looking concerned for her and confused at Team Seven. Shikamaru was staring at Sasuke, who had finally stopping sniping with Naruto and was staring back, arms folded defensively over his chest. “You’re different, Uchiha.”

“Am I supposed to be flattered, Nara?” Sasuke shot back, and then turned to Naruto and his sensei. “Come on, let’s get this thing started.” He stalked down the road toward the training ground.

The tall silver-haired jounin nodded amiably at Team Ten and followed his dark-haired student, Asuma falling in at his side and bending their heads together to talk. Naruto patted Ino awkwardly on her shoulder, chirped, “Sorry ‘bout that, Ino-chan! Sasuke’s not really house-trained yet!” and bounced after them.

Sakura hurried to join her team, and Ino stared after them, completely blindsided. “*What the heck*,” she said slowly, “was *that*?”

“Precisely what I want to know,” Shikamaru muttered, moving in on Ino’s right side as Chouji moved in on her left. He stared with narrowed eyes down the road at Team Seven’s backs, and groaned softly. “Ugh, this is going to be *way* more troublesome than I had thought.”

“What?” Ino asked, distracted as she tried to beat the dust out of her long ponytail. “What do you mean?”

“*Look* at them, Ino,” Shikamaru sighed. “Look at the way they move.”

Surprised, Ino flicked her hair over her shoulder and did as her teammate said.

At first she didn't see it. They were just walking down the road, they'd almost reached the entrance to the training ground now; Naruto and Sakura had caught up to Sasuke-kun and were walking on either side of him, apparently having an intense conversation about something. Ino'd never seen them be so civil before; they were walking peacefully together, not even touching, though all three seemed kind of twitchy—

Ino blinked. "They walk differently," she said slowly.

"They walk like *ninja*," Shikamaru corrected.

And they did. Every step was fluid, economical; what Ino had thought was twitchiness was them constantly scanning their surroundings. They walked close enough to defend each other, but far enough away to not foul each other if they needed to get off a sudden attack. Compared to the imploding ball of chaos that Team Seven had been when it'd formed, it was as different as night and day.

"Weird," Chouji said, bewildered. "How'd they do that? We've been working together for years and I don't think we look like that."

"*Troublesome*," Shikamaru muttered, which did not answer Chouji's question.

Ino scowled suddenly. "Well, I don't care," she sniffed. "We're the stronger team, and we have better teamwork. We're gonna beat them today and show Sakura-pig just who deserves Sasuke-kun's hand in marriage!"

"When did this become about marriage," one of her teammates hissed behind her, but Ino ignored them as she marched forward, trying to ignore the pain in her back.

"Heeey," a loud familiar voice shouted, and Team Eight came into view, Kiba waving one arm energetically. "Sorry we're late! Let's get this party started!"

Yes, Ino vowed as the nine rookies all gathered in front of their sensei, it didn't matter how nicely Sakura walked. Ino would show her exactly who the better kunoichi was.

—

"Right," Kakashi-sensei said, for once not holding his stupid orange book, all of his attention on the teams. Naruto suppressed an excited bounce—he loved it when Kakashi focused on them, it always meant they were going to learn *really cool stuff*. "This is standard melee combat, three-on-three-on-three. You and your teammates have encountered two teams of foreign ninja and your duty is to neutralize them however you can." The big bear-looking sensei drove his elbow into Kakashi's side, and Kakashi immediately amended, not sounding winded in the slightest, "Without, of course, permanently maiming or killing each other. This is a training exercise, after all."

"You'll have two hours to complete the task," the pretty sensei of Team Eight said, her red eyes surprisingly warm and non-creepy as she looked at them. "The team with the most

members standing at the end wins. This is an exercise for you to practice your teamwork and cooperation, so be sure to work together.”

Pah, Naruto thought, and glances at his two teammates told him that they were thinking the same thing. *None of this ‘most members standing’ thing. We’re ALL gonna make it through, and we’re gonna take EVERYBODY else out.*

“Stay in the training grounds,” Kakashi picked up, now sounding bored, “and be as stealthy as you can. We’ll be hanging around watching you, but we won’t jump in unless something really goes wrong. So look out for each other.” And with that, he seemed to think the explanation was done, because he disappeared in a swirl of leaves.

The other two jounin-sensei sighed in tandem, then nodded at their teams and wished them good luck before disappearing too.

“Right,” Naruto said, his grin probably bordering on a little savage, “let’s get started!” And he grabbed Sasuke’s and Sakura’s arms and dashed off into the training ground.

They didn’t go far, though; their strategy depended on them making some pretty big plays as quickly as they could, so Team Seven just went far enough to hide themselves in the trees as they plotted out their first move.

“We’ve got to take out Kiba’s team first,” Sakura whispered almost silently, repeating what she’d told them last night. “They’re the most danger to us if this battle goes on for longer than we want.”

“Right,” Naruto nodded, keeping half of his attention on the moving chakra signatures of the other genin. “We can’t hide from them, so who should we take out first?”

Shino, Sakura signed with her hands, using the improvised hand signals they’d come up with last night. They’d made signs for their six opponents, along with signals for *down* (a thumbs down), *failed* (an x with both arms crossed in front of them), *jounin* (one hand imitating Kakashi’s spiky hair), and a separate one for *Kakashi* (both hands imitating reading a book). Simple, but with Kiba’s enhanced hearing and Shino’s bugs, they’d thought some hand signals were necessary.

Naruto nodded thoughtfully. That made sense; the longer Shino was in action, the more time he had to spread his bugs around the training ground, making it more and more difficult for him to be caught unaware. As it was, they’d quickly discarded the idea of taking Team Eight by surprise. They just didn’t have the skill yet to counter that kind of tracking ability, so they were going to have to hit hard and quick and hope to keep them off-balance.

Me and Sasuke? Naruto gestured, and Sakura nodded, then pointed sternly at Sasuke. *No flames!* She made a weird wiggly motion to indicate fire, and Sasuke rolled his eyes but nodded. They didn’t want to kill Shino’s bugs, after all.

“Clones?” Naruto whispered as low as he could, his hands already forming the Tiger seal.

Sakura nodded and held up all ten fingers, flashing them twice. Naruto concentrated and created twenty clones, popping them into existence on the branches around them. “Let’s go!” he grinned at Sasuke, who rolled his eyes again and sprang off through the branches.

Naruto and five clones followed him, the others staying behind to take orders from and guard Sakura. Barely ten seconds in he had to tug Sasuke to the right, because the Uchiha was heading in totally the wrong direction. “They’re over here, teme,” Naruto mouthed, gesturing. “About forty meters.”

Sasuke nodded, eyes suddenly narrowing in thought. “Ground or trees?” he asked in a tone just barely above a whisper.

“Uh—” Naruto concentrated over in that direction, not sure if he could even tell the difference. But the warm lights he could feel were definitely positioned lower than they were, so he said, “Ground,” feeling pretty confident.

Sasuke nodded, staring at Naruto for a long moment before leaping through the trees. All three of them were still getting the hang of tree-running, but their natural athleticism helped save them from any slips with their chakra and kept them from faceplanting into the ground.

This advantage was what allowed them to plough right into Team Eight’s fortified position.

The trees immediately exploded in a flurry of movement and shouts and angry buzzing. Team Eight had clearly known they were coming and decided to stand and fight, as Sakura had predicted, but they were woefully unprepared for Naruto and Sasuke’s dual assault and the presence of Naruto’s clones.

Two of the clones were instantly overwhelmed by Shino’s bugs, drained of chakra in moments and popping out of existence. But the distraction cost Shino dearly as Sasuke and two more Narutos were able to get around behind him, Sasuke lashing out with the hilt of a kunai and rapping the Aburame hard over the back of the head, stunning him. The last clone and the real Naruto engaged Kiba, Akamaru, and Hinata, keeping them from aiding their teammate as Sasuke whipped ninja wire around Shino’s hands, temporarily disabling them and allowing him to get close enough to crack Shino over the back of the head again, knocking him out completely.

“Stink bomb!” Naruto yelled, and Sasuke immediately leapt for the trees as a cloud of noxious smoke exploded in the clearing below him. Kiba and Akamaru howled in distress, and Sasuke could hear the three remaining members of Team Eight stumbling around below them.

Sakura tapped Sasuke on the shoulder, finally having caught up to them. She held up her hands in the first seal for the False Surroundings genjutsu, and Sasuke nodded sharply. It wouldn’t fool Hinata for long, but if they could get the genjutsu to take for even a few seconds, it would give them the advantage.

The genjutsu slid into place with barely a ripple, hiding the addition of the other Naruto clones in the trees and making all of the bushes and stones on the ground appear just slightly

left of where they actually are. Sakura couldn't hold it for long, though, so Sasuke took a deep breath of relatively-clean air and then dove down into the stinking cloud.

Akamaru, still just a puppy, was sneezing so hard that it was almost too easy to wrap him up in ninja wire and dump him at the edge of the clearing. Kiba and Hinata had managed to stumble out of the stink bomb's blast radius and were standing back to back, Kiba's eyes and nose streaming as he tried to fight off the attack on the most sensitive of his senses. He caught sight of Sasuke and Akamaru, and with a roar, charged.

He was faster than Sasuke had expected; he crossed the distance between them in just a few bounds, and his hands—claw-tipped, Sasuke noticed in surprise—slashed across his chest before he could get away. Sasuke managed to turn at the last second, and those claws raked across his shoulder rather than his chest, tearing through his shirt and leaving bloody furrows in their wake. He lashed out with a foot, kicking Kiba in the chest and creating enough space between them to regain his balance.

The genjutsu flickered and disappeared. Sasuke couldn't tell if Sakura had run out of chakra or if Hinata had dispelled it, but it didn't matter because with a cry of "Sorry, Hinata-chan!" Naruto was tackling her head-on. But Sasuke didn't have time to pay attention to that; Kiba was coming after him again, and the Inuzuka was one of the best in their class at taijutsu even without his furry companion and their combined clan techniques.

And he was *strong*, Sasuke realized sourly, nearly getting bowled over as Kiba rushed him again. He planted his feet with an extra chakra boost and flipped Kiba through the air, slamming him into the ground and trying to get him in a lock. But he couldn't grapple with the other boy for long; Kiba was far stronger than him, and apparently more used to wrestling as well—probably from the Inuzuka dogs. Sasuke broke away with a bruise darkening his chest and five more claw marks scoring his hip.

We underestimated him, Sasuke thought grimly, drawing two kunai and dashing for a tree. *He's better than I thought*. He ran up the trunk and flipped over Kiba's head, lashing out with one fist and striking him on the back of the head with the hilt of the kunai. Kiba stumbled but didn't go down, and Sasuke growled in frustration as he touched the ground and then instantly sprang back towards him.

It took a bit longer and a few more blows, but finally Sasuke managed to hit the sweet spot on Kiba's neck and the Inuzuka dropped like a stone, eyes rolling back in his head as he fell unconscious. Panting, Sasuke moved to tie him up and then surveyed the area.

Shino was still out on the other side of the clearing. Some of his bugs were milling around, but without any direction from Shino they seemed to be harmless. Naruto and Sakura stood by a trussed-up Hinata, whose eyes had been blindfolded shut. With a grunt, Sasuke dragged Kiba over to Akamaru and dropped him on the forest floor.

"Nice!" Naruto whispered, face bright and grinning. "That wasn't too bad! Now we just gotta find—" But all of a sudden he froze, face blank and unmoving.

"Oh *shit*!" Sasuke cursed, glancing down and noticing the unnatural shadow attached to Naruto's feet. He leapt backwards immediately, which turned out to be a good decision as

Chouji hurtled out of the trees and landed right where Sasuke had been standing. With a blood-curdling battle cry, Ino launched herself from a tree and attacked Sakura.

This was bad. They weren't ready, they were still catching their breath from fighting Team Eight, and Naruto had been trapped by the Nara Shadow Possession Jutsu. Sasuke cursed violently in his head as he whipped three shuriken at Chouji's large form, gaining a bit of distance and thinking quickly.

Team Ten clearly had their own strategy prepared. They'd split Team Seven nicely, with each member taking one of Sasuke's team. He could see parts of the epic grudge-match going on between Sakura and Ino; that was bound to be devastating and honestly, Sasuke didn't know who would win.

Where's Shikamaru? Sasuke thought urgently, trying to look around while fighting off Chouji at the same time. *Why hasn't he shown himself—*

Chouji caught Sasuke on the side of the head with a hammer-blow of his fist, and suddenly Sasuke found himself on the ground, struggling to breathe as he blinked up at the tree canopy over his head. Chouji quickly went in for the capture, and Sasuke lashed out dazedly as best he could, kunai scoring deep cuts on the bigger boy's arms—

A roar sounded from across the clearing, and Sasuke felt his head spin. But then he recognized the voice that shouted, “*Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!*”

And suddenly the forest was *filled* with Naruto.

Sasuke had no idea what happened next in the scrum of bodies. By the time it was over, though, Chouji, Ino, and Shikamaru were being dragged together by victorious clones, and Naruto—the real one, Sasuke thought but wasn't sure—was leaning over to help Sasuke to his feet.

“You all right, teme?” he asked anxiously, looking Sasuke over. “You took a coupla nasty blows.”

Sasuke went to nod, and then nearly fell over at the pounding of his skull. “I'm fine, dobe,” he snapped anyway, one hand at his head. “How's Sakura?”

“I'm okay,” Sakura's voice came, exhausted, and their pink-haired teammate joined them, nursing some nasty bruises of her own by the look of it. “What happened?”

Naruto shrugged, because even he wasn't too sure. “Dunno,” he replied. “I was stuck in Shikamaru's jutsu, and then suddenly it broke.” He wandered back over to their prisoners. “Hey, Shikamaru, did you break the jutsu or did I?”

Shikamaru glared tiredly up at them, hair and clothes completely mussed. “Troublesome,” he muttered grumpily. “It was a bit of both, I think. You were fighting the jutsu really hard, and I can't hold it for very long yet. But what the *heck* was that, Naruto? Kage Bunshin no Jutsu? Where on earth did you learn that?”

Naruto grinned. “That’s my special jutsu!” he boasted. “‘S great, isn’t it? Real clones! I learned it from—”

“All right, that’s enough now,” Kakashi cut in, dropping out of the trees with the other two sensei. “Team Seven seems to have won pretty decisively. Let’s get everyone back on their feet and then discuss what happened.”

Pretty-sensei and Bear-sensei were already moving to their teams and untying and reviving them. Naruto was fine, but both Sasuke and Sakura looked pretty banged up, especially Sasuke who had ended up taking on two taijutsu specialists in a row. Kakashi looked them both over and gave Sasuke a damp cloth to clean up his bleeding cuts from Kiba, and then all twelve ninja (plus Akamaru) moved away from the clearing—which still smelled of the stink bomb Naruto had dropped—and settled on the open grassy field near the entrance to the training ground.

“Now,” Kakashi said, looking around at all of the genin, “tell us about your strategies and your plans for your fellow genin.”

Naruto shrugged. “We talked last night,” he said, “and we made lists of all of the things we knew about the other teams. Then Sakura-chan came up with plans on how to take out each member. It totally didn’t go like we planned, though! Everything was all over the place and we had to do things out of order and then Shikamaru’s team caught up to us and we totally had to wing it!”

All three jounin nodded as if this made perfect sense to them—not only made perfect sense, but they had *expected* it. “There is a famous saying,” Pretty-sensei said, her red eyes calm as she looked over her own genin. “‘No battle plan survives contact with the enemy’. You all made plans based on what you wanted to happen, rather than what would realistically happen. Of course, that’s perfectly normal; ideally, our plans would go exactly as we expect. But you have to account for the other sides’ actions as well, and make plans for that. A good shinobi has multiple strategies and can adapt on the fly.”

“Which you were all very good at today,” Bear-sensei added, pulling out a cigarette and lighting it up. “Kiba did quite well adapting to Akamaru getting taken out so quickly, and Shikamaru, I don’t think you planned from the beginning to attack Team Seven?”

“Yeah,” Shikamaru shrugged, almost boneless on the ground and clearly wanting to take a nap. “We were coming to take out Shino, because his bugs were the most dangerous if left for a long time.”

“That’s what we thought too!” Sakura jumped in. “If Shino had had time, he’d have spread his bugs all over the forest and been nearly impossible to beat. So we thought we’d take him out first.”

Shino let out a quiet “hn” and ducked his nose behind his high collar. Naruto could see a faint dusting of pleased pink on his cheeks.

“And then we thought to take out Kiba next,” Sakura continued, gesturing at the dog ninja, “because his nose combined with Hinata-chan’s Byakugan were probably the next

dangerous.”

“Yeah, thanks for that,” Kiba grumbled, rubbing at his nose. “I still can’t smell anything other than that awful stink bomb you guys dropped.” Akamaru let out a huge sneeze in agreement. Naruto grinned proudly, even though his own nose wasn’t very happy with him either.

“But then, what to do about Ino’s team?” Sakura continued. “The Ino-Shika-Cho team is probably the best at actual fighting right now, and Shikamaru’s a genius, so we wanted to take him out too, but we wanted to do it on our terms. So our plan was to neutralize Team Eight and then regroup and maybe rest a bit before going after Team Ten. But then they came and found us when we were already exhausted from fighting Team Eight. I think we would’ve probably lost if Naruto hadn’t gotten free and spammed us with clones.”

“Yes, well done Naruto,” Kakashi murmured, and Naruto beamed, sitting up even straighter. “Of course, all nine of you already know a fair bit about each other’s strengths and weaknesses. If you were actually all from different villages, you wouldn’t know anything about each other and would have to adapt on the fly based on what you observed about each other’s abilities in combat. Still, you did a very good job.”

“And what about you guys?” Pretty-sensei asked her team. “What was your plan?”

Kiba shrugged. “We were gonna go after Team Ten first,” he replied. “We wanted to take out Shikamaru and Chouji. But then Naruto and Sasuke totally surprised us!”

Naruto was a little offended that neither of the other rookie teams had thought that Team Seven was a big threat, but he admitted to himself that it made sense; they *hadn’t* been a big threat, before.

“Well, you all did decently for a first try.” Kakashi squinted up at the sun. “Team Seven, you get a break until one o’clock, and then meet me at Training Ground Three. We’ll talk more about your strategy then. Eat, take care of your injuries, and come back ready to train some more.”

“Okay, sensei!” Naruto agreed, the three of them all hopping to their feet. They followed their sensei out of the training ground, and Naruto barely caught Ino’s voice behind them:

“Wow, Asuma-sensei, their jounin-sensei is way more of a hardass than you are.”

Chapter End Notes

I managed to update on Monday! *confetti*

Unfortunately, this marks the end of my pre-written chapters. When I started posting this story I had the first four chapters already written, and I wrote the fifth pretty slowly - and even so, I only fit in half of what I had planned on being in chapter five, so chapter six might be really long. As I am still in the process of moving halfway around the

world while simultaneously being on vacation and job-hunting as well as apartment-hunting, however, next week's update is highly likely to be late.

...In short, I am uprooting my entire life. Next week's update is almost *definitely* going to be late.

When I do update, I do it on Monday. Drop me a comment and let me know what you think!

In Which There is a Lot of Training

Chapter Summary

Team Seven trains. A lot. It's not exactly a montage, but it's basically just a lot of world-building. And personal headcanon.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Mornin’, Sasuke,” Naruto yawned, slumping down on the bridge next to his teammate as they waited for their third teammate and their sensei to arrive. Squinting at the sky to gauge the weather for the day, he absently stretched out his legs as he waited. “What d’ya think we’ll be doing today?”

Sasuke shrugged, moving stiffly after the melee fight from yesterday—though he seemed pretty okay, all told. Kakashi-sensei had had them stretching and working on flexibility for most of the afternoon after they fought Teams Eight and Ten, which Naruto suspected had a lot to do with why Sasuke was moving as freely as he was, despite his bruises.

“Sensei said he’d start us on elemental training this week,” Sasuke said, and it took Naruto a moment to realize that his taciturn teammate was responding to the question he’d asked earlier. “We’ll probably do affinity testing, and then work on that.”

Naruto nodded thoughtfully, spreading his legs wide into a perpendicular split and laying his torso down on the ground in front of him. “S true. I forgot about that. You’re Fire, right?”

Sasuke shrugged.

Naruto huffed. “Well you can do that Great Fireball whatever pretty well, right?”

“*Great Fireball Technique*, dobe, and yeah, I’m pretty good.” At first Naruto thought Sasuke was done speaking, but then his teammate added quietly, “That jutsu’s—*was* used as a coming-of-age for Uchiha. You weren’t considered an adult until you could perform the Gokakyuu no Jutsu.”

“Oh.” Naruto stared at the dark-haired boy. Sasuke had never, ever, *ever* offered up information about his family before. Naruto wasn’t exactly sure what to do with this situation; how did he keep from making Sasuke clam up again? Shit, what should he say? “But, uh…” Naruto made a vague gesture with his hands. “You were pretty young when your family—I mean, you were eight, right? You learned the jutsu when you were eight?”

A tiny, barely-there smile flickered across Sasuke’s face. “I was seven, actually. I mastered it in a week.”

“Wow, teme.” Naruto sat back and thought about that. “That’s pretty impressive.”

But sharing time seemed to be over, because Sasuke looked away from his teammate with a noncommittal, “Hn.”

Naruto rolled his eyes.

That was about when Sakura rounded the corner at the end of the street, and Naruto released his stretch to wave at the girl. “Mornin’, Sakura-chan!”

“Morning, Naruto,” Sakura replied with barely any of her usual perkiness, dropping down to sit cross-legged next to her male teammates on the bridge. One of the bruises from Ino yesterday had darkened, spreading across Sakura’s chin and cheek like a spill of mottled purple ink.

Naruto instantly frowned, worried. “What’s up, Sakura-chan? Something bad happen?”

Sakura shrugged and let out a huge sigh, alarming both of her teammates (though Sasuke didn’t show it). “Nothing, really. My parents were just...concerned about my training, that’s all.”

“What’s up with that?” Naruto questioned, not in the least reassured. “What does that mean?”

Sakura frowned a little bit, starting in on her own stretches. “Nothing, it’s just...they were worried about me when I came home yesterday, I guess my bruises looked pretty bad.”

“Oh.” Naruto didn’t really know why that was significant. “So...they didn’t like that?”

“I’m a kunoichi!” Sakura snapped, and both Naruto and Sasuke sat bolt upright. “It’s just some *bruises*! I get ones just as bad all the time from you guys! Just because I got one on my *face* doesn’t mean I’m *damaged*! I’m going to get worse just from training, and when I become a chuunin I’m going to go fight other ninja! This is my *job*!”

“Yeah, it is, Sakura-chan,” Naruto agreed tentatively. He and Sasuke had edged carefully away from their irate teammate. “You’re a good ninja.”

Sakura smiled at Naruto. “Thanks, Naruto. But they don’t *get* it! It’s my *job* to get stronger! And the fact that Ino hit me doesn’t make me sad, or upset, it makes me angry!” She clenched her fist, on her feet, eyes almost glowing green. “Next time, Blondie won’t get in *nearly* as many hits!” she vowed.

“Okay, Sakura-chan,” Naruto agreed instantly, now on the opposite end of the bridge with Sasuke. “Um, ya think you could calm down a little bit?”

Sakura blinked, and finally seemed to focus on them again. Instantly all of her irritation seemed to vanish, and she hid her hands behind her back like they’d forget she’d been ready to punch someone if she only hid the evidence of her fists. She laughed weakly. “Um, sorry about that, Sasuke-kun, Naruto. I was a little...frustrated.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Naruto agreed, and then yelped as he was slapped on the back of the head by Sasuke. “Ow! I mean,” he backtracked quickly when he saw the ominous narrowing of Sakura’s eyes, “I’m sure you’ll get strong enough to beat Ino! You can do it, Sakura-chan!”

“Hmph,” Sakura huffed, seemingly mollified by that. “Well, of course! Next time I’ll *sit* on that long-haired pretender!”

Naruto and Sasuke exchanged completely confused looks, absolutely baffled by the psyche of preteen girls.

“Well, well,” a deep voice drawled, “looks like all of my genin are here and ready to work.” Kakashi appeared silently on one of the bridge’s fenceposts, squatting there as if he didn’t have a care in the world.

“Sensei! You’re—on time?” Naruto asked confusedly, glancing up at the sun and then at his teammates.

“Naruto, there’s no need to be rude,” Kakashi told him, sounding wounded. “It’s 8:30, is it not?”

“Half an hour, for you, is on time, sensei,” Naruto told the lanky jounin seriously.

Kakashi waved this off with a lazy hand. “Maa, I guess I was just so excited about today that I couldn’t help my little old lady neighbor with her groceries. If she falls and breaks a hip today because I’m not around, I guess it’s your fault, huh.” He ignored the three yells of outrage and beamed behind his mask, visible eye crinkling up in an upside-down U. “Today, we’ll be testing you for your elemental affinities!” With a twitch of his hand, Kakashi made three pieces of flimsy paper appear between his fingers.

Sakura and Naruto ‘ooooohed’ with interest, instantly forgetting about their outrage as all three preteens crowded around their sensei. Like puppies, Kakashi thought nostalgically. Dangerous, grumpy, half-grown puppies. How cute they were.

“What’s the paper for, sensei?” Naruto demanded, bouncing on the balls of his feet with excitement. “What do we gotta do? How do we find out? What kinda jutsu will we learn first?”

“Ah!” With another flick of his hand, Kakashi made the papers vanish again. “Later, I will explain all,” he told them, inwardly snickering at their mingled groans of disappointment. “First, morning exercises! Routine is important, my ducklings. Your usual ten laps, ready, go!”

—

Kakashi made them run through every single one of their morning exercises—ten laps atop the wall surrounding the village, then three times through the obstacle course in Training Ground Thirteen, then one hundred pushups (Sakura could still only do eighty before collapsing, which was significantly better than the fifty she’d originally been capable of),

then target practice, taijutsu practice, and finally, when they were all exhausted, tree- and water-walking to enhance their chakra control.

“Stretch!” Kakashi finally told them perkily as they collapsed gasping on the ground. “You might walk away from me bruised, but if you walk away stiff, then it’s your own fault!”

With groans like they were dying, Team Seven began to laboriously pull themselves through their cool-down stretches.

“Sensei,” Naruto puffed, letting out an involuntary hiss as Sasuke’s heels dug into his thighs, forcing his stretch wider, “You’re kind of a sadist, you know.”

“What a sweet thing to say, Naruto,” Kakashi drawled, turning a page in his orange book. Naruto wanted to light it on *fire*.

“*Now* can we learn about our elemental affinities?” Naruto asked plaintively. He really, really wanted to know. Not that that would stop him from learning all of the coolest jutsu, no matter what affinity! But he wanted to know so that his library clones could focus themselves on the theory most relevant to him.

Kakashi seemed to consider this for a moment. “Maa, I suppose.” He hopped down from the tree branch where he’d been perched and stowed his book away in whatever inter-dimensional pocket it seemed to reside in. “Gather around, then!”

The three genin shuffled until they were in a loose circle, still stretching out their bodies.

“Now,” Kakashi said, pulling the papers from before out of...somewhere, “this is chakra paper. Special paper treated with dense levels of chakra, extremely sensitive to the slightest amount in the air. When you channel some of your chakra into it...” Kakashi held up a fourth piece of paper in his free hand, and all of a sudden it crinkled with a loud sound, “...it indicates what your primary affinity is, along with any secondaries you might have. As demonstrated, I have a Lightning affinity.” He held out the paper so that they could all observe how the paper had crinkled up. “Lightning crinkles the paper, Water dampens it, Earth crumbles it to dust, Fire burns it, and Wind splits it in two.” His one visible eye crinkled up into a smile. “So just channel your chakra into the paper, and we’ll know your main affinity!”

“That’s it?” Sakura demanded, outraged—though the full force of her anger was a bit diminished as she offered her hands to Sasuke, who took them and twisted her to the side, making her back pop loudly. “All we have to do is channel some chakra into the paper? Sensei! We could have done this in like, two seconds before we started training this morning!”

“Ah,” Kakashi held up a finger, “but then would you have trained properly, Sakura-chan? No, everything in its proper time, as I always say.”

“You never say that,” Naruto grumbled, finishing up the last of his stretches and hopping to his feet, shaking out his limbs to get everything settled.

Kakashi ignored Naruto as if he hadn't heard anything. "Now, please take a paper..." he distributed them to his team, "...and channel away!"

Instantly all three papers simultaneously reacted: Naruto's split in two with a tearing sound, Sasuke's crinkled and then lit on fire around the edges, and Sakura's crumbled to dust.

"Well," Kakashi mused into the silence, "that is certainly interesting."

Naruto took his eyes off of his torn paper and looked back up at his teacher. "What is, sensei?"

"Well, the most common chakra affinity in Fire Country is, as you might guess, Fire," Kakashi replied. "But only Sasuke has any Fire affinity, and it's not even his main one; Lightning is stronger, which is quite rare in Fire Country. In fact, you all have rather rare affinities for Konoha."

"Is that bad?" Sakura wanted to know.

"Not at all," Kakashi said, eye crinkling up again—and for some reason, Naruto felt that this was the first genuine smile he'd seen from their sensei today. "In fact, it adds a very simple layer of deception to your ninja profiles. If your opponents know you're from Konoha, they will expect Fire techniques. If they *don't* know you're from Konoha, being strong in rare affinities will divert attention from your village. Either way, you have an advantage."

He clapped his hands together. "Now! To the library we go!"

—

"Hey, Naruto."

"Hmm?" Naruto murmured, eyes skimming over the scroll in front of him quickly. He formed the seals of the wind jutsu he was studying slowly as he read, not channelling any chakra but getting used to the hand movements.

"You can usually tell where other ninja are, right? Like, when we were fighting the other teams, you could tell where Team Eight was, right?" Sasuke wasn't looking at his Lightning scroll; he was focused on Naruto across the table, black eyes intense as usual.

Naruto blinked and looked up at his teammate, a bit baffled by this apparent non-sequitur. "Um, yeah, I guess," he replied. "Can't you?"

Sasuke shook his head slowly, his gaze thoughtful. "I can tell if they're close by, but I can't feel people if they're more than three meters away," he said. "You could tell if Team Eight was on the ground or in the trees."

Naruto thought about that, and shrugged. "So?" he asked.

"So, moron, I think you're a sensor-type."

Naruto scrunched up his forehead. "What's a sensor?" he asked curiously.

“Someone who can sense chakra from far distances,” Sakura replied promptly. Naruto hadn’t even known she’d been listening to them from her place at the end of the table. “It’s pretty rare, actually, Naruto! It’d be super cool if you were. You know, they say that the Nidaime was one of the best sensors of all time!”

“Oh,” Naruto said, a bit interested. “That sounds cool, I guess.” If one of the previous Hokages could do it, that actually could be pretty awesome!

“Hn,” Sasuke grunted—and Naruto was pretty sure that was his agreeing grunt. He was getting better at telling them apart. “You should tell Kakashi-sensei at some point, maybe he can help you train it. Having a sensor on our team would be useful.”

Naruto beamed, leaning over to sock Sasuke on the arm. “There you go, teme! You’re starting to get this ‘team’ thing!”

“*Dead last*,” Sasuke hissed, rubbing his arm, “hit me again and see just how much I’m getting it.”

“Now, now, boys,” Sakura said calmly, “we’re in the library.”

That made both boys sit down immediately. Kakashi-sensei had been very *descriptive* in his warnings about what would happen if they disturbed the peace of the library in any way. With final scowls at each other, Naruto and Sasuke settled down to study their new jutsu until Kakashi came to pick them up.

Their sensei finally dropped in about an hour later, when all three of them were thoroughly sick of practicing the hand seals over and over again without actually being able to try out the jutsu itself. “Right!” he said cheerily, though in a low tone in deference to their location. “Ready to go outside and blow things up?”

“Sensei, I think Naruto’s a sensor,” Sasuke said immediately, standing and rolling up his scroll. Naruto squawked in outrage.

“Teme! I *said* I’d ask him, didn’t I!”

Sasuke shrugged indifferently. “I guess with the pain in my arm, I just *forgot*.”

“A sensor, huh?” Kakashi asked, stepping casually in between the glaring boys. “That’s interesting, Naruto. Why does Sasuke think that?”

Naruto shrugged, still not sure if they should be bothering with this at all. “I dunno, I guess ‘cause I could tell where Team Eight was when we were fighting them yesterday. It’s not a big deal.”

“Hm,” Kakashi said thoughtfully, folding his arms behind his back as his grey eye went sharp with thought. “Well, that’s interesting. Hm.”

“Sensei, you said that’s interesting twice,” Sakura pointed out, coming around the table to stand shoulder to shoulder with the boys.

“Did I?” Kakashi asked absently. “Hm.” Then his gaze seemed to refocus on his team. “Right, well, if you are, Naruto, that’s a very useful skill to have. Let’s practice with it, see how far your range is. But for now, let’s go practice jutsu!”

“This,” Naruto hissed to Sasuke as they backflipped out of a tree to avoid a flurry of razor-sharp shuriken, “*cannot* be real training.”

Sasuke shrugged, panting heavily as he peered around a tree trunk. “Well, we’re definitely getting to practice our new jutsu.”

“I guess,” Naruto grumbled, also peering around the trunk to see if their stupid, lazy, *strong as heck* sensei was still standing where he had been five seconds ago. Of course, he’d vanished into nothingness, just like he had been this entire time. “But we only know one elemental jutsu each, teme, except for you, how is this fair—” Then his eyes widened. “Move!” He shoved desperately at Sasuke as he leapt in the opposite direction, and two kunai thunked into the tree right where their necks had just been.

“Sakura!” Naruto bellowed, hands already flipping as quickly as he could through the seals, *tiger-ox-dog-rabbit-snake*—

Sakura, up in the tree next to them, cried out, “Doton: Practice Brick!” And a rough wall of earth thrust itself up out of the ground in front of them just as another wave of kunai thudded into the heavy dirt.

Sasuke was already springing up the wall, vaulting over the top as he cried out, “Katon: Great Fireball!”

Naruto was immediately after him, thrusting out his hands. “Fuuton: Great Breakthrough!”

Wind whipped through the clearing, catching Sasuke’s already large fireball and turning it into a firestorm, sending it roaring through the trees where their teacher had been, but Naruto already knew it wasn’t enough to catch him, was already turning, seeking—

“Left, Sasuke!” he yelled, and Sasuke, flashing through hand seals, obeyed instantly.

“Raiton: Electromagnetic Murder!”

Lightning burst from Sasuke’s hands, rippling and shrieking its way through the trees, blinding all three of them momentarily. The forest rang with silence after it faded away, the only sounds the crackling of the flames from both Naruto’s and Sasuke’s combined attack and Sasuke’s lightning in the trees.

“Suiton: Water Dragon Bullet,” a low voice intoned from behind them, and all three genin spun around in time to see a huge dragon made of water rise up through the forest. Bracing himself for impact, Naruto gaped as the dragon reared up and *over* them, instead falling with a great splash and hiss on the forest fire they’d inadvertently started.

“Well done,” Kakashi said, and Naruto turned back around to face him, barely even a hair out of place, the talented bastard. “Very, very well done.”

Naruto beamed, warmth filling up his chest like hot, fizzy bubbles. Kakashi-sensei thought they’d done well!

“Though I suppose next time,” Kakashi continued, casting a mild gaze over the charred mess of the forest, “we’d better practice some Suiton jutsu first.”

Naruto snickered, and Sakura let out a giggle. Even Sasuke was smiling a little bit. “We did it, sensei!” Naruto shouted. “We did a combined attack! That was *so cool!*”

Kakashi reached out and actually *ruffled Naruto’s hair*. Naruto went very still, an unnamed feeling rising in his chest. It was a little uncomfortable, a bit strange, but at the same time he never, ever wanted it to go away.

“Indeed it was, Naruto,” Kakashi said, not seeming to notice anything odd about what he’d just done as he withdrew his hand. “You all worked together amazingly well, and you all supported each other. This is the point of a team. They optimize your fighting, and you optimize theirs. If you three hadn’t worked together, you would never have been able to fight me off using only jutsu, even with me restricted to only weaponry. Individually, everyone has weaknesses: strength...” he nodded at Sakura, “or strategy...” he glanced at Sasuke, “or speed,” he looked at Naruto. “But together, your individual weaknesses are cancelled by your team, and there is only strength left.”

Naruto nodded earnestly, taking in Kakashi-sensei’s words and folding them into his heart. “I’m never gonna let my team down, sensei,” he vowed, clenching his fists.

“Good, Naruto,” Kakashi said softly, shifting his gaze from a silent Sasuke to the blond boy. “Letting your team down—betraying that trust in you, to support them—that’s the worst feeling in the world, and one of a shinobi’s greatest regrets.”

Naruto paused, because, that sounded like... “Have you ever let your team down, sensei?” he asked slowly, awkwardly.

Kakashi pushed his hands into his pockets, gaze far away and unfocused. “Yes, I did,” he answered quietly. “I let my team and my own jounin-sensei down, and I’ve regretted it ever since. I realized my error and tried to correct it, but it was too late and one of my teammates died. It was how I lost my eye.”

Naruto felt Sakura crowd in on one side, and he pressed closer to Sasuke. “Your genin team?” he almost whispered. His fingers closed on the edge of Sasuke’s sleeve, and his other hand wrapped around Sakura’s wrist.

Kakashi’s one grey eye focused on them, unreadable and fathomless as the sea. “Yes.”

Then he seemed to shake off the melancholy. “Now, let’s go clean up a bit, and talk about how you three coordinated your attacks.”

Their training continued.

Kakashi-sensei made them practice *forever* before he let them learn a new jutsu, and then he would drill them unexpectedly on the previous jutsu they'd learned so that they wouldn't forget it. By the end of their second month training together Naruto had learned two Fuuton, two Suiton (which he was second-best at, after Fuuton), one Katon, and one Doton jutsu. He loved it, loved twisting his hands around the seals and feeling the rush of his chakra through his body, more and more refined and familiar every time he did it.

Sasuke was focusing more on his two affinities, learning Raiton and Katon jutsu as fast as Kakashi would let him. He still hadn't activated his Sharingan, which he was getting a bit touchy about, but with the way he memorized things, it seemed like he already had the perfect memory that the Sharingan was supposed to give him anyway.

Every couple of weeks, they would campaign with Team Ten and Team Eight. The three jounin-sensei always had a goal for the day, some area of ninja abilities that they were supposed to focus on. Sakura was mostly on her own studying genjutsu, because Kakashi-sensei didn't seem to be able to use it, but she was so good at studying she didn't seem to have any problems—and after their second time training with Team Eight, Kurenai-sensei took her aside, and Naruto found out later that the pretty jounin had offered Sakura private genjutsu tutoring.

That made Sasuke jealous, for some reason, which, what? Naruto didn't understand his broody teammate at all, sometimes. Why would Sakura-chan getting stronger be something to be jealous over? When asked, Sasuke didn't seem to understand his own emotions either, just snapping and grumbling like he usually did before retreating to work on his chakra control.

"Uchiha teammates are always difficult to understand at first, Naruto," Kakashi-sensei told him, patting his shoulder. "Don't give up."

Naruto nodded, determination renewed, and then asked Kakashi-sensei *again* for some more tips on sealing.

"After you learn the basics," was the expected (*infuriating*) reply.

"I agree with him, Naruto," Iruka-sensei said, when Naruto complained over dinner about Kakashi's strict teaching. "Sealing can be very dangerous if done wrong. You need to understand everything about the theory before trying to create seals yourself."

Naruto chewed on his nikujaga in frustrated silence for a minute. "But I'm learning so much!" he protested finally. "We have our daily training every morning, and I'm getting so strong there, and Kakashi-sensei is letting me learn all of these jutsu! And Sasuke-teme and Sakura-chan are getting really good at combining attacks, and I think we work together pretty well as a team. So why can't I start drawing seals?"

Iruka smiled fondly and ladled more nikujaga into his bowl. “Study the theory, and you can. You’ve finished most of what is available to genin, right? I’ll check you out some higher-level sealing theory books.”

True to his word, the next day Iruka-sensei took Naruto to the library and checked him out two C-rank and one B-rank books on sealing theory. Naruto barely waited until they were out of the library before cheering loudly and hugging Iruka-sensei around the waist.

“Thanks so much, Iruka-sensei! I’m gonna read them soooo well, and then will you help me practice? Please? Please, please?”

Iruka chuckled kind of self-consciously, rubbing the edge of his scar. “Well, I mean, I guess, if you want me to. I’m mostly good at barriers and traps, you know. And Naruto, I’m not your sensei anymore. You don’t have to call me that unless you want to.”

“That’s okay,” Naruto said dismissively, stroking the cover of one of his books and really really wanting to open it up and look at the table of contents. “I remember how good you were when you trained me before my team placement! And…” He stopped, brow furrowed. “What would I call you, then, instead of Iruka-sensei?” he asked slowly.

Iruka shrugged awkwardly. “Uh, well, I hadn’t really thought about it. Iruka-san, I guess.”

Naruto’s whole face scrunched up. “That sounds so *formal*.” He thought about it for a couple of blocks, then nodded decisively. “I’ll think about it! But until I come up with something better, you’re Iruka-sensei, okay sensei?”

“Okay, Naruto,” Iruka said, resting a warm hand on Naruto’s head.

—

Naruto was late to morning training the next day.

It worried Sakura, who had never seen Naruto late for anything before, especially training—he always seemed to enjoy it so much. At 8:10, when Naruto was ten minutes late, she glanced hesitantly at Sasuke and suggested, “I suppose we should start…?”

“Hn,” Sasuke said, looking down the road in the direction of Naruto’s apartment with furrowed brows before starting their warmup routine.

Naruto didn’t show up until a bit after 9:00, hurrying down the road with a large knapsack clutched carefully to his chest. “Sorry Sasuke, Sakura-chan,” he panted, placing his burden down gently at the base of a tree. “I was reading and I forgot what time it was.”

“Reading?” Sakura asked, because despite his new diligence, Naruto still didn’t strike her as the type of person to *enjoy* studying. “What are you reading?”

Naruto turned to face her, grabbing her hands in his and raising them clasped between them. “Sakura-chan,” he said solemnly, “The Nidaime is a *genius*.”

“Um,” Sakura said awkwardly. “Yes? He was very smart, he invented a lot of jutsu and things.” She tugged tentatively on her hands.

“But that’s not all!” Naruto said fervently, not letting go, his blue eyes practically sparkling with enthusiasm. “He was a sealing master! Did you know that! He was the best Sution user *ever*, and he studied from the Uzumaki—my family! — in order to master sealing, and he was a sensor and he used a sword really well and he was super fast and he invented the Shadow Clone Technique! He invented *my technique*! He’s *amazing*!”

“Indeed,” Kakashi intoned, appearing out of nowhere as he tended to do. “Nidaime-sama was quite impressive. And *he* was never late for training.”

Naruto spun to face their teacher, finally letting go of Sakura’s hands (to her relief). The entirely hypocritical comment about being late seemed to not even register with him. “Sensei! I wanna be like the Nidaime!”

Kakashi folded his arms, looking down at his shorter student. “Really? And what has sparked this sudden interest in previous Hokages?”

Naruto darted over to his bag, rummaging in it before triumphantly pulling out a book. “Look! Look! Iruka-sensei checked out some higher-level sealing theory books for me, and this one’s basically all about the Nidaime’s theories and techniques for sealing!”

Kakashi took the book from Naruto’s grip and leafed through it, his grey eye speeding over the pages. “This is fairly advanced, Naruto. B-rank, I’d say.”

“Well, yeah,” Naruto shrugged. “I’ve finished all the stuff in the genin section on sealing. There wasn’t a lot, anyway. Iruka-sensei knew that and said he’d check me out some stuff from the chuunin section. That one’s B-rank, and I have two C-rank ones too.” He gestured at his bag.

“Show me,” Kakashi ordered.

So Naruto did.

Kakashi looked carefully through all of them, then closed the last book and sighed. “Well, you certainly seem farther along in the theory than I had expected.” He regarded a vibrating Naruto wearily. “And you wish to model yourself after the Nidaime?”

“Yeah!” Naruto almost shouted. “He’s so cool, sensei! And Sakura-chan said before that he was a sensor, and you said I could do that, and he was a ninjutsu and sealing master, and that’s what I wanna do! He was super smart!”

Kakashi regarded him for a long moment, and then sighed again. “Well, I suppose it’s better than some other people you could model yourself after. Like a toad.” Naruto cocked his head to the side, confused, but Kakashi just said, “All right, Naruto. I’ll help you learn sealing. But you’ve got to keep up on everything else too, you know. No slacking on anything.”

“Yes, sensei!” Naruto promised.

“And Sasuke—” Kakashi turned to face their silent teammate, who was watching the whole exchange with a strange, almost angry look on his face. “I was going to bring this up later today, but now is as good a time as any, if we’re talking about what you three want to focus on. Are you interested in studying kenjutsu?”

Sasuke paused, dark eyes glittering in interest. “Kenjutsu?” he said slowly.

“Swords,” Kakashi said simply.

“I know what kenjutsu is, sensei.”

“Just making sure. Anyway, Raiton lends itself very well to bladework, as does Katon, if you train it properly. I’m not a kenjutsu master—” and something in the quality of his voice changed a bit, when he said that, “—but there are some clans in Konoha who specialize in it, and I know the Uchiha had several styles of their own. If you’d like I can introduce you to some masters.”

Sasuke ducked his head. “Foisting us off on other teachers already, sensei?” he mumbled. “Lazy.”

“Maa, Sasuke-kun—” Kakashi objected woundedly.

“Yeah,” Sasuke interrupted, looking up. “Yeah, kenjutsu sounds...good. Nice.” He let out a huff of breath and looked away, apparently frustrated with words. Naruto repressed a snicker. Their broody teammate was so bad at talking, really.

“Excellent,” Kakashi said brightly. He turned to their female teammate. “And how about you, Sakura? You’re studying genjutsu with Kurenai, and I know you expressed an interest in medical jutsu as well. Both are control-intensive subjects, you’ll have to refine your chakra control far more than most shinobi.”

Sakura nodded, green eyes determined. “Yes, sensei. I like genjutsu a lot, I’m learning a lot of stuff from Kurenai-sensei that’s really helpful. And I think medical jutsu is important for every ninja to know at least a little bit. But...” she hesitated for a second. “But I want to continue studying Doton, if it’s okay with you, sensei. I don’t want to be weak and hold my team back.”

Kakashi nodded, his eye crinkling in approval as he looked at her. “Maa, Sakura, I’d never let you slack off,” he said sweetly. “So!” He clapped his hands together. “Your new schedule, from now on, will be our usual training in the morning, then new jutsu before lunch. I expect all of you to continue learning whatever scrolls I give you, no matter what else your other teachers have you doing. After lunch, for now, will be training with your teachers or by yourselves if your teachers are busy. Now, we’ve spent enough time standing around talking! Training time! And Naruto,” he sang, “because you were an hour late this morning, you can do an extra ten laps around the village, and an extra fifty pushups. On the river.”

Naruto gaped, outraged. “Sensei!” he said. “You’re late *all the time!*”

“Am I?” Kakashi mused. “Better hurry up! The morning’s wasting!”

Chapter End Notes

I feel like this was just a lot of talking and training explanation I'm sorry

Kakashi is a troll

Why doesn't the Nidaime get more love

He's kind of a badass

Except for that whole hating and distrusting the Uchiha thing which, fair, had plenty of justification and like a lifetime of warfare behind it but really they're helping you found a village the least you could do is not let your opinion affect the opinions of the rest of the village for literally generations

But hey I updated on Monday

So

That's good

I'm still in the process of moving tho (seriously, it's gonna be like another month before I'm actually done moving) so next week's update is as always up in the air

I feel like my end notes are just constantly like 'yay I updated on time don't expect this to last suckers'

[Nikujaga](#) is delicious Japanese food that's usually a homecooked dish, like, you wouldn't be able to go to a restaurant and ask for nikujaga in Japan because it's only made at home, so basically Iruka is cooking Naruto all of these good homemade dishes that he's probably never had before and if Iruka's not careful he's going to have a permanent couch resident

Also all of the jutsu I mentioned here are real I spent an hour combing the Naruto wiki pages for basic-level jutsu for the three of them, all hail the Naruto wiki, praise and honor to its family

I update on Mondays comment and tell me what you hated about this chapter

/dead

In Which Kakashi is Actually a Pretty Decent Teacher

Chapter Summary

Kakashi gets some help teaching his ~~minions~~ genin, and we meet some other people (finally).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Kenjutsu?” Raidō asked, surprised, setting down the sudoku puzzle he’d been lazily working on in the Jounin Standby Station. “You want the Uchiha to specialize in kenjutsu?”

“Maa, maybe not specialize.” Kakashi propped his hip against the arm of Raidō’s couch, his relaxed form belying the incredibly unusual nature of his request. “That’ll be up to him once he gets to chuunin, of course. But he’s very focused, my Uchiha, so I figured giving him something other than revenge to focus on would benefit everybody.”

Raidō snorted softly. “No kidding. Uchihas are terrible that way. They all got so *obsessed*.” He sighed, letting his head fall back against the armrest opposite where Kakashi was perched. “All right, I’ll see what I can do to at least teach him the basics. I don’t know if I can commit a lot of time, though, Kakashi. I *do* have other duties.”

Kakashi nodded. “As much as you can do will be great. We meet every day at Training Ground 5 at 13:00.”

Raidō nodded. “Okay, I’ll be there tomorrow.” He fixed Kakashi with a piercing look. “You’re not leaving your other students to fumble around on their own, are you?”

Kakashi waved his hand as if he was not in fact highly likely to do just that. “They’re all getting teachers in something they’re interested in. Kurenai’s helping Sakura-chan with genjutsu, and I’ll be helping Naruto.”

Raidō’s eyebrows shot up. “Really?” he asked, surprised. “You’re taking the Yon—the Uzumaki kid yourself? That’s...surprising.”

Kakashi shrugged, not admitting to the frequent almost-sleepless nights he’d been having ever since Naruto had been placed on his genin team and blown his expectations completely out of the water. The cold sweats he’d woken up in, throat frozen around the last cry he’d made of his mentor’s name as Minato was swallowed up by the fury of the jutsu he’d performed to save the village; to trap its destroyer in the body of his own son. And there were the other dreams as well, ever-present but less frequent—of falling rocks and the sickening crush of bone, of pained gasps and the bloody tears of an eye that didn’t belong to him.

“He needs my help,” Kakashi said simply, and with that sentence moved unknowingly further towards self-forgiveness than he had in twelve years.

Raidō nodded slowly, eyeing the other jounin. “Well, good for you,” the former guard of the Yondaime said. He picked his sudoku back up. “Now, since you’re apparently taking away all of my free afternoons for the foreseeable future, I’m going to go back to my puzzle.”

Kakashi grinned behind his mask and ambled out of the Jounin Standby Station.

He’d already spoken to Gekko Hayate, his other choice for tutoring Sasuke, and Kurenai. Both had agreed to the afternoon schedule whenever they were free. Kurenai had even rolled her eyes at him and said that she’d have continued to tutor Sakura even if he hadn’t asked, because *‘honestly, Kakashi, you have no idea what to do with a young kunoichi.’*

Which was true. Not just young kunoichi—Kakashi frequently found himself at a loss with older kunoichi, as well. If he couldn’t treat them as any ordinary soldier, he floundered.

It was, to be quite honest, how he was getting by training his team at all. That very first day, he’d been so irritated with Sasuke and Naruto fighting that he’d disciplined them as he would any older ninja under his command... And they had responded extremely well to it. (Well, Naruto more than Sasuke, but it had still worked on both of them.) So when it came time to train them, Kakashi had gone with his gut and set up a regimen as he would for a chuunin coming off long-term disability. And again, all three of them responded well to the routine.

It had been eye-opening for Kakashi. He had zero experience with children; he didn’t like them, didn’t understand them, and didn’t want to spend time around them. It was part of the reason why he’d always refused a team of his own, besides his own traumatic past with his genin team. But *now*... If he just treated them like mini adults, they seemed to blossom. He just hoped it stayed that way.

He also needed to start thinking about signing them up for D-ranks. He’d been avoiding it, mainly because *he* didn’t want to do them even if he was just watching his genin perform whatever menial task they’d been assigned, but he was starting to get pointed comments from the shinobi who manned the Mission Desk. Genin had to do a minimum number of D-ranks before they could qualify for C-ranks, and it was mostly expected that they do several C-ranks before they take the chuunin exams, so if they wanted to progress they’d have to get started on that pretty soon.

Depending on the D-rank, we can probably do more than one in a day. If it’s just dish-washing for the dinner rush and weeding gardens, we can do those kinds of things quickly. Kakashi mused on his options as he ambled down the street, orange book automatically out and in front of his face even though he wasn’t actually reading it. *It just feels like so much wasted time, when they could be training instead. Is there any way to get more out of the D-ranks? I wonder if I can somehow add in something to make it more difficult for them, so that they’re training at the same time...*

“Kakashi-san,” a cool voice greeted him, and Kakashi blinked and peered over the edge of his book to see Iruka-sensei standing in front of him, a bag of groceries in one hand and a disapproving twist to his mouth.

“Iruka-sensei,” Kakashi replied, wondering what the shorter chuunin wanted now.

“I was just on my way home from the market,” Iruka said mildly (casting a blistering glance at Kakashi’s book), “and I wanted to ask you how Naruto’s training is going.”

Kakashi smiled, letting his eye crinkle up and not moving his book from in front of his face. “Oh, he’s doing quite well, Iruka-sensei. Thank you for checking out those higher-ranked books for him, they’ll come in great handy soon.”

Iruka smiled back with almost zero humor. “Will they? I’m so glad. Oh—I suppose I should also tell you, Naruto asked me to tutor him in some things on the side, so I’ll be taking up some of his free time. You understand.”

Kakashi frowned slightly, his book lowering just a little. “What did he ask you to help him with? I’m sure my own training will cover it.” *He’s my student now, not yours*, he wanted to say, but knew better.

“Oh, just this and that,” Iruka waved his free hand dismissively, smile becoming a bit more smirk-like. “I have a unique skillset that meshes very well with Naruto’s, and I’m quite happy to help him out with anything he needs.” He hoisted his bag of groceries higher on his arm and gave Kakashi a sweet smile that sent a shiver down the silver-haired jounin’s spine. “Have a good evening, Kakashi-san.”

Kakashi watched the short chuunin walk away, his mask covering his frown. There was no need to be jealous, he told himself. *He* was Naruto’s jounin-sensei, after all.

And so Team Seven’s training escalated.

Raidō introduced Sasuke to his katana, Kokuto. With a black, non-reflective blade and then coated in poison as an extra layer of redundancy, it was the perfect weapon for an assassin—which, Raidō informed the young Uchiha, he and his partner Genma were experts in.

“Partner?” Sasuke asked, black eyes sharp. “I thought assassins typically worked alone.”

Raidō shrugged, sheathing Kokuto with a graceful movement. “Sometimes, yes, but most assassins on Konoha’s roster work in permanent or semi-permanent pairs. In the world we live in a lone fighter is always targeted first, and every assassination is unique, so with two people you have twice the chance of your expertise matching up with the target’s lifestyle and habits. Many times, for a ninja, solitude is self-sabotage.”

Sasuke nodded silently, lips pursed in thought. Raidō caught Kakashi’s eye and gave him a barely visible wink.

Somebody read my psych notes in Sasuke’s file, Kakashi thought to himself wryly, and turned back to Naruto’s earnest efforts to draw the basic sealing radicals perfectly.

“Not bad,” he offered neutrally, examining the strokes. Naruto’s handwriting wasn’t necessarily the most beautiful, but it had a raw confidence about it that was strange to see in

one so young. None of his brush strokes had any hesitation marks, which, in sealing, could be fatal; if the sealer wasn't completely confident of his ability to draw the seal correctly, any hesitations could redirect the flow of chakra, which tended to end up in explosions—the unplanned kind. “Do them again.”

“Aww, sensei!” Naruto complained, but bent back over the paper. Kakashi went back to watching Sasuke work slowly through a beginner's sword kata, Raidō correcting his form occasionally with a long wooden *bokutō*, a match to the one he'd given Sasuke to practice with. “No live metal until you're ready to kill someone with it,” he'd told the Uchiha when the boy had asked about the wooden swords.

“Done!” Naruto said, and Kakashi blinked and looked down. The second set of radicals looked better than the first; he could tell that Naruto had been careful to make them look good.

“Nice,” he said, turning a page in *Icha Icha Paradise*. “Now draw me an exploding seal.”

Naruto gasped loudly. “*Really*, sensei? You're really going to let me draw one?”

“That's what I said,” Kakashi hummed, pretending complete focus on his book.

“Yatta!” the blond-haired boy cheered, and bent eagerly over his paper. Kakashi watched him out of the corner of his eye, the familiar ache in his chest giving a dull throb.

He's so like you, sensei, he thought.

Minato had loved seals like nothing else. If they hadn't been at war, Kakashi thought that he'd have probably disappeared into the R&D division, merely for the opportunity to design and create sealwork that he couldn't afford to spend time on as an active jounin. But they had been at war, so Minato had taken on a genin team and more missions than was reasonable and only worked on his sealing in his rare downtime. And even so, he'd managed to recreate the Nidaime's infamous Flying Thunder God jutsu.

And now Naruto wanted to model himself after the Nidaime. Kakashi felt a strong sense of irony in that. He didn't know that his father was the Yondaime Hokage, and yet was modeling himself after his father's idol just the same.

“Okay, sensei, I think I'm done,” Naruto said, and Kakashi blinked out of his thoughts and looked down.

His forehead scrunched.

The seal glistening on Naruto's paper was no explosive seal that Kakashi had ever seen. He could recognize the component radicals easily enough, and with the way they were configured, it looked like it was *probably* an explosive seal, but...

“What is this, Naruto?” he asked, closing his book and squatting down next to his student.

Naruto beamed. “It's an explosive seal, sensei, just like you asked for! I thought of it myself. It'll make a big boom and lots of smoke. I considered changing this *ki* radical here to *rai*,” he

continued, pointing out a graceful swooping curl, “but I figured making a flash-bang would probably distract Sasuke a lot.”

Kakashi blinked. “What’s a flash-bang?” he asked.

“It’s something else I thought up!” Naruto explained. “See, this one, it’s perfect for a getaway. The big bang will distract your opponent, and then the smoke will cover you as you retreat. But flash-bangs are offensive! They make a huuuge bright flash and noise at the same time, just like when lightning is right overhead an’ the thunder happens at the same time. So your opponents will be super disoriented an’ can’t hear or see well, so you can come in and take ‘em by surprise!”

Kakashi was set utterly back on his heels. *Though really*, he thought to himself dazedly, *I shouldn’t be surprised that Naruto has already invented new ways of mayhem and madness.* “I hope you haven’t tried any of these out, Naruto,” was all he said out loud.

Naruto deflated a bit. “No,” he grumbled. “Iruka-sensei made me *promise* not ta try any sealing without adult supervision.” Then he looked up at Kakashi with big blue eyes. “But you’re adult supervision, sensei! So can we try this one out? *Please?*”

Kakashi considered it. He figured he probably shouldn’t encourage this—but honestly, who was he kidding, he wanted to see exactly what kind of crazy things his kids could come up with. “Maa, I suppose we won’t know if you’ve really managed to make an explosive tag until we test it anyway,” he said, as if the outcome didn’t matter to him at all. “What’s the release time on this?”

“No release time, sensei,” Naruto told him importantly. “See this?” He pointed to a series of tiny jagged lines near the center of the seal. “Once I charge it with chakra, it’ll only detonate once it hits the ground! So you don’t have to judge the timing, you just gotta charge it and throw it, an’ it’ll go off right where you threw it to!”

“Hmm,” Kakashi said, which was quickly becoming his way of hiding the fact that he wanted to say *holy shit my kids are so smart what the fuck is wrong with everyone, why was he dead last.* “Well, wrap it around a rock and let’s see if it works.”

Naruto cheered and did just that, cutting it carefully away from his earlier practice of radicals and wrapping it around a good-sized rock to give the paper weight.

“Charge it,” Kakashi told him, and the seal lit up instantly with chakra. “Aim it to the middle of the field, far away from Sasuke and Raidō. And throw.”

With a huge explosion, the entire middle of the field was covered with...orange smoke.

“What the hell, dobe!” Sasuke demanded, stopping his practice to turn and stare at his teammate.

“Don’t call me that, teme!” Naruto shot back, and then turned to look up at Kakashi, grinning. “Look, look, sensei! It *worked!* Yeah!”

“Orange, Naruto?” Kakashi asked wearily. How had the boy even gotten the smoke to change color?

Naruto shrugged unrepentantly, grin not wavering in the slightest. “‘S my favorite color, ya know! And it *worked*! It worked just like I said it would! That’s so cool!”

“Yes,” Kakashi sighed, and smiled down at his victorious student. “It worked extremely well. Now let’s see what other adaptations you’ve thought up, shall we?”

—

“We have a change of plans today, my minions,” Kakashi announced to his team two weeks later.

Naruto, Sakura, and Sasuke looked up at him from where they were working—Sasuke standing on a post and practicing a kata, Sakura flicking genjutsu at him and seeing how long it took him to notice and break it, and Naruto running through the hand seals to...Kakashi squinted, and yes, that was the Raiton jutsu he’d taught to Sasuke two days ago. What cute genin, learning how to share!

“Don’t call us minions, sensei,” Sakura said, frowning. “That’s rude.”

Kakashi waved that away. “D-ranks,” he declared.

His genin watched him, clearly waiting for the punchline. “...Are...a thing?” Naruto finally said.

“That you currently do not do,” Kakashi told him. “And that you must do, if you wish to ever move beyond your lowly rank of genin and advance to chuunin. But fear not, your sensei is here to help!”

“Team Ten’s been doing D-ranks for weeks,” Sakura commented. “Ino-chan complains about them constantly.” She frowned at Kakashi. “Sensei, are we supposed to have started these a while ago?”

Kakashi sweatdropped and decided, again, that smart kids were the toughest to deal with. He had a sudden appreciation for all of his own teachers when he’d been a kid. “D-ranks are the lowest-ranking missions available in the village,” he said, pretending to not hear Sakura’s question. “Anyone can file one, as they cost very little, and they make up the bulk of the in-village missions available. As such, they are mainly filled by genin teams. It’s generally expected that genin do a minimum of fifty D-ranks before moving up to low-level C-ranks, and that they complete at least ten C-ranks before reaching chuunin level. Of course, those are just guidelines. There are no actual requirements for taking the Chuunin Exams, besides being an active genin.”

“Chuunin Exams, huh?” Naruto mused, and both he and Sasuke got identical gleams in their eyes.

Kakashi frowned at them through his mask. “No,” he said.

“But sensei!” Naruto protested. “We wanna get strong! Aren’t we a good team already?”

They were, unfortunately, a very good team. They’d continued to get better and better every week, and trounced the other genin teams two times out of three when they fought together—although, galvanized by their defeats, the other two teams were doing their level best to catch up. Sakura’s hero worship had basically died the common death of all childhood crushes; up close and personal, she got to know Sasuke as a real person rather than an ideal, and fell quite naturally out of ‘like’, though every once in a while she still had her moments. Sasuke seemed to be taking Kakashi’s and Raidō’s subtle hints about teamwork well, his attention now focused on Naruto rather than vengeance. And Naruto...

Naruto was like the bright sun, shining and warm and enthusiastic, pulling his two teammates along in his utter delight at studying the ninja arts. He learned everything he could get his hands on, listened to Sakura lecture about healing jutsu, practiced sword kata with Sasuke, invented new explosive tags like it was nothing...

If Kakashi was honest with himself (something he tried to avoid at all costs), his team very well *could* pass the Chuunin Exams on their first try.

“We’ll talk about it later,” he deflected. “Today, we have our first D-rank missions! And, because your sensei is so nice and thoughtful, I’ve come up with some ideas to make things more interesting!”

“Interesting how,” Naruto said warily, as the three students stood and gathered around their teacher. Over the past month and change they’d been training with Kakashi, all three genin had learned to be cautious whenever Kakashi mentioned something ‘interesting.’

Kakashi whipped out a mission form, grey eye curving up into a smile. “Today, my minions —” (“We’re not minions, sensei!”) “—You will be finding a poor, helpless, lost cat. *However*, you do not just have to find this cat. You must find this cat without any of you uttering a single word. If any of you speak while on this mission, all three of you will be doing double the usual morning training tomorrow.”

He beamed even wider at their gaping expressions. “Starting now! Time’s a-wasting! Off you go!”

Chapter End Notes

I liiiiiiive

I seem to enjoy ending chapters with Kakashi being an asshole

I am finally mostly set up in my new place with my new job in my new city, so I actually managed to bust out a chapter this week. No promises for next week tho.

[Sudoku](#) is a super cool logic game, basically the Asian equivalent of crossword puzzles. If you like number puzzles, you'll have a good time with sudoku.

[Radicals](#) are the simpler components that make up Japanese and Chinese characters. Each kanji (or hànzi in Chinese) is made up of several radicals. Some radicals can stand on their own with their own meanings as well. I am basing sealing off of this system, because we never get an explanation for how exactly sealing works, and I like the idea of it being made up of various radicals. It seems like it would be easy to experiment and create new things that way.

You probably guessed through context (or I hope you did), but a [bokutō](#), also known as a bokken, is a wooden sword shaped usually like a katana, although you can find them in the wakizashi and tanto style as well. There's no way Raido will honor Sasuke with a live sword until he has earned it.

I update on Mondays. Drop me a line.

In Which Sakura Begins Her Epic Road Toward Being A Badass

Chapter Summary

Team bonding. Fluff. Iruka-sensei and Kakashi-sensei fight again. Feminist feels. The usual.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sakura slammed down an impressive stack of books with an almighty *thud*, the loud noise making her two teammates jump and Kakashi look up from his bamboo plate of takoyaki. Naruto took one look at his female teammate's face and tugged his own plate closer to his body, stabbing the last round ball with his little skewer and stuffing it into his mouth as though afraid that the table was going to get rage-flipped at any moment. Sasuke, taking note of his female teammate's expression as well, wisely pulled his half-eaten takoyaki off of the table entirely.

"Sensei," Sakura said sweetly, baring her teeth in what could only generously be called a smile, "when was the last time you went on a mission with a kunoichi?"

Kakashi eyed her warily. "...A few months ago, I suppose, before I got pulled off the active roster to teach you three," he replied.

Sakura's smile widened. Her teeth were very white. "And what function, exactly, did the kunoichi perform for your mission?"

Kakashi clearly knew that this conversation was riddled with explosives, but he had no idea where they were. "Well," he said slowly, "she served as distraction and intel gathering for the team."

"And how, exactly, did she do that?" Sakura pressed, her grin now looking distinctly homicidal.

Now Kakashi maybe had a faint glimmer of where this was going. "She, ah, dressed up as a geisha and attended a party that the samurai we were investigating attended, and got us the intel we needed. Lots of very important intel," he added weakly.

"Did she fight, at all?" Sakura asked sweetly.

"Um." Kakashi held very still and refused to shift his weight like a guilty person. "No, not that I can recall."

"Did *you* fight at all, sensei?"

“Um.” Kakashi had had interrogations that were less uncomfortable than this conversation, pinned by his genin’s bright green eyes. “Yeah, I fought some.”

“To take down the enemy,” Sakura clarified.

“That’s...not exactly what the mission was, but basically yes.”

“And *yet*, ” Sakura growled, throwing her hands up in the air, and here was the main issue, whatever she was so mad about, “despite being highly qualified and a trained fighter, the kunoichi on your team did *nothing* but entrapment and intel! Do you know what they call that, sensei? Do you? They call that a *honeypot mission*. Do you know what missions make up 90% of kunoichi assignments? Huh, do you, sensei? *Honeypots!*”

“It...It wasn’t really a true honeypot,” Kakashi tried to protest, though weakly. “She didn’t —”

“Oh please, just because she didn’t have to *sleep* with anybody doesn’t mean it wasn’t a honeypot!” Sakura shrieked. “And I refuse! I refuse, okay, sensei, I am going to be a *dangerous close range fighter*, I am not letting my boys go out and fight bad guys without me, they’d get themselves killed! I am not going to wait in the wings while they rush off and blow things up, there is no way that is ever going to happen! *I. Refuse. To. Do. Honeypots!*”

A flock of birds in a nearby tree took flight in a rush of wings, calling the alarm. A ringing silence fell over their end of the market, everyone staring at the frozen tableau of genin and jounin-sensei. Nobody moved for a long moment.

Finally, the silence was broken. “Sakura-chan,” said Naruto, actual tears in his eyes as he clasped his hands together in front of his chest, “You *do* like us!”

Sakura dropped her arms and sputtered, face turning a light pink. “I—well,” she huffed, propping her hands on her hips, “I’ve just spent a lot of time training you boys, at this point! What’s the point of all the teamwork training we’re doing, if I’m just going to be relegated to the background?”

“Hn,” Sasuke grunted in agreement, the harsh lines of his face a bit softer as he looked at his teammates. “Sakura’s right. We’re used to each other’s styles now, it’d be stupid to break us up when we work well together.”

Naruto gasped loudly in exaggerated surprise. “Wow! Teme likes us *too!*”

“Dobe, I *swear*, if you don’t stop—”

“Watcha gonna do, huh teme? Huh?”

“I changed my mind,” Sakura told Kakashi as the boys started in on each other, pinching and poking and slapping like they were five years old, not twelve. “I’d like to trade them both in right now, if you please.”

“No one’s going to trade anyone in anytime soon,” Kakashi replied, casually collaring both boys as they looked about to roll off of their bench and onto the dusty ground to continue

their argument. “Your team remains the same until at least the Chuunin Exams. It usually gets broken up then, because it’s extremely rare for an entire team to get promoted at the same time. Usually you get promoted up in ones and twos, and often no one from your team gets promoted at all, so you three will have a long time together.”

“Teams don’t usually get promoted together?” Naruto asked, and it figured that that would get his attention. He hung unconcerned from Kakashi’s grip, frowning at the thought. “They don’t promote you all together from the Chuunin Exams?”

“Not usually,” Kakashi agreed, setting both boys on their feet now that they seemed appropriately distracted. “It’s very rare that all three members of a team show all of the qualities needed to be a chuunin. The Exams test you on both teamwork and individual skills, so no one can rely on their teammates to pull them through all the way.”

“Hmm,” Naruto said thoughtfully. Sasuke nudged his side with an elbow, and they shared a loaded look. “Thanks for the info, sensei!” he chirped, and pulled Sakura into a three-way huddle, all three genin whispering excitedly.

Little menaces, Kakashi thought fondly. Competitive, adorable minions.

“About your earlier outrage, Sakura,” he said, because at this stage it wasn’t advisable to let them plot for too long, “I think there’s someone you should meet.”

—

“The hell is this, Hatake?” Anko propped her hands on her hips and surveyed the short threesome arrayed before her. “I didn’t sign up to babysit a set of brats like you did. Don’t you dare try to foist your responsibilities off on me.”

“I’m not foisting anything,” Kakashi sighed long-sufferingly. “Sakura, this is Mitarashi Anko. She’s a tokubetsu jounin with the T&I division.”

“Nice to meet you, Mitarashi-san,” Sakura said, manners winning over her obvious trepidation. With her low cleavage, mesh shirt, and general air of hot badassery, Anko looked exactly like what she was: a deadly weapon.

“Eeeww,” Anko said, screwing up her face in disgust. “Call me Anko-sama, brat. Or just Mistress, if that works better for you.”

Sakura blinked and her forehead scrunched together. “Um…” she said, glancing at Kakashi.

Kakashi sighed. “Don’t listen to her, Sakura, call her whatever makes you feel comfortable. I tend to go with ‘you bitch’, but—” He leaned back out of the way of the (poisoned, he was sure) senbon that went flying by his face. “—That might be a little too personal for you, at this stage,” he finished calmly.

Anko raised her fist in Kakashi’s face. “Why’d you call me here, asshole? Get on with it, I’ve got better things to do than stand here yapping.”

“Sakura here,” Kakashi said obligingly, “has just learned about the honeypot missions and their completion rates for kunoichi.”

“Oh. Oohhh.” Anko dropped her fist and whirled, demeanour doing a complete one-eighty as she grabbed Sakura and squished her to her chest. “You poor dear, I understand completely, it’s an absolute outrage, isn’t it—”

“Um,” Sakura squeaked, eyes wide as her head was pressed firmly against Anko’s breasts. Sasuke and Naruto had both taken aborted steps forward when she’d been grabbed, clearly itching to do something but wary of the apparently unstable tokubetsu jounin.

Kakashi reached out and pried one of Anko’s arms off of Sakura. “If you suffocate her, Anko, I’ll make *you* do all the paperwork.”

“Oh, right.” Anko released Sakura, set her in front of her, and began smoothing down her pink hair, fussing like an overprotective mama snake in armored mesh. “So what did you come to me for, Kakashi?”

Kakashi shrugged. “Sakura wants to be a strong fighter kunoichi; I figured no one’s better for breaking stereotypes than you are.”

Anko got a slightly scary gleam in her eye. “I *see*. So you wanna be a badass, huh, pinky? Well I can *definitely* help with that.”

Sakura smiled hesitantly up at the older kunoichi, apparently deciding that she was okay after all. “Really, Anko-san? That would be a huge help. I don’t want to get left behind just because I’m a girl.”

“Trust me, kid,” Anko promised, wrapping an arm around Sakura’s shoulders, “when I’m through with you, you’re going to be the most badass bitch on the block.”

Kakashi beamed, proud of his ability to provide good role models for his genin.

—

Iruka surveyed his dinner preparations with a satisfied smile. Everything was simmering or grilling properly, and it would be done just in time for—

“Heeyyy, Iruka-sensei!”

The door to Iruka’s apartment banged open and Naruto trooped in, tired face sporting a huge grin. Sasuke followed him in like a black-haired shadow, toeing off his sandals in the genkan and lining them up neatly. Naruto just kicked his off and left them any which way, and Iruka couldn’t suppress a well of fondness in his chest for the loud, bright boy.

“Good evening, Naruto and Sasuke,” he said, turning off the gas to the mini grill and deftly turning out the three fish onto three different plates. “Dinner’s almost ready, if you’d like to join me.”

“F that’s okay with you, sensei,” Naruto said, ducking his head and rubbing the back of his head sheepishly, giving Iruka a slightly hangdog smile. “I wanna tell you about what we did today! See, teme here—”

Sasuke shoved Naruto, silencing him for a moment. “Wait until dinner’s served, dobe.” He bowed shallowly to Iruka. “Sorry for the intrusion, Iruka-sensei.”

“You boys are always welcome, of course,” Iruka replied calmly, keeping his amusement hidden. The boys had eaten at his apartment five days out of the last seven, and Naruto had slept over most of those days as well. Sasuke, much like a feral cat, always needed a bit more encouragement; he’d only slept over twice, despite how clearly reluctant he was to return to the Uchiha compound at the end of every night.

Iruka brought the three plates of fish over to his traditional low table, setting them before the three seating cushions already laid out on the floor. The boys flopped onto their cushions like puppies, their growing limbs all awkward angles and bony edges. Iruka suppressed a frankly ridiculous rush of warmth in his chest as he went back into the kitchen for the rice and sauteed vegetables. No matter how much they stressed his food budget, he loved having these boys around.

“Did you boys wash your hands after your last mission?” he called out, and the living room fell silent for a moment before there was hushed whispering and socked feet hurrying to the bathroom.

“Doing it now, sensei!” Naruto called out cheerfully.

“Mhm.” Smiling a secret smile, Iruka went to join his boys at the table.

—

The next morning he sent them off after a good breakfast. Naruto had convinced Sasuke to spend the night, and so the two boys ran off together through the early morning mist, footfalls silent on the hard dirt.

Iruka watched them go and thought, soberly, *I have to have a talk with Kakashi.*

He didn’t want to; he didn’t approve of the silver-haired jounin, didn’t like him very much, and the thought of having another conversation like the one they’d had at the Academy before team selections made Iruka’s stomach twist. Kakashi was just so *irritating*.

But Naruto was learning so much so quickly, and soon he was going to start asking more specific questions about his family. It wouldn’t be possible to keep his past from him forever, and Iruka honestly wondered how the Sandaime had planned to reveal Naruto’s parentage. The older he became, the more risk there was.

As it was, it was a miracle one of Naruto’s library clones hadn’t come across a history book with pictures of the Yondaime.

“Hey,” Naruto called, suddenly running back out of the mist and skidding to a stop in front of Iruka, “I thought of somethin’ ta call you other than sensei, sensei!”

Iruka smiled fondly down at the blond-haired boy. “Really? What is it?”

Naruto scuffed one sandal against the ground, suddenly shy. “Well, I was talkin’ to Sakura-chan and Sasuke about it, and Sasuke asked a buncha questions about you ‘n’ how you act around me ‘n’ stuff, and then he said that...uh...” He peeked up shyly through his eyelashes. “He said you sounded like an onii-san, sensei. So...I mean, would it be okay if I called you Iruka-nii-san?”

“Oh, Naruto,” Iruka breathed, chest tight. “I would be honored.”

Naruto perked up, everything about him rising up like a sunflower opening to the sun. “Really? You’d really like that?”

Unable to help himself, Iruka swept him up in a hug, pressing lips to Naruto’s blond hair and breathing in his scent. “I would *love* that. Absolutely love it.”

“Okay,” Naruto whispered, hands clenched in the back of Iruka’s shirt like he was afraid Iruka would disappear if he loosened his grip even a little. “Okay. I’ll...I’ll see you later, then, Iruka-nii-san.” He pulled back a bit and smiled up at Iruka, the sun coming out. “Have a good day at the Academy!”

“You too,” Iruka said, and cleared his throat, forcing his arms to let go of the boy. “Train hard. I’ll see you when you’re done.”

“Yeah!” Naruto let go and took a couple of steps back, still staring at Iruka as if afraid he’d disappear. “Bye, onii-san!”

Iruka raised a hand. “Bye, Naruto,” he said, and watched as Naruto turned and dashed off, a small blob detaching itself from the mist and joining him further down the road—Sasuke, presumably. Both boys disappeared into the early morning, and Iruka stood there staring after them long after they were gone from sight.

Yeah, he sighed internally. I really need to talk to Kakashi.

—

Iruka managed to track down Kakashi the very next day, catching him right outside the marketplace as he ambled towards home, nose buried in his book. “Kakashi-san,” he said, falling into step with him. “I need to talk to you about Naruto.” He took a deep breath. “You know his...situation, with his tenant, and his parents. He’s learning at an amazing rate right now, and at this point it’s only a matter of time before he comes across something either about the attack or about his father. We both care about him, and I believe want the best for him. I think we should do our best to tell Naruto about his past as much as possible. Oh, and his apartment is absolutely awful.” Iruka glanced at the silver-haired jounin, but his masked face gave nothing away, and he hadn’t lowered his book. “...So, at this point, I think I’m going to try to get Naruto moved in with me permanently,” Iruka concluded, and searched

Kakashi's face (or, really, the sliver of skin that he could see) for any hint of what the jounin was thinking.

"Mm," Kakashi hummed thoughtfully.

Iruka waited, and when nothing else seemed forthcoming, sighed irritably. "I'm going to need a bit more than that, Kakashi-san."

"Hm?" That single grey eye blinked and refocused on him. "Oh." ...And curved up into a bright smile. "I'm sorry, were you saying something?"

Iruka stopped dead in the road. His eye twitched. He took a deep breath, and then let it out. And again.

And then, despite his best efforts, he heard his restraint break with an almost audible *snap*.

"HOW ARE YOU IN CHARGE OF CHILDREN," Iruka shouted, yanking out a handful of kunai and letting them fly with deadly accuracy. Kakashi sprang straight up to avoid them, landing on a nearby roof and then letting out an 'eep!' of surprise when Iruka was hot on his heels. "HOW ARE YOU A RESPECTED JOUNIN OF THIS VILLAGE. STAND STILL SO I CAN KILL YOU."

"You should know better than anyone, sensei, asking someone to stand still never works!" Kakashi tossed over his shoulder, vaulting over a food stall and knocking over a group of trash cans with a huge clatter. "As a sensei, aren't you supposed to *teach* kids that?" He ducked a flurry of senbon needles for that comment.

The civilians around the two ninja stopped and stared as Iruka chased Kakashi over the buildings, and then shrugged and went back to their business. Another normal day in Konoha.

—

Sasuke blinked in surprised at Kakashi-sensei's appearance the next morning. Their jounin-sensei seemed to be a bit...battered, several senbon still sticking out of his flak vest, and his edges looked rather singed.

"Morning," Kakashi greeted his genin cheerfully. "I ran into an angry dolphin on the way here, so I had to help it find its way back to the ocean. How are you doing on your morning exercises?"

"We're about to start the running, sensei," Sakura reported, and Naruto squinted at Kakashi doubtfully.

"Problem, Naruto?"

"Noooo," Naruto said slowly, "only, Iruka-sen—I mean, Iruka-nii said he met you last night. Did you meet him again this morning? Did something happen?"

“Minions don’t get answers unless they’ve finished their workout!” Kakashi sang, and Naruto and Sakura groaned loudly. Still, the three of them started running, heading for the big wall that encircled Konoha. Kakashi-sensei kept pace with them, completely unaffected no matter how long they ran. Sasuke couldn’t *wait* until he had that kind of stamina.

When they were finished with their workout, the team began their stretches while they waited for Kakashi to tell them what they were doing today. Sasuke helped Naruto get a better arch in his back, staring up at their lanky sensei above them.

“You’re doing quite well on the D-ranks, my minions,” Kakashi announced, eye crinkling up in a smile. “How’s your individual training going?”

“Anko-nee-san says that she’ll start me on poison compounds by next week,” Sakura reported, a small smile of satisfaction on her face as she stretched her quads. “She says I’m nearly finished memorizing the varieties and potencies, so we can move on to practical training!”

Sasuke felt Naruto shudder at the same time as a chill ran down his own spine. Their tiny pink-haired teammate was shaping up to be absolutely *terrifying*.

“Hayato-san and Raidō-san say that I’m progressing adequately,” Sasuke said, his flat tone belying how very enjoyable he was finding his kenjutsu training. “We’ve managed to find some scrolls on the Uchiha kenjutsu styles, so I’m starting on those.” The sparse words hid a sleepless night of nightmares after that particular search through the Uchiha compound, but maybe Naruto could sense something, because his teammate’s (friend’s?) shoulder pressed firmly against Sasuke’s in comfort. Sasuke...didn’t pull away.

“And you, Naruto? How do you feel your training is coming?”

“It’s pretty great, sensei,” Naruto replied, beaming. “You don’t really explain things super well sometimes, but I’m gettin’ better at figuring out what you’re trying to say! And Iruka-nii’s helping me a lot with traps and reconnaissance!”

“That’s...good,” Kakashi said. “Well, I think you three have progressed far enough to have earned something a little more complicated than in-village D-ranks. Come on, we’re going to the Mission Desk and seeing if they’ve got anything a bit more challenging for us.”

“REALLY? Yatta!” Naruto cheered, slinging an arm around Sasuke’s neck and squeezing him close in celebration. Sasuke elbowed him in the side with a grumble, but didn’t actually make him get off as Naruto scooped up Sakura in his other arm. “We’re gonna do a real mission! Woohoo!”

“Mhmm,” Kakashi hummed, visible eye crinkling with genuine fondness as he watched the three of them wobble down the street, attached to each other and unwilling to let go. “Yes, I think you three are quite ready for a C-rank.”

I AM A TERRIBLE PERSON FOR MAKING YOU ALL WAIT SO LONG

I love you all and I cannot believe this story already has over 1000 kudos, y'all are seriously the best

I feel like I'm actually shit at writing Team 7 bonding moments, like, I constantly feel their progress into teammates is either not developed enough or I'm explaining too much instead of showing y'all their development

[Takoyaki](#) are delicious savory nuclear-hot balls of batter, green onions, cabbage, octopus, and other tasty goodness, usually served with special takoyaki sauce and mayonnaise on top, a common street food in Japan. Seriously, do not bite into one of those until you KNOW it's cool on the inside, your un-scalded taste buds will thank you

I have absolutely no idea when the next chapter will be up, but I will do my best to make it sooner than this one, esp coz I have so much planned for the Wave mission

Any questions or comments about my writing, you know what to do

In Which Team 7 Leaves the Village, And Shit Gets Real

Chapter Summary

The beginning of the dreaded (by me) C-rank. Team Seven has somehow collected a great deal of mother hens. Kakashi kicks ass, and Naruto finds out something completely world-shattering.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Naruto woke up before dawn the morning they were to leave on their first out-of-village mission. Blinking blearily in the hazy pre-dawn light, he rubbed his eyes and sat halfway up, looking around. His gaze fell on the softly breathing forms around him, and Naruto was unable to keep a smile from spreading over his lips.

Sasuke and Sakura had accompanied him back to Iruka-nii-san's apartment after they'd received their mission to escort a civilian builder back to Wave Country, the three of them completely wired and eager to get started. Iruka received them with smiles and congratulations, and then he'd asked the all-important question:

"What are you three packing, then, to take with you?"

All three genin had froze mid-motion, turning to stare at each other with *oh shit* looks on their faces. "We...haven't thought about it, Iruka-nii," Naruto said slowly.

Iruka looked to be hiding an amused grin. "Well, pull out all of your supplies, then, and let's go over what you'll need."

They'd done a short section on mission packing when they were in the Academy, but it'd all been theoretical then; they'd never even left the school grounds. Now it struck all three genin that they were *leaving the village*, and they were going to be relying on whatever they brought with them and nothing else.

Naruto had dashed to 'his' room—the room where he stashed his stuff when he stayed over at Iruka-nii's, which seemed to be filling up with more and more of his stuff, now that he thought about it—and dragged all of his ninja gear out into the living room.

Iruka was as strict a taskmaster as ever, asking pointed questions about how long they expected to be gone, what could they expect the weather to be like, what was the terrain like along their route, what kind of enemies could they anticipate and also *not* anticipate, would they be camping most of the way or would they be heading through villages where they could get rooms at an inn...

Naruto, Sasuke and Sakura soaked in all of the information like sponges, bright eyes fixed on their old sensei as he pulled out his own ready-bag and began laying out everything that he had in it. And it was a *lot*.

“Most of this comes from experience,” Iruka had told them, pulling out skeins of rope and waterproof dropcloths and fat packets of senbon and oilcloth-wrapped bundles of tinder.

“You figure out what works best for you, and what kind of things you need to feel secure in even unexpected situations. Then you balance that with how much you’re willing to actually carry, and what will just weigh you down. But keep in mind, it is far better to be overprepared than underprepared. It might just save your life, or the life of your teammate.”

“I’m going to have to go shopping,” Sakura breathed into the slightly stunned silence.

The boys nodded solemnly.

Now Iruka had definitely been hiding a grin. “Well, you’ve still got a few hours until the markets start closing. Don’t just rely on my opinion, too; I’m just a jack-of-all-trades chuunin. Every ninja has a specialized kit suited specifically for them and their abilities. Ask your other teachers what kinds of things you’ll need for your specialities.”

Naruto nodded determinedly. “That’s great advice, Iruka-nii! Guys,” he said, turning to his teammates, “let’s go find our teachers and go shopping. We’ll meet back here by dinnertime, okay, say 1900 hours? Then we can put together our packs and figure out who’s gonna carry what.”

Sakura and Sasuke had both nodded firmly, voicing their agreement and leaping for the door, Sasuke’s grumbled “No wonder chuunin and jounin wear those vests with all the pockets” covering up Iruka’s sputtered, “Wait—what? Here? Dinner? *What?*”

And that was how Team 7 and affiliated jounin had ended up at Iruka’s apartment, eating dinner and arguing loudly over how to properly pack for a mission.

Anko was fighting with Genma (who had followed Raidō, honestly, he wasn’t even helping any of Team 7 train, though the glint in his eye might indicate a change in that status soon) about the appropriate way to distribute poisoned senbon versus unpoisoned senbon about one’s person. Sakura was ignoring them both, filling her newly purchased knapsack with packets of medicine and vials of poisons—gifted to her by Anko, because she wasn’t at the level of mixing and preparing her own yet.

Naruto was tucked into a corner of the couch, tongue clenched between his teeth as he carefully inked new seals under the watchful eye of Kakashi. He was determined to create sets for all three of them, including several varieties of his new exploding seals as well as some useful stealth seals he’d found. If only he’d had time to practice storage seals!

Hayate and Raidō had Sasuke spread out in another corner of the living room, lecturing him about proper blade care and supplying him with enough whetstones and cleaning oilcloths to fill a small blade shop. Sasuke had taken the fussing rather well, nodding along silently to all the directions despite the fact that he didn’t even own a good long blade yet, just several short wakizashi and tanto.

All three genin had made sure all of their kunai and shuriken were up to standard, oiling and sharpening the ones that hadn't been and making sure they all had more than was considered standard to carry. They had taken Iruka's words about being overprepared very seriously.

Iruka had just sighed and bowed to the invasion of his apartment, escaping to the kitchen to make dinner in between advice to Naruto on what kinds of trap-laying materials he should bring—namely the things unavailable in nature, such as wire and quick-release mechanisms. Not technically necessary for traps, but they made them a lot easier and quicker to set up.

Dinner had been loud and raucous, six adults and three preteens spread out over the living room's various surfaces and eating Iruka's simple grilled chicken and stirfry with all indications of voracious hunger. Hayate had kept the introverted Sasuke from fleeing the scene, speaking to him quietly underneath the general louder conversations. Sakura had quizzed an amused Genma on his specialization and how he incorporated his specific skills into his missions, especially with a sword-wielder like Raidō as his partner, and Naruto...

Naruto had been *so happy*, flushed and beaming, surrounded by everyone he cared about, everyone eating and laughing and talking together, almost like...like a *family*.

Even the next morning, Naruto felt his belly fill up with a sparkling warm feeling, just remembering how amazing the night before had been.

He glanced around the living room. Sasuke and Sakura were curled up like puppies at his sides, all three of them having crashed right where they were when exhaustion finally hit them. Their supplies were still strewn around the room, half-packed bags listing over next to various sorted piles of inventory. Someone, probably Iruka-nii, had covered them with blankets.

"Dobe, it's too early," a voice grumbled at his side, and Naruto looked down to see Sasuke blinking crankily up at him.

"Sorry," Naruto whispered, unable to prevent a grin from spreading across his face. "We're leaving today. Aren't you excited?"

"Yes, but it's still too early. We're not supposed to meet Kakashi-sensei at the gates until 0900. Get some more sleep." Sasuke poked at Naruto's arm until he lay down again, and then snuggled closer with a sigh, sides just barely pressed against each other. On his other side, Sakura let out a grumble and slung an arm over Naruto's hip.

Surrounded by his team and warmer than he'd ever been in his life, Naruto settled back down and closed his eyes, slipping back into sleep with a smile.

—

Iruka accompanied them to the gates, after feeding them a good breakfast and making sure they'd packed everything they'd meant to pack. Sakura had to dash off and say goodbye to her parents, so she would meet them at the gate, but Naruto and Sasuke walked through the early morning streets of Konoha with Iruka, both boys practically vibrating with excitement.

Iruka wished he could share their unrestrained joy. C-ranks were generally benign, but there was also a great deal of room for things to go wrong, simply because of the inexperience of genin and the dangers of the wide world. For the two boys he'd come to almost consider family, Iruka's happiness for them was equaled by his worry.

Kakashi was already standing by the gate, his tall rangy figure easy to spot, the squat figure of the bridge-builder next to him. Hayate and Raidō, too, were lounging against the wall a short distance away, and with a soft punch to Naruto's arm Sasuke trotted off to his mentors.

"Naruto," Iruka said, stopping Naruto before they completely joined Kakashi and the civilian. "I have something for you. A going-away present, I guess."

Naruto stared up at him, blue eyes wide. "You didn't have to do that, nii-chan. You've already done so much for me."

"Not nearly as much as you deserve, Naruto." Iruka smiled and ruffled his hair, then offered him the tightly-packed roll of scrolls in his other hand. "Here. This is for you. I know we didn't get to start on barrier seals beyond talking about the basics, but I thought you'd like to study them on the way. I've put a bunch of my notes in there. If Kakashi-sensei says it's okay, you can practice them while you're away."

Naruto stared at him for another long moment, and then threw his arms around Iruka's waist and buried his face in his chest. Iruka squeezed him tight in return, throat tight and eyes hot. "I'm gonna miss you, nii-chan," Naruto mumbled into his flak vest.

"I'm gonna miss you too, Naruto." Iruka took a deep breath and nodded to Kakashi, who was watching them carefully with his one grey eye. Kakashi nodded back, for once his book nowhere to be seen.

Naruto finally pulled away, his eyes a bit wet but his cheeks dry. He took a deep breath. "I'm going, Iruka-nii."

Iruka smiled and nodded. "Go and come back. Be safe." He watched Naruto bound over to Sasuke, who was clutching a long sword-shaped bundle—no guesses as to what Raidō and Hayate had provided as their going away gift. The two swordsmen seemed to still be lecturing the Uchiha on appropriate care and use, though Sasuke looked unwilling to let his new sword go even to draw it, so Iruka wasn't sure how that was going, really.

"Hey, sorry I'm late!" Sakura called, waving wildly as she dashed around the corner, followed by a casual-looking Anko, whose bored expression was fooling nobody.

"Right, everyone present and ready?" Kakashi asked, checking with each of his genin for enthusiastic nods. "Okay, let's get on the road." He strode through the open gates without further fanfare, ignoring the gate guards' huge grins as Team 7 waved their last goodbyes to their mentors and trotted after him out the gate.

Iruka, having drifted over to the three tokujō as they said their goodbyes, sighed. "Now what am I supposed to do with all my free time?" Raidō drawled, hands in his pockets. Hayate coughed and nodded in agreement, and Anko snorted.

Iruka stared out the empty gate. “They’ll be back soon enough,” he said, and sent up a quick prayer to any deity listening that his words would prove true.

Naruto was going to murder their civilian charge before the week was out—and if he didn’t do it, Sasuke would. Tazuna the bridge-builder was loud, rude, a drunk, and *slow*. Naruto was convinced that even as a civilian, he’d never be as slow as the old man.

And he complained *all the time*. About *everything*. The quality of their service, the heat of the sun, the food, sleeping on the ground... Naruto was ready to knock him out and carry him the rest of the way by the end of the first day, he was that annoying.

Kakashi hummed when Naruto grumbled some of this to him on the third day. “Yes, he certainly does talk a lot, but never about anything of substance. Usually people who babble on about inconsequential things have something to hide, so what could our simple bridge-builder be hiding?”

Naruto’s mouth snapped shut with a click, and he looked ahead at Tazuna’s back with newly wary eyes. “You’re awfully suspicious, aren’t you, sensei?”

Kakashi turned a page in his book. “All ninja develop a healthy sense of paranoia, it’s part of the job. Look underneath the underneath; question everything. Don’t be surprised, be the one doing the surprising. In the shinobi world, nothing is true; everything is permitted.”

Naruto sighed. “Being an adult is exhausting.”

Kakashi let out a loud bark of laughter, throwing his head back as his eye crinkled up in amusement. Up ahead, Sasuke and Sakura and Tazuna all turned to look at them, surprised. Naruto stared up at his teacher, breath caught in his chest at the completely unexpected sight of his teacher laughing unrestrainedly. It...it was strange, to see Kakashi that way, so happy, but Naruto liked it. He wanted to make Kakashi laugh more; he’d never realized until now how solemn their teacher usually was.

“That’s true,” Kakashi chuckled, smiling down at Naruto through his mask. “Being an adult is a lot of work. But I’m sure you can do it. You’re going to be a great adult, Naruto.” And he patted Naruto on the shoulder.

Naruto ducked his head, feeling his face—his whole body—grow hot. “Thanks, sensei,” he mumbled.

Then his brow furrowed as he noticed a large puddle in the road. It was a cloudless, clear summer day; they hadn’t had rain in at least a week.

“It’s...good that it’s not raining, isn’t it, sensei?” he said, trying to be subtle.

Kakashi hummed an agreement. “I’m surprised there aren’t *more people* on the road, taking advantage of the nice weather,” he said. *So sensei knows*, Naruto thought with satisfaction. That made him feel a lot safer.

Sasuke, clearly listening up ahead, flicked out their made-up hand signal for *danger*? Without turning around. Naruto signed back, *watch out*, and Sakura, face half-turned towards them as she pretended to listen to Tazuna, nodded and whispered to Sasuke.

Kakashi and Naruto, bringing up the rear of their group, finally passed the puddle, and everyone burst into a flurry of motion. Naruto dashed to the left, drawn kunai in his hands, and Kakashi disappeared in a flicker of movement so fast Naruto couldn't even see it happen. Naruto wasn't quite as fast, though, and he cursed as he felt spiked chains whip around one of his legs before he could get away, sending him crashing to the ground.

Flipping over onto his back, he yanked at the chain, eyes darting around the battlefield. Sasuke and Sakura were guarding a terrified Tazuna, weapons out and ready. Their two enemies were masked like Kakashi, big and terrifying and horribly real, wearing hitai-ate that had been scored through the middle to mark them as missing-nin.

Cursing, Naruto yanked the chain off of his leg, ignoring his bleeding hands and leg as he limped as fast as he could over to his teammates, taking up his position as the third point in their bodyguard formation.

"We should help," Sasuke ground out, eyes flicking rapidly over the battlefield. Kakashi was engaging the two missing-nin, fighting both at the same time, their attacks eerily synchronized and deadly.

Sakura shook her head. "We can't, we have to protect our charge," she said. It was something Kakashi had been clear on: on an escort mission, if they ran into trouble, the three of them were to defend their charge, unless it looked like he was losing and it became necessary to assist him. "*But then,*" Kakashi had said, "*If I need saving by you three brats, I might as well keel over dead right now.*" And he'd run away as they'd chased him, shouting threats.

"Kakashi-sensei can do it," Naruto said determinedly. He couldn't put a lot of weight on his leg, which was dripping a slightly alarming amount of blood into the dirt. He gripped his kunai tighter in slick hands. "He's super strong. He'll defeat them."

And even as he spoke, Kakashi did *something* so fast they barely saw it happen, and one of the men (were they twins?) cried out and fell to the ground, blood spurting from a slashed neck. Sakura gasped, hands flying up to cover her mouth, and the remaining ninja howled with fury and flew at Kakashi, spiked chain—now detached from his brother—whirring through the air. It caught Kakashi along the arm but didn't slow him down at all, the lanky form of their teacher crouching and then lunging forward in a smooth movement.

The missing-nin stumbled, let out a wet gasping sound, and crumpled. Blood began to pool beneath his body.

The forest fell silent around them. Kakashi, panting, straightened up and flicked blood from his blades. "You three all right?" He asked roughly.

The three genin nodded, eyes wide. Naruto didn't know about the others, but it was the first time he'd actually seen a dead body. Kakashi-sensei had been so *fast*. He'd killed them with no pause, no hesitation in his movements. It had seemed so easy.

Suddenly dizzy, Naruto wobbled and sat down hard in the dirt.

“Sensei!” Sakura knelt by Naruto’s side, hands reaching for his leg. “Naruto’s hurt!”

Kakashi was suddenly next to him, his bigger body hot against Naruto’s side and smelling of metal and blood. “What happened, Naruto?”

“I got caught by that spiked chain they were whipping around,” Naruto said through gritted teeth, stretching out his leg carefully and wincing when the wounds pulled. Sakura stuck her hands into the rips in his pant leg and tugged harshly, tearing the cloth all the way open. Naruto yelped. “Sakura-chan!”

“Hush,” she ordered, digging into her pack. “They’re missing-nin from Mist, they probably used poison on their blades. Did you get nicked, sensei?”

Kakashi shook his head, ignoring his arm dripping blood. “I’m fine.”

Sakura nodded, her lips pressed so tightly together they were white. Her hands trembled faintly as she pressed bandages against Naruto’s wounds, but she didn’t falter. Sasuke stood over them, eyes scanning the forest around them warily, guarding them from further attack.

“Can you check the chain, Kakashi-sensei?” Sakura asked. Kakashi rose silently and went back over to the...the *bodies*.

“It doesn’t show signs of poison,” he reported, squatting and sifting the chain through his hands. “No strange odors, nothing liquid on the blades.” His voice tightened. “Other than Naruto’s blood.” He let the chain fall back to the ground.

Sakura nodded. “Do you feel strange, Naruto? Hot, short of breath, dizzy, something wrong with your vision?”

Naruto shook his head. “It just hurts.”

“Okay. That’s good.” Sakura wrapped his leg quickly, sticking the end to the other bandages with a small chakra tab. “That’ll have to do until we camp tonight.”

Sasuke offered a hand to Naruto, who took it and let his teammate pull him back to his feet. Sakura had done a good job, not wrapping it too tightly and restricting his movement; he’d be able to fight, if necessary.

“Well then,” Kakashi said, voice hard as he turned to face Tazuna, “I think it’s about time you were honest with us, Tazuna-san.”

—

They made cold camp that night, not risking a fire to betray their position. Naruto’s leg felt fine now, as he protested to a determined Sakura—and indeed, when she sat on him and unwrapped the bandages, his injuries had been completely healed, only the streaks of dried blood to show where they had been.

“I’m so jealous of that,” Sakura huffed, bundling up the dirty bandages and shoving them back into her pack. “Those injuries should have put you out for a week, Naruto!”

Naruto grinned and shrugged sheepishly.

“All right, you three, come over here.” Kakashi’s voice cut through their banter, and the genin immediately sobered up and gathered around their sensei. Tazuna’s story of slavery and crippling poverty had put things a bit in perspective, and they needed to decide what to do next. And none of them had forgotten seeing their lazy teacher cut down two missing-nin like it was nothing.

“First,” Kakashi said, pulling out a familiar black-edged scroll and making Naruto stiffen, “I think we need to talk about a few things.” He unrolled it and, with a poof of smoke, the heads of the dead ninja rolled out.

Naruto took a deep breath that trembled slightly and clenched his hands into fists. It was jarring, to truly realize that they were *killers*, that ending another person’s life was *easy*, as easy as slicing open a few fragile layers of skin. That Kakashi had probably killed hundreds of people, could probably not even remember the accurate number.

“Now I mentioned this when I collected the heads,” Kakashi said, “but let’s recap. I collected the heads and burned the bodies because all you need for identification and collection of bounties is the head of your target. I burned the bodies because I didn’t want to leave traces of our presence behind. These two…” he gestured at the blank-eyed heads on the ground, “... are chuunin-level missing nin from Mist, called the Demon Brothers. They assisted in the S-rank nukenin Momochi Zabuza’s escape from Hidden Mist after his failed attempt to assassinate the Mizukage. Moderate bounties on their own, but the important thing is that they’re associates of Zabuza, who was one of Hidden Mist’s Seven Swordsmen. Which means,” he cast a sharp look over at Tazuna, who shuddered, “that it’s possible that we will be encountering Zabuza in the next couple of days. An *S-ranked missing nin*.

“We were hired, Tazuna-san, under the impression that this was a C-rank mission; the only opposition we could expect would be bandits looking for an easy mark. Just the presence of these two—” he pointed at the heads, “—would be enough to bump it to a B-rank, but the presence of *Momochi Zabuza* bumps it automatically to an A-rank and an escort of at least three jounin. You are putting my genin at an unacceptable level of risk, Tazuna.”

“P-please,” Tazuna gibbered, “I need your help! I can’t afford a higher-ranked mission, and Gato has been so terrible to us! As soon as I get my bridge built—”

“If you get your bridge built, Gato will just come in and destroy it again!” Kakashi snapped, glaring coldly over at the old man. “If Zabuza has been hired to kill you, I *cannot* in all conscience take my team of *barely trained genin* against him! If my team is killed because of your stinginess and lies, old man, you will *regret it for the rest of your miserably short life*.”

Wow, Naruto thought, reluctantly admiring, *Kakashi-sensei can be really intimidating*.

“Please, you have to help us!” Tazuna cried. “The people of Wave have no hope without you! If—if I get my bridge built, I can pay you in money from the trade it brings in!”

“That’s not the point!” Kakashi snapped. “The point is that because you lied, my barely out of the Academy genin might be taking on an S-ranked nukenin!”

“Kakashi-sensei,” Sakura said softly, putting a hand on his arm, “we don’t know for sure yet that Zabuza’s even here. Tazuna-san is right, they do need our help. And we *did* accept the escort mission to Wave.”

Kakashi stared at her for a moment, and then sighed. “And what do you two think?” He asked the boys.

Naruto shrugged. “I think Sakura-chan’s right,” he replied. “I don’t—I don’t wanna face an S-rank ninja,” he gulped at the very idea, “but if we can help Wave Country, I think we should.”

Sasuke nodded. “What Naruto said,” he grunted. “We can at least see what the situation is, right?”

Kakashi sighed. “Then it seems as if I am overruled,” he told Tazuna. “We will escort you either to your home in Wave or until Momochi Zabuza shows up, whichever comes first.”

“Oh, thank you,” Tazuna gasped, “Thank you, thank you—”

“Don’t thank me,” Kakashi snapped. “Thank them.” He gestured at the genin. “They’re the only reason I’m not turning us around right now.” He rolled the heads back up into their scroll and sealed them away.

“Now,” he continued, “there’s one other thing I want to talk about.” He was silent for a minute, gathering his thoughts. “The three of you saw me kill today.”

As one, the three genin drew closer together until they were pressed against each other shoulder to shoulder.

“None of you have seen someone be killed in front of you before, have you?” Naruto and Sakura shook their heads, but Sasuke hesitated, looking torn. “I wouldn’t count the Massacre, Sasuke,” Kakashi said to him. “What your brother did to you was torture, nothing less, but you didn’t actually see him kill anyone, did you?”

Sasuke ducked his head and stared at the ground. “The...the genjutsu he used on me,” he mumbled softly. “It...made me watch him kill our parents over and over again.”

Naruto sucked in a horrified breath. He met Sakura’s wide eyes. Neither of them had heard Sasuke talk about the Uchiha Massacre, ever. He didn’t even mention it obliquely.

Kakashi nodded soberly. “Well, if you want to talk about that later, you can come to me at any time. I want to—Do you have—How are you doing, with seeing me kill those men?”

Naruto looked down and fidgeted with his hands in his lap. “It...was pretty surprising, at first,” he muttered. “It’s kinda easy to forget in the village that we’re training to kill people. But...but that’s our *job*, sensei, and if you hadn’t killed ‘em, they woulda killed us for sure! So...I guess I’m doing pretty okay now.”

Kakashi nodded. “It’s okay to *not* be okay, too,” he said. “You don’t have to like the fact that we kill people. But you *do* have to not hesitate. If the choice is between the life of an enemy and the life of your comrades, you had better not hesitate for a single moment. One second can be the difference between life and death.”

The three of them nodded together. “Yes, sensei,” they chorused.

The next day was tense for everyone. The four shinobi had set up rotating watch shifts for the night, which meant that none of them had gotten a full night’s sleep. Kakashi was used to it, but he doubted that his genin were. He hoped they’d be all right for the day.

Their guard formation had been pretty loose before, usually two in front with Tazuna and two behind, but now they tightened it up, using a standard diamond formation: Sasuke in the front, Sakura and Naruto on either side, and Kakashi in the rear, with Tazuna in the middle and within grabbing reach of both Naruto and Sakura if something went wrong.

And something, inevitably, went wrong.

Naruto barely heard the almost silent whistle of rushing air and threw himself at Tazuna, knocking both him and Sakura to the ground. Sasuke and Kakashi were there instantly, and Naruto jumped back to his feet to see a huge man standing on the blade of a monstrous sword embedded more than halfway through the trunk of a tree.

“Momochi Zabuza,” Kakashi said, both greeting and warning. Naruto tensed his muscles and slipped one hand into the pouch where he kept his explosive seals.

“Well, well. Sharingan no Kakashi. No wonder the Demon Brothers didn’t succeed. But I hope you know you won’t have such an easy time against me. Why don’t you just hand over the old man and we can all go our separate ways?”

Kakashi settled into a ready stance and lifted his hitai-ate so that it rested straight on his forehead, uncovering his left eye. A ragged scar bisected it down the middle, but when Kakashi blinked it open the eye itself seemed undamaged, although strange—all red iris, with three dots instead of a pupil.

Sasuke, already tense, went taut as a drawn bowstring at the sight. If they lived through this, Naruto was going to ask him about that.

“You know that’s never going to happen,” Kakashi replied, and Zabuza shrugged.

“Worth a shot,” he said, and the two jounin blurred into action.

It was far different than the fight from yesterday, and far more terrifying. These were jounin, deadly masters of their trade, and no words were wasted on taunts or bargaining. Naruto could barely follow their movements half the time, though Sasuke’s eyes were darting around, apparently following pretty well. But Kakashi-sensei was at a disadvantage, he could tell; as the one with something to protect, Kakashi couldn’t take certain risks or allow certain

blows to land, and that made him more vulnerable. He had to deflect jutsu aimed at their party rather than simply avoiding them, and it was wearing him out quickly—Naruto could see it.

“Shit,” he hissed. “Do you guys—”

“Yeah,” Sasuke muttered, eyes wide and focused, intent. “He’s doing good, he’d probably even win, but—”

“At what cost?” Sakura finished grimly, tugging on the edges of her gloves and settling her fingers more firmly around her kunai.

Naruto nodded, digging in his pockets for one of the scrolls Iruka-nii had given him. “I’ll stay here and guard Tazuna,” he said, already drawing seals in the dirt with his knife. “You two help Kakashi however you can.” In his hurry, Naruto didn’t realize he’d dropped the ‘sensei’ he normally used with Kakashi’s name.

“Right,” Sasuke nodded, divining Naruto’s plan with a glance. “Sakura, you ready?”

“Yeah. Let’s go.”

They dashed in opposite directions, into the trees, and Naruto quickly checked his seals against the scroll. They looked right, so he slapped his hands together into Ram and released his chakra. With a burst of light, the seals began to glow, and a transparent blue barrier rose between Naruto and Tazuna and the fight in front of them.

“Don’t touch the barrier, Tazuna-san,” Naruto ordered, one hand ready in Tiger as he palmed some shuriken in his other hand. “Unless you want your fingers burned off.”

Tazuna squeaked some sort of agreement, and Naruto immediately ignored him, focused intently on the action in front of him.

It went very quickly. Sasuke and Sakura were so far below the skill being displayed in front of them it would be laughable, if it couldn’t very well mean their deaths. So they were smart about it, darting in and out whenever they wouldn’t distract Kakashi. A gout of Sasuke’s flame turned a Suiton jutsu into useless steam, and Sakura’s screeched Doton caught a hail of shuriken in its dirt wall. Sasuke threw one of the explosive tags Naruto had made them, the loud distracting flash-bang giving Kakashi time to jump back and regroup. Kakashi adapted quickly to his students’ presence, a grim set to his eyes, and fought harder than ever.

Naruto watched, heart in his throat, every muscle in his body tensed to move at a moment’s notice. Zabuza was being pushed back, his every move countered, and it was frustrating the huge man, Naruto could tell. His pointed teeth were bared beneath his bandages, and huge sweeps of his sword forced both genin back. Sasuke had both his new katana and his more familiar wakizashi in each hand, but he was so outclassed as a swordsman it wasn’t even funny; even one blow from that huge zanbato would probably break his blades like twigs. Still, he moved with confidence, slashing and whirling around their enemy, keeping Zabuza constantly turning.

“Enough!” Naruto heard him roar, and in a moment they were buried in swirling, choking mist. Naruto’s breath caught, eyes darting around, trying to see anything through the fog. But it was unnaturally thick, clearly a jutsu, and Naruto cursed and dove into one of his pouches for his seals.

Something crackled against his barrier, and Naruto’s head shot up just in time to see a clone of Zabuza *poof* out of existence. “Fuck!” he shouted, and poured more chakra into the barrier. It thickened and darkened, encasing them in a humming blue dome.

“Seals, huh?” Zabuza’s voice drifted through the fog. Naruto spun, trying to identify where it was coming from. He couldn’t hear any of his teammates—the fog must be muffling all sound. “How clever. Such a clever little boy—and blond-haired, too.”

Naruto bared his teeth, clenching an explosive tag in his free hand. “Come out and I’ll show you just how clever I am, teme!” He wished he knew a barrier that could let things *out* but not *in*; he wanted to throw his tag to see if it could disperse some of the mist, but couldn’t get it through the barrier. He could only wait.

“Now, now,” Kakashi’s voice suddenly came, echoing around just like Zabuza’s, “I believe *I* am your opponent, Zabuza.”

“Oh?” Zabuza replied. “But I’m done playing with you. I want to play with the Yellow Flash’s son. How fascinating, to know Namikaze Minato had a child. Are you following your father’s footsteps, boy, and studying sealing?”

Naruto swayed, the edges of his vision going grey. “What?” he whispered.

“Fuuton: Great Breakthrough!” Kakashi’s voice came, and a howling wind tore at the mist, forcing it away. Sasuke and Sakura were caught in what looked like a huge ball of water, held at the fingertips of Zabuza, who was standing, terrifyingly, right in front of Naruto. Naruto took an automatic step back, and immediately felt ashamed. He firmed his grip on his kunai and scowled.

“I dunno who you are, teme, but—”

“But I know exactly who *you* are,” Zabuza growled, and two of his clones attacked Naruto’s barrier from behind, making Naruto flinch and the barrier wobble. Tazuna let out a whimper of fear. “The Yellow Flash’s son. Isn’t Konoha clever, hiding you all these years. Well, with your daddy dead, of course they’d want to keep you out of sight—”

A torrent of fire roared between them, making Zabuza curse and jump out of the way, the prison around Sasuke and Sakura falling. Kakashi stood in front of Naruto, tall and angry, fiercely protective. Sasuke coughed and helped Sakura, bruised and limping, off to the side, out of the way.

“I said,” Kakashi snapped out, voice like iron, “that *I* am your opponent.”

“Touchy subject?” Zabuza bared his pointed teeth in a humorless grin. “Come on, then.”

But Kakashi was clearly done being cautious. His red left eye swirling, he flew into a series of attacks, barraging Zabuza with jutsu and not letting up for a moment. The strain on him was obvious, but he seemed not to care, pounding on the missing-nin until Zabuza was on his knees, barely conscious, huge sword on the ground next to him.

But before Kakashi could go in for the killing blow, senbon flashed out of the trees, landing with perfect accuracy in Zabuza's neck, felling him instantly.

Naruto watched the big man slump to the ground, mind filled with white noise. He blankly watched the Mist hunter-nin exchange words with Kakashi and collect Zabuza's body and sword, unable to form any kind of coherent thought. The only thing echoing through his mind was Zabuza's voice: *The Yellow Flash's son...Namikaze Minato...your father's footsteps...*

The Yellow Flash's son.

The Yellow Flash is the Yondaime Hokage.

The Yondaime Hokage is my father.

"Dobe?" Sasuke asked quietly. Naruto turned his head slowly and saw his two teammates crouched at the edge of his barrier. "You okay?"

Naruto shook his head slowly. He was unable to speak; he didn't know what would come out, if he opened his mouth.

"Naruto," Kakashi said, and crouched by the barrier too, looking *very* worse for wear. Naruto wondered why they were all kneeling, and then realized that he was on his knees too, the dirt and rocks digging into his legs. "Can you let the barrier down?"

Naruto stared at his sensei. "Did you know, Kakashi?" he asked quietly. "Is it true? Is the Yondaime Hokage my father?"

Kakashi hesitated. One of his arms, propping him up on the ground, was dripping blood slowly into the dirt. He looked *awful*. "Yes," he finally let out on a sigh, some unnamed tension leaving his body. "You are the son of Namikaze Minato and Uzumaki Kushina, Naruto."

Then his mismatched eyes rolled up and he collapsed.

"Sensei!" Three voices cried, and Naruto yanked his chakra out of the barrier so fast it gave him a head rush. He didn't let it slow him though, jumping forward to roll Kakashi over as Sasuke and Sakura joined him.

"He's not bleeding heavily," Sakura reported immediately, checking him over with quick hands. "He took some of Zabuza's jutsu head-on, but I can't imagine anything that would cause this..." She pulled up each one of Kakashi's eyelids, and the red one glared back at her, still spinning lazily. She shuddered and quickly let the scarred eyelid fall shut again.

"That's a Sharingan," Sasuke reported, his voice flat. "My clan's doujutsu. I don't know how Kakashi-sensei got one, but if he keeps it covered all the time, he probably can't deactivate it,

which means it probably drains a lot of his chakra.”

“Oh,” Sakura let out a relieved breath. “That makes sense. He’s just suffering from chakra exhaustion. Tazuna-san, how far away are we from your home?” she asked the bridge-builder.

“U-um, about half a day’s travel, I’d say,” stuttered the old man.

“Okay. We can take turns carrying sensei and Tazuna-san. We’ve got to get there as fast as possible, we’re really vulnerable out here. Sasuke, I’d say you take point first—”

“I’ll carry sensei,” Naruto interjected, bending to pick up Kakashi and somehow arrange his long limbs around his person so that none of his teacher was dragging on the ground.

“And I’ll carry you, Tazuna-san.” Sakura picked up their escort despite the old man’s protests and arranged him on her back, nodding at Sasuke. “Let’s get out of here.”

The three genin leapt forward, dashing down the road as fast as they could. *Sensei*, Naruto thought, Kakashi a heavy weight against his back, *what have you been keeping from me? What have I not known, all these years?*

Chapter End Notes

HAHAHAHAHAHAHA idk if any of you saw that coming, but I've been planning this reveal since like the third chapter. I really think it's stupid that if they're so worried about Naruto being discovered by enemies of the Yondaime that they can't even tell him WHO THE FUCK HIS PARENTS ARE, that NO ONE recognizes Naruto when he leaves the village. Fuck, even Kakashi gets mistaken for his father when they visit Suna, and his face is completely covered!

Anyway.

This is a really long chapter, which is part of the reason why it took me so long. I love all of you so much, the reviews and kudos I get for this story are just amazing! I'm really shit at replying to reviews, but they galvanize me like a Raiton jutsu to the ass.

I did so much sword research for this chapter, btw, you have no idea. A [wakizashi](#) is one of the traditional swords of feudal Japan, generally worn accompanying a katana. It's shorter and lighter than a katana, making it easier to wield. A [tanto](#) is an even shorter sword, basically a long dagger with a straight blade - katana and wakizashi, like many traditional Japanese swords, are gently curved. A [zanbato](#), which you know if you've read Rurouni Kenshin, is a huge broadsword designed for someone on foot to take down a samurai and his horse in one blow. Its name literally means 'horse-slaying sword'. I don't know if Zabuza's Kubikiribōchō is technically classed as a zanbato, but that's what it looks like to me, so. Artistic license.

Hahahahaha also don't mention how all of these different swords span like 500 years of Japanese history, believe me, I'm aware. What is historical accuracy, anyway? /dead

Also, I use a lot of 24-hour or military time in this chapter. For my fellow Americans, who are basically the only country I've ever visited who don't use 24-hour time at all (seriously, why? It's so freaking useful, get it together, America), instead of using AM or PM to mark the difference between morning and afternoon, the hours just keep on plugging on after 12 noon: 1pm is 13:00, 2pm is 14:00, etc. No more confusion if people are talking about 7 in the morning or 7 in the evening. In the American military, they refer to it as ~ hours, i.e., 900 hours = 9:00am, 1500 (pronounced fifteen-hundred) hours = 3:00pm. Because the Hidden Villages are basically military dictatorships (and because Japan actually uses 24-time), I make them use 24-hour time.

Also I tossed in a reference to Assassin's Creed did anyone catch it (>.>)

And I think that's it for this chapter. Look at me, talking about Japanese things other than food in my end note!

I love you all and hopefully I will post another chapter soon.

In Which We Meet Some More Familiar Faces

Chapter Summary

The fallout of Zabuza's battle. Kakashi's PhD in guilt rears its head. We enjoy this filler chapter before we get to the meat of the Wave mission.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Kakashi came to consciousness all at once, his brain alert and ready as he kept his eyes closed and catalogued where he was through sound and smell. The scent of brine and the soft sound of waves from the window—he was near water, then. The room he was in smelled a bit musty, like the tatami mats on the floor hadn't been replaced in too long. Rustling and soft voices told him that Naruto and Sakura were in the room with him. Carefully, Kakashi flexed his wrists and ankles to make sure they weren't bound, though all evidence pointed to them successfully reaching Tazuna-san's house. He opened his eye.

"Sensei!" Sakura said, crossing the room and kneeling next to him. "How are you feeling? You were asleep for a while. It's the day after the fight."

"Surprisingly good, considering." Kakashi checked his chakra levels and was indeed rather surprised at how high they were. He must have collapsed more from exhaustion and blood loss, then. Embarrassing, but overall a good thing. He'd be back on his feet very soon. "How are you three? Anything happen?"

"Uh, well..." Sakura cast a glance over her shoulder at Naruto, who—very uncharacteristically—was sitting silently off to the side of the room, not participating in their conversation at all. "We...we got to Tazuna-san's house fine, if that's what you mean. Sasuke-kun's guarding him right now, with one of Naruto's clones. If something happens the clone will dispel to let us know."

Kakashi nodded, trying to lever himself up into a sitting position. Sakura immediately fussed over helping him, adding more pillows to his back so that he could rest against the wall comfortably. Panting slightly from just that much exertion, Kakashi tilted his head so he could stare at Naruto through his uncovered eye.

"Naruto."

The blond head lifted, and blank blue eyes met his. "Yes, sensei?"

Kakashi gestured weakly. "Come over here."

Naruto moved over and dropped down cross-legged on the floor, curling in on himself again. Kakashi sighed.

“So,” he said wearily. “About what you heard.”

“What I was *told*,” Naruto corrected, raising his head defiantly. “What an *enemy ninja* spotted in two minutes of meeting me. Sensei—” his voice cracked on that last word. “*Why?*”

Kakashi closed his grey eye, heartsick. Under his hitai-ate Obito’s eye prickled with the burn of tears. *Always so quick to cry*, he thought nostalgically.

“When you were born,” he said, “it was the day of the Kyuubi attack. Even though she had just given birth, your mother fought and fought to help the Yondaime leash the Kyuubi. Your parents both sacrificed themselves to protect the village that night. After the attack, the Sandaime was afraid that if Konoha’s enemies knew that the Yellow Flash had had a child, they would come after you without your parents to protect you. He decreed that your parentage and the circumstances around your birth were an S-class secret. No one who knew your parents or that you were their son could speak of it, to you or anyone else.”

“The Sandaime did that?” Naruto asked quietly.

Kakashi nodded. “I’m so sorry, Naruto,” he whispered. “I should have tried harder.”

Naruto laughed wetly, ducking his head and surreptitiously wiping his eyes. “Why are you apologizing?” he sniffed. “It’s not your fault.”

“No, but...” And here Kakashi hesitated, his inner caution (and guilt) holding him back. But if he didn’t say it now, he probably never would, and as this event proved, the truth always came out. “Your dad was my jounin sensei,” he admitted. “I was close to both of your parents. I should have done more when you were a kid.”

Naruto stared, blue eyes huge in his face. “You...you knew my parents?” Next to him Sakura let out a little sound, her own eyes filled with tears.

Kakashi nodded. “I did. Your father was a great man.”

Naruto swallowed harshly. “Could...could you tell me about them, sometime?”

“I promise,” Kakashi whispered, ignoring the wrenching in his chest, as if some horrible invisible wound was bleeding into his ribcage, “I will tell you anything you want to know. Anytime you want to ask.” *You deserve to know everything, no matter how much it hurts me to remember. And the Sandaime can’t do anything, now the cat’s out of the bag.*

Naruto reached out and tentatively wrapped a hand around Kakashi’s wrist, eyes downturned. “Thank you, Kakashi.”

The kids stuck close to Tazuna's house for the rest of the day, rotating a restless watch between the three of them. Tazuna's daughter Tsunami was a kind, quiet woman, and her kid Inari was basically never seen. Apparently he'd had some sort of run-in with Sasuke or Naruto or both, according to Kakashi's shameless eavesdropping. He couldn't quite figure out what precisely had been said, but it seemed to have fused his two male genin together at the hip. Kakashi had thought it was basically impossible for them to spend *more* time together, but he'd clearly been wrong.

All three genin informed Kakashi of their concerns about Zabuza. "You told us to just take the head and burn the body, sensei," Sakura said during her shift at his bedside, small hands competently checking Kakashi's few open injuries.

"That hunter-nin was an accomplice of Zabuza's, wasn't he," Sasuke mumbled, perched in the window and watching both Kakashi's bedroom and the outside of the house simultaneously. Kakashi caught a faint red glimmer in the Uchiha's eyes; he was perilously close to awakening the Sharingan.

"Sakura-chan said that Anko-nee-san's told her about senbon users so precise they can make people look like they're dead even when they're not," Naruto reported, leaning against the far wall with his knees drawn up to his chest, arms propped out over them. "You think that's why the hunter-nin didn't just cut off his head, sensei? Because he's on Zabuza's side, so he wanted to save him?"

"At this point, I think it's more than likely," Kakashi replied, munching thoughtfully on his rice porridge. The Wave villagers were just as poor as advertised, so Naruto had taken Sakura out into the forest and taught her how to set traps for small game to take the burden of feeding four extra people off of Tsunami-san's shoulders. They'd been moderately successful, and the savory rice porridge made with bird broth was the product of their success. "It's a clever strategy; keep an ally hidden out of sight while Zabuza fights, and if he looks like he's in trouble, the ally can jump in with the hunter-nin ruse and get him out of there. Most shinobi wouldn't question a hunter-nin, so the ruse just needs to hold up until they get away, and even if they realize it afterwards like we did Zabuza's already long gone."

Naruto scowled and scuffed a hand through his spiky hair in frustration. "Arrgh! That means we're gonna have to fight that guy again! That's so irritating!"

Kakashi hummed his agreement, visible eye crinkling in amusement at his young teammate. "Well, we are ninja after all, subterfuge is something we're very good at." He set his now-empty bowl aside and stretched his arms over his head, letting out a groan of satisfaction as his muscles pulled and stretched. "But, not to sound immodest or anything, Zabuza was worse off than I was at the end of that fight, so he's going to be bedridden for a few more days at least. And I..." Kakashi threw aside the covers and got carefully to his feet, ignoring Naruto's cry of *Sensei!* "...Am already back on my feet," he finished proudly, wobbling only the slightest bit.

"Honestly, sensei," Naruto sighed exasperatedly, taking his elbow to support him as Kakashi began to walk slowly towards the stairs. "Sakura-chan's going to punch you, you know."

Kakashi winced at the thought. Sakura might still have the worst stamina of the group, but she'd been training hard, and her punches *hurt*. "I'm counting on you to protect me, Naruto," he said cheerfully.

Naruto scoffed, pressing close as they began descending the stairs. "Not on your life. Sakura-chan is *scary*."

Sakura did indeed threaten Kakashi with her fists, but some fast talking coupled with judicious use of sad puppy eyes managed to stave her off. Sasuke just rolled his eyes at their ridiculous sensei and rolled up four large stones so they could all sit comfortably at the edge of the water.

"Right, my minions," Kakashi said, lowering himself onto one of them with a sigh, "tell me what you've learned these past two days."

"Gato really is awful," Naruto reported, taking the stone directly to Kakashi's right. Sakura settled on Kakashi's other side, and Sasuke sat across from him to round out their circle. "He's a crime lord with just enough legitimate business to make the daimyo of Wave look the other way. Also, I think he's bribing, like, everyone at court."

Sakura nodded. "I've gone into the main village three times and each time I've seen thugs collecting 'taxes'." Her voice was thick with disgust on the word. "These people have nothing left and Gato's *still* trying to bleed them. It makes me sick, sensei."

"Most of the able-bodied men have disappeared under suspicious circumstances," Sasuke offered. "There's plenty of hunting and fishing around here, but there's just no one to do it. Also, I think Gato probably punishes anyone who tries with some made-up rule, because no one even seems to be attempting it anymore."

"Hmm," Kakashi hummed thoughtfully. The thing was, they were in a bit of a bind. They'd technically finished their mission; they'd escorted Tazuna safely home. But the Hidden Villages tended to not let local crime lords get as bad as Gato had, because it was bad for business. Kakashi hadn't heard even whispers about this Gato guy before they got to Wave, which meant that some intelligence officer in Konoha was seriously dropping the ball, and that was a problem all on its own.

Wave had been hit hard by the loss of Uzushio in the Second Shinobi World War and had never really recovered, caught in the shadows of Fire and Water. It was the only real buffer between Fire Country and Water Country, as tiny as it was, and it behooved Konoha to make sure it was indebted to them rather than Kiri.

"Right," Kakashi said, and his genin sat up straight. How polite they were, letting him think in silence. "Learning moment, my minions! We can't let Gato continue as he has been. Any ideas why?"

"Because he's a *dick*?" Naruto demanded instantly. Sasuke snorted in laughter and immediately covered his mouth, shoulders shaking. Sakura was more open about it, laughing

loudly and unrestrainedly.

“Very astute, Naruto,” Kakashi told him, not hiding his own chuckle. “But I was hoping for something a bit more in-depth.”

Naruto shrugged, foxy grin making the whisker marks on his cheeks crease. “If he gets more powerful, he’ll think he can cause problems for Fire Country.”

“True,” Kakashi acknowledged, and gestured for them to continue.

Sakura made a thoughtful noise. “Wave is between us and Water Country,” she said slowly, clearly feeling her way into an idea. “It’d be good to have a stable, strong barrier in between us?”

“True,” Kakashi said again, pleased. Sakura was their best strategist; he’d hoped she would pick up on that.

“If we defeat Gato, Wave will be indebted to us,” Sasuke said shortly.

Trust the Uchiha to pick up on the interpersonal connection, Kakashi thought wryly. But it was a good balance; Naruto thought in broad strokes and long-term goals, Sakura thought in politics, and Sasuke thought in personal motivation. They made a good team. “True,” Kakashi said for the last time. “All of you made excellent points. If Gato subjugates all of Wave, he’s most likely to start picking at the border villages of Fire Country. We’re traditional enemies with Kiri, so they might even fund Gato to encourage him to cause us problems. But if we defeat Gato and help Wave get back on its feet, we’ll have a strong, stable country in between us and Water, and they’ll be grateful for our help and inclined to support us rather than our enemies. So getting rid of Gato helps us in multiple ways. Plus,” Kakashi eyed Naruto cheekily, “he is, as they say, a dick.”

Naruto cackled.

“So what now, sensei?” Sakura asked, leaning forward eagerly.

“Now, my cute genin,” Kakashi said, biting the base of his thumb and flicking through a familiar set of seals, “I am going to give you a lesson in something called a ‘pre-emptive attack’.”

The tiny pug with droopy eyes who poofed into existence at Kakashi’s summoning was deeply unimpressed with them, their reactions, and even his summoner, as evidenced by the first words out of his mouth.

“By the Dog Star, Kakashi, did they actually let you *reproduce*?”

“Oh my gosh, he’s so cute!” Sakura squealed, clasping her hands together in front of her chest. “Look, he even has a little flak jacket and a hitai-ate! Sensei, why didn’t you tell us you’d contracted with ninken?”

“It never came up,” Kakashi said with a longsuffering sigh, watching Sakura and Naruto crowd around Pakkun while Sasuke pretended disinterest (while scooting so he still had a

good view from his rock).

Pakkun took their admiration as his due, magnanimously allowing them to pet his fur and touch his soft paws. He had them utterly charmed in moments, and if Kakashi didn't put a stop to this quickly, he had a feeling embarrassing genin stories were going to start coming out.

"Okay, Pakkun, how about we get started on what I actually called you here for?" He cut in, waving Sakura and Naruto back to their rocks. They went with sad pouts, but settled quietly enough.

"I don't babysit," Pakkun said immediately.

Kakashi sighed. "I didn't call you for that."

"Then what do you want?"

"No respect," Kakashi lamented, "no appreciation, no listening to your summoner—okay, okay!" he said quickly, as Pakkun flicked his tail and turned around as if to de-summon himself, "I need you to track someone for me. His name is Zabuza, he's a missing-nin. His scent should still be on my jacket." He held out his flak jacket for Pakkun to sniff.

"The scent's totally contaminated," Pakkun grumbled. "Smells of all of your puppies too. How on earth do you expect me to get results when you give me this crap to go on."

"I have faith in my best scent hound," Kakashi said sunnily.

Pakkun sneezed, but Kakashi could tell he was pleased by the flattery. "Fine. Give me Uuhei, Shiba, and Guruko. They can help me search. What do you want us to do when we find him?"

"Well, we're actually looking for his employer, Gato," Kakashi replied. "He should show up to talk to Zabuza at some point. When he does, let us know."

"Roger that, Boss," Pakkun said, as three other poofs of smoke surrounded him, clearing away to reveal the ninken he'd asked for.

More time was lost as all three genin had to coo over the new arrivals (even Sasuke unbent enough to pet them) and introductions were had all around, and then Kakashi gave his hounds the scent and sent them off on their mission.

"Now," he said, standing up and stretching languidly, "we wait."

Ninken, if you aren't aware, literally means 'ninja dogs' (忍犬). The first character there is pronounced *shinobi* or, when attached to another character, *nin* (i.e. 忍者, ninja [the second character means 'person']). The second character usually reads as *inu*, dog, but when attached to another character is usually read as *ken*.

I'm feeling Japanese-deprived now that I'm living in the States and not speaking and reading it everyday. Sorry for the mini kanji lesson.

AND I'M SORRY FOR THE LATENESS AND SHORTNESS OF THIS CHAPTER. I told y'all I was dreading the Wave mission (;A;) I have it all plotted out, I'm just having difficulty writing it down. Bear with me.

In Which This Stupid Arc Comes to an End

Chapter Summary

Team Seven find Zabuza and Haku (and Gato).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Finding Gato was easy, after that. It took the dogs barely eight hours to find the cottage where Zabuza and his accomplice—who they learned was named Haku—were hiding. The four ninja had been preparing to head out after the notification when Uuhei appeared. “Boss, the Gato guy just showed up,” he reported.

Kakashi frowned slightly, glancing up at the setting sun. It was a good time for Gato to appear, catching Zabuza as he was settling in for the night, and Kakashi should have considered that. “Naruto, set several clones to guard Tazuna and his family,” he ordered, shoving the last few things back into the pockets of his flak vest. “Are you three ready to go?”

“Yes, sensei,” the three genin chorused, gathering around him. With quiet *pops*, four more Narutos poofed into existence and immediately scattered to do as ordered.

“Right, let’s go.” Kakashi nodded to Uuhei and leapt into the trees, following his ninken.

The hut where Zabuza was hiding was unsettlingly close to Tazuna’s house, barely half an hour away at a fast run. The four ninja settled into the trees just over the hut, clearly able to hear Gato yelling.

“—Useless, missing-nin scum!” The voice was shouting. “I’m paying you to kill that irritating bridge-builder, and now I come to hear that not only is he still alive, he’s been working on his bridge all day?”

“Five signatures,” Naruto breathed into Kakashi’s ear. “If two are Zabuza and that hunter-nin Haku, then that leaves Gato and two bodyguards.”

Kakashi nodded. “Right. You three, we’re going to do a frontal assault. The important thing will be to neutralize Haku and the two bodyguards. Sakura, you take the one on the left, Naruto, the one on the right. Sasuke, you’re the fastest, you subdue Haku as fast as you can. Use ninja wire and charge it with lightning chakra, that should put him out. Ready?”

The three genin nodded, gripping their weapons of choice firmly.

“Three—two—one!”

In a blur of movement, Kakashi leapt down into the clearing and kicked the door in. He felt his team rush around him, Sakura and Naruto leaping for the bodyguards on either side of the fat man—Gato—and taking them down easily. As Kakashi had thought, they were just ordinary thugs, not chakra trained; he relaxed a little bit. That Haku was *fast*; he (she?) managed to get off two senbon before Sasuke wrapped him up tight, and the crackle of lightning chakra illuminated the angry snarl on his (her) pretty face.

“Evening, all,” Kakashi said brightly.

“Sharingan no Kakashi,” Zabuza rasped from the bed, sitting up with great effort, dark eyes sharp and wary. “Fancy seeing you here.”

“I know, right? Such a coincidence,” Kakashi chirped, and as Gato went to speak he lashed out with one hand, wrapping his fingers around the man’s fat throat and squeezing. Gato gurgled. “And you, good sir, must be Gato! I’ve heard so much about you.” He smiled underneath his mask, letting his one visible eye curve upward. “So we have two options here,” he continued, releasing Gato and gesturing to Naruto and Sakura to let up the two goons they’d subdued.

“Attack them!” Gato rasped, and the two goons, too stupid to see when they were totally outclassed, obeyed. Naruto and Sakura responded immediately, instinctively, and barely ten seconds later two thuds were heard as the goons hit the floor, their throats cut.

Fuck, Kakashi thought, glancing carefully at what he could see of his genin out of the corner of his eye. Sakura made a tiny whimpering noise and pressed the back of her wrist over her mouth. Naruto seemed to wobble on his feet for a second, before he firmed his grip on the two kunai in his hands and seemed to get it together.

And Sasuke...Sasuke, who had made an aborted jerk forward when Gato had spoken, was staring at his teammates with red eyes.

FUCK, Kakashi thought again vehemently, but even as he watched Sasuke blinked and the Sharingan was gone. He’d activated his doujutsu in protection of his teammates, rather than in defense of himself, Kakashi realized in a burst of blinding insight. Well. That was certainly different. He wondered how it would affect the development of Sasuke’s Sharingan.

Since none of his genin seemed like they were going to immediately fall apart, Kakashi turned his attention back to the main problem. “Now, that wasn’t very nice,” he chided Gato, who was pasty white and sweating. “I was going to give you the choice of returning the money you stole to the people of Wave and leaving peacefully, but now I don’t think that’s an option. I think I’ll go with my second option, which was to kill you and just give the gold back myself.”

“You!” Gato spun to look at Zabuza. “You’re contracted to protect me! Protect me!”

Zabuza shook his head, baring the filed teeth of the Seven Swordsmen in a vicious grin. “I’m contracted to kill the *bridge-builder* for you, as you just so kindly reminded me,” he said calmly. “I have no contract to protect *you*. ”

Gato spun to face Kakashi again, face a rictus of fear. Kakashi stepped forward and, without fanfare, broke the man's neck.

He watched the fat man fall to the floor dispassionately. "Are you two all right?" he asked, turning to Sakura and Naruto and dismissing the body in front of him. Gato had been a filthy, greedy roach of a human being, and Kakashi didn't feel any regret about ending his life. He was much more concerned about his genin, who had just made their first kills.

Sakura nodded, hand still over her mouth as if she might throw up if she moved it. She was pale and wide-eyed, and turned her face silently into Kakashi's flak jacket when he wrapped an arm around her shoulders in an awkward embrace. "And you, Naruto?" he asked, turning to look at the blond boy.

Naruto nodded, blue eyes huge, face pale under his tan. "I—I'll be all right, sensei," he whispered, eyes flickering back to the goon at his feet, as if unable to look away for long.

"First kills?" Zabuza asked, leaning back against the wall behind him.

Kakashi nodded. "Not really the way I wanted to do it," he sighed, "but better than most, I suppose. You two do realize if you hadn't killed them, they would have killed you, yes? They wouldn't have hesitated because you look like children. I want you to think about that, okay?"

Sakura nodded again, and Kakashi turned back to Zabuza and Haku. "Sasuke, let him go." Sasuke unwound the ninja wire with a flick of his wrist, the lightning chakra fading with a quiet crackle. Haku immediately stepped up next to the bed but made no other movement, watching them warily.

"So now what?" Zabuza asked roughly.

Kakashi shrugged faux-casually. "Now we go and find Gato's hoard, take enough for an A-rank mission, pay you whatever you were promised, and give the rest back to the people of Wave."

"A right do-gooder, aren't you?" Zabuza sneered.

"Do you mean you actually trusted this sack of shit to keep his word and pay you when you were finished?" Kakashi replied sharply. Zabuza scowled and looked away. "Terumi Mei is planning a rebellion against the Mizukage," Kakashi revealed, and Zabuza's hands twitched, but there was no other tell. "I'm sure she'd appreciate any aid and gold she can get."

"Zabuza-san?" Haku asked softly.

"Quiet, Haku," Zabuza growled. "How can I know you'll keep your word?" he shot at Kakashi.

Kakashi shrugged, sticking his hands in his pockets, deceptively relaxed. "Well, like you said, you were contracted to kill Tazuna. You failed, and now the man who contracted you is dead. There's no reason for you to go after Tazuna again, which means that there's no reason

for us to fight you. Seems like we can all walk away with what we want.” He nudged a toe against Gato’s still corpse. “Well, most of us.”

Zabuza let out a rough bark of laughter. “Sounds good to me. I hated that creep anyway.” He levered himself off the bed with a hard grip on Haku’s shoulder, who immediately wrapped a supporting arm around the nukenin’s back. “Let’s go, then. No way I let you divvy up my gold without me.”

Gato’s huge, ostentatious mansion was easy to find and plunder. Like the mistrustful, stingy idiot he was, Gato had kept all of his treasure hidden in his house, and with Zabuza’s directions they were sorting through piles of stuff in less than an hour. Kakashi had taken care of any guards—no reason for his genin to kill more people than they had to on this trip.

“How much is normal A-rank pay, sensei?” Sakura asked as they sorted through stacks of *ryo* and piles of jewelry and lacquered woodwork.

“Usually about ten ryo,” Kakashi replied, scooping up some interesting-looking scrolls and sealing them away into one of his storage scrolls. Anything that looked like it might contain interesting or valuable information was collected and stored. “Though it depends on the details of the A-rank. This one, with its high level of risk and dangerous opponents,” he nodded to Zabuza, who accepted the acknowledgement with a grunt, “would probably be worth twelve to fifteen ryo.”

“Daaaang,” Naruto whistled. “That’s a lot of money.”

“Even split four ways, it’s a sizeable sum,” Kakashi agreed.

“Life sure is different in Konoha, huh?” Zabuza said gruffly, dumping a shower of silver *monme* into a sack. “In Kiri, you were lucky to get seven ryo for an A-rank.”

Kakashi shrugged. “Fire Country is quite large, and our citizens generally do well for themselves. And Konoha’s the largest, most stable Hidden Village. Our prices reflect that.”

They finished dividing up the money and left the mansion. Zabuza and Haku, after an awkward pause, said their goodbyes and disappeared into the trees. Kakashi wasn’t sure if he’d done the right thing, there; but it was well known that Terumi Mei was planning a rebellion, and a destabilized Kiri caught up in civil war couldn’t cause problems for Konoha, so he felt pretty good about letting the two missing-nin go.

The genin were drooping as they arrived back at Tazuna’s house, the late hour combined with the adrenaline crash causing tired yawns and mumbling as they climbed the outside of the house and slipped in their windows to avoid waking the family.

“Good job, you guys,” Kakashi said quietly, exhaustion pulling at his limbs. Maybe he wasn’t quite as fully recovered as he’d let his team believe. “Naruto, you still have clones monitoring the house, right?”

“Yeah, sensei,” Naruto affirmed, a huge yawn almost splitting his face in two. “Nothing happened while we were gone, one of them just dispelled to tell me.”

“Great. They can be on guard duty tonight. Get some sleep, everybody,” Kakashi ordered, collapsing onto his bed. The genin did the same, all four falling into a sound sleep almost immediately.

—

The next few days were...hectic. Kakashi had informed Tazuna of the leftover treasure in Gato's mansion, and the old man had actually cried. The villagers had divvied up the treasure as evenly as possible, with volunteers taking amounts to other villages and dispersing it as well as they could across Wave. At least it was a small country, Naruto thought, and everyone seemed to know everyone, which made it easy.

With the new influx of money and the renewed resolve of his workers, Tazuna finished his bridge in a matter of days, and with many thanks and apologies and offers of assistance the next time they were in Wave, Team Seven finally started on the path home. Which was good, because Naruto had been having nightmares.

Not super bad ones—or at least he didn't think so. But he couldn't forget about the man he had killed in Zabuza's hut, and it followed him into his dreams. A lot of the time it was very simple, just the fallen corpse of the man on the floor, eyes open as they had been when Naruto had cut his throat, and it wasn't until Naruto woke up in a cold sweat that he realized he'd been terrified. Other times he was running, fighting in pure darkness, knowing his team was in danger but not able to find the enemies he knew were out there.

Their second night back on the road, Kakashi pulled Naruto aside after they'd made camp. “How are you doing, Naruto?” he asked quietly, settling on a fallen tree and gesturing for Naruto to find a seat as well.

“Um, I'm okay, sensei,” Naruto replied, sitting cross-legged on the ground. He didn't know why Kakashi wanted to talk to him separately; everything seemed fine with the team.

“And how are you doing with the man you killed?” Kakashi asked, and it felt like a bucket of ice cascaded through Naruto's stomach.

“Um, fine,” he muttered, picking at the knee of his dark grey pants so he didn't have to meet his teacher's knowing gaze.

Kakashi sighed almost inaudibly. “In the Academy, and in literature, everyone always assumes that killing someone is hard,” the jounin said quietly. “But it's not. Killing another human being is easy. A sharp edge, an unprotected throat, and it's all over in a matter of seconds. It's dealing with the fact that it's so easy that's the hard part.”

If he wasn't careful, Naruto was going to wear a hole in the fabric of his pants with all of his rubbing. “He...he was so much bigger than me,” he whispered. “And he fell over just like that.”

“It'll be like that for a while,” Kakashi agreed. “Until you get your growth spurt, you're going to be a lot smaller but a lot deadlier than most of the people you fight on missions. That's a fact of ninja life. That's why there are such stringent rules about shinobi

disagreements with civilians, and why the Academy trains you to never, ever raise a hand against someone who hasn't made themselves a threat. Being a ninja, knowing so many ways to kill people, carries a lot of responsibility."

"I keep dreaming about him," Naruto mumbled. "Is that normal?"

Kakashi nodded. "Completely normal," he assured him. "And unfortunately, you'll probably have dreams of some kind for the rest of your life. Being a ninja doesn't lend itself to restful sleep. But remember, Naruto, that man was going to kill you. He didn't care that you're a child. He would have killed you without hesitation if you hadn't killed him first, so remember that."

Naruto nodded and took a deep breath. He did feel better now, in some way. It was good to be reminded that he hadn't killed some harmless civilian; he'd killed a hired thug, who had been helping Gato do horrible things to the people of Wave. He'd done a good thing.

"Are you going to talk to Sakura-chan too?" he asked, because Sakura had been very quiet lately, not speaking unless directly spoken to and going around with a haunted look in her eyes.

Kakashi nodded. "I plan on talking to her tomorrow, and Sasuke."

Naruto's forehead furrowed. "Why Sasuke? He didn't kill anybody."

"Yes, but he activated his Sharingan. Haven't you noticed his eyes flickering red every once in a while? He'll need to train it, now that he has it."

Naruto's mouth rounded in surprised realization. "Oh! Yeah, that makes a lotta sense! I read in the library that the Uchiha doujutsu is super cool and can let you copy any jutsu. And you have one too, right sensei? Can I watch you guys train? How do you train a doujutsu, anyway?" He bounced a little in place, mood perking right up at the thought of learning cool new ninja things. And *doujutsu*! They were super private, obviously, clan secrets and all, so Naruto had never seen one in use up close!

"Calm down, Naruto," Kakashi chuckled, the corner of his eye crinkling up fondly. "If Sasuke says it's okay for you to watch, it's fine with me. I wasn't exactly born with the Sharingan, obviously, and now that Sasuke has no older clan members to help him, training's probably going to be a bit slapdash."

"That's okay!" Naruto chirped. "Okay, sensei, are we done talking? I wanna eat dinner!"

"Yes, Naruto, if you don't have any more questions, we're done talking," Kakashi said, and they rejoined the other two members of their team.

Kakashi kept his word, dropping back from the group the next day to talk to Sakura as they broke for lunch. Naruto kept Sasuke busy with his usual chatter, and when they came back to the group Sakura's eyes were red-rimmed but there was a new determination set in her face. Sasuke's conversation happened over dinner that night, Naruto's nosiness negating the need for privacy. Sasuke grumbled that it was fine if his team heard about his doujutsu, they'd

have to know if they were going to use it in battle, after all, and Naruto couldn't help but squeeze his broody friend tight before quickly letting go again in case of retaliation.

All in all, it was a tired but happily accomplished Team Seven that arrived at Konoha's gates two days later, dusty and ready for baths but proudly proclaiming the completion of their first A-rank. They were greeted with warm smiles from the gate guards and, in a happy turn of events, Iruka, waiting just inside the gates to give them all big hugs (barring Kakashi, who got a firm handclasp and a nod instead).

"Go turn in your reports, and then come visit me," the chuunin told them, brown eyes sparkling with pride. "I want to hear *all* about your mission."

"Yay! Dinner at Iruka-nii's!" Naruto cheered, and Team Seven trooped back into their village, home again.

Chapter End Notes

Lolololooooool y'all guess what

I had this chapter finished last Wednesday

And I was like 'I'll wait until Sunday to post! That way it'll be two even weeks since my last update and I can look it over again!'

And now here we are

Five days *after* Sunday

orz my life

BUT HEY GUESS WHAT I GOT INTO GRAD SCHOOL, I CAN DO WHAT I WANT. Lol gaiz, people are actually gonna teach me even more weird stuff about languages, I'm actually gonna have a degree in Applied Linguistics and then you're never going to get away from my rants about Japanese. *\o/*

Fun fact of this chapter:

[Ryo](#) was the official currency in pre-Meiji Japan from the Kamakura period (1185-1333 CE) up until the Meiji Revolution in 1868. In the beginning of the Edo period (1603-1868 CE) the Tokugawa Shogunate attempted to standardize the value of the ryo and create gold, silver, and brass standards. The idea was that one ryo was equal to how much rice could feed a person for a year. Gold coins were called ryo, silver was called monme, and idk wtf brass was called coz nobody gives a fuck about that.

For the purposes of this story, I am basing the value of the ryo off of the early Edo period value, which is commonly thought to have been 1 ryo = 100,000 yen, or approximately 1,000 USD. Therefore an A-rank as stated by Kakashi at ten ryo is approximately equivalent to 10,000 USD. A hefty sum of money, for one mission. (Of course, in actuality the value of the ryo never really worked out like that, but let's ignore historical fact, okay? We're playing with magical ninjas, we do what we want.)

Kakashi and co. took their mission pay in ryo because it's easier to carry and much less unwieldy than hefting around a shit-ton of silver and brass coins, but Zabuza and Haku took their pay in monme because where they're going silver attracts way less attention and they can parcel it out easily without flashing around gold and seeming to be attractively rich to thieves. They don't have a ninja bank that will take gold ryo and split it up for all team members like Team Seven do; they've gotta be practical about this stuff.

What, no, I do not spend way too much time thinking about the practicalities of living in a magic ninja world. FIGHT ME.

In Which We Get Started on Something New

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of the Wave mission. A couple of people are pretty mad. Kakashi doesn't give a fuck. Sasuke experiences some growth as a person!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The Sandaime took a deep pull on his pipe, the cherry at the end glowing bright red. He sat back in his chair and observed the silent Team Seven in front of him, just finished giving their mission report. The silence stretched until the genin, unused to mission reports and being in front of the Hokage, fidgeted uncomfortably.

“So,” Sarutobi finally said, “To recap, the four of you met a nukenin from Kiri, Momochi Zabuza, on your supposedly C-ranked mission, and Zabuza recognized Naruto as the son of the Yondaime. Thus causing the revelation of an S-class secret.”

Kakashi didn't even bat an eye at the subtle displeasure dampening the room with the Hokage's heavy chakra. “Yes, sir,” he replied blandly. The more he'd thought about it, the more he'd become frustrated with the stupid secrecy clause anyway. What good had it ever done, to keep Naruto's parentage from him? “Zabuza went after Naruto specifically, once he saw him using seals. I managed to defeat him, but the secret was already out.”

Sarutobi took another long draw on his pipe, sharp dark eyes examining all four of them under craggy brows. Finally he sighed, filling the air with smoke. “All right. I suppose there's nothing we can do about it now. Did anything else happen on this mission?”

“Zabuza escaped with an accomplice before I could kill him,” Kakashi reported, “and we made it to Tazuna-san's house with no problems. There we learned that a crime lord, Gato, had seized control of Wave and was extorting the citizens. He was the one who had hired Zabuza to eliminate our escort. Because our mission was to protect Tazuna-san until he finished his bridge, I decided that the best way to do so was to eliminate Gato as a threat. We did so, and took the A-rank pay from his coffers.”

“Right,” Sarutobi sighed. “I presume this will all be written down in more detail in your mission reports. Make sure you get those turned into the mission office within a week. Dismissed.”

Naruto didn't move, even as his teammates passed him as they headed for the door. “Jijii, why did you keep it a secret?” he asked bluntly.

Sarutobi observed him for a long moment. "Because the war had only ended a few years before, and your father had many enemies," he finally replied. "I did what I thought was right to protect you."

"Were you *ever* going to tell me?" Naruto asked, his throat tight, hands clenched. *I've graduated from the Academy. I've been a genin for months. If ever there was a good time to tell me, surely it would have been when I became an adult...*

"One day, when I thought the time was right, I would have told you," Sarutobi said. "But now I suppose the question is moot. I will release a decree rescinding the S-class secret. If you wish to find out more about your father, you're free to do so."

Naruto nodded jerkily and headed for the door. Kakashi held it open for him, and Sasuke and Sakura crowded in behind him as he passed, protecting his back.

Naruto took a deep breath as they exited the Administration building into the sunlight, letting it out in a long exhale as he looked up at the clear blue sky. Sakura took his hand, green eyes worried, and Sasuke pressed their shoulders together on his other side.

Naruto turned and gave them a bright smile. "Alright, guys, let's go to Iruka-nii's for dinner!" he said.

Iruka-nii was *not* impressed by the story of their mission. Totally, completely, *violently* not impressed. After his broken bowl and snapped chopsticks were properly disposed of and everyone had settled down a little and put some food in their bellies, Iruka took a deep breath and asked them to go over the story again, now that he was paying a little better attention.

"...An' then we finished Tazuna's bridge, and then we came home," Naruto finished, the second retelling much more subdued than the first had been. It was sobering to remember how scary it had been, how quick and deadly their opponents had been and how Kakashi had had to take care of them. How *Naruto* had taken care of one of them.

Iruka let out a long sigh and sat back, hands in his lap and brow furrowed thoughtfully. "So you know about your dad," he said finally. "Do you have any questions about him? I was only a genin when the attack happened, but I could tell you some more general things about what it was like when he was Hokage."

Naruto shrugged, nudging at his chopsticks so he didn't have to look anyone in the eye. "Think probably I will later," he mumbled. "I can't really think of anything right now. I just..." He swallowed and looked up. "My dad was the *Fourth Hokage*. He was an amazing, strong, awesome ninja. I just...I want to do him proud. I want to become the best I can be, to make my family proud." He blinked away the mist in his eyes and firmed his chin, glancing around at his teammates.

Sasuke reached over and gripped his arm, squeezing comfortingly. "Me too," he said quietly. "I want to make my family proud of the ninja I become." He'd seen real combat now, seen Kakashi actually *fight* with a Sharingan, and the more he thought about it, the more something was *really weird* about Itachi-nii-san the night of the Massacre. Sasuke had never

acknowledged it before, his mind automatically shying away from anything involving That Night, but seeing Naruto face his own hidden past with courage gave him the push he needed.

He took a deep breath. “I think maybe it’s time I give in to the Psych Department’s requests for a session.”

Naruto blinked and raised his head, tilting it to the side curiously. “What do you mean, teme?”

“Every year around the anniversary of the—the Massacre, the Psych Department sends me daily requests for about a week,” Sasuke replied. “I’ve always ignored them before, but... maybe I’m ready to talk about it, a little.”

“If that’s what you want to do,” Kakashi said, dark eye lazily focused on Sasuke. “I can help you set up an appointment.” He seemed completely unsurprised and indifferent, and Sasuke relaxed a bit; he hadn’t realized how much he’d needed that, for no one to make a big fuss about his decision. It was momentous, for him, and because of that, he needed everyone else to treat it as if it was normal.

“Right,” Sasuke nodded. “M-maybe in a couple days?”

Kakashi nodded, and that was that.

“We’ve all done so much,” Sakura spoke up suddenly, from where she’d been sitting silently and absorbing everything. “We’ve gone on this crazy mission, and we’ve killed, and we’ve worked together and done some amazing things. I...” She sat up straight, hands clenched in her lap, eyes blazing. “I don’t ever want to be separated from you guys!” she said, loudly and kind of fast, like if she didn’t say it like that she maybe wouldn’t ever say it. “I want us to become an amazing, strong, powerful team, and make *all* of our families proud!”

“Yeah,” Naruto nodded slowly, and then with increasing confidence. “Yeah. I don’t think I could do it without you guys. It just...it feels right, doesn’t it? To stay together?”

“Yeah,” Sasuke said roughly. “I can’t imagine putting up with any other idiots other than you two, anyway.”

But his real meaning came through clearly, as Naruto grinned and wrapped an arm around his shoulders, shaking him slightly but not letting go, and Sakura scooted up on his other side, surrounding him with warmth and friendship.

“We’re gonna be the best team to ever come out of Konoha!” Naruto declared, and Sasuke and Sakura didn’t disagree.

—

Team Seven slid back into their normal routine almost as if they’d never been gone. Some things had changed, though; Sasuke had changed up his kenjutsu training to include Sharingan training, and now had a standing appointment to see the Psych Division once a week. Genma joined Anko in training Sakura in poisons and assassin-work, which Sakura,

completely sprung back from her first kill, was learning with ferocious determination, and Kurenai helped Sakura out with genjutsu pointers whenever she wasn't busy with her own team. And Kakashi and Iruka were finally collaborating to shove as much sealwork and trapwork down Naruto's throat as they could.

Team Seven worked from sunup to sometimes past sundown, and oftentimes collapsed in a pile on Iruka's couch or spare futon rather than going back to their separate houses. Kakashi and Iruka smiled fondly and made them chip in for groceries for the huge meals they all ate together.

Two weeks after their return, Sasuke stood just inside the gate to the Uchiha district, staring at the silent, empty houses, trying to psych himself up for something he knew he had to do.

Raidō and Hayate had told him yesterday that he'd reached the point in basic swordplay where he really needed to pick a style. He'd been mastering basic kata and kind of learning a mishmash of his two masters' styles up until this point, but now that he'd woken his Sharingan, he really needed a sword style that took advantage of all of the benefits a Sharingan brought.

Which meant that he needed an Uchiha style.

Which meant that he needed to go hunting through the houses of his dead relatives, for all of the scrolls of clan-specific fighting styles that had been left behind.

Which meant going into his *dead relatives' houses*.

"Yoooo, teme~" a familiar voice sang from down the road, and Naruto crashed into Sasuke, wrapping his arms around him from behind. "Watcha doing? You're gonna be late for warmups!"

"I need an Uchiha kenjutsu style to learn," Sasuke replied, his voice sounding kind of funny and distant to his ears. "But all the scrolls are in the compound."

"Oh." Naruto's arms loosened, and he stared into the empty compound too. "You've never...I mean, you just live in your old house, right?"

"Yeah," Sasuke breathed. The streets were *so silent*. The bodies had been taken away and the bloodstains scrubbed clean, but he still remembered how it had looked, before.

"Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!"

Sasuke jerked around to look at his teammate, surprised, as about fifty clones popped into existence. "What are you doing, dobe?"

Naruto grinned at him, whisker marks creasing to give him a rather foxy smile. "C'mon, teme! Kakashi-sensei'll make us do double if we show up late, and we can't have that! My clones can search your compound while we're training!" He sobered up a bit, blue eyes staring earnestly into Sasuke's. "Is there anything else you'd like them to collect, while they're doing this?"

“Um,” Sasuke said, struck speechless by this thoughtful, kind gesture from his teammate, from his *friend*. “Um. I guess, weapons? Might as well gather up all of the weapons, too.”

“Right.” Naruto nodded and turned to his clones. “You heard that, boys! All of the scrolls in the compound, just gather them up into sealing scrolls! Make sure you mark where they came from, don’t wanna make Teme confused.” He shot Sasuke a teasing grin. “And all the weapons! Anything you find!”

“Yes, Boss!” The clones chorused, and leapt around the two genin with whoops, darting into the Uchiha Compound to begin their task.

“C’mon,” Naruto said gently, taking Sasuke’s arm and leading his gobsmacked teammate away. “Let’s get to practice.”

—

“So,” Kakashi said, and paused.

His genin looked up at him from their training, Sakura casually catching the last shuriken that Sasuke had just thrown at her and dropping it into her pouch. “What’s up, sensei?” she asked, breathing hard and taking the opportunity to stretch and take a drink of water.

“Well,” Kakashi said, and paused.

Naruto and Sasuke, also breathing hard, raised their eyebrows at him in unison. Naruto wiped away the sweat on his forehead and caught his water bottle as Sasuke tossed it in his direction. “Dunno if I’ve ever seen you speechless before, sensei,” he grinned.

Kakashi felt a flicker of a smile form behind his mask, but it disappeared soon enough. “We talked about this a little bit,” he said haltingly, “but I don’t know if it’s what you really want to do. If it’s not, there’s no rush. Zero rush. Seriously, you guys can take as long as you want. Don’t do this unless you’re sure.”

Now all three genin were looking at him with concern. “What is it, sensei?” Sasuke asked, dark eyes sharp.

Kakashi took a deep breath. “The Chuunin Exams will be held in Konoha in a month’s time,” he said. “I want to know if you guys want to enter.”

It was a testament, Kakashi thought, to how mature they were already becoming that none of them immediately leapt on the suggestion.

“Huh,” Naruto said thoughtfully, eyes going distant as he thought over the idea. “I mean, we’ve only been genin for like, six months...”

“But we’ve come so far since then,” Sakura interrupted, propping her hands on her hips and twisting her back. “We’ve learned so much.”

“It would be good to see how we measure up against other genin teams,” Sasuke said slowly. “And since they’re offered in Konoha this time...”

All three of them looked at Kakashi. “Do you think we could pass, sensei?” Sakura asked.

A month ago, Kakashi would have said no. He’d been considering entering them for exactly the same reasons they’d just listed, because it would do them good to see what other genin teams with more experience could do, and with Konoha hosting, it was relatively risk-free. But he wouldn’t have said they could *pass*.

But now...

“I think you have a good chance,” he admitted. “You’re *remarkably* well-rounded, for genin fresh out of the Academy. You’re disciplined and hard-working, and you work well together as a team. Even individually, you’re very strong. It’s all up to this year’s challenges, of course, but you might be able to pass as a team.”

“Okay,” Naruto said, and all three genin had a spark of determination in their eyes that hadn’t been there before. “Okay, sensei. Let’s do it. Sign us up.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay y'all, I am SO sorry that this took so long! I have no excuse tbh, I'm just an incredibly lazy person (;A;)

AND IT'S NOT EVEN AS LONG AS I'D LIKE. But right before the Chuunin Exams was a really good stopping place so I figured I'd rather put out a short chapter more quickly than agonizing for (let's be real) another month on the beginning of the Exams.

I will do my godawful best to get the next chapter out sooner. YOU'D THINK, BECAUSE I HAVE ALL THIS SHIT PLOTTED OUT, THAT IT'D BE EASY TO WRITE, BUT NOOOOO, GOTTA MAKE SUNSHINE SWEAT AND CRY AND PROCRASTINATE ALL OVER THE PLACE. GDI.

But gaiz, I plotted out more chapters basically up to the climax of the story and I'm soooooo excited you have no idea it's gonna be great ohohohohoho >:D

In Which The Forest of Death Explodes a Little Bit

Chapter Summary

THE CHUUNIN EXAAAAAMS. Our plucky protagonists kick names and take ass. Kakashi is a paranoid motherfucker. In a loving way, of course.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sakura didn't tell anyone, but the day of the first part of the Chuunin Exam, she threw up twice before she even made it out her front door. Her mother tutted about her taking a long time in the bathroom, but luckily Sakura managed to hide the sound and smell with some quick-thinking genjutsu, so she made it out the door without any hysterics.

The ground seemed to wobble beneath her sandals a little bit as she made her way toward the Administration Building. Sakura gritted her teeth and forged onward stubbornly, unhooking her water pouch from her pocket and taking a few big gulps, swishing it around in her mouth and spitting it out inelegantly onto the dirt street. A passing civilian couple stared aghast at her manners, but Sakura ignored them, sliding her water pouch away again and picking up the pace.

She couldn't help it. She'd done research, as soon as they'd agreed to compete in the Exams, on the last few Exams to have taken place, and the dry accounts of the injuries (and deaths!) involved had left her trembling at night. The thought of Sasuke or Naruto missing an eye or, the gods forbid, an *arm* was horrifying.

But they'd trained! She told herself as the Administrative Building loomed in front of her. They'd trained like fiends, running through scenario after scenario as if they were already in the Exams, answering Kakashi's and Iruka's quizzes on stealth and strategy and tracking during their lunch breaks, rushing through as many D-ranks and the occasional C-rank (only ever close to home) as they could so they could save up money for gear. Sakura had more things sealed up in scrolls on her person than her parents had in their entire *house*.

It was going to be fine, Sakura told herself firmly, picking up the pace as she saw the spiky black hair of her Uchiha teammate by the side of the entrance. The first part of the Exam was usually some form of intelligence/stealth tracking. That was easy, for them; Naruto's henge-d clones and Sasuke's Sharingan were invaluable.

"Morning, Sasuke-kun," she greeted, trying to make sure her voice was light and cheerful.

"Morning," Sasuke grunted, turning at an angle to the wall as she joined him so they could each watch one end of the street without totally having their backs exposed. Sakura tucked in next to him, the stance feeling totally natural after all of the times their many sensei had

sprung sneak attacks on them. “Constant vigilance!” Anko had grinned, after walking straight up to them under a henge and managing to tie Naruto and Sakura together and bury Sasuke in the ground up to his hips.

“This should *not* be part of our training,” Sasuke had gritted out, trying to free himself of the dirt.

Anko had laughed tauntingly. “Oh, baby Uchiha, how else are you supposed to learn to be aware of your surroundings?”

The two of them were quiet as they waited for Naruto, only occasionally breaking the silence as they asked each other about things they’d packed or items they’d prepared. Sakura was so, so glad she’d gotten over her crush on Sasuke a long time ago; they were much better friends, and honestly Sasuke was not really a good romantic catch, unless you were ready to settle down and rebuild an entire *clan* with him. Which Sakura was not. But he had a much quieter personality than Naruto’s, and as much as Sakura had come to adore their sunshiney blond friend, he was very loud most of the time.

Except, apparently, when he was sneaking up on them.

“Hey guys,” a voice said from directly in front of them.

Sakura jumped, lashing out with her fist and feeling it connect with something at the same time as Sasuke swore and whipped out a kunai, both of them leaping apart. Sakura skidded to a halt twenty feet away, crouching and trying to see where the voice was coming from. Sasuke, feet attached to the side of the Administrative Building as if by glue, brought his fingers into the Release seal. “Kai!”

“Ow, Sakura-chan,” the voice complained, coughing slightly, but nothing appeared. “You punch *hard*.”

“I’ve been working on my hand-to-hand with Anko-nee-san,” Sakura said faintly. “Naruto, where *are* you?”

Naruto giggled and all of a sudden appeared in the middle of the street, whiskered face beaming. “It’s cool, right? I finally got it to work, and Iruka-nii and Kakashi-sensei said it was stable enough to use! It’s my Invisibility seal!” He flashed a piece of paper that had been attached to the front of his clothes. “Well, it’s not really invisibility,” he continued as his teammates crowded around him to examine it. “It’s more like, ‘Don’t notice me!’ You just channel some chakra into it, and everyone around you is convinced you don’t exist! They’ll see you but not register you, you’re like a total nonentity! And it’s not a genjutsu, so like teme demonstrated, it can’t be dispelled!”

“Wow, Naruto,” Sakura said, impressed. “That’s really cool!”

“You made ones for us, right?” Sasuke asked him.

Naruto’s grin became sly, and—displaying excellent sleight-of-hand—he made two more papers appear between his fingers. “Of course, teme, what kind of teammate do you think I

am?”

Sakura took her seal and stared at it, feeling an invisible weight lift from her shoulders and straighten her back. Of *course* they could do this; they were Team Seven! Naruto had slaved over these seals so they could have an extra layer of protection, just as they had all slaved over their training so they wouldn't fail each other and get hurt.

Sakura slapped the seal to the front of her vest and grinned at her two teammates. “Let's go *crush* them,” she said.

—

“Five hundred silver on at least one member of Team Ten making it through the Third Exam,” Asuma said, cigarette clenched between his teeth even though the Jounin Stand-by Station was strictly no-flame.

“Same on Team Eight,” Kurenai said instantly.

Genma wrote down their wagers diligently, as well as a few other jounin's bets.

“A thousand on Team Seven making it through Part Two faster than anyone else,” Kakashi said lazily, book held up in front of his face.

“Ah, good one!” Genma grinned, writing it down. After teaching Sakura for the past weeks, Genma had a very good idea of what Team Seven was capable of.

“Five hundred silver on my Youthful Genin beating my Eternal Rival's team to the tower!” Gai boomed, flashing Kakashi a grin and a thumbs-up. Kakashi blinked slowly and turned back to his book.

“Five hundred on Sakura punching one of her opponents unconscious!” Anko declared. Then, from the doorway, came Iruka's voice.

“One ryo on *all* of Team Seven making it through the Third Exam.”

The room hushed, all the jounin turning to look at the schoolteacher. Iruka seemed unperturbed at the thought of his large bet, simply smiling and moving into the room to sit in one of the seats next to Genma at his table.

Kakashi eyed him with his one visible eye from where he was stretched out on a couch, not putting down his book. “A bit confident, aren't we?”

“Are you *not*?” Iruka asked him.

“I was trying to at least give them false hope,” Kakashi said longsufferingly. Iruka snorted softly.

“Ahh, mean, Iruka!” Anko pouted, draping herself over his back. “Now I should up my bet too!”

“Shut up everybody, it’s starting!” Genma shouted, and immediately everyone gathered around the crystal ball set up in the middle of the room. Rather than having all the jounin coming up with their own ways to spy on the First Exam and very likely scaring the pants off of the chuunin invigilating the exam, the Hokage had agreed to set up a crystal ball in the Standby Lounge for everyone to watch.

“Where the heck are our kids?” Iruka muttered to Kakashi, who had got off his couch for a better vantage point.

“Must be hiding somewhere,” Kakashi muttered back. There was no way they’d get caught by Kotetsu and Izumo’s little trick with the room numbers. “Oh, there they are.” The door had just opened, letting in Gai’s team with Team Seven following them.

Iruka’s forehead scrunched. “Nobody’s paying them any attention,” he whispered.

Kakashi smirked. “Must be Naruto’s new seal.” And it was good to know that although it affected everyone within sense range—sight, smell, sound, etc.—of the seal, it did not affect long-range viewing jutsu. They’d have to experiment more, after the Exams.

The three genin dropped the seal one at a time, at different parts of the room, pretending as if they’d been there the whole time and simply no one had seen them. Kakashi saw Kiba start and Akamaru’s nose twitch curiously in Naruto’s direction, where he’d released the seal right behind Shino. It must have been jarring to suddenly realize someone who you hadn’t smelled or heard was suddenly standing so close.

Ibiki didn’t make his kids even blink, Kakashi noted approvingly, and the paper exam was no problem at all. Sasuke used his Sharingan to copy the disguised chuunin next to him’s arm movements. Sakura actually knew all the answers, excellent researcher that she was, and Naruto knew a bunch of them too, though there were a few he stumbled over. Kakashi watched, wondering how he was going to get those ones, when all of a sudden he began writing again on the questions he’d skipped over. Huh. Kakashi would have to ask how he’d cheated after they finished the Exam.

Then came the tenth question. Kakashi watched with bated breath, though he’d never admit to it. He knew Sakura had been more anxious over the Exams than she’d let on. But his kids sat like statues through several other teams (both plants and real contenders) departing, and Kakashi let out a little silent breath, sitting back in his chair a bit.

First part down. Two to go.

—

That had been *easy*.

Sakura let out a long breath at the reveal of the trick of the tenth question, sitting back in her chair. She’d never even been seriously tempted to give up; this was *their* time, and they were going to *kill* this test. She couldn’t imagine letting down her teammates down in such a way; they succeeded together or they failed together, and that was it. Her boys, of course, being two of the stubbornest people she’d ever met, didn’t raise their hands either.

Then Anko made her grand entrance, and Sakura, Naruto, and Sasuke all had to stifle bursts of laughter. God, sometimes her nee-san was *ridiculous*.

Smart, though, to not give them any time to rest before the next part of the Exam, Sakura mused as they were all herded out of the room and through the village, Sasuke and Naruto coming up to flank her on either side as they hopped over the roofs after Anko. If the other teams hadn't come prepared for a survival test, they were shit out of luck.

Sakura absently patted her left hip, where the scroll sealing the absolutely beautiful set of poisons that Anko and Genma had given her as an exam present rested. She'd already laced some sets of senbon and shuriken with paralytics and hallucinogens, not wanting to use the lethal ones in an exam where they weren't actually supposed to kill anyone. Her other pockets held her scrolls of survival gear, weapons, and med-kit. She, like the other two members of Team Seven, came *prepared*. Their teachers would hardly let them do any less.

When they reached the gates into Training Ground 44 and Anko-nee told them what they would be doing, Sakura relaxed a little bit more. A lot of the training they'd been doing both with their teachers and the other two rookie teams had been just like this: courier missions with a chance of meeting hostiles on the route. This was only different in that the terrain was going to be dangerous as well, and they actually had to search out a hostile team. Team Seven received their scroll—Heaven—and were led to their gate.

Sakura looked over at Naruto and Sasuke. "Ready?" she asked, tightening her arm guards and checking to make sure her gathered braid was still tight and secure.

Naruto nodded, checking his seals and readjusting his thigh holster. "Invisibility seals?" he asked quietly.

"Best option," Sasuke agreed, doing his own gear check. "We don't want to attract more attention than we can handle. If we can shadow some teams and find out what scroll they have, then take them out quickly, we can avoid most of the fighting."

"We should try to avoid Konoha teams as well, if we can," Sakura said. "We're from the same village. There's no point in beating one of our own teams; we need to look strong against the other villages, so we need as many teams as possible to pass."

"Smart," Naruto nodded. "Okay, on three?" He pressed his hand against his breast pocket, where his seal was hidden.

Sakura and Sasuke nodded, ready.

"One—two—three!"

And they disappeared from perception.

—

The first hour was easy. Team Seven followed three teams before they found one with an Earth scroll, a team from Grass who were completely out of their depth in the huge, close

trees. Sakura almost felt bad for them, considering how easy it was for Team Seven to take their scroll—but only almost. This was, after all, an exam to very literally find the best ninjas. If the Grass team couldn't cut it, they couldn't cut it.

"Right," Naruto said, cleaning off his blades on one of the downed Grass ninja's shirts. "What should we do with them?"

This was an excellent question, because they'd all got at least scratched by one of Sakura's paralytics, which meant they'd be unable to move for anywhere between one and five hours, depending on how much poison had entered their bloodstream. Which meant that they'd be completely vulnerable to the local fauna, as well as any other teams that came by.

"Hmm." Sakura propped her hands on her hips, surveying the area. "Let's stick them over there by that tree. I barely scratched one of them, he should be able to move pretty soon." She lugged one stiff body over to the tree and propped him upright. "Listen," she told the boy, looking into his furious eyes. "The paralytic should wear off in an hour or two. Whoever can move first is going to have to protect you guys from the other beasties in here. I don't know if you've seen, but there are huge, nasty creatures in here, and they'd love to eat you for lunch. That's about as far as I'm willing to go for foreign nin," she said, glancing over at her teammates as they dragged the other two downed team members over.

"Yeah," Sasuke shrugged. "You'll still have a few days to get both scrolls back," he told the one he'd dragged over. "Good luck trying to get both, though." They prepared to leave, rechecking returned weapons and scrolls, but before they could leap away into the trees, they were interrupted.

"Well, well," a voice purred. Sakura, Sasuke, and Naruto immediately whipped around, drawing weapons and dropping into ready stances. A tall figure emerged from the trees—another Grass nin, a woman, but with no sign of her teammates. Sakura immediately began scanning the area around them, unwilling to get ambushed. "Here you are already with both scrolls," the strange woman continued, eyes unsettlingly slow to blink. "I was going to suggest we battle for them. Ah well."

"If you want to help your village-mates, they're just paralyzed," Naruto said warily, taking a step to the side to better protect their flank. "They'll be fine in a few hours."

The woman barely even glanced at the three Grass nin at the base of the tree. "No," she said dismissively. "If they were defeated, it's no concern of mine. I'm far more interested in you three. I guess I'll just have to take what I want by force." And, in an utterly disturbing burst of speed, the woman's neck shot out toward Sasuke, mouth wide and—and *fangs* bared.

But none of them were there when the head struck. Far too used to Kakashi and his horrible habit of attacking at full speed whenever and wherever he could, the three teammates' reflexes were honed and ready, and all three leapt straight up for the trees as soon as the strange woman began to move.

"What the hell?" Naruto cursed, backflipping over a branch and firing off a hail of shuriken after the freaky ninja chasing them. "I've never seen anything like that! It's like she's got no bones!"

“Really weird,” Sakura agreed, shoving extra chakra into her legs to catch up with Naruto. But the two of them quickly realized that the woman was uninterested in them; she seemed to be completely focused on *Sasuke*, and in a very concerning way.

“Shit,” Naruto cursed, throwing a kunai and barely managing to deflect a long arm that would have stabbed Sasuke through the shoulder. “What the hell is wrong with you, lady!?”

But the woman was changing even before their eyes, Grass uniform melting away to reveal purple rope and yellow eyes and long white tunic—

“Oh, Shodaime protect us,” Sakura breathed. “Guys, it’s *Orochimaru!*”

Sasuke blew a huge fireball back at their pursuer, who cackled out a laugh and sent razor-sharp wind whipping after them, dispelling the fire as if it had never been. “Oh, clever girl,” he crooned. “But are your teammates as clever?”

“We know who you are,” Sasuke grunted, skidding across the dirt on his knees as he ducked under a lightning-fast sweep of Orochimaru’s sword. “As an S-class missing-nin, you are forbidden from being within Konoha’s borders unless you’re captured and are being brought in. Why are you here?”

“So smart, little Uchiha.” Orochimaru weaved lazily between a shower of Sakura’s senbon, and oh, how she wished she’d laced at least a *few* with one of her deadly poisons! “I’m here for you, of course. And, to a lesser extent, your teammate.” His creepy yellow eyes flashed in Naruto’s direction.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. They were *so* screwed. There was no way the three of them could take on one of the Sannin; they were completely outclassed. The only reason they were still alive was because Orochimaru was toying with them. Sakura forced tears back and re-firmed her grip on her kunai, glancing around as she tried to figure out a way to get them out of this alive.

They were going to have to hit hard, and hit fast, throw everything they possibly could at him and then run like hell for the Tower. If they could make it—if they could even make enough of a fuss to draw the attention of the invigilators—

Sakura formed a few hand seals and dropped into the ground, traveling through it as fast as she could, appearing behind Orochimaru and frantically signaling to Naruto and Sasuke. *Go hard—kill—run away—* she signed as fast as she could.

To their credit, Naruto and Sasuke didn’t even pause. They attacked in concert, turning on a dime from trying to retreat through the trees to lunging straight at the missing-nin. “Tajuu Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!” Naruto shouted, and *thousands* of Narutos popped into existence around them, all hurling themselves with warcries at Orochimaru.

Orochimaru barely even blinked, dispelling them ten at a time as he whirled in a circle, sword a gleaming blur in his hand. Fire roared through the trees again, immolating hundreds of the clones, but then Orochimaru had to stop and defend against Sasuke, who had a sword in each hand and was attacking as fast and as furiously as he could.

Sakura had lost sight of the real Naruto in the scrum, but she was too busy working on her own side to look for him. Luckily Orochimaru seemed occupied with the remaining clones and Sasuke, an ugly snarl now marring his androgynous face as he fought.

Then the explosions started.

YES, Naruto, Sakura thought, beyond glad that they'd trained so much. Naruto had seen what she was doing, was improvising with his explosive tags to help her, and Sasuke was losing but trying so hard to help too—

With a terrifying roar, four of Kakashi's eight dogs leapt into the clearing, Bull leading the charge and quite literally bowling Orochimaru over. But the Sannin was up in the next second, sending wind-blades whipping through them with a scream of rage. The last of the clones dispelled and Sakura heard one of the dogs let out a yelp of pain, but she couldn't look because he was almost there, almost—

Sasuke slashed viciously at Orochimaru's head, katana crackling with lightning chakra, and Orochimaru took one more step.

And Sakura pulled as hard as she could, lifting and wrenching with all of the chakra-assisted force she had, and the ninja wire in her trap severed Orochimaru's left leg below the knee.

“Run!” she shouted even as Orochimaru toppled, bursting past Akino and Urushi, and Naruto and Sasuke followed her without question, because even missing a leg it was unlikely they'd be able to defeat him, Orochimaru was a *legend*, and now he'd be pissed and not underestimate them again. They *had* to get to the tower.

The four other ninken burst into the clearing as they left it, bloodcurdling howls raising the hair on Sakura's arms, but she didn't stop.

“Other—ninja—incoming!” Naruto gasped, his mouth bleeding and favoring his side.
“Kakashi's with them!”

Oh thank the gods, Sakura thought. *They'll take care of Orochimaru.*

Sure enough, chakra roared and filled the air behind them as what seemed like every jounin in Konoha descended on the Forest of Death.

—

Kakashi limped wearily into the tower, surrounded by the other jounin who'd answered his dogs' call to action. Some were worse off than others, some had to be supported into the tower because they couldn't walk on their own, but they hadn't lost anybody, which was a miracle, considering who they'd been facing.

But maybe not, considering the condition they'd found him in—

“Sensei!” cried three voices, and Kakashi raised his arms as three bodies collided solidly with his torso.

“Hey, guys,” he rasped tiredly, wrapping his arms around as much of his kids as he could reach. His entire body was sore and his left arm was maybe bleeding onto Sasuke a little, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. His team was *safe*.

“You’re okay?” Naruto asked, looking up into his face. “Did you kill Orochimaru?”

Kakashi shook his head. “He escaped, unfortunately,” he sighed. “But nice job with his leg.”

“That was Sakura,” Sasuke told him, dark eyes solemn. “She told us to attack him as hard as we could, and she set a trap with ninja wire and we drove him into it, and it sliced off his leg like *that*.” He sliced his hand through the air, mimicking what Sakura’s wire had done.

“Yeah?” Kakashi smiled at a pink-faced Sakura and ruffled her messy hair, her braid already coming undone and wisping around her head. “Great job. Seriously, you three, you did amazingly well. And you already had both scrolls? Did you open them?”

“We did!” Naruto reported, and he turned to point across the room, where Iruka was helping the injured jounin and answering a masked ANBU’s questions at the same time. “Iruka-nii was on the other side! He was super worried, apparently all of you went dashing off but he couldn’t because he’d been attached to our scroll so he had to wait until we summoned him.”

“Right,” Kakashi said, and winced as one of them bumped his wrenched elbow. “Well, I think I need to sit down.”

His genin helped him to a chair, fussing and fluttering over him like he was about to die. Sakura brought him some water, and the boys cleaned and bandaged his obvious wounds.

“Are your dogs okay, sensei?” Sakura asked, hovering.

“Why were they in the forest anyway?” Naruto asked.

Kakashi nodded. “I had them following you three, just to make sure you were okay. They’ll be fine. A couple of them were injured, but they’ll all recover. They went back to the Summon World to heal.”

“You’re so paranoid, sensei,” Naruto said fondly.

Kakashi smiled wearily. “Did Orochimaru say what he was doing here?”

The three genin exchanged hesitant looks. “He...he said he wanted me,” Sasuke mumbled. “He tried to bite me? I guess?”

“And me,” Naruto added, “but he was mostly focused on Sasuke. I was secondary.”

Kakashi stared, and then let out a huge sigh. “Well. That’s very not good.”

—

The Second Exam ended in a great deal of confusion. Teams started arriving at the Tower, exultant in their finish, only to realize that something much larger had happened, given all of

the high-ranked jounin everywhere and the animal-masked ANBU perched in every corner, here and then gone when you turned your head.

Naruto and his teammates had told and retold the account of their encounter with Orochimaru what felt like a dozen times, to a whole variety of people—a bunch of ANBU, then to Ibiki who'd been their First Exam invigilator, then to a sharp-eyed Nara and a pretty blond man who introduced themselves as Shikaku and Inoichi, who Sakura had whispered were Ino and Shikamaru's dads. *Then* they had to tell their story *again* to the Hokage.

All in all, it was a thoroughly exhausted and grumpy Team Seven who finally gathered five days later to hear the details of the Third Exam. They'd been fed and treated and allowed to sleep, but they weren't allowed to leave the Tower until the Exam was finished, and that on top of the endless questioning was really starting to get on their nerves. It wasn't *their* fault that Orochimaru had attacked them!

It was a small number of teams who made it through to the Third Exam. Two had got caught up in the jounin's fight with Orochimaru, their scrolls inadvertently destroyed; a few had opened their scrolls before reaching the tower and been disqualified. Others had been defeated. Some were killed. The second team to reach the tower, a Sand team of siblings, made Naruto feel *very* uneasy. The youngest, a small red-haired boy with pale green eyes and a scar in the shape of the kanji '*ai*' on his forehead, crept out Naruto's sensor ability like *whoa*. His chakra was immense, a roiling, seething mass that seemed distinctly predatory. And he seemed to have two *different* chakras? Was that even possible? Naruto didn't understand the kid at *all*.

So he stayed far away. It freaked him out, and after the Wave mission *and* Orochimaru, he was trusting his instincts about things that freaked him out.

Sakura wove absent-minded genjutsu around them and the arena, little things like making the walls seem a little farther away than they actually were, turning Sasuke's eyes light blue, fixing the rips in Naruto's mesh shirt to make it look perfect again (he'd only brought two shirts, and the other one was currently being worn by Sasuke, whose clothing scroll had been destroyed). The feel of her chakra dancing across his skin was refreshing, like lying against soft, cool earth after a hot workout. Naruto figured it was because she was an Earth-type; Sasuke next to him felt hot and prickly, like there was lightning crackling just underneath the surface of his skin, waiting to come out.

"You will be battling one-on-one for the Final Exam," the Hokage said, and Naruto tuned back into what was happening at the front of the room. "The fights will take place one month from today, to give you time to prepare to face your opponent. We will now choose your pairings." He turned to a weird machine some chuunin were messing with, and it whirled to life.

"Must be a random generator of some kind," Sasuke murmured, eyes flicking over the other genin around them in the arena. More than half of them were Konoha nin; all three of the rookie teams had made it through the Second Exam, as had the older team they'd followed into the First Exam room, with the kid with the bowl cut and the Hyuuga boy who had to be related to Hinata somehow. All in all, six teams had made it through: four from Konoha, one from Suna, and one from Oto. That meant eighteen participants and nine matches.

Naruto nodded. “It’s more than likely we’ll get matched up against another Konoha nin,” he replied, also looking around. “Only two foreign teams made it through.”

“We’ll just have to show ourselves in the best light we can,” Sakura said, flicking her fingers at Ino’s back and making her long hair turn bright blue. Chouji, catching the change out of the corner of his eye, choked back a snort of laughter. Grinning slyly, Sakura changed the ground beneath Chouji to look like a dark hole in the ground.

A pointed cough came from their right, and all three teammates glanced subtly to the side to see Iruka staring expectantly at Sakura. With a tiny pout, Sakura clenched her fingers into fists and both genjutsu disappeared. Kakashi, slouching next to Iruka, gave them a sly wink.

“Haruno Sakura and Hyuuga Neji,” announced the Hokage, and Sakura turned in surprise to stare at the older Hyuuga boy, who was looking back at her, white eyes unreadable.

“Aw, shit,” she muttered. Naruto squeezed her shoulder sympathetically.

“Tough luck, Sakura-chan.” It really was a bad matchup for her; the Gentle Fist fighting style precluded any of her close-range taijutsu, and with the Byakugan, genjutsu were useless.

Sakura shrugged philosophically. “I’ll just have to outsmart him.” She was already mulling over the possibilities.

“Uzumaki Naruto and Kankuro,” The Hokage announced.

Naruto wrinkled his forehead. “Who?” He looked around.

“Oh, that must be him,” Sasuke pointed. Naruto looked over to see the big painted kid from Suna staring back at him, grinning. He gave a little shudder. Well, at least it wasn’t—

“Uchiha Sasuke and Gaara,” announced the Hokage, and Naruto’s insides turned slowly over in dread as the redheaded boy next to Kankuro turned to stare at Naruto’s best friend.

Chapter End Notes

All right y'all, shit be gettin' real. Here is where we start getting into the REAL timeline changes. What do you think???? I'm super interested to hear y'all's thoughts!

It was pointed out to me last chapter that it had been a long time since I'd had any of Sakura's POV, just as I was thinking the exact same thing xDD so it worked out really well that Sakura had to strategize most of this chapter! I do love her, but sometimes I forget her just because she's so well-balanced compared to Sasuke the walking implosion and Kakashi and Naruto the mess of Definitely Not Feelings.

Huge shoutout to the [Chuunin Exams](#) page on Naruto Wiki. I didn't want to go back and watch the episodes again, so I basically lived on the wiki while writing this chapter. Also, before people try to tell me, I KNOW that the canon has a preliminary round to whittle down the numbers of the final candidates. In my story, because of Orochimaru's resounding defeat, Kabuto's team just fucking up and disappears, so there are 6 instead of 7 final teams, bringing the number of finalists to 18 genin. 9 one-on-one matches, whittling to 4, then two, then a three-person free-for-all, seems totally reasonable to me. Also I don't fucking want to write a preliminary round. Also we all know we're never going to make it to the final round anyway.

I've been remiss in not mentioning my writing influences. I've been super influenced by many fantastic writers' headcanons here on ao3. [blackkat](#), as I'm sure she is for many of you, is a huuuge part of my Naruto fandom experience. Naruto's Invisibility Seals, as well as much of Team Seven's fight with Orochimaru in this chapter are inspired by her depiction of their fight in her work [backslide](#). Another notable fic for me is [MueraRashaye's](#) excellent teambuilding fic [a political perspective](#), from which I take a lot of Kakashi's method for teambuilding. Last chapter's scene with Naruto helping Sasuke search the Uchiha compound with his clones is also inspired by that fic. BASICALLY ASSUME I'VE READ EVERY TEAMBUILDING FIC ON AO3, OKAY, BUT FEEL FREE TO GIVE ME RECS!! If you want some recs of your own (or some serious Kakashi love, because idk if y'all can tell, but he IS my favorite), feel free to go look at my bookmarks! Or ask, if you're looking for something specific :)

I've also been remiss in not mentioning all of the FANTASTIC reviews I get for this story. Y'all seriously are the best! I don't answer a lot of reviews unless you ask me a question, or make a particularly insightful comment about the story, but please know I read and love every single one of them!! When I'm in a writing slump and trying to kick myself back into writing this fic, I often go back and reread y'all's reviews from the previous chapter. You seriously make my days and keep me engaged in this story.

So, for this exciting American sports weekend (Kentucky Derby AND Stanley Cup playoffs!!!), I hope y'all enjoyed this extra long chapter!

In Which The Final Exam Finally Happens

Chapter Summary

A lot of people kick ass, and Sakura is the BAMF we all know her to be.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Right,” Hayate said, and coughed. “You’re a kenjutsu user going up against a long-distance sand user. What are you going to do?”

“Well,” Sasuke said...

“Tough luck, chibi,” Anko said, her twinkling eyes belying her commiserating tone. “So what’s your strategy gonna be against Mr. White-Eyes?”

“I have a few ideas,” Sakura said...

“Have you even seen Kankuro fight before, Naruto?” Kakashi asked, turning a page in his book.

“Not really, but that’s what this month’s for!” Naruto gave his sensei a thumbs up and grinned sneakily. “I’ve already got three clones following him around. No worries.” He’d actually managed to slip one *onto* Kankuro’s body, henge’d as a bug, and he was pretty proud of that.

Kakashi raised an invisible eyebrow and conceded the usefulness of that. “From what I know of him, he’s a puppet user,” he said. “Suna is well-known for their puppetry, as well as their poisons; the desert surrounding their village is an excellent source of rare poisonous creatures and plants, so you’ll have to be especially careful.”

Naruto nodded thoughtfully, rocking back and forth on his feet as he thought. “So that big hulking thing he’s always carrying around, that’s his puppet?” he asked.

“Most likely,” Kakashi confirmed.

“Kay.” Naruto nibbled on his bottom lip as he thought. “So I just gotta destroy the puppet, then.”

“That would definitely limit his options,” Kakashi agreed. “But Suna puppets tend to be reinforced and very hardy, so it won’t be as easy as it sounds.”

Naruto shrugged. "I'm good at destroying things, sensei."

Kakashi sighed long-sufferingly. "Yes, you are," he agreed. Naruto beamed.

"So! New seals?" he asked, bouncing a little on his toes. "And is there a way to protect myself from poisons?"

"Don't get poisoned," Kakashi deadpanned.

"*Sensei.*" Naruto rolled his eyes. Kakashi grinned behind his mask and turned a page in his book.

"Developing immunities to poisons can take years, and we don't know what kinds of toxins Kankuro will use. Your best bet is, honestly, to avoid getting hit at all costs. Your, ah, *tenant* will probably help you if you do get poisoned, but it's best to not rely on that. Explosive tags, long-range weapons, and strategy will be your best bets. You're essentially fighting two people, so you've got your work cut out for you."

"Not as much as Sasuke and Sakura," Naruto mumbled, suddenly glum as he was reminded of his teammates' opponents.

"True," Kakashi conceded. Unless Sakura managed to finish the fight against Neji in the first few moments, it was very unlikely that she'd be able to win against the Hyuuga prodigy, and Sasuke was up against the bloodthirsty Gaara kid. All three of his kids had tough fights ahead of them. And they'd all be on their own in the ring, unable to rely on their frankly exceptional teamwork.

"Hey," Kakashi said suddenly, reminded of something that had been bothering him, "what did you do in the First Exam to get the answers? How did you cheat?"

Naruto grinned slyly, his whiskered cheeks creasing. "I had a couple of clones henge'd into shuriken and stuff before we entered the room, just in case I needed them," he explained. "When the exam started, they transformed into bugs instead and went and got a peek at Sakura-chan's paper, then dispelled. That's how I got the couple answers I didn't already know!"

Kakashi blinked, surprised. That...was ingenious, really. It had never occurred to him that you could use shadow clones in such a way. "Very clever, Naruto."

Naruto shot him a victory sign, beaming.

"Right," Kakashi continued, snapping his book shut and getting ready to buckle down. "Let's get started on your training, then."

—

All three members of Team Seven trained harder than ever in the month before the Final Exam. Sasuke's sword had been destroyed in the fight against Orochimaru—it hadn't been designed to channel chakra, and the lightning chakra Sasuke had forced into the blade had

ruined it completely. So Sasuke was back to his shorter blades and unassisted chakra attacks, trying to make his lightning strong enough to fuse Gaara's sand into glass.

He rarely saw Sakura except for meals these days; she was constantly training with Anko and Genma, who had picked up her stealth and poison training in an effort for her to at least make a dent against Neji. The last time they'd met up for lunch she'd been a dusty, bedraggled mess, muttering something about 'just because he can see me doesn't mean he can counter me' with a rather unholy light in her eyes, and Sasuke had been appropriately intimidated.

Naruto was the same, training like a fiend under Kakashi-sensei, and Sasuke couldn't *wait* to see what they all brought to the fight arena. Hayate always rapped him on the head and admonished him gently when he got distracted during practice, though, so Sasuke buckled down and focused. He didn't want to make any of the (many, many, how had it become so many?) people who supported him disappointed.

Konoha was buzzing after the incident with Orochimaru, all shinobi tense and on high alert, roaming the village in pairs or teams with sharp eyes constantly scanning. Sasuke didn't go anywhere by himself; when he wasn't with his teachers (rare), he was shadowed by any number of ninja, who were at least polite enough to hang far enough back that they could all pretend he didn't know they were there.

With his newly awakened Sharingan, though, that was an impossibility, and Sasuke found himself seeking out Kakashi for advice on blocking out people's chakra signatures so he could walk down a street after training and not twitch at every single civilian and stray cat that crossed his path.

Kakashi was rather unhelpful, though. "I just got used to it," he said with a shrug. "I can't turn mine off, Sasuke, that's why I wear my hitai-ate like this." He tapped the metal plate covering his eye with one long finger. "I also don't think mine affects me like yours does you, because I'm not physiologically adapted for it. You seem to pick up a lot even when it's deactivated, and you have...kind of...levels?" The tall jounin tilted his grey head in thought.

"Yeah, 's true, teme," Naruto piped up, bouncing over from where he'd been running through a trap obstacle course with Iruka. He peered at his teammate, leaning casually on Kakashi's shoulder to prop himself upright, and Kakashi just adjusted his weight a little with a sigh, letting Naruto treat him like a post. "Like right now, your eyes are just a little bit red, like you're using it the tiniest bit!"

"Really?" Sasuke asked, startled, one hand flying up to touch the skin below his eye. "They're a little red right now? But I finished training twenty minutes ago."

"Maybe this is some effect of the Sharingan we don't know about," Kakashi mused, peering interestedly at Sasuke, and without any warning his hand darted out lightning-quick with a palm strike to Sasuke's face. Sasuke jerked to the side and his hand came up automatically, shoving his sensei's arm to the left so that it missed him completely. "See," Kakashi smiled, not at all fazed by the fact that he'd just attacked his student, "you're still using some of the effects of the Sharingan without it being fully activated. You wouldn't have been able to block that, normally."

Sasuke glared up at his teacher, but without any real heat. “Sensei, if I *hadn’t* blocked that, you would have broken my *nose*,” he pointed out.

Kakashi shrugged, unconcerned.

“That’s super cool!” Naruto enthused, also apparently unconcerned about possible damage to Sasuke’s face. “It’s like a secret weapon, Sasuke! If people don’t know you’ve got a little bit of your Sharingan activated, you can take them by surprise!”

“That is pretty cool,” Sasuke mused, now focused on the potential advantages. “I wonder if my family has anything written down—” and then he stopped, because talking about his family was still painful.

“Yeah,” Naruto said, now peering at him anxiously. “Maybe in the scrolls I pulled outta your compound, Sasuke?”

“Yeah,” Sasuke agreed, relaxing a little at the reminder. He wouldn’t have to go looking for them himself; Naruto had already collected all of the scrolls in the compound. Well, all the easily find-able ones, anyway—Sasuke was sure that his family was plenty paranoid enough to keep hidden files, maybe only discoverable by the Sharingan, if that was possible.

All in all it was a very prepared Team Seven that walked into the huge arena for the Final Exam, striding out onto the bare earth and gazing around at the huge high walls and seats that were slowly filling with spectators. Kakashi, Iruka, Hayate, Raidō, Genma, and Anko were all in the audience, all six of their main teachers having accompanied them to the arena before separating to head up to the seats.

Most of the other teams were present now; only the team from Otogakure seemed to be missing. Their proctor was some jounin Naruto had seen around the Standby Station, a sarcastic guy who always wore sunglasses. He looked less sarcastic and more alert today, talking quietly with some chuunin before striding up to the teams.

“Right,” he said, eyes sweeping over them. “The Final Exam starts in five minutes. If the Otogakure team doesn’t show up before then, they are disqualified and their opponents will be reassigned.”

Naruto glanced around to see Kiba scowling and the two other members of Neji’s team frowning. They’d been the matchups with the Oto team, presumably. Now they were at a big disadvantage; any training they’d been doing for their specific opponent was useless, perhaps even detrimental, depending on who they would be paired up against.

They waited a few more minutes, and Naruto saw his own opponent Kankuro and his sister Te-something glancing up into the stands with worried, frustrated looks. Following their gaze, Naruto saw that they were looking at the top box where the Hokage’s white hat was visible. He didn’t know what they were concerned about; everything looked normal to him.

But then again, maybe it didn’t... There were a lot of guards around the Hokage’s box. And as Naruto did a surreptitious sweep of the rest of the arena, there were a lot of shinobi in uniform scattered amongst the civilians who’d come to watch. He nudged Sasuke on his left,

gesturing subtly to check the crowd, and Sasuke's lips thinned as he saw the same thing, nudging Sakura on his other side to point it out to her.

"Right, that's it," the proctor said, and Naruto focused on him. "The Otogakure team is disqualified. Yang Tenten, you would have been first against Dosu of Otogakure. Now you will fight Inuzuka Kiba. Rock Lee, you will go last and fight the winner of the first battle."

The Hokage stood to make a speech, which Naruto tuned out mostly, instead exchanging little hand signals with his team about the situation. Sakura pointed out the rather large number of medic-nin in the entrance tunnel. Sasuke, eyes just a little bit red, said that the ninja in the audience were tense and attentive. Naruto stretched out his senses and told them that there were the tiny little chakra dots that he associated with ANBU all over the arena.

Looked like things might get a bit intense.

The rest of the contestants filed out of the arena, heading back to their various sensei's sides. Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura settled on the railing next to Kakashi and the other genin from their graduating class—minus Kiba, who had stayed on the arena floor to face off against Tenten. Naruto was looking forward to seeing some good matches; he couldn't wait to see other ninjas' styles from different villages.

"Everyone's awfully tense, sensei," Sakura muttered to his right, voice almost inaudible and lips hardly moving to deter any lip-readers in the audience.

"Aa," Kakashi agreed, turning a page in his book like he hadn't a care in the world. His three genin weren't fooled, though; his slouch was the 'ready to kick ass' slouch, not the 'I'm super into my book and not paying attention' slouch. "We might get a little trouble here at the matches today, so be prepared."

Naruto and Sakura both shifted closer to Sasuke, who let out a silent sigh but didn't actually pull away.

Down on the ground, Tenten and Kiba were pretty well-matched, Tenten's speed and liberal use of weaponry countering Kiba's teamwork with Akamaru. But unless she came up with something else soon, Kiba was going to wear her down; he was far too used to fighting taijutsu users, what with fighting Hinata and Chouji all the time, and just weaponry wasn't going to be enough. Sure enough, Akamaru put on a short burst of speed at just the right time, catching Tenten right as she flung an exploding tag at Kiba, sending him flying. But the ninken had Tenten by the throat, and the match was over.

"Not bad," Kakashi commented, as the invigilators cleaned up the arena and gave Tenten back all of her weapons. "A good fight to get us started. Both were very flashy and showed themselves to good advantage, but neither were going full out against a fellow Konoha nin. Smart."

"Nara Shikamaru and Sabaku no Temari," called the proctor, and Shikamaru slouched down into the arena, taking his time while his opponent—the third Suna team member—rode her gigantic fan down into the ring in a showy display.

“Kick her butt, Shikamaru,” called Naruto, giving the lazy genius a thumbs up as the Nara sighed longsufferingly. Naruto just barely caught a faint “*troublesome*” drifting up to their positions in the stands, and grinned.

Shikamaru did, indeed, kick her butt—in the laziest, most strategically Nara way possible. Then the bastard had the gall to forfeit, right before he was going to win! Ino sputtered in outrage at the *lamest excuse ever* of Shikamaru being unable to hold his shadows for any longer. The underachieving bastard just didn’t want to fight anymore, and he knew he’d eventually have to go up against one of the Rookie Nine if he progressed further in the matches! Ino was going to punch him *so hard* when he got back up to their seats, honestly...

Then Chouji’s name was called, and Ino patted her other teammate’s arm encouragingly as he took a deep breath and headed down into the ring, allowing Hinata to pass in front of him courteously.

“Chouji’s been dreading this,” she muttered in an undertone to Sakura as the two clan ninja squared off. “He’s still got issues about hitting girls, and Hinata’s so slight and shy still that he was worried if he even *could* manage a hit against her. But he trained super hard too, because he knew Hinata was going to take it seriously and he wanted to greet her on an equal level.”

Sakura nodded thoughtfully. “They’re both taijutsu users, too, this is going to be a close-combat battle. I’m really interested to see Chouji-kun’s clan techniques against the Byakugan. That should be really interesting.”

Below them, the two genin bowed deeply to each other, and then the proctor called, “Start!”

Hinata immediately activated her Byakugan and dropped into a ready stance, her all-seeing eyes cataloguing every move Chouji made. He too was ready, and with a deep breath he charged into one of his clan’s signature techniques. He was huge and fast and barrelled down at ridiculous speeds at Hinata, but she kept her cool and leapt to the side, striking out and hitting him in three points as he rolled past her.

Chouji unfurled from his Human Bullet Tank, wincing slightly as he rotated his arm and shoulder. But turning into a ball seemed to have helped prevent complete blockage of his tenketsu points, and he struck a new pose, before leaping into the air and slamming a suddenly huge fist into the ground, making it rumble and crack, shards of rock and clumps of dirt flying out towards Hinata. With a cry unable to be heard over the crumbling of earth, Hinata spun in a modified version of her clan’s technique, knocking away all of the projectiles.

“Impressive,” Sasuke muttered, his eyes flashing red for a few moments as he studied Hinata’s movements. “She’s better at that than she used to be.”

Sakura beamed smugly and bounced on the balls of her feet. “She’s a *lot* better than she used to be.” She and Ino had begun a campaign to draw Hinata out of her shell and give her more confidence *forever ago*, way back when they first started doing inter-team training, and with Kurenai’s support Hinata had improved by leaps and bounds. Apparently she’d only needed strong female role models and friends to help her find her place in the world.

But Chouji had improved a lot too, and apparently he'd taken the past month of specialized training to heart, because he pulled out a collapsible bō staff and extended it to its full length.

"Oh, *smart*, Chouji," breathed Ino, leaning forward over the railing. "Hinata won't be able to reach his tenketsu points with that!"

And indeed, the next few minutes were filled with lightning-fast blurs and flurries of exchanged blows, neither opponent able to execute a finishing move. Hinata couldn't reach Chouji to deactivate his tenketsu, but Chouji was still a beginner with the bō and couldn't maneuver with it fast enough to defeat Hinata's fierce defense. Hinata had been studying Chouji's movements, though, and had a plan. With a cry, she charged forward, taking a hard hit to her left thigh and nearly falling over but bulling forward faster than Chouji could correct for, hands snapping out and *one-two-three-four* shutting down both of his arms at the shoulder. The two genin came to a halt, panting loudly, with Hinata's stiff hand pointed directly at Chouji's throat.

Chouji grimaced in pain, completely unable to move his arms. "I forfeit," he called.

"Oh good," Hinata said weakly, and fell over.

It turned out that last hit to Hinata's leg had fractured her femur. She refused to let the medi-nin fussing over her heal it, though, until she had unsealed all of Chouji's tenketsu points, apologizing profusely. Chouji waved it off with a wide grin. "You're a lot faster than you used to be, Hinata-chan!" he said, supporting her with a big hand on her shoulder as the medi-nin pressed glowing hands against her thigh.

"Thank you, Chouji-kun," Hinata smiled shyly back. "Y-you're much better than you used to be too, I was really surprised when you pulled out that staff." Her forearms and hands were black and blue from blocking and redirecting blows.

Chouji rubbed the back of his head sheepishly and chuckled, stooping down and sweeping the staff off the ground. "Yeah, I hadn't really thought to train in it before now, but a lot of my clan members use them and Asuma-sensei suggested it as a good choice against a super-close-range fighter like you." He offered her a hand up as the medi-nin finished, and together they limped over to the stairs to loud applause from the audience and whoops and hollers from their friends.

"Great job, Hinata!" Ino and Sakura cheered, throwing their arms around her neck and squeezing her tight between them. "You certainly showed them," Sakura muttered quietly into her ear, gesturing with the tiniest tilt of her head toward the area of the seats where several white-robed members of the Hyuuga clan could clearly be seen, Hyuuga Hiashi among them. Hinata, face already pink from the overt affection, turned even pinker and she smiled shyly.

"You too, Chouji!" Naruto whooped, bounding over to pound Chouji on the back. "That was a super cool fight, you guys! Awesome!"

"Haruno Sakura and Hyuuga Neji," the proctor announced, and Sakura drew back, smoothing down her dark red tunic and straightening her utility belt on her hips.

“Wish me luck, guys,” she said. “I’ll get him once for you, Hinata,” she added softly. She hugged her boys, Naruto squeezing her tight and Sasuke giving her a firm nod, and walked calmly down into the arena.

Neji was already there waiting for her, pale lavender eyes fixed on her in a cold stare. “You have no chance of defeating me,” he said. “You may forfeit now if you wish. It is fated that you will lose.”

Sakura calmly pulled out a pair of fingerless gloves from one of her pouches and slipped them on, settling the plated guards over the backs of her hands and clenching and unclenching her fingers a few times to make sure they were comfortably positioned. Then she looked up and met Neji’s eyes flatly. Slowly, very deliberately, she extended one hand, clenched her fingers with her thumb up, and then tilted it so that her thumb was pointing down toward the sandy floor of the arena.

“Fuck fate, and fuck you, Hyuuga,” she said coolly, as Neji’s face flamed pink with anger at her insult. “The fight’s not over until it’s over.”

The proctor coughed, sounding like he might be covering a laugh. “Are you both ready?” he asked. Sakura nodded, not taking her eyes off of her opponent. “Three...two...one...start!” And he leapt out of the way.

So did Sakura, speeding away as her fingers blurred through hand signs. “*Doton: Earth Flow River!*”

Neji, pursuing her with his Byakugan activated, let out a yelp as the ground underneath him turned into a flowing river of mud. He almost immediately leapt up to stand on the surface as if he was water-walking, but the mud river had swept him off his feet and now his entire back was covered in mud, matting down his long hair. Sakura snickered briefly, but her attention was still focused on speeding around the arena—Neji was much better than she was at taijutsu, and if her tenketsu points were shut down, she was done for.

“How *dare* you!” Neji snarled, but Sakura was already whipping through the seals for her next jutsu, and she skidded to a halt as she cried, “*Doton: Earth Dragon Bullet!*”

The mud surged and bubbled as a huge dragon head emerged from its depths, rearing up and pelting huge balls of mud at Neji. He whirled into the Gentle Fist defense, Sixty-Four Palms or whatever it was called. Sakura didn’t care because this was her *chance*—

She dashed forward, legs protesting, chakra already almost gone from those two energy-expensive jutsu. Just as Neji was coming out of his defense rotation, Sakura was there, lashing out with three paralytic senbon clenched between her fingers.

She missed by millimeters; Neji managed to see and deflect her hand at the last moment, his stiff fingers smashing into her wrist and forcing her needles away. Sakura’s other fist came up in a wild bid— *and actually managed to hit Neji in the face.*

Sakura stumbled back out of striking distance and grimaced, rotating her wrist gingerly. By some miracle it wasn’t broken, and he hadn’t hit any of her tenketsu points, but it was

basically out of commission for the rest of the fight. She could already feel it swelling. But she'd gotten her strike in for Hinata, and she felt viciously satisfied about that—and also for how *wrecked* Neji looked, covered in mud, hair a dirty tangle, face a mask of rage as a bruise blossomed on his cheekbone.

“Looks like fate isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, Hyuuga,” she taunted, and brought her hands up for her final gambit.

Neji snarled and attacked, Byakugan blazing, and Sakura let out a yelp and dove for the ground. She wasn’t quite fast enough; even as she disappeared into the Hiding Like a Mole technique, she felt her right arm go dead and numb. *Well, at least I can’t feel my injured wrist any more*, she thought grimly, and tunneled through the earth, reaching up with her working left arm to yank Neji into the ground.

It almost worked, too. She managed to pull Neji in up to above his knees, but with sharp shocks of pain she felt her arm’s tenketsu shutting down, and she burst from the earth, gagging as nausea from chakra exhaustion rolled in her stomach.

Sakura looked over at Neji, still furious and capable of fighting even though he was stuck in the earth (though it wouldn’t be for much longer, the way he was wrenching himself free), and sighed. She looked over at the proctor and called, “I forfeit.”

“What?” the man said, eyebrows shooting up over his sunglasses in surprise.

Sakura shrugged her one working shoulder, left arm dead from the elbow down and right arm dead at the shoulder. “I can’t fight anymore,” she said. “I did my best against him, but with him still having two working arms and able to use his defense, I won’t be able to get to him. And my chakra’s exhausted anyway. So I forfeit.”

The proctor raised his arm and called, “Winner, Hyuuga Neji!” He was still looking at Sakura though, with a kind of surprised approval in his expression.

Sakura didn’t care. She just wanted to go back to her team and let them coddle her a little bit, because she *really thought she could do it*, but clearly it hadn’t been enough.

“Hold it right there!” Neji snarled, pulling his last foot free with a shower of earth. He stormed over to her, Byakugan still activated. “You little twerp, how dare you—”

“How dare I what?” Sakura asked coldly, staring icily into those white, veined eyes. “How dare I come up with a strategy specifically targeted to you? How dare I use psychological tactics? How dare I be *good*, how dare I almost *beat* you? What, Hyuuga?”

Neji pulled back just a tiny bit, and then rallied. “How dare you try to *humiliate* me like this!” he snapped.

Sakura raked him up and down with a derisive gaze. “I don’t think I humiliated you at all,” she replied. “I think you did that all on your own.” And she stalked toward the stairs to the upper stadium, still furious and burning with thwarted revenge.

The audience was applauding, she realized dimly as she slowly climbed the stairs. Applauding and cheering and whistling, for their fight. She would smile and wave, but her vision was starting to wobble in and out of focus, and she still couldn't lift her arms.

"That was *amazing*, Sakura-chan!" Naruto bellowed, leaping on her as soon as she arrived back at their portion of the audience. "So cool! You were super awesome, you showed him!"

Sakura winced as he jostled her arms, but couldn't help a smile. "I lost, Naruto," she pointed out.

Naruto waved that away as if he was swatting a fly. "Only because you couldn't move your arms!"

"Well, moving my arms is pretty important for casting jutsu and throwing senbon and actually, you know, *fighting*, so yeah, I lost," Sakura pointed out, turning so that Sasuke could awkwardly wrap her in a quick hug.

"Good job," he muttered. Sakura beamed. He was becoming so emotionally competent!

A hand ruffled her hair, destroying her utilitarian braid even more than her fight had, and Kakashi-sensei's eye smiled down at her. "Aa, you did an excellent job at showcasing your talents against a stronger opponent, Sakura-chan. If you had larger chakra reserves, I'm sure you'd have been able to defeat him."

"Thanks, sensei," Sakura replied, blushing a pleased pink. Then she turned. "Um, Hinata, would you mind...?" Her arms were really starting to hurt now, the numbness fading to an awful burning sensation as her body rebelled against the artificial blockage of her chakra pathways.

"S-sure, Sakura-chan," Hinata replied, activating her Byakugan so that she could see which tenketsu points were blocked. "Y-you did really well against N-Neji-niisan. Congratulations."

"Thanks," Sakura said, rotating her left arm with a wince as its function was restored. "I punched him in the face for you, you know." Her green eyes glinted wickedly. "And the mud was a nice touch, wasn't it?"

Hinata let out a soft giggle, glancing over to where a thunderous Neji had rejoined his teammates, still covered in slowly drying mud. His other male teammate—Lee, Sakura thought his name was—was loudly congratulating him, along with his sensei. Tenten, the kunoichi who had fought Kiba, was apparently snickering at his appearance. "It does look nice," Hinata agreed, looking a bit guilty for admitting it.

Sakura cackled, and then bit back a curse as her wrist throbbed angrily at her. "I should go get this looked at," she said. "Who's up next?"

"Shino-kun and Ino-chan," Hinata said, as the proctor finished drying up the mud river Sakura had created. All of the other damage, both from her fight and the previous ones, was left in place. Sakura assumed that if it didn't massively change the structure of the arena, they left it.

“Aw man,” Sakura pouted. “I’ll be as quick as I can!” She hugged Ino quickly and dashed off to find a medic.

It was a speed test, with Ino and Shino; whoever caught the other first would win. If Ino could catch the Aburame in her family’s Mind-Switching technique, she would win, but if he caught her with his chakra-draining bugs before that, he would win. It was a fast, sneaky battle of thrown kunai and quick evasion, but eventually Shino prevailed, Ino sinking to the ground with a grimace on her face. “I forfeit!” she called grumpily, and brushed at her arms and legs to knock off wherever the bugs had clung to her.

Sakura tugged Ino against her side in a half hug as the two contestants rejoined them. “At least we both lost,” she said philosophically. “I don’t think I could have stood it if you had won and I didn’t, Ino-pig.” She gave the blonde a big smile, arm still slung around her shoulders, and Ino ducked her head so her bangs shadowed her eyes, a small smile tugging at her flushed cheeks.

“Sabaku no Kankuro and Uzumaki Naruto,” announced the proctor, and Naruto bounced with excitement.

“It’s my turn!” he said. “Guys, it’s my turn!”

“Well then, get out there, idiot,” Sasuke ordered fondly, and Naruto just hopped over the railing, not waiting to take the stairs. He cushioned his fall with chakra and then took a moment to check over his various pouches, scrolls, weapons, and wrappings, making sure everything was in place for his epic plan. He palmed the first scroll he was going to use and bounced to the middle of the arena, grinning at both the proctor and the weird face-painted cat-eared guy he was fighting.

“Avenge me, Naruto!” Sakura shouted from above, and Naruto’s grin grew just a bit wider in response. That didn’t even make sense, it’s not like he was fighting Neji. But he slid into a ready stance anyway, buoyed by his team—his *sensei*— watching him.

“Start!” the proctor shouted, and got the hell out of the way as Naruto immediately lunged forward, scroll hand leading, other hand gripping a kunai.

The scroll slammed into the ground as Kankuro leapt away—but it didn’t matter, because Naruto hadn’t really been aiming for him. As soon as it touched the ground the scroll exploded into billows of thick grey smoke, filling the entire arena and not dispersing.

“Fuck,” Kankuro cursed somewhere in the gloom, and Naruto could hear the rattle and click of his puppet as he brought it into play. But Naruto ignored him for a moment, using the cover of the smoke to set up something really quickly and then stalking the chakra sense of his opponent across the field.

The chakra strings Kankuro used to control his puppet were not visible, exactly, but they still affected the smoke somehow, Naruto found as he drew close; he could almost see *something* in the smoke, twitching and moving like threads.

“Fuuton: Gale Palm!” came Kankuro’s voice, and Naruto shrugged philosophically as his smoke was forcefully blown away. He hadn’t needed it to last for too long, anyway.

Kankuro’s eyes widened as he realized how close Naruto was, and Naruto grinned and lunged for his puppet. The creepy humanoid thing jumped away with a twitch of Kankuro’s hands, and Naruto pivoted and followed it without pause, throwing out a scatter of shuriken. Each one exploded on impact, showering the both of them with dust and stone shards.

“Fuck!” Kankuro shouted, jumping away as Naruto suddenly switched tactics and headed straight for the stationary puppeteer. “Sage’s staff, kid, does everything you own explode?”

Naruto laughed and gracefully flipped over the puppet as it came whistling towards him. “Most of it, yeah!” he confirmed cheerfully. To emphasize that, he threw one of his specialities, squeezing his eyes shut tight right as it hit the ground. Even so the bright light and huge noise of his flash-bang flashed through his eyelids and made his ears ring.

He herded a disoriented Kankuro around the arena with a combined water-wind jutsu, making sure to stay away from anything the puppet threw at him; he could see various discolorations on all of its weapons, so they were definitely poisoned. Finally Naruto had them right where he wanted them, and instead of ducking away from the puppet’s next rush he skidded to a halt and faced it head on. Weaving away from a slash of its weird jointed arms, Naruto reached out with two fingers and delicately tapped it on its cloaked body.

Then he turned and grinned, raising his hands into a seal. *“Kekkai ninjutsu: Four-petaled Lotus!”*

And a glowing dome unfurled itself over the puppet, sealing it inside, just before an explosion rocked the barrier, blowing a huge hole in the puppet’s side.

Kankuro stared in shock at the barrier. His puppet lay limply on the ground inside it, its many limbs splayed out in a caricature of death. “You—you destroyed my puppet! You...you...”

Naruto shrugged. “Sorry, man. It might end up being salvageable?” He offered, and dove at Kankuro with a kunai leading the way.

The rest of his fight was pretty easy. Kankuro, used to relying on his puppets and unprepared to fight up close, was nowhere near as fast as Sasuke or as strong as Sakura. Naruto had him on the ground and moaning in pain in just a few minutes.

“Winner, Uzumaki Naruto!” The proctor called, and the crowd erupted in cheers. Naruto waved at the stands, grinning, before bringing his hands together in a release seal and taking down the barrier.

“Sorry again about your puppet,” he told Kankuro, and headed for the stairs, eager to get back to his team.

“Naruto, that was *amazing!*” Sakura squealed, launching herself at him and almost knocking him over with her hug. “You’ve already gotten that good at seals? Wow! I had no idea you’d improved so much!”

“Good job, idiot,” Sasuke agreed, black eyes approving.

“Excellent work,” Kakashi said softly, and Naruto ducked his head, his whole body flushing with heat.

“Th-thanks, sensei,” he stuttered, his insides feeling weird and kind of squirmy. Kakashi praising him wasn’t *that* strange, was it?

“I’m gonna have to do better than you now,” Sasuke said, and the fluttery feeling in Naruto’s stomach instantly disappeared to be replaced by dread.

“Uchiha Sasuke and Sabaku no Gaara,” intoned the proctor, and the strange, scary ninja from Suna entered the ring to face Sasuke.

Sasuke took a deep breath and tightened his armguards before stepping towards the stairs, ready to enter the ring. Before he could depart, though, Naruto’s hands were suddenly on his shoulders, big blue eyes staring intensely into his own.

“Be...be careful, okay, teme?” he asked seriously. “That guy...he freaks me out. So be careful, yeah?”

Sasuke nodded, surprised at Naruto’s uncharacteristically somber mood. “Yeah, okay, dobe. I’ll be careful.” He exchanged a fist bump with Sakura and trotted down the stairs, emerging onto the sunlit field and approaching the proctor and his opponent.

“Ready?” the jounin asked, looking at both of them. Sasuke nodded, as did the silent redhead. “Sasuke versus Gaara, begin!” And he leapt away.

Sasuke immediately had to dodge a spear of sand, cursing internally. Damn, that was *fast*! Gaara didn’t move, his feet planted and arms crossed over his chest, waves of sand gushing out of his gourd and hurtling toward Sasuke.

“It is useless to resist,” he intoned, mint-green eyes following Sasuke around the arena blankly. “Your blood will be used to satisfy Mother.”

Fuck, Naruto, he really is creepy, Sasuke thought, hands speeding through seals as he dodged another spear of sand. His chakra was reluctant, fighting the shape he was trying to mold it into, but Sasuke had practiced all month and he hammered it into place. He spun in midair, eyes locking in on his opponent, hands coming into rest in Hare.

“*Suiton: Raging Waves!*” he shouted, and blew a torrent of water out of his mouth.

A wall of sand rose up and absorbed it as if it was never there, not even a drop landing on Gaara. “Useless,” Gaara’s voice floated up from below. “You cannot break my sand defense.”

But Sasuke hadn’t really expected it to reach Gaara. He was more interested in how it interacted with his sand—and yes, it looked like Hayate’s and Raidō’s predictions had been correct; it *was* slowing the sand down. Sasuke forced out another Suiton, his Fire- and Lightning-oriented chakra reluctantly coating his opponent’s sand completely in water.

Now he could take a bit of a break; the sand was much slower as it pursued him, making it easy to dodge, and the clumpy spears had not nearly as much force behind them.

“What did you do?” Gaara snarled, now scowling. “My sand is not responding.”

But Sasuke wasn’t here to chitchat. Though his teachers had been coaching him in the art of a good psychological mindfuck, he didn’t have time for that here, and he wasn’t about to start monologuing about everything he’d learned about sand in the past month.

He activated his Sharingan; everything immediately slowed to a crawl. Drawing the double katanas strapped to his back, Sasuke took a deep breath and called up his lightning. Unlike the water from earlier, lightning leapt to his call, crackling down his arms and the blades of his swords with all the power of a summer storm. Sasuke felt it rush through him, dangerous and unpredictable, and grinned wildly. He took two steps and broke into a run, leaping into the air as lightly as a bird.

“Raiton: Sword Cyclone!” He called, and came crashing down, spinning so fast in the air that his swords were a blur of crackling lightning, white-hot and impossible to see.

He struck Gaara with the sound of a thunderstrike, and the arena exploded, washing dust and clods of earth and chakra-charged bits of lightning over the audience. Civilians screamed and shinobi ducked for cover, raising shields and leaping to protect. The very arena itself shook and rumbled, and several Doton users dropped to their knees, slamming their hands to the ground to stabilize the building.

When everything settled, the spectators hesitantly got to their feet and peered into the ring. Kakashi sank his hands into the backs of Naruto’s and Sakura’s uniforms just in time to prevent them from diving headfirst over the railing to Sasuke’s side.

Finally the dust cleared to reveal the contestants. Sasuke was alive, if rather worse for wear, which eased some of the tension out of Naruto and Sakura. Panting and dirty, Sasuke wiped his forearm across his face to remove some of the dirt, hands still clenched around his swords. The two blades—which must have been chakra-conductive, they didn’t look like they were about to fall apart—were still letting off sparks of lightning, which crawled up and over Sasuke’s bare arms, his armguards and protective wrappings burned away. The edges of his sleeves hung ragged and burnt, and Sasuke’s hands were trembling with muscle exhaustion, but he took a defensive stance, staring at Gaara. And Gaara...

Gaara was standing in the middle of a half-destroyed cocoon of sand. Pieces of hard sand, frozen in shapes that looked remarkably like the branches of trees, crumbled slowly around him. He looked as though he’d been flung against the back wall of his cocoon, and pieces of the hard sand (it looked like *glass*?) had clearly exploded inward and struck him. He was covered in dirt and sand and blood, dozens of tiny nicks covering his face and arms. He was panting raggedly, and his eyes...

Naruto swore a blue streak and flung himself against Kakashi’s restraining hand, the jounin barely managing to brace himself and haul him back. “Lemme go, sensei! I gotta go help! Sasuke’s gonna—”

“What did you do,” Gaara shrieked, raising one trembling hand to stare at the blood on it.
“WHAT DID YOU DO!”

And the second chakra in his system, the roiling morass of malice, surged.

“Oh,” Naruto breathed, slumping back so suddenly that Kakashi nearly overbalanced backwards at the release of tension. *“Oh...”* One hand rose to touch his stomach, and clenched hard in the fabric covering his navel.

“What, Naruto?” Sakura asked tensely, hands hovering next to her weapons pouches. “What is it?”

“Sensei,” Naruto said numbly. “That boy is like me.”

Down below, Gaara screamed and transformed.

Chapter End Notes

Y'ALL, I TOTALLY MISSED OUR ONE-YEAR ANNIVERSARY. I TOTALLY MEANT TO HAVE SOMETHING POSTED FOR THE ANNIVERSARY OF THIS FIC BUT I MISSED IT BY TEN DAYS. //sobs messily

ANYWAY. This chapter was like giving birth, y'all. A lot of pain and screaming and waiting around for something to happen and then more pain and screaming. BUT IT'S FINALLY HERE!! *o/* OTL I hate writing fight scenes so much, why am I in a fighting manga fandom.

Japanese trivia:

In many Asian cultures, the thumbs up means what you'd expect it to mean - good job, nice, okay, etc. But the thumbs DOWN is an insult kind of like raising your middle finger in the US, like 'I'm gonna fuck you up.' So when Sakura gives Neji the thumbs down she's basically saying she's gonna fuck him in the not-fun way.

All of the jutsu I used here were real, except for Sasuke's Raiton jutsu (I couldn't find one that fit what I needed) and Naruto's barrier jutsu. I made that one up because barriers are super underdeveloped in canon and like, why? They seem hella useful? For like everything?

NOW THAT WE'RE DONE WITH THE FINAL, the next chapter should come out a lot faster! Yay! Tho now I have to write the invasion :/ which will be short and to the point, goddamnit, because I want to get to the goodies!

I really am so sorry this chapter was so late, guys, I started a new job and my equilibrium was totally thrown off, I was really struggling to find time to write. But I think I've got things figured out now, so full speed ahead!

ALSO, shout out to reviewers **theidiotwithnoname** and **ShikabaneMai** for their lovely insightful reviews which actually kicked me off my ass and got me writing again! I kept them in my inbox and referenced them when I got frustrated :3 You guys are seriously my bread and butter, whenever I read a new review from someone it reminds me how much people are enjoying this story! Thanks so much!

In Which Naruto Has Several Very Important Conversations

Chapter Summary

The Invasion! Shuukaku! Lots of fighting! Teamwork! The Power of Friendship!

Chapter Notes

GUYS, GO BACK AND READ THE END OF THE LAST CHAPTER! GUYS!!
GUYS!! GUYS!! GO BACK AND READ THE LAST CHAPTER!!

I added shit to the end of the last chapter, because I liked it better that way. GO BACK AND READ IT OR YOU WILL BE REALLY CONFUSED, OKAY. GO DO IT. I WILL WAIT.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The arena was in chaos. All around the stands, Suna shinobi were revealing themselves and attacking, only to be met by Konoha's forces. A sleep genjutsu was trying to settle over the stands, but it was broken left and right as ninja leapt into battle and civilians screamed and ran. Above them, the Hokage's voice thundered as he directed teams.

The rookie teams couldn't care less, all focus riveted on the ground below them, where Sasuke and Gaara still stood. Gaara was almost half transformed, his wild eyes black and yellow, his arms and one of his legs huge and sandy-colored. He screamed and thrashed, Sasuke only just leaping out of the way, before suddenly turning and dashing out of the arena.

"Sasuke!" Naruto and Sakura were instantly at his side, Kakashi alighting next to them and deflecting some stray shuriken.

"I'm fine," Sasuke grunted, shrugging off their helping hands. "What was *that*?" He stared off after the trail of destruction that Gaara had left behind.

"That was a problem," Naruto said tensely. "Sorry, guys, I gotta go after him! I gotta help him, if he...If he's like me..."

"What do you mean, like you?" Sakura asked, but Naruto was already tearing after Gaara. "Naruto!" With barely a glance back at their sensei, caught up with two Suna nin, they sprinted after their blond teammate.

"Fucking *hell*," Kakashi hissed, dispatching his two opponents with savage thrusts and haring after his kids. "Don't they know better than this by now?"

It was easy to see where they had gone; Gaara had left a path of destruction six feet wide of broken rubble and cracked wood. But following them was less easy, as Kakashi kept on being stopped by chuunin and even jounin for orders. Kakashi directed the chuunin to evacuation efforts and the jounin to the arena, stubbornly forging ahead towards his team. If Gaara really was a jinchuuriki like Naruto thought, his kids needed him.

Ahead of him, in the forest, chakra seethed and boiled as it rose above the trees.

Fuck, Naruto thought, speeding through the trees as he followed the path of destruction Gaara had left. *Fuck, how could I not have seen it? It makes so much sense, the strange chakra, the double signatures... but I've never transformed like that, what the hell was that? Was he actually transforming into his bijuu?*

He alit on a branch and stared. Gaara had stopped running and turned to wait for him, a wide, crazed smile on his half-transformed face. **"You will be my first kill of the day,"** he rasped out, his voice strange and distorted.

"Um," Naruto said, looking him over and analyzing the situation as fast as he could. "I don't think so, sorry. Are you a jinchuuriki?"

Gaara snarled and lashed out, Naruto leaping away as splinters flew behind him. Landing on another tree branch, he watched as Gaara convulsed and screamed, apparently fighting the transformation. **"I will kill you!"** he howled, thrashing around. **"Your blood will prove my existence!"**

"I'm pretty sure you exist, man!" Naruto replied. This was *crazy*. Was there something wrong with the seal separating bijuu from host? Naruto had never, ever even come *close* to something like this. It was like they were half-melded.

"Naruto!" Sakura and Sasuke landed on the branch next to him, weapons out and ready to fight. "What the hell is happening?" Sasuke demanded, red eyes widening at the sight of an almost fully-transformed Gaara.

"Shit," Naruto swore, panic rising in his throat. Now his teammates were here, and Gaara was about to unleash the full power of a bijuu on them. They'd never survive, even if Naruto might. What could fight something as big as a bijuu?

And of course, the answer came to him: *another bijuu*.

Naruto took a deep, trembling breath, and turned to his teammates. "I need you guys to trust me, okay? Like we've never had to do before. You gotta believe in me, and trust me, okay?"

Sakura and Sasuke stared at him, clearly uncomprehending. "Well, of course, Naruto," Sakura said, all of them sticking their feet to the tree branch with chakra as Gaara thrashed again, transformation almost complete. "We trust you. What are you planning?"

Naruto let out a shaky, humorless laugh. “The craziest thing,” he said. “The craziest, *stupidest* thing. Just...don’t judge me, okay? If it works? I’m still me. I promise.”

They clearly didn’t understand, but they both nodded anyway, eyes firm, and Naruto swallowed down a lump in his throat. He had the *best* team.

“Okay,” he said, and plopped down on the branch, sticking his butt and his hands to the tree with chakra so he didn’t fall off. “Just...don’t do anything stupid, for a few minutes.”

And he closed his eyes and fell into his mind, searching for his seal.

He didn’t know how long it took; time was meaningless inside his mind. But all of a sudden one second he was falling through darkness, and the next he had landed on what felt like ground, splashing through water. Naruto got to his feet and looked around.

He was standing in a lake of water that rose to his mid-calf, gurgling gently around his feet. It wasn’t pitch-black here; there was light coming from somewhere, but it was dim and weak, like the first light of the dawn, turning everything hazy and surreal. There didn’t seem to be any features other than the water, though off in the distance Naruto thought he saw the suggestion of mountains.

Then he turned far enough, and saw the cage.

Well, shit, he thought weakly.

The nine-tailed fox was awake and watching him, a huge mountain of red in the dim light. Glowing eyes stared down at him from far, far above Naruto’s head, and white teeth flashed as the creature spoke.

“What are you doing down here, little maggot?”

Naruto’s knees went weak at the malice dripping from each word. He swallowed and told his legs firmly to stop that, and took a few sloshing steps forward to face the cage properly. He could see the seal now, a white *ofuda* pasted to the central bar of the cage. It seemed wholly inadequate for keeping such a huge creature contained, but it didn’t even seem to be straining at all.

“I’m here,” Naruto said, and his voice trembled on the first word but he quickly firmed it, “with a request.”

Sharp white teeth were bared in what could not possibly be called a smile. The red eyes glowed even brighter with hatred. **“A request? Of *me*? You mewling, puny creature, you come in front of my prison and dare to ask something of me?”**

“Yes, a request,” Naruto replied, raising his voice slightly to be heard over the rumbling of the fox’s voice. “My teammates are under attack from another of the bijuu. He’s transforming into his bijuu form now, and we have no chance against him. I request...” Naruto swallowed hard, but then forged on. “I request that you lend me some of your power, so that I can transform into you and beat him.”

The fox was silent for a long moment. Then he bent his huge head down, pressing it against the bars of the cage so that he could look Naruto almost straight in the eye. Naruto's knees went weak again and he almost took a step back, before firmly telling himself to buck up. **"You wish to use some of my power to transform into me, in order to beat one of my siblings?"**

"Y-yes," Naruto said, and cursed himself for the stutter. Then he couldn't help but ask, "Are you guys siblings? I didn't know that. How many—"

"Silence," the fox snapped, and Naruto's mouth clicked shut. The great beast raised his head again, now appearing thoughtful. **"You are requesting,"** he repeated, an odd emphasis on the word, **"to use my power to protect your territory."**

"Um, well, yes," Naruto said. "Gaara will kill my friends and destroy my village, if I don't stop him."

"Which sibling of mine is it?" The fox asked suddenly.

"I—I don't know," Naruto replied honestly. "He's, um, really pale, like sandy-colored, with black markings. His eyes are ringed with black and yellow in the center."

"Shuukaku," the fox rumbled, and Naruto stayed quiet, not knowing how to respond to that. The fox thought for a long moment, his many tails rustling absently in the darkness behind him. Naruto crossed his fingers and prayed silently to any creature—god, beast, or yokai—who would listen.

"Very well," the beast said at last, and Naruto jerked, he was so tense. **"You may use some of my power in order to transform into me and defeat Shuukaku. The brat could use a reminder of who is the stronger of us, anyway."**

"Th-thank you!" Naruto said, knees going weak again, but this time in relief. Then he paused. "Um, how do I, er, draw on your power?"

The fox grinned again, and lay down, nose pressed against the bars. **"You may touch me, and take some of my chakra that way."**

Naruto edged forward warily, every nerve in his body screaming against getting any closer to the huge predator. But he had to, for his teammates. Visions of the fox snapping out those huge jaws and biting off his arm when he stuck it through the bars filled his head, but Naruto gritted his teeth and reached out anyway, hand trembling as it approached the huge snout. The fox lay still, one huge red eye fixed on Naruto's form. Slowly, ever so carefully, Naruto's tiny hand pressed against the hot fur of the fox's nose.

Power slammed into him, boiling and rushing through his veins as Naruto cried out and was flung backward. He flailed, unable to tell up from down, no idea where he was, *who* he was —

And then he slammed back into himself, opening his eyes with a huge gasp of air and almost falling off the tree branch he was sitting on.

“Naruto?” Sasuke called in concern, snapping out a hand to steady his shoulder. Naruto took huge breaths, his entire body feeling as though it was filled to the top with a boiling, rushing flood, barely contained by his skin.

“I’m okay,” he managed to gasp, and grinned weakly at his two teammates. Time barely seemed to have passed out here; Gaara was just finishing his transformation, looming above them. “You guys remember what you promised, right? To trust me? It’ll be okay.”

And without waiting for them to reply, Naruto tipped forward off of the branch, falling towards the ground as he shaped one hand into a familiar seal.

Henge, he thought, and the flood filling his veins finally overflowed.

Four paws hit the earth like boulders, red fur rippling up and over them as shoulders taller than any Fire Country tree rose high above them. Naruto shook out his whole body and felt his tails whip out behind him, felt the crack of trees as they were forced to give way for his huge form, and he bared savage teeth at the threat in front of him.

There was no way he was going to let this *interloper* harm any of his friends.

Gaara roared at him in challenge, and Naruto growled back, baring his teeth and lunging forward. He heard Sasuke’s and Sakura’s shouts of surprise, felt them leap away, but he didn’t pay attention to them beyond making sure they were out of range. He snapped his teeth at Gaara’s face, trying to get a grip on his neck, bulling forward to move Gaara further away from Konoha and his teammates.

Gaara was slippery though, his raccoon-like body eeling away from Naruto’s attack and his one tail whipping up to slam into Naruto’s face. Naruto was knocked to the side, crushing trees like twigs under his body, but he shook off the blow and leapt back into the fray. Gaara was ready for him, huge paws spread wide as if giving Naruto a hug, and the two of them crashed to the earth, snapping and snarling.

Naruto could feel the wild power of the nine-tailed fox coursing through his body, feel the burning chakra fueling his transformation. He was larger than Gaara, more powerful than Gaara, and he pushed every advantage he had, eyes focused on the tiny trapped figure of the Sand ninja in the tanuki’s forehead. He managed to get a good mouthful of Gaara’s sandy neck and shook him like a fox shook a rat, trying to snap the real Gaara out of it. Gaara—or really, the demon he’d turned over control to—snarled and kicked, breaking free and panting heavily.

Naruto didn’t let up, pressing his advantage. He pinned Gaara to the ground and nosed at Gaara’s tiny body, trying to wake him up. Ugh, he was too big! There was nothing he could do without tearing Gaara apart.

“Naruto!” Tiny feet alit on his head. “Can you understand me? If you can hold him still, Sakura and I will get Gaara!”

Sasuke. Two more tiny feet thumped down next to his ear, marking Sakura’s arrival, and Naruto felt a huge rush of affection for his teammates. If he’d had tear ducts, he’d have been

bawling his eyes out at their acceptance and support of him. But his distraction cost him, as Gaara shook free and slammed him to the side. Naruto went, carefully keeping his head upright so that his teammates didn't fall off, and got back to his feet a little ways away.

He barked once, a fox's yip, and charged again, bowling Gaara over and fastening his teeth into his scruff again. Gaara thrashed and howled, his back legs gouging into Naruto's stomach, but Naruto held on, keeping the demon's head as still as possible as the two tiny weights leapt off his own head and darted for the still form of Gaara, half-submerged in sand.

They couldn't cut him out, that much became clear very quickly; the demon was moving too much to do it safely, and as soon as they started cutting Sasuke was sure it would get a lot worse. Gaara was unconscious, though, and if they could wake him up, it would probably break the demon's hold over him.

"Sakura, get behind him, hold him still!" Sasuke ordered, and Sakura jumped behind Gaara's limp body, looping her arms around him and putting him into a taijutsu hold. Sasuke drew one of his katana, sent up a prayer that this would work, and reversed his grip, driving the pommel of his sword *hard* into Gaara's forehead.

Everything froze for a long moment. A trickle of blood trailed down from where Sasuke's sword had struck. Then, all of a sudden, the monstrous transformation cracked and dissolved into sand, falling away underneath Naruto's paws and sending him thumping to the ground. Sasuke let out a yelp, grabbing for Gaara and Sakura as all of a sudden their footing dissolved underneath them. They fell through the air, Sasuke fighting to get his feet underneath him so he could channel chakra and break their fall, and Naruto shot out his nose, getting it under them just in time so that they landed against soft red fur instead of the destroyed forest below them.

"Thanks," Sasuke told him, and underneath his feet Naruto's muzzle vibrated as he rumbled out a reply.

Gaara moaned in Sakura's arms, and Naruto lowered his nose so they could all hop off. Sakura dragged Gaara to the ground as well, where he slumped, giving his head a little shake as if to straighten it out.

"Alone..." Gaara moaned, lying where Sakura had left him, curling in on himself. "I'm so alone..."

Naruto stared down at the boy, at what could have been himself, if he hadn't had Sasuke and Sakura and Iruka-nii and Kakashi-sensei and the other rookies. He let go of his transformation, pushing the foreign chakra back inside him where he felt the nine-tailed fox accept it with a grumble. With a soft *fwoosh*, he transformed back into himself, landing lightly next to his teammates and bending over Gaara's prone form.

"Yeah, you might be alone now, but that can change, yanno!" he said firmly. Gaara's black-ringed eyes snapped open and he stared wide-eyed up at Naruto as Naruto continued, "I used to be alone, except for Hokage-jijii, but he was always busy so he couldn't spend much time with me. But then I got my team, and Kakashi-sensei, and Iruka-nii, and all my other friends. Being alone doesn't stop just because you whine about it, ya idiot! Being alone stops because

you *do* something about it!” He frowned down at Gaara, who looked absolutely gobsmacked. “You’ve got those two teammates a’ yours, right? The puppet guy I fought and that blonde girl?”

“My siblings don’t care about me,” Gaara snapped in what sounded like reflex. “They’re afraid of me, they don’t want to talk to me—”

Naruto bopped him on the head with his fist, and one of Gaara’s hands shot up to where he’d hit, eyes going even wider with shock. “How do you *know* that if you’ve never *talked* to them!” Naruto pointed out.

“The only way to prove my existence is by killing!” Gaara retorted.

“The only way to prove your existence is to *live*, you idiot!” Naruto shouted. “Live, and make friends, and create your own family! Make people acknowledge you by being better, and kinder, and more helpful! *Make* them acknowledge you by never going away, and protecting what’s important to you!”

“Gaara!” A voice cried out, and a huge blast of wind caught them all off-guard and sent them tumbling away. Naruto righted himself in time to see Kankuro and the blonde girl, Te-something, land next to Gaara and sling his arms over their shoulders. With quick, fearful glances at Team Seven, Gaara’s siblings leapt away with Gaara’s battered form suspended between them.

Naruto stared after them, after the only other person he’d ever met who understood what it was like being him.

“I hope he’s okay,” he muttered quietly.

“Maa, I’m sure he’ll be fine,” a voice said lightly, and Kakashi leapt down from one of the few remaining trees in the area to join them. “More importantly,” and he leveled a piercing gaze at Naruto, “are *you* okay?”

“What?” Naruto asked blankly, and then remembered that he’d just used the fox’s power to transform into the demon. “Oh, oh yeah! I’m fine.” He rubbed the back of his head sheepishly and glanced, hangdog, at his teammates.

“Hold still,” Kakashi ordered, clearly not taking his word for it, and Naruto squawked as his teacher began poking and prodding at him, hands lighting up with a green medical scanning jutsu.

“Wha— *sensei*! I’m fine, I swear!”

“You just channeled a massive amount of demonic chakra, Naruto,” Kakashi said, ignoring his wriggling and easily keeping him in place. “It’s corrosive and highly dangerous to humans, unless the proper precautions are taken.”

“Well, obviously that doesn’t apply to me, considering I’m hosting the creature, so I’m *fine*! Ack—sensei—leggo!” Naruto finally managed to break free and smoothed down his rumpled

uniform, glaring at his teacher.

“Well, you do seem to be showing no adverse effects,” Kakashi frowned. “Still, I’d like to get you checked over when we get back to the village.” Then he turned to face their two teammates. “Do you guys have any questions?”

Sakura, eyes wide, shook her head slowly. “Naruto...” she whispered, hands clutched together. “This is why you’ve been alone all this time! This is why people in the village don’t like you! You’re the kyuubi jinchuuriki!”

Naruto ducked his head again, staring down and scuffing the ground with his foot. “Yeah,” he mumbled. “I got it sealed inside me the night I was born. My dad died to seal it inside me.” And hadn’t it burned, when he’d realized that. When he’d realized that if the Yondaime Hokage was his father, that meant that his own father had chosen to seal the kyuubi no kitsune inside his son, rather than another child or even a shinobi. He’d done it and then he’d *died*, just left Naruto all alone, and Naruto didn’t know who his mom was but she’d obviously died in the attack as well, leaving him all by himself to deal with growing up a jinchuuriki.

Sakura hugged him hard, and Naruto went stiff all over before melting into her arms. The tears he hadn’t been able to cry as the fox welled up now, and he sniffed wetly, burying his face in her shoulder and wrapping his arms around her waist.

“You know, a lot of things make sense now,” Sakura said thoughtfully, letting him cry into her shoulder. “Why all of the parents told their kids to avoid you when we were little, why you have so much chakra... I bet this is why you’re so good at henge, too, Naruto! You know kitsune are well-known for being excellent shapeshifters.”

“Yeah, dobe,” Sasuke said, stepping in closer to them—but not too close, in case Naruto’s feelings were catching. He poked Naruto in the side gently. “Just because you have a big old chakra cheat inside of you, doesn’t mean you get out of training like the rest of us.”

“You’re still our teammate, Naruto,” Sakura said softly, petting his hair.

“I love you, Sakura-chan,” Naruto mumbled wetly into her shoulder. He reached out and snagged some part of Sasuke, reeling him in and smushing his wet face into Sasuke’s shoulder as the Uchiha wiggled and complained. “I love you too, Sasuke.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sasuke grumbled, and gave him some awkward pats on the back.

Naruto freed himself from the tangle of his teammates and flung himself at Kakashi. “I love you too, sensei,” he said, burying his face in Kakashi’s flak vest and squeezing him tight.

Kakashi was stiff as a board, clearly completely uncomfortable with such outpourings of affection, but he managed to give Naruto’s hair a quick ruffle before eeling away from his embrace and putting several feet between himself and all of his genin, in case another one of them decided to cover him in feelings.

“Maa, maa, now that we’re all in the know and everyone’s still friends, let’s head back to the village and see what’s up, ne?”

Naruto scrubbed his tears away and beamed at his team. “Okay. Let’s go see what’s happened!”

The village was under martial law when they got back. They were challenged three separate times just passing through the village, and they all went through slightly invasive checks to make sure they weren’t under genjutsu or some other disguise. But other than that things seemed to be under control, though very quiet; there were only shinobi on the streets, and they all seemed to have destinations in mind, nobody merely out for a stroll. All of the civilians, Kakashi explained as they headed for the Hokage Tower, were restricted to their evacuation sites until martial law was lifted, which would likely be tomorrow morning. Their duty now as active shinobi was to report in to the Hokage and be debriefed, then receive new orders.

The Administrative Building and attached Hokage Tower were absolute bedlam. Shinobi rushed back and forth, tight squads or pairs of black-clad, white-armored ANBU were everywhere, and it seemed as though there were ten people in every room barking orders. Kakashi led them straight through, not stopping until he found the scarred Nara who’d questioned the three of them in the Forest of Death after their encounter with Orochimaru—Nara Shikaku, the Jounin Commander.

“Commander,” Kakashi said, sketching a lazy salute. “Reporting in.”

“Oh, right.” The Nara’s lazy eyes, not seeming so lazy right now, skimmed over the three genin behind Kakashi. “You guys were the ones who went after the transforming Ichibi, right? Can I assume that as we haven’t all been crushed by a rampaging bijuu, the situation’s been dealt with?”

Kakashi nodded. “My three genin were able to subdue Sabaku no Gaara and reverse the transformation into the Ichibi,” he reported. “Naruto especially was a great help. I dare say it would have been nearly impossible without him.”

“He was, was he.” The Nara’s dark eyes fixed on Naruto, and Naruto gulped. The jounin looked completely unsurprised by Kakashi’s words, and Naruto could tell by the way the man stared at him that Nara Shikaku knew what he was. “And where is the Ichibi now?”

“After my genin reversed the transformation, Sabaku no Kankuro and Sabaku no Temari engaged us and were able to flee with their brother. I chose to return rather than pursue, as the immediate danger was past.”

“Mm. Troublesome.” Nara Shikaku sighed. “Their father’s dead, has been for a while. Orochimaru had been impersonating him, but with his encounter with your brats in the Forest of Death going so badly, we think he decided to retreat rather than go through with the invasion he’d planned. He didn’t inform Sand, of course. We’ve got about fifty furious Sand jounin and chuunin in our holding cells baying for blood. With their limited options, we’ll

probably be seeing those three kids again soon.” He gestured at the door behind him. “The Hokage’s through there, go check in with him and then come back for your next assignment.”

“Yes, sir.” Kakashi led his team past the Commander, who was immediately engaged in two other conversations, and rapped on the door.

“Enter,” a voice called from within.

Kakashi pushed open the door to reveal the Hokage sitting behind his usual desk, Iruka on one side, three elderly people in robes on the other, and about fifteen ANBU scattered around the room. Sakura shivered when all of those blank painted masks turned as one to look at them. ANBU were so unnerving!

“Hokage-sama,” Kakashi said, saluting. His voice went just a little bit drier. “Honored Elders.”

His three genin saluted a bit raggedly behind him.

“Ah, Team Seven.” The Sandaime put down the report he had been reading and regarded them through tired eyes. He looked very old, even older than usual. “What do you have to report?”

“I and my team were able to subdue Sabaku no Gaara and reverse his transformation,” Kakashi stated. Naruto noticed his funny phrasing; he didn’t say ‘my genin were able to subdue’, as he had with the Jounin Commander. He also didn’t call Gaara ‘the Ichibi’, instead putting emphasis on his human name. “After he transformed back, however, his two teammates were able to repel us long enough to retreat. I chose to return rather than pursue, as they were no longer a threat, in order to determine the situation in the village.”

“A wish choice, Hatake-san,” Sarutobi said, cutting off one of the Elders, who had opened his mouth, eyes glittering. “The situation here is under control. All of the invaders have been captured, and we are beginning relief efforts. See the Jounin Commander for your team’s assignment. Dismissed.”

Kakashi bowed, his genin following his lead, and turned to leave, herding Naruto in front of him. Naruto peered around his body and made eye contact with Iruka, who gave him a tiny, white-lipped smile. Reassured, Naruto made to turn around and face front again, but his eye was caught by the three Elders. They were all watching him, and he really didn’t like the looks on their faces. All three of them were looking at him differently, and yet all three expressions felt... *greedy*. Naruto felt a shiver go down his spine and he quickly scurried out the door. He didn’t like them at *all*.

Nara Shikaku immediately assigned Team Seven to search and rescue, which made sense, with Kakashi’s dogs and Naruto’s shadow clones. Kakashi had Naruto assign two clones to each dog and then sent them out into the village to look for people trapped by debris. Shinobi battles were always quite hard on their surroundings, and even if this had only been half of an invasion, it had still been an invasion.

They worked for the rest of the day, going where they were told, clearing roads, rebuilding houses, ferrying supplies and messages. Finally Nara Shikaku told them they were off-duty until the next morning and to go home and get some rest, and they trudged silently to Iruka's house, not even having to discuss it. Kakashi, his visible eye drooping with tiredness, ruffled their hair and told them to eat well and get a good night's sleep before turning and loping off into the gathering dusk towards his own apartment.

The three genin slumped into Iruka's apartment, dusty and sore and exhausted. Sakura claimed the first shower while Naruto headed for the kitchen to find something to fill their gnawing bellies. He and Sasuke sat silently at the table, almost too tired to chew their hastily thrown together fried rice of leftovers, until Sakura emerged in a billow of steam, one of Iruka's yukata nearly drowning her as she said the bathroom was open.

"You go first, teme," Naruto yawned. "I'll set up the beds." He passed Sakura her bowl of fried rice and went to pull the futons out of the closet. Iruka didn't have an extra bedroom, but after Naruto and Sasuke had started staying over more and more, he'd invested in two fluffy, thick futons for his living room floor. Naruto laid them out and covered them with their blankets, surveying them with his hands on his hips before nodding decisively. That was big enough for the three of them, definitely.

Sasuke emerged from the bathroom similarly to Sakura, though he at least had his own yukata (which had somehow migrated to Iruka's house) to change into. Naruto barely kept his eyes open through his own quick scrub-down, and when he came out of the bathroom his teammates were already curled up on the mattresses, fast asleep. With one last jaw-cracking yawn, Naruto flopped down, kicked one of Sakura's legs out of the way (she always star-fished in her sleep), and was asleep between one blink and the next.

—

"So." The kyuubi no kitsune regarded Naruto from his immense height. **"Back again, are you?"**

Naruto looked around. He was, indeed, in the lake of water surrounding the fox's cage. "Um, yeah," he said, frowning puzzledly, "but this time it wasn't on purpose? No offense," he added quickly, looking up at the fox.

The fox let out a wordless rumble—of anger or amusement, Naruto couldn't tell.

"Anyway, thanks!" He said quickly. "I dunno if you can see what I can, or anything, but we totally whooped Gaara's butt! So thanks for lending me your chakra and stuff."

The fox didn't reply for a long time, merely staring down at him. Naruto fidgeted a bit; he still wasn't very good at standing still for long periods of time. Finally the creature asked, **"Why did you come down here the first time? You could not have possibly thought I would help you."**

Naruto scratched his head and shrugged. "Well, I mean, Gaara and his bijuu were gonna flatten us if I didn't at least *ask*, so I thought, why not?"

The fox let out a huge huff of air that nearly sent Naruto splashing into the water on his butt. **“You are definitely that woman’s spawn.”**

“Wha—” Naruto gaped up at him. “You knew my *mom*? What was she like! Was she cool? Can you tell me about her?”

White teeth bared themselves in a warning snarl. **“Do not think you can ask things of me, worm. I gave you some of my power because I wanted to beat my sibling, no other reason. We are not—”** The fox paused suddenly, his glowing red eyes narrowing. **“Get out of here.”**

“Hey, rude!” Naruto squawked, propping his hands on his hips. “You can’t scare me away—”

“You foolish worm, can’t you tell? Someone is in your house. WAKE UP!” The fox roared, and Naruto was suddenly tumbling through the air, his eyes jerking open with a gasp just in time to see Iruka, only in his uniform pants and loose shirt, land knee-first on a shadowy figure’s back, his teeth bared and a kunai clenched in his fist.

Adrenaline flooded Naruto’s body as he acted completely on instinct, yanking out a handful of shuriken and sending them flying at another shadowy figure, rolling to his feet and diving after his weapons before they’d even hit. “Sakura!” he shouted, cracking his chakra over the room like she’d taught him to break any genjutsu in place, and he heard a muffled curse and the sharp hiss of some of Sakura’s senbon.

But there was no sound from Sasuke, and Naruto saw two other shadowy figures struggling with somebody on the ground. Hoping Iruka would forgive him for this, Naruto whipped through some seals and shouted, “*Katon: Gokakyuu no Jutsu!*” Blowing the fireball directly at those two figures.

The fireball lit up a gruesome sight. Four intruders, all dressed in a uniform Naruto recognized, and all horribly...strange. Two of them were grappling with a sluggish Sasuke, who was somehow compromised but still putting up a good fight. Iruka was trading blows with another, and Sakura was engaging the one Naruto had thrown his shuriken at. The fireball distracted the two fighting Sasuke, and Naruto hurled himself at them with a cry of, “*Kage bunshin no jutsu!*”

The apartment was suddenly full of Narutos. The sounds of crashing furniture and loud cries punctuated the space. The fireball had caught one of the walls on fire, and the flicker of the flames made the room look like something out of a nightmare. Naruto’s clones were getting popped left and right, and Naruto scrambled for his gear, yanked out a seal, and shouted, “EYES!” before slamming it to the ground.

The flash-bang detonated with the sound of a hundred lightning strikes. Even Naruto was dazed for a moment, but he shook it off in time to see one of them lift... *something* ...and aim it at a prone Sasuke.

There was no time for tactics. Naruto put his shoulder down and charged the mutated ninja with a bloodcurdling cry, bulling him into the wall and then through it, crashing them down onto the street two stories below. Dazed, ears still ringing from his flash-bang, Naruto groped

in his seal pouch and pulled out *something*, slapping it against the closest part of the enemy before leaping away.

The seal went off, blowing a hole in the side of the ninja with a scream of pain. *Oh good, it was an actual explosive one*, Naruto thought—but the ninja *got to his feet*, snarling and bleeding and missing half of his torso, but still ready to fight.

“SHANNARO!” Was shrieked from above him, and Naruto looked up just in time to see both Iruka’s and Sakura’s opponents get booted through the hole he’d made in the wall. Two seconds later saw the last intruder come flying out as well (though under his own power), a panting Sasuke landing heavily at Naruto’s side, both swords in hand.

Lights were coming on in the buildings around them, an alarm was blaring, ninja were rushing toward them. Infiltrating a village already on alert after an invasion had been a stupid move, Naruto thought.

“Sasuke!” one of the intruders called desperately, glancing around at the people surrounding them. “Orochimaru-sama would make you more powerful than you could ever dream! Don’t you want to kill your brother?”

Sasuke bared his teeth, blood running down his face from a cut on his forehead. “I don’t need that kind of power!” he shouted. “Konoha is my home! I will defeat my brother with my team, on *my* terms, and I will *never* leave my village!” He spat blood into the dirt, a challenge and insult all in one.

The four experiments of Orochimaru’s took one last look around and then leapt for the roofs, clearly deciding to cut their losses. Other shinobi pursued them, but Naruto turned to Sasuke, who was swaying, swords drooping toward the ground. Sakura reached out and supported him just in time as he slumped to the side.

“They gave me something,” he grunted, wiping the back of his wrist over his mouth and spitting again. “Airborne, I breathed it in. Ugh, I feel awful.”

Iruka laughed tiredly. “Well, it certainly has been an eventful day,” he said wearily, looking back up at his apartment. Someone had thoughtfully put out the fire with a Suiton jutsu, but there was still a huge hole in the wall, and the scent of charred wood drifted down to them in the street. “We’ll have to figure out—”

“You all are coming home with me,” Kakashi interrupted, landing in the street next to them with a slightly crazed look in his eyes. “Now I can’t even stop worrying about you when you’re *asleep*?” He turned to Iruka. “I thought they were safe with you! If this is what happens when they sleep at your place—”

“This was clearly a special circumstance, *Kakashi-san*,” Iruka retorted, bristling like a wet cat. “They’ve slept over at my place dozens of times before with nothing happening, and I don’t like your insinuation—”

“Naruto, go get your stuff,” Kakashi ordered tersely, squaring off with Iruka. “Well clearly your traps aren’t up to snuff, if four of *Orochimaru’s agents* can get through them to kidnap

—”

“—I didn’t see *you* helping fight them off, did I—”

Naruto sent three clones up to get their stuff as Iruka and Kakashi bickered, and then, barely pausing in his sniping about Iruka’s teaching abilities, Kakashi chivvied all four of them along the street like an anxious sheepdog. The three genin went willingly, exhaustion hammering down on their shoulders, Naruto and Sakura supporting Sasuke on either side. The day had gone on forever; they could hardly believe that that very morning, they’d been lining up in the arena to fight in the Third Exam. It seemed like eons ago.

Still, the three of them thought as they got ready for sleep in Kakashi-sensei’s barren apartment, the day had turned out pretty well, all told. There was nothing like having good teamwork at your back. They curled up on their slightly damp futons and dropped off with the certainty that, whatever tomorrow brought, they’d still be together.

Chapter End Notes

I shat this chapter out in three days I hope you all APPRECIATE IT

Idgaf about the Sound Four so I totally bullshitted that fight, btw

I had to do a shit-ton of research for Naruto and Gaara's fight because I didn't remember jack shit so the whole 'Gaara's stuck in Shuukaku's forehead' thing took me by surprise, be glad that I even stuck that much to canon, which is why I had no shits left to give for the Sound Four fight

Tell me what you think! I really like this chapter!

In Which the Sandaime Makes Some Decisions

Chapter Summary

The Nara do NOT like early mornings. Team Seven do NOT like some of the news they receive.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The next morning came far too quickly, with a summons to the Hokage's office. The three genin yawned and complained and dragged their feet, but even so they were dressed and ready to go within fifteen minutes—habit made it impossible to *not* get ready quickly. Kakashi, his silver hair perhaps a bit more droopy than usual but otherwise looking unaffected by the crazy events of yesterday, led the way through the quiet streets to the Hokage Tower, Iruka yawning at his side.

The Hokage wasn't quite ready for them, so they waited in the hallway, leaning against the wall tiredly. After a few minutes they were joined by Shikamaru, who put them all to shame by instantly falling back to sleep as soon as he propped himself against the wall. Sakura and Naruto snickered quietly at their snoozing friend, but they didn't have long to make fun of him, because just a few minutes later the door to the Hokage's office opened and Nara Shikaku—looking just as sleepy as his son—beckoned them inside.

The Sandaime was waiting for them, his craggy face lined with exhaustion. Standing next to his desk was an unfamiliar ninja, carrying a stack of what looked like green folded cloth. Kakashi felt his stomach swoop.

"We are here to address the events of yesterday," the Hokage said, taking a sip of what Kakashi was sure was nearly medical-strength tea. "Genin, step forward."

The four genin approached the desk, standing in a line. Kakashi and Iruka exchanged looks, Iruka clearly not knowing how to feel about this either.

"Despite the untimely interruption, the Chuunin Exams has come to a satisfactory close," the Hokage said, folding his hands together on top of his desk and looking very impressive despite his sleepless night. "Out of the many talented genin that represented Konoha this round, you four stood out for your quick grasp of unexpected situations, your ability to plan ahead and strategize for your opponent's weaknesses, and your awareness of not only when to push forward, but when to pull back." He made a gesture, and the nameless chuunin stepped forward and handed him the stack of what were now clearly flak vests.

"Uchiha Sasuke, step forward."

Sasuke, on the far left, took a step forward until he was directly in front of the desk and bowed deeply to the Hokage. He gave his oath of service in a clear, unhesitating voice, and after the Sandaime accepted his oath and presented him with a flak vest, he bowed again and returned to his spot next to Sakura.

“Haruno Sakura, step forward.”

Sakura, eyes wide and trembling with unshed tears, gave her own oath and received her flak vest in turn, stepping back to make way for Naruto.

Once Shikamaru had received his vest and stepped back into the line, the Hokage looked the four of them over with clear pride in his eyes. “You are the future of Konoha,” he announced. “As chuunin, you will not only face danger in protection of your village, but also be expected to lead your fellow shinobi. The Will of Fire burns strongly within you, and I know you will stand strong and face all of the experiences ahead of you as proud shinobi of Konohagakure.”

The newly-minted chuunin exchanged excited smiles as the Sandaime sat back down behind his desk and announced, “You are dismissed. Take the day and inform your families and friends. As of tomorrow, you will begin your duties as chuunin. Jounin Hatake, stay behind.”

Kakashi, already turning for the door, stopped in his tracks. So did his team, who all turned to look at him with surprised, curious looks on their faces. Kakashi nodded to them (hopefully) reassuringly, and Iruka ushered them all out, giving Kakashi a long look before shutting the door to the office.

Kakashi turned back to the Hokage and bowed shallowly. “Hokage-sama,” he said, no idea why he’d been held back from leaving with the others.

“Kakashi-san.” The Hokage observed him from under his bristly eyebrows, then sighed and reached into one of his drawers, withdrawing his pipe and a box of tobacco. He packed and lit it, then sat back in his chair, exhaling a huge plume of smoke. Kakashi stood silently, wondering what this was about.

“I’m retiring,” the Hokage finally announced. “Again. And I want you to be my successor.”

Kakashi felt as though he’d just been punched in the gut. “You...What?” he stuttered. “Hokage-sama, you can’t be serious—”

“I can, and I am. I’m old, Kakashi,” Sarutobi sighed, and suddenly Kakashi could see it, the weariness on his face and the weight on his shoulders. He’d been old when he’d retired the first time and made Minato-sensei his successor, and now he was ancient, like a gnarled tree constantly buffeted by unceasing winds. “This is a young man’s job. You were trained by Minato-kun, are unfailingly loyal to our village, and are from one of the founding clans. All three of your students have just become chuunin on their first try at the Exams, despite having only graduated from the academy six months ago. You are one of our strongest shinobi, and I know you will be an excellent Hokage, despite you never wanting the title.”

Creeping, prickling dread was crawling up Kakashi’s arms and legs. *Obito*, he thought desperately, remembering his fallen teammate and his bright, happy declarations that he was

going to be Hokage. *Sensei*. Minato, bright blue eyes smiling at him from under the brim of that white hat. *Naruto*. His own student, sensei's son, shouting determinedly about becoming Hokage and protecting the people important to him.

"Hokage-sama, I *can't*," Kakashi said desperately, the dreams of three of his most important people bearing down on him, feeling like they would crush him under their weight.

Sarutobi gazed at him, something strong and implacable in his eyes. "You can, Kakashi," he said, unyielding. "I need someone strong to hold the village together, until someone more suitable and perhaps more idealistic than both of us can take the position. There is no one else." Both shinobi's thoughts went to the bright-haired boy who had just left the room, and his dreams for the future.

Kakashi let out a shuddering sigh. He was right, of course—the Sandaime was, infuriatingly, almost always right. And Kakashi would always do his duty to his village. "Very well, Hokage-sama," he said wearily. "I'll become the Godaime Hokage."

Sarutobi nodded, some of the lines around his eyes easing with what was probably relief. "Thank you, Kakashi," he murmured.

They decided on a month of shadowing, so that Kakashi could learn the ins and outs of the position, before the Sandaime would retire and Kakashi would be inaugurated as the fifth Hokage. Kakashi left the office feeling distinctly shell-shocked and was surprised to see Shikaku leaning on the wall outside, clearly waiting for him.

"So he asked you, didn't he?" the Nara asked, sharp eyes taking in Kakashi's form. "It *is* for the best, Kakashi. And you won't be alone." Kakashi shook his head, unable to speak, and Shikaku clapped a hand to his shoulder. "Come on. It's too early for a drink, but I'll buy you breakfast while you think about how you're going to break it to your kids."

Kakashi let out a little whimper, and Shikaku slung a commiserating arm around his shoulders as he steered him toward the exit.

—

The kids were waiting for him on the street right outside, new flak vests stiff and shiny on their chests, all three of them beaming. They'd made Shikamaru stick around too, and the poor boy was nearly asleep standing up, right there in the road where Naruto had him collared so he couldn't escape.

"Sensei!" Naruto bellowed when they saw him, letting go of Shikamaru so suddenly that the unsuspecting boy actually fell over and bounding up to Kakashi, his grin rivaling the sun for brightness. "Look! *Look!* We made chuunin, all three of us, on the first try!"

"Aa, you did," Kakashi agreed, looking over his team as they crowded around him, Sakura beaming, Sasuke with a tiny smile on his lips. "You all did an amazing job, and I'm very proud of you." He took a deep breath. "Let's get you to the Quartermaster, so she knows your faces, and then I'll take you all to breakfast."

Chattering happily, the group moved off down the street, a scowling Shikamaru unable to escape Team Seven's infectious happiness and Shikaku trailing silently along in Kakashi's shadow. They wended their way through the maze of streets in the center of the village, Kakashi directing them subtly in the right direction as his three teammates (*not his teammates anymore*, his mind whispered) speculated excitedly about what amazing things they could requisition from the fabled Quartermaster and wondering how their friends on the other rookie teams would take their promotions.

Finally Kakashi pulled to a stop in front of a boring, nondescript door in the middle of a blank wall, wisteria climbing innocently around the frame and over the top. In the spring it bloomed soft shades of pink and purple, a flowery contrast to the cold practicality of what lay behind that door.

Kakashi rapped twice on the solid wood, and then pushed it open.

The interior was close and cluttered, shelves and racks of oddments filling every available space. The air smelled of metal and leather, with a sharp, biting undertone that made Kakashi think of explosives. It was almost completely silent, save for a soft, irregular grinding noise, so quiet it was impossible to tell where it came from. Kakashi strode right in, ignoring his team's suddenly subdued whispers, and made for the back of the room.

The source of the grinding noise became clear as they rounded the corner of the last shelf. Against the back wall, half-hidden by racks of swords, sat a kunoichi, running a whetstone along the edge of a blade. The edge glinted in the light, looking sharp enough to split hairs.

"Hatake," the woman greeted, her voice a harsh rasp. She set the sword aside and sat back in her chair, sharp eyes scanning the crowd behind him. She was beautiful, with fine bone structure and large eyes, her red-brown hair a wave of curls spilling over her shoulder. "I see you've brought me some visitors."

Kakashi nodded, gesturing his three kids forward and tugging Shikamaru up next to them. "New chuunin," he reported. "Bringing them to you, Shiranui, for their first sets of gear."

"Right," the woman grunted, placing her hands on the counter in front of her and heaving herself to her feet. Sakura let out a tiny gasp as she limped out from behind the counter and her right leg was revealed, a steel-rod-and-mesh prosthetic extending from just below her knee. It looked shiny and sharp and just as dangerous as the rest of the woman.

The Quartermaster stuck it out to show it off, and the four teens winced at their transparency, but leaned forward for a better look. "Lost it years ago," the woman cackled, and now that she was standing, her hair had fallen away from her neck to reveal a vicious scar that dragged across the hollow of her throat, likely what had damaged her vocal chords. "I could still run missions if I wanted to, but it's more trouble than it's worth, so I stay in-village these days." She limped down one of the narrow aisles, and with hesitant glances at each other, the new chuunin followed her. Kakashi and Shikaku trailed after them, but stayed at the back of the group.

"Here." Shiranui tugged packs off of a high shelf and tossed one to each of the teenagers. "Standard chuunin travel gear, don't lose it for at least six months or I will be very upset with

you. What are your specialities? Do you need any special gear?"

"I'm a kenjutsu user," Sasuke said, glancing at his teammates.

"Got plenty of swords around here. Go find something you like and I'll tell you if it's included in standard gear or if you'll have to pay a bit extra for it. What about the rest of you?"

"Just standard weapons for me," Shikamaru replied, no longer looking sleepy.

"A Nara, huh?" The Quartermaster grunted, looking him over and then glancing at Shikaku. "Go fill up on anything you're running low on, then."

"Nothing for me, either, nee-san, unless you have sealing paper 'n stuff?" Naruto asked, blue eyes wide and hopeful.

That seemed to give the Quartermaster pause, and she looked Naruto up and down. "Sealing paper, huh?" She said thoughtfully, and glanced at Kakashi. He gave her a tiny nod. "It's been a while since someone's asked me for a lot of that." She pivoted on her good leg and pointed toward the other side of the room. "Go check against that wall, there's a bunch of different kinds and some sealing inks there too." Naruto bounced off happily, and the woman's attention fell on Sakura. "And what about you?"

Sakura cleared her throat nervously. "Um, well, I'm a poison and genjutsu user?" She said uncertainly.

The Quartermaster's eyebrows lifted the tiniest bit, and she nodded. "Poisons are this way. Follow me." She limped down the aisle, and Sakura followed her, clutching her gear pack.

"Um, Shiranui-san," Sakura said hesitantly. "Are you related to Genma-san?"

The Quartermaster nodded, not pausing in her slow path through the store. "My little brother. Why?"

"O-oh, um, well, he's teaching me poisons," Sakura admitted. "He and Anko-san. He's very nice!"

Shiranui-san let out a rusty laugh. "Nice? Really? Well, good for you, girlie. Not many are better than Genma at what he does."

Sakura beamed, and Kakashi smirked underneath his mask, wondering if his student actually knew Genma was (in)famous for.

"Shiranui-san," Sasuke said, trotting up and holding up three swords. "How about these?"

"Three, boy? Really? You really need three swords?" The Quartermaster took them and looked them over, nodding. "These two are standard-issue katana, they're covered. This one is chakra-conductive, but I'd be careful, Uchiha, it can only hold so much. If you want a really good chakra-conductive sword I'd start saving up for it now. Knowing you Uchiha, you'll go overboard and shatter this one. You Fire-types are always so dramatic."

Naruto, just joining them with his arms full of paper and brushes, sniggered. “She sure knows you well, Sasuke!” He turned to the Quartermaster and held out his spoils. “How about these, nee-san? How many of these do I get to keep?”

The woman gave them a cursory glance. “You’re the first person to come in asking about those in years, except for this one jounin. As far as I’m concerned, they’re all covered. Call it a promotion discount. Don’t think I’ll be so nice if you use all of it up in a month, though.”

“Wow!” Naruto lit up. “Thanks, nee-san!” He carried his spoils over to the counter, and Kakashi muttered a soft ‘thank you’ to Shiranui as they all headed back to the counter to get tallied up.

“Don’t thank me, Hatake,” Shiranui said quietly. “He’s already taking after his mom and dad, huh? You train him up well, then, and we’ll call it even.” She limped back to her seat behind the counter and pulled out a ledger.

It took a while to get all four of them tallied up. Because it was their first time, the Quartermaster had to create new accounts for them, and then they kept darting back and forth for things they’d forgotten—a new pack of shuriken, another set of kunai, more ninja wire, things like that. All three of them were like kids in a sweetshop, and even Shikamaru couldn’t pretend apathy in the face of all of the amazingly lethal goodies the room held.

Finally everything they were requisitioning was properly logged, and the five of them trooped out, the teens’ packs bulging with all of their purchases. “Right,” Shikaku said with a yawn, squinting up at the sky. “Breakfast. Let’s go.” He turned and slouched off down the street, clearly with a destination in mind, and Shikamaru followed, catching up to walk alongside his father.

“Us too, sensei?” Naruto asked, and Kakashi nodded.

“Aa,” he agreed. “And I’ve got something to tell you guys.”

“What is it?” Naruto asked instantly, and Sakura and Sasuke also turned their faces up to him, expectant.

Kakashi sighed. “In private, you brats,” he said wearily, scruffing Naruto’s and Sasuke’s hair. “Come on, I’ll tell you over food.” He followed the Nara down the street, his team trailing him obediently.

Shikaku led them to a nice tea house, their doors just opening, and they were led to a private room immediately. They settled onto cushions, and Kakashi’s kids chattered about how they’d never been in a place like this and what they were going to order. They were so *happy*, and Kakashi swallowed down a lump in his throat as he wondered how he was going to tell them his news.

Tea and breakfast was ordered and delivered, the staff quiet and discreet as they slid bowls of miso soup and rice and plates of delicately grilled fish onto the table before disappearing with low bows. Kakashi picked up his chopsticks with a sense of impending doom—there was nothing else to delay it, now, nothing to deflect his kids.

“So, sensei,” Naruto said, digging his own chopsticks into his bowl of rice, “what’s this news you have for us?”

Kakashi took a quick sip of his strong green tea, the grassy flavor of sencha rolling over his tongue as he tried to figure out where to start. “Now that you are all chuunin,” he said slowly, “you no longer are assigned under a jounin-sensei.”

“What!” Naruto exclaimed, shocked. “But you’re our sensei, sensei!”

“But you no longer need a sensei, Naruto,” Kakashi sighed, trying to ignore the fond smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. No matter how smart and skilled Naruto got, some things remained the same. “Chuunin are expected to lead teams of their own, and work in pairs as well as in larger groups. A lot of the time you *are* assigned to semi-permanent teams under a jounin, but, unfortunately...that won’t be the case for us.”

“What do you mean, sensei? Why not?” Sakura asked, brows furrowed. She didn’t seem surprised that he was no longer going to be their sensei; she’d clearly known about the consequences of becoming chuunin. Sasuke, too, was looking at him intently, both of his more perceptive kids knowing that there was something more that he wasn’t telling them.

Kakashi took a deep breath and set his chopsticks down. “Sandaime-sama has asked me to become the next Hokage,” he said quietly. “I accepted.”

Silence rang through the room, as loud as a shout. His genin (*chuunin, they’re chuunin now*) looked horrified, as if unable to believe what they’d heard. Kakashi stared down at his hands on the table, unable to look them directly in the face. Shikamaru and Shikaku were silent and still, Shikamaru’s eyes wide and sharp and awake, darting between all of them.

“Sensei,” Naruto whispered, and Kakashi repressed a tiny flinch. “You’re gonna become the next Hokage?”

“Sandaime-sama has already retired once,” Kakashi said, unable to keep himself from trying to explain, to rationalize his decision to his kids. “He was old then, and when Yondaime-sama died he had to pick up the hat again. Leading a village is a young man’s game, he deserves a retirement and rest. I’m the only one in the village who is young enough and strong enough to take the position. I’m well-known throughout the Elemental Nations as a powerful jounin, and I was the student of the Yondaime. And now that you three are chuunin...”

“Just because we’re chuunin now doesn’t mean we don’t still *need* you!” Sakura burst out, green eyes welling with tears. “We were genin *yesterday*! We still have so much to learn—we’ve only been on one mission out of the village, Naruto’s barely begun studying seals, we need so much more practice working as a team—we *need* you, sensei.”

Kakashi shook his head, heart welling with fondness for his tiny, loyal team. “You three are so strong,” he told Sakura gently. “All you really need now is experience, and there’s no way to get that except by going on missions. Your other teachers will still be available to help you train, and I’ll be shadowing the Hokage for a month before officially taking the hat. I’ll still be around to help you transition.”

“All three of us got promoted,” Sasuke said abruptly, black eyes narrowed. It was the first time he’d spoken since they sat down for breakfast. “Our entire team got promoted, sensei, and you said that’s really rare, that all three members of a genin squad are all ready to become chuunin at the same time. Shikamaru’s the only other genin to get promoted, and he’s a certified *genius*. Were we all promoted just to free you up so you could take the hat?” Naruto and Sakura both sucked in shocked gasps at the idea and immediately looked to their sensei, rising affront on their faces.

Sasuke was going to make a great ANBU Commander or advisor to the Hokage someday, Kakashi thought fondly. He was so suspicious of other people’s motivations and so good at teasing out hidden agendas. Not so good at the *emotions* side of people, but very good at the *manipulations* side.

“It was a consideration,” Shikaku interrupted before Kakashi could answer, his deep voice jerking Team Seven’s attention to him. They’d all clearly—not *forgotten* that he was there, but dismissed him as unimportant when all of their attention was focused on Kakashi. “But it was just a bonus, that promoting all three of you would free up Kakashi to be the Sandaime’s successor. You all did amazingly well in the Exams and, honestly, facing off against Orochimaru alone and not only surviving, but seriously injuring him would have earned you all field promotions, if it had been out of the village. That plus your individual ingenuity in defeating your third-round opponents, and Sandaime-sama was happy to promote you.”

‘Happy’, Kakashi mused, was probably a bit of an exaggeration; probably ‘less hesitant’ would have been a better descriptor, considering his team were only twelve years old and they weren’t currently at war. But he would take it; coming from Shikaku, the Jounin Commander and advisor to the Hokage, his team would accept it much more easily than if they’d thought he was trying to cover up for the Hokage promoting them undeservedly.

His team settled down, almost visibly becoming unruffled. “Well,” Sakura said, still eyeing Shikaku a bit suspiciously as if trying to figure out if he was being truthful with them (Shikaku looked completely unperturbed; a wet-behind-the-ears chuunin would never be able to make him blink), “I guess that’s all right, as long as we were promoted fairly.” Then she turned back to Kakashi, and her eyes became big and round and sorrowful, still the tiniest bit wet from earlier. Kakashi suppressed a twitch. “But sensei, we’ll *miss* you.”

“Maa maa, Sakura-chan, I’m not disappearing,” Kakashi soothed, hoping beyond hope that she didn’t start crying for real. “I’ll still be here, and you’ll still see me a lot. Just...in a different capacity.” And finally, he mustered up enough courage to look over at a silent Naruto.

Naruto’s forehead was furrowed, his eyes dark with thought, teeth chewing on his lower lip. *Must train him out of that habit*, Kakashi thought absently, *before he bites right through it when an enemy startles him*— And then he remembered that it was no longer his job to teach Naruto that stuff, and forced his mind to think about something else.

“Well,” Naruto said slowly, clearly feeling his way carefully into his thoughts, “I suppose you’re just gonna have to take really good care of that hat, sensei, coz I’m gonna be coming for it in a few years.” And he smiled, tentatively, a peek of sun coming out from behind clouds.

Tension Kakashi hadn't even known he was carrying drained out of his spine in a rush, leaving him feeling weak and very glad he was already sitting on the floor, otherwise it would have been very embarrassing to have his knees wobble. "Naruto," he breathed, and then beamed, curving his visible eye up into the happiest smile he could manage. "Aa. I'll take really good care of it. You'd better not keep me waiting too long, either. I'm not going to have any time to read my books as Hokage, you know."

"Ugh, sensei, you're so lazy," Sakura complained, and just like that the tension was broken. They finally tucked into their breakfasts, the conversation turning to the more practical matters of being promoted, and Kakashi's team might be breaking up but it definitely wasn't breaking apart. He wouldn't let it, and, it seemed, neither would his genin.

Chapter End Notes

WHATUP Y'ALL HOW Y'ALL BEEN HOW'S LIFE TREATING YOU I'M GOOD I'M JUST WORKING, Y'KNOW, AND IN GRAD SCHOOL AT THE SAME TIME ALSO WE'RE LOSING TWO MEMBERS OF OUR TEAM SO WE'RE GOING TO BE WORKING AT HALF CAPACITY AT WORK NBD GAIZ I LOVE IT

//dead

Srsly, tho, so sorry this is so late coming out, I have had zero motivation to write recently and close to zero time to write even if I wanted to. But it's finally done! *pom poms*

Fun Japanese note: A traditional Japanese breakfast consists of miso soup, a bowl of rice, a small grilled fish, cooked vegetables, maybe some tofu, etc. Idk wtf people in Naruto have for breakfast, but because this is a teahouse, I'm assuming it's a traditional meal. Also, sencha is a super basic Japanese green tea found literally everywhere in Japan - it's basically like Kakashi ordered a cup of coffee with his breakfast.

Also, I figure most people in the Naruto fandom know this by now, but idk I wanted to share it anyway because I miss kanji.

三代目 Sandaime is a title given to a generational leader in Japan. 三, san, literally means three, 代 dai literally means generation, and 目 me (pronounced 'meh') is a counter used to designate a specific order. So 三代目 Sandaime literally means "the third generation". Obvs you can use this for any number, not just three: 二代目 Nidaime, second generation, 四代目 Yondaime, fourth generation, etc. etc. you get the point. INTERESTINGLY, our beloved derp Hashirama is not called 一代目 Ichidaime, but 初代目 Shodaime. Both of these words mean the "first generation," but no one in Japan would ever say 'ichidaime'. It's kind of redundant. You already have the counter for a series, so you know it's a number in a series, so it's like saying "the number one first generation", kinda. Instead you say 初代目 Shodaime. 初, sho, means 'first', as in

the first time you are doing something. It's the same character as in the word 初めて hajimete, which, as anime watchers, I'm sure you all have heard before; it means the first time something has happened, such as, to take a totally random example, being the first leader of a secret ninja village.

SO, where would you hear these kinds of titles in modern Japan? Not many places, let me tell you. Mainly they're used for yakuza leaders, which casts a whole new light on Naruto (>.>); But they can also be used to refer to family-run businesses and restaurants. For example, if a family-owned ramen shop has been in business for four generations then the current owner could be referred to as the 四代目 yondaime owner. But even that's rare; tbh the only place where these titles still matter is with the yakuza. And that's a lesson for another time.

TELL ME WHAT YOU THINK ABOUT THIS CHAPTER! Hahahahahahaha we're finally getting to the fun parts, everyone >:D Here's my first super huge divergence from canon! I'm so excited~~

In Which There is Even More Divergence from Canon

Chapter Summary

After Kakashi's bomb has been dropped, the new chuunin do a lot of repair work and meet someone rather odd. They also meet Team Gai, which goes... about as well as you could expect.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The four newly promoted chuunin were put on light duty for the first few days, helping the village-wide cleanup and filling in gaps on guard rosters. They'd never seen the aftermath of a battle before, and it was humbling, to see the destruction an average ninja could wreak. It put all of their ethics and accountability lessons into perspective.

The four of them had been the subject of great envy and celebration from the rest of the rookie teams, Kiba letting out a howl of pretend outrage and dogpiling on top of Naruto with a yapping Akamaru. Ino was quiet and distant for a little while, clearly struggling with her envy. Sakura was hesitant to engage, not sure if it would make things worse or better. She hovered at Naruto and Sasuke's side, casting anxious looks over at the blonde, but neither girl stepped forward to bridge the divide.

Naruto couldn't focus on Sakura's and Ino's drama, though. He had other problems: namely, that he was being stalked by frogs.

It was really irritating, and not very subtle at all. Naruto noticed them the day after their promotion to chuunin and Kakashi's announcement. They'd been helping rebuild a street of shops and homes that had had the bad fortune to be located close to the arena and subsequently gotten flattened by the battle. The construction workers took ruthless advantage of having ninja helpers, and Team Seven was kept hopping, ferrying heavy loads of wood to the upper floors, hauling around stones and mixing clay and using very tiny wind jutsus to help dry things faster.

The frogs hung out beneath bushes or rocks, watching Naruto with unblinking, weird eyes. They had to be somebody's summons; regular animals didn't act like that. But it was *so obvious* and *so irritating*, Naruto couldn't imagine any ninja who would actually do something like this. Maybe they were trying to get his attention?

Finally, after two days of being followed around with no sign of the actual ninja the frogs were attached to, Naruto sighed and sent two senbon flying at his latest stalker with a twitch of his fingers. The needles embedded themselves in the ground just shy of the frog's front legs, who let out a shocked croak and leapt backwards.

“Go tell your summoner,” Naruto told it, “that if they want to talk to me, they should do it *directly*. And I won’t put up with any more stalkers!”

The frog nodded quickly and vanished in a puff of smoke, and Naruto turned back to his work, waving off his teammates, who were both looking his way. Naruto knew that Sakura and Sasuke had both noticed the frogs as well, but since Naruto was the only one being followed they’d let him deal with it however he wanted. *Maybe now I’ll get some answers*, Naruto thought.

And, several hours later as they were leaving their latest job site, he did.

The rattle of a traditional drum and the string of a shamisen suddenly sounded from the air, and Team Seven stopped in their tracks, looking around suspiciously. “From Mount Myoboku, the Toad Sage... Jiraiya of the Sannin... Is here!” And with a clack of red geta sandals and a whirl of long white hair, a huge ninja spun gracefully into the street in front of them and posed.

Team Seven stared.

The strange tableau stayed frozen for a long moment, before the stranger began to droop slightly. He relaxed his pose and peered down at them, clearly disappointed by their reactions. “Oi, what a quiet group. Didn’t you hear me? I’m—”

Sasuke stepped forward, hand on his sword hilt, moving in front of Naruto. “You’re the one who’s been stalking Naruto,” he said, eyes narrowed suspiciously.

The stranger coughed. “Stalking? Ah, that’s a bit—”

“That’s right,” Sakura interrupted, stepping up next to Sasuke and twirling a senbon through her fingers threateningly. “Toads have been following him around for days now. What do you want with a thirteen-year-old boy? Sounds fishy. What are you, a pervert or something?”

The man laughed uneasily, eyeing the senbon in her hand. “What! Of course not! He’s a boy! I only have interest in observing the female form—”

Sakura’s eye twitched, and the senbon disappeared into her vest so she could crack her knuckles threateningly. “*Oh really?*”

The man yelped and hopped back a step. “Wait! I’m here for a reason! I need to talk to Naruto!”

Naruto sighed and wrapped his hands around Sasuke’s and Sakura’s shoulders, preventing them from attacking this guy who apparently knew him. “It’s fine, guys. What do you want, pervert?” He asked the man.

The man drooped even more at the address, but apparently deemed it more important to say whatever it was he’d come to say. “Ah, perhaps somewhere a bit more private?” He hedged, glancing around the street.

Naruto sighed irritably. He was hot and tired and wanted to take a bath and relax after their long day helping with repairs, but he also wanted to find out what this guy—Jiraiya of the Sannin, who was hardly ever in the village—wanted with him. “Fine. We’ll go to my place. Guys?” Sakura and Sasuke nodded, and jumped after him as he took to the rooftops to head toward his apartment.

It took just a few minutes to get settled into his tiny apartment, his teammates tidying up the mess of scrolls and books and weapon-cleaning materials spread over his living area while Naruto headed to the kitchen to make tea. Their usual routines in the small space were interrupted by the presence of the huge man standing awkwardly by the door, eyes roving over the shabby apartment.

“Right,” Naruto said, pausing so Sakura could set out his small square table before setting down his teapot, three cups, and one water glass (because why would he have more than three teacups? Only his teammates ever came over, so now he had to improvise). Iruka-nii had taught him well over the last few months, though, so Naruto waited until after he’d poured the tea and everyone was settled before asking, “So what’s up, Ero-Jiraiya?”

Jiraiya choked slightly on his tea and hastily placed his cup back on the table. “Ah...” he glanced at Sasuke and Sakura, who were both sipping their tea and staring at him. “Well, it’s, uh, rather of a delicate nature...”

Naruto waved his hand. “Yeah, yeah, whatever. I don’t have secrets from these guys, so just say whatever you came to say.”

Jiraiya’s eyes narrowed, and he leaned forward significantly. “No secrets? Not even particularly *big* ones?” His eyes dropped to Naruto’s stomach.

Naruto’s forehead scrunched for a minute, because he still wasn’t great at subtlety, and then cleared. “Oh! You mean the Kyuubi?” Then he squinted suspiciously at the Sannin. “How do *you* know about it? Weren’t you already gone when it attacked?”

Jiraiya glanced at Sasuke and Sakura, both of whom looked supremely unsurprised. “I was in-village at the time. Why do they know? Did you tell them?”

Sasuke rolled his eyes. “You clearly haven’t heard everything that happened at the Chuunin Exams,” he sniped, and took a sip of tea.

Jiraiya looked to Naruto, who shrugged. “The Ichibi jinchuuriki went nuts and started to transform,” he explained. “I asked the fox for some of his power so I could transform into him and beat the Ichibi. My team helped me subdue him, and Kakashi-sensei and I told them about me, considering the cat was already out of the bag.”

“I see,” Jiraiya said faintly. Then he shook his head as if to clear it. “Wait, you *asked* the Kyuubi for his power?”

“Um, yeah.” Naruto took a sip of tea from his water glass.

“*How?*” Jiraiya looked as if he was going to faint.

Naruto exchanged glances with his teammates, and shrugged. “Dunno, I just went into my mind and he was there behind these huge bars, and I told him what was going on and asked him for some of his power, and he gave it to me.”

“Just like that,” Jiraiya said weakly.

“I guess so.”

Jiraiya sighed and let his forehead thump forward on the table, muttering something that sounded like “too much like your mother.”

“So what do you *want*, Ero-Jiraiya?” Naruto demanded. He still had no explanation for why this old guy wanted to talk to him about his passenger.

Jiraiya popped upright and leveled a finger at his face. “Stop calling me that! And I’m here to examine your seal and fix it if it’s started to erode.”

“*Erode?*” Three voices said at the same time, and all three chuunin sat forward, staring at the older ninja.

“What do you mean, erode?” Sasuke asked, immediately going on the attack. “The seal can erode? Is that dangerous to Naruto? How can we tell?”

Sakura, on the other hand, focused more on the preventative. “You said you can fix it. Was it broken in the beginning? Is there anything we can do to help him?”

“Whoa, whoa, back up,” Jiraiya said, hands in the air as if to ward them off. “I can fix it if necessary, and the Yondaime built in safeguards in case it failed. I don’t know what it means that Naruto’s actually talked to the creature, though.”

“So what do I need to do, then?” Naruto asked.

“I need to examine the seal, and see if there’s any sign of it cracking. If there is we’ll have to leave the village and go somewhere remote to repair it.”

“Why somewhere remote?” Sasuke asked, scowling, but Naruto was nodding slowly.

“In case it breaks out, teme,” he said. “Can’t have it rampaging through the village again.”

Sakura frowned fiercely. “We’ll go with you, if that’s necessary,” she declared.

“I doubt you’ll be allowed,” Jiraiya said, and held up a hand when all three chuunin glared at him. “You guys are just chuunin, and this is the Kyuubi no Kitsune we’re talking about. It’s highly unlikely you’ll be able to go with him if he does need the seal reinforced, but we’re getting ahead of ourselves. If I may?” He gestured at Naruto.

“What, right now?” Naruto asked, but he lay down on his back and hiked up his shirt so that his bellybutton was visible, framed by the soft beginnings of what was going to be some serious muscle definition in a year or two.

Jiraiya laid a chakra-coated hand over his stomach, and Sasuke and Sakura leaned in to watch as Naruto's seal lit up, black lines scrolling over his skin like a strange sun. He poked and prodded and muttered, and every once in a while Naruto's belly felt very strange, until finally he sat back and sighed.

"Well, it's not as bad as it could be," he said wearily, passing a hand over his white hair. "It definitely has eroded some, but it's holding up well, all things considered. I'll set up a time to head out of the village—"

"Does it need to be repaired?" Naruto interrupted, pulling down his shirt and sitting back up.

Jiraiya paused, looking surprised. "Well, no, it doesn't *need* to be, but the more you use the fox's power the more it'll erode, so the sooner the bet—"

"That's okay then," Naruto interrupted again, shrugging and picking up his glass to finish off his tea. "I don't plan on using the fox's power unless I absolutely need it, and I don't want to leave the village right now unless I absolutely have to. We're really short-staffed right now, and we've got a lot of missions."

Jiraiya was silent for a minute, clearly not sure how to deal with this. "Well, okay, if that's what you want," he finally said grudgingly. "But if Hokage-sama says that it needs to be repaired, we'll leave as soon as we can."

"If Hokage-sama says so," Naruto agreed, and Sakura and Sasuke both relaxed a little. "So, Ero-Jiraiya," Naruto continued, "you're some kind of sealing expert, then?"

Jiraiya twitched again at the name, but answered, "Yeah, I trained with the best of the best in sealing when I was young and even taught the Yondaime sealing myself." His chest puffed out in pride.

Sasuke scowled. "So you knew Naruto's dad, too, huh? So why haven't you been around, then, if you were Yondaime-sama's teacher?"

Jiraiya gaped around at them. "You know about your dad, too!?"

"That ship sailed on my first mission out of the village, pervert!" Naruto replied, exasperated. "I'm the man's spitting image! The first missing-nin we ran into pegged me for his son immediately! Honestly, I dunno how you guys thought you could keep that a secret." He thumped his glass down on the table crossly. "Anyway, I asked about sealing 'cause I have a question." He went over to one of the piles of scrolls in a corner of the room and rifled through it, oblivious to the eyerolls Sakura and Sasuke exchanged behind his back.

"A-ha!" He emerged with a scroll clenched in his fist, triumphant. "Kakashi-sensei says I've basically exhausted all his knowledge of sealing, but I think he's just being lazy again, because he definitely knew more than he said he did in the beginning—but anyway!" He rolled out the scroll, which was filled with tiny, cramped writing and seal diagrams, and pointed to one section. "What the *heck* do they mean here, about the interlocking activation matrices?"

Jiraiya peered down at the scroll, forehead scrunched together. “You...you’re working on *this*, kid?” he asked slowly.

“Yeah. So do you know what they’re talking about?”

“Kid, I didn’t cover this kind of stuff until I’d been studying sealing for five years. How long have you been studying? One?”

“A bit less than that,” Naruto said thoughtfully, thinking back to when he’d started. “Maybe about...six months? But my clones have been reading every day while I do missions, so I guess longer than that.”

Jiraiya stared at him slack-jawed for a minute, before sighing heavily. “*Definitely* your parents’ kid,” he muttered. “Okay, brat, it’s like this...”

Two heads, one blond, one white, bent over the scroll, and Sasuke and Sakura exchanged long-suffering looks. They might as well get started on showers and dinner, then. Naruto wasn’t going to be resurfacing for a while.

—

Kakashi slouched down the street, posture loose and lazy, his visible eye trained on the lurid orange book in his hand. This was the first time he’d been able to slip away from the Administration Tower and all of the meetings and paperwork, and he was meandering along rereading one of his favorite Icha Icha books as he tried to convince himself that he wasn’t actually heading towards his kids’ favorite training ground. No, his path just happened to be leading in that direction, that was all. Totally a coincidence. He didn’t miss them or anything

—
“DYNAMIC ENTRY!” A voice bellowed.

A green blur soared into the air over a rooftop off to the right, seeming to pause in midair at the apex of the arc before descending in a truly awe-inspiring series of flips, twirls, and somersaults. A large puff of dust flew into the air as Maito Gai landed directly in front of Kakashi in one of his signature poses, hips cocked and one arm raised heroically.

Kakashi blinked slowly, gaze not rising from his book.

“DYNAMIC ENTRY!” Another, younger voice cried, and a smaller green blur also leapt off of a building, executing not quite as many flips before landing next to Gai. The landing as well was a bit heavier, not as smooth, but Kakashi supposed he could forgive that considering the many years Gai had had to practice.

Then he got a good look at the kid, and wanted to brain himself with his book. He always forgot how *enthusiastic* Gai’s mini-me was in his emulation of his sensei. Two of them was just too much.

“ESTEEMED RIVAL!” Gai announced joyously. “How happy am I to run into you on this fine day! I have not yet had an opportunity to offer my sincerest congratulations on your

Youthful Success! I have heard that you have graduated your first ever team to chuunin status! Truly, you are a worthy rival, for even in this you have surpassed me! Your team must truly be full of the Springtime of Youth, to advance so quickly in the fields of combat!”

Gai’s mini-me gasped in joy, even as his two other teammates alighted next to them with long-suffering expressions on their faces. “Yes, Gai-sensei’s Rival, your team is exemplary! I can only hope to someday be as Youthful as the beautiful blossom, Sakura-chan!”

Kakashi, who had been pretending to ignore the ridiculous duo in front of him up until this point, nearly choked. “Beautiful blossom?” He echoed weakly.

Mini-Me nodded fervently, clasping his hands together in front of his chest. “Sakura-chan is the perfect example of the kunoichi flowers Konoha is blessed with! She is graceful and elegant like a lily, and her strength and battle prowess inspires both awe and fear!”

“...Right,” Kakashi said slowly. Well, Mini-Me wasn’t *wrong*...

“WELL SAID, LEE!” Gai boomed, clapping his student on the back. “Konoha’s fine flowers embody the Will of Fire in unique and beautiful ways! Always appreciate your kunoichi teammates, for they have learned to be both beautiful and deadly, like a steel sakura blossom!”

“Gai-sensei! I will remember your words and always strive to appreciate my teammates!”

“Lee!”

“Gai-sensei!”

“LEE!”

“GAI-SENSEI!”

Aaaand they’re gone, Kakashi thought flatly as Gai and Mini-Me dissolved into sparkles and tears. He glanced over to the other two genin. The kunoichi was watching her sensei and teammate with a face that looked exactly as unimpressed as Kakashi felt, and the Hyuuga who had fought Sakura—Neji—had his lip curled in distaste, eyes flashing in anger. Clearly that experience still stung, then.

“Right,” Kakashi mumbled, trying to edge around the crying duo in the middle of the street. He really wanted to get over to his kids before they got assigned to another mission. “Well, I’m just gonna—”

“RIVAL!” With amazing speed, Gai flung himself across the space between them and grabbed Kakashi’s hands, raising them to clasp in front of his face, miraculously no longer crying. “YOU MUST TEACH ME YOUR YOUTHFUL WAYS OF FIRE SO THAT I, TOO, MAY USHER MY SWEET STUDENTS INTO THEIR SPRINGTIMES OF YOUTH AS CHUUNIN—”

“Yeah, no,” Kakashi said, and kawarimi’d with a nearby potted plant.

He hurried down the street toward the training grounds, hoping that he'd been able to lose Gai quick enough that his team would be able to distract him and get him back on track with whatever they were supposed to be doing. He really just wanted to see his kids, okay?

Alas, it was not to be.

Kakashi had just strolled into view of his team, already warming up for training, and offered a casual "Yo," when from behind him he heard a bellow of:

"DYYYYYYNAMIC ENTRY!!"

With lightning-fast reflexes, Kakashi dodged to the side. Gai landed with a boom and a splintering of the earth right where Kakashi has been standing, clouds of dust billowing into the air. He rose to his feet with a beaming smile, clearly unaffected by this near miss, and propped his fists on his hips as he boomed, "I challenge you, Rival! A Friendly Spar between our two teams! Let us pit ourselves against each other in Youthful Combat, to test our skills!"

"Sensei, who's this?" Naruto asked, Kakashi's team meandering over to join him as Gai's team also landed on the path. Kakashi sighed wearily.

"This is Maito Gai, my...comrade," he introduced. "And his genin team. I think you guys have already met."

Sakura looked over at Neji and smirked. Neji scowled and crossed his arms. Tenten waved politely. Lee, hands clasped in front of his chest, looked like he might burst into Manly Tears of Joy or some such thing at any moment.

"SAKURA-CHAN!" Lee cried, no longer able to contain himself. "I would like to express my Sincere Admiration of your fighting style and skill under duress! Surely, your fight against my teammate and Esteemed Rival, Neji, was inspiring! I only regret that I was not also able to display my abilities in the Chuunin Exams!"

"Ah...right," Sakura said, a bit uncertainly. Lee had been slated to be in the final fight, after Sasuke and Gaara, which had never happened. "Well, I hope you get a chance next Exam, then."

Lee gasped, and sparkles flew around him as he brought a clenched fist to his heart. "Sakura-chan! Your thoughtful words have moved me greatly! Please, allow me to express my Purest and Utmost Devotion for you! If I may, I would be honored to ask for your permission to take you on a date!"

"*Whoa*," Naruto and Sasuke both said sharply, taking half-steps in front of Sakura together. "Back off, Eyebrows," Naruto said, scowling. "She's *our* teammate."

"Aa," Sasuke grunted, black eyes narrowed.

Sakura sighed and rolled her eyes even as her entire face flushed bright pink. She reached out and gave both boys sharp pinches to nerve points in their shoulders, shoving them aside as they let out twin yelps of pain. "Honestly, boys," she scolded, working hard to keep her voice

level even as her insides jumped and twisted with mingled embarrassment and affection. “I can speak for myself, thanks.” She turned to face Lee. “Thank you for your interest, Lee-san, but I’m not interested in dating right now. I’m only twelve and I just became a chuunin, so I want to focus on my team.” She didn’t look back at Sasuke, but she crossed her fingers internally and hoped that he took this declaration to mean that she truly was over her crush on him (and she was! He was still really pretty, though, so she might still stare sometimes...).

Gai, standing to the side and forgotten about until this point, burst into Manly Tears of Joy. “Oh, Lee! To think you have chosen such a Pure and Youthful Blossom for your first love! Such a noble and honorable rejection! Buck up, Lee! Do not despair, for the Springtime of Love comes at different times for everybody!”

“Gai-sensei!” Lee cried, clasping his teacher’s hand. “I will remember your words and Never Give Up! Sakura-chan, thank you for your honest expression of your feelings! I shall do the same and try to better myself for the future!”

“Lee!”

“Gai-sensei!”

“...Right,” Sakura said flatly as Gai and Lee dissolved yet again into tears and sparkles. “Okay then. So are we sparring or what?”

“I’m okay with it,” Neji said immediately, and Tenten nodded, ignoring her two other teammates serenely as she stretched out her arms.

“Yes!” Gai gasped, spinning around to point at Kakashi. “Rival! Our challenge! Possibly our last chance to pit our teams against each other before your coronation! We must *Battle!*”

Kakashi sighed irritably. “Fine,” he said, tucking away his book into its pocket. “Are we fighting too, or just our teams?”

Gai grinned broadly, a glint in his eye. “Why, Rival, why on earth would we abstain?”

—

The subsequent battle between Team Kakashi and Team Gai was fierce enough to draw attention from across the village. It lasted two hours, neither team willing to admit defeat, and showcased some truly amazing talent on both teams. It only stopped, in fact, because the Hokage’s Guard showed up to drag Kakashi back to the Administration Tower.

Naruto pouted as they watched a drooping, dirt-covered Kakashi get dragged away by his collar. “Aww. We were having so much fun!”

Neji, covered in so much dust that he looked like a mini dirt hill, coughed out a cloud of dust and glared. Lee and Gai, however, were in complete agreement.

“Truly, a sad day,” Gai sighed. “But my fearless rival has many demands on his time now, as he trains to become the fierce protector of our village! We must respect the needs of the village and support him in his endeavors!” The jounin clapped his hands together decisively

and surveyed the six young ninja around him. “Now then! Do you wish to continue our youthful training?”

And so Team Seven ended up doing drills and practicing one-on-one combat under the enthusiastic eye of the Great Green Beast of Konoha. It was edifying, that was for sure, and the three of them dragged themselves back to Naruto’s apartment two hours later on wobbly legs, exhausted to the bone.

“I really need to get a new apartment,” Naruto groaned after they managed to drag themselves up the four flights of stairs into his top-floor room and flopped all over the floor to catch their breaths.

“We’ll help you look,” Sasuke grunted, but Sakura sat up abruptly before curling over her abused core muscles with a whine.

“I’ve been thinking about that actually,” she said carefully after she’d recovered. “And...” she bit her lip, before blurting out, “What do you guys think about us moving in together?”

Naruto and Sasuke blinked, turning their heads to look at their teammate. “Like... like all of us living together?” Naruto checked. Sakura nodded.

“I’ve been thinking about moving out of my parents’ house for a while,” she confessed in a rush. “I’m a chuunin now, and we’re going to get sent on a lot more missions. I know they worry, and I just think... it’d be better for all of us.”

Naruto nodded thoughtfully, beginning to smile. “Yeah, Sakura-chan! That makes sense. And I’d love to live with you guys!” Then he hesitated and turned to Sasuke. “Teme?”

Sasuke stared off into the distance for a while, clearly thinking hard. “Yeah,” he finally said quietly. “I think... that might be good.”

Naruto beamed and flopped his arm over so that his fingers could rest gently against Sasuke’s wrist. Sakura giggled happily and tipped over to land on top of them, squeezing her teammates tightly as they wiggled weakly and complained about how she was all hot and sweaty.

So they started planning. None of them actually knew how to get an apartment—Naruto’s had been given to him by the Sandaime when he had been, honestly, far too young to be living alone—so of course they went straight to the most knowledgeable adult they knew. Iruka-sensei hugged them all and promised to help them pick out a place as soon as he got off work (and a bit regretfully tabled all of his own plans to ask Naruto to move in with him), and then took them on a whirlwind tour of the available ninja-friendly apartment buildings in Konoha.

“Always go for ninja-owned or -occupied,” he advised them as they stood in the middle of an empty 2LDK. “It’s just easier that way.”

Naruto nodded distractedly. “But, Iruka-nii, do we really need this much space?”

“Naruto, there are three of you,” Iruka sighed, looking over the apartment with a calculating eye. “You honestly should get a 3LDK, but you’re not making enough money yet to afford one. Maybe you guys can convert the living room into a bedroom, or something.”

Eventually they found a good place, and with the help of Naruto’s clones they’re moved in in a single morning. Sasuke disappeared for a while and came back with a grey, set face, arms full of scrolls which he dumped onto their new table.

“What’s all this, Sasuke?” Naruto asked curiously, munching on a stick of dango from a heaping plate Sakura’s mom had sent over.

“This is some of the stuff that your clones found for me in the compound,” Sasuke replied, nudging one corner of a furled scroll with his fingertip. “Specifically, the stuff they found in my old house.” He took a deep breath, eyes flat and determined. “I think it’s time I try to figure out what happened with the Massacre.”

Chapter End Notes

GUYS, I CANNOT BELIEVE IT HAS BEEN SO LONG SINCE I UPDATED BUT IT TURNS OUT??? THAT GRAD SCHOOL??? IS HARD???

OTL I cannot promise that it won't be this long before I update again but I CAN promise that I have not abandoned this story, I am still working on it, I have it all plotted out and please don't worry.

Thank you soooo much if you've stuck around waiting for this to be updated, and thank you soooo much to all the newcomers who are just arriving!! Please let me know what you think!

Japanese culture note:

Japan is very crowded, I don't know if you know this. Like, VERY crowded. Because of this their apartments are waaay smaller than what I, as an American, would expect to be 'normal', and they also have many more different types of apartment than we do. In the US, it's basically just classified by how many bedrooms there are - 1-bedroom, 2-bedroom, etc., and then with the square footage. Realtors will try to entice you in the descriptions with nice living rooms, a separate dining room, laundry in-unit, etc., but we don't really classify apartments and if you really want to know what it looks like, you have to go actually visit the place.

In Japan, they've invented this ingenious way of telling you exactly what kind of floor plan the apartment has. They count the bedrooms, sure, but they also count the other rooms in the apartment, and they label them based on their names: L stands for living room, D for dining room, K for kitchen. You rarely find all three of them together, and in fact a lot of apartments in Japan are just LK, or even just 1K - a bedroom/all-purpose room and a kitchen. (Naruto's old apartment that he has at the beginning of the series is a

1K, and a shitty one at that - at the top of the building, where it gets really hot because Japanese buildings aren't insulated, and teeny tiny even by Japanese standards.)

So when Team Seven is apartment-hunting, Iruka wants them to find a 3LDK, which means a 3-bedroom with a living room, dining room, and kitchen. That's a BIG apartment. They definitely don't have the money for that yet. Even a 2LDK is probably pushing it, but with three of them paying rent, it'll probably work out.

In Which We Say Goodbye to Canon Entirely

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The morning dawned bright and sunny on the day of Kakashi's coronation as the Fifth Hokage of Konohagakure.

All shinobi who could be recalled from their missions had been summoned back to the village, trickling in in small numbers over the past month and swelling the numbers of visible ninja on the streets until it seemed as though there were twice as many shinobi as there had been before. On the morning of the coronation, they filled the square in front of the Hokage Tower in a sea of blue and green, covering the rooftops and every spare available space, balancing delicately on the banners and flags that had been strung across the streets in celebration.

The civilians of Konoha were there too, decked out in their best kimono, bright spots of color among the quiet camouflage of the uniforms. They provided most of the noise as well, despite being quite outnumbered by their ninja counterparts; they chattered excitedly to each other, and children waved little flags with the Konoha leaf on them and played games among the feet of their parents.

When the clock struck ten, the doors on the upper balcony of the Tower flew open and silence fell. The Sandaime Hokage emerged, dignified and poised in his white robes, and gave a ringing speech about bravery, loyalty, and the Will of Fire. Kakashi, standing just behind him in his own set of white robes, stepped forward and knelt in full view of all of the citizens of Konoha, making his oath to the seat of the Hokage and to the village in a clear, carrying voice.

Near the very front, just far enough back that they could see the balcony clearly, Sasuke, Naruto, and Sakura beamed with wet eyes, bursting with pride as their sensei accepted the hat of the Hokage with a bowed head. Kakashi stood and turned to face the crowd as Sarutobi raised his voice for the last time.

“Citizens of Konoha, greet your Godaime Hokage!”

And the village shook with the roar of celebration that rose from the watching crowd.

—

After the coronation, there was a festival that lasted for three days and three nights. Great displays of fireworks were set off each night, decorating the sky over Hokage Mountain in washes of evanescent beauty, and the people, civilians and shinobi alike, celebrated the coronation with great cheer.

“Well, Kakashi-sensei?” Naruto grinned, elbowing his old teacher in the arm and nearly getting squashed by Sakura as she went in for a hug herself. “What’s it like, huh, wearing the

robes?”

“Remarkably hot,” Kakashi said dryly, tilting the brim of the Hokage hat down to cover his eyes a bit more. Because his hitai-ate wouldn’t fit under the hat, he’d had to switch out the normal cover for his Sharingan for a regular eyepatch, and was looking rather roguish as a result.

“Are you still wearing your normal uniform underneath?” Naruto asked curiously, and patted Kakashi’s chest to find out. He was, in fact, still wearing his flak jacket underneath, which Naruto was only just able to feel before his teammates were pulling him away.

“*Naruto*, you can’t just go and *touch* the Hokage!” Sakura hissed reprovingly.

“Hn,” Sasuke agreed. “Seriously, dobe, the hell.”

“What—” Naruto looked curiously at his teammates. “Come *on*, you guys, it’s just Kakashi!”

“Kakashi-sensei, who now has some seriously scary guards with him at all times,” Sakura pointed out, gesturing at the ANBU who were discreetly standing a short distance behind the new Hokage. “Also, don’t just go around touching people’s chests, it’s weird.”

“Ah.” Naruto laughed nervously. Yeah, now that he thought about it, he could see their point. “Sorry, sensei.”

“Don’t worry about it, Naruto,” Kakashi said mildly, his grey eye unreadable as usual. “Shall we begin making the rounds, then?”

They walked through the celebrating streets slowly, both because it was very crowded and because everyone they passed wanted to greet their new Hokage. Civilians limited themselves to deep bows and polite greetings, but many of the shinobi who knew Kakashi personally wanted to come up and give him their congratulations in person, and so it was slow going as they moved through the festival. Sarutobi, now out of his Hokage’s robes (“And it had better be for good, Hatake Kakashi, do you hear me?”) and in a formal black kimono decorated with the Sarutobi clan *mon*, walked with them, hands casually linked behind his back and every once in a while saying something quietly to Kakashi.

At one point Naruto fell back from the group a bit, smiling sadly at the large number five printed so proudly on the back of Kakashi’s robe. His father had worn the four, and now his teacher—his beloved teacher, who had trained and supported and believed in him—wore the five.

“You okay, Naruto?” Sakura asked softly, dropping back to walk next to him and peering into his face. She’d always been perceptive about their moods, always aware of the atmosphere around their team. Up ahead, Sasuke looked back at them and then slowly began dropping back as well.

“Yeah, ‘m fine, Sakura,” Naruto replied, looking ahead at Kakashi again. He’d stopped to speak with a jounin, someone he probably knew fairly well if the amused grin she was wearing was any sign. Naruto gestured at the robe as Sasuke settled in on his other side. “My

father wore that robe, and now my teacher's wearing it. The six," he said quietly, with all the solemnity of a vow, "Is mine."

Sasuke was *so confused*.

Confused, and also rather pissed, the Uchiha thought, surveying the scrolls covering every flat surface in their living room. Yep, that just about summed up how he was feeling right now. His eyes fell on the scroll directly in front of him, and he scowled.

"Yoooo, Sasuke," Naruto called, slamming open their front door and tramping in loudly. Two thumps marked the removal of his sandals in the genkan, and then Naruto's hot and sweaty form was draped over Sasuke's shoulders, soft blond hair brushing his face. "Whatcha doin'?" Naruto asked curiously, looking at all of the mess.

"Get off, idiot, you're all sweaty and gross," Sasuke grumbled, but didn't actually shrug Naruto off. "I'm trying to figure out what the fuck my family was up to before they died."

Naruto hummed thoughtfully, digging his pointy chin into his teammate's shoulder. "They were the Military Police Force, right? They ran the in-village security? I got chased by them a coupla times when I was young, and once this suuuper scary Uchiha collared me and took me up to ol' jijii's office and *lectured Jijii*. I remember thinking it was the politest tantrum I'd ever seen."

Sasuke nodded, then brushed Naruto's hair out of his face with a huff. "Yeah, they were given the responsibility of protecting the inner village by the Nidaime, when he established our central government—you know, the Administrative Building, the Mission Desk, the Hospital, the Academy. The Uchiha were given the job of the Military Police because the Sharingan allows us to see through shinobi tricks and we can copy any skills we see that aren't bloodline limits, so we can apprehend criminals more safely. But according to these records," he gestured to the pile on his left, "the power of the Military Police had been *seriously* reduced over the past twenty years or so. My grandfather talks about it a little toward the end of his journals as the Clan Head, and my father talks about it a *lot*. Every year their ability to take action against criminal shinobi and assist the T&I and other departments was reduced a little bit more, and in the...uh..." Sasuke hesitated, then forged on. "In the Kyuubi attack, the Uchiha were ordered to assist in civilian evacuation rather than fight. And afterwards there were rumors that an Uchiha had been the one to set the Kyuubi on the village, which made people really angry and wary of us." He sighed and slumped a little under Naruto's weight. "I don't remember any of that at all," he admitted quietly. "I was eight. I thought everything was fine."

Naruto squeezed Sasuke around the shoulders comfortingly. "That sucks," he agreed quietly. "Do you know what happened before the Massacre, then?"

"Not yet." Sasuke shook his head. "My father's journals don't mention anything except very veiled references to 'meetings,' whatever kind of meetings those were. And he mentions...he mentions being concerned about Itachi. He was suspicious of how withdrawn Itachi was becoming, and how he seemed to be pulling back from the Clan. But I've been through

everything here.” Sasuke waved his hands at the piles of paper surrounding them. “I’ve even put together a rough timeline of when and how things started going wrong.” He nudged the scroll directly in front of him. “But there’s nothing here that says anything *real*. I’m missing something big. These are all publicly accessible documents, at least to all clan members; there’s gotta be more in my father’s office or in the Uchiha shrine.” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I’m going to have to go check with my Sharingan.”

Naruto nodded, his hair tickling down the side of Sasuke’s face and neck. “Okay,” he said. “Do you want me to come with you?”

Sasuke blinked in surprise, pulling away so he could turn and look at his teammate. “What? You don’t have to. I can do it.”

“But you hate goin’ back there,” Naruto argued, blue eyes too knowing. Sasuke crossed his arms defensively. “Why should ya do it on your own if I can come with you? Sakura-chan won’t be back from her courier mission until late tonight, otherwise you know she’d offer too. We can go right now and be back before dinner.”

Sasuke uncrossed his arms and shoved his hands into his pockets instead, hunching his shoulders a bit. “Fine, dobe, if you want to come that bad you can.” He rolled his eyes. “You don’t even have a Sharingan, but you can carry things, I guess.”

Naruto grinned, flashing a victory sign. “Awesome! Lemme just grab something to eat super fast and let’s go!” He trotted into the kitchen without further comment, giving Sasuke’s shoulders a chance to come down from their previous position around his ears.

Sasuke took another deep, calming breath, and then called out, “There are onigiri in the fridge.”

“They don’t have tomatoes in them, do they?” Naruto called back suspiciously. “Coz I swear, teme—”

“No, they don’t have tomatoes, Naruto,” Sasuke rolled his eyes. “Honestly, I did it *one time* —”

“Once was enough!” Naruto reappeared, cramming an entire triangle of onigiri into his mouth and speaking through it, two more held in his hands. “Sh grosh, s’r’sly, t’matoes are meant t’ be cooked—”

“Raw tomatoes are the *best*!” Sasuke led the way to the genkan, slipping on his sandals and then steadying Naruto as he did the same, bickering all the way out the door.

—

Sasuke stormed, white-faced, through the Administration Tower, scattering paperwork ninja in his path to the left and right with his crackling chakra and red, whirling eyes. Naruto trotted at his side silently, clutching tightly to his huge armful of scrolls. Sasuke was glad he wasn’t talking; he didn’t know if he could say a single word right now without screaming.

The Hokage's assistants tried to stop them, but Sasuke just blew past them as he had everyone else, shoving open the door to the Hokage's office in a chakra-assisted push that had the door swinging wildly through the air and cracking against the wall like an explosive tag going off.

Kakashi was sitting at his desk, going over paperwork. It was lucky that he was alone, a small part of Sasuke's brain registered coldly. If he'd been in a meeting the door likely would have been sealed, and Sasuke didn't think he could wait.

He slammed the book he was carrying down on top of Kakashi's paperwork and hissed, "What the *hell* is this, Kakashi!"

Kakashi sat back in his seat, grey eye flicking between his two students. He'd luckily had time to gesture off his ANBU guard before they attacked the whirlwind that had just burst into his office, but he was just as baffled as his assistants, who were peering into the room worriedly. "Close the door, please, Kirita-san," he requested, and his senior assistant's lips pursed in disapproval before he nodded and swung the door shut. "What the hell is what, Sasuke?" Kakashi asked.

"*This*," Sasuke growled, Sharingan eyes spinning wildly as if he was in active combat. Kakashi had never seen him so worked up before, not even all those months ago when they were in Wave Country. "*This* is my father's personal journal, hidden away in our house, detailing not only a *coup* that my family was planning because they had been ostracized so completely from the village, but *also* the fact that he didn't trust my older brother and thought that he was a *spy for the Sandaime!*"

Kakashi went very cold. Very deliberately, he lowered one hand to press against a seal etched into the bottom of his desk. With a crackle of chakra, the room was suddenly deadened of sound; the ambient noises from outside the door and windows was suddenly gone, as if a thick curtain had been pulled around the entire room. "A *coup*?" Kakashi asked quietly.

"That's not all, sensei," Naruto spoke up from behind Sasuke. He stepped forward, dumping his own armload of books and scrolls on top of the book Sasuke had thrown down. At least these didn't seem to be singed, Kakashi thought nonsensically—there had been a distinct hand-shaped mark on the cover of Sasuke's father's journal, as if Sasuke hadn't been able to keep his lightning entirely under his skin. "These are other testimonials, journals and correspondence and stuff between the Uchiha council and elders of the clan an' such. They were all locked away in Sharingan-locked hiding places. They talk about the buildup, over *decades*, about rumors and power-grabs that undermined the Uchiha and pushed them away from the village." Naruto's blue eyes met Kakashi's, not a glimmer of mischief or amusement in them. They looked far older than a thirteen-year-old's eyes should look. "They talk about the Village Elders being the ones behind it."

Ice cascaded down Kakashi's spine. "The Elders," he repeated softly, and felt a similar tremor run through his hidden ANBU guards. His stomach rolled. The *Elders*. His genius brain spun lightning-fast, connecting previous seemingly unconnected instances, discrepancies and things he'd noticed both when he was in ANBU and a jounin, and since he'd taken office.

Remembering a gnarled, grizzled hand on his teenage shoulder, and a charismatic old man convincing him to attempt assassinating the Hokage.

With a snarl of rage, Sasuke whirled away from the desk and paced in quick, jerky steps around the circular office. “My family was *loyal*,” he gritted, spinning to face Kakashi, ignoring the heat he could feel against his cheeks. “The Uchiha were one of the *Founding Clans*, we helped *build* this village with our *own hands*. We have *always* held the Will of Fire in our hearts. I may have been eight years old when my family was killed, Kakashi-sensei, but I *remember* that.” Unable to stay still, he began moving again, his limbs twitchy, restless. He felt like he was in battle, but there was nobody to fight. Nobody except demons of the past, thought laid to rest five years ago.

“If my family were planning a coup, how bad must it have been?” he asked, anguished.

“Sasuke,” whispered Naruto, padding over to him and lifting his hands to his face. Cold thumbs swept over his cheeks, wiping away sizzling hot tears that Sasuke hadn’t even realized were trailing down his face, and Sasuke made a tiny wounded sound in his throat, closing his eyes and ducking his head to hide behind his teammate’s solid frame.

Face pale and set, Kakashi sifted through the pile of damning proof on his desk. There was so much of it, and more, he knew, in the Archives that he would have to pull—records of missions, Military Police reports, private reports and messages from the Police Commissioner directly to the Hokage. If what he feared was true, this would likely take years to unravel.

“Sasuke,” he said quietly, standing and moving out from behind the bulk of his desk so that he could approach his student, “I swear to you, I will figure this out. There is obviously a lot here that nobody knew before. I *swear* to you, I will find out what happened to your family and why.”

Sasuke blinked up at him, a few more hot tears escaping the corners of his Sharingan eyes and trailing down his cheeks. Kakashi could see red marks where the tears had fallen, the teen’s skin inflamed from the heat—a byproduct of crying with the Sharingan active. “Do you promise, sensei?” he asked wobbly, all of his anger seeping out of him like a sad deflated sack. Naruto slung an arm around his waist and gave him a side hug, turning a bit so he could look up at their sensei too.

Kakashi reached out a hand and gripped Sasuke’s shoulder firmly, placing his other hand on Naruto’s as well. “I promise, Sasuke,” he said, each word falling between the three of them like an oath. “I promise you I will find out what happened to your family.”

Sasuke nodded, closing his eyes and wiping the backs of his hands across his cheeks to dry them. His voice hitched as he took a trembling breath in and then let it out. “Okay. Okay, thank you, sensei.”

Kakashi withdrew his hands and walked back over to his desk, releasing the privacy seal around the room. His ears popped slightly as the sounds of the outside world came floating back in. “You two are off-duty for the next three days. Stay at home, tell Sakura when she gets back but tell no one else about this, do you understand? This could plunge the entire

village into civil war. I'll let you know as soon as I have a plan for how to deal with this." He tried to smile for them, letting his eye crinkle in the corner so that they knew he meant it. "Take the window on your way out—no need to walk by everyone in the building."

His two genin—no, not anymore, his chuunin—nodded and shuffled over to one of the windows, sliding it open and hopping out subduedly. Kakashi watched their retreating forms get smaller and smaller over the rooftops before sighing exhaustedly and slumping down into his seat, scrubbing a hand through his flyaway hair.

Then he looked over at the patch of ceiling where one of his ANBU was hiding. "Get me Nara Shikaku, Yamanaka Inoichi, and Sarutobi Hiruzen," he ordered. "Now."

The Sandaime had some *answers* to give.

It took the entirety of their three days of leave for Sasuke to calm down and come to grips with what he and Naruto had found in the Uchiha Compound. Naruto hovered, but he was bad at helping with this kind of stuff—he'd never had a Clan to know what that was like, with the weight of generations of history pressing down on you, the devastation when Sasuke had realized that something went terribly wrong. His usual coping mechanisms were to train until they collapsed, or to shout at Sasuke until they both felt better—neither of which really worked in this setting.

But training at least allowed Sasuke to focus on other things, and so he and Naruto ran themselves ragged for three days, despite Sakura's best efforts. She'd arrived home from her mission a bare hour after the two boys had gotten back from Kakashi's office, her cheerful greeting dying an instant death when she saw the looks on her teammates' faces. Naruto had taken it upon himself to explain in terse words what they had found, for which Sasuke was grateful; he didn't think he could open his mouth again without regretting whatever came out.

Sakura worried, and fussed, and wanted to take care of him, which Sasuke was grateful for, he really was, he knew she cared about him and wanted to help, but right now his body felt like a hot seething bag of spikes, stretched tight over too many feelings inside him. Too many soft touches and the bag would burst, sending spikes everywhere, and he didn't want that, didn't want to hurt Sakura and Naruto with the sharp points of his feelings.

So he and Naruto trained until Naruto had to carry him home on his back, trooping through the streets of Konoha as the sun set over the trees. They trained until Sasuke's hands could barely grip the handle of a kunai, and trembled uncontrollably when they finally managed it. They trained until Sasuke barely registered the messenger hawk that landed on their windowsill on the third day, his tired gaze barely lifting from the kitchen table where Naruto and Sakura had forced him to rest while they made lunch.

It was a summons from Kakashi-sensei—from the Hokage. The three of them ate lunch quickly, Sakura healed some of Sasuke's soreness and blisters as best she could, and then they hopped onto the rooftops and headed straight for the Tower.

They were ushered straight into his office when they arrived, where they found Kakashi slumped over his desk, bruises under his eyes like he hadn't slept a wink since they'd seen him last. Inoichi-sama and Shikaku-sama looked similarly fatigued, and even the two paperwork chuunin in the office looked tired. Clearly there had been a lot going on since Sasuke and Naruto's talk with the Hokage.

"Ah, good, you're here," Kakashi said tersely. He held out a scroll sealed with the mark of Konoha. "I have a mission for the three of you, a confidential courier mission. All of the information you need is in here. You'll have to track down the recipient, so pack for a long trip—I don't know how long you'll be gone. Don't open the scroll until you're a day out from the village."

Naruto accepted the scroll and looked over their sensei carefully. He was as impassive and unreadable as ever behind his mask, but Naruto thought that there was something stiff and unhappy about his body language. What had they found over the last three days?

"Understood," he said, echoed by Sakura and quieter by Sasuke. "Is that all, sen—Hokage-sama?"

Kakashi sighed and creaked to his feet, coming around his desk to stand in front of them. He laid a hand each on Sasuke's and Naruto's heads, not quite ruffling their hair but affectionate nonetheless. Then he did the same to Sakura standing in between them. "That's all, you three. Pack well and be careful. I'll see you when you get back."

Unsettled by Kakashi's uncharacteristic show of affection, Naruto searched their sensei's mostly-hidden face for any clues but found nothing. He nodded slowly. "Okay, sensei. See you when we get back."

They left the administration center and headed back to their apartment, packing up quickly and efficiently. Sasuke packed up all of the papers he hadn't given to Kakashi, intending to go through them more thoroughly in their downtime, and the three of them were on the road in two hours, hopping through the trees in a vaguely westerly direction.

Sasuke barely waited until the sun was over the horizon the next morning before tearing into the scroll they'd been given. He reared back in surprise as several more scrolls poofed into existence, but they didn't have their names on them, so Team Seven huddled around to figure out what their sensei had sent them.

Team Seven, the main scroll said.

It's worse than I could have possibly thought. Sasuke, you were right. Your clan was planning a coup, pushed to it because of dissidents within the village sowing resentment of your clan and trying to push them out. Itachi was manipulated and forced into believing that if he killed them all himself, he would be allowed to save you. It was an insidious plot and I'm horrified to know that the Sandaime allowed it to happen, even if it was already in motion by the time he found out about it. Now Itachi is supposedly a spy for Konoha, though I have never seen any information that he has provided cross my desk and I have no idea who his handler or his contact might be.

To this end, I'm sending you three to Konoha's spymaster, Jiraiya of the Sannin. If anyone knows who Itachi's been reporting to, it's him, and he can protect and teach you while I root out the rot that's poisoning Konoha. I've included scrolls for both him and Senju Tsunade (currently a traveling nin somewhere close to Fire Country) within this mission assignment.

Thus, your official mission parameters are: Deliver these two scrolls to their intended recipients and stay with Jiraiya on an extended protection/apprenticeship detail. Learn all you can from him and send me back any information you may gather. I will send my ninken to you every week for your reports; do not send them to me any other way for now, in case they get intercepted. You have my permission to tell Jiraiya anything that you think he should know in order to protect you and gather more information about this situation from the outside.

Sasuke, this is an order from your Hokage: DO NOT ATTEMPT TO GO AFTER ITACHI. From what we do know, he has joined a missing-nin terrorist organization and it would be extremely dangerous for both you and him if you try to contact him. Jiraiya is an excellent spymaster; defer to his judgement in gathering information and making contact with leads.

I don't know when you three will be able to return to the village. If what I fear about this whole situation is true, I don't want you three anywhere close to this until I've managed to clear out the traitors. I'm sorry it has to be this way. Train hard, stick together, and trust each other. I promise, I'll bring you home as fast as I can.

Hatake Kakashi

“Fuck,” Sasuke whispered, the corner of the parchment crushing under the force of his fist. “*Fuck.*” He blinked black tears, his eyesight flickering back and forth between his regular vision and the surreal heightened sharpness of the Sharingan. “Itachi was *forced*— he’s a spy —”

“There’s still so much here that we don’t know,” Naruto said tightly. “Why did your family go for a coup, instead of a peaceful option? Why was Itachi led to think that a massacre was the only way out? Why was the village so hostile to the Uchiha in the first place? Who the *fuck* has so much power and influence that they could engineer something like this?”

“Why would they *want* to?” Sakura cut in, her own eyes swimming with tears.

With a bit-off oath, Sasuke threw himself to his feet and punched the nearest tree, shreds of bark and wood flying as his fist pulverized the trunk. The three chuunin watched in silence as the tree teetered briefly before crashing to the ground, sending leaves and small twigs flying. Sakura absently brushed some of them out of her hair.

“Right,” Naruto said after a minute. “We’ve got to find Jiraiya as fast as we can, then. If he really is a good spymaster, he’ll be able to help us get some answers.” He stared down at the scroll in front of him.

I don't know when you three will be able to return, Kakashi had said.

Naruto’s jaw set and he got to his feet.

“Come on, you two,” he said, rolling up the few things they had unsealed for their camp and carefully tucking the three scrolls from Kakashi into a sealing pouch. “We’re Team Seven. We’re the strongest team to come out of Konoha since the Densetsu no Sannin. When we’re together, we can beat *anything*.”

Chapter End Notes

Rolls up 15 months late with Starbucks HOWZIT, Y'ALL? HOW 'BOUT THIS LIFE WE'RE LIVING? HOPE Y'ALL ARE HANGING IN THERE AND NOT DYING IN A VARIETY OF DYSTOPIAN HELLSCAPE WAYS.

Forreal, tho, who else is completely dumbfounded at the world we live in??? I'm mainly speaking to my fellow Americans here, as we have recently discovered that we are living under a fascist dictatorship and a police state, so we're all a bit reeling here. Hope the rest of the world is feeling better about themselves than we are rn. *sips tea*

So, the pandemic's been shit. I got laid off from work back in May 10 days before I was due to take my Master's exam, and subsequently failed that too. So May was a bit of a shit time for me, not to mention the stress before that of balancing full-time work with my full-time Master's, and I'm very very sorry about the lateness of this chapter but I literally did not have the brainpower for anything else for a long time. I'm currently job-hunting and will be retaking my Master's exam in December, and I feel like I'm finally being pulled back to the Naruto fandom a bit, so hopefully I'll be able to keep up the momentum and get you guys another new chapter soon.

On that note, you guys, YOU ARE THE BEST. I literally have not stopped receiving kudos and comments and love for this fic the entire time I was gone. Thank you for all the continued interest and support you've given, and I hope you'll continue to support this fic in the future!!

Japanese culture note of the chapter: *Mon* (紋) is the Japanese word for a family crest or coat of arms, and can traditionally be seen on men's formal kimono [as in this picture here](#). Called *mon-tsuki*, literally "with mon", the little white decorations on the black outer haori would display an individual family's crest. Since most Japanese families these days don't really have family crests, these have become mostly decorative, or might simply be a representation of their family name. This type of formal kimono is really only worn at traditional Japanese weddings or very formal events nowadays, and Japanese men often opt for a more commonly found western-style suit instead. It's absolutely 100% something the Sandaime (and really, all the Clan men in Naruto) would wear - gotta show that Clan pride, after all.

Note #2: A *genkan*, as I'm sure most of you Japanophiles already know, is the [entryway into a Japanese house](#) where you take your shoes off before entering the main house. Set

lower than the main floor, it's usually tiled for easy cleaning, with shoe racks or cupboards to keep your shoes and spare sets of slippers for guests. You take off your shoes there and step up onto the main floor in order to keep the interior of the house clean, a holdover from ancient society when the Japanese had to deal with a ton of mud and water around their houses. That's why Japanese houses are traditionally lifted about a foot off the ground, and the word in Japanese for "Come in," *agatte* (上がって), literally means "Step up".

Pop down to that comment box and tell me what your favorite part of this EXTREMELY AU chapter was. >:3

In Which We Have a Massive Time Skip

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ino stepped through the main entrance of T&I and squinted into the sunlight, raising one hand to shield her eyes. It looked like it was early afternoon, judging by the position of the shadows, and she let out a long sigh, rolling her neck on her shoulders. She was loving her internship at the Interrogation and Information side of T&I, that was for sure, but when they got important codes in and everyone had to pull 24-hour shifts, it could get pretty intense. Still, it was worth it, when they got information like they'd gotten today.

"Hey, little princess!" a voice called cheerfully, and Ino opened her eyes and smiled at her clansman, a tall androgynous man named Inori, as he passed her clearly heading for his own shift. "How're things? Busy day?"

"Busy week," Ino groaned. "We got some new reports in yesterday, they'll probably be hitting your desks at some point today." Inori worked on the Analysis team, compiling and filtering through information sent to them by the many informants across the Elemental Nations after the Cryptography department (Ino's current internship) finished decoding them.

Inori nodded, a glint of interest sparking in his deep blue eyes. "Nice. That'll be something to look forward to, then. Tell your father I say hello!" And he disappeared into the building, his long ash-blond ponytail swinging behind him.

Ino took a deep breath of crisp fall air, smiling to herself as she set off down the street to look for her old teammates. Yes, something to look forward to indeed.

—

"Ino, can you please just tell us *why* you've dragged us to this very specific breakfast stall on the entire opposite side of the village," Shikamaru whined, setting his head down on the rough wood countertop. His sleepy eyes squinted up at her balefully, and the tiny yawn that immediately followed his sentence removed any actual force from his question. "I *just* got back to the village, I was looking forward to sleeping for sixteen hours straight."

"Aww, poor baby, only getting ten hours instead," Ino crooned, patting her old genin teammate's bushy ponytail mockingly. Shikamaru grumbled wordlessly into the countertop, but was apparently still too sleepy to actually retaliate. "Besides, can't I just want to catch up with you guys?"

"You *can*," Shikamaru muttered, "but you *don't*."

"Rude," Ino said blandly.

"Am I wrong?"

“Well...not exactly.” Ino took an aggressive bite out of her steamed bun, chewing vigorously as she thought about how to phrase things so that she didn’t get into trouble for breaking T&I confidentiality. “Something’s happening today that we’ve waited a long time for, that’s all. And I wanted to be here when it does.”

Chouji snorted quietly from Shikamaru’s other side. “Just ‘coincidentally’ right by the action?” he asked knowingly. Since Ino’s start at Interrogation and Information, there had been a few other ‘coincidental’ run-ins with pivotal people or events within the village.

So Ino was a bit of a busybody, whatever. It was a good quality to have in an Info expert, according to her father, who had laughed himself sick at one of her ‘coincidental’ run-ins before telling her that exact thing. Ino hummed agreement, taking a sip of hot tea and feeling it warm her all the way down to her belly. She nudged Shikamaru. “Eat, Shikamaru, you’re going to be busy for the rest of the day.”

“How do you *know* that,” Shikamaru moaned, but finally sat up and reached for the pile of nikuman in front of them. “I’m supposed to be off-duty for the next three days, woman.”

“Like I said,” Ino replied primly, eyes sliding toward Konoha’s front gate, just visible from their seats, “something’s happening today.”

They sat at the stall for a while, Ino sipping slowly at her tea while her boys munched their way through several plates of food. It was when she was on her second pot of tea that her eyes widened and she sat straight up. “Excuse me! Check please!” she called to the stall owner.

“What? What? Is it happening?” Chouji asked, eyes wide.

Ino barely glanced at the total before slamming down some silver and pushing back her stool. “They’re here!” she breathed, wide gaze fixed on the front gate.

Off in the distance, a group of six had just entered through the huge Konoha gates. They were a motley group, wearing a variety of travel-worn clothing, and they seemed to have stopped to the side of the gate to argue. Though it was too far to really see them clearly, one member’s bright yellow hair stood out like a beacon.

Ino was barely able to keep her stride from becoming a run. “SAKURA!” she yelled.

The tall pink-haired girl in the group turned, eyes wide, and Sakura let out a cry of happiness. “INO!” Ino launched herself at her old friend, and Sakura caught her up in her arms, swinging the taller girl around in a half-circle before setting her back down.

Wow, she’s strong, Ino thought dazedly, but the thought was quickly buried underneath the joy of having her friend back again. “Naruto! Sasuke! Welcome back!” she said, flinging her arms around Naruto and then giving Sasuke a tentative pat on the shoulder, which he accepted surprisingly well.

“So troublesome,” Shikamaru complained, coming up behind Ino but unable to keep the smile off his face as Chouji moved in for his own hugs and backslaps. “Not even letting us

know that you were coming back to the village, honestly.”

Naruto, tall and handsome and *sixteen*, wow, laughed brightly. “Hey, Shikamaru! It clearly didn’t stop you guys from finding out, though! Thanks for coming to greet us!”

“That’s all Ino,” Shikamaru said, always willing to brag about Ino’s successes in Intelligence. “She’s the one with all the insider information. She just drags us along.”

The huge white-haired man behind Team Seven let out a loud laugh. “Sounds familiar, doesn’t it, hime?” he asked jovially, nudging the blond woman next to him, who let out a disapproving ‘Hmph!’

Ino pulled back from Sakura and belatedly bowed to the two Sannin. “Jiraiya-sama, Tsunade-sama, welcome back to Konoha,” she said formally. Shikamaru and Chouji quickly emulated her, looking at the two legends with a little awe.

“Thanks, Yamanaka-san,” Jiraiya grinned. “It’s great to be welcomed back by such a pretty face! I suppose the Hokage’s waiting for us?”

“I would assume so,” Ino agreed blandly. “I’m not sure of the Hokage’s schedule, of course. We just happened to be eating breakfast and *coincidentally*—” she glared at Shikamaru, who rolled his eyes, “—saw our old friends arrive. After almost four years, I’m sure you can imagine how eager we were to greet them again.” She smiled sweetly, ignoring Jiraiya’s and the third unknown adult’s (black hair, very calm-looking, holding a pig?) knowing grins and the pointed coughs from her own two teammates. “Shall we escort you to Hokage Tower?” she offered.

“I’m sure its location hasn’t changed, but the company would be nice,” Jiraiya replied, and so Ino linked arms with Sakura and they headed down the street toward the center of the village, the six old classmates chattering away while the three adults followed behind.

—

Kakashi had imagined his team’s return to Konoha for a long time. Practically the day after he’d had to send them out the gate, he’d been imagining what it would be like when they were finally able to come back. It had taken much, much longer than he’d like—the corruption revealed by the Uchiha’s records and Danzo’s machinations had nearly destroyed his entire faith in the shinobi system, and even the sanitized version that they’d released to the public in order to explain Danzo’s execution had been enough to shock and horrify the civilians and lower shinobi ranks. In his rare, precious off-hours Kakashi escaped his draining, demoralizing job by spending an enjoyable time imagining elaborate scenarios where his three teammates returned triumphantly, somehow defeating all of Konoha’s external enemies and settling in the village with absolutely no problems at all.

The reality, more than three years after sending them away, was not quite as picture-perfect as the idyllic fantasy he’d created, but Kakashi was more than content with what they’d all managed to achieve. And he was ready— *beyond* ready—to see his sweet little genin again.

But it wasn't his sweet little genin who shoved open his office door with an off-key, terribly harmonized warble of "Ka-ka-shi-sen- *seiii!*" It wasn't even his fierce little chuunin that he vaguely remembered from the short time between their promotion and their departure from the village, clever and quick and growing up so fast.

No, the group of people who tramped grinning into his office were adults, full shinobi with battle-scarred armor and battle-ready glints in their eyes. Sakura was long and lean and beautiful, the promise of her pretty childhood face finally coming true in her delicate bone structure and big green eyes, pink hair braided long past her shoulders. Sasuke looked like Kakashi remembered his father looking at that same age, solemn and watchful, but an ease and relaxation in his face that Kakashi couldn't recall ever seeing before. And Naruto...

Kakashi couldn't stop himself from staring. Naruto was *beautiful*, taller than both of his teammates, even without his spiky blond hair giving him a few extra centimeters. He was big, too, his shoulders broader and more filled out than Sasuke's lean rangy form or Sakura's solid compact muscle, his arms and legs corded with strength. He looked simultaneously like both of his parents and also nothing like them at all.

All three of them, without exception, looked happier and more content than Kakashi had ever seen them in his life.

"Kakashi-sensei!" Naruto and Sakura cried again, and Kakashi couldn't stop the huge grin that spread over his face under his mask, standing and moving around his desk to greet them. Impulsively, he held his arms out wide and swept all three of them up into a tight embrace. Naruto and Sakura returned it enthusiastically, and even Sasuke squeezed Kakashi's ribs.

"Maa, look at you!" Kakashi said, detangling himself quickly before the Feelings got too intense. "You're all so big now! Where did my cute little genin go?"

"Kakashi-sensei, we haven't seen you in almost four years," Sakura said like he was an idiot. "Did you think we were going to stay small forever?"

"Well, I didn't think you'd get *this* big." Kakashi reached out a hand and ruffled Naruto's hair, almost level with his own lofty height. Naruto grinned at him, bright blue eyes sparkling, and Kakashi withdrew his hand quickly, feeling a weird twinge in his gut. Ah, he probably shouldn't do that anymore; it's not like they were young kids. His hand tingled with warmth, and Kakashi smoothly redirected the topic.

"Jiraiya-sama, Tsunade-sama," he greeted the two Sannin, extracting himself from his pile of students and bowing. "And Shizune-san. Welcome back to Konoha."

"Kakashi-kun," Jiraiya said, a sly grin lighting up his craggy face. "Glad to see someone who's not me wearing that hat, hahahaha!"

Kakashi eye-smiled, letting his visible eye curve into a crescent that was simultaneously agreeable and yet faintly mocking. "Yes, it's certainly not for everyone," he said mildly. "And Team Asuma, too. Ran into our returning comrades on their way to the tower?"

“Yes, Hokage-sama,” Ino said without a blush as Shikamaru gave a little scoff next to her. “But we’ll head out now. Sakura, come see me! We definitely have to catch up soon!” Bowing to the Hokage, Team Asuma departed, closing the door behind them.

Kakashi let out a silent breath, resting one hip against his desk and looking over his old team. “So, how’re things?” he asked, falsely casual. “Sasuke, how’s your brother since your last report?”

“He’s doing better,” Sasuke replied, black eyes lighting up. It had taken Jiraiya and Sasuke a full year to pin down Itachi and get him to talk, away from any prying eyes. The revelations on both sides—the Uchiha coup, Danzo’s manipulations of both Itachi and Shisui, the Sandaime’s lack of action and *lack of support* for a fully-undercover spy—had caused more than one knock-down drag-out fight between the brothers, if Naruto’s private reports were to be believed, but once Itachi had finally trusted that they were there to help and they believed him, things went smoother. They went even smoother when Kakashi’s team tracked down Tsunade and Shizune and they were able to help with not only Itachi’s mental instability, but also his lungs, which Tsunade’s terse report had revealed had been suffering from a long-term, debilitating disease known as “white lung”.

Stronger and healthier in both body and mind than he had ever been even before he left the village, Itachi had become an invaluable source of information about both the terrorist organization Akatsuki and about various factions and movements around the Elemental Nations. His relationship with his little brother was still...not *good*, but there was some kind of understanding there, Kakashi knew. And honestly, what kind of relationship can you have with a brother who murdered your entire family, even if he was brainwashed into doing so?

“He’s been partnered with Kisame of the Seven Swordsmen,” Sasuke continued, holding out a scroll. “Here’s the latest update—we received that about three weeks ago. Akatsuki wants to start moving for the jinchuuriki, but they’ve been losing more and more members and their influence over some of the Hidden Villages is beginning to crack. We’ve been a major thorn in their side and they haven’t been able to catch up to us since that time when Hidan and Kakuzu found us.”

Kakashi nodded, remembered fear tightening his throat. That had been an awful report to receive.

A year ago two of Akatsuki’s members had managed to find Jiraiya, Sasuke, and Naruto, traveling by themselves while Sakura was spending time learning poisons and chakra control with Tsunade and Shizune. The fight had devastated a small forest and almost leveled a mountain, and both Sasuke and Naruto had nearly died in order to kill Kakuzu permanently. Hidan had fled, and Jiraiya had rushed the boys to Tsunade, which was the only thing that saved their lives. Reading that report, nearly two weeks late because of their recovery, had almost caused Kakashi to throw out all of their carefully crafted plans and call them back to the village right then and there.

He hadn’t, though, and good thing he’d resisted, because they’d uncovered more of Danzo’s Root network just after that, and the standing orders for all Root members had been to kill Sasuke and Naruto at the first opportunity. Even dead for six months as he had been at that time, Danzo was still poisoning the village with his toxicity.

Speaking of which... “As I wrote a year ago, Shimura Danzo was executed for treason, sedition, and conspiracy to revolt,” Kakashi said, placing Sasuke’s report on the desk next to him. “I won’t go into all the details, because if we waited for me to list every single one of Danzo’s crimes we would be here until tomorrow morning. Suffice it to say, Sasuke, that you were right. Danzo was the one who arranged the Uchiha Massacre, in order to remove their influence from the village at the same time as getting his hands on the Sharingan for some honestly horrifying experiments.”

White-lipped, Sasuke nodded jerkily, unsurprised. Naruto slung an arm around his shoulders, and Sakura squeezed his hand.

“There were various other plots,” Kakashi continued. “All of which were, supposedly, to strengthen Konoha and return her to some idealized ‘greatness’. Funnily enough, many of his plans *weakened* Konoha in both the short- and long-term, and many of them actually played into Akatsuki’s and other Hidden Villages’ agendas. Whether that was on purpose or by accident, we may never know.” He slouched casually against the desk, hands resting on either side of him. “The Council of Elders has,” he paused delicately, “*retired* due to the shock of such a betrayal of one of their own.” Naruto and Sasuke gave simultaneous snorts of derision, and Kakashi crinkled his visible eye at them in acknowledgement. “The Shinobi Council and the Civilian Council are sharing administrative and legislative duties under the auspice of the Hokage’s Office, which seems to be going pretty well, I guess.” He shrugged lazily. “And that’s it, I think.”

“That’s it, he says,” Sakura muttered, but she said it fondly. “Well, sensei, now that we’re back, what do you have in mind for us?”

“Rest and relaxation, for now,” Kakashi replied, and all three of his team gave him identical dismayed frowns. “You all have just returned after years abroad, and you need to assimilate back into the village. Sleep, eat, reconnect with your friends, get the lay of the village. You have the next week off of the mission roster while we figure out what to do with all of the latest information that you’ve brought in. Take advantage of it.” He gazed mournfully out the window. “Ah, if only I could have a week off...”

“You’d spend it doing nothing but reading, sensei,” Naruto teased. “All right! Well, if we’ve got a week off, let’s get started! Can we go, sensei?”

“Go, go,” Kakashi sighed wearily, waving them off with a limp hand. “Leave your poor sensei to drown under his pile of work, it’s fine. I’ll send messenger hawks if I need you.”

The three chuunin said their goodbyes and trooped out, already chattering to each other. The door closed behind them on Sakura asking, “Hey guys, do we even have a place to live—?” and the room fell into a brief silence.

“Well then,” Kakashi said soberly, moving around his desk to sit back down in his chair and beckoning Jiraiya, Tsunade, and Shizune forward. “Let’s start with the rest of it, shall we?”

“It’s weird though, right?” Naruto asked, stretching his arms out and squinting at the sky. It looked like it was late morning, judging by the angle of the sun; they’d been training for around three hours, and it was starting to get hot. “Like, does Kakashi-sensei look different to you? He just looks different somehow.”

Sasuke snorted and took a deep gulp of water from his water bottle. “He looks exactly the same to me,” he drawled. “Maybe it’s the way *you* look at him that’s changed, huh?”

Off to the side, Sakura snickered, grinning at Sasuke. Naruto frowned.

“What does *that* mean?” he asked confusedly.

“It’s great to be back, though,” Sakura sighed, changing the subject. It was something all three of them had found themselves saying almost every day since their return, five days ago. It felt so different and yet exactly the same, being back in the village, and being fully able to relax for the first time in literal years had been heady for everyone.

“Yeah,” Naruto sighed happily, tugging off his close-fit tee shirt and stretching his shoulders. His chest and back muscles flexed smoothly under his mesh undershirt, and both Sakura and Sasuke watched appreciatively, enjoying the aesthetics. Their teammate had certainly grown up handsome. “It’s great to just be able to relax and work on stuff we haven’t been able to focus on. Are you guys gonna want to go again, see if we can get the timing right on that new...jutsu...?” But he was distracted, straightening up and looking down the road, clearly sensing something. Sasuke and Sakura perked up and turned their heads just in time to see a tall, silver-haired figure round the corner, familiar orange book held lazily in one hand.

“Yo,” Kakashi said in greeting, his visible eye curving up in a smile. “Fancy seeing you here. What a coincidence.”

Sakura giggled, hopping to her feet. “Yeah, what a weird coincidence, sensei!” she said, darting in for a quick hug that Kakashi allowed with the stiff attitude of an aggrieved cat, enduring it only because he knew it would be short.

“Here to help us train, sensei?” Sasuke asked, twisting his arms to pop his back and thankfully not going in for his own hug. “Or just want to watch?”

“Oh, I was hoping to get in a little exercise of my own if I can,” Kakashi replied, but his tone seemed a little stilted for some reason, his lazy drawl not sounding quite so lazy. “Might as well put you three through your paces, see what you’ve learned in three years out of my sight.”

“Great! Want to do a two-on-two?” Sakura suggested, glancing over at Naruto, who—uncharacteristically—had been silent up until now. “Naruto?”

“Y-yeah, that sounds good,” Naruto agreed, shaking himself out of whatever thoughts he’d been buried in. “Me and Sasuke against you and sensei?” he suggested quickly. It suddenly seemed like the worst idea in the world to be up close with sensei right now. “To split up the Sharingan users?” He bent down and snatched up his short-sleeved shirt, tugging it back on quickly, not sure why he felt so exposed with his sensei’s one grey eye focused on him.

“Sounds good to me,” Sasuke said, smirking for some reason. “Hm...Keep-away?” He held up two bright yellow ribbons. “Whoever grabs the other pair’s ribbon first wins?”

They all agreed quickly on the rules, and soon Naruto was dashing through the forest with a bright yellow ribbon attached to his waist, Sasuke right at his side. “Sakura and sensei are both super devious,” he muttered, half of his attention following the two bright chakra signatures of their opponents as they traveled quickly through the forest about half a kilometer away. “Guaranteed that they’re gonna try to trick us at least a couple of times. How’re your chakra reserves?”

“Pretty good,” Sasuke said, perfectly in step with Naruto as they leapt through the trees, his Sharingan already whirling. “I wasn’t doing much with it earlier.”

“Okay, so I’m thinking traps and genjutsu if we can, then you’re faster than me so you should try to get their ribbon, I *bet* you sensei’s gonna be the one they put it on—shit, look out!”

Reacting instantly, the two of them dived in opposite directions, whipping around huge trees as a gout of fire roared out of thin air in front of them.

“They’re still super far away!” Naruto hissed, whipping out some shuriken and palming some seals in his off-hand. “How did sensei do that?”

“He’s a genius,” Sasuke said grimly. “Okay, you ready? Clearly they don’t want us to have time to prepare, we’re gonna have to go straight in.”

Naruto grinned, his blood already racing in anticipation of a good fight. “You know that’s the way I work best!”

It devolved into chaos as soon as the two teams collided. Sakura immediately threw out genjutsu left and right, and it didn’t matter if they were powerful or if they lasted long, because any moment of inattention they caused could be the end of the fight. Naruto could faintly see the fluttering of a yellow ribbon at Kakashi’s waist—sure enough, they’d given it to the experienced, wily jounin—but his vision was almost instantly obscured by a massive flying rock, and he had to duck and roll, quickly slapping down a simple electro-trap as he rolled past a tree. His vision was roiling, and he quickly flared his chakra, dispelling *three* different genjutsus as he leapt to his feet and sent razor-sharp leaves whipping towards Sakura. But she was focused on Sasuke, so their original plan of having Sasuke grab the ribbon was a bust, okay, that was fine, Naruto could do it—

Hands burst out of the earth below him, and Naruto leapt back into the trees, barely escaping his sensei’s Hiding Like a Mole technique. “*Fuuton: Typhoon!*” he cried, and small whirlwinds erupted from both hands, whipping around the forest and stirring up dust and leaves, obscuring everyone’s lines of sight.

From some distance away Naruto heard Sasuke snap, “Katon: Raging Embers!” and now the dust was on fire, casting flickering shadows and turning everything into a scene out of nightmares. But Naruto was used to fighting like this, he and Sasuke used this trick all the time, and as he flared his chakra again just in case another genjutsu had taken hold he dived down, arm extended—

The clash of kunai against kunai disappeared into the larger sounds of battle, and Naruto was already pivoting. His taijutsu was leaps and bounds better than it was three years ago, and he and Kakashi exchanged lightning-quick moves before leaping apart, panting.

“You’ve certainly improved, Naruto,” Kakashi commented, leaning to the side as a gush of water from Sakura’s Suiton swept through, extinguishing the burning flames with hisses and explosions of steam.

“Thanks, sensei,” Naruto grinned. His hands flexed around his kunai.

They leapt into motion again at the same time, blades clashing against each other, both trying to get in close enough to grab the ribbon dangling so tantalizingly near. Naruto grunted as he took a blow to the ribs, eeling his way sideways so that tricky hand couldn’t snap down and grab his ribbon, and returned it with a glancing blow to Kakashi’s thigh where he’d made his own attempt to grab Kakashi’s ribbon. It was electric, sparring with Kakashi this way—they were of the same size now, Naruto’s experiences fighting missing-nin for three years giving him the knowledge he’d been lacking before. Even with Kakashi’s Sharingan eye whirling red in his face, Naruto was more than used to fighting a Sharingan user, and he was sparring with Kakashi of a Thousand Jutsus and *holding his own*.

It was the best feeling he’d had in a long time.

The fight ended quickly, as they tended to do; Kakashi stepped in a rope trap that Naruto had laid down, and his quick glance down gave Naruto an opening to *lunge*—

They both froze, panting, each with a blade at the other’s throat, their other hand firmly on their opponent’s ribbon. Naruto could feel the corded muscle of his sensei’s back heaving up and down as he breathed, felt the cool tips of his sensei’s fingers against his own overheated skin at his waist. They gasped for air, staring into each other’s eyes, unable to move.

“Aww, does this mean we’ve tied?” Sakura’s voice came, and Naruto and Kakashi jumped apart, ribbons snapping off in each other’s hands. Sasuke and Sakura were standing a few feet away, Sasuke with his arms crossed and an unimpressed look on his face, Sakura grinning with her hands on her hips. “Unless you two know who grabbed the ribbon first?” she prompted.

“Um,” Naruto said, and cleared his throat. “I’m—I’m pretty sure it was at the same time, yeah.” He glanced at Kakashi, who had already pulled his hitai-ate down over his Sharingan and was looking remarkably unruffled. “Sensei?”

“Yes, it was simultaneous,” Kakashi confirmed, his breath still coming faster than normal. It seemed to be the only sign of their fight left, and Naruto was irrationally glad to hear it. If *he* was feeling so off-kilter from just a friendly spar, he wanted Kakashi to show some sign of it too. “You all have certainly grown so much these past few years.” He glanced up, where the sun was now almost directly overhead, beaming down through the trees. “But now, unfortunately, I have to get back to the Tower. Let’s do dinner sometime soon, okay? Bye!” And he disappeared in a swirl of leaves, not even letting them say goodbye.

“Rude,” Sakura commented affectionately. “Now, Naruto, would you like to explain to us what exactly *that* was?” She and Sasuke both pinned him with expectant stares.

Naruto huffed out a breath and raked both hands through his spiky blond hair. “Honestly, you guys,” he said weakly, “I have *no* idea.”

On the other side of Konoha, Kakashi slammed open an apartment door and made a beeline straight for the couch, flopping face-down onto it. “Iruka,” he moaned to the chuunin sitting at the table, “I’m so fucked.”

Chapter End Notes

What is up, my dudes.

How's life. How's work. How's school. I am, all reports to the contrary, actually alive and well, thank you all for your concern. And I still love this story. And I will be updating it when I can.

HOWEVER, it came to my attention about two years ago that I really really hated everything that I had plotted out for the end of the story, mainly because it required me to write massive fight scenes and was not nearly as focused on the relationships that I was building, so I completely scrapped that and have been wallowing in a mire of writer's block ever since.

Until today, when I sat down at my computer, used parts of this fic as examples in a completely different workshop, and fell back in love with it. I wrote 1700 words today to finish this chapter and am posting it literal minutes after I finished writing it, so y'all are getting it about as fresh and new as it's possible to get. I hope you enjoy it!! It's very, very different!

In other news, I DID pass my Master's exam in December 2020, thank you to all who asked about it in the comments!! I am now the official holder of a Master of Arts in Applied Linguistics. And I have a new, MUCH better job than my last one, and am generally doing very well! I hope you all are doing the same, drinking water, taking naps, touching grass etc., and I hope to post again before the end of the year (but I make no promises).

I'm mostly a lurker, but you can find me on [twitter](#) if you like!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!