

What You Knead

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What You Knead

by [AgentMalkere](#)

Summary

It started, as most things did in Kakashi's life, with a mission gone wrong.

(In which Kakashi accidentally acquires an emotionally healthy coping technique.)

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

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

It started, as most things did in Kakashi's life, with a mission gone wrong. The information on their target had been bad, and no one on Kakashi's ANBU squad had made it back to Konoha unscathed. One hadn't made it back at all. Kakashi, for his part, had returned on a squad mate's back, semi-conscious after getting his leg caught in a particularly nasty earth jutsu. His leg had required surgery to fix properly, and now Kakashi was out of the hospital on crutches and a month of enforced medical leave.

Kakashi's first stop after leaving the hospital was the library. He had a grace period of maybe two hours before that last shot of painkiller they had given him wore off, and Kakashi planned to take full advantage of it. Once it wore off completely, it would be a couple of days at least before he'd be able to leave his apartment. He hated being stuck in his apartment without anything new to read. (*Icha Icha* was great, but there were only so many times in a row that you could read the same book without it getting tedious.)

Kakashi hobbled through the library grabbing books off shelves more or less at random. He was generally willing to read pretty much anything, and he didn't have time to browse titles today. He managed to fit eight books into the bag the librarian had lent him (since he didn't exactly have any free hands), and didn't bother looking more closely at any of them than that before he made it home.

Later, lying on his bed as the last of the pain medicine wore off, Kakashi sorted through his haul. A historical romance, a book on philosophy, two volumes about Fire Country myths and lore, a political history of Kiri, a fictionalized account of a silk trader's life during the First Great Shinobi War, a book about blacksmithing, and-

Kakashi blinked at the last book in his hands. *The Art and Science of Bread*? He'd actually managed to grab a *cookbook*?! Kakashi tossed it aside with a frustrated sigh. Well, that was a bust – he had no interest in reading recipes.

Seven out of eight wasn't so bad. Kakashi picked up one of the books of myths and lore and settled back with a wince to read.

A week and a half later, Kakashi stood gloomily in the grocery store. He was down to one crutch, but his leg still hadn't healed enough for him to start training again. (The med-nin had told him with a wide and terrifying smile that Kakashi could either wait the appropriate amount of time to heal or be permanently crippled – the choice was entirely up to him.) Kakashi had just about finished off his stack of books and was starting to go stir crazy. It didn't help that the nightmares were picking up again without the full body exhaustion of training and missions to keep them at bay. If he stood still too long, the darkness of his own thoughts always caught up with him. Limping around the grocery store was at least

marginally better than staying cooped up in his apartment. He needed something that he could *do*-

Blue and white packaging caught Kakashi's eye. He stared at the bag of flour. Well... he had ended up with that cookbook, hadn't he? Bread was just flour, water, salt, and yeast, right? What the hell, why not? Kakashi grabbed the bag of all-purpose flour and one of the brown jars of instant yeast (because 'dry active' yeast sounded vaguely suspicious) and headed to the front of the store.

It couldn't hurt. It had to be better than being left alone with his own thoughts.

Kakashi may have overlooked a few key pieces of information – like the fact that he didn't own any measuring cups. Or a baking tray. Or a mixing bowl. He did have some spoons, though, so he improvised. A pot he usually used to reheat soup was repurposed into a mixing bowl, and Kakashi more or less guessed at ingredient amounts by using a drinking glass to measure the flour and water. A soup spoon was used to guess amounts of yeast and salt.

By the time Kakashi was done, what he mostly had was a mess, but sitting in the middle of it all was something vaguely recognizable as a lump of dough. As far as light arm workouts went, Kakashi hadn't minded the kneading part too much even if he had ended up wearing a liberal amount of flour.

He abandoned the dough to its own devices in another pot greased with the last dregs of a bottle of vegetable oil that he hadn't even realized he owned and threw a clean shirt over top of it because that was the closest thing to plastic wrap and a dish towel that he had. Five chapters of historical romance later, the dough ball had puffed up a bit. The dough mostly stuck to his hands when Kakashi tried to reshape it like the recipe told him to. By the time Kakashi dumped the lump into the semi-greased frying pan that he was using in place of a baking tray, probably half the amount of dough the recipe called for remained. Kakashi just shrugged, read a few more chapters of his book (because you were apparently supposed to leave the dough alone a second time), and then threw the whole lot in his oven. Then the plot of the historical romance picked up, and he sort of forgot about the bread until his nose picked up the faint scent of burning.

The lump of dough hadn't so much turned into a loaf as simply gotten even more misshapen and slightly burnt. It was semi-stuck to the bottom of the frying pan, and when Kakashi cut it open for curiosity's sake, it had slightly less aeration than cheese. It was completely inedible.

Kakashi stared down at the pathetic loaf. He'd completely and utterly fucked it up beyond a shadow of a doubt and-

And-

It was okay.

Nobody was hurt. Nobody was dead or dying.

He'd completely screwed up, and the only thing left on his hands was flour.

Kakashi had failed at something, and *it was okay*. That had never happened before.

The pathetic not-really-bread went in the garbage, the frying pan was left in the sink to soak, and the historical romance was abandoned in favor of the “science of bread” section of the cookbook. Kakashi left his apartment the next morning with a comprehensive list of all the supplies he needed.

Kakashi had never come across anything that he wasn’t good at with little effort before. Baking did not come effortlessly to him. It should have been frustrating, but it wasn’t. It was a relief. It was just a loaf of bread. It didn’t have to be perfect, because nobody’s life was at stake. Village safety wasn’t on the line. So what if Kakashi over-proofed his dough or added way too much flour? Nobody cared.

By the end of his enforced medical leave, Kakashi could bake a passible loaf of basic bread, the med-nin was practically *giddy* with how well Kakashi’s leg had healed, and there was a mountain of misshapen bread loaves in the ANBU base kitchen that *nobody knew the source of*. (It was the cause of much paranoia.) Kakashi returned seven of his eight books to the library, handed the librarian a fistful of ryo, and told her that *The Art and Science of Bread* had gotten lost on the road of life. Then he asked if the library had a baking section.

Chapter End Notes

This fic is entirely the fault of greentrickster and kereeathan on tumblr who shamelessly encouraged me after I posted this AU idea.

Expect more from this universe, because I love bread baking, Kakashi, and emotional healing.

(Also, no, I couldn't resist putting a terrible pun in the title.)

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Wow. I was not expecting nearly the response that I've received for this story. Thank you all so much!

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

After a year of baking, Kakashi thought he was starting to get pretty good. Waking up in the middle of the night from a nightmare and making bread dough until his hands were covered in nothing but flour rather than blood worked so much better than anything else. Better even than training himself to exhaustion. Needless to say, he'd made a *lot* of bread in the past year. He'd read everything about bread he could find in the library's – admittedly small – baking section. He'd also been working on refining a mist jutsu he'd copied in Kiri so that he could use it to keep his oven humid and get a better crust on his loaves.

He hadn't been spending as much time at the Memorial Stone lately. There was only so long that you could leave bread dough proofing before all the yeast gave up, and you got sad pancake bread. So if Kakashi talked to his dough while he kneaded it sometimes instead of the actual Memorial Stone, well, he didn't think that any of his lost friends would mind. Actually, Obito was probably laughing his ass off in the afterlife over Kakashi baking bread, so at least what he was doing had entertainment value. He'd moved his old team photo to the small window ledge in his kitchen. In some ways, he preferred talking to the picture to talking to the stone.

Kakashi was part of Naruto's ANBU guard detail tonight. His sensei's son had just started at the Academy, and Kakashi had been hoping that Naruto would finally be able to make some friends, but so far no luck. It was deeply disturbing and made Kakashi question what little faith he had left in humanity (tiny thimbleful that it was). Kakashi had been keeping his distance due to a combination of orders, trauma, and, well, ANBU was sort of known for its ridiculously high turnover rate. It seemed unfair to introduce himself to Naruto when he tended to disappear abruptly without any warnings and no guarantee of coming back alive – or even a particularly high probability of coming back alive for that matter. And Kakashi was an ANBU captain. He was basically living on borrowed time. But-

But Naruto looked so unhappy. And Kakashi was still too lost in his own head and darkness to be able to talk to the kid directly but, well....

Kakashi wondered how hard it would be to make pork buns.

The answer was the *bun* part wasn't that hard – it was just an enriched dough, and Kakashi had been getting better with those. The *pork* part, on the other hand, was causing a multitude of problems. Namely because Kakashi had been spending the past year teaching himself how to *bake* not *cook*. The most he really knew how to do when it came to cooking was mediocre omelet. Well, he could also reheat soup and leftovers and work the rice cooker, but that didn't really count.

Pork was a lot trickier than omelet.

Kakashi had already managed to burn the outside of one pork tenderloin while somehow leaving the middle raw. He'd also set off the smoke detector in his kitchen twice before he'd finally pulled out the batteries. At this rate, actually producing an edible pork bun might require some sort of divine intervention.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

And now someone was pounding on his door.

...

Who the hell did he know who would actually knock on his door?

Kakashi abandoned the charred remains of the tenderloin and went to investigate.

There was an unfamiliar chuunin with a ponytail and a scar across his nose on the other side of his door. Kakashi blinked at him, wondering if he was lost.

“Can I help you?” he finally asked.

The chuunin shook his head slightly as if trying to clear it.

“Yes, I live in 3A down the hall, and I just wanted to make sure that you'd set your apartment on fire on purpose rather than by accident.”

Kakashi blinked at him a second time and then took note of the gray clouds of smoke billowing down the apartment hallway. Hmmm... he probably should have opened a window after the smoke detector went off the second time.

“I'm trying to cook pork tenderloin,” he muttered absently, mostly to himself. If he opened the window at the far end of the hall, a quick wind jutsu ought to take care of the smoke before it set off the building's sprinkler system.

“Pork tenderloin?” the chuunin repeated, sounding bewildered. “You set your apartment on fire cooking *pork*?!”

“It's not on fire – just smoldering,” Kakashi corrected, waving him off and not really paying attention. Now what wind jutsu could he use that would get rid of the smoke but also not put any holes in the walls...? Kakashi didn't notice the chuunin's expression shift from slack jawed shock to long suffering irritation.

“Gods save me from *jounin*,” the chuunin muttered under his breath and shouldered his way past Kakashi into the apartment. Kakashi was so surprised that he didn’t even try to stop him.

Nobody had just barged into his apartment like that since... since the last time Kushina had visited with Minato-sensei. For once the thought was more melancholy than an aching well of pain.

Kakashi shook off the thought and chased after the chuunin who had invaded his apartment. He found him vigorously flapping a baking tray at an open window to try to encourage the smoke to leave. An appropriately laid back wind jutsu finally presented itself in Kakashi’s mind for consideration. Yeah, that ought to work. Kakashi ran his hands through the three simple seals.

“*Soyokaze no jutsu*.”

A brisk breeze swept around Kakashi’s apartment and then funneled out the open window, taking the majority of the smoke with it and leaving the chuunin looking rather windswept.

The chuunin opened his mouth, but Kakashi held up a finger before he could say anything.

“Hold that thought.” Then he hurried out of his apartment to take care of the smoke in the hall. If he set off the building’s sprinkler system, his landlord would kill him, and she was the retired head of T&I. She was a lady to be feared and pay tribute to, and she had no qualms about cutting off anyone’s hot water.

Once the hall was only vaguely smoky instead of alarmingly gray, Kakashi headed back inside. The chuunin was in his kitchen now, inspecting the charred husk of the pork tenderloin. Kakashi had to squash the urge to grab his team photo off the window ledge and hide it. The chuunin was also holding Kakashi’s container of baking soda and looking much calmer now that he was no longer wreathed in smoke.

“Some of the grease in the bottom of your oven had caught fire,” he explained, waving the container of baking soda. “I put it out. It looks like you had your oven rack too high.”

“Oh.” Kakashi peered into his oven which now had a liberal coating of baking soda on its bottom. *Right* – he’d finished that cheese flatbread off under the broiler to get it to crisp properly and then had forgotten to move the rack back down. Oops. He probably should have noticed that his oven was on fire. That was going to be a pain to clean out.

“It’s a simple enough fix,” the chuunin offered. “Just move the oven rack down and use a tray with edges so the fat doesn’t drip.” There was none of the censure in his tone that Kakashi had been expecting. “What were you trying to make?”

“Ah,” Kakashi rubbed the back of his head and laughed self-deprecatingly, “pork buns. I’m a-” Kakashi hesitated, because he hadn’t actually *told* anyone about the bread, though the grocery store clerk probably had a pretty good idea at this point. But he’d never actually said the words out loud. Not to anyone living, anyway. He plunged on, “I’m a decent baker, but it seems cooking is a bit beyond me.”

Part of Kakashi was braced, waiting for the ridicule, the judgement, the snort of disgust that an elite shinobi *baked* in his spare time of all things. But it never came. The chuunin just smiled at him.

“I have the exact opposite problem – I’m a decent cook, but I can’t bake to save my life. I-” The chuunin hesitated. “I could help you out if you would like.”

Kakashi was an ANBU captain. He had a life expectancy that could probably be measured better in months than years. It wasn’t fair of him to get close to people only to die. And even if *he* didn’t die, the people who got close to him inevitably did, and he didn’t want to end up with this man’s blood on his hands, too, but-

But he *really* wanted to make those pork buns for Naruto. Kakashi was too damn lost in his own head and nightmares to approach him directly, to talk to him the way he knew Minato-sensei and Kushina would have hoped, but he still wanted to *do* something for Naruto. Something to make the kid smile. The only things Kakashi was any good at were killing things and baking. Going on a killing spree would help exactly nothing. And Naruto had just started at the Academy, and he needed more protein in his diet, and he really like pork ramen so... pork buns.

And Kakashi really did need the help.

“Well,” Kakashi began after a slightly too long pause, “I have another tenderloin, but I’m all out of soy sauce.”

“I have more soy sauce back in my apartment,” the chuunin offered.

“In that case,” Kakashi bowed from the waist with purposefully exaggerated formality to hide his lingering anxiety, “I accept your gracious offer of help. I desperately need it.”

The chuunin laughed a little and rolled his eyes.

“I’m Iruka Umino, by the way,” he told Kakashi as he put down the baking soda.

“Kakashi Hatake.”

“Nice to meet you.”

Later, with the second pork tenderloin safely roasting on the correctly placed oven rack and absolutely nothing on fire or smoking in an upsetting way, Kakashi commented,

“So how can I repay you for saving that poor piece of pork from a horrible fate?”

Iruka laughed.

“You could always teach me that jutsu that you used to get rid of the smoke. I really could have used something like that when one of my students set off a stink bomb in my classroom yesterday.”

Kakashi thought of Minato-sensei using that jutsu to flip Kushina's long hair into her face and wondered what Iruka would think if he told him that the Yondaime had specifically invented that jutsu to tease his wife.

"Sure, I could do that."

Maybe, just maybe, Kakashi could let someone else in again. Just this once.

Naruto didn't have many friends – in fact, he could count all of them on one hand – but that just made them all the more valuable. There was Hokage-jiji, of course, and Teuchi and his daughter, but Naruto also had a secret friend – Dog-san.

Dog-san was an ANBU, and he left Naruto pork buns. They weren't store bought pork buns, either – these were *homemade*. He could tell, because they tasted way better. Nobody had ever *made* anything for Naruto before, and that made the pork buns extra special.

Naruto had only met Dog-san in person once so far. He had jerked awake from a nightmare in the middle of one night to find a tall ANBU man in a dog mask frozen in the act of leaving two pork buns on his bedside table. Naruto had blinked up at the stranger, who had stared right back. Then Dog-san had hesitantly reached out and ruffled Naruto's hair with one hand. He'd lifted one gloved finger to the lips of his mask and silently darted back out Naruto's window.

Naruto had asked Iruka-sensei about the ANBU after that, and Iruka-sensei had told him that ANBU were elite shinobi – skilled beyond jounin level, even – who went on the most dangerous missions. They lead hard lives and had to keep their identities a secret from everyone except the Hokage in order to keep the village safe. They couldn't even talk to normal people.

Naruto thought that Dog-san must have been very lonely to have decided to be friends with him, but that was okay, because Naruto was lonely, too, so he was very glad that Dog-san did. Naruto now greeted any ANBU he saw with a smile and a wave, so that when he eventually saw Dog-san, he could wave at his friend without anyone getting suspicious. Naruto may have only been an Academy student, but he could do his part to keep his friend's identity safe.

Since the pork buns always appeared in the same place on Naruto's side table, sometimes Naruto left things for Dog-san in return. Little things. A short note, a picture he doodled during class, a particularly nice rock he'd found down by the river. It was tricky, because Dog-san's visits didn't seem to follow any sort of pattern and were sometimes quite far apart, but that was all right, because Naruto knew that his friend was off somewhere protecting the village.

Sometimes Dog-san left Naruto other things aside from the pork buns. Naruto now had a small collection of different shaped shells that he kept in a jar even though he had never seen the ocean. Dog-san had left him an entire *book* on his birthday. It was called *The Tale of the*

Gutsy Ninja, and Naruto had found it sort of confusing and some of the words were hard, but he'd really liked that the main character had the same name as him.

Naruto was really looking forward to the day he became Hokage and was able to meet his secret ANBU friend properly and thank him for all the pork buns.

Chapter End Notes

'Soyokaze' means 'dancing breeze' (unless Google translate completely lied to me - always a possibility)

Chapter three is on its way - I just need to type it up!

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

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

At this point, Kakashi could safely say that he was *good* at making bread. He'd managed to become a genius of hard work as well as a regular genius, and if Gai ever found out, Kakashi would probably have to do something drastic – like become a missing-nin. Iruka joked that he ought to open a bakery, and the predominant theory around the ANBU base was that they were being haunted by the vengeful spirit of a baker whose shop had been the collateral damage of a mission gone wrong and *don't touch that bread – you don't know where it came from!*

Kakashi probably would have told his fellow ANBU members the source of all the bread if they weren't being so *hilarious* about it. Well, Tenzou and Shisui knew at this point. The three of them had gone on a month long mission together, and Kakashi may have brought a sealing scroll full of premade flatbread dough and a skillet to cook it over their fire, because mission rations were, quite frankly, the worst. Now Shisui took great joy in wandering around the ANBU base casually eating the 'cursed bread' much to the horror of his comrades, and Tenzou occasionally stopped by Kakashi's apartment to pick out a loaf or some rolls from Kakashi's latest batch.

Kakashi's windowsill had gained two more pictures. He'd found a picture of Kushina jokingly stealing Minato's Hokage hat in a cardboard box buried in the back of his closet. The other picture had required a trip to the house that Kakashi technically owned but hadn't set foot in in years. It was a picture from his parents' wedding. His father looked much younger than he did in Kakashi's memories, but it had felt like the right one to pick. After all, his mother and father were together now.

Kakashi only visited the Memorial Stone once a week these days, and even then it was only to leave flowers. He didn't linger any more. Talking to names carved in a stone had finally lost its appeal. He'd rather remember his friends and family alive and smiling than as cold bodies on the ground.

Somedays, Kakashi could look at himself in the mirror and almost believe that Rin's death truly hadn't been his fault. He still wasn't sure if he'd ever be able to forgive her for using *him* to commit suicide, though. It was a work in progress.

There was also a glass jam jar full of river rocks on Kakashi's windowsill and a box of childish drawings and notes carefully saved in a drawer of Kakashi's side table. Kakashi thought that he was just about ready to introduce himself to Naruto properly. And he thought he could probably even manage it without blurting out "You look so much like your parents" at any point in the conversation and bringing the wrath of the Sandaime down on his head. He was planning to do it the next time he was out on medical leave and had a guaranteed stretch of time in the village.

And given that he was currently stumbling back into Konoha at midnight, unsteady on his feet due to a combination of blood loss, chakra exhaustion, and at least three broken ribs, that probably meant that he'd be able to talk to Naruto in the next couple of days. Kakashi wondered if Iruka would be willing to pick up some books from the library for him. Iruka was generally amenable to that sort of thing if he didn't have a mountain of tests to mark.

Kakashi staggered into the ANBU base, hoping to properly bandage the wound in his thigh before reporting to the Hokage. The Sandaime got really *tetchy* about people dripping blood on his floor when it wasn't an emergency. He was not expecting the base to be in chaos. Chaos by ANBU standards anyway, so it was a very efficient chaos with lots of people running around and a great deal of soft, panicky gossiping.

"Senpai? Oh, thank gods, no one was sure if you were out on a mission or if he'd gone after *all* the sharingan users – not just the Uchiha." Tenzou skidded to a halt in front of Kakashi, cat mask still on his belt and eyes as wide with tightly controlled panic as Kakashi had ever seen them.

"Just got back from a mission. What *happened*?"

Tenzou's expression was grim.

"Itachi went rogue. He murdered everyone in his clan except his younger brother."

"Even-" Kakashi couldn't quite bring himself to say Shisui's name. All he could think about was the last time he'd seen Shisui before he'd left on his mission. Shisui had had his feet propped up on a table and had been cheerfully munching on a piece of toast and jam while Badger had been shouting at him to 'stop eating cursed food and tempting fate!'

Tenzou simply nodded.

"How did no one see this coming?" demanded Sparrow coming to a stop next to them. "At the very least, *you* should have, Hound! You *trained him* after all."

A wide, gaping chasm of darkness seemed to stretch open beneath Kakashi's feet.

"Don't be ridiculous!" snapped Tenzou fiercely.

"Maybe that was the problem," Sparrow snarled, her voice unnaturally high and tinged with hysteria, and Kakashi remembered that she had been a part of Itachi's squad. "After all, who better to train a clan killer than *Friend-Killer Kakashi*-"

Kakashi caught Tenzou's fist before it connected with the side of Sparrow's head. His voice was flat and cold when he spoke,

"Sparrow, if you're too emotional to think rationally, then take yourself off duty. If not, then I'm sure you have orders you should be getting to."

Sparrow took one step back, then another.

"Y- yes, Captain." Then she bolted.

“Ignore her, Captain,” Tenzou told him quietly as Kakashi let go of his fist. “She’s not thinking clearly.”

Kakashi just nodded. Logically, he knew that Sparrow was just lashing out at the first convenient target in her shock and pain – just trying to find someone else to blame aside from herself, but-

Friend-Killer Kakashi.

Kakashi had thought that he’d finally put that wretched nickname behind him years ago.

The darkness yawned massive and hungry below him, threatening to swallow him whole.

Was this how you felt, Dad? Just a little?

Maybe once Kakashi would have taken the blame as his due – simply another failing to add to his already long list and heavy load – back when he spent every free moment at the Memorial Stone drowning in ghosts. But now-

Kakashi had been a shinobi since he was five years old – a chuunin at six, a jounin at thirteen, an ANBU at fourteen. For seventeen years he’d given himself wholly and unquestioningly to his village. He’d done and seen enough to fuel three lifetimes worth of nightmares. And he was done. Kakashi had wallowed in death and darkness long enough. He was finally ready to step back out into the sun.

It took a full twenty-four hours before Kakashi was able to give his report to the Hokage. Kakashi’s mission had been a success, after all, and was far less pressing than dealing with the fallout of the Uchiha going from close to a hundred strong to just one living member, who was only eight years old and thoroughly traumatized. (Nobody was willing to think of Itachi as a member of the Uchiha clan at the moment.) There was also the fact that Konoha no longer had a police force – no small issue all by itself.

Kakashi took his week and a half of medical leave to look into his finances, plan, and learn how to make an eight-strand braided loaf. (He could do three- and four-strand braided loaves no problem, but eight was *hard*.) He also spent some quality time talking over his decision with his windowsill pictures.

By the time his leave was up, everything was in place, and Kakashi went to the trouble of making a formal appointment with the Hokage.

The Sandaime looked resigned but not surprised when Kakashi set his ANBU mask on his desk and handed over the scroll containing his resignation.

“I’ll admit,” the Sandaime sighed, “I was rather selfishly hoping to keep you in ANBU a bit longer. You’re my best captain, but after eight years, it probably is time for you to return to being a jounin-”

“You misunderstand, Hokage-sama.” Kakashi took a deep breath, steeling his resolve. “I want to retire entirely.”

That caught the Sandaime off guard.

“You’re only twenty-two and one of the strongest shinobi in the village. You cannot simply *retire*.”

“I’ve been a shinobi since I was five. I may be very good at being a shinobi, but... I would like to learn how to be a *person* while I still have a chance.” Kakashi had been practicing this little speech in front of his windowsill pictures for the last three days. He hoped it sounded as convincing in the Sandaime’s office as it had in his kitchen.

The Sandaime sat back in his chair and stared at Kakashi for an uncomfortably long moment, his expression unreadable.

“I can’t let you retire,” the Sandaime held up a hand, forestalling Kakashi’s protest, “but I can take you off active duty and make you part of the reserves. You’ll be expected to keep up with your training, and in the event of a serious threat to the village, you *will* be reactivated. Otherwise, for all intents and purposes, you will be a civilian unless you choose to return to active duty.”

Kakashi bowed deeply, relief loosening the tightness in his chest.

“Thank you, Hokage-sama.”

The Sandaime picked up his pipe and sucked in a deep lungful of tobacco.

“So do you have a plan for what you’re going to do next?” he asked after blowing out a cloud of blue smoke.

Kakashi smiled, the most honest, relaxed expression he’d managed since Rin’s death, and waited for the Sandaime to take another pull on his pipe before answering,

“Well, a friend of mine keeps suggesting I open a bakery, so I thought I’d do that.”

There was something vaguely satisfying about watching the God of Shinobi nearly choke to death on his own pipe.

Naruto woke up to the sun in his face. That was the nice thing about Saturdays – no alarm clock because no class. Naruto stretched and then rolled onto his side to check his bedside table to see if Dog-san had stopped by the night before. He had, but instead of the usual pork bun, there was a small origami dog standing on top of a slip of paper with an address written on it.

Naruto blinked at the address. Why would Dog-san have left him an address? Did he need Naruto’s help for a mission? Naruto was going to be Hokage one day, but he wasn’t sure

how much help he'd be on an ANBU mission just yet. Did this- Did this mean that Dog-san wanted to *meet* him?

Naruto had never gotten dressed so fast in his entire life. He didn't even bother with breakfast before bolting out of his apartment with the address clenched in his hand. It took him to a bakery that Naruto was just about certain hadn't been there a couple of weeks ago. A freshly painted, blue and white sign declared it the Ryouken Bakery.

Naruto hesitated outside the front doors. It certainly didn't *look* like a front for some sort of ANBU mission, but then it wouldn't, would it? In fact, it just looked like a civilian business. Naruto bit his lip. Civilians sometimes got... unpleasant when he went into their shops. But Dog-san had all but *asked* him to come here, and his friend had never asked him for anything before. What if Dog-san really did need his help?

Naruto squared his shoulders with renewed determination and pushed open the doors. Overhead, a bell jingled. It looked like a regular bakery on the inside, too. Shelves stacked with bread lined the walls, and a counter with nobody behind it stood in front of a curtained doorway that presumably lead to a back room.

Before Naruto had time to wonder why Dog-san had asked him to come to a deserted bakery, a man stepped through the curtain. He was wearing a plain beige apron, a white, short-sleeved shirt trimmed with dark blue triangles, an equally dark blue, cloth mask that stretched from the collar of his shirt to the bridge of his nose, and a black eyepatch that covered his scarred left eye, but Naruto recognized him. Recognized the height and the build and the unruly silver hair that had always peeked out from beneath the hood of Dog-san's coat the handful of times he had caught a glimpse of his friend patrolling in the village.

"Hello Naruto-kun," the man smiled. Then he reached behind the counter and held out a very familiar roll. "Pork bun? You look like you missed breakfast."

Naruto *beamed*, wide and honest and brighter than the sun.

Chapter End Notes

At least one more chapter of this story is guaranteed (just not typed up), and I do have a fifth chapter in progress, so we'll see how the inspiration flows. :) I've got some ideas - it's just a matter of pinning them down.

Ryouken translates roughly as hound or hunting dog (unless Google is lying again) because Kakashi thought that calling his bakery 'The Scarecrow Bakery' sounded weird.

On a side note, Sparrow retired from ANBU a month after Kakashi did. The sheer weight of the paranoia of finding 'cursed bread' literally *everywhere she went* for four solid weeks finally got to her. Tenzou regrets nothing - you don't mess with Senpai.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

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

The Ryouken Bakery was one of Naruto's favorite places in Konoha – rivalled only by Ichiraku's. He ended up there almost every day after class, and Kakashi, the owner, was the *coolest*. He used to be an *ANBU captain*, which Naruto only knew because he'd technically known Kakashi since before he'd retired from ANBU. Naruto would sit on a counter in the back kitchen and do his homework and talk about class while Kakashi made bread in all shapes and sizes and one of Kakashi's shadow clones minded the shop. Kakashi would help him when his homework got confusing. Sometimes after the bakery was closed for the evening, they went over to one of the training fields, and Kakashi would help him with his taijutsu and shuuriken aim. With his friend's help, Naruto's grades had slowly improved until he was mid-ranked in his class instead of hopelessly dead last.

Naruto had never had a big brother before, but... he thought that this was what it was supposed to be like.

Kakashi had been expecting to catch a fair amount of flak for basically quitting to become a baker, and there definitely had been some. The Council had had conniptions. Some of his fellow shinobi and a number of civilians had expressed their distain about him switching to the reserves at such a young age. The surprising part had been just how *supportive* a large number of people were. Gai had actually cried joyful tears on him despite Kakashi's best attempts to get away. (They still sparred at least twice a week when Gai was in the village, and Gai still considered Kakashi his rival whether he was semi-retired or not, because apparently taking care of his mental health just made him an even more worthy opponent. Kakashi didn't even bother trying to understand.) Iruka had been surprised when he'd first told him and then just shook his head and sighed, "I really should have expected that," with a smile. Then he'd helped Kakashi put up his new shelves.

Most of Kakashi's regular customers were shinobi. The Akimichi clan had a standing weekly order as did the Inuzuka clan. There were even a handful of ANBU who occasionally stopped in after their patrols and made purchases using hand code before heading back to their ANBU base quarters. (They were generally referred to him by Tenzou, who had taken over leaving 'cursed bread' around the ANBU base and spreading the rumor of the vengeful baker's spirit with unexpected zeal. Apparently Tenzou had developed a taste for pranking his comrades. It was an unexpected turn of events, but Kakashi thoroughly approved.) Civilians wandered in and out – some more than others. Kakashi's bakery was developing a reputation for quality.

Kakashi couldn't remember ever feeling this content before in his entire life. Part of him missed the adrenaline and challenge of missions, but he didn't miss the killing, didn't miss the blood coating his hands. And even if he *had* missed it, it was all worth it just to hear Naruto's enthusiastic greeting every day when he arrived after the Academy let out.

If the Sandaime and the Council would let him, Kakashi would definitely have stolen- er, *adopted* Naruto by now, because a ten year old living on his own ought to be *illegal*. And he was speaking from experience. His sensei's son was far too good for this ungrateful village, and Kakashi's customers had quickly learned that any unkind remarks they made directed at Naruto would get them kicked out of the bakery with extreme prejudice. And if the customer in question was a shinobi, the kicking would be very literal. No one could throw somebody out a door quite like a wrathful ex-ANBU captain. Kakashi didn't care what anyone said about *him*, but Naruto was out of bounds.

The bell over the bakery door jingled, and Kakashi glanced up from the book he was reading. He was out front for once while his shadow clone minded the ovens.

"Really, kid? A bakery?" Jiraiya stepped through the door. "When both your entry and Hound's disappeared from Kiri's Bingo Book, I thought you had been killed in action."

Kakashi closed his book with a decisive snap.

"Not dead – just not on active duty anymore."

Jiraiya's eyebrows shot up.

"You switched to the *reserves*?!"

"Yes," Kakashi told him coolly. "Two years ago now. Which you'd know if you stopped in Konoha more than once a decade." A bit of an exaggeration, but Jiraiya wasn't exactly Kakashi's favorite person at the moment.

Jiraiya either missed his dangerous tone or chose to ignore it.

"You're not even thirty, yet! That's way too young to be on the reserves! You have a duty to Konoha. What would Minato say?!"

And that was a low blow even for Jiraiya. If Kakashi hadn't had a vested interest in his bakery not becoming a smoking crater in the ground, he probably would have been tempted to go after Jiraiya with a chidori or, at the very least, pulled some kunai out of the weapons pouch he had never stopped wearing. Instead he stood up from his stool and leaned his hands on the counter, *radiating* killing intent.

"I think he'd say, 'Why is my ten year old son living in an apartment by himself, sensei, instead of with his *godfather*?'"

Jiraiya flinched slightly.

"I'm Konoha's spymaster. I couldn't take a little kid on the road with me – it wouldn't be safe!"

"He doesn't even know your *name*," Kakashi snapped. "Couldn't pick you out of a line up if he *tried*. Even if you couldn't take him in, you could have stopped by the village every once in a while and at least *talked* to him! That would have been enough!" He could tell that his words had made a palpable hit. "You were the only person the Sandaime's orders didn't

apply to, and you're a *seals master*. Nobody would have questioned you spending time with the village's jinchuuriki. It wouldn't even have been the first time you had taken in war orphans! You were just too much of a *coward* to take any responsibility."

Jiraiya glared at him.

"I wouldn't go throwing stones in glass houses if I were you, Hatake."

Kakashi glared right back.

"I was a suicidal, fourteen year old ANBU operative with orders from my Hokage not to approach Naruto until he was at least four years old so no one would suspect that he was really Minato-sensei's son. Besides," the door bell jingled, and Kakashi quickly slammed a lid on his killing intent, "I haven't been in a glass house in a while."

"Hey nii-san!" Naruto called cheerfully, peering around Jiraiya. Kakashi's heart still sort of melted every time Naruto called him that. "Who's the old geezer?"

Kakashi raised a challenging eyebrow at Jiraiya. Jiraiya turned to look at Naruto. His expression was wistful and pained, but his mouth remained firmly shut.

"Nobody," Kakashi finally said, staring Jiraiya straight in the eye. Jiraiya looked away. "Just a customer. Come on, Naruto, I'm closing up early today. We can head over to Training Field 3 and do some taijutsu practice." Kakashi really needed to get out into the fresh air to clear his head a bit.

"Training before homework? Yeah!" Naruto cheered.

"Could you go in the back and tell the shadow clone that he can disperse after he's taken the last batch of bread out of the oven? I'm just going to finish helping this man."

"Sure thing!" Naruto darted through the curtain into the back.

Kakashi turned back to Jiraiya.

"Is there anything else I can help you with?" he asked levelly.

Jiraiya's shoulders slumped a little, and he sighed.

"No. Take care of yourself, kid. And... take care of him, too." Jiraiya turned and left in a rustle of coat, and Kakashi had to squash the urge to shout at him some more. At this point, it wouldn't help anything. If Jiraiya was still too lost in his own grief to act like a godfather, nothing Kakashi could say would change his mind.

Kakashi never used to have the patience for teaching people things. When he was younger he honestly hadn't understood why people didn't just get it the first time they were told. He didn't know how to break explanations down into smaller pieces or approach concepts from different angles, because he'd never *needed* to. Baking had taught Kakashi a lot about how

to not be instantly good at things, which meant that Kakashi was much better at helping Naruto than he might otherwise have been. Naruto took more after Kushina, who had been a brilliant and gifted kunoichi but not a prodigy. But being a prodigy wasn't always a good thing as Kakashi could personally attest. What Naruto didn't possess in natural talent he made up for with grim determination and tenacity.

Kakashi ruffled Naruto's hair when he finished the kata they'd been working on without any hesitations for the third time in a row.

"Good work." Naruto beamed. "Let's head back to my apartment and get some supper."

Naruto's eyes widened.

"Your apartment? Really?" He'd never been to Kakashi's apartment before. Kakashi nodded. Naruto grinned but then frowned. "Iruka-sensei told me that any time you use your kitchen for something that isn't bread related you set it on fire."

"That's a gross exaggeration. What Iruka-sensei actually meant to say is that you should always leave jam making to the professionals." Kakashi had nearly lost an eyebrow to that little incident and had had his hot water cut off for three days for the scorch marks it had left on his kitchen ceiling. Long story short, the next time some hopeful ANBU tried to special order jam-filled doughnuts, Kakashi was charging double and getting pre-made jam. Naruto didn't need to know that though. "Besides, I was thinking we could get takeout."

"Let's get ramen!"

Kakashi wasn't even remotely surprised. He had absolutely no doubt that Naruto was going to grow up to beat Kushina's record of twenty-eight bowls of ramen in one sitting. At ten, he could already manage *five*. Kakashi was pretty sure that it was some sort of Uzumaki kekkei genkai.

Naruto started rubbernecking the instant Kakashi opened his apartment door. He looked like he was trying to memorize every detail at once in case he didn't get another chance.

"Put your bag on the table, and then I'll show you where I keep the chopsticks," Kakashi told him as they toed off their shoes by the door.

Naruto bounded into the living room, depositing his takeout bag on the table and spinning in a circle to get a better look at everything. Kakashi shook his head with a smile, put his own bags down, and then headed into the kitchen with Naruto following close on his heels.

Kakashi was digging through a drawer in search of two pairs of matching chopsticks (how? How did he have so many chopsticks that *didn't match*?!) when Naruto piped up,

"Hey, Kakashi-nii, is that your gennin team?"

Kakashi straightened up to find Naruto pointing at his old team photo.

“More or less, though we were all chuunin when that was taken.”

“You were so *short!*” Naruto laughed. “And-” He paused, squinted more closely at the picture, and then screeched at an ear-bleedingly loud volume, “OH MY GOSH, YOU WERE TAUGHT BY THE *YONDAIME?!?*”

Kakashi waited until the ringing in his ears had subsided before responding. It was okay – he probably hadn’t needed that eardrum anyway.

“Technically Minato-sensei was still just a jounin when he taught me, but yes.”

“That’s *so. Awesome.*” Naruto was up on tiptoe trying to get a better look at the picture. “He’s my hero! What was it like to be taught by him? What was *he* like?” he asked eagerly.

Kakashi blinked. The Sandaime had forbidden him from telling Naruto about his parents, but he’d never said *anything* about not regaling Naruto with stories about Kakashi’s chuunin team and their sensei and their sensei’s girlfriend. Hel-*lo* loophole. All he had to do was not mention Kushina’s last name or the fact that she was a jinchuuriki, and he was home free.

“Come on,” Kakashi grabbed his team photo and Kushina’s picture off the windowsill and then pulled four chopsticks out of his drawer at random – they ought to work well enough whether they matched or not. “I’ll tell you all about him over supper.”

Naruto’s eyes practically glowed with excitement. He dashed back out to the table and sat down so quickly that his chair slid a few inches across the floor sideways.

“Looks like we’re having a family dinner, sensei,” Kakashi murmured quietly, and then followed after Naruto at a slightly more sedate pace. The pictures were set in a place of honor in the center of the table. Once they both had a takeout container of ramen in front of them, Kakashi started, “You can’t really talk about Minato-sensei without also talking about Kushina, the Red Hot-Blooded Habanero. They were together pretty much the entire time I knew Minato-sensei-”

Kakashi had never seen Naruto pay so little attention to a bowl of ramen. Over the next two hours, Kakashi talked himself practically hoarse. It barely even scratched the surface of everything he wanted to tell Naruto about his parents, but that was all right. It was a start, and he had time.

Chapter End Notes

If Jiraiya had been around for when Kakashi was still in ANBU, he would have been part of the pro-bakery camp, but he missed all that and I think that this was also a fair amount of his own guilt talking.

For anyone who was curious, here's Kakashi in his normal bakery clothes (art by me):





Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

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

“KAKASHI HATAKE!” Kakashi looked up from his book as the bakery door slammed open to reveal a furious Academy teacher. “What were you *thinking* teaching a twelve year old DANGEROUS FORBIDDEN JUTSUS?!?”

“Maaa, it was just the one forbidden jutsu,” Kakashi shrugged unrepentantly. “And I was thinking that Naruto has *so much* chakra that it will probably take another couple years of chakra control exercises before he has the finesse to successfully create a basic buunshin.” Kakashi didn’t mention that he remembered basic buunshin giving Kushina similar problems even as an adult. He wasn’t sure if it was an Uzumaki-ludicrous-chakra thing, a jinchuuriki thing, or a combination of the two.

“You do realize that Kage Buunshin no jutsu would *kill* any of Naruto’s classmates if they tried it, right? Most shinobi don’t have the chakra to do it safely until they’re chuunin,” Iruka sighed.

“Which is why I have impressed upon Naruto that he isn’t allowed to teach it to any of his teammates until they *all* pass the chuunin exams.” Kakashi slid his book under the shop counter. “I take it from your yelling that Naruto passed? You must have run pretty fast to beat him across town.”

“He’s actually waiting outside. I asked him to wait so that I could yell at you properly before we went out for celebratory ramen.” Iruka turned and shouted over his shoulder, “Okay, Naruto – I’m done!”

“NII-SAN!!!” Kakashi walked around the counter and an excited blur of orange slammed into his side with enough force to knock a less well-trained person off their feet. “I *PASSED!!!* I’M A GENIN!!!”

“Congratulations, Naruto.” Kakashi ruffled his hair, and Naruto’s smile was radiant. His ever present goggles had been replaced with a brand new hitai-ate. “I never doubted that you would.”

There was always about a week between the Academy graduation exam and genin team assignments. The paperwork only took about a day. The rest of the time was needed to track down the various potential jounin senseis and pry them out of the places they’d hidden themselves when they’d been told that they were being forced to work with children.

Because of this, Naruto was at the bakery with Kakashi helping knead dough when the hawk arrived.

“He’s *stalking* me!” Naruto was grumbling. “I mean, I’m kind of flattered, but I don’t care if he *is* Hokage-jiji’s grandson, that’s still no excuse for acting like a complete and utter *brat* – believe it!”

The still familiar triple tap of a beak on glass caught Kakashi’s attention immediately, and he felt his heart sink as soon as he spotted the messenger hawk outside the window. He froze for the barest fraction of a second before wiping his hands on his apron and going to open the window. The hawk didn’t wait for a response and took off again as soon as Kakashi had relieved it of its scroll.

A summons from the Hokage. In all likelihood, he was being reactivated but-

Kakashi had been keeping an ear to the ground and up to date on the latest ANBU gossip. Even Tenzou agreed that things had been quiet the last few years. Suna was too broke to start any trouble. Kiri seemed to be busy trying to become the first hidden village to implode and spectacularly self-destruct. Iwa was still rebuilding after the last war. And Kumo was always a potential threat, but the Raikage hadn’t tried anything significant since he had failed to kidnap the Hyuuga clan’s heiress. Everything had been quiet... unless one of their enemies had simply been biding their time.

Please. Please, not another war. Naruto had *just* graduated.

“Something wrong?” asked Naruto, pausing to frown at the scroll in Kakashi’s hands.

“The Hokage just wants to talk to me,” Kakashi told him with a smile that was more forced than normal. He stripped off his apron and wondered absently how much flour was too much flour to be wearing when he saw the Hokage. He didn’t have time to go home and change. Maybe he should put a light henge on his clothes? “Would you mind watching the shop for me? I don’t think I should be too long.”

“All by myself?”

“Well, you *are* a genin these days.” Kakashi tapped the metal plate of Naruto’s hitai-ate, and Naruto grinned at the reminder. “Think of it as a practice D-rank mission.”

“Yeah! I can do that!”

Kakashi didn’t bother with a henge. If the Sandaime hadn’t wanted him to show up in his office covered in flour, he should have given him more notice.

The brand new jounin vest folded neatly on the Sandaime’s desk confirmed Kakashi’s suspicions. He was being reactivated.

“You asked to see me, Hokage-sama?”

“Yes.” The Sandaime pushed the jounin vest towards Kakashi, but Kakashi kept his hands folded behind his back. “The Council has decided that it’s time for you to return to active duty.”

Kakashi let out a soft, resigned sigh.

“Who opened hostilities? Kumo? Kiri?”

“Nothing of the sort. As you know, the Academy graduation exams finished yesterday.” Kakashi nodded. “Sasuke Uchiha was among the students who passed.”

“So you want me to go after Itachi?” Kakashi asked blankly. He supposed he could see the logic in that – the best opponent to send against a sharingan user *was* another sharingan user – but five years seemed like an *awfully* long time to wait to deal with the Itachi problem.

“No, I want you to teach Sasuke.”

There was a moment of perfect, dead silence.

“You want me,” Kakashi repeated, “to teach Sasuke Uchiha. Forgive me, Hokage-sama, but I believe your exact words were ‘in the event of a serious threat to the village,’ and I don’t understand how one maladjusted twelve year old constitutes a serious threat to the village.”

The Sandaime sighed.

“Kakashi, you’re the only person left in Konoha with any understanding of how the sharingan works. Sasuke is going to need your help when he awakens his clan’s gekkei genkai.”

“If,” Kakashi corrected. “There were plenty of Uchiha who never did. Sasuke might end up being one of them. And who knows when he will even if he does. I could just tutor him when that happens. I’m really not a good choice to be a jounin sensei.”

The Sandaime raised an eyebrow.

“If ever there was an ideal role model for a young man, who has lost everything and is subsequently drowning himself in darkness because he doesn’t know a better way, I think it would be you.” Kakashi looked away. That comment had hit a little too close to home.

“Also,” the Sandaime continued, “if you agree to this, I’ll put Naruto on your team as well.”

That got Kakashi’s attention.

“Sasuke graduated Rookie of the Year, didn’t he? The top two students always get paired with the class’s dead-last, and Naruto is a solidly mid-ranked student.”

“True,” the Sandaime gave a small shrug and puffed on his pipe, “but I’ve always thought that that was a bit of a nonsensical tradition. I think it’s time for a change. Don’t you?”

It was blatant emotional manipulation, and the really annoying thing was that it was *working*.

“Fine. I’ll do it if you finally put through that special dispensation so that I can tell Naruto that he’s a jinchuuriki. He’s a genin now and an adult in the eyes of the village – he has a *right* to know.”

“Done,” the Sandaime nodded. “Stop by the Mission Room tomorrow to pick up the files for your new team and fill out some paperwork.”

Kakashi finally picked up his new jounin vest. He'd have to do some shopping – the last time he'd worn a full set of proper shinobi blues, he'd still been growing.

“Yes, Hokage-sama,” Kakashi bowed. And – because he was back on active duty now, wasn't he? – he left out of the Sandaime's window instead of the door.

Holy hell, he'd just agreed to be a jounin sensei.

What had he been *thinking*?!

Once the bakery was closed for the day and Naruto had headed home with an invitation to dinner the next night (because the Council was made up of assholes like Danzo who had been blocking Kakashi's requests for permission to tell Naruto that he was a jinchuuriki for the past *year* and he wasn't going to risk saying anything until he had that signed dispensation in his *hand*), Kakashi didn't even bother going home. Instead he walked right past his apartment, down the hall, and started pounding frantically on the door of 3A, new jounin vest still clenched in one hand. It took a full thirty seconds for Iruka to yank open the door, which was twenty-eight seconds too long in Kakashi's opinion. Before Iruka could do more than glare at him, he blurted out,

“How the *hell* do I *teach children*?!”

Iruka's face went blank, and his gaze shifted from Kakashi's frantic expression to the vest clutched in his fist.

“They tapped *you* to be a jounin sensei?” There was a touch of disbelief in his voice.

“I know. It's a terrible idea, but the Sandaime is a master of emotional blackmail, and I said yes. Now, how the hell do I teach? I have no clue what I'm doing. I was generally too busy fighting with Obito to pay attention to how Minato-sensei handled things, and Naruto has heard the bell test story at least five times, so there's no way they're not going to pass.”

“Kakashi... you've been basically tutoring Naruto for nearly five years now,” Iruka told him patiently. “What did you think you were doing if not *teaching* him?”

“Uh...”

Iruka rolled his eyes.

“Come on. I'll make curry, you can sit at the table not touching anything, and we can discuss the fundamentals of teaching children armed with edged weapons.”

“Hey,” Kakashi protested as he followed Iruka into his apartment, “I'm not *that* bad at cooking!”

“If it isn't something you can cook over a campfire or a recipe you've tried at *least* three times, you're a menace. Now go sit down and don't. Touch. *Anything*.”

The special dispensation sat like a brick in Kakashi's pocket as he and Naruto ate supper the next night. How the hell did he start this conversation?

"It's so cool that you're going to be going on missions again," Naruto was babbling, a certain amount of anxiety hidden underneath the cheer. "Do you know who your team is going to be, yet?"

"Yup, but I can't tell you."

"Aw! Why not?"

"It's in case there have to be any last minute team changes. Nothing is actually *officially* official until team assignments are announced." Kakashi would be more frustrated about that rule if he wasn't also looking forward to the look of surprise on Naruto's face when he found out who his team's jounin sensei was.

Naruto pouted.

"That's really annoying."

Kakashi just shrugged and chewed thoughtfully on a slightly overdone slice of beef. Damn it, he just couldn't think of a way of easing into this. Might as well go with the old standby of full frontal assault.

Kakashi pulled the scroll containing the special dispensation out of his pocket and set it down on the table with a *thunk*.

"What's that?" asked Naruto around a mouthful of rice.

"Signed permission from the Hokage so that I can finally have a conversation with you that I've been wanting to have for a while."

Before Kakashi could continue, Naruto interrupted eagerly,

"Is it about when you were in ANBU?"

"No-"

"This isn't going to be like the puberty conversation, is it?" Naruto interrupted again, eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"Thank gods, *no*," Kakashi groaned. He was actively trying to repress the memories of that particular talk. "Hold on – I need help for this." He got up and retrieved Kushina's picture from the kitchen. Naruto eyed it curiously as Kakashi set it in the center of the table. "I know that I've told you what an amazing person and kunoichi Kushina was-"

"Yeah! Her chakra chains sound like they were so *cool*! I wish I could have seen them."

Kakashi just barely managed to bite back the words ‘I wish you could have, too,’ because at this rate it was probably going to take a *new Hokage* getting elected before somebody finally let him tell Naruto who his parents were. (He was secretly hoping that if he dropped enough hints, Naruto would figure it out for himself. So far no luck.)

“Well, there was another thing that made her amazing that I haven’t been able to tell you about, because it’s an S-Class secret.” Kakashi took a breath before continuing. “Kushina was the jinchuuriki of the Kyuubi no Kitsune. She kept the entire village safe by keeping the Kyuubi sealed inside of her chakra, so it couldn’t hurt anybody.”

“You mean the demon fox that attacked the village?” Naruto’s eyes were wide.

Kakashi nodded.

“The night of the attack Kushina’s seal was in a weakened state.” Kakashi reached out a hand and traced a finger over Kushina’s smiling image. “Something happened – I don’t know what – but the Kyuubi was ripped out of her. She and Minato-sensei fought to the last to try to stop the Kyuubi, but in the end, the only way sensei could stop the Kyuubi was by giving his life to seal it inside a new born baby, who then took on Kushina’s legacy of protecting Konoha from the demon fox.”

Naruto’s eyes were saucers and shiny with unshed tears. Kakashi could almost see the pieces fixing together in his head.

“You mean... the- the Yondaime sealed the Kyuubi in... me?” he whispered.

“Yes.”

“So I killed the Yondaime?”

“No. Sensei chose to sacrifice himself to save everyone in the village. It was *his* choice. He wanted people to see you as a hero for the burden he put on your shoulders.” Kakashi still wasn’t very good at hugs, but Naruto really looked like he needed one, so he tried his best anyway. Naruto snuffled into Kakashi’s shirt.

“Is that why people don’t like me?” he finally asked.

“People are stupid,” Kakashi grumbled. “The Sandaime made it illegal for anyone to talk about the Kyuubi, because he wanted you to have as normal a childhood as possible, but I think that just confused people and made things worse.”

Naruto was quiet for a long time, face still buried in Kakashi’s shirt. Then he sat up, wiping his nose on his sleeve, and stared at where Kushina’s picture stood smiling in the middle of the table.

“Were people mean to her, too?”

“Some. If people got too rude, though, she generally started throwing punches, and not many people knew that she was a jinchuuriki.”

“She must have been really brave,” Naruto finally concluded.

“Yeah. Yeah, she was.”

“So since Kushina had the Kyuubi in her before and I have the Kyuubi in me now, do you think that means that I have some of Kushina inside of me, too?”

“Yeah, Naruto, I’d definitely say that you do.” And Kakashi wasn’t sure whether he wanted to laugh or cry.

“Then I’m going to keep on protecting the village just like she did – believe it! And when I become Hokage, I’m going to get rid of that law, because not talking about important things never helped anybody!”

Kakashi ruffled Naruto’s hair, because he’d run out of words.

Gods above, this kid.

Kakashi stared at his reflection in his bathroom mirror. Wearing a hitai-ate instead of an eyepatch again felt weird and only left him with a small triangle of face. He already missed having two visible eyebrows. Oh, well – he’d get used to it again.

He ran a hand through his hair. What was it Obito used to occasionally call him? Oh, yeah – paintbrush head. Not entirely inaccurate.

Kakashi was mostly just wearing a standard jounin uniform, but he’d added an old-fashioned clan sleeve to the right shoulder of his vest. It was white with the red Uzushio whorl and the Hatake clan border of triangles in dark blue instead of the usual crimson. Clan style but still not exactly the same as the one his father had worn. His tanto strap was a familiar weight across his chest. He’d never really worn his tanto when he was in village, but he’d rarely gone on a mission without one since he’d made chuunin. He needed to get used to wearing one for extended periods of time again.

Kakashi glanced over at his stack of team files. Naruto’s held exactly no surprises, Sasuke’s current address was deeply upsetting and further proof that the village Council was comprised of nothing but *idiots*, and Kakashi really hoped that Sakura Haruno was better taijutsu in reality than she appeared to be on paper, because otherwise she was going to need a *lot* of work.

Well, team assignments weren’t until that afternoon. Time to head over to the bakery and get started for the day.

It could have been worse, Sasuke reflected. He could have ended up on a team with Kiba. At least Naruto wasn’t a *complete* idiot. He was obnoxiously *loud*, but he generally tried to pull his own weight instead of being utterly useless. Sakura, on the other hand, Sasuke would have gladly traded for Kiba. Sasuke hated fawning, and the only person in their class

who fawned worse than Sakura was Ino. And Ino at least had Yamanaka clan techniques going for her.

Sasuke didn't have great hopes for the new 'Team 7,' but it didn't really matter. His teammates weren't important – they were just there to help him make chuunin. Just another stepping stone in his quest for vengeance. Connecting with others only made you weak – Sasuke had learned that the hard way. The best he could ask for was useful teammates, who wouldn't slow him down – wouldn't be deadweight.

Speaking of slow, where the *hell* was their new sensei? Everyone else had left over half an hour ago. Even Iruka-sensei had looked at the clock, pressed a hand to his face, and then told them that he'd be right back before he'd disappeared nearly ten minutes ago. Sasuke was not impressed. His estimation of Team 7's jounin sensei was dropping by the minute. Clearly somebody had been scraping the bottom of the barrel when they'd found this one.

"Hey Sakura-chan," Naruto had looped two kunai over his fingers and was walking them across his desk like a pair of particularly deadly legs, "do you have any idea what you want to specialize in, yet?"

"Oh, uh, I don't know – maybe genjutsu?" Sakura shot Sasuke a sideways glance, checking for his approval. Sasuke continued to ignore her.

The classroom door abruptly slid open with a bit too much force – the result of the person doing the pushing using their foot instead of a hand. The man framed in the doorway was still in the middle of pulling on his jounin vest and-

"NII-SAN!!!"

Sasuke nearly fell over sideways from the sheer volume of Naruto's shout. Had he mentioned how much he hated how obnoxiously *loud* Naruto was?

"Maaa, sorry, I'm late-"

Naruto had already leapt over his desk and was standing in front of the man, who was presumably their new sensei, practically vibrating with excitement.

"So you're really going to be our jounin sensei?" Naruto demanded. The man nodded. "That's so awesome! We're going to be the best team *ever*!"

Sasuke stared skeptically at the jounin. He was tall, wore an old-fashioned clan sleeve with an unfamiliar clan pattern, and his shirt, mask, and forearms were liberally smudged with something that looked distinctly like flour. He also had his hitai-ate slanted down over one eye and an apron dangling from his left hand. Sasuke was not impressed.

"Nii-san?" Sakura repeated, her tone colored with confusion and disbelief.

Sasuke scowled fiercely to himself. Another point against their new sensei.

"Well, you've probably spent enough time in this classroom. Meet me on the roof, and we'll do introductions." The jounin eye-smiled and then disappeared in a swirl of leaves.

Naruto was literally bouncing now.

“This is the best!” he crowed.

“How do you know him?” asked Sakura, standing up from her seat and heading for the door.

“Kakashi-nii runs the Ryouken Bakery!” Naruto told her cheerfully. “He got reactivated just to teach us! Isn’t that so cool?”

“Reactivated?”

“Oh, yeah – he’s been on the reserves for a few years now.”

In an unprecedented moment of solidarity, Sakura and Sasuke exchanged a dubious look behind Naruto’s back as he raced ahead of them. Most shinobi didn’t join the reserves until they were at least forty, and given the color of this Kakashi’s hair, he was probably pushing fifty. They’d been saddled with a semi-retired, half-blind, forty-something *baker*. What the HELL had Iruka-sensei, Mizuki-sensei, and the Sandaime been *thinking*!?

Sasuke didn’t groan, but his scowl did deepen. It looked like their jounin sensei was going to be even more of a deadweight than Sakura.

Brilliant.

“So just say a little bit about yourselves. Likes, dislikes, dreams for the future – that sort of thing.” Kakashi smiled and ignored Sasuke and Sakura’s blatantly doubtful expressions. They’d clearly already jumped to their own unfavorable conclusions about him. Obviously they were going to need some practice looking underneath the underneath, because making assumptions like that in the field was a great way to get yourself killed.

“Why don’t you go first, sensei, to show us how it’s done?” suggested Sakura, pushing her hair back over one shoulder. Kakashi made a mental note to have a word with her about her hair. Long hair was fine, but wearing it loose like that was a non-verbal boast and flaunt of skills that most shinobi and kunoichi didn’t attempt until they made jounin. He wondered if grabbing it during the bell test would be enough to get his point across without excessive conversation.

“All right. My name’s Kakashi Hatake. I like making bread, dogs, and romance novels. I dislike sweets and when my oven catches fire. As for dreams for the future,” Kakashi considered this for a moment, “I’d really like to perfect making Tea Country croissants.”

“Me next!” Naruto adjusted his hitai-ate with one hand, grin bright and sunny. “I’m Naruto Uzumaki! I like ramen and training. I dislike any bread dough that takes more than three hours to rise, because that’s just way too long! And my dream is to become Hokage! Believe it!”

Kakashi nodded at him with a fond smile and then turned his attention to Sakura.

“I’m Sakura Haruno. I, um, like-” She glanced sideways at Sasuke and made a strange squeaky noise as her face turned red. “My future dreams-” She did the same glance-squeak-red-face thing again but louder and somehow redder. Then she added fiercely, “And I dislike Ino-pig!”

“O...kay.” Her exam notes said she had made a perfect bunshin, Kakashi reminded himself. *Perfect*. And Academy instructors didn’t hand out that note lightly. There was potential there – even if it was currently buried under twelve feet of hormones. He turned to his last student.

Sasuke had his hands folded in front of his face, and his eyes were narrowed dangerously. He looked less like a newly minted genin than a brooding supervillain contemplating his latest world domination plan.

“My name is Sasuke Uchiha. I don’t have any likes, and my dislikes are none of your business. As for my dream, it’s not so much a dream as a goal – to kill a certain man.”

Kakashi resisted the urge to slap a hand against his face, but the words popped out of his mouth before he could stop them,

“Really? Your dream is to murder Itachi? That’s a terrible life goal.” Kakashi sighed, “Besides, you’re going to have to get in line – Shisui was very popular.” He didn’t mention that ANBU took betrayal even more personally than the average shinobi.

Sasuke’s expression was completely gob-smacked for a moment before turning into a glower. Clearly no one had ever questioned his unhealthy quest for vengeance before. This was why you shouldn’t let children live by themselves in the house where their parents *got murdered*. At least Kakashi had been moved into his own apartment. Hopefully, Sasuke wasn’t so far gone that the kid wouldn’t be able to still find the person hiding beneath the pain and vengeance. And hopefully the Sandaime was right and what Sasuke really needed was another option aside from the path he was currently walking.

Gods above, this team was going to need so much work. Then again, often the doughs that took the most time and effort produced the best breads. In the end, the patience and extra effort was always worth it. Maybe that was the best way to think of Team 7.

Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura were still just base ingredients, but there was a glimmer there – a potential that maybe, together, they could be something great.

Chapter End Notes

You can't be chronically late and run a bakery, but Kakashi did get the time of team assignments completely wrong.

Also, the romance novels in question are, in fact, bodice rippers but not Icha Icha. Kakashi is still mad enough at Jiraiya that he's waiting until new Icha Icha books arrive

in the library before reading them because he doesn't want to give Jiraiya any money.
(It's doubly frustrating because he's still Kakashi's favorite author.)

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

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

Naruto was *so excited*. His team was taking the *bell test*! The same one that the Yondaime had given *his* students. How cool was that?

And the best part was that Naruto already knew part of the secret – it was all about teamwork. Which made sense when you really thought about it – one-on-one, no genin would be able to take on a jounin. So they needed teamwork and strategy and to not get hung up on the actual number of bells. Now he just had to convince Sasuke and Sakura. He hadn't had a chance to tell them what to expect after team introductions yesterday, and Kakashi hadn't been running late that morning.

The question was, who should he try to convince first? Sakura would probably be easier to convince, but she generally always sided with Sasuke about everything. As soon as Sasuke disagreed with Naruto, Sakura would most likely change her mind again. Sasuke would be harder to convince, but once Sasuke went along with Naruto's plan, Sakura would agree on principle.

Damn it, he was going to have to talk to Sasuke-teme first.

Naruto's stomach grumbled. He'd only eaten a small breakfast that morning in an act of team solidarity. He knew that Sakura and Sasuke would have taken Kakashi at his word and not eaten anything.

Naruto kicked his feet thoughtfully for a moment. The branch he was sitting on was high enough up the tree to obscure him in the leaves without blocking his view of Kakashi. Kakashi was currently standing in the middle of the clearing, reading a book about sponge starters. He looked sort of bored.

Naruto made twenty shadow clones that all mobbed Kakashi at once and used the distraction to slither down his tree and head off in the direction he'd last seen Sasuke go. The shadow clones ought to keep Kakashi entertained for a minute or two.

He found Sasuke hiding in a bush, watching with narrow-eyed focus as Kakashi casually fought off Naruto's shadow clones.

"Hey, teme." Naruto settled down next to him. "I've got a plan."

"Dobe, I don't need your help to take on some *baker*. Worry about your own bell."

Naruto gaped, torn between wanting to defend his nii-san's awesomeness and wondering how Sasuke had managed to get Rookie of the Year and still be *this dumb*. He settled for rolling his eyes, because smacking the bastard on the back of the head like he really wanted to would probably shake the entire bush and give away their position.

“Listen, the bells are just-” But Sasuke had already shot out of the bush to launch his attack. “-a distraction.” Naruto scowled at Sasuke’s back. It was all well and good to know that this was supposed to be a test of teamwork, but it didn’t matter if your teammates refused to listen to you.

Naruto watched with a certain amount of satisfaction as Kakashi handed Sasuke his ass without ever glancing up from his book. A well-placed kick sent Sasuke flying out of the clearing. Kakashi turned a page.

Naruto scooted out of the bush just before Sasuke crash-landed back into it. Sasuke’s feet ended up sticking up into the air in a very undignified manner.

“Kakashi-nii was in ANBU,” Naruto told him in his best unimpressed tone. “Wanna hear my plan now, teme?”

“Hn.”

“Right. First we need to find Sakura-chan.”

“The bells are just a distraction?” asked Sakura doubtfully. She twisted a piece of hair around one finger and glanced nervously at Sasuke. Sasuke was always so cool and smart, but even Sakura could admit that the leaves sticking out of his hair detracted from his mystique slightly.

“Well,” Naruto hedged, rubbing one cheek, “I mean, not *entirely*, but the number of bells definitely is. The point is that we’re supposed to work *together* to get them.”

“I don’t know-”

“Can we just give my plan a try? I spent all night coming up with it – believe it!”

“*Fine*. Let’s hear it, dobe,” Sasuke finally decided.

Sakura nodded. If Sasuke-kun thought it was all right, then it must be.

“Right! Sasuke and I are going to distract Kakashi-nii while you grab the bells, Sakura-chan!” Naruto beamed.

Sasuke and Sakura stared at him.

“Is that *it*?” asked Sasuke, his tone dripping with condescension.

“Really, Naruto?” Sakura scowled. “You spent all night coming up with *that*?”

“Not *just* that!” Naruto protested. “Watch this!” He made the same weird seal he’d used at their graduation exam. Five more Narutos appeared in their hiding place, and then two of them hinged into Sasuke, and two more turned into Sakura. Sakura felt her face go very hot

– she was surrounded by Sasuke-kuns! “Team 7 – army style! That way we can attack head-on, but still have the element of surprise, because he won’t know which ones are the real us!”

“Huh.” Sakura blinked. “That’s not actually entirely stupid.”

“Hn.” Sasuke stood and walked a circle around the extra Sasukes and Sakuras, scrutinizing them. “Might be worth a try,” he finally admitted. “How many of those can you do?”

“A lot, but more than thirty gets excessive if I’m not in a wide open field. I just get in my own way.”

Sasuke looked thoughtful, then picked up a stick and started scratching a crude map of the clearing where Kakashi was still reading on a bare patch of ground.

“Make five clones of Sakura and four of me and you. Sakura, you hide in that large tree at the far end of the clearing, and we’ll try to herd him towards you.”

“That’s brilliant, Sasuke-kun!”

“It was my idea in the first place,” Naruto grumbled, but Sakura ignored him. Any plan that Sasuke-kun came up with had to succeed! And Inner Sakura really liked the idea of ganging up on their sensei.

This was going to work!

In the initial confusion of the Team 7 army rushing into the clearing from every direction, Sakura hinged herself into a rock at the base of the tree Sasuke had mentioned. She tried to attune her chakra to the natural chakra of the area around her the way Iruka-sensei had described to them in stealth and infiltration class. She did her best to feel the flow of her chakra and mentally smooth its edges into the world around her. *I am stone. I am earth – cool, steady, firm.* She had never tried it before, but it was worth a shot if it made her blend in better. It was hard to stay quiet and focused when Sasuke was fighting right in front of her and looking so *cool*, but Sakura kept her breathing carefully soft and even.

Kakashi-sensei had finally put his book away, but the “herding” part of the plan wasn’t working so well. His feet had barely moved an inch from their original position. At this rate, they’d never get Kakashi-sensei within Sakura’s reach before the time was up. Then Sasuke blew a *massive* fireball at their sensei and Kakashi leapt back-

Landing right in front of Sakura!

Her breath caught. This was her chance! She’d have to be quick and pick her moment just right....

Sakura waited until Kakashi’s attention appeared to be focused on Naruto, Sasuke, and the two remaining Sakura clones, and then she *lunged*.

Her fingertip *just* brushed a bell and then-

There was a hand in her hair, pulling her head back, and a kunai at her throat.

The scream brought Sasuke up short. To his left, Naruto and the two remaining clones froze as well.

Kakashi had Sakura trapped by the hair and was holding a kunai to her neck.

“Put down your weapons and surrender,” Kakashi ordered calmly. He wasn’t even the slightest bit out of breath, and that irked Sasuke to no end.

Naruto dropped the shuriken in his hand, and his remaining clones dispersed themselves. Sasuke let the kunai fall out of his hand as well. Great. So much for that plan. Damn it, Sasuke refused to fail this test and get sent back to the Academy all because of Sakura and her stupid hair.

“Well, I have to say-” Kakashi started, turning his head towards Naruto and leaving his left side – and the bells – *wide open*.

Sasuke didn’t even think – he sprang forward.

He got *so close*.

Then in a blur of motion that was too fast for his brain to follow, Sasuke found himself lying face first in the dirt with his arm twisted painfully behind his back and a kunai pricking at the base of his skull. Somewhere above him, Kakashi let out a disappointed sigh.

“And you were all doing so *well*. Congratulations, Sasuke-kun – willful endangerment of a teammate’s life is an automatic fail. Thanks to your actions, your entire team is going back to the Academy. And when I was just about to pass you, too. Such a shame.”

The ropes bit uncomfortably into Sasuke’s arms as he shifted against the post he was tied to. Naruto and Sakura sat gloomily to either side of him. Kakashi had left a few minutes earlier saying that, if Naruto and Sakura could follow orders and not share any of their lunches with him, then he might reconsider sending them back to the Academy with Sasuke.

Sasuke’s empty stomach groaned, and he winced.

“To hell with this,” Naruto abruptly announced. He pulled a roll out of the paper bag that was sitting next to the two untouched bento and shoved it in Sasuke’s face. “Eat something. If your stomach growls any louder, it might wake the dead.”

Sasuke resolutely turned his head away.

“Don’t be stupid, dobe. You’re throwing away your only chance of not going back to the Academy.”

Naruto just moved the roll so that it was in front of Sasuke's face again.

"Like another year at the Academy will kill me." And Naruto's tone was a little strained, a little forced, but he still sounded like he meant every word. "Until somebody tells me otherwise, we're still a team, and I don't let my teammates starve no matter what – believe it!"

Sakura hesitated, then opened one of the bentos and selected a piece of grilled salmon with mismatched chopsticks and held it out towards Sasuke as well.

"Naruto's right. We're a team. And- and even if we only got to be a team for twenty-four hours, I think we were a good one. At least for a little bit there." Her smile was shaky but honest.

Sasuke stared at them.

Connections made you weak. Caring made you weak. Compassion made you weak. Friendship made you weak.

But-

Sasuke's stomach clenched painfully and growled again.

But solitude made you starve to death.

And a tiny part of Sasuke wondered if maybe, just maybe, that was what had happened to Itachi. If, somewhere between the pressures that the Uchiha clan had heaped upon his shoulders and the lonely isolation of his ANBU missions, Itachi's soul had quietly starved to death.

Maybe, that tiny part whispered so softly that Sasuke couldn't even hear it, yet, *Itachi was wrong about what strength is.*

Sasuke looked down and swallowed thickly. He didn't want to say the words. They stuck painfully in his throat and sounded so, *so* weak in his ears, but they needed to be said.

"I'm... sorry. I shouldn't have- I messed up, and neither of you should be paying for my mistakes." He finally forced himself to look up at Naruto and Sakura. "I'm sorry."

Naruto's eyes were wide with surprise for a moment and then he smiled. It was a smaller, more controlled thing than Naruto's usual smiles, and it somehow made his face look far older than it should.

"And we forgive you." Then the unfamiliar smile was replaced with a much more familiar look of unshakable determination. "Now eat the damn pork bun already, teme."

Sasuke finally gave in and took a bite of the pork bun. It tasted far better than he was expecting it to.

“Congratulations, Team 7.” All three of them jumped as Kakashi spoke up from directly behind them. The ropes holding Sasuke in place went slack, and a third bento dropped into his lap. “You pass.”

Sasuke stared blankly at the lunch sitting in his lap. Kakashi stepped around from behind them.

“Really?” asked Sakura in disbelief.

Kakashi nodded.

“Naruto, good plan, but do remember that just combining shadow clones and punching doesn’t always solve everything. Sakura, that was some excellent stealth you demonstrated – I would barely have noticed your chakra if I hadn’t been looking for it – and I expect your hair to either be in a bun or cut short when you arrive for training tomorrow morning. Sasuke, that was an impressive fire jutsu, but if you *ever* put a mission above the lives of your teammates again, I will personally kick you back to the Academy, because you won’t deserve to be a shinobi. That goes for all of you, understand? Those who break the rules are trash, but those who abandon their comrades are worse than trash.”

“Yes, sensei,” chorused the newly minted and still rather shell-shocked Team 7.

“Excellent! Meet me at the Ryouken Bakery at 6am tomorrow morning. Until then, you have the rest of the day off. Enjoy your lunches – and please don’t lose my chopsticks.”

Chapter End Notes

It was Sasuke acknowledging and apologizing for his mistakes that caused Team 7 to pass in this universe - not the sharing of food despite orders.

Since a number of people have asked, never fear - Kakashi actually owns the building of the Ryouken Bakery, so if he needs to close it down for a few weeks for an out of village mission, he can do so without having to worry about rent or anything. If push came to shove for some reason, he would sell the Hatake clan estate, give up his apartment, and just live in the bakery.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

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

Kakashi hadn't expected to actually *enjoy* being a jounin sensei – and he didn't always – but overall, yeah, it was sort of fun.

Naruto had thrown himself into D-ranks with a surprising amount of enthusiasm. His chakra control was slowly improving the more he practiced tree walking. It was too early to say for sure, but Kakashi thought that there was a good chance that Naruto might end up being team lead when the three of them made chuunin.

Sakura had gotten tree walking down on her first try and mastered water walking in less than forty-eight hours, so now Kakashi had her working on endurance training while the boys worked on their chakra control. He was also teaching her how to pick locks using chakra and dismantle basic security seals, because that girl had the makings of an infiltration *expert*.

After his apology during the bell test, Sasuke seemed to be a little less quick to dismiss his teammates out of hand. Kakashi was under no illusions that the kid had dropped his vengeance quest, but he was viewing his teammates as people instead of tools, and that was a good start.

Their teamwork was improving as well. It was odd. Naruto would generally come up with a basic plan, Sasuke would add some much needed detail, and more recently Sakura had started pointing out flaws and suggesting alternative options. The system seemed to work well for them so far.

Naruto had also sort of become team spokesperson.

“Could you please explain to me,” the Sandaime sighed long-sufferingly, “how you managed to change your D-rank mission to help organize files at the Academy into a B-rank suspect apprehension?”

“It was all Sakura-chan!” Naruto announced proudly. “She’s the one who noticed the code in Mizuki-sensei’s files!”

“It wasn’t a very complicated code.” Sakura shuffled her feet, looking a little embarrassed. “And he’d left the files right there on his desk.” She pushed a few strands of hair that had come loose from her bun behind her ear. It was one of her more obvious tells that she was lying. Kakashi had complete faith that Sakura had taken advantage of the opportunity to practice her new lock picking skills on her old sensei’s desk.

Had Kakashi mentioned how proud of his students he was?

“And then what did you do, Sakura-chan?” asked the Sandaime.

“Well, I hid one of the files in my weapons pouch, and then I went to find Sasuke-kun and Naruto, because if Mizuki-sensei really was a traitor, I couldn’t leave either of them alone with him. Then we took the file I’d found to Kakashi-sensei.”

“Yeah!” Naruto interrupted. “And Kakashi-nii told Sakura-chan good work and then asked us how we wanted to handle things since it was our mission, and we decided that we should apprehend Mizuki-sensei before he had a chance to influence any more kids or hide the evidence.”

The Sandaime turned a deeply unimpressed expression on Kakashi, who just beamed right back at him. If the Sandaime hadn’t wanted to deal with this sort of thing, he shouldn’t have given Kakashi a genin team.

“They had a very good plan,” Kakashi told him cheerfully, “and I was on hand the entire time, ready to step in if something went wrong.”

“And half of Mizuki-kun’s hair had been singed off when you brought him in because...?”

“I miscalculated my fire jutsu,” Sasuke blatantly lied at the same time Naruto solemnly told the Sandaime, “Sasuke-teme takes traitors to the village very personally.”

“So, is this the third time or the fourth time that Kakashi-sensei has hired us for a D-rank at his bakery?” asked Sakura as she squished the excess water out of her sponge.

“Fourth.” Sasuke was scrubbing his sponge over a particularly stubborn patch of dirt on the glass of the bakery’s front window.

“Yeah, it’s great, isn’t it?” Naruto nodded. He was swiping off the leftover water from his section of window with a rubber scraper, leaving behind wide stripes of sparkling clean glass.

“The 4am wake up, I could do without.” Sakura peered through the window to where Kakashi was talking to another jounin, who was holding two loaves of bread and had a senbon sticking out of his mouth like a toothpick. That did not look safe. She was starting to wonder if mental instability was a requirement for becoming a jounin. “I wonder why he wears that mask all the time,” she muttered to herself, not expecting any sort of answer.

“Oh, that’s because nii-san has gills,” Naruto informed her solemnly. “He’s very sensitive about them and doesn’t like it when people stare.”

“WHAT?!?” Sakura yelped, her head snapping to look at Naruto. Sasuke dropped his sponge.

“Haha! Gotcha!” Naruto grinned. “It’s actually his Hatake clan marks. They’re a really weird color.”

Sasuke narrowed his eyes at him suspiciously.

“...You’re lying.”

“Could be.” Naruto folded his arms behind his head and beamed cheerfully. “But why would I lie about nii-san having fangs? The first time I saw them, I thought he was a vampire!”

“Naruto, come on – be serious!” Sakura protested. “Why does he wear that mask all the time?”

“I am being serious – that cystic acne of his is no joking matter!”

By the time Kakashi made it outside to find out what all the shouting was about, Naruto was lying on the ground, howling with laughter, and Sakura and Sasuke had up-ended the entire bucket of soapy water over his head.

Sasuke had started showing up at the Ryouken Bakery on Saturday mornings, because, well, his sensei was weird, but the bakery was a better place to be than the empty Uchiha Compound when he woke up from the usual 5am nightmare. And Sasuke kind of liked the smell of bread dough. His mother used to make bread sometimes, and it was... nice to remember her that way. Having something to do with his hands that wasn’t training related was nice, too.

Kakashi never commented on Sasuke’s presence even though they never had team training on Saturdays. Sometimes they would talk a bit – usually about inconsequential things. Naruto generally showed up around 10am and had never questioned Sasuke’s desire to be at the bakery either. (Naruto seemed to take it for granted that everyone should want to spend their free time at the Ryouken Bakery.)

The smooth, soft ball of dough moved rhythmically beneath Sasuke’s hands. It was strangely peaceful.

“So what are you going to do after you murder Itachi, anyway?” asked Kakashi absently.

Sasuke froze mid-knead. He glanced sideways at Kakashi, but his sensei seemed to be completely absorbed in shaping loaves.

“Why?”

“Oh, just wondering.” Kakashi didn’t look up from his work.

“Hn. I don’t have a plan for after that.” Sasuke started kneading again with more force than necessary. Silence stretched out, and for some reason, Sasuke felt the uncharacteristic urge to fill it. He tried to imagine his life after he’d finally killed Itachi. He couldn’t picture it.

“You’re not planning to die in the process are you?” Kakashi asked as he headed for the ovens with a different tray of loaves that had apparently finished proofing.

“No,” Sasuke snapped, annoyed. What sort of stupid question was that?

Kakashi just hummed thoughtfully to himself, slid the loaves into one of the massive ovens, and performed a quick mist jutsu.

“Well, I suppose you could always restart the police force,” he commented distractedly. “If you want to stick with the theme of honoring your clan’s memory and all that.”

“What?”

“The Sandaime has never gotten around to restarting the force, and I know it’s caused problems. If you want to pursue your quest for justice after Itachi is dead, being a regular shinobi probably isn’t going to work well for you but being a police officer might.”

Sasuke stared blankly into middle space, his hands continuing to work the dough in front of him on automatic. He’d always thought of his quest as one of vengeance. He’d never thought of it as justice before. His soul burned frantically when he thought of vengeance, but his resolved firmed and held steady when he thought of justice. Perhaps that was a better way of thinking of it – as justice, not vengeance – because Sasuke knew perfectly well that fire was just as likely to harm as help.

Sasuke tried to picture himself as a police officer hunting down people who had hurt others. The image had a certain appeal.

He finally offered a noncommittal “Hn” in response. It was something to think about.

Sasuke hadn’t meant to yell at Sakura – the words had just tumbled out, short and sharp and aimed to hurt. But, damn it, she’d been complaining about her parents. Her *parents*. Did she have any idea what he would *give* to have his mother alive to scold him about his eating habits?

Sakura’s eyes had gone wide and hurt, and Sasuke had stormed away without apologizing, because he was a little afraid that, if he opened his mouth again, all that would come out would be more bile and venom, and Sakura didn’t actually deserve it. Naruto had been shouting after him, but Sasuke had ignored him.

Now Sasuke was in a tree near Training Field 6 lost in dark thoughts and definitely not hiding. He scowled as Kakashi settled on the branch just below his and viciously wished for a moment that he had Sakura’s talent for making her chakra invisible. Sasuke let the silence stretch out for two agonizing minutes before he couldn’t stand it anymore and snapped,

“Are you here to lecture me or be condescending and try to say that you ‘understand how I feel’? Because you *don’t*. I lost *everything*. You have *no idea* how it feels.”

Kakashi stared up at him with that infuriatingly neutral look for a moment before he spoke.

“Well, by the time I was born there were only two members of the Hatake clan left, and I never had an older brother, so in that respect, no, I don’t. But you’re hardly the only person

to have lost everything.” Sasuke let out a skeptical snort. “Did you learn how the Third Shinobi War started at the Academy?”

Sasuke frowned slightly at this seemingly abrupt change of topic.

“Iruka-sensei said a mission went wrong, and Suna used it as an excuse to attack us,” he muttered.

“My father led that mission. He was one of the best jounin in the village, and they used him as a scapegoat to blame for starting the war. His teammates stopped talking to him. No one would look him in the eye. Some civilians threw things. Some shop keepers refused to serve us. It just got worse and worse no matter what he did. He finally committed suicide when I was eight. I found his body when I came home from training.” Kakashi’s voice was carefully blank and emotionless in a way that Sasuke recognized far too well.

“My best friend sacrificed his life to save mine on a mission. He probably wouldn’t have had to if I had just listened to him in the first place. His name,” Kakashi pushed up his hitai-ate and opened the left eye that Sasuke hadn’t even realized he still owned, “was Obito Uchiha.” And Sasuke *gaped*, because that was a sharingan. That was a gods damned, fully-formed *sharingan*. “I lost my eye on that mission, and as he lay dying, Obito gave me his. It was my first mission as a jounin. I was thirteen. Less than a year later,” Kakashi held a cupped hand over the sharingan, “my other friend and teammate threw herself in front of one of my jutsus and used me to commit suicide. She did it to protect the village. Her name was Rin Nohara.” Kakashi lowered his hand to reveal the black pinwheel of the mangekyou. “My hand went straight through her heart. I still haven’t forgiven her.”

Something in Sasuke’s shocked brain finally clicked, because he may only have been eight when his clan was wiped out, but he knew – he *knew* – how much trauma was required to gain the mangekyou. The elders used to call it the final gift of tragedy (even if it was a gift that some, like Itachi, had abused). It was physical proof that Kakashi may have never born witness to his clan’s massacre, but on some level, he still *understood*. He *really did*. Sasuke truly wasn’t alone in his pain like he had always thought. It was a revelation – a relief on a profound and visceral level.

“My sensei and his wife died protecting the village the night of the Kyuubi attack, and after that I’d run out of people to lose.” Kakashi closed his eye and pulled his hitai-ate back into its usual slant. He turned his head away from Sasuke to stare out over the training field and seemed content to leave Sasuke to his own thoughts for a while.

Sasuke’s mind, however, was still all but blank with shock. He’d spent *so long* isolating himself, because he’d thought his grief and pain were unique, and he’d been wrong. After a long while, Sasuke’s branch became too empty, and he clambered down to join Kakashi on his branch instead. Sasuke hugged his legs and rested his chin on his knees.

“What about Naruto?” he asked, not looking over at Kakashi.

“I didn’t start getting to know Naruto until he was six, and I didn’t *officially* meet until he was eight.” Kakashi’s tone was fond.

Sasuke's nose wrinkled slightly.

"How did *that* work?"

"I was in ANBU," Kakashi shrugged.

"So?"

"All ANBU are weird – it's the only way to cope with the stress. Naruto and I were sort of... pen pals, I guess? Only he did all the writing, and I mostly left him food, because six year olds shouldn't live pretty much on cup ramen."

"What changed, then?"

"One of my former subordinates, whom I'd helped to train, massacred his entire clan."

Sasuke's breath froze in his chest. He wasn't sure how many shocks and revelations he could take in one day.

"You... *trained* Itachi?" Sasuke whispered.

Kakashi looked over at him. What little of his expression that could be seen was weary.

"In part. He was on my squad when he first joined ANBU."

Sasuke didn't ask any more questions. His head was reeling yet again from too much information. It was going to take a while to process.

He'd never really thought about how Itachi's betrayal might have effected others in the village.

Silence stretched out with none of the tension it had held before. Finally Kakashi rolled his shoulders and stretched his neck from side to side.

"Take ten more minutes, then run two laps of the village for verbally abusing your teammate, and come back and apologize to Sakura. I'll have a chat with her and remind her to be more sensitive to the fact that all of her teammates are orphans."

Sasuke nodded, and Kakashi hopped down out of the tree.

Sakura still had a crush on Sasuke, but... she wasn't sure if she was in love with him anymore. Or if she had ever actually been in love with him in the first place. Because the longer Sakura was on Team 7, the more she realized that she didn't really *know* Sasuke. *Naruto* seemed to understand Sasuke better than she did, and that sort of stung.

There was also the fact that Inner Sakura *really* wanted to punch Sasuke in the face. *Hard*. Because all it would have taken was the slightest of flinches for that kunai at her neck to break skin – to slit her throat. She was just lucky that Kakashi-sensei was better shinobi than

that. Sakura may have forgiven Sasuke for his rash actions, but Inner Sakura definitely *hadn't*.

“All right.” Kakashi looked between Sakura and Sasuke. “Taijutsu only. First one to go under the water loses. Understand?”

They both nodded.

“Kick his ass, Sakura-chan!” shouted Naruto from the river bank where he was trying to use his chakra to split leaves.

“Go.” Kakashi swept one hand down and then stepped out of the way.

Sasuke's taijutsu was stronger than Sakura's, but she was much better at water walking.

Sakura ducked out of the way of Sasuke's first kick. This was the third time Kakashi-sensei had had them spar this way. Sasuke had won the first two, and even though she was improving, Sakura didn't have much hope that she'd win this one either.

She ducked again and threw a punch that Sasuke blocked with ease but-

Sakura noticed for the first time that Sasuke's footing wobbled when his attention was split between blocking her and staying upright. She hadn't caught that during their previous spars. Maybe... she could use that?

She dropped and tried to sweep his feet out from under him. He jumped over her leg easily, and when he landed, his feet were rock steady. Okay. Keep his attention off his feet.

Sakura wouldn't say that she was holding her own exactly, but by keeping her blows aimed at Sasuke's face and shoulders, she definitely wasn't losing as fast as last time. Sasuke wasn't moving his feet quite as much as he should be – wasn't quite as poised and graceful as usual. Inner Sakura was taking a certain amount of smug satisfaction from that. At least she was going to make Sasuke *work* for this victory.

Sakura fainted left just as someone in the next training field over disturbed a flock of crows, and the birds burst from the treetops cawing raucously. Sasuke's eyes flicked to the crows for the narrowest fraction of a second.

There was a *crack* as Sakura's right jab connected solidly with Sasuke's nose.

Sakura caught the briefest glimpse of Sasuke's shocked expression before he apparently lost focus entirely and disappeared under the water with a splash. She gaped down at the rippling water. Had she- Had she just *beaten* Sasuke? And... oh gods, had she broken his nose?

“YEAH! That was AWESOME, Sakura-chan!” cheered Naruto.

Sasuke spluttered to the surface. Sakura bit back six different apologies, because she finally knew Sasuke well enough to know that he wouldn't appreciate *any* of them. She offered him a hand up, and he took it. Blood was streaming down his face. Oh gods, she really *had* broken his nose....

“Good hit,” Sasuke commented as he pressed one of his arm guards under his nose to help staunch the bleeding. He gave her a small, approving nod. It was the most acknowledgement Sakura could ever remember receiving from him.

A hand landed on top of Sakura’s head.

“Good job, Sakura.” Kakashi sounded... proud.

“But it was mostly just luck,” protested Sakura despite the warmth starting to glow in her chest.

“We’re shinobi. A lucky win is still a win. And you had the skill to back up your luck.”

“Yeah, Sakura-chan!” Naruto came wobbling out onto the water to join them. His water walking was doing vastly better, but he wasn’t quite up for doing more than katas on the river, yet. “Before you wouldn’t have been able to hit Sasuke-teme even if he *had* given you an opening!” Naruto looked over at Sasuke and burst out laughing. “Your shorts are see-through when they’re wet! I can see your boxers!”

“Shut up, dobe,” Sasuke muttered and made a halfhearted attempt to sweep Naruto’s legs out from under him. Naruto yelped and nearly lost his balance.

“Let’s see that nose.” Sasuke moved his arm so that Kakashi could get a better look at the damage. Kakashi nodded to himself. “We’ll stop by the hospital before we head over to the Mission Room to pick up today’s D-rank.”

Sakura trailed after her teammates as they headed off the river to collect their things. Inner Sakura was still gloating. Sakura herself was feeling an odd combination of shocked and giddy. She’d always limited herself to book smarts because, well, parents had never entirely approved of the Academy – not really – and she’s been *so distracted* by Sasuke... she’d never really thought that field work was an area where she could succeed.

But between the bell test and catching Mizuki-sensei and now this....

Maybe she had been wrong. Maybe she could be strong in her own right.

Maybe Sakura didn’t need to worry about her teammates leaving her behind, because she could keep up with them all by herself.

“-and then Sakura hit him square in the nose while he was distracted. Sasuke was so surprised that he completely lost focus on his feet and went under,” Kakashi finished. “It’s the first spar that Sakura has actually won.”

“Sounds like they’re all doing well,” Iruka concluded as he stirred the pan of beef stir fry on his stove. Fridays had sort of turned into Kakashi’s weekly update/teaching-advice-session and dinner with Iruka. Kakashi still wasn’t allowed within three feet of the stove under pain of pain.

“Yeah. I think they’re ready to start taking C-ranks.” Kakashi watched Iruka’s back carefully, trying to predict Iruka’s reaction from the shifting of his shoulders. He didn’t detect any disapproving shoulder rolling or stiffening, so Kakashi didn’t think that he was about to be yelled at.

“I don’t see why not,” Iruka agreed casually. Kakashi had been expecting to have to defend his opinion a bit. He still wasn’t sure how many D-ranks was sufficient D-ranks for a team. He didn’t actually *remember* all that much of his time as a genin when he was five, and then he’d mostly done D-ranks with Obito and Rin on sufferance before they made chuunin as well. (Kakashi had been field promoted to chuunin at six and then Konoha had lied about his status so that he could be snuck into the chuunin exams with his teammates to help ensure they passed.) And that had been during a war – the sooner genin teams could get to doing useful things like C-ranks, the better. “A few C-ranks should give you an idea of what survival training areas they need to work on.”

“No lecture about how I’m pushing them too fast?” Kakashi asked hesitantly just to be sure.

“From what you’ve told me, their teamwork is getting pretty solid which is the main point of D-ranks. Sasuke is listening to his teammates, Sakura’s endurance has been slowing increasing and her taijutsu is improving, and Naruto seems to be developing some impressive leadership skills and should be able to start learning elemental jutsus soon. Plus, I’ve seen all three of them taking the shortcut over the roofs, so obviously their chakra control is doing well. At this point, a C-rank sounds like the next logical step.”

“Oh. Good.” Kakashi paused for a moment. “I was just wondering, because Asuma hasn’t taken Team Quick Bread on any C-ranks, yet, and I sort of assumed he’d be the first one to take his team out of the village.”

Iruka rolled his eyes.

“*Why* do you keep calling them that?”

Kakashi shrugged.

“Quick breads use a chemical raising agent instead of yeast and don’t require any kneading. They’re basically minimum time and effort for maximum yield which is what that team is. They probably shouldn’t have all been put on a team together until they made chuunin so that they could learn to work with other people before being stuck in their parents’ patented formula.” Kakashi had given it more thought than he probably should, but he also remembered other people trying to stuff him into his father’s mold when he was young. He could sympathize.

Iruka just shook his head and dumped the finished stir fry into a bowl.

“True, but you try explaining that to the Sandaime and their parents. I was out-voted. Hopefully Asuma will take them on some missions with other teams to compensate for that.” Iruka plunked the bowl down on the table as well as a bowl of rice. “How would you feel about an escort and protection mission for your team’s first C-rank?”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Excellent. There’s a bridge builder from Wave Country who wants an escort home and someone to guard his bridge from ruffians until construction is complete. Drop by the Mission Room tomorrow morning, and I’ll assign it to your team.”

“Well then,” Kakashi scooped some rice onto his plate, “I guess only one question remains – will you look after my sourdough starter for me while I’m gone?”

Iruka half-choked on a piece of beef.

“Your *what*?”

“My sourdough starter, Ukki-san. Don’t ask – Naruto named it. It’s five years old, and I can’t leave it by itself – it’ll starve.”

“The *hell* is a sourdough starter? And why do you apparently need to *feed* it?!”

“It’s a live yeast culture. It gives bread a more robust flavor. I’ve had it since I started the bakery,” Kakashi explained patiently.

“And Naruto named it because...?”

“He found it in my fridge and said that, if it was alive, it needed a name.”

Chapter End Notes

Sometimes it's really hard to believe that when I started this fic I was thinking, "This might end up being a twoshot - three chapters at most." And now it's "Wave Country arc, here we come!"

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

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

If Tazuna had wandered into the Ryouken Bakery, Kakashi would have kicked him back out again. Rude and drunk was never an attractive combination. Rude, drunk, and taking potshots at Naruto left Kakashi itching to dropkick their client. He was having to close his bakery for *weeks* because of this man. It wasn't worth it.

Professional. Professional. Be professional.

Naruto's florescent orange village clothes had been replaced with rusty orange, blue, and black for the mission. After his dunking in the river, Sasuke had exchanged his white shorts for dusty brown ones which were definitely a less eye-catching color. Sakura's red dress was still rather bright for an out-of-village mission, but for a C-rank escort it ought to be all right.

All three of them had done a good job not over packing, and Sakura had even thought to bring a few basic medical supplies. They also all looked like they were considering throttling their client. Sakura's eyebrow was twitching, Sasuke was glowering into the middle distance, and Naruto was growling periodically under his breath. At least most civilians didn't antagonize the shinobi they hired. Well, okay, some nobles did, but that could probably be attributed to stupidity brought on by inbreeding. And escorting nobles was generally A-rank material.

Hmmm... while hiding their client's body could probably be considered a teambuilding exercise, it wasn't a good precedent to set. What they needed was a distraction.

"Merits of shuriken versus kunai. You have ten minutes to decide amongst yourselves which is best, and then you have to convince me," Kakashi announced.

"Kunai," Naruto decided at the same time Sasuke stated, "Obviously shuriken."

They frowned at each other and then turned to Sakura for a tiebreaker. She looked thoughtful for a moment.

"Actually, I always thought senbon were better than either shuriken or kunai."

Naruto looked scandalized and then turned to Kakashi.

"Is she allowed to vote for senbon?"

Kakashi considered this.

"I'll allow it," he decided.

"Sakura-chan, how can you say *senbon*?! They're so fiddly-"

Kakashi smiled to himself as his students started debating weapons. There. That ought to remind Tazuna that the twelve year olds he was bating could kill him. It was at least a five day trip to Wave Country, and hopefully Tazuna would calm down his attitude for the remainder of it.

Five minutes later, Sakura had agreed that kunai were more versatile than senbon, but Sasuke was still staunchly defending the honor of shuriken. Kakashi glanced down at the puddle of water as they walked by it. Well, damn. That wasn't good.

If Kakashi had been leading a team of chuunin, he would have been tempted to let this play out a bit to see whether the shinobi poorly hidden as a puddle had a grudge against Konoha or were after Tazuna, but this was Team 7's first C-rank. Not a chance.

Kakashi dropped a little farther back from his team. When the blade chain flew out to ensnare him, Kakashi ducked, wove out of the way, and slammed a kunai into the earth, pinning the chain to the ground. Then he cracked the two chuunin's heads together. What sort of incompetents disguised themselves as a puddle miles away from any river when it hadn't rained in three days? And who had let these idiots out of their village unsupervised?

Kakashi looked up to find a semicircle of shocked faces staring back at him.

"I'm going to have to agree with Naruto and Sakura – kunai *are* more versatile," he shrugged. "Now, who noticed that puddle?"

Only Sakura raised a hesitant hand.

"I thought the ground was awfully dry for such a large puddle," she admitted.

"Good situational awareness. Never brush off anything that looks out of place – it can be a lifesaver." Kakashi hoisted an unconscious chuunin a little higher under one arm. "Sasuke, get the rope out of your pack and help me tie these two up. Naruto, Sakura, guard Tazuna-san. We don't know if they had any comrades."

Tazuna looked startled by their attackers but somehow not *surprised* to be attacked by shinobi rather than thieves or gang members. Kakashi narrowed his eye. He had a feeling that he and Tazuna needed to have a *talk*.

"All right, let's make camp here for the night," Kakashi announced when the sun started to sink low on the horizon. "Work together to get a fire going." He wagged a finger at Sasuke. "No fire jutsus – that's cheating. I'm going to have a word with Tazuna-san while you do that. Remember to stay aware of your surroundings." Kakashi put one hand on Tazuna's shoulder and subtly but firmly steered him to the far side of the clearing from where his students were searching for dry wood. "You and I need to talk."

"Huh? About what?" Tazuna whined. He was trying to look guileless and missing by a mile.

"Why are there trained shinobi after you, and how many more should we be expecting?"

“I don’t know what you’re-”

“Lying about the danger level of a request,” Kakashi interrupted, his tone deadly polite, “is sufficient cause for me to terminate this mission *right now*, take my students home, and leave you here to die. I won’t even lose any sleep over it, though my students might complain a bit, because they’re still young and rather idealistic. Now tell me everything before I terminate this mission on *principle*.”

Tazuna’s face had gone an interesting shade of green-gray. He started talking – fast.

“Gato has Wave Country in an economic strangle hold. Not even our Daimyo can afford to pay for more than a C-rank mission from Konoha or any other hidden village. Once my bridge is complete, it should open up trade again, but that’s put it in competition with Gato’s monopoly. My village is *dying*. We’re *desperate*. The only shinobi he’s ever sent have been the lower ranked ones – chuunin? We’re all civilians – he’s never needed more than that.”

Kakashi sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

“If you’d been honest about your situation, the Hokage probably would have authorized this as a B-rank mission with the proviso that you pay the rest of the fee after the bridge was completed. As it is, my team can only accompany you as far as your home.”

“But-”

“My students are *genin*. Very promising genin, I’ll admit, but this is their *first* mission outside Konoha. They are *not* ready to hold off an organized attack of chuunin level shinobi.”

“In other words, welcome to your second accidental B-rank mission,” Kakashi concluded.

Sakura, Naruto and Sasuke exchanged glances.

“So we’re not going to protect the bridge once we get there?” Naruto asked.

Kakashi shook his head.

“We have no idea how many shinobi Gato may have hired. Our team is too small to protect an entire bridge the size of the one Tazuna-san is building. Our mission scroll said it was two hundred feet. Apparently it’s closer to two *thousand* feet.”

Off to one side, Tazuna flinched slightly.

“I forgot a zero?” he suggested weakly.

“Of course you did,” Kakashi agreed with false cheer. “Since this isn’t a regular C-rank mission, we’re going to be sleeping in shifts. I’ll take the first watch. Sakura, you’ll have the second watch. Sasuke, you’re third, and Naruto, you have the dawn watch. Two hours each.

If you notice anything out of the ordinary, wake me right away. Now,” Kakashi pulled one of his two storage scrolls off his belt, “who wants flatbread?”

“You brought bread dough on a mission?” asked Sakura, sounding scandalized.

Sasuke snorted.

“Why are you surprised?”

Kakashi just hummed to himself as he unsealed his first batch of dough and his skillet. He might not be able to knead his stress and worries away at the moment, but at the very least, cooking some flatbread ought to help a bit.

Three and a half days on high alert and there had been no further hints of danger. They were less than an hour from Tazuna’s home now, and Kakashi was on edge. This all felt far too easy. When missions went wrong for him, they went *spectacularly* wrong. This seemed too simple.

Kakashi rolled his shoulders. He’d sealed his pack ANBU-style into his spare storage scroll in favor of his tanto. It was probably overkill, but if he had to fight off an army of low level shinobi at a moment’s notice, he wanted his sword to be readily available.

“What was that?” asked Naruto suspiciously as something rustled off to one side of the path. He’d paused and pulled a kunai.

Sasuke peered around Naruto and into the bush the noise had come from, two shuriken in hand.

“Hn. It’s just a rabbit.”

Sakura leaned around to look as well.

“Yeah, but a white rabbit at this time of year?” she pointed out, her expression dubious.

“Why wouldn’t it be white?” Naruto asked.

Kakashi widened his senses as his suspicion mounted. Because what the unseasonably white rabbit mostly screamed to him was ‘distraction.’ He turned, senses searching and-

There.

“*Duck!*” he shouted. His students and Tazuna hit the ground just in time as the massive sword that would have decapitated them scythed through the air.

Kakashi was already rolling to his feet, tanto in hand, when the blade slammed into a tree trunk, gouging deep into the wood. Between one breath and the next, a man was crouched on the flat of the sword like a deadly platform. The sun caught the Kiri hitai-ate the man wore and glinted.

Oh, *hell*.

“Hmph.” The man straightened up. “Not a single opponent with even a Bingo Book entry. Hardly even worth my time.”

Well, as far as things going catastrophically wrong on missions went, being accosted by an S-class missing-nin on his genin team’s first C-rank mission was definitely up there. Kakashi may have been off of active duty long enough to no longer feature in most Bingo Books, but Zabuza Momochi, the Demon of the Bloody Mist, had definitely *not* been.

“Ah, well, not all of us can be famous,” Kakashi shrugged. “Get in defensive formation, and guard Tazuna-san,” he called over his shoulder without taking his eye off Zabuza. For the moment, he had the element of surprise on his side, and he was hoping to take full advantage of that. “I don’t suppose you could be convinced to just let us go on our way,” Kakashi suggested casually, subtly adjusting his stance, “since we’re clearly not worth such a notorious shinobi’s time.”

Zabuza’s eyes narrowed.

“Actually, you do look familiar.”

Damn it. So much for the element of surprise.

“Like you said, I’m not in any Bingo Books.” Kakashi caught the telltale shifting of Zabuza’s feet. He had just enough time to shove up his hitai-ate before he was blocking a blow aimed at his head. “Not recently anyway.”

Thank gods for his tanto, otherwise he’d be trying to block that ridiculous sword with just kunai and armor-backed gloves and be at risk of losing a hand.

Zabuza snorted.

“The son of Konoha’s White Fang back from the dead. I remember you. Overrated, I always thought. When no one claimed credit for killing you, I figured you had followed your dad’s example and offed yourself.”

Kakashi reminded himself that getting angry just gave the enemy the upper hand. He gave a powerful shove to disengage his sword from Zabuza’s and then leapt back out of the weapon’s monstrous reach. His mind was flicking through everything he remembered of the Bingo Book entry on Zabuza in search of something useful. Water jutsus. One of the Seven Swordsmen. Ex-ANBU, so presumably paranoid. Speculated to be something of a sadist but unconfirmed. Killed his entire graduating class.

Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

Lightning jutsus and mind games. Try to get that sword away from him, though that was a longshot. Few people outside of Konoha had any idea how the sharingan worked or what exactly it even *did*. Play that up to the hilt, lure him out onto the nearby river, and electrify the whole damn thing first chance he got. Keep him as far from Team 7 as possible.

He could do this.

Then Zabuza took the opportunity to shroud the entire area in thick, unnaturally dense fog.

Kakashi really hated fighting Kiri shinobi.

He dispersed a water bunshin and then took advantage of the fog to replace himself with a water bunshin as well and left the bunshin to fill in his team about who Zabuza was. He'd copied that jutsu *years* ago, but Zabuza didn't need to know that. Let the head games begin.

Kakashi blocked a blow aimed for Tazuna after his bunshin was sliced in half and managed to twist and kick Zabuza in the solar plexus. The missing-nin staggered back with an *omph*, and Kakashi pushed his advantage. He ducked and slashed under Zabuza's long reach. The tip of his tanto caught a shallow slice across the other man's ribs before Zabuza was out of reach again.

Kakashi flipped over a swipe aimed at his legs and just missed putting his tanto through the hole in the end of Zabuza's giant meat cleaver of a sword. He danced back towards the river, and Zabuza stalked after him, clearly irritated now. Kakashi flicked his fingers through the seals of a wind jutsu around the hilt of his tanto. Blades of wind slashed through the fog, clearing the air as Zabuza dodged out of the way.

Kakashi's feet landed on the surface of the river. Blocking yet another overarm swing of Zabuza's sword shook Kakashi's entire frame painfully, but he held firm. He was built more for speed than brutal upper body strength.

"You're quite the pest aren't you, Hatake," Zabuza sneered.

"So I've been told."

This time it was Zabuza who abruptly disengaged almost sending Kakashi stumbling. Kakashi leapt high to avoid losing a leg-

"Hageshi tsunami."

Oh, *fuck*. His hands were moving to form the seal for a shunshin, but it was already too late.

A two story wall of water slammed Kakashi out of the air and sent him crashing under the surface of the river – the worst *possible* place to be when fighting someone who specialized in *water* jutsus. Gods damn it *all*. Kakashi struck out desperately for the surface, sword sheathed and head spinning somewhat from the impact. The water around him was already becoming steadily denser with chakra as his hand finally broke through to air.

"I think not. *Haisui Suirou no jutsu*."

Because that's what Kakashi really needed in his life right now – to find out that Zabuza had apparently come up with his own nasty variation of the already unpleasant Water Prison jutsu. That had definitely *not* been mentioned on his Bingo Book entry. His mind ran frantically through every jutsu he had ever copied or memorized.

Nothing. He could think of *nothing* that was big enough of an impact to shatter the sphere he was trapped in without simultaneously killing him in the process due to the confined space. Kakashi could already feel the jutsu starting to suck greedily at his chakra reserves.

Why was he still alive? Kakashi could barely move due to the sheer density of the water trapping him. All Zabuza had to do was run the Water Prison through with his sword, and Kakashi was dead. Why was he-?

Kakashi spotted the water bunshin walking towards shore.

Of course. Why kill your enemy straight away when you could slaughter their genin team and client in front of their eyes and then take your time killing them after when they were half-drained of chakra.

“RUN!” he shouted. “The bunshin can only get so far from its creator! Just *RUN!*”

Kakashi knew that they wouldn’t the instant that he saw the mulish expression settle onto Naruto’s face.

He was going to watch his students die, and then he was going to die.

I guess I’ll be seeing you soon, Obito. Sorry, sensei.

Why had he ever agreed to leave his bakery?

...

Like *hell* was he letting his students die without a fight. Kakashi started sluggishly forming hand seals for the first drilling-style water jutsu he could think of. Maybe it would just exhaust his chakra reserves faster, but he had to at least *try*. If nothing else, it might help further divide Zabuza’s attention.

“Hey Sakura-chan, what’s the difference in strength between a bunshin and the shinobi who created it again?” asked Naruto.

“About a tenth of the original shinobi’s strength,” Sakura answered automatically. She wondered how Academy facts came to her so easily even when her knees were shaking and her heart felt like it was trying to slam its way out of her chest.

“You got an idea, dobe?” asked Sasuke, never taking his eyes off the bunshin’s slow, almost lazy approach.

“Yeah. We need Kakashi-nii to defeat this guy, right? So I’m thinking army style.” Naruto’s teeth were bared in a fearsome facsimile of a grin. “Sasuke, you’re in charge of getting Sakura-chan to the tree.”

“Got it.” Sasuke pulled a windmill shuriken out of his pack. “Forget moderation – go for chaos. Also,” his eyes flicked ever so briefly to Sakura, “shuriken are better than rocks.”

Sakura dipped her chin in understanding and shifted to strengthen her stance a bit more.

“Let’s do this.” Her voice barely even quavered.

In the sheer *pandemonium* that was close to a hundred of Naruto’s shadow clones hinged into the various members of Team 7 all swarming Zabuza and his water bunshin at once, Sakura felt Sasuke’s hand on the base of her neck just above her pack and hinged herself into a shuriken. It was a vastly disorienting sensation to suddenly be small and shoved into Sasuke’s weapons pouch. Bumping in the darkness was almost enough to turn her stomach and break her concentration. She breathed through the discomfort and mounting anxiety. Her hands needed to be steady – Kakashi’s life depended on it and so did hers and the rest of her team’s.

And then there was a hand grasping her, bright light, and Sasuke’s voice whispering, “Aim for the hand controlling the Water Prison.”

Then she was flying, whirling through the air.

I am air. I am metal. There is nothing to detect – not even a hole where natural chakra should be. I am invisible.

Sakura zipped past Zabuza’s left ear. He tilted his head slightly to avoid her but didn’t spare her even a glance. Sakura reached the peak of her arc – high and directly behind Zabuza’s head. She released her henge with barely a whisper of chakra. Zabuza was holding Sasuke’s windmill shuriken in his left hand. For a moment, she felt weightless.

Sakura pulled three kunai from her weapons pouch. She aimed – rotator cuff, nerve cluster above the elbow, delicate tendons of the wrist. Her mind felt strangely calm, almost serene. She threw.

Zabuza dodged – only one kunai skimming the shallowest of cuts across his bicep – but that was okay, because his concentration had been broken, and the Water Prison had collapsed.

Sakura landed on the surface of the river hard and rolled a couple of times. Thank gods for river sparring practice. She got her feet under her and sprinted for shore. If she stayed out on the water, she’d be leaving herself open to water jutsus that she couldn’t block. She’d done her part – now she needed to get the hell out of the way.

Kakashi’s head was close to swimming from chakra loss by the time the sphere around him collapsed (he’d gone through over a dozen jutsus trying to break free of the Water Prison variation, and its chakra consuming water had eaten all of them), but that was all right – he’d completed ANBU missions on less. As Zabuza dropped the windmill shuriken in favor of his sword and whipped around to retaliate against Sakura’s sneak attack, Kakashi lashed out, quick as a snake, got one hand through the hole in the end of Zabuza’s sword, and *yanked*. It wasn’t enough to make him let go, but it did send Zabuza stumbling off balance. Zabuza snarled in frustration and kicked Kakashi hard enough in the chest that he felt his ribs creak. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sakura reach the relative safety of the bank. The boys

had somehow managed to disperse the water bunshin somewhere in the chaos of mob warfare – Naruto style.

He was so proud of his kids, but he also sort of wanted to throttle them for scaring him half to death.

Now for no-holds-barred psychological warfare. If Kakashi had learned anything from the on-going ‘cursed bread’ debacle, it was that even highly trained people did incredibly *stupid* things if you got them thoroughly enough freaked out. It was an obnoxiously draining genjutsu that Kakashi rarely ever used, but he ought to have enough chakra left for it and to electrify the river and potentially run Zabuza through with a chidori if necessary.

Kakashi looked Zabuza square in the eye and active his sharingan’s slightly hypnotic effect that would make his actions appear to be happening simultaneously to Zabuza’s instead of fractionally delayed.

Five minutes and fifteen perfectly mirrored jutsus later, Zabuza was starting to get that same wild-eyed look that Hawk used to get when he saw new recruits eating toast. And then Zabuza did something every trained shinobi knew better than to do – he turned, partially blocking his sightline of Kakashi, in an attempt to hide his hand seals from Kakashi’s view. Perfect. The opening he’d been waiting for.

Kakashi flashed through a completely different set of seals from the ones Zabuza was forming and slammed his palm into the surface of the river.

“Inazuma no jutsu.”

Zabuza shrieked in pain as electricity tore up his legs, but apparently Kakashi hadn’t made his jutsu powerful enough, because the man started staggering towards the shore and Team 7 instead of being incapacitated.

Damn it.

Kakashi threw two kunai. They hit Zabuza in the leg and shoulder, but he barely slowed down. Kakashi ran after him, hands starting to form more seals. It looked like he’d have to resort to the chidori and hope his reflexes weren’t too compromi-

Two senbon sprouted from the side of Zabuza’s neck. The missing-nin collapsed unmoving on the river bank, body half in and half out of the water.

“Thank you, jounin-san. I’ll take it from here.”

Kakashi didn’t relax when he saw the Kiri hunter-nin. He’d spent too many years in ANBU to relax when faced with one of those masks, but he did pause. The small, cynical, ANBU part of his brain grumbled, ‘Typical hunter-nin, showing up at the last minute to claim all of the credit with none of the work,’ but another part of his brain was insisting that something... wasn’t right. He unsheathed his tanto.

Kakashi walked forward and knelt to feel Zabuza’s throat for a pulse. Nothing.

“Sensei?” asked Sakura uncertainly.

“He’s dead,” Kakashi told her, but his voice sounded uncertain even to his own ears. Why? What was he missing? His mind felt hazy.

He straightened up, careful to keep his movements smooth and strong while there was a foreign nin watching.

“I’ll take his body to be destroyed now.” The hunter-nin stepped forward almost too fast and hauled Zabuza’s body over his shoulder. “Forgive me, but I cannot perform my duties while there are foreign eyes watching.”

Kakashi frowned. That *definitely* wasn’t right. Hunter-nin never *moved* bodies before dealing with them. He took a step forward, but he was too slow. The hunter-nin and Zabuza’s body disappeared in a swirl of air and chakra.

The thought that had been nagging at his fuzzy mind finally fully emerged. It was a conversation he’d had once with Genma at the bakery about acupuncture points and senbon and how a true master could theoretically use them to simulate... death.

Fuck.

Kakashi turned to his team, but the movement was too sharp, too sudden. The edges of his vision went gray. He’d used even more chakra than he’d realized. His lips tried to form the words ‘not dead’ and ‘accomplice,’ but he couldn’t seem to put any sound behind them. The hilt of his tanto slipped from suddenly numb fingers. The chakra under his feet gave out, and his sandals splashed into shallow water. His knees buckled.

Kakashi was unconscious before he even hit the ground.

“***NII-SAN!!!***”

Naruto’s scream rattled Sakura’s bones. Her mind felt numb.

But... they’d won, hadn’t they? Zabuza was dead. The hunter-nin had taken his body away. They’d *won*. So why was Kakashi crumpled on the ground like a broken doll?

Naruto raced forward, thudded to his knees, and grabbed Kakashi by his shoulders. He shook him violently. Kakashi’s head lolled.

“Nii-san! *Nii-san*! Come on – wake up! You gotta wake up! We’re almost done the mission – another half hour of walking and then the old man is home, and we’re *done*. Please, you’ve got to wake up!”

“I thought he was your teacher.” Tazuna’s voice was a hoarse whisper, and his face had gone gray.

“He basically adopted Naruto,” Sakura whispered.

Next to her, Sasuke's skin was chalky, and his hands were shaking slightly. His eyes had gone alarmingly blank.

Naruto had stopped shouting and was rocking back and forth gently. He looked like he was fighting back tears.

There was something they should be doing. Something obvious and simple. Sakura fought the fog of shock that was choking her brain.

Pulse. They had just seen Kakashi fall over the same way Zabuza had, but that didn't mean that he was dead, too. They needed to check for a pulse.

Before Sakura could open her mouth, Sasuke's expression hardened, his hand darted down to his weapons pouch, and he whirled on Tazuna, a kunai in his hand.

"You told us chuunin! *Chuunin!*" Sasuke snarled as Tazuna cringed back from him. "But you've lied about *everything* else – did you lie about that, too?!"

"No-!"

"Why should we believe *anything* you say?!" Sasuke demanded, taking a menacing step forward.

Sakura lunged between Sasuke and Tazuna, arms spread wide.

"Sasuke-kun, *no!* He's our *client!*"

Sasuke's eyes narrowed.

"Move, Sakura."

And Sakura just... snapped. Her nerves were frayed and tattered. Her team had been attacked by an S-class missing-nin. She'd hinged herself into a shuriken and seen her first man die and her sensei collapse with no apparent cause. They were all in shock and panicking instead of thinking, and they were shinobi, gods damn it, and that *wasn't acceptable behavior*.

Sakura wound her arm back and slapped Sasuke across the face with a resounding *crack*.

"*NO. We are shinobi of Konoha, and we do not harm our clients!*" Sakura was shouting, and if a few tears were escaping from the corners of her eyes, she thought that she could be forgiven. She took a deep breath in and out, trying to calm herself. Sasuke was staring at her like he'd never seen her before. He lowered his kunai. "Our first priority in this situation should be making sure Kakashi-sensei is all right and then completing our mission, so," Sakura's voice cracked ever so slightly, and she hated herself just a bit for it, "could one of you *please* check Kakashi-sensei's pulse, already?"

"Pulse?" Naruto's voice sounded dazed as he lifted his head. Sakura could almost see the moment his mind switched back from blind shock and panic to coherent, logical thought. He pulled aside the high collar of Kakashi's jounin vest and pressed trembling fingers into the

side of his throat. His shoulders slumped in relief. “I’ve got a pulse,” he rasped. “Slow and a little weak, but it’s there.”

“Chakra exhaustion,” Sasuke muttered, his head hanging, bangs falling to hide his face. “It’s probably chakra exhaustion.” He slipped the kunai back into his weapons pouch. “Sorry, Sakura. You’re right. I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

Sakura lowered her arms.

“I don’t think any of us really were.”

“Come on, guys.” Naruto had rolled Kakashi onto his back and was hauling him farther up the river bank so that his legs were no longer trailing into the water. His voice was strained and tight but calm, like he’d shoved all his fear into a box and put it to one side to be dealt with later. “We need to make a stretcher. Kakashi-nii is way too tall for any of us to pick up.”

Sasuke pulled off his pack and dug out a spool of chakra wire and his ground sheet.

“We can cut some long branches with kunai.”

Sakura eyed Sasuke’s ground sheet thoughtfully and then pulled out her own as well.

“One of ours is going to be too short, but if we lair two, that should be long enough,” she pointed out.

“Iruka-sensei said that you treat chakra exhaustion basically the same as blood loss and shock, right, Sakura-chan?” Naruto asked, straightening up.

“Yeah. Rest, fluids if they’re awake, and keep them warm and dry.”

“Right. Okay.”

Sasuke finished laying out the two ground sheets and cutting a length of wire to use as a measure.

“I’ll go start cutting branches,” he announced, standing. “I won’t go far.”

Sakura headed over to Naruto and Kakashi. Her knees felt weak, and her head felt light, but that wasn’t really important at the moment.

Kakashi’s clothes were muddy and damp from lying on the river bank, and his pants legs and sandals were soaked.

“Let’s move him onto the ground sheets,” she suggested. “It’ll at least get him a little off the ground.”

“Yeah,” Naruto nodded. “I’ll get his shoulders – you get his feet.”

By the time Sasuke returned with two lengths of sturdy branch, Sakura and Naruto were tucking blankets around Kakashi's still form. Sakura sat back on her heels as Sasuke started piercing small holes at regular intervals along the edge of the ground sheets with the tip of a kunai.

"You can stay in my house while he recovers," Tazuna offered quietly. "It's the least I can do after all the trouble I've caused."

"Thank you," Sakura murmured.

The adrenaline was wearing off, and all she really wanted to do was cry and then sleep for a week, but that would have to wait. For now, Sakura's team had a mission to complete and an injured team leader to get to safety.

Chapter End Notes

I've always thought that Kakashi didn't really get his reputation and nickname of 'Sharingan Kakashi, the Copy-Nin' until after he left ANBU. He was definitely known of before then, but he was doing mostly covert ANBU missions that nobody knew about if they went correctly which isn't a good way to gain a reputation.

Some more Japanese courtesy of our unreliable old friend, Google Translate:

Hageshi tsumani - raging tsunami

Haisui - draining

Inazuma - lightning tree

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

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

Kakashi woke slowly. His head felt cloudy. His muscles felt watery and weak. His ribs felt like they'd been stomped on. The last time he'd felt anything remotely like this was a few years ago when he'd seriously overdone it training with his mangekyou and woken up in the hospital an hour later with an anxious Gai hovering over him.

Kakashi peeled open his right eye. The ceiling above him featured a lightning-like crack and a water stain. Probably not a hospital then. Definitely not Konoha's hospital at the very least. Where was he? What had hap-

Oh gods, *Zabuza* – he wasn't dead.

Kakashi tried to jerk upright. It didn't work, and he sank back down onto the futon with a groan. He really *hated* chakra exhaustion.

Someone had stripped him down to his undershirt, mask and boxers. He wondered if it was the same person who owned the futon. Where was his team? Had the fake hunter-nin come back to finish them off while he was unconscious? Probably not if he was still alive, but where were they?

"Kakashi-sensei?" Sakura's head appeared around the doorway as if summoned by his thoughts but more likely summoned by his groan. "You're finally awake!" She padded the rest of the way into the room. "You really scared us. You've been unconscious for a day and a half." She sat down cross-legged by the futon to Kakashi's right.

"Sorry about that," Kakashi murmured. Trying to sit up had taken a worrying amount of effort. Damn missing-nin and their chakra draining techniques. If he was any judge, he was going to be off his feet for *days*.

"I think we'll forgive you under the circumstances," Sakura tried to joke, but it fell rather flat. "Naruto and Sasuke-kun are going to be annoyed that you woke up while they weren't here."

"Not here? Where are they?"

"They're out guarding Tazuna-san. We've been rotating guard duty so one of us would definitely be here when you woke up. Everyone agrees that Gato is really cheap despite being so rich, so he probably won't waste his money on another S-class missing-nin after Zabuza."

Kakashi felt ill in a way that had nothing to do with chakra exhaustion.

“Zabuza’s not dead,” he rasped. “That hunter-nin was his accomplice. If you hit the right nerve points with senbon, you can simulate death. I realized what had happened too late.”

Sakura bit her lip,

“So Sasuke-kun and Naruto are in danger?”

“Probably not today,” Kakashi sighed. “The body takes a while to recover from that sort of paralysis.”

“How long?”

“I think Genma said about a week.” So most likely about the same amount of time that Kakashi was going to be out of commission. Convenient. He’d say almost say *too* convenient, but he couldn’t think of a single advantage someone could take from the situation. “Why are you still guarding Tazuna even though our mission is over?”

“He didn’t ask us to, but we agreed that it was a fair trade for him feeding us and letting us stay in his house while you recover.” Sakura paused and twisted her fingers together. “And, sensei, I’ve been to the village now, and they really do desperately need this bridge. They used to have a trade agreement with Kiri, but after Gato started running people out of business, Kiri just... stopped caring. The people... half of them are starving. It just doesn’t seem right to stand back and do nothing.”

Kakashi reached out a shaky hand and rested it on Sakura’s arm.

“Sakura, I could take out that bridge by myself with ten well-placed, demolition-grade explosive tags – possibly less. We may be able to help them safely complete their bridge, but what they really *need* is a permanent guard.” Sakura’s shoulders slumped, and she hung her head. Kakashi sighed. “We have to leave as soon as I’m able to travel again, but,” Kakashi paused and knew that he was probably going to regret this decision even before he made it, “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt for the three of you to keep guarding Tazuna-san and his crew until then. You’re guarding the *people*, though, *not* the bridge. If something happens, you are to take the civilians and *run*.”

Sakura looked up and smiled.

“Yes, Kakashi-sensei. Thank you.”

“You’d probably just all sneak out and go protect the bridge anyway if I told you no,” Kakashi muttered to himself. Sakura offered him an innocent grin but didn’t deny it.

His team was going to cause so much trouble when they eventually made chuunin – he was looking forward to it. His nerves would probably be *dead* by then, but he’d definitely enjoy watching the antics.

“I’ll got let Tsunami-san know that you’re awake so that she can make you some miso soup,” Sakura announced, standing up. She paused when she reached the doorway. “Uh, Kakashi-sensei, I was wondering,” she turned back to him, “um, just how old *are* you?”

Kakashi frowned at her in confusion, wondering where that question had come from.

“Twenty-seven. Why?”

Sakura made a strange choking noise, and her face went red with embarrassment for some reason.

“Oh, no reason!” she squeaked. “I should really go see about that soup!” Then she rushed out of the room.

Kakashi frowned after her.

Huh. What had that been about?

Two hours and a cup of miso soup later, Sasuke and Naruto returned with Tazuna.

“Nii-san! You’re awake!”

“Hey Naruto- *omph!*” Naruto’s tackle hug nearly squashed Kakashi.

“Careful, dobe – you’re going to knock him out again if you keep that up.”

“Shut up, teme!”

Something eased in Kakashi’s chest at the sight of the two boys whole and clearly uninjured.

“I’m glad you’re both okay,” he told them and awkwardly patted Naruto’s back since Naruto clearly didn’t have any plans to let go for a while.

Sasuke sat down on the floor a little distance from Naruto but still within easy reach of Kakashi.

“Sakura told us that Zabuza is still alive,” Sasuke informed him. Kakashi nodded.

“People should really stay dead when they’re defeated,” Naruto grumbled and then gave Kakashi one last squeeze before sitting up.

“You’re going to have to be extra careful,” Kakashi told them. “I know that we haven’t had much of a chance to go over chakra sensing, yet,” Which would be changing the *instant* they got back to Konoha, “but you’re going to need to keep your senses wide open at all times.”

“Don’t worry, nii-san – we will!”

“I don’t know – are we going to have time with you giving a motivational speech to every single person we meet?” Sasuke asked, his tone serious but a teasing tilt to his mouth.

“I did *not*-!”

“The entire bridge crew. That fruit seller. Three different fishermen-”

“I was just *talking* to them, you bastard! *Talking*.”

“Sure you were.”

Kakashi huffed a laugh,

“Just try to keep the revolutions to a minimum, Naruto.”

“Nii-saaaaan!” Naruto whined.

“Do you know where my jounin vest got put?” Kakashi asked instead of teasing Naruto further.

“I’ll get it.” Sasuke stood and walked purposefully out of the room.

Naruto was quiet for a moment, his hands twisting in the hem of his jacket in a way that meant he was having a hard time putting words to his thoughts. Finally, he whispered,

“I completely lost it after you collapsed.” He looked ashamed. “I- I didn’t even think to check for a pulse. I just fell apart.”

Kakashi held out one arm, and Naruto burrowed into his side, face hidden in shame.

“It was your first life or death battle. You held it together until after the fight was over. Most shinobi freeze at least once their first time out in the field, and that’s usually just against regular bandits – not S-class missing-nin. You did a good job.”

“And you pulled it together once Sakura reminded you to,” Sasuke offered quietly from the doorway. He was holding Kakashi’s jounin vest and staring at his feet. “You didn’t come close to eviscerating our client.”

Kakashi patted the empty space on the other side of the futon, and Sasuke shuffled over. He sat down, pulled his knees to his chest and hugged his legs.

“There’s a reason you’re supposed to work slowly up to taking A-rank missions.” Kakashi stared up at the ceiling. He glanced toward the door and noticed an extra shadow on the floor. “They highly stressful, and if you haven’t had time to build up to them, they can bring out and enhance the less desirable aspects of your personality. *All* of you did admirably. I’m proud of all of you. You, too, Sakura.” Sakura, caught in her eavesdropping, wandered in as well and settled on the blankets by Kakashi’s feet. “You three saved my life. Thank you.”

The four of them stayed like that quietly until Tsunami called that dinner was ready.

“What did you want your vest for anyway?” asked Naruto as he sat up.

“Oh, that.” Kakashi reached out and snagged his vest from where Sasuke had set it on the floor. He dug tiredly through one of the inner pockets and produced a fistful of ryou.

“Would one of you buy me some yeast and bread flour while you’re at the market tomorrow? Or even all-purpose flour – I’m not that picky at this point.”

Two days after waking up in Tazuna's house, Kakashi was balanced precariously on an old pair of wooden crutches and kneading bread dough like his life depended on it. Should he be up and about just, yet? No, probably not, but Kakashi had brought one book with him. *One*. And his team's C-rank escort mission had turned into an A-rank *nightmare*. An *on-going* A-rank nightmare, and if Kakashi could, he would throw all three of his students over his shoulder and book it back to Konoha.

Yeah, so Kakashi was already on his second loaf of bread.

He really wished that he had his windowsill pictures with him to talk to. At least Tsunami had graciously leant him the use of her kitchen and oven. He couldn't experiment with recipes, though, because it was rude to set other people's ovens on fire.

"What's the point of sending them to guard the bridge? They'll just get killed."

The eight year old nihilist, however, Kakashi really could have done without. Nine year old? Ten? Kakashi wasn't really good at guessing ages between 'walking and talking' and 'Academy graduate.'

Kakashi didn't look over at Inari, because he was a little afraid that the movement would make him overbalance on his crutches.

"They're not guarding the bridge – they're guarding Tazuna-san and his building crew."

"So? You're still all going to die," the little boy muttered sullenly.

"Everybody dies eventually," Kakashi shrugged, "but, no, my team isn't going to die this mission." He fervently wished that Inari would leave.

"Heroes always die."

That brought Kakashi up short. He twisted on his crutches to look at Inari. The little boy was leaking around the eyes. Oh gods, small, crying child and nary a pork bun in sight.

Inari scrubbed at his face and glared at him.

"Are you going to yell at me for being a crybaby, too?" he demanded.

Ah. So *that* was what Naruto had been shouting about last night. Kakashi still hadn't been deemed well enough to join everyone at the table at that point and had only caught the tail end of raised voices.

"Of course not." Kakashi carefully rearranged himself so that his back was leaning against the counter, his bread dough temporarily abandoned. "One of the bravest people I ever knew used to cry at the drop of a hat. There's nothing wrong with crying."

Inari blinked at him in surprise.

“But- But Naruto said-”

“It’s all right to grieve.” Kakashi glanced at the torn picture hanging by the kitchen table. He suspected the missing person was either Inari’s father or older brother, and given the state of things in Wave Country, it was no stretch to guess that he’d died on Gato’s orders. “The important thing is not to crawl down into the grave with the people we’ve lost. Visit, remember the good times, but don’t stay. After all, it’s how they lived that makes a person a hero – not their death.”

Inari stared at him, eyes still leaking.

“How would you know?”

“I survived the Third Shinobi War. I’ve seen a lot of good people die.”

“Did you cry?”

“Not at first. I tried to crawl into the grave after them. None of the people I lost would have wanted that for me.” Kakashi eased away from the counter and turned back to his dough. The familiar, soft texture of bread dough beneath his fingers was soothing.

After a moment, small feet padded slowly over to him, and a small hand hesitantly curled into the hem of his shirt. Kakashi looked down at Inari. The boy was looking down, and the volume of leaking had increased greatly.

“Sometimes, it’s really hard... to remember that there were good times,” Inari whispered.

“Yeah,” Kakashi agreed softly, “but eventually it gets easier.” He looked at his bread dough, and then tore off a chunk and handed it to Inari. Inari accepted it with a frown.

“What am I supposed to do with this?”

“You knead it.” Kakashi demonstrated. “I always find that it’s better when I have something to do with my hands.”

Inari rolled the ball of dough between his hands.

“This is what I always thought jellyfish ought to feel like,” he decided. He prodded the dough across the countertop.

Kakashi glanced back at the kitchen entrance when he heard a floorboard creak. Tsunami was watching Inari from the doorway. She caught Kakashi’s eye and gave him a small, grateful nod. Kakashi nodded back and then returned his attention to kneading.

He was really looking forward to this mission being over.

Two days later, Kakashi was off his crutches and walking steadily under his own power again. His chakra reserves were still depleted – just over half strength at best – but walking

didn't require excessive amounts of chakra.

"We're leaving tomorrow," Kakashi informed his team at supper that night.

"But the bridge is almost done!" Naruto protested. "Tazuna says they have less than a day of work to go."

"We're days ahead of schedule," Tazuna agreed. "My crew has been working much better with your team guarding them."

"The daily motivational speech probably hasn't hurt either," Sasuke nodded mock seriously. Naruto tore a piece off of his bread roll and threw it at Sasuke. Sasuke just caught it and ate it.

"Nevertheless, we need to head back to Konoha tomorrow. Our mission is over," Kakashi sighed. "We'll take you as far as your bridge in the morning, Tazuna-san."

Tazuna nodded in understanding.

"Thank you. You and your team have done far more than I could have hoped. Gato is cheap and has no patience for failure. If we're lucky, he'll have fired that missing-nin and will wait a while before he tries anything else. Honestly, he'd profit more from trying to set up some sort of toll than by destroying the bridge."

Kakashi wasn't quite so optimistic, but for Tazuna and Wave Country's sake, he hoped the man was right.

The next morning Kakashi and Team 7 headed out with Tazuna after bidding Inari and Tsunami goodbye. Tsunami and Inari were heading out as well to visit one of her friends.

Kakashi was once again wearing his tanto on his back with his pack sealed in its scroll. He doubted he'd manage to relax until he and his team were safely back inside the gates of Konoha. He was going to hire his team for another D-rank at his bakery just so that he could keep an eye on them while also baking a bread mountain.

Pretty much *everyone* in the village waved at Naruto as they passed through. Naruto waved back, Sasuke rolled his eyes, and Sakura just shook her head.

Kakashi's general feeling of unease continued to grow the closer to the bridge they got. He wished he could believe he was just being paranoid.

"It's awfully quiet," Tazuna muttered to himself as they arrived at the bridge. "I hope the crane's engine isn't malfunctioning again."

Kakashi already had his tanto unsheathed by the time they found the first unconscious member of the bridge crew.

“Take Tazuna and head back to the village,” Kakashi ordered, but even as he spoke, unnaturally thick fog was rolling out to engulf the entire bridge. *Damn it.* “Never mind. Defensive formation. Do *not* lose sight of each other.”

Kakashi stabbed the water bunshin before he’d even fully, consciously registered its presence. He shoved his hitai-ate up. First opportunity he got, he was running Zabuza through with a chidori. He needed to finish this fight as quickly as possible and conserve chakra as much as possible, because he had no *idea* what Zabuza’s accomplice could do. Or if the little bastard carried poisoned senbon.

“Don’t think you’re going to catch me with the same trick twice, Hatake.” Zabuza’s voice seemed to boom out of the fog from every direction at once. “You can’t copy what you can’t see.”

The fog was choked with chakra but... there was a subtle pattern to it. The way it shifted and swirled belied movement. Kakashi ducked just in time as Zabuza’s sword cleaved through the air at neck height.

“Suiryuudan no jutsu.”

Kakashi leapt out of the way as the massive, familiar water dragon. The jutsu crashed into the spot where Kakashi had been standing, cracked the concrete, and sent water sluicing from one edge of the bridge to the other.

Kakashi sent a gout of flame back in the direction the jutsu had come from. The fire burnt away some of the mist for a moment and illuminated two figures standing near the far railing, one tall and broad, the other small and lithe.

“The stage is set. After you, Haku.”

“Thank you, Zabuza-sama.”

The fog rolled back in, shrouding both figures once more. Kakashi had been right – where the chakra was densest in the fog was where Zabuza was. And dodging that water jutsu had put far more distance between Kakashi and his team than he was comfortable with. He spun back towards where he’d left his students and Tazuna just as Naruto’s startled shout cut through the air. Zabuza was barring his way.

“Your team will be dead in a matter of minutes, Hatake. Your fight is with me.” Not a bunshin, definitely the original this time, and his eyes were shut for some reason.

“Really? Fighting me with your eyes shut?” Kakashi asked in a flippant tone that he in no way actually felt. “Seems a touch arrogant.” He thrust with his tanto but wasn’t surprised when he was blocked.

“You’re not going to catch me with that genjutsu eye of yours again, and I don’t need my eyes to defeat you.”

Huh. That seemed like overkill. Gai just watched Kakashi's feet to avoid his sharingan when they sparred. Then again, given the amount of chakra in this damn fog, Zabuza probably had a very detailed feel of everything that was happening on the bridge.

Behind Zabuza Sasuke's Grand Fireball jutsu lit the fog for a brief, eerie moment.

"Then I guess I'll just have to go through you." Kakashi disengaged blades, slapped a quick water jutsu into the puddles on the ground that would hopefully snag Zabuza's feet or at least slow him down a little, and then rolled out of the way as Zabuza's sword nearly bisected him. He really didn't want to engage in a lengthy sword battle – that would just be playing to his enemy's strengths. Zabuza *specialized* in kenjutsu – Kakashi did not. He was probably a better long distance fighter than Zabuza was, though.

He whirled through a dizzying series of lightning and fire jutsus. When he'd finally put what he hoped was sufficient distance between himself and Zabuza, Kakashi replaced himself with a lightning bunshin and flipped over the railing. Have fun sticking a metal sword through *that*.

There was almost no fog below the bridge, and Kakashi raced along the underside towards his team. Somewhere overhead he heard Zabuza swear colorfully as he apparently electrocuted himself on the lightning bunshin. He could feel Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura's chakra signatures flaring almost directly above him. He swung himself back up over the railing-

And directly into the path of Zabuza's arcing blade.

Kakashi managed to shove himself back out into the open air far enough that the sword only tore through his vest and slashed a deep gouge in his chest instead of eviscerating him. A shuunshin landed him in a graceless sprawl in the center of the bridge.

Damn it.

He rolled to his feet.

"Slowing down, Hatake? That chakra exhaustion finally catching up with you?" Zabuza sounded ever so slightly out of breath. Evidently Kakashi wasn't the only one feeling the effects of this battle. Kakashi's mind raced as he reminded his knees that they weren't allowed to wobble until the battle was over and his team was safe.

He just needed to keep Zabuza relatively still so that he wouldn't have to chase him down with a chidori and stretch things out even longer. Well, he did have the pack's mass summons scroll, and Zabuza's weapon *did* have Kakashi's blood on it now. With a scent that strong, the fog wouldn't even slow his ninken down. It was worth a shot. The pack might only be able to keep Zabuza in place for five seconds, but that was more than double the time that Kakashi needed.

The scroll slipped easily from its pocket on the front of his vest thankfully unharmed. He smeared blood from his wound across it in one swift movement (that was definitely going to

require stitches when this was all over), set his intentions clearly in his head, and then pressed the scroll against the ground.

Kakashi's sharingan caught the telltale swirl of fog, and he blocked Zabuza's sword with his tanto as it sliced through the air. In some ways, Zabuza was almost predictable. He was a brutal fighter but not the most creative one. Or perhaps that was just his style when he was fighting blind.

Kakashi proceeded to parry, block, and dodge, mostly trying to stall for time so that his ninken could find their opening. The fog was starting to dissipate a bit. It must be a tiring jutsu to maintain. Kakashi could just make out some sort of... domed structure? What the *hell* was that? He'd never seen anything like it before. This fight needed to be over five minutes ago.

Kakashi danced back out of Zabuza's reach once more, and the pack chose that moment to attack. Zabuza's eyes snapped open in shock as teeth sank into his limbs. The fog was rolling back faster now, and Kakashi could see that his students and Tazuna appeared to be trapped in a structure made of *mirrors*. He didn't waste any breath on words.

His hands flew through the necessary seals, and then he sprang forward with a handful of screaming lightning. Kakashi pulled his hand back to strike-

Suddenly, it wasn't Zabuza in front of him anymore but a young, pale, delicately featured face surrounded by dark hair.

Rin.

Kakashi's arm jerked left almost of its own accord. His hand plunged through bone and muscle. Hot blood splattered his face. Something hit the ground with a *thud*.

Kakashi's mind had gone numb.

"Gods damn it, Haku, you idiot! What were you thinking?!?"

"Sorry... Zabuza-sama. I didn't... have time for senbon."

Far below the bridge a small fishing boat bobbed on the surface of the river. Its sole occupant stared up at the underside of the bridge.

Nori had heard the shouting and just now a sound like pane after pane of glass shattering. His hands tightened around his fishing net. In these parts such sounds of violence could only mean Gato. Someone was attacking the almost-completed bridge, but what could he do? He was just one man....

But he thought of his friend, Nashi, and her nearly empty fruit stall with its few wrinkled apples and bruised peaches. He thought of Tsurizao, who could no longer work after being crippled by one of Gato's goons. He thought of the children begging on the streets, whom he didn't even have enough to give a few small coins to. And he thought of the blond boy he'd

met in the market whose words had radiated *hope* and *belief* and *conviction* like the first sunrise after a decade of darkness.

Nori looked down at the trident lying in the bottom of his boat that he sometimes used to spear large, bottom feeding river fish. Maybe one ant couldn't harm a wasp, but an entire colony of ants could tear a wasp to pieces. He put down his net and picked up his oars.

This was *their* home. *Their* bridge. And he was *sick* of watching his village die.

(And in the village square, two unconscious hired swordsmen had already been tied up, and the other ants were starting to swarm, the anger in their hearts finally burning past the fear of years to become courage.)

Zabuza shook off the pack with a mighty heave and leapt back from Kakashi with Haku tucked against his side. Haku's left arm remained behind on the concrete of the bridge, severed just above the elbow. Kakashi didn't even try to chase after them.

"Bandage that! Don't even *think* about bleeding out!" There was the barest hint of hysteria underlying Zabuza's tone. "You're no use to me dead!"

A warm, furry face nudged Kakashi's slack hand.

"You with us, Boss?" asked Pakkun from where he was perched on Bull's head.

Kakashi blinked. Tried to shake off the mind-deadening haze.

"Yeah," he croaked. "Go protect my team. I'm going to try something while he's distracted."

"Something stupid?" asked Pakkun cynically. Before Kakashi could even respond, the pug sighed, "It's you – of course it will be. Let's go!"

Kakashi pressed his palm to his sharingan and concentrated as the pack ran to surround Team 7 and Tazuna. He desperately wanted to check on his students, but he needed to finish this *now* while Zabuza was distracted, and he was only going to have one shot at this.

Zabuza was standing defensively on the front of Haku now, but he made no move to attack while Haku slowly wound bandage around the cauterized stump of his arm. He had his sword held in front of him almost like a shield.

Kakashi lowered his hand and focused his activated mangekyou.

The portal opened in the center of Zabuza's blade instead of his chest. *Damn it.* But he could work with that. Nothing threw a kenjutsu specialist quite like destroying their weapon.

"What the *hell?!?*" Zabuza tried to yank his sword free of the portal's pull. Kakashi gritted his teeth and redoubled the chakra he was feeding to his mangekyou.

Tink.

A hairline fracture shot through the metal as Zabuza desperately fought to save his weapon.

Tink. Tink. Tinktink.

The fractures were spreading and multiplying, radiating out from the edges of the swirling vortex.

CRACK.

Zabuza's sword shattered. Metal rang as pieces of the massive blade hit the ground.

Kakashi dropped to one knee as he lost hold of his mangekyou, and it swirled back into a normal sharingan. His head throbbed.

Zabuza gaped at the shattered remains of his sword.

Slow clapping broke the silence.

"Really, I don't know why I gave you a second chance after you failed the first time." A short man wearing sunglasses and carrying a cane was standing a little ways down the bridge. One of his arms was in a cast and- oh, there was the miniature chuunin army that Kakashi had been expecting since this mission had first gone wrong. This must be Gato. "What a waste of money you turned out to be. It turns out I can hire a whole *army* of missing-nin for what you wanted to charge me. Consider yourself *fired*." Gato spotted Haku's arm lying on the bridge. "Ha! Lost an arm, did you? Serves you right for breaking mine!"

Zabuza stared at Gato with dangerously narrowed eyes.

"So you're not going to pay us?"

"Absolutely *not*."

"Just needed to be clear." Zabuza let the hilt of his ruined blade fall from his hand. "Hey, Hatake, lend me your sword."

Kakashi laboriously hauled himself to his feet.

"Why should I?"

"Because I'm not working for him anymore, and you *broke mine*."

"Fair enough." Kakashi unsheathed his tanto and tossed it to Zabuza hilt first. Zabuza snatched it from the air with ease.

Gato took a step back.

"You can't hurt me! I *own* this place! I own this whole *country*!"

“Not anymore!” The shout came from behind Kakashi. He twisted around in surprise. What looked like the *entire* village was standing just behind his wide-eyed students and Tazuna. Men and women were armed with tridents, fishing spears, boat hooks, pitch forks, sickles, and anything else that had been near at hand. Even Tsunami was standing in the front of the crowd brandishing a kitchen knife, and Inari had managed to get his hands on a crossbow that Kakashi highly doubted he knew how to use.

“You’ve taken our homes and our livelihoods!” shouted a man with a trident.

“Taken our loved ones!” yelled Tsunami.

“We’re *done* letting you take things,” snarled another woman, raising her boat hooks.

“And you insulted Haku and broke our contract.” Zabuza rolled his neck. “I’d say I can hurt you all I want.”

Gato barely had time to scream as Zabuza lunged forward and killed him with a single swing of gleaming silver. He shredded his way through a quarter of the missing-nin Gato had hired before they realized what was happening and turned tail and ran. Zabuza let out a disgusted snort as he watched them flee.

“Amateurs.” He turned back to Kakashi and tossed him back his tanto. “How do you fight with that piece of shit, Hatake? It’s *tiny*.”

Kakashi caught his sword and pulled his hitai-ate down over his sharingan with a shrug.

“I’ve got nothing to compensate for.”

Zabuza ignored the insult and started fussing over Haku’s one-handed bandaging job, though he’d probably stab anybody who pointed out the fussing for what it actually was.

“So they’re not trying to kill us anymore?” asked Sakura. Her left arm was hanging limply at her side – presumably numb from the multiple senbon protruding from her shoulder – and she was limping. Behind her Naruto and Sasuke were also bristling senbon like porcupine quills and limping, but they were upright, and all their limbs were attached. Kakashi resolutely did not look down at where Haku’s arm still lay. Sasuke’s eyes were red and sporting a single tomoe each.

“No, they’re not,” Kakashi confirmed. “Status report?”

“Senbon *suck*,” Naruto stated decisively. “But no significant injuries.”

“My arm should be fine once we pull the senbon out,” Sakura agreed.

“He didn’t seem to be aiming for anything vital,” added Sasuke. “Honestly, he didn’t seem all that invested in killing us. Naruto almost had him talked to a standstill after I broke his mask.”

“Motivational speech no jutsu is surprisingly effective,” Sakura nodded. She pulled a senbon out of her thigh with a wince and let it clatter to the ground. Her right hand was shaking.

Naruto's hands were trembling as well. Sasuke's hands were steady, but his face was ghostly white, making the scratches on his cheeks and his newly awakened sharingan stand out even more vividly.

Kakashi wiped some of the blood off his tanto on his pants leg and re-sheathed it.

"Good work."

"Are *you* okay, nii-san?" asked Naruto anxiously.

"Huh?"

"You're swaying," frowned Sasuke.

"And sort of dripping blood," Sakura pointed out.

And now that adrenaline and shock were starting to wear off... oh, yeah, his chest *was* sort of blazing with pain, wasn't it? And his chakra reserves were desperately low again. Kakashi stared down at his bloody vest.

"I should probably bandage that," he muttered vaguely and then staggered slightly. Sasuke and Naruto each caught one of his arms and guided him over to the railing a few feet away from where Haku and Zabuza were. His legs folded inelegantly under him as he sat down. He pulled his storage scroll off his belt and unsealed his pack with a small burst of chakra.

"Naruto, help Sakura get those senbon out of her shoulder. Be gentle – they can cause damage on the way out as well as the way in. Sasuke, my med kit is in the front right pocket of my pack."

Kakashi eased out of his tanto strap and vest and gingerly wrapped gauze and bandage around his chest in a rough field dressing while his students helped de-senbon each other. He needed to put some stitches in but in the middle of an incomplete bridge surrounded by civilians wasn't exactly the best place to do that. He looked up to find Zabuza glaring at him.

"Why *aren't* you in the Bingo Book?"

"I was sort of retired for a while there." Kakashi stared thoughtfully at Zabuza's unscored hitai-ate. "Why'd you decide to work for Gato?"

"Revolutions are fucking expensive."

"Right. You tried to depose the Mizukage," Kakashi nodded to himself.

"I tried to *kill* the bastard. He's tearing apart my village from the inside out," Zabuza snarled.

"Have you ever considered starting your revolution on a smaller scale?" Kakashi asked, leaning himself back against the railing with a wince.

"How?"

“Well, these people certainly look ready for a revolution.” Kakashi waved one hand vaguely at where the civilians were tossing the bodies of the dead missing-nin over the side of the bridge to drift out to sea and a watery, unmarked grave. “But they’re not going to make it very far if they have to constantly worry about protecting their bridge. They may not be able to pay as well as Gato, but they won’t stab you in the back either.”

Zabuza gave the villagers a disdainful look, but before he could speak another thin, tired voice spoke up.

“Could we, Zabuza-sama?” Haku’s eyes were dull with pain but hopeful. “I think I’d like that – protecting them.”

Zabuza stared at Haku for a long moment. His eyes flicked to the space where Haku’s arm should have been and then to some distant point out over the river.

“I’ll think about it.”

Haku smiled.

Metal jingled as Zabuza’s sword started reassembling itself, and Kakashi was suddenly very glad for Gato’s timely arrival.

“Hey, Kakashi-nii,” Naruto piped up, “do we have to give Haku back his senbon or do we get to keep them?” He flourished a fistful of senbon.

“Under the circumstances, I think it’s up to you, Naruto.”

“I’m keeping mine,” Sakura declared.

“You missed one.” Sasuke pulled a senbon out of Sakura’s half fallen out bun and handed it to her.

“Thanks, Sasuke-kun.” She sighed. “I need to figure out a better way of pinning my hair – this just isn’t working.”

“I’ve always found that a cover works best,” Haku told her, and Kakashi wondered just how much more surreal his life could get.

Sasuke handed his senbon to Haku.

“Shuriken are the best anyway.”

“They are *not*!” Naruto protested hotly, also passing his senbon to Haku. “Kunai are *so much better*.”

“I broke his mask with a shuriken.”

“Yeah? Well, we couldn’t have made that stretcher without *kunai*, and I didn’t see you blocking any senbon with *shuriken*, teme!”

“If today has proven anything, it’s that *senbon* really are the best,” disagreed Sakura.

“You want us to stick around, Boss?” asked Pakkun, sitting down next to Kakashi.

“I think we’re good now. You can head back.”

Pakkun huffed.

“Right.” The pug watched for a moment as Sasuke, Naruto, and Sakura started debating weapons. “Looks like you’re doing a good job with your pups so far.”

Kakashi smiled to himself.

“Thanks.”

Chapter End Notes

A really minor difference from canon that isn't really relevant to the story or anything but amuses me: Zabuza refers to Kakashi as "Hatake" (instead of "Kakashi" like he does in canon) because he doesn't actually remember Kakashi's name from his Bingo Book entry. All he remembers is "son of the White Fang" and "fancy kekkei genkai eye that presumably does something special," and he remembers the White Fang being called Something-Or-Other Hatake, so he's guessing that Kakashi is probably a Hatake.

If anyone is interested, the end of Chapter 4 now includes artwork of Kakashi in his apron and bakery clothes!

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

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

The entirety of the Uchiha clan had neglected to ever mention that the sharingan could be this much of a *pain*. Sasuke's eyes kept activating at random moments and refusing to *deactivate* again. In the three days since they'd finally left Zabuza and Haku at Tazuna's house, it had happened *five times*. It was annoying and an area of the sharingan that Kakashi couldn't help him with.

"I *can't* deactivate mine," he'd explained. "That's why I keep it covered."

So Sasuke now had a ton of really pointless moments *perfectly memorized*. And apparently the sharingan needed at least two tomes before he could perfectly replicate the things he memorized. It was frustrating, but it also meant that Sasuke was the first one on Team 7 to notice Kakashi's slowly deteriorating health.

They had spent two additional days at Tazuna's house recovering from the battle on the bridge. Kakashi had spent most of the first day asleep while Zabuza grumbled under his breath about being fought to a standstill by a man who was practically half *dead*, and then the second day he'd spent eating like there was no tomorrow. By the time they'd left, Kakashi had seemed tired but otherwise recovering quickly.

Three days later Kakashi was starting to look bruised under his visible eye, and his shoulders were hunched in discomfort. Sasuke wouldn't have noticed anything at all if he didn't have a picture perfect recollection of what Kakashi had looked like only an hour after they'd left. He wasn't sure if their sensei just wasn't sleeping well after everything that had happened (Sasuke knew *he* wasn't after all) or-

Sasuke's eyes flicked down to the ruined front of Kakashi's jounin vest that Tsunami had done her best to stitch back together.

-if he wasn't healing properly.

Sasuke had caught a brief glimpse of the ragged stitches that Kakashi had referred to as an 'ANBU patch job.' He didn't know more than the incredibly basic first aid that they'd learned at the Academy, but even he didn't think that those stitches would last well. And he was... he was *worried*, damn it! Sasuke didn't like not knowing for certain what was wrong, and they'd already watched Kakashi nearly die *twice* on this mission. He'd already lost too many people that he cared about. He couldn't *stand* the thought of potentially losing another.

Naruto and Sakura didn't seem to have noticed anything was wrong, yet. Maybe the sharingan was making him jump at shadows? He'd have to keep an eye on things.

Sasuke nearly swore as he accidentally activated his sharingan yet again. If he hadn't seen Kakashi in action these past two weeks, he'd be starting to suspect that his clan's gekkei

genkai was highly overrated.

The next day Kakashi was definitely looking worse. A touch of a flush was peaking above the edge of his mask, and he actually stumbled over a rock on the road. He wasn't walking any more slowly, but he'd been practically lethargic when they'd stopped for lunch. Naruto and Sakura were starting to shoot him worried looks as well.

Sasuke didn't like it, and he didn't know how to *fix* it which he liked even less.

They were still sleeping in shifts, so that night once his watch was over Sasuke woke Sakura as well as Naruto.

"Ngh, the sun isn't up, yet," Sakura groaned, pulling her blanket over her face.

"Team meeting," Sasuke whispered.

Sakura pushed her blanket back down again and sat up with a frown. Naruto was already rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"What is it?" Sakura asked softly. "And why aren't you waking up Kakashi-sensei, too?"

"Because Kakashi-sensei is the one I'm worried about."

All three of them looked over to where Kakashi was sleeping fitfully. Sasuke suspected that, under normal circumstances, their whispering would have woken him up.

Naruto hugged himself.

"Me, too," he admitted.

"I think his wound might be getting infected," Sakura agreed, her eyes worried in the banked glow of the fire. "We should make it back to Konoha tomorrow, right?"

Sasuke nodded,

"As long as we don't slow down too much, we ought to be there just before supper."

"I think we should skip reporting into Hokage-jiji and just take Kakashi-nii straight to the hospital," Naruto muttered. He paused, and a thoughtful look settled onto his face. "Hey Sakura-chan, is your arm still numb?"

Sakura grimaced.

"Not my whole arm, but it still sort of feels like some of my fingers are missing, and I'm getting pins and needles in my elbow. According to Haku, that should be wearing off soon, though. What are you thinking?"

“Kakashi-nii isn’t always the best about his own health, because he really hates hospitals, but if we say we want to get your arm checked out before we report in, he definitely won’t say no. And once we get him through the front doors, the med-nin definitely won’t let him leave without a checkup.”

“Won’t he catch on?” asked Sasuke.

“Probably,” Naruto shrugged, “but he’s not going to put up a fight, because Sakura-chan’s arm is a legitimate concern.”

“And if his fever gets worse, he might actually *not* notice,” Sakura added. She wiggled her left hand fingers sluggishly and frowned at them. “After this plan, one of you gets to be the decoy next, though.”

Kakashi was so glad that they were almost back to Konoha. He’d been changing his bandages, but the wound in his chest was definitely infected. ANBU patch jobs were supposed to hold up to a couple of days of hard travel until you could reach a proper medic. Kakashi had been hoping that this one might last longer with an easier pace of travel but evidentially not. Tazuna’s village hadn’t had a proper doctor, and Kakashi was much better at putting stitches in other people than himself despite his unfortunate amount of practice.

He was definitely running a fever, and he ached all over. It was straight to the hospital for him as soon as they had finished reporting in. Kakashi grimaced at the thought. He really hoped that this could be fixed with a quick bout of chakra healing, so that he could get home to his kitchen and his oven. His old nightmares about Rin’s death were back with a vengeance as well as the ones about the Kanabi Bridge mission (though featuring the exciting new twist that now it was sometimes one of his students trapped under the rock instead of Obito). He had so much bread he wanted to bake.

He really missed his bakery.

“Hey Sakura-chan, how’s your arm doing?” Naruto asked, arms folded behind his head as he walked.

“Tingly. And it still feels like I only have a thumb and index finger on that hand.”

Sasuke looked at her contemplatively.

“You should probably get that checked just to make sure there’s no nerve damage.”

Sakura winced at the thought.

“Hey nii-san,” Naruto turned to Kakashi, “our mission wasn’t super important to the village, right?”

“All missions are important to the village, but ours wasn’t exactly critical, no.”

“Then it would be okay for us to get Sakura-chan’s arm checked before we report in, right? It’s not like our mission was time sensitive.”

Kakashi considered this and glanced over at Sakura. She was staring down at her left hand, the anxiety clear on her face. Honestly, he’d feel better if they got Sakura’s arm checked, too. He didn’t like how long it was taking her to recover.

“That would probably be a good idea,” Kakashi agreed.

He realized he’d been played about halfway through the hospital’s front doors. A hand closed on each of his arms, and Kakashi found himself being towed forward by Naruto and Sasuke as Sakura marched up to the front desk.

“I need my arm and shoulder checked for nerve damage, and we think that Kakashi-sensei’s wound is infected,” she informed the kunoichi behind the desk. At the mention of his name, every medic in the room turned to look at Kakashi like sharks scenting blood.

Yikes.

“I was planning to come straight over to the hospital as soon as we reported in, you know,” he told Naruto and Sasuke but didn’t resist as they continued to tug him forward.

“You were swaying when we got through the gates. Jiji can wait.”

Sasuke nodded in agreement.

A med-nin strode up to Kakashi, swept a critical eye over him, and then held a palm full of diagnostic chakra to the right side of Kakashi’s face. The med-nin frowned.

“Could we get a gurney over here?” he called.

Kakashi tried to back up, but Sasuke and Naruto held him firmly in place.

“That’s overkill, isn’t it?” he protested. “I definitely need my stitches redone, but I can walk just fine.”

“Whether you *can* walk or not isn’t the issue. You’re suffering from chakra exhaustion and running a high fever – you shouldn’t *be* walking.” The med-nin pointed at the blood stained front of Kakashi’s vest. “When did that happen?”

“A week ago,” volunteered Sasuke. “And he’d already been recovering from chakra exhaustion for a week before that.”

The med-nin’s eyes narrowed, and Kakashi grimaced. So much for not being admitted to the hospital.

“Don’t worry, sensei,” Sakura had joined them again, “we’ll come back and keep you company after we report in.”

Naruto patted his arm.

“You took care of us. Now we’re taking care of you.”

Kakashi sighed.

“You’re all menaces,” he told them matter-of-factly, but his words were fond.

Sasuke crossed his arms,

“We’re shinobi – it’s a job requirement.”

There was a brief moment of silence. Naruto goggled at Sasuke.

“Teme... did you just... make a joke?”

“Hn.”

“You did! You totally did!” Naruto crowed happily.

“Shut up, dobe.”

Kakashi reluctantly climbed onto the gurney when it arrived.

A relatively short while later Kakashi was ensconced in a hospital bed and hooked up to an IV of antibiotics and fluids. His wound had been cleaned out and properly closed, and he’d been promised some chakra healing to speed things along once the infection was cleared up and the swelling had gone down. (Chakra healing worked best on fresh wounds.)

Kakashi shifted, trying to find a more comfortable position. The kids had probably been right to just take him straight to the hospital. Now that the mission was officially over and he was lying down, even the thought of sitting up almost seemed too much. He was exhausted down to his bones, and his head was swimming with fever. He wondered whether it was worth the effort of sitting up to retrieve the spare blanket from the end of his bed. His hospital scrubs were thin, and the surgical mask he’d been given to wear left his neck uncomfortably chilly and bare.

There was a knock on his door. Kakashi rolled his head to the side just in time to see Iruka come in carrying a stack of library books.

“Hey.” Kakashi offered him a tiny wave that was really more a flopping of one hand.

“Hey yourself.” Iruka set the books down on Kakashi’s side table. “I sent your team home and told them to wait until morning to come visit, so they should be here in about half an hour.” He pulled a chair over and sat down. “I also stopped by your apartment and picked up one of your spare eyepatches.”

“Thanks.”

Iruka was quiet for a moment while Kakashi slowly secured his eyepatch in place.

“We haven’t done this in a while,” he finally murmured.

“No,” Kakashi agreed. He shot Iruka a wry look, “I figured I was safe until they at least made chuunin.” Iruka snorted. “Maaa, I know – it was uncharacteristically optimistic of me.”

“I think your team has officially made the Top Ten List of Most Disastrous First-Time-Out-of-the-Village Missions.”

Kakashi closed his eye with a grimace.

“They nearly died,” he whispered.

A hand settled on his shoulder.

“But they didn’t. And now you have three overprotective little hellions who would go through hell or high water to make sure that they don’t lose you either. I thought that they were going to start threatening the Sandaime when it was suggested that perhaps it would have been wiser to turn back as soon as it became apparent that the mission’s danger level had been lied about.”

Kakashi huffed and opened his eye again.

“In retrospect, I really should have aborted the mission.”

“No recriminations. You did the best you could with the information you had at the time. You all made it back to Konoha, and your students, at least, even managed to do so in one piece.”

Kakashi sighed softly and changed the subject.

“How’s Ukki-san doing?”

“Foaming away like a happy yeast culture.” Iruka started sorting through the books he’d brought. “So I assume you can’t sit up at the moment-”

“Not really, no.”

“-so which of these am I reading to you? And, fair warning, it’s not any of the romance novels.”

“Aw, but I’m sick.”

“No. You can read those on your own time. Think of it as motivation to heal faster.”

Sasuke jerked awake from yet another nightmare with a gasp. He sat up in bed and wiped the sweat off his forehead. That was the third one tonight. He glanced at his alarm clock. Just after one o’clock.

Damn it.

Sasuke rolled out of bed. He hated his room at night, and he doubted he was going to managed anymore sleep. To hell with this.

Sasuke started rummaging through a drawer for clean clothes.

He was going out.

Lightning crackled in his hand, and blood was splattered across his face. A pale, young face smiled up at him.

“It’s okay, sensei. It was only an arm.”

Kakashi’s eye snapped open. That was a new one.

He took a slow, deep breath in through his nose and breathed out through his mouth. Fever induced nightmares were always some of the worst. Kakashi continued to breathe in and out slowly, trying to calm his hammering heart.

A soft sound caught his ears.

He wasn’t alone. And it was still pitch black outside. Had Tenzou stopped in after a late patrol?

Kakashi shifted his head.

Sasuke was curled up in one of the chairs next to his bed.

Kakashi blinked.

“Couldn’t sleep?” he rasped. He didn’t point out that visiting hours had ended long ago. They lived in a shinobi village – visiting hours were more of a suggestion than anything else.

Sasuke started slightly.

Silence stretched out, and just as Kakashi was beginning to think he wouldn’t get any response at all or at best a noncommittal ‘Hn,’ Sasuke admitted,

“No.”

“I’m not doing so well on that front either,” Kakashi agreed.

Sasuke looked away.

“It was just... too quiet.”

“Mmm,” Kakashi nodded. He wondered if Sasuke had come in the hospital’s main entrance or just snuck in through the window. Probably the window. “Sasuke,” he waited until his

student was looking at him again, “do you actually *want* to be living in the Uchiha District?”

Sasuke blinked.

“Where else would I go?”

Kakashi stopped himself from shrugging just in time. That would have hurt.

“Your own apartment. Or, if you really wanted, I could put you up at the Hatake estate for a while – I don’t use it. You own the Uchiha District – it’s not going anywhere without your explicit say-so and a lot of paperwork – but nothing requires you to *live* there unless you want to.”

Sasuke stared at him for a long time, dark eyes wide and haunted. When he finally spoke, his voice was a barely audible whisper.

“I don’t.”

“We can start looking at options once I get out of the hospital,” Kakashi murmured. The adrenaline of his nightmare was wearing off, and he was exhausted again. His eyelid drooped.

Just as he was drifting back to sleep, he heard Sasuke whisper,

“Thanks, sensei.”

Sasuke was still curled in the hospital chair watching Kakashi breathe as the first gray of false dawn started to lighten the sky. As long as he could see that Kakashi was breathing, he knew for sure his sensei wasn’t dead and he hadn’t lost another person. Also, as long as he was in Kakashi’s hospital room, Sasuke didn’t have to be alone, and he could justify it to himself as standing guard.

There was a soft scraping sound at the window. Sasuke stiffened and then relaxed as he saw that it was just Naruto letting himself in. Naruto wordlessly picked up one of the other visitor’s chairs and set it next to Sasuke’s. He didn’t look like he’d slept much. Neither of them spoke, and Kakashi didn’t stir.

Outside the window the sky lightened and brightened to true dawn, and the sun began its slow climb.

Two minutes after visiting hours officially began, the door gently opened to admit Sakura. She collected the last chair and joined them. After a few minutes, she leaned her head against Naruto’s shoulder.

In the silent presence of his teammates and sensei, Sasuke slowly drifted back to sleep. If there were any more nightmares, he didn’t remember them when he woke up.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” asked Sakura dubiously. The bag of groceries in her arms wasn’t heavy, but its bulkiness made it awkward to carry. At least the lingering tingling and numbness in her left arm from Haku’s senbon was finally gone. (During the little sleep she’d gotten the previous night, she’d fallen asleep with her left arm above her head, and when she had woken up it had felt heavy, numb, and unresponsive again due to being left at such an awkward angle for so long. It had scared her more badly than she would have expected.)

“Sure it is!” Naruto assured her cheerfully. “It’s a team building exercise!”

“Does Kakashi-sensei actually know we’re using his kitchen?” asked Sasuke, shifting his hold on his own bag of groceries.

“Well, yeah – I asked first,” Naruto shrugged as he pulled a key out of his pocket. “He just said that if we get his hot water cut off, we’ll be running laps of the village until our legs fall off.”

Sakura and Sasuke both winced.

“Well, curry isn’t that hard at least,” Sakura muttered.

Naruto nodded.

“Iruka-sensei taught me his recipe. It’s really good, and if we run into any major problems, he lives just down the hall.” Naruto unlocked the door and then pressed his palm to the wood to deactivate whatever security seals Kakashi used. “Kakashi-nii hates hospital food, so this will make him really happy.”

Sakura trailed after her teammates into their sensei’s apartment. She wasn’t entirely certain what she’d been expecting Kakashi’s apartment to look like, but she supposed she would have pictured something a little more Spartan. Or possibly flour to be liberally coating everything since their mission to Wave Country was the first time she’d ever seen Kakashi entirely flour smudge free. Instead, Kakashi’s apartment appeared to be exactly neat with touches of personality that softened it. Three bookcases stood against one wall. The first was entirely filled with cookbooks – no surprise there – and the first three shelves of the second bookcase were filled with books in a variety of sherbet colors that mostly likely meant they were romance novels. The remaining space in the bookcases was taken up with a bewildering variety of fiction and non-fiction. A striped green and cream blanket was thrown over the back of the couch, and a few smooth, fist-sized, gray rocks sat clustered on a side table. There was also a crayon drawing in various shades of orange hung on one wall. It appeared to depict a frog with some sort of sword or stick dancing in a hail of shuriken. Or maybe a cloud of deformed butterflies. Sakura was going to go ahead and guess that Naruto had drawn that.

“Kitchen’s in here!” Naruto called.

Sakura realized that she was gawking but didn’t feel too guilty, because Sasuke had been, too.

When they reached the kitchen, Naruto was standing on a counter and grumbling about tall people who put important things on the top shelf. Sasuke snorted in amusement, set down his bag of groceries, and began looking through the cupboards for pots. Sakura started unpacking the groceries they'd brought.

Something bright red caught Sakura's eye, and when she turned her head, she found herself staring at a very familiar, mischievous grin. It was Naruto's 'Ha! Gotcha!' smile that generally put in an appearance after a successful prank, but it wasn't on Naruto's face. It was on the face of a woman with long red hair holding the Hokage hat in one hand. Sakura blinked and then asked before she could think better of it,

"Naruto, is that your mom?" Because if you ignored the eye and hair color, the woman looked spookily similar to Naruto.

There was a moment of dead silence in the kitchen, and Sakura belatedly hoped that she hadn't asked a horribly insensitive question.

"*What?*" Naruto hopped down off the counter, and Sasuke straightened up from the cupboard he'd been peering into.

Sakura twisted her hands together for a second and then pointed at the woman in the picture.

"It just- Well, she has the *exact* same smile as you, and I've never seen that outside of families before."

"Oh, that's Kushina, the Red Hot-Blooded Habanero. She was a super badass kunoichi and married the Yondaime." Naruto pointed at another photo that Sakura hadn't noticed. "Kakashi-nii has been telling me stories about them for years."

The other picture Naruto had indicated was definitely an old team photo and... woah. Yeah, that was definitely the Yondaime. The Yondaime... who had spiky blond hair and blue eyes.

Sakura's head swiveled from the man with Naruto's hair and coloring to the woman with Naruto's smile and face, who had apparently married him. Sakura's brain went blank with shock.

"Holy shit." Sasuke turned from the pictures to stare at Naruto. "You're the Yondaime's son." Evidently he'd come to the same conclusion as Sakura.

"No, I'm not, teme. Don't be crazy. I... I..." Naruto glanced at the pictures, and the palpable longing on his face was painful to witness. "You- you really think so?" he finally asked, voice soft and hesitant.

Sakura nodded vigorously,

"You look far too similar to both of them for it to be a coincidence."

"But... why wouldn't-?" Naruto looked lost, and Sakura reached out and pulled him into a hug, because he looked like he really needed one. "Thanks, Sakura-chan," he mumbled into her shoulder.

Sasuke patted Naruto awkwardly on the back when Sakura finally released him.

“Come on, dobe – let’s make curry and then go interrogate Kakashi-sensei while he’s still trapped in a hospital bed and can’t get away.”

Naruto let out a slightly watery laugh,

“I think Hokage-jiji might be the one who needs an interrogation, but asking Kakashi-nii would probably be a good start.”

Kakashi stared at the ceiling of his hospital room. He had started reading one of the novels Iruka had left him, but he’d run out of energy. IV antibiotics were the worst. Okay, not the *worst*, but Kakashi definitely hadn’t missed them. They always left him feeling even more drained than he already was. The chakra exhaustion wasn’t helping and had probably contributed to his wound getting infected in the first place, too.

The door of his hospital room rattled and then swung open. Kakashi turned his head to see Sasuke, Sakura, and Naruto filing in. They were carrying a bag each, but Sakura seemed concerned, Sasuke had a look of grim determination on his face, and Naruto appeared to be a strange combination of hopeful and upset. Had something happened?

“Is Naruto the Yondaime’s son?” Sasuke demanded before Kakashi had a chance to say anything.

“Subtle, Sasuke-kun,” Sakura sighed. “Remember? The plan was to be *subtle*.”

Finally.

“I can neither confirm nor deny that Naruto is related to Minato-sensei,” Kakashi told them, “and it’s definitely not because of a ridiculous order that would get me into a bunch of trouble if I did.”

Naruto’s eyes widened in comprehension, and Sakura nodded.

“So that’s a yes,” she stated decisively.

Sasuke nudged Naruto with an elbow,

“Told you.”

“How was I supposed to know? Also, your interrogation skills *suck*, teme – believe it!” Naruto’s expression had gone from upset to thrilled, though, which was a relief. “Oh, *wow*! My parents are-!”

“Please don’t shout S-class secrets in my hospital room, Naruto,” Kakashi interrupted. “I’ll get in trouble.”

“That reminds me! We made you curry!” Naruto waved enthusiastically at the bags they were carrying.

“Thank you. ... You didn’t set my kitchen on fire did you?” Kakashi had been wondering why Naruto had wanted to borrow his kitchen for a ‘team building exercise.’

“No,” Naruto protested indignantly. “Only *you* do that!”

“It’s one of the perks of having your name on the lease,” Kakashi nodded and attempted to prop himself up on one elbow without pulling the stitches in his chest. His head spun. Ugh – fever and low chakra were not a good combination.

Sakura immediately came over to help him. Naruto and Sasuke started rearranging chairs and the side table, because apparently ‘We made you curry’ was actually code for ‘We’re having team dinner in your hospital room,’ and Kakashi was perfectly fine with that.

These kids – Kakashi wouldn’t trade them for the world.

In fairly short order, Kakashi was propped up in bed with a couple of pillows and the curry and rice had been unpacked.

Sakura pulled a brand new box of chopsticks out of the bag Naruto had been carrying. She handed a pair to Kakashi.

“How is it that you don’t have *any* chopsticks that match, sensei?”

“That is a question that I have been asking myself for *years*,” Kakashi told her. He accepted the chopsticks and bowl of rice and curry that Sasuke was holding out to him. It smelled like Iruka’s recipe.

Kakashi hesitated a fraction of a second, then casually reached up, pulled off the surgical mask he was wearing, and tried a bite of the curry.

There was a clatter as Sakura dropped her box, and chopsticks went rolling across the linoleum floor. Kakashi looked up and wished that he could use his sharingan to memorize Sakura and Sasuke’s gob-smacked expressions.

“What?” he asked innocently.

At the foot of the bed Naruto cackled with laughter.

“You’ve been hiding your face from us for *months*, and all that was under that mask was a *mole*?!? Naruto told us you had *fangs*!” Sakura was waving her arms and shouting.

“What the *hell*, sensei?!” Sasuke agreed.

Kakashi just smiled to himself and took another bite of curry.

You didn’t need to wear a mask around family.

Chapter End Notes

Hey folks! So I have good news and bad news. Let's get the bad news out of the way first - the tendonitis in my wrists is acting up, making it painful for me to type. Because of this, it's going to be a while before you get the next chapter. I don't want to push things and run the risk of ending up in matching wrist braces again. I can make no promises on when the next chapter will be appearing, but have no fear - I adore this story and I *will* be back.

The good news is that writing long hand doesn't bother my wrists like typing does, and every single chapter of this story is hand written long before it is typed up and edited, so while I might not be posting new chapters, I will be writing them. The other good news is that, because I won't be trying to write new chapters, type up old chapters, skim old episodes to remind myself how certain things were/weren't addressed in canon, *and* go to work, this is going to greatly increase the possibility that this story will continue on into Shippuden territory. No guarantees, yet - I'd really like to go there, but it's going to take a lot more work and planning than writing this story pre-time skip.

Thank you all for your patience and understanding, and hopefully I will be back with new chapters sooner than expected!

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Hi everybody! I'M BACK!!! Thank you all so much for all your support and wonderful reviews! They mean the world to me. My wrists are doing much, much better, though updates will be slow so that I don't overdo it and put myself right back into the same boat again.

And now, without any further delay, let's get this show back on the road!

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

Sasuke liked his new apartment. It was smaller than he was used to, but there wasn't a single surface in it that he could point to and trace a remembered bloodstain. It was wholly free of ghosts.

He hadn't brought much with him from his parents' house. Mostly just his clothes, weapons, team photo, and a few odds and ends. He'd taken the one framed photo in the house that featured only his mother, but for now he was keeping her in a drawer. He hadn't wanted to leave her behind, but at the same time, he wasn't ready to see her smiling at him every day. It still hurt too much.

Sasuke had finished unpacking his things last night. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept so well. Kakashi had promised to stop by that morning and help him set up some security seals. For now, Sasuke was wandering around his tiny kitchen considering the issue of breakfast.

There was a rap on his living room window. He looked up to find Naruto cheerfully waving at him. He was holding some sort of potted plant. Sasuke opened the window and stood aside to let Naruto in.

"Morning, teme! It's really cool that we're living in the same building now!"

"We share a wall," Sasuke pointed out. "It probably would have been easier to just walk ten feet down the hall than to go out the window."

"Where's the fun in that?" Naruto shrugged. "Anyway, I brought you a housewarming present!" He proudly held out the potted plant.

Sasuke accepted it with a raised eyebrow.

"What is it?"

"Basil. It smells really nice, and you can chop it up and put it on all those tomatoes you eat."

Sasuke had never kept a plant before. He gave the leaves an experimental sniff. They did smell rather nice.

“Thanks, dobe.” He set the basil plant down on his side table next to his copy of their team photo. Then he frowned. “Why does the side of the pot say, ‘Midori-san?’”

“‘Cause that’s its name,” Naruto told him like it was the most obvious thing in the world. Before Sasuke had a chance to ask *why* the basil *needed* a name, Naruto had already changed the subject. “I don’t get why nobody has ever wanted this to live here.” Naruto shoved his hands in his pockets as he looked around. “I mean, I know the building’s hot water can be a little dicey, but otherwise it’s pretty nice.”

Sasuke couldn’t fathom it either. The only explanation he could come up with was that it had something to do with the strange dislike that most civilians had for Naruto. He didn’t get it. Sure, Naruto could be loud and something of a hot-head, but that hadn’t seemed to bother any of the villagers in Wave Country. On occasion during D-ranks, when Kakashi had been out of earshot for one reason or another, people had made nasty comments. It pissed Sasuke off.

Someone knocked on the door, interrupting Sasuke’s thoughts.

Sasuke opened the door to find Kakashi and Sakura standing on the other side.

“Yo.”

“Good morning, Sasuke-kun!”

Sasuke blinked at them.

“Good morning?”

“We brought breakfast,” Sakura smiled. “Don’t worry – I cooked it, not Kakasi-sensei.”

Kakashi let out a long-suffering sigh,

“I *can* cook, you know.”

“We’ve seen the scorch marks on your kitchen ceiling, sensei,” Sakura sniffed primly.

Sasuke looked from Kakashi and Sakura in his doorway to Naruto standing in his living room.

“You all planned this, didn’t you?” He stepped aside to let Kakashi and Sakura in.

“It’s a housewarming party!” Naruto beamed.

“This is for you.” Sakura handed Sasuke a neatly folded blanket. It was deep purple with a pattern of pale green shuuriken. Sasuke appreciated that she hadn’t made any attempt to wrap it. “I’ll admit that shuuriken make a nice pattern even if senbon are still the best.”

Kakashi quickly offered the brown paper bag he was carrying before Sakura's comment could spark off yet another weapons debate.

"Fresh loaf of that sun-dried tomato bread," he told Sasuke and then held up the stack of seal transfer papers in his other hand, "and those security seals I promised you."

His team was ridiculous, Sasuke decided. He was glad that he hadn't ended up with anyone else.

Sakura was manning the front counter of the Ryouken Bakery. She didn't have to be. It was Saturday, and this wasn't a mission, but ever since they'd gotten back from Wave Country and Kakashi-sensei had been released from the hospital, she'd just found herself wandering over to the bakery every Saturday morning. It just felt... safe. Peaceful. She was starting to understand why Naruto and Sasuke liked it there so much.

Slowly, Sakura twisted a senbon through her fingers. They hadn't worked with senbon much at the Academy, but she'd always found the whole concept of them appealing. Since they'd returned from Wave Country, Sakura had started practicing with senbon regularly. It would be a while before she was good enough to use them reliably on missions, but it was a good goal to work towards. Besides, if she dipped them in paralytic or poison, she could afford to be a little less accurate to start.

The front door suddenly burst open, and Sakura nearly dropped her senbon.

"MY MOST ESTEMED RIVAL! MY TEAM HAS RETURNED FROM A SUCCESSFUL BORDER PATROL AND REQUIRES CELEBRATORY ANPAN!"

Sakura's first thought was 'green.' Her second thought was 'eyebrows.' Her third was 'Maybe sensei tried to retire, because he was too sane.'

The bizarrely dressed jounin blinked at Sakura in surprise.

There was a rustle of curtain behind Sakura.

"Gai, what have I told you about shouting in my bakery?" Kakashi asked as he came out wiping his hands on his apron.

"Ah, forgive me, Kakashi – I was overcome with Youth." The strange jounin, Gai, waved a hand at Sakura. "Have you finally seen sense and hired some help instead of merely relying on shadow clones?"

"Not a chance," Kakashi told him cheerfully. "This is Sakura Haruno. She's a member of my gennin team."

Three more shinobi had wandered in behind Gai – two boys and a girl. Sakura thought that they looked about a year older than her.

“Hi Gai-san!” called Naruto cheerfully as he emerged from the kitchen, Sasuke following behind him. “Hey Bushy Brows! Hey Ten-Ten-san!”

“Hello Naruto-kun!” called one of the boys, the one who looked sort of like a miniaturized version of Gai. “I’m glad to see your Youthful Spark is still burning brightly! How was your first C-rank mission?”

Naruto offered him a big grin and a thumbs up.

“It was a total disaster! Our client lied about the danger level, and we got jumped by S-class missing-nin – twice!” He rubbed the back of his head. “So I guess I technically still haven’t been on a C-rank, but we did survive our first A-rank okay.”

Sakura hadn’t thought of it that way before, but Naruto was right. She really hoped that their next C-rank mission *stayed* a C-rank mission.

The Gai clone’s mouth was hanging open as were the mouths of his teammates. Gai himself looked horrified.

“I’ve officially beaten your record of four months to destroy a new jounin vest,” Kakashi informed Gai casually, shoving his hands in his pockets. Gai moved so fast that Sakura didn’t even see a *blur*. “*Gack!* Gai, I’m fine! Put me down!” Kakashi flailed, desperately trying to escape Gai’s octopus hug and weeping. Kakashi’s feet weren’t actually touching the ground, and his arms were pinned to his sides.

“Always so Cool and Hip! Wait here a moment, my cute students – my Eternal Rival and I need to talk.”

“We do *not*. I already talked to Iruka!” Kakashi was still struggling as Gai hauled him through the curtain. Not long after, the kitchen’s back door clanked shut.

“Are they always like that?” asked Sakura.

“Yup,” Naruto nodded, looking completely un-phased.

“Gai-sensei is a brilliant shinobi, but he can be kind of intense,” agreed the girl, whom Sakura thought was probably Ten-Ten.

Kakashi had stopped struggling by the time they got outside, resigned to his fate. Gai set him down carefully on his feet.

“Now, in all honesty with no Youthful ears listening, how are you doing?” Gai asked with a level of seriousness that he usually reserved for training and missions. Kakashi wasn’t getting out of this.

Kakashi slumped against the back wall of the bakery. He and Gai rarely had these conversations, but they’d started cropping up occasionally since Kakashi had left ANBU.

“I purposefully ruined five loaves of bread as soon as they released me from the hospital,” Kakashi reluctantly admitted, “so I’ve been better.”

“Nightmares?”

Kakashi hesitated, but he knew that once this conversation was over Gai wouldn’t bring up the topic again.

“Haven’t been this bad since I switched to the reserves. I think they’re starting to slow down again, though.”

Gai nodded.

“I’ve already watched you nearly lose yourself once to darkness. I never wish to do so again.”

Kakashi looked away. Honestly, Gai and his melodramatic grand statements.

“Not going to happen.” Kakashi paused and then added, “Unless, of course, something happens to my bakery. In which case, I have every intention of becoming a missing-nin, starting my own terrorist organization, recruiting my team, and burning the world to the ground.” He gave Gai a cheerful eye smile.

Gai rolled his eyes.

“Always so Hip and Cool,” he grumbled. “Shall we spar tomorrow at Training Field 12, my Rival?”

Kakashi straightened up, relieved that the topic of emotions was once again closed.

“Sounds like a plan. Now let’s get back inside before Sasuke and Neji kill each other. I don’t think Sasuke’s going to respond any better to Neji’s ideas about ‘fate’ and ‘destiny’ than Naruto.”

Neji and Sasuke were glowering at each other when Kakashi and Gai made it back to the front of the bakery. Naruto and Lee were chatting amiably about taijutsu katas, and Sakura and Ten-Ten were apparently bonding over senbon.

“We should train together tomorrow!” Ten-Ten was enthusing. “I haven’t worked on my senbon throwing in *ages*, and I really shouldn’t be letting it slide.”

“I’m not very good, yet.”

“That’s fine. Neither of my teammates are all that interested in weapons outside of the basics, and it’s always more fun to train with other people.”

“Okay.”

“I have returned, my adorable students!” Gai announced grandly, arms flung wide. Kakashi rolled his eye.

“We missed you, Gai-sensei!” piped up Lee, tears in his eyes.

“He was gone for five minutes,” Neji told him, eyes narrowed and unimpressed.

Kakashi busied himself retrieving Team Gai’s usual order from the display cabinet as Gai handed Sakura the appropriate amount of ryou.

“See you tomorrow, Sakura-san!” Ten-Ten waved as they left.

Kakashi’s sensitive ears just caught Lee saying, “Sakura-san is so cute! Do you think she’d-,” before the door closed behind them.

Naruto stared down at the perfectly bisected leaf in his hand.

“I did it,” he whispered. Then he held the pieces of leaf aloft and crowed, “Kakashi-nii, I *did it!*”

“Excellent work, Naruto.” Kakashi came over to inspect Naruto’s pieces of leaf. “Looks like you’re ready to start learning your first wind jutsu.”

“Aw yeah! I’m *so* ready – believe it!” Naruto pumped a fist in the air. “What sort of awesome jutsu are we going to start with?”

“A very simple one.”

“Awww....” Naruto deflated slightly. He got that learning elemental jutsus required time and patience, but Sasuke already knew half a dozen fire jutsus, and Naruto was sort of jealous. At least he had the satisfaction of knowing that he was *way* better at breaking free of genjutsus than Sasuke was. Sakura had been practicing the basic genjutsu weaving that she was learning on them, and they hadn’t found a genjutsu that could hold Naruto, yet.

“Once you have the basics down solidly, you’ll be able to master more complicated jutsus much faster. And then you and Sasuke are probably going to be able to level a training field together, because even basic wind jutsus can augment fire jutsus to a *terrifying* degree.” Kakashi shuddered slightly at the thought.

Naruto perked up.

“Really?”

“Yup. Now, this is one of the first jutsus I ever purposefully copied. It’s not actually a battle jutsu, but it’s very good for practicing channeling the correct amount of chakra into a jutsu without worrying about it backfiring if you overdo it. Done just right,” Kakashi formed three seals, “you should create a breeze just strong enough to flip someone’s hair into their face. *Soyokaze no jutsu*.” A breeze rustled through Naruto’s hair and tickled his nose. “Minato-sensei invested it to tease Kushina when they first started dating.”

And Naruto abruptly went from vaguely unimpressed to *one hundred percent invested in learning this jutsu*. Because this simple jutsu was a tangible piece of his *parents*. And it still amazed him that he had *parents* now with *names* and *faces*, and it turned out that they were the heroes that Kakashi had been telling him about for *years*.

Naruto straightened up, completely focused.

“What happens if you do it wrong?”

“Too little chakra and nothing happens. Too much chakra and you can strip leaves off trees. Wind jutsus, like fire, can do a lot of collateral damage if you’re not careful.”

“Show me the seals again?” Naruto requested. He was going to *perfect* this jutsu no matter what.

Naruto still didn’t understand why Hokage-jiji hadn’t just *told* him who his parents were – he could keep a secret – but for now he wasn’t asking, because he didn’t want to get Kakashi-nii into trouble. Finding out the why could wait. The important thing was that Naruto knew the truth now.

Sasuke’s collection of plants was growing. The pot of basil Naruto had given him had acquired a friend, because Sasuke was really enjoying having fresh basil on his tomatoes, but he didn’t want to strip his plant bare. He’d bought the shiso plant on a whim, because it had smelled good, too, and cooking with fresh herbs tasted better. The cilantro and oregano had come home for similar reasons.

At that point, Sasuke had given up, bought a small bag of potting soil, and planted his assortment of herbs in the empty window box that his apartment had come with. Team 7 had done enough D-rank gardening missions at this point that it wasn’t like Sasuke didn’t know how, and besides, he was running out of windowsills. It was a miniature herb garden. It was practical, and he liked weeding it every few days and watering it.

The bonsai tree now sitting on his kitchen table, however, Sasuke had no excuse for.

Sasuke sat with his arms folded on the table and his chin resting on his arms, staring at the bonsai tree. What had possessed him to buy a *bonsai*? It wasn’t practical. It wasn’t useful. And he had no *idea* how to take care of it. Sasuke had just liked the look of it. The shopkeeper had said that it was a good one for beginners.

The sensible thing to do would be to return the tiny tree, but that felt like giving up. Sasuke hated giving up. He’d have to see if he could find a book on bonsai trees, though, because he hated failing just as much as he hated giving up.

The idea had first been proposed by Gai. Apparently Neji was needed for some sort of clan business for the day, so Gai had proposed that their teams combine for morning training and

an afternoon joint D-rank mission. Kakashi hadn't seen any reason to object. His students hadn't had a chance to spar with anyone else aside from himself and each other. Lee specialized in taijutsu, and Ten-Ten was primarily a long range fighter. It would be good practice for all of them.

Sakura and Ten-Ten had gone first. Ten-Ten had ultimately won their bout, but it had been very close. Kakashi was particularly impressed with the simple but highly effective genjutsu that Sakura had managed to weave that had apparently made it feel like something especially nasty was crawling up the back of Ten-Ten's neck. Ten-Ten was now explaining to Sakura how the seals on her weapons scrolls worked with the special enthusiasm that Ten-Ten seemed to reserve for weaponized projectiles.

Sasuke and Lee were up next. Kakashi was possibly hoping that this match up would remind Sasuke that, just because he had the best taijutsu skills of his teammates, that didn't mean that he didn't have plenty of room for improvement. Sasuke hadn't been getting a big head, per se, but the Uchiha ego had practically been genetic and a gentle reminder never hurt anybody.

"Remember," Gai was telling Lee. Well, proclaiming to really, but that was just Gai's default state. "When fighting a sharingan user, never make eye contact! Instead, direct your Youthful gaze to their feet to predict their movements!"

"Yes, Gai-sensei!"

"Lee really only uses taijutsu?" Sasuke asked. After several minutes of irritated concentration, he'd finally managed to activate his sharingan.

"Yup."

"But *I* don't have to stick to only taijutsu for this spar."

"Nope."

"Hn." Sasuke looked vaguely suspicious as well he should. It seemed Sasuke was finally starting to take 'looking underneath the underneath' to heart.

"To your positions!" Gai called.

Sasuke and Lee squared up and shifted into their preferred ready stances.

"Kick his ass, Bushy Brows!"

Sasuke shot Naruto an annoyed look.

"How come you never cheer for *me*, dobe?"

"Cause you don't need me to cheer for you, teme!"

Sasuke rolled his eyes but shrugged in apparent agreement and returned his attention to Lee. Ten-Ten and Sakura had stopped discussing weapons in favor of watching their teammates.

“Begin!”

“Right.” Kakashi handed Sasuke an ice pack and set a cup of tea down in front of him.

“Since you’ve activated the second level of your sharingan, it’s time for the tricky discussion of the ethics and morals of sharingan use.”

Sasuke pressed the ice pack to the darkening bruise on the side of his face that had just barely missed being a black eye. He hadn’t even seen the kick coming. Lee was shockingly fast, and his kicks has the stopping power of a brick wall. If Sasuke had known that acquiring the second tomoe would make his eyes easier to control, he would have offered to spar with Lee *so much sooner*.

“Morals and ethics?” he asked.

“Mmm.” Kakashi sat down across from Sasuke, pulled down his mask, and took a sip of his own tea. It still weirded Sasuke out how *casual* Kakashi had gotten about the whole mask thing when their team wasn’t in public. “Your cousin Shisui called it the Can-May-Should Principle.”

Sasuke couldn’t remember ever hearing his family talk about that.

“Never heard of it.”

“Not all of the Uchiha clan followed it, and it made them... unpopular with a number of people,” Kakashi sighed. “Right, so ‘can.’ Just because you copy a jutsu doesn’t necessarily mean that you can perform it. Sometimes that’s because the jutsu in question is based on a kekkei genkai, like Haku’s ice mirrors or the Hyuuga’s gentle fist. In the case of taijutsu, it can be because your body lacks the necessary physical training. I’ve been sparring with Gai for years. I’ve copied his movements with my sharingan at least a hundred times, but I would never use more than one or two of his moves in a battle, because his style takes a huge amount of specialized physical training that I haven’t done. The sharingan is a shortcut, but it’s not a substitute for actual training.”

Sasuke nodded. He supposed that made sense.

“‘May’ applies to your fellow shinobi of Konoha. Yes, you can copy almost any jutsu you see one of your comrades use, but unless you have their permission, you really shouldn’t be using those jutsus. A lot of shinobi view it as a type of theft, and it is a fast way to make yourself wildly unpopular and resented. Nobody cares if you copy basic elemental jutsus, but clan techniques and jutsus that your fellow shinobi invented themselves are definitely off limits. ‘May’ only gets ignored in life-or-death situations, and obviously it doesn’t apply to enemies.”

“So,” Sasuke hesitated, “if I wanted to incorporate some of Lee’s moves that I copied today into my own style...?”

“You need to talk to Lee first and most likely Gai as well since it’s really Gai’s style that Lee uses. Gai will probably require you to do some additional training with them if he does agree to it. And there is a good chance that he’ll say no. Gai thinks of his style as a life style – I’m not sure what he’ll say about someone wanting to only use select pieces from it.” Kakashi took another sip of his tea. “At the end of the day, ‘may’ is really about respecting your fellow shinobi, and that’s where past members of your clan ran into the most trouble.” Sasuke grimaced but didn’t deny it no matter how much he’d like to. “‘Should’ is more subjective. Basically, you’ve copied a jutsu. You *can* perform it, and you *may* perform it, but *should* you perform it? I’ve copied at least a dozen jutsus that I would never perform – not because I can’t, but because of the sheer level of sadism they require. That’s the sort of judgment call that only you can make. Those same jutsus probably wouldn’t cause most of the members of T&I to bat an eye, but for me, they go too far.”

Sasuke finally tried his own tea.

“Sounds straightforward enough,” he decided.

“It is,” Kakashi agreed, “but that doesn’t make it any less important.”

Kakashi’s shoulders finally relaxed as the arch of Konoha’s gate finally passed above his head. He and his students had been out of the village for less than twelve hours on an escort mission that only counted as a C-rank because it involved leaving Konoha. After their disastrous Wave Country mission, though, Kakashi had been almost pathetically grateful that their exasperatingly easy and boring mission had stayed exasperatingly easy and boring. Team 7 had escorted the most paranoid watermelon farmer in Fire Country home. The man had been convinced that the ‘watermelon mafia’ was out to get him.

Ahead of him his students were still discussing exactly how a watermelon mafia might work since Naruto had never managed to get a satisfactory answer out of their hyper paranoid client.

“Maybe the watermelons *themselves* have formed a mafia,” Naruto suggested.

“*How?*” Sasuke countered.

“Someone mixed up the ingredients in the fertilizer they were making and as a result the watermelons gained sentience!”

“And grew legs?” asked Sakura. She’d worn her new, dark crimson, out-of-village dress for the day’s mission. It was the same style as her bright red village dress, but the trim and circle on her back were black instead of white, making the whole ensemble much less eye catching. She’d also stuck a pair of senbon through the base of her bun like hair sticks.

“Absolutely,” Naruto nodded mock seriously. “And now those watermelons are on a quest for vengeance because-”

“Boss!” Naruto was interrupted by an excited shout. “You’re back! How was your mission?! Did you fight any more S-class missing-nin?!?”

Konohamaru and his two friends, whom Kakashi still wasn’t sure of the names of, were charging down the road to meet Naruto. Naruto waved and ran forward to meet them, shouting, “Hi Kotetsu-san!” as he blasted past the gatehouse.

“Did that child just call Naruto ‘Boss’?” asked Sakura.

“Mhm,” Sasuke nodded.

Sakura hesitated.

“Does that mean... Naruto has minions?”

Sasuke halted mid stride, a look of horror passing over his face.

Kakashi just smiled to himself.

A breeze rustled the leaves of the tree Team 7 was sitting under.

“That,” Naruto decided, flopping on his back, “was *awesome*.” He offered Sasuke a high five, and Sasuke solemnly slapped their palms together. Kakashi was leaning back against the tree trunk with one arm across his face.

“When I said that you and Sasuke could probably level a training field if you combined your wind and fire jutsus, I wasn’t suggesting that you actually *try* it,” he groaned.

“That fireball was the size of a *house*,” Sakura muttered. Her face was soot stained. “I’ve been working on my genjutsu – not earth jutsus. At least let me learn how to do walls before you idiots try that again.”

“We weren’t expecting it to be that big, Sakura-chan.”

“You’re both morons,” Sakura decided.

“I’m going to have to fill out so much paperwork,” mumbled Kakashi.

“That was a really cool water jutsu you used to put all the flames out, Kakashi-nii.”

“My sharingan were activated when you did that jutsu,” Sasuke piped up. “Can I use it next time we practice?”

“No. *Umi no tatsumaki no jutsu* is an A-rank jutsu meant for melee fighting. It would take about half of your chakra reserves to perform at the moment. You can use it once your reserves are large enough that you can do it twice without passing out.”

Sasuke let out an annoyed huff but didn’t protest.

“You both owe me lunch for setting my dress on fire,” Sakura announced. She held up her scorched and ruined hem and frowned at it.

“Yeah... it was supposed to go straight – not loop back on us.”

“Barbeque?” Sasuke suggested.

Sakura considered this.

“Acceptable,” she finally decided. She stood up. “Come on – nearly dying makes me hungry. Are you coming, Kakashi-sensei?”

Kakashi lifted his arm from his face. In the near distance, a few wisps of black smoke were still rising from Training Field 16. Overhead a messenger hawk wheeled and called. Looked like the Hokage was calling a general meeting. He stood up.

“I’ll meet you there. The Hokage’s calling a meeting. I shouldn’t be more than half an hour.”

“Want us to order your usual, nii-san?”

“Sure.”

Kakashi took off for the Hokage Tower.

Was it really time for the chuunin exams already?

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading!

Our latest translation courtesy of Google Translate:

Umi no tatsumaki - "ocean tornado"

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Thank you SO MUCH to everyone who has commented! You're all wonderful, and your words kept this story alive in my heart even when I'd lost the inspiration to write anything full stop. I'm so glad to finally be back.

Happy holidays, everybody! Let's finally get this party going again!

A hand landed on each of Kakashi's shoulders as he left the Hokage's meeting chamber and steered him down a side hall away from the main crowd of leaving jounin. Gai was to his left, and Iruka was to his right. Gai's expression was thunderous. Iruka was wearing his 'this time everyone dies' smile. Kakashi was definitely about to get yelled at.

When they reached a room that was empty of people but half full of filing cabinets, Iruka shoved Kakashi in and shut the door behind them.

"Right. Now that it's just the three of us – WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU THINKING, KAKASHI?!?"

"Indeed, my rival, I waited a full year to nominate my team for the exams for a *reason*."

Kakashi held up his hands defensively.

"I was thinking that, while they might not be able to *pass* the exams, yet, they're far enough along that this will be a good opportunity for them to get a feel for the format of the exams. They're legally adults, and I want to at least give them the choice of whether they participate or not. I can't give them the choice without nominating them. If the exams were being held anywhere other than Konoha, I wouldn't even be considering it." He sighed. "I have *no idea* what Asuma and Kurenai were thinking, though."

"If it turns out to be anything along the lines of 'I will not be out done by Kakashi Hatake,' they're in for the pranking of their *life*," Iruka muttered, crossing his arms with a fierce scowl.

"Thanks for not yelling at me in front of the Hokage. That would have been awkward."

"You generally have a good reason for doing things," Iruka sighed, unfolding his arms. "Even if I couldn't think of a single one at the time."

Kakashi slid into the booth where his students were already eating.

“So I-” He paused. “*Why* are you eating with weapons instead of chopsticks?”

“It’s a contest,” Naruto told him cheerfully as he stabbed a piece of bok choy with his kunai. “First one who gives in and uses actual chopsticks has to pay the bill.”

Sakura was holding a pair of senbon in one hand like silver chopsticks. She delicately picked up a strip of chicken.

“Doing all right there, Sasuke-kun?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

Sasuke was very carefully spearing a piece of beef on one point of a shuuriken.

“I’m fine.”

“Is your rice undercooked?” Sakura widened her eyes innocently. “It doesn’t look like you’ve eaten any!”

“Hn.” Sasuke glared at his shuuriken as if trying to will it to have fewer sharp edges.

It was hard to remember sometimes that just a few months ago Sakura never would have *dreamed* of teasing Sasuke like this, and Sasuke would never have lowered himself to participate in such a ridiculous contest – or even to go out to lunch with his teammates.

“Part of the rules is that you’re not allowed to pick up your plate,” Naruto told Kakashi in a conspiratorial stage whisper. He gathered some rice between two kunai, leaned his head back, and dropped the rice into his mouth.

“Right.” Kakashi picked up his chopsticks.

“Does this mean that he’s paying for lunch?” asked Sasuke.

“Not a chance,” Kakashi informed him. “I already put out the training field you set on fire – I’m not paying for your food, too.”

“That wasn’t what Jiji called the meeting about, was it?” asked Naruto.

“No. The summer round of the chuunin exams are going to be starting in a week.” His team put down their weapons and turned their full attention on him, interest clearly peaked.

“Under any other circumstances, I wouldn’t be considering letting you participate in the exams so soon, but they’re being held in Konoha this summer. The exams are very dangerous – even when they’re being held here – but this is an ideal opportunity if you want a chance to get a feel for how the exams work.”

“Like a reconnaissance mission?” asked Sakura.

Kakashi nodded.

“The choice is entirely up to the three of you.”

Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura all exchanged thoughtful glances.

Naruto stuck out his hand palm down over the table.

“Scope out the competition now, and then kick all their asses in the winter exams?” he suggested.

Sasuke put his hand on top of Naruto’s.

“I’m game.”

Sakura added her hand to the pile.

“We keep a low profile this time. This is reconnaissance – unless something goes Wave Country wrong, we save shock and awe for the next round.”

Both boys nodded.

“Downplay the sharingan,” Sasuke decided.

“Play up the dumb blond.” Naruto grinned mischievously.

“And nobody takes a clingy fangirl seriously.” Sakura paused. “Unless that will make you uncomfortable, Sasuke-kun. I could do book-smart wallflower instead.”

“Hn. No, clingy fangirl would work better. Just only hang off of my arms, and be ready to roll with it when I shove you off.”

Sakura nodded.

“Got it. They’ll never see us coming.”

All three of them grinned at each other.

“We’re in, Kakashi-nii,” Naruto announced. “Where do we sign up?”

Kakashi pulled the forms out of his vest.

“Fill these out and turn them in in Room 301 at the Academy one week from today. The deadline is 3pm that afternoon.”

“Do you know if Gai’s team is going to be taking the exams?” asked Sakura, accepting one of the forms.

“They are.”

“We’re going to have to ask them not to blow our cover,” she muttered as she looked over the form.

“So... that means Neji’s going to be in this exam.” Naruto looked thoughtful for a moment and then turned to Sasuke and held out a hand. “I will buy you an entire *crate* of tomatoes if you manage to give Neji a black eye.”

Sasuke took his hand.

“I’ll buy you three bowls of ramen if you break his nose.”

They shook on it solemnly.

Sakura blinked.

“Why are you two so gung-ho about beating up Neji?”

“It’s his *destiny*, Sakura-chan.”

“Nobody who thinks that the Uchiha were *fated* to be massacred deserves to have a straight nose.”

“Ah.”

Sasuke picked up his chopsticks, took a bite of rice, and then groaned as he realized what he’d just done.

“Ha! You’re paying for lunch, teme!”

Kakashi just shook his head.

Iruka opened the door on the fifth knock, took in Kakashi’s frantic, flour-covered appearance, and shook his head.

“They decided they wanted to take the chuunin exams, didn’t they?”

“Why did I think that treating them like adults was a good idea?!” Kakashi demanded.

“How many loaves of bread are you on?”

“Ten. I ran out of flour, and the grocery store closed an hour ago. Can I have some of yours?”

“Can’t you just get some from the bakery?”

“No, it screws up my budget.”

“Fine.”

Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura had congregated in Sasuke’s apartment to continue their planning for the chuunin exams, because it was cleaner than Naruto’s and didn’t contain Sakura’s parents, who were rather overbearing.

“So the exams are three parts. One of them is *bound* to be some sort of wilderness survival,” Sakura frowned.

“We could bring sealed packs,” Naruto suggested. “You know, like Kakashi-nii does when we’re out of the village on a mission.”

“Basic storage scrolls shouldn’t be too expensive to buy,” Sasuke nodded. “And we should definitely have a med kit with us.”

Sakura and Naruto both nodded vigorously.

“Ration bars would be a good idea, too.” Sakura pulled a piece of paper from her weapons pouch and started making a supply list. “I should probably get some paralytic for my senbon as well.”

“Hey, teme, whatcha gonna do about your plants?” asked Naruto. “We have no idea how long any of the parts of the exams are going to be.”

“I bought a watering bulb for the basil, and the window box will be fine on its own. I was thinking of asking Iruka-sensei to watch my bonsai for me.” Sasuke glanced over at where his bonsai was perched on its windowsill. The bonsai hadn’t lost any more leaves since he’d finally figured out a good watering schedule. It also had a sticker on its pot labeling it “Ki-san,” because Sasuke had given up on trying to stop Naruto from naming all of his plants.

“Too bad you can’t ask Cat-san to take it,” commented Naruto.

“Who?”

“He’s one of Kakashi-nii’s friends from ANBU. Kakashi-nii says he’s *really* good with plants.”

Sakura stared at the target thoughtfully. Her cluster of senbon was tighter than before, but her accuracy still needed work. Ten-Ten gave her a thumbs up.

“You’re improving!”

“Thanks.”

“Are you planning on having your senbon with you for the exams?”

“Yeah.” Sakura offered her a small smile. It had been too long since she’d had a proper friend outside of her teammates. “We’re only trying to *look* incompetent – not actually be unprepared if something goes wrong.”

Ten-Ten nodded.

“It’s a good plan, though Lee will be disappointed that he won’t have the chance to fight Naruto or Sasuke all out. And Neji....” Ten-Ten trailed off and frowned. “I wish he’d talk

to me. He's always been a bit standoffish, but with the exams coming he's being downright abrasive. I assume that his family is putting pressure on him, but I really don't understand how clan politics work and neither does Lee." She sighed softly, turning a kunai round and round in her hand idly. "I'm worried about him."

Sakura gave her a brief, one armed hug.

"It'll be all right. You guys are a team – you'll figure it out. Sometimes Sasuke-kun can be sort of like that. Usually he just needs a bit of space to get out of his own head."

"You're probably right." Ten-Ten was quiet for a moment. "Want to give senbon a break and see who can make the most detailed pattern on the target with kunai?"

"Sure!" Sakura turned to the small backpack she used to carry excess kunai, shuuriken, and senbon as well as a few other things when she did weapons practice with Ten-Ten.

Ten-Ten peered over her shoulder.

"Oh, are you reading through the bingo book?"

Sakura bit her lip and nodded, setting the slightly dog-eared copy to one side on the grass.

"After our first out of village mission, I just... wanted to be prepared." Sakura's confidence had grown in leaps and bounds since Wave Country, but books still made her feel safe. Or, at least, as safe as it was possible for any shinobi to ever feel. She didn't want to be caught off guard like that again. It's wasn't pleasant reading – a couple of entries so far had made her feel physically sick – but it was important. Maybe it wasn't really relevant to the chuunin exams, but it didn't feel like something she should be putting off either.

It was Thursday. The chuunin exams started on Monday, and Kakashi had given his team the afternoon off to stock up on any supplies they thought they needed. Kakashi had changed into his mostly civilian clothes after they'd finished training that morning and headed straight to his bakery. He generally only wore civvies on the weekend, but these were special circumstances. His concessions to the fact that he wasn't on the reserves anymore when he wore civilian clothes were his hitai-ate tied around his neck (he wore his eyepatch so that he could enjoy having two eyebrows for a while) and his sheathed tanto hanging on a hook just inside the entrance to the kitchen.

Kakashi was sitting behind the bakery counter, staring at his book more than reading it and reminding himself that his students could handle this and that, if he made anymore bread dough at the moment, there wouldn't be enough room for all the loaves and rolls in his ovens. He wished he had more ovens. At this point he'd even be happy to do one of Gai's ridiculous challenges.

He looked up gratefully as the bell jingled and three people filed into the bakery. Suna genin from the look of them. The taller of the two boys was a puppeteer – not an ideal form of fighting in Konoha's humid climate. Unless he was using an incredibly high quality puppet,

he was probably going to run into problems with stiff and seizing joints. The boy glanced briefly at Kakashi's hitai-ate and then clearly wrote him off. Arrogant.

The girl had a battle fan strapped to her back and wasn't nearly so quick to dismiss Kakashi as inconsequential. Instead, her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. Kakashi wondered if she had spotted the faint burn scars on his hands that he'd acquired from years of using high level lightning jutsus.

The shorter boy's eyes were cold and hard enough that they might as well have been made of stone. There was no light in them, like he'd locked away every one of his emotions until only chilly calculation was left. He stared at Kakashi like he was sizing him up for a coffin and then he turned his attention to the display case. The boy's chakra felt *massive* in a way that reminded Kakashi of Naruto for some reason.

"Can I help you?" Kakashi asked.

The girl pulled out a wallet.

"Could we get a red bean paste anpan, a chestnut anpan, and... do you want a pork bun, Gaara?" The question was rather hesitant.

The shorter boy tilted his head slightly to one side as he considered the offer.

"That will suffice," he finally decided.

The girl appeared to relax minutely.

"And a pork bun."

"Are you in Konoha for the chuunin exams?" asked Kakashi casually as he gathered the assorted rolls in a paper bag.

The taller boy snorted.

"As if we'd be here for anything *else*."

The girl shot him a glare before offering Kakashi a restrained smile.

"Yes. We hope to do our nation proud."

She placed the correct amount of ryou on the counter, and Kakashi handed over the paper bag.

"Well, best of luck to the three of you."

The shorter boy turned to look at him again.

"Luck will not be necessary," the boy intoned flatly.

Kakashi watched silently as the trio left. He'd have to warn his students to watch out for those three – especially the shorter boy. There was something *off* about him.

“Kankuro, you *idiot*, we're supposed to be keeping a low profile – not antagonizing the *entirety* of Konoha,” Temari snarled as soon as the bakery door closed behind them.

“Feh. If that guy isn't a career genin, I'll eat *sand*.” Kankuro crossed his arms. “He was just a *baker*, Temari.”

“You unobservant *moron*, he was a *jounin*.”

“*What?!*”

Gaara ignored his siblings. He took a bite of his pork bun. It was good. He'd have to get another before Konoha was razed to the ground. Perhaps he'd go back during the evening and take the opportunity to feed Mother as well.

Kakashi did not know *why* his bakery had apparently become the gathering place for all the rookie team jounin sensei plus Gai, but he *did not approve*. They were all in his *kitchen* – not even out front in the shop. He was being *invaded*.

Couldn't they leave a man to stress bake in peace?

“I don't see what you're so worried about,” Asuma commented. “Today's just the written exam. The Forest of Death isn't until tomorrow.”

Kakashi didn't throw the ball of dough he was kneading at Asuma's face, because that would be a waste of dough. He wouldn't be nearly as stressed if these three would just *leave him alone*.

“Do you know who's proctoring the first exam?” asked Kurenai.

“Ibiki, the head of T&I.” Asuma reached for his packet of cigarettes. “So it's definitely going to be a psychological pressure cooker this year.”

“Light a cigarette in my bakery, and I will put a kunai through your hand,” Kakashi informed Asuma with an eye-smile. Asuma hurriedly put the pack away again. “And I'm not worried – I know my team will be fine – I'm *working*.”

Gai patted his back consolingly, clearly not believing him.

“Of course, my Rival.”

“This bread doesn't make itself, you know.”

Kurenai raised an eyebrow,

“You use shadow clones, so it sort of does.”

Kakashi glowered at her, and she just shrugged.

“It’s true,” Asuma agreed. “Anyway, if you didn’t think your team could handle the exams, why did you nominate them?”

“It’s not their *skills* I’m worried about – it’s their ability to find trouble.”

An hour later his fellow jounin had finally left Kakashi alone, and Kakashi was feeling calmer without an invading force in his kitchen. His kids were allowed in the back of the bakery, and Iruka was allowed in the back of the bakery – that was it.

“Nii-san!” Kakashi was just pulling another batch of loaves out of the oven when he heard Naruto’s shout. He left a shadow clone to finish things and headed out front. “We passed the first exam!”

“And Naruto gave another motivational speech,” Sasuke added, “so more teams passed than the proctors were expecting.”

“His campaign for hokage is off to a good start,” Sakura agreed.

Naruto rubbed the back of his head sheepishly.

“I got a little carried away.”

“It’s all right,” Sakura assured him. “I think we sold the ‘Team Incompetent’ thing pretty well.”

“Congratulations.” Kakashi smiled. “What did you think of the first exam?”

“Straightforward enough once we realized that the whole point was to cheat without getting caught,” Sasuke shrugged.

“Says you,” grumbled Naruto. “None of my jutsus are good for that sort of information gathering. There was no way to make a shadow clone proctor to get the answers for me without getting caught. I was banking on Sakura’s big brain getting us through, because I remembered just enough of that stuff not to get a zero.”

“Now you know what you need to work on for next time, dobe. Don’t worry about it.”

“So where’s tomorrow’s exam?” asked Sakura. “Anko-san said that we had to ask you for the location.”

“Training Field 44.”

“Isn’t that the one Cat-san goes to when he wants to ‘commune with nature?’” asked Naruto.

“Cat-san is an odd, *odd* man,” Kakashi nodded. Tenzou liked the sheer *size* of the trees in the Forest of Death. He’d use moukuton to sink into one of the massive trunks and nap on his days off. As far as strange ANBU habits went, it was a fairly tame one.

“So that’s probably the wilderness survival test that we were anticipating,” decided Sakura. “Can you give us any hints, sensei?”

“Of course not,” Kakashi told them cheerfully. “And I definitely wouldn’t recommend to pack the way you would have if you’d known about Zabuza and Haku in advance.”

“We definitely need to add more antibiotic cream to the med kit,” Sasuke muttered.

The smoke detector in Kakashi’s kitchen shrieked as he yanked his window open. He pulled his pictures off the windowsill.

“*Soyokaze no jutsu*.” Smoke funneled out the open window. “Now shut up,” he told the smoke detector. It screeched a few more times and then stopped.

There was a knock on his door and then a rattle as Iruka let himself in with Kakashi’s spare key.

“What have you set on fire now?” he called by way of greeting.

“Nothing. All of the butter came out of my croissants, and now it’s in the bottom of my oven.”

Iruka wandered into the kitchen and inspected the very dry croissants. He tapped one with a fingernail. It made a *thunking* noise.

“I think you could probably weaponized these.”

“Yup.” Kakashi smiled down at the ruined croissants. They were dry little bricks, and it was okay.

Iruka just shook his head at him.

“So, have you requested to be the one to greet your team when they reach the Tower, yet?”

Kakashi blinked.

“I can do that?”

Iruka pulled a scroll out of his pocket and handed it to Kakashi.

“I had a feeling you were going to say that, so I grabbed a copy of the request form for you.”

“Thanks.” Kakashi accepted the scroll gratefully and started searching for something to write with.

“Are you going to survive the next five days? They’re only an hour into the second exam.”

“An hour and sixteen minutes,” Kakashi corrected. “And I made sure to stock up on flour, yeast, and butter.”

“Well, I’m in the Mission Room the next few days if you need anything. Academy classes are on hold with so many foreign shinobi in the village.”

Kakashi nodded and then made a triumphant noise as he finally located a pen. He started filling out the form, reminding himself to breathe. Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura were smart and well prepared. They’d be fine. They were treating this as a reconnaissance mission, and he’d warned them to avoid the Suna genin. They wouldn’t do anything reckless.

...maybe Kakashi should just sleep at the bakery until his students got back.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Another chapter in less than a week? What is this?! (This chapter is lowkey dedicated to my physiotherapist, who might actually be made of magic.)

Thank you so much to everyone who reviewed!!! You're all wonderful!

Now where were we? Oh, yes, the always cheerful and pleasant Forest of Death....

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

Until that moment, Sakura would have described their time in the Forest of Death as unpleasant but not unmanageable. They hadn't gotten separated. No one had gotten eaten by any of the ludicrously massive bugs. They'd avoided at least one ambush by another team. So far, so good.

Then the Grass-nin had cornered them. And the woman's face was entirely wrong, but she'd said her name was *Orochimaru*, and the unnatural way her tongue had lolled from her mouth-

Sakura's stomach was full of ice, and her ears were full of static. She remembered that entry from the Bingo Book and the words printed in red at the top:

DO NOT ENGAGE – RUN ON SIGHT

Sasuke and Naruto were shifting, getting ready to defend themselves. The woman was still talking, but Sakura wasn't listening any more.

"Training Field 16," she breathed, just loud enough that her teammates could hear her.

Sasuke's eyes widened.

"But, Sakura-chan, I thought you said-" Naruto started to protest.

"Just *trust me*," Sakura interrupted.

The fireball was even bigger than before, yellow-orange with edges of red, but Sakura paid it no attention. As soon as Sasuke and Naruto had completed their respective parts of the joint attack, she wrapped her arms around both of them and shunshin-ed the three of them away in a desperate wrench of will and chakra.

They landed in a tangled pile on the large branch that they'd stopped on to eat earlier. Sakura rolled away from Naruto and Sasuke and threw up over the edge of the branch. Her hands

were shaking badly. No wonder Iruka-sensei had always warned them against trying to shunshin with more than one other person unless you absolutely had to.

“Are you all right, Sakura-chan? What was that about?” Naruto patted her back. Sakura reluctantly sat up.

“Orochimaru is an S-class missing-nin. He has ‘run on sight’ orders in the Bingo Book.”

Sasuke swore and ran a hand through his hair.

Naruto blanched and then rallied,

“Right. Okay. We need to-”

There was a creak. Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura all looked up with a jerk. A figure was crouched on a branch above them, head cocked to one side. Its skin was burnt and blackened but was flaking away to reveal an entirely new face underneath the ruined flesh. Sakura’s stomach dropped as Orochimaru smiled.

“Nice try.”

Naruto was, by nature, an optimist, but even he could admit at this point that – barring a miracle – they were probably going to die. Haku hadn’t really had his heart in it when he had tried to kill them. On some level Haku had *wanted* to be talked down. Orochimaru clearly wasn’t on the same wavelength. If anything, Naruto got the distinct impression that the missing-nin was *enjoying* himself. He had set a pair of giant snakes on them. *Giant snakes*. Purple and black snakes the size of trees! And he was just *watching* to see what they would do.

Sasuke was pulling out every fancy trick he could think of, Sakura was wielding a kunai like a dagger since senbon and genjutsu weren’t going to do a damn thing against those tough reptile scales and non-human minds, and Naruto and his shadow clones were trying to mob one of the snakes. Naruto’s wind jutsus were proving to be about as effective as Sakura’s senbon against the snakes’ scales. Honestly, another Training Field 16-style attack would be nice about then, but Naruto and Sasuke still hadn’t figured out the recurve problem, and Sakura probably didn’t have enough chakra left to transport the three of them out of harm’s way again so soon. If Orochimaru wasn’t infinitely faster than them, Naruto would be tempted to suggest they run for it.

“Senbon in the mouth?” he shouted at Sakura as he landed momentarily near her.

She shook her head.

“Don’t have anything with a high enough dose- wait! We’re being stupid! Eyes! Forget the scales – aim for their eyes!”

“Got it!” The slam of one snake’s tail dispersed five of Naruto’s shadow clones at once, and he grimaced. “If we can hold one still, is your aim still steady?” Sakura gave a curt nod.

“Find a good vantage point – I’ll tell Sasuke.”

Naruto created another ten clones to provide Sakura with cover as she fell back to a better position. Then he bounded up to Sasuke’s branch as Sasuke blew another Grand Fireball at the snake on the left.

“Should’ve packed more explosive tags,” Sasuke snarled in frustration. “I’m ready for one of your dumbass ideas, dobe!”

“We hold one still, and Sakura takes out the eyes.”

“Got it.” Sasuke glanced up at where Sakura had situated herself. “Start on the left – you keep its tail still, and I’ll take care of the neck.” He pulled a fistful of shuuriken and a spool of chakra wire from his weapons pouch.

Naruto leapt down to help his shadow clones. He and his clones shouted encouragement at each other as they hauled on the snake’s tail, keeping it as immobile as possible. Overhead Sasuke’s shuuriken spun through the air weaving an almost invisible web of wire between tree branches and around the snake at throat height, and then Sasuke set the web on *fire*. The snake froze for just a fraction of a second. That was all Sakura needed. Two kunai flew true. The snake thrashed its head violently in blind pain, snapping the chakra wire with its flailing. Sasuke leapt from his branch and plunged a kunai into the soft, vulnerable underside of the snake’s chin. It wasn’t clean, it wasn’t neat, but it worked. One giant snake down – another giant snake and a missing-nin left to go.

Naruto and his shadow clones scattered to avoid the giant snake’s corpse as it collapsed to the ground. Together they swarmed back up the nearby trees to the illusion of safety that high ground gave.

Orochimaru was still passively watching and... smiling.

“Oh, Sasuke.” The words weren’t loud, but they somehow carried across the clearing. “I had my doubts, but I think I might be impressed. With the power I could give you, you could go far. And to think Itachi told me that you were worthless.”

Worthless.

Worthless.

It was a word that had been bandied around so often in Naruto’s life – less so since he’d met Kakashi-nii and Iruka-sensei and then Team 7 – but it still scraped at something deep and incredibly painful and still raw in Naruto’s chest. And to have that awful, ugly word directed at one of his teammates, one of his *friends*, on top of *everything else*-

Naruto saw red. He roared in fury, his skin feeling like it was burning, his bones feeling like they were melting. He screamed a wind jutsu, and instead of glancing off thick scales, the snake’s delicate underside was torn open. Then he *lunged* at Orochimaru with no thought in his head except stopping the man from ever laying a *single finger on one of his friends ever again*-

“Ah, ah, ah – none of that.”

A hand slammed into Naruto’s stomach, and the world went dark.

Sasuke had never so fervently wished that they could be back in Wave Country. At least during that disaster of a mission they’d had *Kakashi* with them when the S-class missing-nin attacked.

His sharingan had permanently etched Naruto’s unconscious body tumbling from Orochimaru’s hold and Sakura’s chalky, terrified face as she dove after him into his memory with distressing clarity. Sakura was now hauling Naruto’s limp form up to lean against a massive tree root while Sasuke kept watch. Orochimaru had disappeared like a wrath after incapacitating Naruto, and they’d put a little distance between themselves and the bloody remains of the giant snakes. Sasuke’s eyes darted around their surroundings looking for any hint of their attacker – the slightest flicker of foliage or whisper of chakra. He was positive that Orochimaru was toying with them – it was the only explanation for how they were still alive. Where had he gone?

Sakura stood and moved so that she was watching Sasuke’s blind spot. She was breathing heavily and so was Sasuke. Naruto lay unmoving between them.

“I must admit, you’ve been even more entertaining than I was expecting, Sasuke.” Sasuke’s limbs involuntarily froze. He gritted his teeth and tried valiantly to fight the grasp of the paralytic jutsu that gripped his body without warning. “I think I should give you a reward – a gift.”

And then a face was flying towards him, neck grotesquely long and jaws gaping, and fangs sank into his neck.

The paralytic jutsu abruptly released Sasuke as the fangs retreated. He collapsed to his knees screaming as brutal pain tore through his body. It felt like acid had been shot into his veins. His vision was graying out.

Distantly, Sasuke heard Sakura shouting as blackness welled up and engulfed him.

Kakashi wandered down the street heading in the direction of Ichiraku’s. He didn’t usually go out for lunch by himself, but it was the second day of the second exam, and his kitchen was too quiet. He missed his students which was a little ridiculous, because he’d gone longer without seeing them than this and been just *fine*.

A figure in a red coat went streaking past him, gheeta clattering frantically on the road. Kakashi turned to watch the figure go.

Apparently Jiraiya was back in town.

Kakashi stepped out of the way of the stampede of furious, half-dressed, and, in some cases, heavily armed women just in time. The kunoichi in the lead had the pale lavender eyes of a Hyuuga, her hair was dripping wet, and she was brandishing a katana. Ah – no wonder they had caught Jiraiya in the act. And presumably taking notes. The man never learned. How he'd managed to become Konoha's spymaster, Kakashi would never know.

"He likes to hide in the rushes in Training Field 17!" he called after the angry mob. Maybe it was petty, but Jiraiya deserved it.

"Thanks, Hatake-san!"

Jiraiya and the mob disappeared around a corner. There was a distant scream and a crash.

Kakashi shook his head and continued on his way toward Ichiraku's. Maybe he should go kidnap Iruka from the Mission Room to come join him.

He hoped his team was doing all right in the Forest of Death. Yesterday he'd thought he'd sensed a flicker of distant chakra that had almost felt like the Kyuubi... but it had been so incredibly brief that he must have been imagining things. If something had gone wrong with Naruto's seal the effects certainly wouldn't have been *brief*.

Kakashi hesitated and then abruptly changed direction towards the Mission Room. He clearly needed some company.

His students would be fine. His students would be fine. His students would be fine-

The walls were splattered with blood. His parents' bodies were tangled on the floor, and Itachi's words rang through the air.

Run. Live your miserable life. Hate me.

*"You need power." Sasuke whipped around as the young voice spoke up behind him. He stared down at his own eight year old face. "Who cares where it comes from? You can't avenge them without power. That's all that matters." Purple chakra was burning around the younger Sasuke's hands. "Can't you feel it? He's given us **so much**. We could **crush** Itachi."*

"Fuck that, teme." Naruto stepped out of the lengthening shadows on Sasuke's other side. "Where's the justice in that?"

Sasuke took a step back from both of them. His foot splashed in something dark and viscous. Another step and the shadows were sucking at his back.

*"You're an avenger," the younger Sasuke told him, reaching for his arm. His eyes were becoming increasingly sunken, his cheeks hollow, his skin sallow. "All we have to do is kill Itachi, and then **we'll never have to be frightened again.**"*

“Come on, teme. Let’s go train.” Naruto held out a hand. There were green leaves in his hair, and his arms were smudged with flour.

“Don’t you think you’ve stayed here long enough, Sasuke-kun?” Sakura had appeared next to Naruto. Flowers were twisted in her hair, and her dress was dark purple with a pale green shuuriken over the heart. The shadows and blood twisted and shied away from where she and Naruto stood.

Sasuke hesitated. Reach for Naruto’s outstretched hand-

*Small hands snatched his arm, fingernails lengthening into claws, tearing into his skin. Heady, nauseating power ripped through Sasuke’s body, and he **burned** like the heart of an inferno.*

*“Can’t you feel it? **Can’t you feel it?**” demanded the younger Sasuke. His lightless eyes were wide, his expression manic. “This power – it’s **everything we’ve ever wanted!**”*

*“You can use this power.” Kakashi was crouched next to Sasuke’s parents, gently closing his mother’s unseeing eyes. “And I suppose you even may, but, Sasuke,” Kakashi straightened up and turned to face Sasuke, his mangekyou seeming to glow in the darkness, “**should you?**”*

Sasuke was burning, burning so fiercely it felt like his bones might turn to ash. He flung out his hand toward Naruto. His fingertips brushed his palm.

It felt like peace.

Ever so briefly he glanced back over his shoulder at the younger version of himself-

Sasuke screamed as the claws in his arm tore him away and dragged him down, down, down into the shadows and blood and burning purple, his team a fading speck of light above him. A few green leaves drifted down into the shadows after him like tears.

Sakura adjusted her hold on the kunai in her hand. Her head was probably woozy from lack of sleep rather than a concussion, but given the way her left eye was starting to swell shut after her head had been ricocheted off a tree trunk, she couldn’t be sure. If not for Lee’s miraculously timed arrival, Sakura and her teammates would probably already be dead. She had managed to get the Oto kunoichi with a few paralytic-dipped senbon, but the other two Oto-nin were made of sterner stuff. After the first genjutsu Sakura had caught them in, they hadn’t given her a chance to weave another.

If she survived this, she was going to start learning earth jutsus, because she desperately wished she had some way of avoiding these soundwave attacks that didn’t involve dodging. Every time she dodged it gave their attackers another chance to get to the still unconscious Sasuke and Naruto.

This had gone so far passed Wave Country wrong, and it was terrifying. What had Orochimaru *done* to Sasuke and Naruto? *Why had he left them alive?* His Bingo Book entry had mentioned that he'd been expelled from Konoha for *illegal medical experimentation*. But Sakura couldn't afford to think about that right now. She couldn't afford even the smallest slip in her concentration – her teammates' lives depended on it. She desperately wished that Naruto and Sasuke would wake up.

A few feet away from her, Lee was struggling to get to his feet. Blood was trickling from one of his ears. The last soundwave attack had clipped him badly.

One of the Oto-nin raised his hand for yet another attack. Sakura wasn't sure that she'd be able to dodge this one in time.

Behind her, chakra suddenly flared, poisonous and corrosive and massive. Sakura whipped her head around and suddenly regretted wishing that Sasuke would wake up.

Sasuke's body was burning, but his mind was icy cold. He tilted his head as his sharingan noted every detail around him. The bruise darkening around Sakura's eye and the blood oozing from a cut at her hair line. Lee's struggles to regain his feet. Naruto's unconscious form lying on the cave floor next to him. The foreign kunoichi crumpled by a bush with three senbon protruding from her shoulder. The two Oto shinobi staring at him with shocked eyes.

Sasuke tilted his head to the other side.

“Which one of them hurt you, Sakura?”

They both needed to die, but the one who had hurt his teammate he would kill slowly. Painfully.

(And inside part of Sasuke was screaming – *screaming* – because this *wasn't him*.)

Power glowed around Sasuke like a corona, and he reveled in it. Compared to him, these two shinobi were *nothing* – mere ants beneath his feet.

(Make it stop! Make it stop! He didn't want this!)

“Sasuke-kun, your *face*-”

He turned away from Sakura. If she wasn't going to answer his question, he'd just take his time with *both* of them. It was a better idea anyway.

“There's no way he can control it,” snapped one of the Oto-nin. He raised his hand. “I'll just blow them *all* away.”

“Zaku, no!”

Sasuke was already moving. The other shinobi seemed pathetically slow to his eyes. He caught both of the shinobi's arms and twisted and wrenched them behind his back.

"You seem awfully proud of your arms," Sasuke commented. He considered their position for a moment. From this angle it would be so easy to break his opponent's arms. It wasn't necessary-

(No, no, no, *please*, **no!**)

-but Sasuke *wanted* to.

He placed a foot in the center of the other shinobi's back.

"I concede! *I concede!*"

"Just take our scroll!"

"Sasuke-kun, **STOP!**"

SNAP.

It felt good.

Nausea abruptly overwhelmed Sasuke as Sakura yanked him back.

What had he just *done*?

Team 7 was huddled in the cave that Sakura had found. Sasuke had his back pressed firmly against one stone wall and was hugging his knees to his chest. His chin was tipped so that his bangs hung down to hide his eyes.

Sakura's head was still throbbing with exhaustion. After the Oto-nin had fled, Ten-Ten and Neji had arrived looking for Lee. Sakura had sent them on their way after assuring Lee and Ten-Ten that her team would be all right. At the time, she'd done it because the longer Team Gai was there, the more panicked Sasuke had looked. She'd been afraid that his agitation would send the black flames burning across his face again. Now she strongly regretted that decision. It would have been infinitely smarter to stick with the other Konoha team.

Next to her, Naruto stirred at long last. Sakura stiffened. It hadn't *looked* like Orochimaru had done the same thing to Naruto as Sasuke, but what if it had been something equally as bad?

"Ngh." Naruto raised a hand and rubbed his face.

"Naruto?" Sakura asked hesitantly.

"Did you let me sleep through my watch?" he mumbled. Then his eyes snapped opened, and he jerked upright. "Oh my gods, are you guys all right?!" he demanded.

“No.” Sasuke’s voice was dull.

Naruto’s head snapped around to face Sasuke, his eyes wide.

“Orochimaru, he... *did* something to Sasuke-kun after you were knocked out.” Sakura bit her lip.

Sasuke’s hand reached up and clenched the fabric covering his left shoulder. Sakura had done the best she could for the puncture wounds with the antiseptic wipes, antibiotic cream, and gauze from their med kit, but not even Sasuke had thought to pack a general anti-venom or... *whatever* you were supposed to use to treat a wound like this. Neither Kakashi-sensei nor the Academy had ever covered what to do in a situation even *remotely* like this. The marking on Sasuke’s shoulder... it looked like a seal.

Sasuke’s fist was white knuckled in his shirt.

“He said it was a reward. A gift.”

“Teme?” Naruto reached a hand out towards Sasuke, and Sasuke flinched.

“Are *you* feeling okay, Naruto?” Sakura asked. “You and Sasuke-kun were unconscious for close to a day.”

“I’ve got a bit of a headache, but otherwise I just feel well rested.” He peered at Sakura. “Sakura-chan, when was the last time you slept?”

“The night before the second exam started. Who else was going to keep watch with you both unconscious?” Sakura rubbed a hand over her face. “We need to get to the Tower as fast as possible. This has gone way past Wave Country wrong. Notifying someone that an S-class missing-nin has infiltrated the village definitely takes priority over scoping out the exams.”

“Can we even get into the Tower without a second scroll?” asked Sasuke.

“Anko-san wasn’t very clear about that. We’re in no shape to take on another team, though.”

Naruto was staring into middle space, his eyebrows bunched together in a slight frown.

“You know, they never said that we actually have to *fight* the other teams to get the second scroll. We’re shinobi – what if we just *stole* one?”

Sasuke finally lifted his head and looked at Sakura.

“Our storage scrolls are about the same size as the Earth and Heaven scrolls. Could you put a genjutsu on one so that the other team didn’t realize that anything had been taken?”

Sakura pulled out her storage scroll and looked at it thoughtfully.

“Yeah. I think so.” She stared out the cave entrance from a moment. “If I caught the whole team in the right genjutsu, I could probably walk straight in and switch out the scrolls without anyone even knowing I was there.”

Naruto grinned. There was a hint of viciousness to it.

“Then get some sleep, Sakura-chan, ‘cause tonight we’re hunting down campsites.”

Gin had drawn the short straw and ended up with the midnight watch. His team had finally acquired their second scroll and decided to rest that night before making the final push for the Tower in the morning. He scrunched his nose. He didn’t like the massive trees of the Forest of Death or its giant centipedes. He was glad that they were almost done with this place.

Gin didn’t notice the slight shiver of chakra as the genjutsu settled over their campsite. Perhaps his team’s sensor, Aki, would have noticed, but she was sound asleep. He didn’t hear the noiseless footsteps. He didn’t see the pink-haired kunoichi walk right into their camp, because, in the genjutsu woven around him, there was no one but his team to see. Gin didn’t notice as the satchel containing his team’s scrolls was carefully eased open. He didn’t see the sweat running down the kunoichi’s face from the effort of maintaining the genjutsu. He didn’t hear the faint snap as she gently closed the satchel again. He didn’t feel her carefully muted chakra behind him as she stood and left as silently as she had come.

After a few minutes, the genjutsu dispersed softly into the midnight air.

Gin rolled his shoulders and wished that his watch would be over already.

“That was *so badass*, Sakura-chan!” whispered Naruto. He and Sasuke had been watching, ready to jump in and back up their teammate if she was discovered.

“I think I burned through almost half the chakra I had left doing that,” Sakura admitted shakily. “I’m going to need to sleep again before we head for the Tower.”

Kakashi was just about to consider the issue of breakfast when he felt the first tugs of the summoning jutsu. He had just enough time to swap out his apron for his jounin vest before he was whisked away. Either his students had decided to sneak a peek at their scroll or they’d only taken four of the five days to reach the Tower.

Ah – they’d made it to the Tower.

“Congratulations, Team- *OOF!*”

Naruto and Sakura both slammed into him and clung.

“Nii-san, it went *Wave Country wrong*,” Naruto mumbled into his jounin vest.

“He said his name was *Orochimaru*. He matched the description in the Bingo Book, and he *did something* to Sasuke-kun. It looks like some sort of *seal*.” Sakura let go and looked up at

him. The ugly purple bruise ringing her left eye was starting to fade to green at the edges. The only thing stopping Kakashi's knees from folding was years of experience in ANBU.

Kakashi's eye snapped to Sasuke. He was standing just behind Naruto and Sakura, his face ghostly pale. A rectangle of gauze was taped to the side of his neck. His eyes were bruised like he hadn't slept in days.

"I broke someone's arms. Just because I could." Sasuke's voice was quiet and shocky.

Naruto let go, and Kakashi stepped towards Sasuke.

"Show me." Sasuke pulled the collar of his shirt to one side. Kakashi stared in horror at the *S-class curse seal* on his student's shoulder. He took a deep breath. He had to be calm about this – his team was already scared enough. He settled a comforting hand on Sasuke's head. "Okay, Sasuke, your chuunin exams are over. I need to take you to a seals master." Sasuke's shoulders slumped in relief, and he nodded. "Naruto, Sakura, do you want to pull out of the exams or keep going?"

Naruto looked down, hugging one arm to his chest. Sakura bit her lip.

"Don't we need a full team to continue?" she asked.

"No. The last exam is one-on-one matches, so the choice is up to you."

"You guys should finish."

Naruto looked up at Sasuke.

"You think so?"

"We completed our priority objective, but we're not done with our reconnaissance mission, yet." Sasuke quirked up the corner of his mouth in a tenuous hint of a smile. "I'll keep gathering information from the stands."

Naruto offered a shaky grin in return.

"You're right – we can't just abandon our mission halfway through. You in, Sakura-chan?"

"Yeah," Sakura nodded.

Kakashi really wished he could stop treating his students like adults and just stick them all in a box of bubble wrap. Maybe keep the box in the Ryouken Bakery's kitchen because with their luck the Raikage would try to steal it for some random reason. Right, focus.

"If you're both continuing, you have to stay here until the time limit for the second exam is up. The proctors will have rooms set up for you. You've all done incredibly well, and I'll be back tomorrow when the second exam official ends. The proctors don't want jounin sensei hanging around the Tower cluttering up the place."

"Okay, sensei."

“You’ll let us know how Sasuke-teme’s doing, nii-san?”

“Of course.”

Once Naruto and Sakura had been delivered to the proctor, who would show them where they could rest and have a proper meal, Kakashi placed a hand on Sasuke’s shoulder and prepared to transport them both outside the limits of Training Field 44.

“Hatake-san, wait!”

Kakashi paused and glanced at the chuunin proctor.

“Hmm?”

“You can’t leave with your student – he’ll be automatically disqualified!”

“I know. That’s the point.”

“But-!”

“What do you think I care about more – a biannual exam that my student can take again in six months or getting the *curse seal* off his shoulder as quickly as possible?”

Kakashi formed the necessary seal, and he and Sasuke disappeared from the Tower before the proctor could respond.

Was it incredibly rude?

Yup.

Did Kakashi actually give a single damn about that at the moment?

Absolutely *not*.

Chapter End Notes

TiedyedTrickster, my beta listener and chief enabler, found the original Tumblr thread that got this all started:

[That first random tumblr post](#)

It's hard to believe how far this story has come.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much much for all of the wonderful reviews! You're all amazing!

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

“We’re going to find a seals master here?” asked Sasuke dubiously as he looked around the hall of the inn.

“He always stays here when he’s in the village,” Kakashi explained as he guided Sasuke towards the room number the innkeeper had given him. “It’s close to the bath houses.” He stopped in front of Room 19. “Okay, Sasuke, try to look as pathetic as possible – we may have to resort to emotional blackmail.” Kakashi raised his fist and knocked.

After a minute, a teeny, wizened old man creaked the door open and peered up at Kakashi myopically.

“Can I help you?” he quavered and then blinked. “Oh, it’s you.” The henge released with a puff of chakra, and Jiraiya was suddenly filling the doorway. “What do you want, kid?” He frowned at Kakashi’s clothes. “You’re back on active duty.”

“Yes, I am. This is Sasuke Uchiha.” Kakashi put a hand on Sasuke’s right shoulder. “He’s one of my students, and during the second chuunin exam, an enemy nin managed to put a curse seal on him.” It wasn’t a good idea to mention Orochimaru’s name in a public hallway where someone might overhear.

Jiraiya stared at them for a moment and then stood aside to let them in.

“Why didn’t you take it off yourself?” Jiraiya asked as he closed the door. “I know Minato taught you basic sealing.”

“Because it was put on him by your *ex-teammate*. There’s nothing *basic* about this seal. The best I could do would be to overlay a barrier seal on it, and I doubt it would hold for long.”

Jiraiya’s eyes had gone wide, and he pressed his hand to the door behind him. An intricate set of security seals flared blue as they activated and then settled back into the wood.

“Orochimaru’s in the village?!” He let out a growl of frustration. “Slippery snake bastard. I had good information that put him in Moon Country less than three days ago. Must have been a decoy. Does Sarutobi know?”

“I’m going to send him a message while you figure out how to get that curse seal off Sasuke.”

Jiraiya turned his attention to Sasuke.

“Left or right shoulder?”

“Left.”

“Blank message scrolls are on the desk,” he told Kakashi as he bent down to inspect the seal on Sasuke’s shoulder.

Kakashi scribbled out a thorough but succinct message to the Hokage then rolled the scroll back up and summoned Pakkun.

“Hey Boss. Another bread delivery?”

“Message for the Hokage.” He handed Pakkun the scroll. “Wait to see if he wants to send a response of any sort with you.”

Pakkun shot Sasuke and Jiraiya a brief, worried glance.

“Got it.” He disappeared in a pop of chakra smoke.

Jiraiya straightened up.

“It’s the same damn seal he put on Anko,” he sighed, anger underlying his words. “So, good news first.” He pulled out the desk chair and indicated for Sasuke to sit. “You got to me in time. This seal is parasitic. Another week or two and I wouldn’t have been able to do jack without potentially ripping out half your chakra coils. At that point, most likely the only person who’d be able to take it off safely would be the one who put it on. Now, bad news – getting this off you isn’t going to be as simple as slapping a suitable counter seal on or picking apart the chakra matrix. What makes this thing so damn insidious is that part of what initially keeps it from being removed is the victim themselves.” Jiraiya ran a hand over his hair. “The last kid that another seals master and I tried to take one of these off of was one of Orochimaru’s students, and on some level, she couldn’t fully accept that her sensei had done something to so profoundly hurt her. By the time she could, it was too late to remove it, and all we could do was mitigate the effects. You’re going to have to reject this thing on every level for the counter to work.”

Sasuke nodded in understanding, face unnaturally blank, and Kakashi felt his heart clench.

“Right then.” Jiraiya started gathering his sealing supplies. “We’re heading over to the Hokage Tower to use the sealing room there. I don’t want any interruptions while we do this.”

“I was surprised to see you back in the village,” Kakashi commented about halfway to the Hokage Tower. Sasuke walked silently to Kakashi’s right apparently lost in thought, and Jiraiya was on Sasuke’s other side wearing an expression of practiced nonchalance.

Jiraiya shrugged.

“The Sandaime has been wanting to talk to me in person for a while now among other things. Besides, I should really check on how Minato’s seal is holding up. Ought to have done it years ago. He’d probably be pissed that it took me this long.”

Kakashi nodded.

“True, but you’re here now, and that would have counted for something with Minato-sensei. Kushina, on the other hand, is probably still going to gut you the instant you reach the afterlife.”

Jiraiya stiffened slightly.

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

Kakashi eye-smiled at him.

“Think of it as motivation not to leave things so long next time.”

Sasuke watched as Jiraiya finished drawing the last few symbols of the giant seal. He was having troubles holding onto thoughts that weren’t angry or dark. Hope and reassurance seemed to slip through his grasp like water, and the specter of Itachi felt like a physical presence standing just out of sight behind him. It wasn’t right. Maybe a few months ago, before he’d joined Team 7, he wouldn’t have noticed the difference – that was pretty much how he’d felt all the time anyway. He hadn’t realized how much that had changed. And maybe he still wouldn’t have noticed the difference if it wasn’t for the fact that he had *dozens* of non-combat moments he could perfectly recall because of his sharingan. All those times his eyes had activated during meals or conversations or simple D-rank missions before he had developed the second tomoe were preserved with crystal clarity in his head. The world had been bright and vibrant and bold. He’d felt cautiously happy – some days almost hopeful. Sasuke had glimpsed a future beyond revenge. He’d touched a life without the shadow of the past smothering him, and he could *remember* what it had felt like. Before, he’d been frustrated by his developing sharingan memorizing ‘pointless’ moments. Now he clung to those memories like a lifeline.

It felt like anger was the only thing giving the world any color now, and Sasuke was swimming in dull, despondent gray. He desperately wanted it to stop. Sasuke wanted the colors back.

Kakashi was crouched next to Sasuke, watching Jiraiya work as well. Three ANBU guards ringed the room, keeping silent sentinel. Sasuke wondered if the one in the cat-like mask was the ‘Cat-san’ Naruto had mentioned. He shivered as a light breeze tickled across his bare shoulders. Jiraiya had already inked another complex design around the curse seal on Sasuke’s shoulder.

“All right, Uchiha, get over here, and let’s get started.” Jiraiya straightened up. Sasuke stood and walked to the center of the seal Jiraiya had created, being careful not to step on any of the symbols in the array. He sat down, and Jiraiya handed him a strip of leather. “Put that in

your mouth. This is going to hurt like hell before you pass out.” Then Jiraiya picked his way back out passed the border of the massive seal. “Ready?” Jiraiya asked when he’d turned back to face Sasuke.

Sasuke glanced over at Kakashi. His teacher was watching him, gaze steady. He gave Sasuke a small nod. Sasuke took a deep breath. He turned back to Jiraiya, stuck the strip of leather in his mouth, and nodded firmly. He could do this.

Jiraiya pressed his palms to the edge of the array. Around Sasuke symbols lit up with blinding, brilliant blue light.

The piece of leather turned out to be entirely unnecessary. Sasuke was unconscious from the sheer magnitude of pain before he even had time to scream.

Sasuke was sitting in empty darkness. Around him the shadows burned purple. Three green leaves lay on the ground by his knee. He picked them up and rubbed one between his fingers.

“It feels good, doesn’t it?” Sasuke turned his head. The younger Sasuke was sitting to his left. His sunken eyes gleamed oddly. “We don’t have to be afraid any more. It’s finally over.” The younger Sasuke reached out for the leaves in Sasuke’s hands. “You don’t need those anymore. We don’t need anyone else now.”

Sasuke jerked the leaves close to his chest.

“No.”

“We don’t need them to kill Itachi.” Small hands reached for the leaves again.

Sasuke stood and stepped back.

“What does that matter?”

*“We have to avenge them. Killing Itachi is the **only** thing that matters.” The small, gaunt face stared up at him. “Don’t you want to be safe?”*

*Sasuke hesitated. His arms uncurled from his chest slightly. Safe. When was the last time he had **truly** felt safe? When had he last not felt Itachi’s specter lingering at the border of his thoughts waiting to finally strike him down, too?*

His hands eased further still from his chest. He so desperately wanted to feel safe again.

“Just let them go. It’ll truly be safe if it’s just us. It’s so much safer if we’re alone.”

Sasuke froze. He stared down at into his own hungry, hollow-cheeked face.

Alone, you starve to death.

His eyes slid down to the younger Sasuke’s hands. They were trembling.

“I thought you said we didn’t have to be afraid anymore.”

“We don’t.” The younger Sasuke stretched his hands towards the leaves, fingers hooked like claws.

*“Then why are you still **terrified**?”*

The younger Sasuke stilled.

“I’m not.”

*“Yes, you are. You’re petrified, and you’re **hiding** down here.” The leaves in Sasuke’s hands were starting to shiver and squirm. “That’s... **pathetic**. You’d rather hide behind someone else’s power than earn your own! Do you really think that a **missing-nin** would give us something that would make us **safe**?!”*

The younger Sasuke was cringing back now.

*“We defeated those Oto-nin like they were **nothing**!” he protested. “Just think of what **else** we could-”*

*“No! Maybe I **can** use this power, but I **won’t**, because this is NOT WHO I AM! **I’M BETTER THAN THIS!!!**”*

*The leaves in Sasuke’s hands **exploded** into a blinding tree of light that blazed like a super nova, burning away the darkness. A rainbow of colors shifted through the white light of its trunk, and luminous emerald leaves tipped its branches. Sasuke reached out, not quite touching but the warmth of the light already suffusing his fingers.*

The younger Sasuke stared up at the massive tree with wide eyes.

“I just wanted to be safe.” The child sounded close to tears.

Sasuke tilted his head, and his own eyes softened just a bit.

*“We already **are**.” Then he lay his hand against the trunk of the tree.*

Sasuke woke slowly. It was dark. Was he still-?

The antiseptic tang of hospital caught his nose, and he realized that it wasn’t nearly as dark as he’d originally thought. Moonlight was spilling in through the window and across the bed Sasuke was lying in, painting the room in highlights of silver. He was in the hospital.

Sasuke sat up. His whole body ached, and his left shoulder throbbed in time with his pulse.

“How are you feeling?”

Sasuke started and turned to see Kakashi slumped in the chair next to his bed.

“Achy but... better.” And it was true. The clinging miasma of unnatural anger and smothering gray seemed to have lifted from his mind. Itachi was once more a shadow at the edge of his thoughts instead of a looming presence consuming his every moment.

“Glad to hear it.” Kakashi straightened up a bit and stretched his back. “The med-nin said that your chakra paths are a bit burnt and that you’re probably going to have an impressive scar on your shoulder, but the curse seal is gone.”

On some level, Sasuke had already known that, but it was a relief to hear the words.

“How long do they want to keep me here?” he asked.

“They were just waiting for you to wake up. Hopefully they’ll release you in the morning.” Kakashi rubbed one hand over his face. “You’re going to have an ANBU guard detail shadowing you for a while just in case Orochimaru tries anything else.”

“Can he- Can he put another curse seal on me?” Sasuke felt sick at the very thought.

Kakashi shook his head.

“No. It’s not the sort of seal that can be applied to someone a second time. Your body has essentially developed an immunity after successfully fighting it off once.”

Sasuke’s shoulders relaxed. Another thought occurred to him.

“How long was I unconscious?”

“About twelve hours. If you can, try to get some more sleep. Enough teams have already passed the second exam that they’ve decided to do an elimination round after the deadline ends tomorrow, and I got special permission from the proctors to bring you back with me to watch.”

Kakashi watched Sasuke drift back to sleep again and sighed softly. Iruka had been by earlier to make sure that Kakashi had eaten. (Kakashi hadn’t.) Tenzou had dropped in as well after the sun had gone down to let him know that his ANBU squad would be taking the lead on Sasuke’s guard detail. Kakashi had spent far too much of the previous day mentally going through recipes to decide on something time-consuming and fiddly enough to distract himself with once he finally got back to his kitchen.

He let his eye close. Sasuke was going to be all right. The counter had worked.

Keeping his students in a box of bubble wrap was sounding more appealing than ever, though.

His team really did have a talent for finding trouble. Kakashi was just glad that they seemed to have an equal talent for surviving it.

Naruto carefully balanced three kunai against each other so that they created a pyramid with their ring ends all leaning against together for support. He looked at them for a moment and then pulled a shuuriken out of his weapons pouch. It was delicately arranged on top of the kunai like a table top. Naruto retrieved another shuuriken.

“I should have brought a book,” Sakura commented. She was perched on the edge of her bed, watching Naruto. “It never occurred to me that we’d end up with a long stretch of waiting where we didn’t have to be on constant alert.”

“Yeah,” Naruto nodded. He didn’t really like reading in his spare time – it always felt too much like homework – but a deck of cards would have been nice. They were both worried about Sasuke, and the room the proctors had given them didn’t really provide any distractions. They’d even tried having a weapons debate, but it had been halfhearted at best. There had been a gaping hole in the conversation that should have been filled by gruff comments about shuuriken. Neither of them had been able to ignore it.

Sakura watched quietly as Naruto added two more shuuriken to his tower.

“Hey Naruto.” Her voice was hesitant. He looked up from his construction. “Just before Orochimaru knocked you out... why did your eyes turn red?”

Naruto’s hand jerked, and weapons went clattering across the floor.

“*What?!*”

“Orochimaru said something about Sasuke, and you started yelling, and your whisker markings went all,” Sakura wiggled her fingertips across her cheeks, “bold, and your eyes turned red. Then you took out that giant snake with one wind jutsu, and Orochimaru knocked you out.”

“I don’t know. I- I just remember being so *angry*.” Naruto stared down at his scattered kunai and shuuriken. He hugged himself. “I don’t know why my eyes would have turned red.”

Sakura slid off her bed and sat down next to Naruto on the floor.

“Well, your mom wasn’t from Konoha, right? Maybe she had some sort of kekkei genkai that we’ve never heard of.” She put an arm around Naruto’s shoulders and gave him a light squeeze.

Naruto pressed a hand to the seal currently invisible on his stomach. Kakashi had told him that jinchuuriki could channel their biju’s chakra like their own in the right circumstances. Was that what had happened? Had that burning in his bones been the Kyuubi?

“Yeah. It... might be something like that.”

Someone knocked on the door. Sakura stood to answer, and Naruto scooped up his weapons.

“Kakashi-sensei! You’re here early!”

“Nii-san!” Naruto dumped his weapons on his bed. “How’s Sasuke doing?”

Kakashi looked tired but in good spirits as he stepped into their room.

“I don’t know.” Kakashi turned and called back out into the hall, “How would you say you’re doing, Sasuke?”

“Much better.” Sasuke stepped into the room. His eyes were light, and his shoulders were no longer hunched in pain. The corner of his mouth was turned up in a small, genuine smile.

“SASUKE!”

“SASUKE-KUN!”

Naruto knew that Sasuke wasn’t much of a hugs person, but at that moment he didn’t care. The bastard was just going to have to deal with it after the week they’d all had. Naruto and Sakura sandwiched their teammate in a group hug. Sasuke stiffened for a moment and then relaxed.

“You scared us, you bastard,” Naruto muttered into Sasuke’s right shoulder.

“Please try not to get bitten by any more missing-nin,” Sakura agreed.

Sasuke snorted, and his arms slowly curled up to return the hug.

“I’ll do my best.”

Chapter End Notes

My job is pure chaos at the moment, and I'm going to need a wee break after the holiday insanity concludes, so the next chapter shall be arriving sometime in mid-January. (It's in the editing stage at the moment.)

See ya at the elimination rounds! Until then happy holidays and have a lovely New Years!

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for the wonderful comments!

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

“So, I don’t think we’re going to be able to make it to the third exam if we stick with the ‘Team Incompetent’ routine,” Sakura commented as they were preparing to head down for the start of the elimination rounds that they weren’t technically supposed to know about in advance. Kakashi had already left to meet with some of the other jounin-senseis.

“Team Semi-Incompetent?” Naruto suggested. “Keep our best jutsus in reserve but still give them a good fight.”

“And concede if your opponent starts coming after you with lethal intent,” Sasuke added.

“No genjutsus for me, and no wind jutsus for Naruto,” Sakura nodded. “I don’t think that any of the other teams from Konoha would use lethal force against us, but the Suna team looks like they might, and the Oto team already has. They’ll be the ones to really watch for.”

“It’s a plan,” Naruto decided. “Let’s go be underestimated!”

Sakura stared up at her name on the electronic board. She was fighting Ino, and... she wasn’t sure how she felt about that.

Falling back into their usual bickering since the chuunin exams began hadn’t been as easy as Sakura had been expecting. Firstly, it felt *really* disrespectful to Sasuke, fighting over him like he was a piece of meat. Secondly, she didn’t *want* to be fighting with Ino. It was just so *pointless*. She wasn’t even sure that Sasuke could return *anyone’s* affection at this point in his life beyond friendship. And even if he could, it wasn’t like he could only pick between the two of them. There were dozens of girls their age in village. It all felt so *stupid*, and Sakura was *angry* at herself that she had wasted *years* of friendship on something so damn *trivial*.

Sakura didn’t *want* a rival – she wanted her best friend back. When this was over, she was going to sort things out with Ino, because quite frankly *her crush on Sasuke wasn’t worth it*, and it never had been.

“You’ve got this, Sakura-chan!” Naruto told her with an overly bright grin and an enthusiastic arm pat. For a brief moment, Sakura wished that they weren’t still playing

‘Team Semi-Incompetent.’ Now that she could tell them apart, Sakura really hated Naruto’s forced smiles. Sasuke had on a blank and disinterested expression but gave her a tiny nod.

Sakura headed down the stairs to the arena.

“You should just concede right now,” Ino told her. “Without Sasuke-kun to protect you, you’re just going to get yourself hurt.” She flicked her ponytail, and suddenly Sakura was *furious*. Not at Ino, not at being underestimated, but at Ino’s sensei for letting Ino wander around with a hairstyle that could so easily *get her killed*. Maybe Ino didn’t have to worry as much given the team she was on, but she wasn’t always going to *be* with Shikamaru and Choji on missions.

Sakura pulled a kunai out of her weapons pouch.

“I can take care of myself just *fine*, Ino-pig!” she snapped. “I’m not a bud anymore!”

Something almost pained flickered briefly across Ino’s face.

“Begin,” the proctor told them with a cough.

Sakura threw her kunai, and Ino dodged it with ease. The kunai planted itself in the groove between the flagstones three feet behind Ino – exactly where Sakura had been aiming. Then she attacked with exactly what she knew Ino was expecting – Academy basics.

Ino was good, but Sakura was used to sparring with Sasuke, who was practically a genius, and Naruto, who just did *not* stay down. She purposefully left her right side open. Subtly braced herself as she saw fist coming, preparing to roll with the hit. A ringing slap caught her across the face instead.

Sakura had expected not to be taken seriously but not *that* much. Ino’s expression was shocked, like she hadn’t been expecting the slap either, and she froze for half a breath.

Sakura didn’t. Face still stinging, she swapped places with the kunai that was now only a foot behind Ino. Even as Ino started to whirl to defend herself, Sakura caught the trailing end of her ponytail, yanked her off balance, and jabbed two paralytic-dipped senbon into Ino’s shoulder.

She let go of Ino’s hair and shunshin-ed across the arena.

Ino pulled the senbon out of her shoulder and let them clatter to the ground.

“If you were aiming for any nerve points you missed,” she informed Sakura tartly.

“I wasn’t.”

“What-” Ino took a step forward. Staggered. “-the hell?!” Her eyes widened as she realized what was happening.

Sakura felt a twinge of guilt, but Ino was clever and talented, and she knew that the instant Ino started taking her seriously her chances of beating her without resorting to genjutsu

would be slim.

Ino let out a growl of frustration as she dropped to one knee. She fumbled for her weapons pouch, pulled out three shuriken, and managed to throw them in Sakura's general direction before she slumped to the ground.

"Winner – Sakura Haruno," the proctor called after a few long moments.

Sakura let out a long breath. The match had been emotionally taxing in a way she hadn't been expecting. Two med-nin were checking on Ino, and a concerned Team 10 and Asuma had filed out onto the arena floor as well. Sakura approached them hesitantly.

"It's a low-dose paralytic. She'll be fine in about an hour," she assured them.

Shikamaru glanced sideways at her.

"Her pride might never recover, though."

There was an annoyed huff from where Ino was being lifted onto a stretcher by the medics. Ino was still awake, just unable to move her arms and legs. She was watching Sakura with an unreadable expression.

"We should spar again sometime properly," Sakura blurted before she could think better of it. "I... miss you."

It wasn't the full apology Sakura had planned, but it was a start.

For a brief second, Ino's eyes were wide, startled, almost... hopeful. Then her mouth pulled up into a small smile.

"Next time... I won't go easy on you."

Sakura offered a tiny smile in return.

"You better not."

Naruto's fight with Kiba hadn't *quite* been a comedy routine, Sasuke decided, but it had definitely been close. It had largely consisted of close-range grappling, and then Naruto tossing dignity to the wind and using his teeth at one point. Not really the shinobi way, but whatever got the job done. If Naruto wasn't still playing up the overly excitable idiot bit, it would have been over much sooner. Maybe Kiba was a better ranged fighter and that's why Naruto had kept the fighting so tight.... Honestly, Sasuke couldn't remember anything about Kiba's preferred fighting style. (He'd mostly ignored Kiba at the Academy.) The Inuzukas did some sort of combo attack thing with their dogs, didn't they? He wasn't entirely certain why Naruto had seemed to be avoiding using almost *any* jutsus. Sasuke had refrained from actually cheering for his teammate – because Team Semi-Incompetent didn't get along as well as the actual Team 7 – but he did give Naruto a small nod of approval for qualifying for the third exam when he rejoined Sasuke, Kakashi, and Sakura on the balcony. Kakashi

ruffled Naruto's hair, and Sakura patted his shoulder. Naruto was beaming and bouncing on his toes. He pulled out the tin of salve that Hinata had gifted him with.

"I can't believe you *bit* Kiba," Sakura grimaced as they waited for the arena to be cleared and the next match to be announced.

Naruto wrinkled his nose.

"He *really* needs to wash that coat, but it worked!"

"Still gross."

"How do you heal that fast?" grumbled Sasuke, watching with a touch of envy as Naruto applied the healing balm to the cuts and scrapes he'd acquired during his fight. The cuts were sealing shut almost as fast as he could wipe balm over them.

"'Cause I'm awesome," Naruto told him flippantly. Then he added much more quietly so that only Sasuke could hear, "It's something I got from my mom." He turned and held the tin out to Sakura, tone loud and boisterous again. "You should put some of this around your eye, Sakura-chan! It might help with your bruise."

"Thanks." Sakura accepted the tin and started delicately rubbing some of the salve into the rainbow of bruises still mottling the side of her face.

Sasuke leaned against the railing and watched the electronic board flicker as it prepared to call up the next pair of contestants. On some level, he was disappointed that he wasn't able to participate, but that was what the winter exams were for. His shoulder still twinged, but it was the discomfort of healing rather than the painful spasms of the curse seal.

Neji Hyuuga vs. Hinata Hyuuga

Byakugan versus byakugan? That ought to be interesting. Sasuke glanced over at where Hinata was standing next to Shino and Kurenai. He didn't really remember much about Hinata from the Academy. She'd been quiet to the point of practically being invisible. The only reason he'd taken any note of her at all was because she'd never fawned over him like every other girl in their class or sent him a single longing glance. He'd appreciated it. Sasuke couldn't recall if she'd had good grades or been any good at taijutsu, but he really hoped that she had, because somebody really needed to kick Neji's fate-obsessed ass. He knew which Hyuuga *he* was rooting for.

"Kick his ass, Hinata-chan!" Naruto shouted. "You can do it!"

"You've got this, Hinata!" Sakura called as well.

Hinata gave them a tremulous smile before she headed down to the arena to face Neji.

If Neji didn't have an impressive bruise on his forearm tomorrow from where Kakashi had grabbed him to stop him from killing Hinata, Kakashi would be *very* surprised. The Hyuuga

may never have particularly approved of Kakashi (like the Uchiha, they saw his successfully transplanted sharingan as an encouragement to doujutsu thieves), but even he knew that relations between the Main and Branch families could, at best, be called strained. He'd had *no clue* that things had gotten *this* bad, though.

"Main House favoritism," Neji sneered at the three jounin and one chuunin holding him back.

"The matched had already been called." Kakashi released Neji's arm. "We just prevented you from being brought up on murder charges."

"You promised me that you wouldn't let this Main House versus Branch House business get to you!" Gai's voice was sharp.

Kakashi gave Gai a meaningful look once the medics had rushed Hinata away for surgery and Neji had breezed past them back up to the platform radiating arrogance and anger.

"Did you have *any* idea that he would do that?" Kakashi murmured as they headed back to join their students.

"No." For once the corners of Gai's mouth were turned firmly down. "I knew that there was a great deal of anger that he was holding close to his heart, but I never imagined that he would do something like this."

"You shouldn't have encouraged her," Neji informed Team 7 as he strode past them. "A failure will always be a failure."

Sasuke, Naruto, and Sakura watched as he rejoined his teammates. Ten-Ten and Lee quite pointedly didn't congratulate Neji on his victory. Ten-Ten refused to even look at him, and her mouth was set in a grim line.

Sakura's grip on the railing had become white knuckled.

"You two were right," she decided. "It *is* his destiny to get punched in the face." She turned her gaze back to the small puddle of Hinata's blood on the arena floor. "She called him *nii-san*, and he did *that* to her."

"What did the medics say?" Naruto asked as Kakashi rejoined them. "Is she going to be okay?"

Kakashi shoved his hands in his pockets. His visible eye was dark.

"They're taking her into surgery now."

"We are buying her so many flowers," Sakura abruptly decided. "She- After that, Hinata deserves flowers."

"So many flowers," Naruto agreed softly.

Sasuke was still staring at Neji as he nodded his agreement as well. He could almost see a familiar silhouette standing behind the other boy.

He wondered if the Hyuuga realized that they had a potential clan-killer on their hands.

Sasuke activated his sharingan less than a minute into Lee's fight with Gaara. He'd sparred with Lee on several occasions since their first match had evolved his sharingan to their second level. He already knew Lee was fast, but-

Sasuke stared in slack jawed shock as Lee's leg weights hit the ground with an almighty crash and massive cloud of dust.

-that was just ridiculous.

"I think I get what you meant about not being able to use Gai-sensei's fighting style even though you've copied it now."

"I only tried it once," Kakashi nodded. "I injured myself."

Without the weights on, Sasuke was having trouble keeping track of Lee even with his sharingan active. No wonder Lee's kicks always felt like getting hit by a house.

"LEE!"

"BRUSHY BROWS!"

Kakashi had to grab the back of Naruto's jacket to keep him from vaulting the railing to defend his friend. Gai was already moving to protect his student. Kakashi watched grimly as the medics swarmed and Gaara was declared the winner. He was starting to strongly suspect that Suna had snuck a ringer in with their genin team in a desperate attempt to bring more money into their village. The older two genin were strong fighters, but that red haired boy was *far* too powerful.

"I'll find out what's going on," Kakashi assured his students. "I'll be back before the final round is over. Wait here." Kakashi shunshin-ed after Gai.

Gai was standing in the hall just outside the arena, looking lost, like he'd run out of steam. Kakashi stopped shoulder to shoulder with him.

"They used the emergency transportation seal to take him to the hospital." Gai's voice was dull. "They said the damage was extensive enough that he may never be able to function as a shinobi again."

Kakashi hesitated. Placed a hand on Gai's back.

“He’s a fighter. You’ve already helped him to do the impossible once – a bad medical prognosis is barely going to slow him down. And even if it does... well, I could always use an assistant at the bakery. Just while he recovers.” Kakashi gave Gai’s back an awkward pat and lowered his hand. “He takes after his teacher after all.”

Kakashi was expecting the octopus hug when it came and for once didn’t instantly start struggling for freedom.

“You are right, my Rival. Thank you. I must have faith in Lee’s Youth and Tenacity. No matter the challenge laid out before him, I know they will not fail him.”

After nearly a minute, Kakashi finally wheezed,

“Air, Gai. I need air.”

“Ah, my apologies.”

Kakashi sucked in a deep lungful of oxygen as Gai let go.

“Just minor bruising – I’ll be fine.”

“I must get over to the hospital to offer Lee my support. Please let Ten-Ten and Neji know where I’ve gone.”

Once Kakashi had informed a worried Ten-Ten and blank-faced Neji what was going on, he rejoined his own students.

“What’s happening with Lee?” asked Sakura.

“Is Bushy Brows going to be okay?” demanded Naruto.

Sasuke didn’t say anything, but he was watching Kakashi with equal intensity to his teammates.

“It’s too soon to say for sure, but it doesn’t look good,” Kakashi sighed. “At the very least, he’s going to have a long, slow recovery ahead of him.”

Sakura stared at the slip of paper in her hand. It seemed so innocuous, and yet it was going to determine who she fought in the final exam.

“What number did you get, Sakura-chan?” whispered Naruto as the proctor finished taking the box down the line.

“Four. You?”

“One.”

“Probably not fighting each other then,” Sakura nodded.

“Now come forward and tell me what number you received,” another proctor with a clipboard instructed.

Sakura glanced down the line of her fellow genin. If she was lucky, she’d either be facing off against Shikamaru or Shino. It wasn’t that she thought that she could necessarily beat either of them (this was still a reconnaissance mission – winning wasn’t the *point*), but she trusted both of them to not try to kill her. After his match with Hinata, Sakura no longer trusted Neji not to go for a killing blow. The Oto shinobi had already tried to kill her once and knew that she used genjutsu because of that. The three Suna genin hadn’t used lethal force *yet*, but, at least in Gaara’s case, that was only because Gai had stopped him. If he hadn’t, Lee would be dead.

Sakura had the childish urge to cross her fingers behind her back.

Shikamaru or Shino. Shikamaru or Shino.

The proctor finished writing and turned his clipboard around.

Sakura went cold.

Sakura Haruno – Gaara

She missed the majority of the proctor’s explanation. Naruto could fill her in later. Her mind was racing. With those automatic sand defenses, she’d never be able to get close enough for taijutsu, and senbon would be useless with that sand armor covering him. She couldn’t just concede the instant the match started without horribly embarrassing her village. She’d have to concede at some point for certain, because otherwise it would definitely be a fight to the death.

None of the Suna genin had used any genjutsu. In fact, Sakura hadn’t seen anyone else use genjutsu during the exams aside from the misdirection the proctors had set up before the first exam. Well, there had been some henges, but that barely counted.

Sakura thought of the pictures of deserts she had seen in her textbooks – dry, barren wastes with nothing but sand and cliffs for as far as the eye could see. She thought of Lee coming to her aid in the Forest of Death and lying bloody and still on the arena floor.

Lee hadn’t deserved that.

An idea was starting to form in her mind. She’d need to talk to Kakashi and do a lot of research but... yeah. That might slow Gaara down a bit.

Maybe she couldn’t beat Gaara. Maybe Sakura wouldn’t be able to land more than a single blow, but if she pulled this off, it would be a fight that Gaara wouldn’t soon forget. After all, genjutsu wasn’t just for stealth and misdirection – it was also for scaring the ever loving *hell* out of your opponent.

“You coming, Sakura-chan?” asked Naruto.

Sakura started and blinked. The proctor had stopped talking, and the other finalists were dispersing. She heard Kankuro mutter to his teammates,

“Did you see that? Too scared to even move. Pathetic.”

“I’m coming.” Sakura turned to follow Naruto. She caught up with him, and they headed up the stairs to rejoin Kakashi and Sasuke.

“Who’d you get?” asked Sasuke when they reached them. “We couldn’t read the names from up here.”

“Neji!” Naruto beamed. Sasuke offered him a solemn fist bump which Naruto cheerfully accepted. “I am going to need one *hell* of a plan!”

“What about you, Sakura?” asked Kakashi.

“Gaara.” Because she was watching for it, Sakura caught the fractional widening of his eye.

“It looks like the two of you are going to have a lot of work to do this month.” Kakashi placed a hand on both Sakura and Naruto’s heads. “Good job. Tonight, we celebrate how well all three of you have done. Tomorrow, we strategize.”

“And visit Hinata and Lee at the hospital,” Naruto added.

Iruka slid onto the empty stool next to Kakashi at Ichiraku’s.

“I hear congratulations are in order.”

“Sakura-chan and I made it to the final round!” Naruto told him cheerfully, leaning around Kakashi. “Sasuke-teme totally would have, too, but we ran into some trouble in the Forest of Death, and he got injured.”

Sasuke shrugged philosophically,

“That’s what the winter exams are for.”

“Are you doing all right, Sasuke?”

Sasuke rolled his left shoulder.

“Still a little stiff, but the medics said that it should be pretty much healed in a few more days.”

“Well, that’s good news.” Iruka smiled at Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura. “It sounds like all three of you are doing incredibly well.”

“Thank you, Iruka-sensei,” Sakura smiled back.

Iruka thumped something down on the counter in front of Kakashi. Kakashi blinked at the package of bread flour.

“What-?”

“I thought I’d buy you some preemptively this time instead of waiting for you to show up at my door at midnight again because you ran out.” Iruka patted him on the back as Kakashi stared at the bag of flour trying to decide whether he should thank Iruka or stab him with one of his chopsticks. He settled on an unimpressed, deadpan look.

“I’ve only done that *once*.”

Iruka just shrugged unrepentantly.

“Kakashi-sensei, do you actually sleep, or do you just train us and bake bread?” asked Sakura innocently. Naruto burst out laughing, and Sasuke smothered a grin with a mouthful of noodles. Kakashi just sighed theatrically.

Team 7 would be camping out in his apartment that night. They were all still too badly rattled to go their separate ways just yet, and Kakashi still needed to tell them that they would be debriefing the Hokage tomorrow afternoon about what had happened in the Forest of Death. Things weren’t all right, but at least for the moment in the companionable warmth of the ramen stand, they felt more manageable.

Kakashi was definitely going to put that package of flour to good use, though.

Chapter End Notes

Happy three year anniversary everybody! Thanks for continuing to stick with me on this crazy ride!

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for all your wonderful, kind (and in some cases really hilarious) comments!!! You are the reason I keep posting!

(I ended up splitting this chapter into two parts for the sake of pacing and also my own sanity. I draw the line at 10k+ chapters.)

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

Sakura stood outside the front gates of the Yamanaka clan compound. She hadn't been there in a long time. She fiddled with the cloth covered box in her hands briefly and then firmed her resolve and headed in. Sakura took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She'd left Kakashi-sensei's apartment early, promising to meet Sasuke and Naruto at the flower shop later, but if this went badly, it was going to be a very awkward visit to the flower shop. She needed to do this, though.

When Sakura knocked on Ino's front door, Inoichi opened it.

"Oh. Hello, Sakura-chan. I haven't seen you here in quite a while."

"No." Sakura looked down at her toes for a moment and then up again. "Is Ino home?"

"She just finished breakfast. Ino!" he called over his shoulder. "You have a visitor!"

"What? I was just heading over to the shop. Who-?" Ino stopped when she caught sight of Sakura. "Sakura?"

No insult or accusation – just surprise.

Inoichi glanced between the two girls, raised an eyebrow, and backed discreetly out of the way.

"Hi Ino." Sakura hesitated and then held out her box to Ino. "I never should have tried to give you back the ribbon. It was a stupid thing to do. Your friendship means more to me than some dumb crush, and I'm sorry that it took me so long to realize that."

Ino stared at the box for a moment before slowly accepting it. She lifted the lid. A pair of hair sticks were nestled inside, dark wood and elegant with a mat finish. They would look striking against Ino's pale blond hair.

For a long minute, Ino was still. Then she removed the hair sticks and handed the box back to Sakura. With a few deft movements, she twisted her long ponytail up into a bun and secured it

place with the hair sticks.

“How do I look?”

“Sophisticated,” Sakura decided.

For a second, Ino’s eyes looked glossy. She wiped at them with the back of one hand.

“So you’re really over Sasuke-kun?”

“Well, I still think he’s cute,” Sakura shrugged, “but he’s also kind of a moron at times. He and Naruto nearly set our whole team on fire a couple of weeks ago by accident.”

Ino barked out a startled laugh.

“*Seriously?*”

“Yeah. Thankfully, Kakashi-sensei is really quick with elemental jutsus, and Training Field 16 is near a water source.” Sakura hesitated. “I don’t care that you still like Sasuke-kun, but he’s my teammate, so… please respect his boundaries. He’s not playing hard-to-get – flirting and stuff makes him really uncomfortable. Talk to him about training or jutsus and he’ll actually have a conversation with you.”

Ino was quiet for a moment.

“Okay.” She held out a hand. “Friends?”

Sakura shook Ino’s hand, her eyes a little damp but smile wide.

“Friends.”

Sasuke had never been in the Yamanaka Flower Shop before – partially because of the inherent risk of running into Ino but mostly because until recently he’d viewed plants (and especially flowers) as a pointless waste of time. The flower shop had a surprisingly calm air to it that almost reminded Sasuke of the bakery. Also, Ino wasn’t flinging herself at him. True, there had been a few moments of uncomfortably outrageous flirting, and Sasuke was pretty sure that that comment about orchids had been some sort of innuendo, but there had mostly been actual conversation and a vastly improved respect for his personal space. Either Sakura had had a talk with her, or Ino had been replaced by an imposter. Sasuke was leaning towards the imposter theory.

“I think we should get Hinata sunflowers,” Naruto decided. “She’s always seemed kinda sad, and sunflowers are really happy.”

Ino looked thoughtfully at the bucket of sunflowers Naruto was standing in front of. Then she retrieved a single stem of purple flowers from another bucket and held it next to the sunflowers.

“Purple asters are always a nice compliment to sunflowers. Mixing flowers keeps your bouquet from being too homogenous.”

“Huh. That does look nice. You’re really good at this.”

“I’m still not sure what we should get for Lee, though,” Sakura mused. The three of them were pooling resources to buy Hinata and Lee a bouquet each.

“Something orange?” suggested Sasuke uncertainly, thinking of Lee’s garish orange leg warmers.

“Orange is always a good color,” Naruto agreed.

“I think you might be slightly biased on that front, dobe,” Sasuke commented. He still couldn’t understand why his teammate thought it was a good idea to wear orange *pants* of all things. An orange shirt he could sort of understand but not pants.

Naruto stuck his tongue out at Sasuke, and Sasuke squashed the urge to return the gesture.

“Hmmm...” Ino looked thoughtfully around the shop. “Well, I’ve never thought that lilies made good hospital bouquets, so tiger lilies are out. Oh! I think we have some gerbera daisies in the back.” She shot Sasuke a bright smile and then disappeared into the back of the shop.

“Hey Sakura-chan,” Naruto hissed out of the corner of his mouth, “what else did you put on those senbon aside from paralytic? ‘Cause Ino’s acting *really weird*.”

Sakura smacked his arm.

“Nothing!”

“But she’s being *helpful* and *nice*, and she’s only hit on Sasuke-teme three times!”

“Stop being ridiculous. We just finally sorted some things out.”

“What about these?” Ino emerged from the back with a bucket of flowers that sort of looked like miniature orange *explosions*.

“Woah.” Sasuke blinked at the flowers.

“I think that might literally be what Lee would look like if he were a flower,” Sakura agreed.

“They’re *perfect*,” Naruto beamed. “Do they need other flowers with them, too, like the sunflowers?”

Ino looked at the daisies with consideration before answering.

“You could put some baby’s breath with them, but they’re so bright that they’ll probably overwhelm most other flowers. Some ferns with them would look nice.”

“Cool! What do you guys think? Sunflowers and those purple things for Hinata and daisies for Bushy Brows?” Naruto asked.

“Works for me,” Sasuke shrugged.

“I think they’ll both like them,” Sakura nodded. She joined Ino at the counter. The two of them seemed to be discussing ratios of asters to sunflowers and the merits of ferns versus baby’s breath.

Sasuke turned his attention to the rows of potted plants that the Yamanaka Flower Shop also sold. He ran his hand gently over soft leaves.

“Hey, teme, check it out – you could get Ki-san a friend!”

Sasuke turned to find Naruto holding out a bonsai tree from the shop’s small display.

“Ki-san doesn’t need a friend,” Sasuke told Naruto as he took the bonsai from him. He very discreetly checked the price tag on the pot before returning it to its display. Sasuke did *not* need a second bonsai tree... and it was outside the weekly budget he was trying to stick to anyway.

Kakashi met his team at the hospital. He’d brought two fresh chestnut anpan for Lee since those were the type he always got when he came to the bakery, and he’d guessed and chosen two red bean anpan for Hinata since he didn’t know the girl but most people seemed to like those. Kakashi was mostly there to check in on Gai, but his students were bringing flowers, so it would be rude if he didn’t bring something, too. Besides, he liked Lee.

When they reached Lee’s hospital room, Gai was in the middle of a speech or possibly a lecture. Either way, Kakashi could almost picture the dramatic backdrop behind Gai.

“Now what have I always told you, Lee? The most important things to a taijutsu master are not only Youth and Tenacity but also Rest! If we do not rest, our bodies do not heal! If our bodies do not heal, we do not become stronger!”

“Yes, Gai-sensei!”

“It will be difficult, but a true taijutsu master must be able to recognize when his body needs time to catch up with his Youthful Spirit!”

“Hello Sakura-chan, Naruto-kun, Sasuke-san, Kakashi-san.” Ten-Ten was leaning against the hall wall outside Lee’s room. There was a dark, painful-looking bruise on her right cheek, and she appeared to be favoring her right leg. “I’m just giving them a little space while Gai-sensei finishes his speech. Lee, the idiot, was trying to get up and walk when we got here this morning.” Ten-Ten paused, her expression crumpling slightly. Sakura handed Sasuke the very orange bouquet she was holding and opened her arms to Ten-Ten in an offered hug, which Ten-Ten accepted. “Thanks.” She let go of Sakura and wiped at one eye with a noise of frustration. “Sorry. The medics don’t think that Lee is going to be able to make a full

recovery, and I know he really does care, but Neji is just being such an *ass* about the whole situation.”

Inside the hospital room, it sounded like Gai was finally winding down.

“-so you must contain yourself and not begin training again until the medics give you permission, or I will be forced... to question your Youth!”

“I promise, Gai-sensei!” Lee sounded close to dramatic tears.

“You should be good to go in now.” Ten-Ten straightened from her barely noticeable slump and put on a cheerful expression like a mask. “Lee! You have more visitors!”

Team 7 followed Ten-Ten into Lee’s room, and Kakashi trailed in their wake. He stopped shoulder-to-shoulder with Gai.

“Hi Lee-san,” Sakura smiled.

“Hey Bushy Brows,” Naruto waved.

“Lee,” Sasuke nodded in greeting.

Sakura took the bright orange bouquet from Sasuke and held it out.

“We brought you flowers.” She paused. “Though, in hindsight, we probably should have brought a vase as well.”

“I’ll go ask at the nurse’s station if they have something we could use,” offered Ten-Ten before slipping back out of the room.

Lee was staring at the flowers, his expression deeply touched.

“For me? Really?”

“Of course. If it hadn’t been for you, we all would have been killed in the Forest of Death, and, besides, you’re our friend.”

“Yeah,” Naruto nodded firmly. “And your battle with Gaara was *awesome*!”

“But... I lost.” Lee looked away, expression grim.

“So? None of us would have been able to get anywhere near as close as you did to beating him. That guy’s defenses are *insane*.”

“Even with my sharingan activated, I could barely follow your movements,” Sasuke added gruffly.

Lee blinked and looked back again.

“Really?”

Sasuke crossed his arms with a nod.

“I want to spar you without those weights on once you’re recovered. Clearly you’ve been holding back on me.”

Kakashi nudged Gai with his shoulder and tilted his head towards the door. His team had the situation well in hand for the moment.

Gai closed the door quietly behind him once they reached the hall.

“Have you actually slept?” asked Kakashi, eyeing the dark bags beneath Gai’s eyes.

“Not much.” Gai rubbed his hands over his face. “They did surgery last night. They think that his arm should heal well given sufficient time, but at best he will walk with a limp for the rest of his life. It is difficult not to let the medics’ pessimism dampen my spirits.”

“Spar tomorrow?” Kakashi offered.

“Challenge?” Gai countered hopefully.

Kakashi sighed.

“Fine. It’s your turn to pick.”

“Laps around the village on our hands! If I lose, I shall do a thousand pushups!”

Kakashi was regretting this decision already, but at least Gai was looking a bit more like his normal, chipper self again.

Hinata stared at the ceiling of her hospital room and hugged the small stuffed dog Kiba had brought for her. As an Inuzuka, Kiba couldn’t actually conceptualize trying to recover from any sort of injury without a dog by your side. The toy was soft and brown, and Hinata doubted her father would have approved of it, but he hadn’t been to visit her and nor had anyone else from her family. Hinata wished that she could say that she was surprised by that. She wasn’t. (It still hurt.)

Kurenai and her teammates had promised to visit again later in the afternoon. Until then Hinata had her stuffed dog and her window for company. The medic had said it would be a few more days before she could go home – possibly a week. Her lungs had taken the brunt of the damage, and he wanted to keep her on oxygen to take the strain off them while they healed.

There was a soft knock on her door. Hinata turned her head, eyebrows bunching in confusion as a nurse opened her door.

“Hinata-san, you have more visitors. Now please remember to be quiet and not stay too long – Hinata-san needs her rest.”

Hinata stared in shock as Team 7 and their sensei filed into her room. Naruto was carrying a bouquet of sunflowers and asters in one of the hospital's plastic water pitchers. Tears welled in her eyes.

"Th- Thank you," she whispered as Naruto set the brilliantly colored flowers on her bedside table. The oxygen mask muffled her voice slightly. "They're beautiful."

"You're welcome."

"How are you doing?" asked Sakura. Her voice was gentle.

"The medics healed most of the damage, but my lungs are going to need the most time to recover. They want to keep monitoring my heart for a while, too." Hinata pressed one hand to her chest and then added softly, "Thank you. For cheering for me."

Naruto smiled at her.

"I've never believed in fate. Everyone can change – destiny is just an excuse to not even try."

Hinata blushed.

"Of course people can change," Kakashi agreed, setting a paper bag on her side table next to the flowers. "I haven't been a rule-obsessed, uptight little twerp in *years*. And Gai went from the very bottom of his graduating class to Konoha's best taijutsu specialist." He paused. "Don't tell him I said that, though."

"No one who could stand up to Neji the way you did," Naruto extended an arm to her in an offered fist bump, "could ever be a failure. You were amazing – believe it."

Hinata shakily lifted her fist and gently bumped it against Naruto's, a small smile on her face and a single tear rolling down her cheek.

Team 7's debriefing with the Sandaime about what *exactly* had gone down with Orochimaru in the Forest of Death had been... ludicrously stressful. Kakashi's students had almost been eaten by *giant snakes*. The only mitigating factor was that all three of them were whole and relatively unharmed. The Sandaime had listened to Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura with a grim expression, commended them for their bravery in the face of impossible odds, and then told them that for now they needed to keep Orochimaru's presence a secret to, among other things, prevent mass panic. The cover story was that Team 7 had run afoul some of the nastier creatures in the Forest of Death which had resulted in Sasuke's injury and removal from the exams. ANBU was tracking down Orochimaru and investigating what had happened to the original Grass team.

Kakashi understood that canceling the chuunin exams would result in a major international incident and cause Konoha to lose face massively – especially since Orochimaru was originally from Konoha (and therefore, in the eyes of the other nations, Konoha's fault). The

Sandaime was playing political chess. Kakashi, however, had never claimed to be a politician and thought that keeping Orochimaru's presence a secret was going to backfire.

With the debriefing out of the way, Team 7 had moved on to the issue of the third exam. His students had chosen the Shodaime's head on top of the Hokage monument to start their plotting- er, planning. Possibly for dramatic effect? Kakashi wasn't really sure why they weren't doing this in the bakery. Maybe they just wanted to be outside.

"So do either of you have any specific areas that you'd like to work on over the next month?" Kakashi asked.

"I'd like to focus on my genjutsu weaving," Sakura decided. "I've got an idea, but I'm not sure if my genjutsus are good enough to pull it off, yet." She paused. "Have you ever been to Wind Country, sensei?"

"Officially? No. Unofficially? Ask me again somewhere less open. I really don't know much about detailed genjutsu weaving, but that's an area that Kurenai specializes in. I'll talk to her and see if she can help you or recommend someone else who can. I'd also like to keep working on your endurance and speed." Sakura nodded. "Naruto?"

"I'm not sure where to start. Work on my wind jutsus, I guess? I don't entirely understand what the byakugan *does* aside from see chakra, so I guess where I really need to start is research." Naruto wrinkled his nose at the prospect.

"Why don't you just ask Hinata?" suggested Sakura.

"Do you think she'd help me? I mean, Neji's still her cousin."

"I don't think you need to worry about that, dobe. She seems pretty enamored with you."

Naruto frowned at Sasuke.

"What makes you say that?"

"I have *eyes*."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?!"

"Not relevant at the moment," Kakashi interrupted. "I can definitely teach you some more wind jutsus. The gentle fist style is a short range fighting style, so long range attacks are probably the best way to counter it."

"So what am I going to be doing?" asked Sasuke.

"You're going to finish healing and then work on your sharingan's ability to spot and break free of genjutsus."

Jiraiya eyed the scorch marks on Kakashi's ceiling.

“Are you *sure* you run a successful bakery?”

“Are *you* offering to cook dinner?” Kakashi countered, not taking his eye off the stir fry he was making. He’d preemptively left his kitchen window open. Just in case. Not that he’d need it, because Kakashi was perfectly capable of cooking without supervision.

“No,” Jiraiya grimaced.

“Then keep your opinions to yourself unless you want your introduction to Naruto be, ‘This is Jiraiya. He peeps at the women’s baths for a living and until recently has made a career out of running away from his problems. Oh, and he’s okay with seals, *I guess*.’”

“Harsh, kid.”

“You peep at the women’s baths for a living?” Jiraiya and Kakashi both jumped as Naruto’s voice spoke up from the open window.

Jiraiya shot Kakashi a glare.

“Thanks for the *introduction*.”

“Hey nii-san! I saw your window was open and decided to just climb up instead of using the door.”

Kakashi moved his windowsill pictures so Naruto could come in. He closed the window once Naruto was inside.

“Hey Naruto.”

“So this is the guy you wanted me to meet?” Naruto looked Jiraiya up and down. “Why do you want me to meet some guy who perverts on the women’s baths?”

Kakashi sighed.

“Naruto, this is Jiraiya of the Sanin, one of the strongest shinobi Konoha has ever produced and the foremost expert on seals in Fire Country.”

Naruto frowned.

“What about the women’s baths thing?”

“He also writes erotica.”

“What’s that?”

“Classier porn.”

“And he’s one of the strongest shinobi the village has ever produced?” Naruto scrunched up his face. “Just how eccentric am I going to have to *be* to become Hokage?”

“Minato-sensei was actually surprisingly normal.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Jiraiya put in. “I think his taste in women made him thoroughly eccentric.” He looked down at Naruto. “Nice to meet you. I want to take a look at your seal and see how it’s holding up.”

“Okay.” Naruto sniffed the air. “Kakashi-nii, I think dinner is burning.”

Kakashi swore and snatched the forgotten pan of stir fry off the stove.

“Seriously, kid, how are you still in business?”

“*Shut up.*”

After the stir fry had been rescued and Jiraiya had redeemed himself slightly in Naruto’s eyes by revealing that he 1) taught the Yondaime and 2) was the one who took the curse seal off Sasuke, things settled down a bit. Kakashi was doing his best to keep things civil. Yes, he was still unhappy with Jiraiya about... a lot of things really, but at least he was finally attempting to be a part of Naruto’s life and he’d gotten the curse seal off Sasuke. Jiraiya was currently regaling Naruto with some of Minato’s more airheaded misadventures from before he’d made jounin. Kakashi had heard some of these stories before but not all of them.

During a lull in the dinner conversation, Naruto abruptly asked,

“Kakashi-nii, what does chakra exhaustion feel like?”

Kakashi blinked at the non-sequitur.

“Uh, generally it makes you very tired and calling on your chakra reserves takes more and more effort, like trying to get water from a drying well. In extreme cases, it can make you dizzy or nauseous as well. Why?”

Naruto looked down and fiddled with his sleeve.

“Ever since the Forest of Death, my chakra has been feeling kinda... weird. I’ve never had chakra exhaustion before, so I thought that made it was that, but it’s more like trying to drink a really thick milkshake. I can feel that my chakra’s *there*, but it’s harder to access than usual, and my control just feels *off*.” Naruto looked up again and waved his arms. “I can still *do stuff*, but it’s way harder than it should be.”

Kakashi and Jiraiya exchanged a concerned glance.

“Yeah, that doesn’t sound like chakra exhaustion,” Kakashi grimaced.

“That sounds more like interference,” Jiraiya muttered. “You said this started in the Forest of Death?”

“Yeah, after that S-class bastard hit me in the stomach and knocked me out.”

“Sounds like a seal to me.” Jiraiya stood up. “All right, brat, no time like the present. Take your shirt off, and get over here. Let’s figure out what that snake-bastard did to you.”

Naruto obediently stripped off his jacket and shirt and followed Jiraiya into the sitting area. Kakashi sat for a moment longer before getting up to follow them. At this rate, he was probably going to skip sleeping entirely and just make croissants tonight once Naruto and Jiraiya left.

“Okay, I want you to gather and focus your chakra like you’re about to perform a jutsu but just hold it instead of channeling it into anything,” Jiraiya instructed. Naruto closed his eyes and frowned in concentration. After a moment the dark swirl of the Kyuubi’s seal appeared on Naruto’s stomach, but the simple design was overlaid with five additional, unfamiliar characters. Jiraiya raised a critical eyebrow. “Crude. Effective but crude. Yeah, he cut off your access to your bijuu and interfered with your chakra paths a bit. But the good news is that this is an *easy* fix. Well,” Jiraiya paused and considered for a moment, “easy for me anyway.” Jiraiya’s fingertips began to glow blue with flickering chakra. “Brace your feet.”

“Why-” Naruto started to ask and then Jiraiya’s fingers impacted his stomach with the counter seal. “*Ow!* What the *hell*, old man?!” he squawked indignantly.

“I told you to brace your feet.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t mention *punching me in the stomach again!*”

“Well, you’re seal’s fixed now, brat. You’re welcome.”

As the two continued to squabble, Kakashi decided that he was definitely making croissants tonight.

“So are you sticking around Konoha for a while, or are you heading out again?” Kakashi asked after Naruto had been sent home with instructions to rest and drink lots of water the next day.

Jiraiya sighed.

“I’d been originally planning to leave after I talked with Sarutobi, but now that’s been delayed, and I don’t like how easily Orochimaru was able to infiltrate the chuunin exams. No one’s sure when he replaced that Grass team, and I doubt anyone will find the bodies at this point. I’m not even sure if the bastard is still in the village, but I’d bet on him trying something again during the third exam. It’s just the sort of big, dramatic thing he’d like.” Jiraiya shook his head. “I have some contacts I need to check in with outside Konoha, but I’m going to try to get that done as fast as possible and be back before the third exam.”

Kakashi nodded. It was more than he’d been expecting honestly. Jiraiya got up to leave but hesitated when he reached the door.

“Listen, kid. I’m sorry.”

“About what?”

“A lot of things. Sakumo would have punted me across the village for what I said to you last time I was in Konoha, and I would have deserved it. You’ve got a good thing going here, kid.”

Before Kakashi could fully process what had been said, Jiraiya slipped out the door and was gone. After a long moment, Kakashi headed to his kitchen to put on his apron. He’d deal with the dishes from supper while the dough was proofing.

Chapter End Notes

Jiraiya - slowly growing as a person but still manfully running away from his problems.

So the sunflowers thing with Hinata was a total coincidence. I'd forgotten what her name meant while writing my original draft, but the image of Hinata with a bouquet of sunflowers just made me happy. I also spent far too much time googling flower arrangements.

Thanks for reading!

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all your amazing comments!

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

Kakashi frowned at Kurenai's door. He'd always gotten the impression that she found him sort of frustrating. They didn't really know each other beyond the general osmosis of being about the same age and living in the same village. Kakashi had done his level best to avoid his age mates when he was a child, because he'd found them annoyingly slow, and Kurenai had never been to the Ryouken Bakery outside of helping Asuma and Gai to invade it during the first of the exams. Maybe she was one of the polite disapprovers who had kept her opinion to herself. Too late to worry about that now.

Kakashi raised his hand and knocked.

Kurenai's eyebrows rose in surprise when she opened the door.

"Kakashi. Can I help you?"

Kakashi floundered for a brief second and then pulled himself together.

"Yes. I was wondering if you'd be willing to give Sakura some pointers on detailed genjutsu weaving. My strength is really more breaking them." He saw her dubious expression. "Her first opponent in the third exam is *Gaara*, that redhead from Suna who almost killed Lee. If she had the sharingan and a lightning affinity, I'd be teaching her the chidori. Honestly, if she didn't have an earth affinity, I'd be tempted to teach it to her anyway, because one-on-one the tunnel vision aspect would be less of an issue, but I *can't*. I'd offer a trade, but I can't think of anything useful that I could help an Aburame with." Kakashi shrugged a little helplessly. He really had nothing to bargain with, and it was galling.

Kurenai's eyes shifted from Kakashi's face to a point just over his left shoulder.

"Your team brought Hinata those flowers, didn't they?"

"Yes."

Kurenai's gaze returned to his face.

"I'll do it. But you're going to owe me a favor."

"Done." Kakashi held out a hand, and they shook on it.

“Tell her to meet me and my team at Training Field 10 first thing tomorrow morning.”

Sasuke pulled the bandage off his shoulder and twisted to get a look at the scar on his shoulder in the mirror. Raised, red tissue formed something like a sunburst centralized on where the seal had been. Jiraiya had said that the visible part of the seal had only been ‘the tip of the iceberg’ – a meaningless metaphor to Sasuke, who 1) had never seen an iceberg and 2) wasn’t even entirely certain what an iceberg *was* aside from, well, presumably large and icy. (Konoha’s winters were mild, and snow was a rarity.) Confusing metaphors aside, the general gist had been that the curse seal had been much bigger than it looked, which had in turn resulted in a scar the size of Sasuke’s palm. Sasuke ran his fingers over the scar tissue. It was still somewhat tender to the touch. The medics had said that the color should fade with time.

After a moment, he started rubbing in the lotion the medic had given him that would stop his healing skin from tightening and restricting his range of motion. Sasuke was doing his best not to dwell on the terrifying ‘could-have-beens’ of the curse seal. It was gone, it wasn’t coming back, and that was the end of it.

Sasuke eyed the large rock Sakura was holding in her arms. When she’d asked him to help her with something for the chuunin exams, he’d assumed it would be something genjutsu or taijutsu related. When Sakura had headed out into the middle of the river, he’d thought that maybe she wanted to do some more water sparring. Now he had no idea what she was up to.

“Hold this for a minute.” Sakura handed Sasuke the rock. It weighted a good ten or fifteen pounds. She uncoiled a length of rope from around her shoulder and started tying it around her waist. Once it was secure, she took the rock back from Sasuke and handed him the end of the rope. Was she trying to simulate being caught by a jutsu or something? Having to fight handicapped in close quarters?

Sasuke frowned.

“What’s the rock for?” he finally asked.

“To counteract my natural buoyancy,” Sakura told him cheerfully. “Pull me up in twenty seconds!”

Before Sasuke’s brain had had a chance to comprehend what that meant, Sakura let go of the chakra under her feet and disappeared beneath the water with barely a splash.

Sasuke gaped down at the still rippling water. *What the hell?!?*

Sakura was hauled back up after a lot less than twenty seconds. She scrunched her nose at Sasuke when she resurfaced.

“I’m pretty sure that wasn’t twenty seconds.”

“You didn’t tell me you were going to try to *drown* yourself!” Sasuke almost shouted.

“I’m *not* trying to drown myself.” Sakura pulled herself back onto the surface of the river. Her rock hadn’t returned to the surface with her. “Kurenai-sensei said that the most important aspects of a good genjutsu are attention to detail and accuracy.”

“And what does that have to do with dunking yourself in the river?”

“Did you know that Suna is located near no rivers or lakes? It sustains its entire population on ground water. While all Suna shinobi know how to water walk, most don’t learn how to properly *swim* until after they make chuunin – if at all. What do you want to bet that Gaara can’t swim?” Sakura’s smile was the picture of perfect innocence. It was sort of terrifying.

Sasuke made a mental note not to piss off Sakura.

Chiharu Sasaki was a civilian nurse, and most days she loved her job. Yes, sometimes she wished that she could use medical jutsu like the med-nin she worked with, but she helped patients while they recovered and made sure that their hospital stay was as comfortable as possible, and that was equally important. Without well trained support staff, the hospital wouldn’t be able to function.

Times like this, though, were hard. Chiharu hated seeing children in hospital rooms by themselves. Yes, she knew that they were both genin and, therefore, adults in the eyes of the village, but one was twelve and the other was thirteen. And neither of them had been visited by a single family member. The boy’s – Lee’s – file had implied that he was most likely an orphan, but the girl, Hinata, was a Hyuuga.

Chiharu was worried about both of them. It wasn’t healthy for either of them to be spending hours on end alone during the day. She and her colleagues had already caught Lee trying to get out of bed twice.

She glanced over the two files in her hands. The doctor had apparently switched Hinata from an oxygen mask to a cannula last night. One of the hospital’s small portable oxygen tanks caught her eye. Chiharu stared at it for a moment thoughtfully, and then picked it up and went to find a wheelchair.

Maybe she could take care of two birds with one stone.

Hinata looked up from the novel Kurenai had brought her at the soft knock on her door.

“Hello Hinata-san.” Nurse Sasaki was smiling in the doorway. “Would you like to get out of your room for a little bit? There’s something I was hoping you could help me with.”

Hinata didn’t know Lee beyond the fact that he was her cousin’s teammate.

“Are you sure this will be all right?” she asked Nurse Sasaki as she pushed her wheelchair down the hall.

“Of course. Lee-san needs to stay off his leg as much as possible, but he’s having troubles staying still without anything to distract him. Someone to talk to will do him wonders, and you must be tired of staring at the same four walls for so long.”

“If you’re sure....”

What if Lee didn’t like her? What if Neji had spread his distain to his teammates? It felt almost easy to believe in herself when her teammates or Naruto were around, but on her own it was so much harder.

“Hello Lee-san!” Nurse Sasaki chirped as she opened Lee’s door. “Hinata-san was feeling lonely, and I was hoping that you, being the lovely young gentleman that you are, would be willing to keep her company for a while.”

Lee had been staring out his window, but now he turned his head to smile at Hinata.

“Of course.”

Nurse Sasaki wheeled Hinata over to Lee’s bedside and patted her shoulder.

“Just press the call button as soon as you start getting tired.” Then she left.

Hinata and Lee were quiet as the door clicked shut.

“You fought most valiantly in your battle with Neji,” Lee finally offered.

Hinata looked down and twisted her fingers together.

“Thank you. I- I’m not very good at the Gentle Fist style.”

“Do you love the Gentle Fist style?”

Hinata blinked and looked up.

“Pardon?”

“Are you passionate about the Gentle Fist style – does your soul burn with purpose at the thought of mastering it?” Lee raised his good arm and waved it emphatically. “Gai-sensei has always told me that, in order to become a genius of hard work, you must have passion and love for what you are doing. Without it, it’s impossible to keep the fires of your Youth burning for long.”

“I... don’t. I’m not.” Hinata bit her lip and looked away again. Maybe once, long ago when she was first starting, she had loved the Gentle Fist style. Back before it had become abundantly clear that she would never match Neji’s genius and before Hanabi had effortlessly performed the katas that Hinata still struggled with. She thought that she remember loving it

once, but that had been such a long time ago. Now the thought of her clan's technique only filled her with anxiety and exhaustion.

"Then perhaps you've been focusing your youthful tenacity on the wrong thing," Lee suggested. "When I was at the Academy, I was dreadful at everything, but no matter how bad at it I was, I *loved* taijutsu. Even though I was a failure, Gai-sensei recognized that passion in me and told me that I could be a genius of hard work in taijutsu and a great shinobi just like I'd always dreamed. But even if I had the chakra coils for it, I never would have been able to become a genius of hard work in genjutsu no matter how much work I put in, because I have no passion for it. Is there something else that you are passionate about instead?"

Hinata knotted and unknotted her fingers. Even voicing the words felt like failing her clan yet again.

"I- I always thought... that I would like to be a medic," she whispered.

"Yosh!" Hinata startled at Lee's volume, and when she looked up he was smiling at her again. "A most worthy and admirable goal! Then you should turn your youthful energies towards becoming a medic, and you will be sure to succeed! You already have the spirit to become a genius of hard work, Hinata-san."

"Thank you, Lee-san, but... Father would never approve."

"Perhaps not," Lee agreed, his expression becoming serious, "but, from what little I know of Hyuuga-sama, there is very little that he approves of. There's no need to *give up* the Gentle Fist style – you don't need to pick only one. Perhaps, given time, you can even learn to be passionate about both."

Hinata bit her lip. What would it be like? To actually *love* what she did? To be able to summon that beautiful green corona around her hands and heal the hurts that the world had dealt out? In her mind, it felt wonderful.

"You're right. I think- I think I'd like that very much." She smiled at him, and Lee smiled back.

"Geniuses of hard work must stick together." His smile faltered. "I'm afraid it will be quite a while before I can return to my hard work, though." He stared glumly down at the blanket covering his legs. "Gai-sensei remains hopeful, but the medics... are not. It has been suggested that I may have to walk with a cane for the rest of my life."

Hinata wished that she could fix Lee's leg right then and there.

"I don't think... that even a cane would slow you down for long, Lee-san."

"Um... oops? Are you okay, nii-san?"

Kakashi carefully disentangled himself from the branches of the tree he'd ended up in. Ow. *Kyoufuu no jutsu* was a C-rank wind jutsu that was supposed to knock your opponent off their feet – not send them flying twenty feet into the tree behind them.

“Did you add an extra seal to that?” Kakashi asked as he managed to turn a topple into a fairly elegant landing. Naruto considered the question and then looked down at his hands contemplatively.

“I think I might have added an extra snake seal.”

“Yeah, that would probably do it. Congratulations on accidentally modifying your first jutsu.” Kakashi rolled his shoulders. He was definitely going to have a bruise. “It’s usually best to get the original jutsu down first before you start modifying it.”

Naruto grinned sheepishly.

“Sorry, nii-san.”

“All right, let’s try that again without any extra snake seals, and then we’ll go check on how Sakura and Sasuke are doing.”

Naruto and Sasuke sat under a tree and watched as Kakashi appeared to stand in the middle of an empty training field calling out seemingly random comments to Sakura, who was standing about ten feet away from him. Sakura had been kind enough not to include them in her genjutsu. Kakashi pressed one hand to his chest.

“Nicely done with the burning sensation, but I’m still not feeling enough current for the apparent speed of the water. There. Much better.”

“Sakura-chan is scary.”

“She hasn’t even used that genjutsu on you,” Sasuke shuddered. “Even when you know what’s going on, it’s really unnerving.”

“I’m really glad she’s on our side,” Naruto nodded.

“How’s your research on the byakugan going?” Sasuke asked. He readjusted the icepack he was holding on his shoulder. He and Naruto had been sparring until about ten minutes ago. Naruto’s black eye was already starting to heal. The sharingan was awesome and all, but Sasuke occasionally still envied the ludicrous speed at which Naruto healed.

“I talked to Hinata briefly now that she’s out of the hospital, and she agreed to meet up with me tomorrow to explain how the byakugan works. Sakura-chan says I should buy her lunch afterwards as a thank you for helping me.”

“Probably.” Sasuke suspected that Hinata would most likely faint if Naruto offered to take her out to lunch. He wondered if Naruto would ever notice Hinata’s impressive case of hero

worship/crush. Possibly not. He frowned at Naruto's rapidly healing eye. "Do you think that you could use your healing thing to reopen a tenketsu point if it got closed?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe Hinata can help me with that, too."

"Are y-you sure you want to try this?" Hinata asked dubiously. She and Naruto were sitting on a log in one of the more tree-filled training fields.

"Yup – believe it!" Naruto held out his arm. Hinata's explanation about the byakugan had been very helpful, but Naruto had always done best with practical demonstrations. "If I get anywhere near Neji when I fight him, the first thing he's probably going to do is start closing those point things, and I want to be prepared to deal with the side effects. Also, Sasuke-teme gave me an idea that I want to try."

"If you're sure." Hinata took ahold of Naruto's arm hesitantly. "This is going to hurt," she warned. He nodded. Hinata activated her byakugan and then carefully jabbed two fingers into the side of his forearm, leaving a circular welt.

"Oh, man," Naruto wiggled his fingers, "that feels funky."

"It takes most people the better part of a day to regain their normal chakra flow," Hinata explained softly. She eyed the red welt on Naruto's arm unhappily.

Naruto focused on his chakra. It felt like Hinata had erected a tiny chakra dam in his arm. Or maybe it was more like trying to suck water through a pinched straw. It wasn't that the chakra *couldn't* get through – there just wasn't enough room for it. Maybe if he forced enough chakra into the pathway, he could un-pinch the straw again. Naruto sent chakra flooding down his arm. It balked at the place where Hinata had blocked it, but he sent more and more and more until-

It felt almost like a *pop*.

"Freaking *ow*." Naruto shook his hand as chakra crackled back through his fingers. Hinata had deactivated her byakugan and was rubbing her eyes. "Are you okay?" Naruto asked with a frown of concern. The pain in his arm had already receded to a prickling sensation.

Hinata gave a tiny nod and lowered her hands.

"Y-your chakra got *really* bright, Naruto-kun. It was sort of like trying to stare at the sun."

"Huh." Naruto stared down at his hands thoughtfully. Then he held out his arm to Hinata again. "Let's try that again!" He lowered his arm slightly. "Unless you're too tired. I know Kakashi-nii had to take it easy for a while after they released him from the hospital."

Hinata did that odd finger-poking-together thing and looked away from Naruto with a light blush for some reason.

"I sh-should have enough energy to try one more time."

“Awesome! And then I owe you lunch.”

“Y-you do?!?”

“Yup! You’ve been super amazing helping me like this, so the least I can do is buy you lunch afterwards – believe it!”

Naruto wasn’t sure why Hinata’s entire head was now bright red. She must be more tired than she was letting on.

Kakashi was pretty sure that he had enough burnt croissants to build a miniature fortress. There was a knock on his window, and he opened it to let Tenzou in. Tenzou eyed the pile of blackened croissants.

“I thought you said they were doing well, sempai.”

“They are.” Kakashi stuck his hands in his pockets, trying to look relaxed. “The only sense that Sakura is struggling with for her genjutsus is smell which isn’t a big issue for what she has planned, and Naruto is fairly confident that he’s figured out a way of reopening his tenketsu points if Neji closes them. Apparently Hinata Hyuuga has been helping him practice. Your squad hasn’t seen anyone so much as *look* at Sasuke strangely, and there’s been no further word on Orochimaru since he attacked my team in the Forest of Death. The Sandaime thinks he’s left the village again. Everything’s fine.” Tenzou raised an eyebrow, clearly not buying Kakashi’s attempt to look calm. “*Fine*. Neji reminds me far too much of myself at that age, which means he’ll go *through* anyone who gets in his way, and Naruto is definitely planning on getting in his way. I’m pretty sure that Suna snuck in their youngest jounin or something, because their team has been to the bakery a few times now, and that redhead’s teammates are, quite frankly, *terrified* of him. Also, I remember what Orochimaru was like from the one or two times I met him, and he’s *persistent*. He isn’t going to stop after just one failed plan.”

Tenzou nodded.

“I realize that Sandaime-sama doesn’t want to lose face with the daimyos by canceling the third exam, but to think that Orochimaru has just left seems... unrealistically optimistic.” Tenzou frowned to himself for a moment, old shadows darkening his eyes. He shook his head and picked up a charred croissant. He tapped it against the counter. “Can I have these?”

“All of them?”

“Mmm. Wolf’s been getting a swollen head lately.”

“Sure. You know, you’d think after all this time somebody would have made the connection between the cursed bread and me leaving ANBU to open a bakery.” Kakashi dug through his cupboard and handed Tenzou a rolled up grocery bag to put the croissants in.

“I tell people that you started the bakery to appease the baker’s spirit and prevent an even greater curse befalling the ANBU base.”

Kakashi frowned,

“And they believe that?”

Tenzou put on an innocent smile,

“I can be very convincing. Besides, some of the new recruits seem to be under the impression that Itachi used to eat cursed bread.”

“Well, in fairness, he *did*, but that’s only because Shisui would hand him pieces of toast without telling him where they came from.”

After two weeks of practice, Naruto only needed a second or two to reopen a closed tenketsu point. It hurt like hell to do, so it definitely wasn’t going to be the first thing he tried against Neji, but it was an awesome ace to have up his sleeve.

“So I want to try a worst case scenario today.” Naruto rubbed the back of his head as Hinata wrinkled her eyebrows at him in confusion. “I want you to close all of my tenketsu points.”

“Naruto-kun, that can be dangerous.” Naruto had noticed that she’d stopped stuttering so much around him over the past couple of weeks. “It can badly damage your chakra pathways.”

“Just this once. You’ve seen how quickly I heal from stuff. I just want to see if I can reopen them all at once. If it all goes sideways, you can say, ‘I told you so.’” He saw the uncertain look on Hinata’s face. “Please?”

“All right, but you need to sit down first otherwise you’ll probably fall over when I close the ones in your legs.”

Having two or three tenketsu points closed had made Naruto’s effected limb feel strangely numb. Having all of them closed actually hurt. His arms and legs ached and prickled. Naruto took a deep breath in and out and tried to focus on his chakra. He could feel it flickering faintly, but he couldn’t make it flare like he had before. Damn it, maybe this hadn’t been such a good idea.

“Naruto-kun, do you have two chakra affinities?” Hinata suddenly asked.

“Huh?” Naruto opened his eyes. “Not as far as I know. Why?”

“Because now all your blue chakra is blocked off, I can see swirls of red.”

Naruto blinked. Red swirls? She must mean the Kyuubi’s chakra. Well, Kakashi *had* said that he ought to be able to use it sometimes. He closed his eyes again and reached out mentally, searching for that fire and anger that he’d felt in the Forest of Death.

One moment Naruto was sitting on the grass beneath a tree. The next he was running through a maze of poorly lit corridors. Puddles splashed beneath his feet. Was this his mind or a representation of the seal? Either way it was sort of creepy. Was the Kyuubi hiding somewhere in all this mess?

Naruto raced down corridor after corridor, checking doors at random. The further he ran, the hotter the air became until he rounded a corner and-

Woah.

Naruto gaped up at the massive, snarling visage of the Kyuubi no Kitsune. Malevolent chakra burned through the air, and the single paper seal holding the bars of the cage shut didn't seem nearly enough to hold back such a massive creature.

"Finally dared to come down here, brat?" The Kyuubi's voice rumbled through his bones. "If I could get out of this cages, I'd rend you limb from limb."

Naruto briefly wondered if this had been a good idea. ...Possibly not. Oh, well – too late to back out now.

"Can I borrow some of your chakra?" Naruto asked. Just taking someone else's chakra seemed rude – even if he'd had any idea how to do it.

For a very brief second, the Kyuubi seemed taken aback.

"Borrow? BORROW?!" it roared. "All you humans ever do is *take*! You won't give my chakra *back*, so why should I *give* you *anything*, brat?"

Naruto frowned. It was a fair point. What could he give a giant demon fox in exchange for some chakra? He looked around the gloomy, almost cavern-like room, doing his best to ignore the trembling in his knees.

"Do you like trees?" he finally asked.

The Kyuubi blinked eyes the size of doors.

"What?"

"Do you like trees?" Naruto repeated. "I'd be angry, too, if I had to be stuck in a place as miserable as this all the time, but I can't let you out, because you'd just go and stomp Konoha flat. So what if I made this place nicer?"

The Kyuubi stared at him, and for a moment Naruto thought it was just going to threaten to rip him to pieces again. Then laughter boomed through the air.

"I've been staring at these same damn walls for nearly a *century*. Give me something better to look at, and I'll give you all the chakra you want and kill you quickly when I finally escape."

“Then I promise to make this place better,” Naruto decided. “And I always keep my promises – believe it!”

“Humans *never* keep their promises, brat.” Red chakra oozed from between the bars like lava. “All they ever do is lie and die. But for trees, it might be worth the risk.”

The red chakra swirled up around Naruto’s legs and torso like liquid fire.

Naruto’s eyes snapped open. The Kyuubi’s chakra cascaded through his body, and his tenketsu points burst back open like they had never been shut.

Hinata yelped in shock, and Naruto held one hand to his head as he let the Kyuubi’s chakra sink back into the seal again.

Oh, man. How the hell did you change the... spiritual representation of a seal? Naruto was going to have to do *so much* research, but he’d made a promise, and he was going to prove that damn fox wrong, because he never made a promise lightly.

“Hey nii-san.” Naruto watched as Kakashi pulled a tray of buns from one of the bakery ovens. He’d specifically come to the bakery extra early, so that he could talk to Kakashi before Sasuke and Sakura got there. “How do you change what a mindscape looks like?”

“You mean like what you see during deep meditation? Not sure. I’ve never had the patience for meditation outside of chakra exercises. Why?” Kakashi prodded the buns and hummed approvingly to himself.

Naruto rubbed the back of his head and laughed nervously.

“’Cause I promised the Kyuubi yesterday that I’d find it something better to stare at than shitty concrete walls.”

The tray of buns clattered across the floor.

“You *what*?! ”

“Promised to make the Kyuubi’s cage nicer in exchange for ready access to its chakra. Just *taking* it seemed rude, and I wouldn’t want to stare at blank walls all the time either, so it seemed like a fair trade.”

Kakashi pressed a hand to his face.

“Only *you*, Naruto.”

SMASH!

Fragments of glass rained down onto the floor. Orochimaru stared at them for a moment before picking up another beaker and throwing that at the wall as well. It exploded in a shower of glittering shards. He reached for the next nearest object that was both fragile and expendable. He didn't usually indulge in fits of temper like this, but it felt earned. The report from Kabuto was crumpled in his other hand.

His plan had been going *so well*. With the seal in place, the Uchiha brat would have walked straight in his hands – *willingly* – so that Orochimaru could mold and train the boy until he was ready to take him on as a vessel. At long last, Orochimaru would have had unrestricted access to the sharingan. But *no*! For once in his *miserable life*, that wretch Jiraiya had to be competent and actually *in Konoha*. Sasuke should have been primed by his trauma to be thoroughly and irreversibly entangled by the curse seal! It had all been going so well! And now Sasuke wasn't even *participating* in the third exam.

Orochimaru threw one last test tube at the wall before taking a deep, calming breath. He stared at the glass shards littering the floor for a moment. Then he folded his hands into a careful seal.

“*Sai kumitate.*” The shards juttered as their pre-applied seals activated and the pieces of beakers and test tubes began to reassemble themselves. (It had been Jiraiya's idea, years and years ago when the wretch had still been tolerable and Tsunade had still had a spine. A seal that would repair Orochimaru's lab equipment when it was accidentally broken. Jiraiya's original design had been crude, but Orochimaru had improved it. Orochimaru had also used it as a base to build the seal that let him possess another's body. Jiraiya would hate that, and that made Orochimaru smile.)

The situation wasn't a total loss. Instead of waiting for Sasuke to come to him, Orochimaru would just have Kabuto snatch Sasuke during the chaos caused by Suna's invasion force. If a barely trained thirteen year old could successfully transplant a sharingan in the middle of a forest, then Orochimaru could do it in his labs and do it better. (It was such a shame that Hatake had never spiraled into anger and despair properly and remained foolishly loyal to Konoha – he would have made a useful tool.) Kabuto ought to be competent enough, at least, to subdue and kidnap a child unsupervised.

There had been one good piece of news in Kabuto's missive – that fool Jiraiya had taken the bait and was chasing another false lead that Orochimaru had laid out for him. Kabuto had intercepted a message to Sarutobi containing Jiraiya's carefully coded message that he wouldn't be able to make it back to Konoha in time for the third exam. Jiraiya had never managed to come up with a code that Orochimaru couldn't crack, and he'd never been able to resist a rumor about Akatsuki activity. By the time he realized his mistake, the fool would be far too late.

Orochimaru picked up a reassembled beaker from the floor. Very soon it would be time to leave this particular hidden lab and replace that useless Kazekage, who couldn't even properly control his village's jinchuuriki. Honestly, it was almost embarrassing, but at least there shouldn't be any difficulty in replacing someone who had so thoroughly isolated himself.

The more he thought about it, perhaps the curse seal not taking on Sasuke was for the best. Why settle for just an Uchiha body when he could simply transplant the sharingan into a *better* body? Why limit himself to only *one* kekkei genkai? Oh, yes, now *there* was an idea. It would certainly give him something to think about during the very dull trip to Konoha.

Sasuke wasn't entirely sure when his apartment had become Team 7's unofficial secondary hang out after the Ryouken Bakery, but he didn't particularly mind. Sakura accepted the cup of tea he offered her. His mother had always made guests tea, and Kakashi usually made tea when they were at his apartment, too. It seemed like the thing to do.

"What's Naruto doing?" Sakura asked.

"Using my bonsai as a meditation focal point. He said it would help to have a reference – whatever that means." Sasuke blew on his own tea.

"It's hard to believe that the third exam starts in less than two days," Sakura murmured.

Sasuke nodded.

"Feeling ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

"I think Kakashi-sensei is planning on locking all of us in the bakery with him tomorrow."

Sakura's mouth pulled up into a smile.

"I think he's worried."

"Hn." Sasuke took a sip of his tea. "You and Naruto will be fine."

The smile widened a little.

"Thanks, Sasuke-kun."

Sasuke picked up the third cup of tea he'd made.

"Hey, dobe! Sakura's here, and your tea's getting cold!"

"Damn it, teme, what part of meditating don't you understand?" grumbled Naruto, standing and returning the bonsai to its usual windowsill.

"The part where you have to do it in *my* apartment."

"I *told* you – I need Ki-san's help!"

Over the past several days, the far right corner of the space outside of Kurama's cage had been taking on a sort of melted quality. Ever so slowly it was stretching and reshaping itself. A long, cylindrical section now protruded from the wall. It tapered to a point and had smaller segments fanning out from it. It was still the same color and texture and the rest of the wall, but it looked rather like an antler or, possibly, a branch.

Kurama had been watching its slow progress, because it was marginally more interesting than staring at an unchanging wall or sleeping. He definitely wouldn't call it a tree, but it was still more than he'd been expecting.

Gaara stared thoughtfully through the front window of the bakery with his sand eye. He wasn't in the least concerned about his pink haired first opponent for tomorrow's exam. Kankuro was right – she looked more like a housewife with her dress and the lace-edged cover on her bun than a kunoichi. Killing her would barely reaffirm his existence. But something about this bakery kept drawing him back.

At first, Gaara had thought it was idle curiosity. No jounin in Suna would open a bakery. Then he'd thought that perhaps he felt some sort of connection with the Uchiha, but the other boy lacked the spark of pure, lonely hatred that Gaara had thought he'd recognized in him. Now Gaara was at a loss for any sort of explanation.

Inside the bakery, the pink haired kunoichi and the Uchiha were shelving fresh loaves of bread, and their blond teammate was seated behind the counter. Why weren't they training? Weren't they worried about tomorrow or were they simply too naïve to understand that they would soon be dead?

Their sensei emerged from the back of the bakery. He was dressed like a civilian again, and his hitai-ate was slung around his neck like Temari's. The man placed a hand on the pink haired kunoichi's head, and she grinned up at him. Something ached with desperate pain in Gaara's chest. A sudden, visceral loathing for the girl swelled in him. He let his sand eye disperse.

Tomorrow she would die to reaffirm Gaara's existence, and he would be glad when she was gone. Perhaps he'd get the chance to kill her teammates during the invasion as well. Mother was looking forward to the invasion.

Gaara slid down from the tree he'd been sitting in. He was looking forward to leaving Konoha, and its far too frequent rain that made Mother howl with irritation. The people here smiled too much.

Kakashi stared around his kitchen. Nearly every surface was liberally dusted in white, including himself.

Well, *Soyokaze no jutsu* wasn't going to be enough to clean up this one, and he was officially out of flour. At least nothing was on fire.

“What the hell?” Iruka stuck his head in the kitchen. He’d come over to keep Kakashi company and had been marking papers in the sitting area. The Academy was back in session since most of the foreign chuunin-hopefuls had gone home once the second exam was over. The daimyos would most likely be bringing shinobi bodyguards with them tomorrow, but the majority of the foreign spectators would be civilians.

“My last bag of flour got knocked off the counter, so I guess I’m done baking for the night.” Kakashi stared down a little sadly at the exploded package of flour on the floor. He really should have caught it, but his brain had initially processed it as ‘not a threat’ rather than ‘oh, shit – my last bag of flour.’ Well, cleaning wasn’t as good as baking, but at least it was still a distraction.

“Well, I was just about done marking anyway. I’ll grab your vacuum, so you don’t track flour anywhere else.”

“Thanks.”

Kakashi opened a drawer and grabbed a dry dish towel. Minato must have been the most Zen person in the history of the village, Kakashi decided as he wiped flour off his counter and onto the floor where it would be easier to vacuum up. One more day and the chuunin exams would finally be over. Sakura and Naruto were as prepared as they would ever be, and he’d be with Sasuke in the stands the entire time in case Orochimaru or one of his minions tried anything else. It would be *fine*.

Kakashi would be more inclined to believe that if he didn’t also know that his students were *disaster magnets*.

The Sandaime, whether he believed that Orochimaru was still in the village or not, would have the ANBU on high alert tomorrow. It was standard procedure. Kakashi remembered doing guard duty during one of the previous exams in Konoha. And Hayate was back in the hospital with another bout of pneumonia, so Genma would be proctoring the third exam tomorrow. Genma would step in if things went too far. Despite the dramatic ‘until one concedes, can no longer fight, or is dead,’ the preference really was that none of the chuunin-hopefuls died. It took a lot of time and effort to train a shinobi of any level, and genin weren’t exactly an endless resource even in a village as big as Konoha. (Maybe Kiri didn’t understand the necessity of not killing off the next generation willie-nillie, but then again the Bloody Mist wasn’t really known for its long term planning.)

It was going to be *fine*, and if one of the fights went sideways and Sakura or Naruto got severely injured, well... Kakashi would just hunt down Tsunade himself and bribe her with sake to come back to the village to make sure that they made a full recovery. Jiraiya probably had some idea of where she was. Though, if Jiraiya was back in Konoha, Kakashi hadn’t seen him.

It was a totally unfeasible and unrealistic plan, but Kakashi felt better for having come up with it. It gave the part of his brain that was naturally inclined towards pessimism and paranoia something else to focus on.

Kakashi finished wiping down his counter and cupboards while theorizing what sort of sake would be best to bribe Tsunade with and how much of it he would need instead of being inundated with a million worst case scenarios that almost all featured his students being horribly killed or maimed in front of him.

Sakura and Naruto were both ready for the third exam tomorrow. There was even a pretty good chance that one of them might make chuunin despite their desire to make chuunin as a team. Sakura's plan to concede if/when things got out of hand was exactly the sort of mature, cut-your-losses thinking that the judges liked to see in chuunin in a no-win situation, and if Naruto managed to beat the Hyuuga clan's resident genius, that was definitely going to turn heads.

Sasuke had already rejected Orochimaru once, and the curse seal couldn't be reapplied. The Sasuke of several months ago might have been tempted by the lure of quick and seemingly easy power, but he'd grown so much since then. You couldn't separate Team 7 with a crowbar at this point.

...

Would Tsunade prefer quantity or quality from her sake?

Iruka returned with the vacuum.

"What's your favorite type of sake?" Kakashi asked.

Iruka blinked.

"If I'm paying, whatever's cheapest. If you're paying, ginjo. Why?"

"Trying to decide what type of sake to bribe Tsunade to come back to the village with if things go wrong tomorrow."

Iruka gave this a moment of proper consideration.

"From the few stories I've heard, I'd go for volume. Maybe a couple crates of table sake and then one bottle of the really good stuff just to round things out."

That sounded like a good place to start.

Chapter End Notes

The latest round of Google Translate Japanese Translations:

Kyoufuu - gale wind

Sai kumitate - reassemble

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