

Connected

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Kapitel 1: Daybreak's Calm

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Summary: When Oto attacks Konoha, Konoha fights back with all its might. With war raging all around them, their bond seems to fail them. And while Sakura still hopes, Naruto wonders. And Sasuke fears he knows.

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"Could you cut my hair for me?" Sakura asks into the silence surrounding them.

"Cut your hair? It's nice as it is, don't you think?" comes his answer, easy and open-hearted as usual, amused about her sudden question. But she can hear that tinge of something way darker beneath it. She feels him shift and leans her back against his some more, unwilling to let go of his warmth.

"It's too long. It gets in the way when I fight." She knows that at this point, he realizes that she is serious.

"You've been fighting like this for three years...," he states, his voice lower than before, a curious tone to it. "Why is this different?"

"Because I can't risk losing this time," is her answer and she almost whispers it. For a split second, it feels to her like she does it out of fear, fear that their tiny moment of peace might end and reality will come crashing down on them if she remembers that this calm is nothing more than a fading illusion. "If I lose, we will lose. If it gets in the way, I won't get a second chance because no one will be there to save me." She knows she will have to make it on her own this time.

"Why didn't you cut it earlier then?!" He jolts away from her, like he's been hit by lightning, and his surprise is evident in his honest voice. She can't blame him for not understanding, yet she feels disappointment wash over her like a wave of cold water when he breaks their contact and the warmth of his body is suddenly only lingering in her clothes and on her skin, like an echo of what was not a second ago.

"I don't know... There's always been someone I trusted." She speaks so softly that he has to lean in again to understand her at all. "I never fought alone... I knew someone would save me. And I'm a medic after all, I never fought in the frontlines...."

He is silent after that, thinking about what she just told him. Almost two minutes pass

before he starts to smile again - even though she can't see him with her back turned to him, she still knows from the change in his flow of chakra. It's a tranquil and calming smile, without any traces of the uncertainty that is raging inside her own head.

"So you... liked your hair more than your life?" he asks, amused again and then, she can feel his warmth again as he kneels behind her, pulls out a kunai. One of his hands tenderly ghosts over her neck, collects her hair into a loose pony tail and then, the metal blade moves and the first locks start to fall to the ground.

She suppresses a sigh, then leans her head back so that the cut off strands of soft pink hair won't fall over her shoulders and into her collar. She pulls her knees closer to her chest, tightens her arms around them.

"I never thought of it that much, I suppose... Cutting my hair... would have been wrong."

"And why is that?" His voice is an easy brush of air over his lips, almost inaudible and heartbreakingly soft. It touches her, touches some spot deep inside her chest and she's overcome by a wave of affection for her best friend.

"Because... I always thought... he liked short hair," she whispers, fighting back a sob. "When we were young, I would have done so much if it had pleased him - cut my hair, become stronger, be there for him... When he was gone, I couldn't cut my hair... Not when he liked short hair." She isn't sure he is able to understand her - after all, he is a boy and she is a girl and she knows that *she* isn't able to understand *his* logic at times.

But all he says is, "I still don't understand why I'm cutting it then..." It makes her heart jump.

"Because he doesn't matter anymore. He's gone, he betrayed us, he won't come back." It's like listening to her own words enforces her resolve. "Trying to be what he wouldn't like is just as stupid as trying to be what he would like. I understand that now..." She is surprised at how determined she sounds. "If my hair is a hindrance to me, I cut it, no matter whether he likes it or not." And she knows that behind her, Naruto is smiling at her.

He's there for her, he listens to her and she can't say how grateful she is for this moments they spent together, this simple moment of peace that he offers her while around them, outside of her small apartment, Konoha is preparing for the one battle that will decide the winner of this war. It's either surviving this fight or being erased from history.

The rest of the time he needs to finish his work is spent in almost absolute silence. Around them, the world is quiet enough for her to hear his heartbeat, even and strong, and his calm, unwavering breath. She doesn't fight the feeling of being pulled into something similar to a trance, concentrating on nothing but the reassuring strength he radiates. When he is done, she wishes it would have taken him longer. Forever, even.

But she knows that they have to go.

The last thing he does before his warmth disappears once more is lean in and place a soft kiss on the now exposed skin on her neck.

"I know it probably doesn't mean much, but I think you're beautiful regardless of your hairstyle," he smiles and she wants to cry because she knows he means it just as he says it. "Whoever says anything different isn't worth the air they breathe."

And with that, he slowly stands up, stretches his muscles and cracks his knuckles before offering her a hand to pull her up as well. Sakura allows him to do so and for a moment, she fails to suppress her desperate wish that this connection will survive the night.

Kapitel 2: This Is War

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Summary: When Oto attacks Konoha, Konoha fights back with all its might. With war raging all around them, their bond seems to fail them. And while Sakura still hopes, Naruto wonders. And Sasuke fears he knows.

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"How are ya, boy?"

Naruto dives to the left, brings up his katana and another enemy goes down. Still warm blood hits his face and he quickly brushes it away. It feels horrible on his skin.

"I'll live through this," he answers truthfully, not bothering to speak any louder than he usually would. Jiraiya is a Sannin after all, his ears are fine.

Behind him, the noise of a body hitting the ground indicates that his former teacher decided to join the fight, his sudden appearance creating only a second of hesitation and uncertainty among their opponents. He can't help but wonder...

"Not quite the answer I wanted but it'll have to do for now." There is a bitter, joyless laugh in his unusually hoarse voice and a shuriken cuts through the air just inches away from Naruto's neck, flies past him and embeds itself into a third attacker's throat with deadly precision.

Another swift slash of steel and they are the only ones alive in the small clearing. Naruto exhales slowly, forcibly calms his heartbeat and breathing.

"How's everyone doing?" he wants to know, wipes the blood off his blade with his own sleeve. His voice is even, emotionless almost, except for the sad undertone he cannot suppress.

Jiraiya crosses the distance between them, his intent stare fixed onto his student's bloodied face, before he even considers answering. Naruto knew him long enough to know this habit. He knows Jiraiya is scanning him, measuring the damage done by the few minor wounds he received during the previous fights. For a second, the older man's eyes linger on the cut just below his collar bone, but it's not a deep one, they both know it's nothing to worry about.

"No one ever said this was going to be easy," he finally says, voice firm and hard and Naruto knows he shouldn't have asked. "This is war. And war kills people."

It's like every word that leaves the grey-haired man's mouth pushes the knife deeper into his chest, but he bears it, fights it down to a dull presence at the back of his mind. He knows that, at the moment, pain is what keeps him going.

"They're fighting bravely, but this battle will not have a winner," Jiraiya continues lowly, seriously, bitterly. Naruto *feels* the pain in each single syllable. "In the end, there will be nothing but dead bodies and regret. And with an awful lot of luck, Konoha's orphanages will be more crowded than ever before after this."

He understands what his teacher says. He knows that this isn't a battle for glory and honor. It's about survival, purely, and about nothing else. Konoha's orphanages... He shivers.

There is another wave of pain and he almost winces with the force it hits him with.

"How is everyone doing, Sensei?" he asks again, unable to keep the intensity of what he feels out of his tone and there, for a tiny moment, he's the boy he once was: an uncertain, desperate child seeking the advice of a person who has been like a father to him.

Jiraiya looks at him with the same emotions, the same helplessness, before he turns his head away, rebuilds a wall he never intended to let down.

"I'm sorry Naruto, I don't know, but there was a series of remotely strong explosions along the southern city wall no ten minutes ago," he whispers, shifts his gaze to the clouds above them, glowing in the silver light of what might be a fullmoon. It's clear gesture, everything Naruto needs to understand and he does as he is told, locks away the child inside, forces himself to go back to being strong despite the pain.

"Did you finish your mission?" he wants to know, changing his tone along with the topic.

Jiraiya's eyes fix on his face once more and the old man nods, serious, hard, untouchable.

"I found their headquarters," he says, strong, determined, down to business. "But I couldn't get close enough to find out whether *he* is there."

Naruto frowns, disappointment and frustration gnawing at his resolve. But he knows he cannot allow himself the luxury of weakness in what is about to come.

"We have to try nevertheless. The faster this is over, the better. If we can kill him, maybe this will come to an end." It's childish hope and he knows it, but it's their assignment, their mission and maybe, maybe, maybe, his prayers will be heard...

He's about to turn around and jump off into the direction Jiraiya came from when

suddenly, the old man's hand is on his shoulder, holding him back with just a tad more force than necessary.

"There's something else, boy," his former teacher tells him and his heart skips a beat. "Someone."

Naruto tenses, can't help but tense, can't fight it. It's almost like this tension has always been there, just waiting for a chance to release it's full power. His heart aches when he thinks of what the Sannin just said, wonders if it weren't better if he just overheard it. He considers it, only to realize that, no, he couldn't ignore it. It is impossible. So he stays where he is, perfectly still, and waits for Jiraiya to continue.

"I sensed him. He's here." The older man makes a vague gesture into a direction and Naruto's senses almost automatically follow his movement, focus on the area there until he feels it - *him*. "Up to now, he's not participating in the bloodshed, but who knows for how long he will wait." It's something between a warning and understanding, knowledge and compassion, and it was meant to be a permission. "I can take down Orochimaru on my own."

"Tsunade-baachan told us to go together...," Naruto says before he really thinks about it and the silence that follows leaves him to wonder why a part of him wants to cry after he wanted to see *him* again for all the years.

Then, Jiraiya speaks again and Naruto's heart almost stops at how heavy his voice suddenly is, at how the pain returns full force and how fake his wavering strength suddenly is.

"Tsunade will never know of this."

There is less than a second of pure shock when Naruto understands the weight of those words. He thinks he will break down. He thinks he can't suppress the tears and the heartache and whatelse washes over his mind in that instant. He thinks he's dying then and there.

Jiraiya turns away and it's like the motion creates a wall of glass between them, blocks Naruto from his almost-father's raging emotions.

And then, from one second to the next, he manages to turn the feeling of being torn apart into determination and strength, swallows the bitter taste in his mouth and makes his decision.

"Thank you, Jiraiya," he whispers, a weak, yet powerful goodbye and maybe-farewell to one of the few persons he ever thought understood him. He makes a step towards his former teacher, leans in and, just for a split second, presses his forehead against the old man's shoulder. Then, he turns, blinks away the tears and starts to run.

It's not far and it doesn't take him long to get there and when he reaches his destination, he feels like it can't be more than a few seconds later, yet it's like a different world.

Sasuke looks older, more mature, and in some dark, twisted way, he is breath-takingly beautiful. But what catches Naruto's attention isn't the change he's gone through on the outside. It's the difference in his eyes. It's what the years of separation changed inside the dark-haired boy, how there is something even darker inside him than there has been the last time they met, and it makes him forget what he doesn't want to remember right now.

For a moment, he believes his heart breaks. Then, more than ever before, he knows that he wants nothing more than to save this person.

"Sasuke," he says with all the force those feelings provide, with all the honesty he has. "There's still a chance. I won't let you go on like this!"

And right then, he sees the slightest shadow of a grin pull at Sasuke's lips. And he restarts to believe in what he used to believe for so long. After all, a connection like theirs cannot be broken so easily, can it?

Kapitel 3: The Darkness Within

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"You will be his ruin," Orochimaru laughs in his disgustingly soft voice. His hands, slender and fragile, yet unmistakably male, move in slow, careful motions and Sasuke wants to scream and *stop* him.

"He will not fall for your tricks," he spits out, not bothering to hide the despair in his head. He's forcing himself to cling to childish hopes, to wishful thinking they both know to be at least unlikely. Yet, he does. He knows this is bordering insanity – that *he* is.

"You still have so much confidence in someone who failed to save you so many times?" Again, there is the snake's sick amusement and he wants to bang his hands against a wall until they're bleeding and he can't feel them anymore. But he can, he can feel *his* hands and they're calmly applying black paint to his fingernails.

"He never failed," he almost hisses, defending a dream he knows to be unreal, yet true. "It was my fault to underestimate my own stupidity." There is so much bitterness in his voice that he wonders why no one hears him.

"He will not save you." He detests the Sannin's twisted humor with just as much passion as he once hated his brother, but this time, the passion is born from pure defencelessness. Itachi was someone he could fight, someone he could *touch*. Orochimaru is so far out of his reach, so far out of his world that it drives him crazy. He's given up on trying to fight months ago.

"He will protect Konoha," he still says, more to himself than to the old man who is just finishing his manicure, because if he didn't say it, he might actually stop believing it. But this is not his secret - in fact, nothing is - and he knows this will make him lose his mind - this helplessness, nakedness, everything.

Orochimaru laughs, sickeningly enthusiastically.

"Keep believing, hold on to this unshakable faith of yours, so it will be even more of a pleasure to crash all of your hopes at once," he then answers, sounding as close to happy as it gets, obviously still not tired of Sasuke's agony.

"He will not fall for this!" Sasuke almost screams, because sometimes, it almost feels like he can block out Orochimaru's voice if he just screams loud enough. But it won't work this time and somewhere deep inside, he knows it never will.

"You are his weakness and I will shamelessly take advantage of this pretty face of yours," the old man smirks, traces one of his freshly painted fingers down Sasuke's cheek, lets it come to rest on his lips. His tongue darts out to lick them as soon as he removes the digit. "Konoha will fall along with everyone within its walls."

Then, his grin grows even wider, and he stands up with all the grace of a cobra, a smooth, determined movement.

"And here he comes. Let's go welcome him, shall we?" he says in a voice so sweet Sasuke feels like throwing up and then, Orochimaru laughs - a different laugh. A laugh Sasuke recognizes as his own. A laugh Sasuke realizes Naruto will recognize as his.

Then, he leaves his tent, leaves the little camp and heads straight into the direction of Sasuke's last hope.

When Sasuke's eyes finally make contact with Naruto's, he knows his heart would have stopped if he were still in control of his body, knows he wouldn't have been able to keep standing for another second if his legs were still his own.

Naruto's eyes are seemingly endlessly deep and Sasuke knows that he is falling, that he is losing himself. And Naruto's eyes are clear and serious, without the slightest trace of hesitation or of the hatred he had feared to see. They are bright azure, more honest and open-hearted than he has ever seen them and he wants to scream his lungs out until Naruto hears him.

And then, Naruto takes a step into his direction, his posture so goddamn trustful it breaks whatever sanity Sasuke managed to keep through this hell, and moves his lips.

"Sasuke, there is still a chance," he says and it's the truth - *it would be the truth* - and Naruto is *begging* him to realize that fact. "I won't let you go on like this!" His eyes are burning with determination and even though he wishes he couldn't, he can see the pain and the despair that this determination is made of.

And there, in this moment, his control slips and he desperately wonders whether their connection could have survived. But deep, deep, deep down, there is a voice that tells him, "No".