

Chapter 8 - Interlude: Kakashi Hatake

Kakashi knew he was a failure of a human being. It was why he had always felt a little burst of relief every time the genin team assigned to him failed to see through the bell test. He could then reject them with a clear conscience. It was a better fate than being subject to the dubious protection of a man who had failed every single person he had ever cared for.

It was also why he had been so extremely conflicted when his sensei's son and his teammate Obito's last surviving kin were assigned to him.

Part of him wanted absolutely nothing to do with them. Let them go to some other sensei. Then he wouldn't have to look at the living remnants of his own failures on a daily basis. And if the worst should happen and they should die, at least it wouldn't be his fault. Whoever said that it's better to try and fail than never try at all had no clue what he was talking about.

Another part though, that hard core of stubborn optimism (that Obito and Minato and Rin had managed to implant in him without his noticing), the same optimism that let him get out of bed in the morning, the optimism that maybe, if he kept living long enough, things just might get better - that same optimism made him wish to take the challenge. Made him want to prove - to himself, to his dearly departed, to fate itself - that he wasn't a failure. That he could live up to the ideals that his teachers and teammates had lived and died by.

He'd done his homework. He'd read their records, and looked in on the two of them in the days leading in to team assignments. The cold and talented Sasuke and the optimistic goofball Naruto, it was like looking at a mirrored image of him and Obito. Oh, he was intellectually aware that there were plenty of differences as well, but there was no denying the strange twisting knot in his chest as he watched them go about their day. All they needed was a responsible kunoichi like Rin to keep the peace between them, and it would be his Team 7 all over again.

It was that last bit that had left him feeling unsettled.

It was perhaps embarrassing to admit, but he'd been so focused on Sasuke and Naruto that he hadn't actually paid any attention to the third member at all. Oh, he'd skimmed Sakura Haruno's academy record, but while her scores had been as high as you'd expect from the top kunoichi of the year, nothing had jumped out at him. So walking into the room and finding her engaged in a push-up contest with the boys had thrown him off his stride. That hadn't been Rin-like at all.

Watching her interactions as he pretended to leave them waiting on the morning of the test had further increased that feeling of dissonance. Much like Rin, she'd played the peace-maker between the conflicting personalities of her teammates. But unlike Rin, she'd done it from the front, leading them rather than helping them. He'd pegged Sasuke as the leader, much like he himself had been. Yet when push came to shove Sakura had quickly commandeered the boys through sheer force of personality.

Kakashi had thought her little power play would fall apart once he laid out the conditions of the test. But even then, she'd managed to browbeat Sasuke into joining her in helping Naruto, and then forced both boys into retreating when it was clear their first assault had failed.

As he'd stood there in the field giving his students time to set up their little traps, he'd been doing nothing but mulling over the enigmatic Sakura Haruno. It hadn't escaped his notice that she possessed some bastardized form of the Body Flicker. And while the rest of her repertoire seemed strictly academy level, there was a smoothness to her movements that reminded him of... well, himself. Few were the fresh genin, even from clans, that would take the trouble to polish their basics to such a high level.

What had stood out even more than her physical abilities though, was the way she'd led the boys around by the nose. Charismatic children were hardly uncommon. But there was something almost *learned* about the way Sakura had manipulated her teammates. It honestly put Kakashi in mind of children trained by the Yamanaka, the Kotori, and other clans who went in for the more social side of shinobi work.

And then there had been the final trap she'd sprung on him. Over the years, a few of the genin Kakashi had tested had taken him up on the offer to try and kill him. But all those efforts had been products of frustration and anger. This was the first time a genin had set out to murder him with malice aforethought.

Kakashi hated to admit it, but he had gotten curious. Curiosity was his one personality trait that had remained unchanged over the years. In his youth it had applied to ninjutsu, now it applied to people. Even as he stood in the Hokage's office waiting to be called upon, he continued to turn over in his mind how an earth a non-clan genin could exhibit so many traits usually reserved for children from the more extreme clans.

In fact, so engrossed was he in his thoughts, that he had delayed his reply to the Hokage's question. Rather than reveal his own preoccupation, he gave out a bored, "Hmm? You said something?"

The Hokage gave a long-suffering sigh. "I said, the results for Team 7?"

"Oh. They pass."

Kakashi ignored the exclamations of surprise and curiosity. Unfortunately, he couldn't ignore the Hokage as the old man said, "Oh? How surprising. And what did you think of your new students."

"Sasuke's a talented loner, Naruto's tough but undisciplined. They both have potential." As he'd expected, those were the two the Hokage wanted to know about. The old man seemed satisfied.

Unfortunately, Yuhi Kurenai had a chip on her shoulder about kunoichi not being taken seriously, and wasn't about to let him get away with glossing over his third member. "And the kunoichi?"

Seeing no way to refuse answering without looking suspicious, he said, "Sakura Haruno. She..."

...is a trained manipulator, an innovative technique user, and possibly a natural born killer...

...has gotten me curious...

...is the real reason I passed this team, and not the two boys I'm supposed to care about...

"...has good basics and seems to get along with the boys. She'll do."