



Chapter 20: The Born Again Principle

“- July 24, 6 ANB .-“

“- Uzumaki Naruto, Human Sacrifice .-“

Scarecrow practically flew him over the rooftops, which was great! But he'd only taken Naruto out of the mountain because Pineapple-Hair said Uncle was getting beat up by a giant monkey, which was stupid! Uncle was too cool to be knocked around by some butt-naked creep that throws its own crap! It was like saying D-...

It was like saying the *Fourth* would get beat up by some crazy swirly-eyed guy who's upset he's not the hero in one of the Old Man's lame romance books! The only reason that weirdo tried to kill everyone was so the world would be as silly and lame as he is! He said so! It was nuts!

There were a lot of ninja around Uncle's home when they got there, more than the ones he could see. Naruto knew where they were because the stuff Uncle put in his head was changing how it did the 'block everyone's feelings' thing. Learning, maybe, everything Uncle did was about learning something. That's how Naruto knew about the normal people peeking through windows and fences too.

“Uncle's jutsu are getting smarter!” Naruto blurted in his post-shunshin daze. “That's so cool!”

Scarecrow made that head tilt that always felt like he was concerned while pretending he wasn't.

“Bet you thought Uncle's jutsu was wearing off!” Naruto jeered at him with finger pointed. “As if!”

“I'm sorry, are you talking to me now, instead of yourself in your head?”

“Like that's gonna fool me!” Scarecrow shouldn't have taken his dog mask off, he wasn't nearly as mysterious when you could see his face! Well, an eye at least... How dare Scarecrow look so cool? Scarecrow should suck! It didn't matter that Naruto didn't actually know what that word meant when said like that, he knew when to use it, so there!

“Now listen, kid, your uncle has a very important guest over, and things are a bit... strained at the moment. So try not to make him even more trouble.”

“YOU don’t get to tell me that, Scarecrow-man!” Naruto shouted. “You’re the one who always brings bad news!”

“Come now, I don’t *cause* any of those bad things, do I?”

“That’s what you say,” Naruto scowled. “I’m going in, don’t follow me! You’re not invited!”

“My, and what if your Uncle did invite me?”

“I won’t believe it unless he says it, you’re shady!”

“That hurts, Naruto.”

“I didn’t say you could use my name!”

“Are you sure? You forget a lot of things you say.”

Naruto shook his fist at the man with a wordless shout, then hurried inside to make sure uncle was alright. He ran upstairs to check his office, he ran across the hall to check his bedroom, he ran downstairs and then another set of stairs to look for him in the basement, he ran back up and out into the back yard and he wasn’t there either, where could he be?! If some monkey stole him away he was gonna-

“Who – Naruto?” Uncle called from the kitchen door. The big, wide yard door made more than half out of glass, same as the big windows. The door and windows to the kitchen that Naruto had run past three different times without looking in. Despite that it also had a second door inside, which was always open.

Naruto’s cheeks burned.

Uncle Hanzo palmed his face with a groan. “Shikaku, you complete and utter *dung beetle*.”

“Uncle!” Uncle didn’t oof when Naruto crashed into him this time, he knew it! Uncle was even more awesome now, somehow, swirly-eye was in for it next time he tried something! “Uncle! You’re alive!”

“As ever before, yet somehow you’re still surprised.”

“Nuh-uh, Shisui’s always worried too! And what do you mean about Pineapple-Hair, dung beetles are cool! Where is Crow-guy anyway, he was supposed to be here!”

“He’s out walking the dragon.”

“You have a dragon?!”

“I was going to tell you, but then you fell asleep on me.”

“You should’ve woke me up!”

“And then I’d not have a moment’s peace for the rest of the day.”

“You don’t anyway!” Naruto huffed. “You’ve been invaded by *monkeys*, Pineapple-Hair already told me! Lemme at ’em!”

Uncle rolled his eyes and carried Naruto inside under his arm. “Child soldiers remain one of the five worst ideas ever.”

“Only one of five?” An unfamiliar voice said from the table, who – it was Monkey Face! “What are the other four?”

“Bloodletting, making medicine out of mummies, trying to ride a horse through a normal door, and dying from a stubbed toe. Of course, nuance may lead to differences of opinions.”

“No mummies!” Naruto cried. “No mummies, no zombies, no g-g-gho- hey wait, how can you die from a stubbed toe?”

“By being too embarrassed to see a doctor after you kick your safe because you forgot the combination.”

“Wow, that *is* dumb!” Naruto marvelled. “What’s nuance mean?”

“What *does* nuance mean,” Uncle corrected.

Naruto rolled his eyes. “What *does* nuance mean?”

“Variation, like how carmine, rusty and pink are all nuances of the color red.”

“Ooooh,” Naruto pretended to know what carmine was just so he didn’t seem stupid in front of a stranger – hey wait a minute! “You!” Naruto pointed at Monkey Face. “What are you doing here?! Scarecrow said you tried to beat up Uncle, I won’t let you! You’ll have to go through me first!”

“Too late, kid,” Uncle harrumphed. “We’re under guest right, if you get violent he’ll just have an excuse to beat on me some more.”

“Eh? I don’t get it!”

Uncle went and explained something about how the ‘old ways’ had something called ‘guest right’ which was basically being hospitable but more hardcore, unless the guest was only there to find a loophole or something to make the host’s life miserable. Or when the host wants to make the guest’s life miserable through loopholes, it was really complicated even if you squinted. That was saying a lot, Naruto squinted really good!

Eventually, though, Uncle noticed that Naruto didn’t get it so he sighed – how did Naruto disappoint him this time?! – lifted him by the scruff and plopped him down in a seat at the table. “Naruto, the Monkey King is a good guy, but he’s having trouble believing I’m also a good guy.”

Ha! “I knew it, he’s just jealous like everybody else!”

“Now now, jealous or not he’s still my guest, as part of my household you have to be polite to him too.”

“But I don’t wanna!”

“You don’t want to be part of my family?”

“What? No! I mean yes! What kind of question is that, I totally want to be part of your family!” Oh crap, he didn’t mean to say that out loud, abort, abort, redirect! “You said that’s what an apprentice is, right? How can you say different now? I mean – ugh, stop confusing me!”

“Stop yelling.”

Safe! “I’m not yelling!” Naruto yelled, then cringed and rubbed the back of his head. “I mean, I’m sorry. I’ll be good.”

“I’ll believe that when I can actually get some sleep with you here.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means babysitting is hard.”

“Wha-I’m not a baby!”

“And a terrible burden it is too, at least as a baby you wouldn’t be able to follow me everywhere like a creepy stalker.”

“Why are you being so mean againnnnnnnnn?”

Monkey-Face had the nerve to interrupt him. “I can see why Saru’s man would send this brat down here, but not why he’d enjoy being in his presence himself.”

Naruto gaped in affront and only failed to jump over the table because the edge slowed him down.

“How dare you! I’m not a brat, Uncle tell him!”

Uncle dropped his forehead in his hand with a groan.

Naruto finally jumped to his feet on the chair and pointed at Monkey Face accusingly. “I knew it, you *did* do something, Uncle’s never this cranky or tired during the day!”

“I *pretend* not to be cranky,” Uncle interrupted with such feeling that Naruto felt his heart being pierced. “But you’re right that I’m not usually this tired, which is why I can’t pretend as well as I usually do.”

“Why should you pretend anything?! This is your house! And you just fought off a bunch of crazies too, you’re a hero! Why do these weirdos keep bothering you?”

“Because I went from a weakling nobody to someone who can be attacked by Konoha’s best and not die in one hit. Somehow.”

“But that’s old news!” Naruto boggled. “And – and that’s kind of cool and all, but it still doesn’t explain why Monkey Face tried to beat you up!”

“I died for a little while yesterday.” Naruto’s heart almost flew out through his throat. “What I did to come back left my spirit really weak. So weak that special eyes like his can’t see it through all the chakra I have now. He thought I was a soulless demon and assumed he was protecting Konoha

from me. He thought I was, you know, one of those clan brothers of the Rabbit Goddess I told you about.”

“Oh! The guys who wanna eat the world?”

“Who want to turn everyone into a fruit to eat, yes. I figured out how chakra works and changed mine a bit, which only those guys could do before.”

“Huh,” Naruto squinted at Monkey Face. “So... He tried to beat you up for being cooler than he could ever imagine?”

Uncle paused, opened his mouth, closed it, and then opened it again to say: “Exactly!”

Monkey-Face ground his teeth on the other side of the table.

“I knew it!” Naruto hollered in triumph. “It *is* because he’s jealous!”

“He’s *cautious*, Naruto.”

“Whatever makes our guest feel better, Uncle,” Naruto gloated loyally while Monkey Face made a sound like an angry tied up Inuzuka dog, served him right, believe it! Naruto peered at Monkey Face. “Can I pull your whiskers?”

“Try it and it’s the pond for you, child.”

“It was a joke!” Naruto lied when Uncle didn’t back him up. “Uncle, Uncle, Uncle! You just said this was one of those old guest right things, guests are supposed to be polite, but he’s not! Who does he think he is?”

“The Third Hokage’s dad in a past life, or something.”

“EEEH?”

“When the bunny goddess trapped everyone in pea pods, the only way to escape without help from outside was death. The pea pods also ate people’s spirits, though, so people couldn’t make it to heaven.” Uncle waived vaguely. “Bunch of people fell and reincarnated as animals instead. Some of them eventually grew big and smart enough to remember, and then they helped free more and more people. The Monkey King here was the first who got out, and eventually, I don’t know if it was before or after the Sage’s Time, the Hokage was born as one of his kids-”

“HE’S THE OLD MAN’S DAD?!”

“Or something, in a past life before this one, I just said that didn’t I? If you’re going to pepper me with questions at least listen to the answers, especially when I don’t have that many of them to begin with. I didn’t have time to squeeze him for details before you showed up.”

“You – we – people were monkeys?!”

“*Some* people, not all. They weren’t all monkeys either. Salamanders, slugs, snakes, birds, the Fourth’s teacher was a toad at some point. Not sure about you and your parents, your dad could summon toads but that’s because he got the contract handed down from the other guy.”

“I might’ve been a toad?” Naruto didn’t know how to feel about this. “Like Gama?” Oh no, Gama! Gama was d-d-d-

“Gama was a just a really big frog, he didn’t have the soul of a former human or anything, that’s why it wasn’t smart enough to talk.”

“I still can’t believe he’s gone!” Naruto wailed tearfully, his nose was runny too all of a sudden, it wasn’t fair! “Wait, I thought Gama was a toad!”

“Frogs have suckers on their fingers, and smooth moist skin. Toads are dry, wrinkly and they like to crawl more than jump.”

“But – but that’s impossible!” It couldn’t be, please say it ain’t so! “That – that would mean Sasuke was right!”

“Yes he was,” Uncle said mercilessly, would it kill him to be nice to Naruto just once? Just once, was that so much to ask?! “All of which you’d have known if you were really listening to me all the fourteen different times the topic came up this year.”

“D-don’t blame that on me, it’s not my fault you’re always so long-winded and boring!”

“But it is your fault that you and Sasuke immediately descended into war within five sentences of meeting. You made a complete idiot of yourself.”

“Nooo!” Naruto wailed, dripping like pudding off the table and his chair down to the floor “It can’t beeeeeeeee!”

“See what I have to work with?” Uncle asked Monkey Face.

“You’re terrible!” Naruto moaned pathetically under the table. “The worst! You’re bullying me when I’m already sad!”

“And dramatic too, very uncute.”

“I’ll never be cute you – you – you mean person!”

“I suppose I should take what I can get,” Uncle grouched. “If this were a few months ago, you’d be calling me a bastard and every other name under the sun by now.”

“Don’t tell Monkey Face that, you-you... you tattletale!

“Tell me you wouldn’t go insane with this as your life,” Uncle told Monkey-Face, the traitor. “I dare you.”

“Extenuating circumstances make no difference,” Monkey Face said flatly as he sipped a saucer of rice wine. “Everyone has them.”

“Not these.”

“I have to rear entire hordes of primates *before* I know if any of them will grow a brain.”

“...You don’t have a wife for that? Concubines? Babysitter baboons, picket pottos, gorilla grandmas, fenced enclosures?”

“Not enough to lighten my burden more than whatever measures you’ve taken against this brat.”

Naruto jumped on the table and threw himself at Monkey-Face with a howl. “STOP CALLING ME A BRAT!”

Next thing he knew, he was plunging face-first into the backyard pond with a loud splash.

Naruto’s return to the kitchen was a slow, meandering, lolling walk of shame amidst the croaking chorus of Gama’s siblings.

“You’re despicable,” he told Monkey-Face from the doorway, dripping water and mud.

Uncle was not impressed. “Don’t be angry at him, I’m the one who threw you.”

“What?! Uncle, how could you?!”

“Naruto?”

“What?”

“Go change.”

“But-“

“Now.”

“I hate you!”

“And do clean up after yourself, or no dessert tonight.”

“... This isn't over.”

“- An hour later .-“

Changing didn't take as long as putting the clothes away in the bathroom hamper, or wiping the water and mud he dragged in. He did it all nice and slow and thorough because he was a good boy, he'll show Uncle and he'll see, everyone will see! Believe it!

Really, it wouldn't have taken even ten minutes if not for the huge spider cobwebs he found! Those took a while to pick through, but by the end Naruto managed to clean them all up *and* fill his spare Prank-o-Pod jar he had under the mattress! And then some! Uncle always said to just sweep them away, but Naruto knew a secret trial of diligence when he heard one, he was sure of it! He refused to fail!

The kitchen was empty when he went back down, but this time he didn't need to run all over the house to look. Naruto could tell where Uncle was because the jutsu in his head was talking to the jutsu that Uncle had cast on the house. That's how he knew that Crow-guy had been by while he was mopping the stairs, and then he left again. If he closed his eyes, Naruto could see a whole bunch of colored things all over the place, and they were telling him stuff! Well, they were telling the stuff in his head stuff, it was way useful!

He found Uncle in the back yard, on the downstream end of the little pond he'd dug for the toads. Frogs. Toad-frogs, whatever!

Monkey-Face was sitting on the roof of the waterwheel, but Naruto was still suspicious of him so he pretended he didn't exist. Being the Old Man's dad was cool and all, but Naruto wasn't gonna believe such a story without hearing it from the Old Man himself. Uncle could still be wrong.

What? He could be, Uncle always says so! Trust but verify, Naruto could say that in normal talk and even Uncle's other talk now, without even messing up the sounds! He could write it in hiragana and kanji and alphabet, Naruto was even sure he knew how to write it in those weird vertical zig-zag lines now, but he was saving that for a surprise.

"Uncle! I'm done!"

"Good job, Naruto."

Uncle didn't look at him though, he was looking at one of Gama's siblings. The smallest, fattest and most ridiculous of Gama's siblings, the one Naruto fantasized about rolling down the street like a snowball, it was terrible of him but he couldn't help it. I mean... look at the thing!

"This one is the most pathetic of my successes by a wide margin," Uncle said as if he'd just read Naruto's mind. "Not because anything went wrong but because the starting point was a sad little Common Rain Frog. These potato fairies are basically the handicapped of the amphibian world. They almost aren't frogs at all. They can't swim, they drown if you put them in deep water, they don't have tadpole babies and instead hatch mini baby frogs which are even more hopeless than they are, they can't even hop, just crawl. Pretty fast for their size, if they need to, but that's the only good things I can say about them. And their skin is so sensitive that I had to use gloves when handling him for the first few months. I'm frankly amazed he hasn't killed himself, honestly."

"Eh?" Naruto hadn't heard any of this before. "How come?"

"His method of travel is to stick his arms straight out without looking over the edge, teeter on his belly and just flop off. It was fine before, since he was so small that he could survive his own terminal velocity. Unfortunately, that's no longer the case, and his respect of gravity hasn't grown with his size."

"Well it's not like it's his fault!" Naruto protested. "He doesn't have a choice! He has this adorable, little, round, plump body, look at those skinny short legs, and that cute butt!"

"... Naruto, I worry about you sometimes."

“You don’t need to!” Naruto hurried to reassure him. “I can take care of myself, you won’t even know I’m here!”

“That’s worse.”

Fatty started to rub his face and belly with his paw.

“I assume,” Monkey Face ruined the moment, the bastard! “That there is a reason for your speech.”

“Yes.” Uncle looked down at the fat toad that barely reached his hip. He put his hand on its head.

Then his hand sunk *into* Fatty’s head, through flesh and brain and blood all the way to the elbow.

“Ack!” Naruto jumped away and hid behind Goggles, a bigger and much less hopeless frog. Toad. Toad-frog, whatever!

Uncle slowly pulled his arm out. Then his hand. Naruto peeked around Goggles, he couldn’t help it, he was curious! Besides, if Fatty’s siblings weren’t panicking, what excuse did he have?

When Uncle’s hand was all back out, there wasn’t any blood or meat bits on it, despite the big hole in Fatty’s head. The slack, gaping-mouthed Fatty, yikes! Did... did uncle pull out his brain?! Naruto was just about to start screaming to high heavens when he noticed what Uncle had in his hand.

A ball of light.

A swirling, shimmering, pulsing ball of light.

“Something’s missing from my amphibians,” Uncle said in that distracted tone that was always followed by Crow-guy ranting about him being ridiculous. This time, though, he wasn’t scowling. “And it’s not the fleshy bits.”

Uncle wasn’t scowling. Or doing anything of the stuff he usually did when thinking hard. He was... smiling. Naruto had never seen the like on him. Uncle had smiled plenty before, but they always looked fake-

Uncle turned away from the slack and insensate body of Fatty, crouched next to the water, and grabbed one of the common grass frogs that had made their home in their pond. Uncle turned to

hide what he was doing then, but Naruto heard the squelch just fine. And then the screams, ugh, the look-at-me-crapping-black-gunk-through-my-skin screams, they were always so awful!

Finally, the screaming stopped.

Then uncle pushed the ball of light into the little frog until the thing was wrapped inside both of his hands like a warm hug.

For a moment, Naruto's vision was interposed by the shimmery branches of light without having to close his eyes. A bright, even prettier light flashed through his Uncle just as he blinked. It was warm, and Naruto thought he saw the face of a woman in it. And some kid, who the heck was that? Intruders!

When the spots cleared, Uncle was standing again. He looked tired, his face all birdbrained like when he went too long without a break and Shisui had to remind him he hadn't slept in three days again.

But...

Uncle's smiles had always looked fake before, especially when he knew Naruto was there. Like a lie and a chore. Like *Naruto* was a chore. Naruto used to be upset at them, at him, before Crow-guy talked to him alone and explained how amazing it was for someone to put so much effort into putting up with you, even when they don't like you. Naruto did his best to appreciate the fake smiles after that, he even came to like them, and he loved Uncle all the more for it, he really did.

But...

He liked this smile a lot better.

"Welcome to life, little one," Uncle warmly told the small creature. "I'm sorry it took me so long. I hope this body serves you better than the first."

"Hey to you too, Pops," said the frog. "Ribbit," it added. "Got any bugs?"

"... Reincarnation," the Monkey King murmured from on high, awestruck.

"Here, Naruto," Uncle stepped over and held out the newest of Gama's – Gama's... "You know where the food is."

What – but – but Gama was... G-Gama w-was d-dead, he – he – no, he couldn't replace Gama, that wasn't right! Even if this new one was cuter and smarter and Naruto knew replacement goldfish happened all the time, he couldn't do that to Gama, he couldn't tread Gama like a goldfish, he just couldn't!

Monkey Face was suddenly there, his big hand over Uncle's just short of touching the new froggy's skin.

Uncle side-eyed him sternly. "Gently."

Monkey Face let Uncle nudge the frog over onto his palm and then raised the small animal up to his face. Looked really, really close at him, gold glowy eyes and everything.

"Hello," said the frog. "Ribbit," it added. "Got any fleas? A nice plump tick maybe?"

Monkey Face straightened abruptly, dropped the frog back in Uncle's hand and backed away to drop down on his butt. Fell, almost. He planted his fists in the grass and... "Not reincarnation," he said faintly. "*Immaculate* incarnation. You... You created a new soul."

"No," Uncle denied, his tone tired but calm. "I didn't. It *came to be*. Souls have a beginning too, after all. It turns out they just need a body, a spirit to nestle in, and the right kind of light."

"The right kind of light." The way the Monkey King looked at Uncle now... It was the first time since Naruto arrived that he didn't feel like he wanted to strangle someone. "To think that I'd live to see the world finally gain its gods."

Eh?

"Don't get ahead of yourself, especially on my behalf, you can thank my wife for that last one, not me." What were they talking about?! "Though maybe stop dragging your feet too, for a change."

"... Perhaps *it is* our failing," the Monkey King sighed, looking from Gama Two to the other frogs, and then at the littler frogs and fish frolicking in the water. "Had we not persisted in this world for so long, instead of allowing time to claim our flesh... Had we moved onwards to the afterlife and advanced our cycle, there might have been enough of us on the other side. Enough of us mighty enough to wrest the Shinju's claim loose, instead of needing Kaguya's own spawn to veer into sentimental whim."

“The nature of humanity is to master their environment,” Uncle replied, and it... *sounded* like he disagreed? Sort of? “Our defiance that drives us to conquer nature rather than just *be* it, to conquer ourselves *and* the nature around us, that, in itself, is part of nature. I won’t hold it against you for betting on it instead of dying in pursuit of some nebulous future. Not when the ones who did have the sight to discern it chose not to even try.”

Naruto felt like his brain might start to smoke from all the thinking he was doing. And failing! “Are you talking about the rabbit goddess again?” And a whole bunch of other things too, he smelled a new story coming on!

Instead of Uncle giving Naruto his story, though, the Monkey King shook himself out of his mood and stood back up on all fours. “You were right in what you suspected,” he told Uncle. “And I was wrong in what I suspected. Whatever your soul was before this, I acknowledge that you are not an interloper. I renounce my suspicions. I will cooperate with you and yours.”

Uncle nodded with a hand on his chest. “I’m thankful.”

“Perhaps I’ll even deserve that goodwill, in time.” The Monkey King jumped up on the waterwheel again. “I go now to make other amends. It seems I’ve quite a few.”

The big monkey jumped much higher and farther this time, quickly disappearing beyond what Naruto could see of the rooftops. After him, the unseen ninja hiding among the rooftops and alleys also left one by one, until Naruto couldn’t feel any person besides Uncle and him anywhere.

“Still think he’s a jerk,” Naruto muttered, hugging Gama Two close.

“Hey,” called the frog a bit more insistently. “Ribbit,” it added. “You got bugs or not?”

“Oh! Yeah, sure, hold on.” Naruto put Gama Two on his head and took out his jar of spiders.

“How do you – where...?” Uncle trailed off incredulously, then he rubbed his face. “No, you know what, I don’t care.” Uncle took a seat on the yard bench and tapped the spot next to him. “Come here, Naruto. We need to talk.”

With much sudden trepidation, Naruto went to hop up on the bench. He picked out a spider in his tweezers and held it up for Gama Two to gobble up. He pretended that feeding Gama two needed a lot more of his attention just to hide his nerves.

“Naruto,” Uncle asked lowly. “If it were up to you, what would you choose between things going back to how they were before and... having a dad?”

Naruto’s stomach flipped. The second spider escaped on half-broken legs as Naruto squeezed the tweezers in his fist. He had an answer ready, he’d had it for months, but he couldn’t spit it out.

Uncle huffed. “Well, ask a loaded question.” He scratched his chin. “It’s not as clear-cut as you think, Naruto. Having parents means that you don’t get to do what all you want. They make all the important decisions, decide who you can see, what friends you can have, when you can go out or stay inside, you won’t get to handle your own money anymore, you’ll have a curfew, and when you do something bad you’ll get punished, not just chased off and then let go because the Third feels too guilty to reign you in-“

“If you leave Konoha I’m coming with you!” Naruto blurted before he could chicken out. It still wasn’t the answer Naruto wanted to give, but he wasn’t brave enough. He wasn’t brave at all. Not when Uncle made it sound like – like it wouldn’t be him? How did that make any sense, who else could it be?

Uncle went quiet. Gama’s siblings were quiet. Even the normal frogs were quiet now, as if to judge him for his words. And the other words, the ones he couldn’t say.

Uncle sighed, but not in a sad way, exactly. More like when Naruto did something that left him *almost* exasperated. “That’s not what I asked.”

“I’m not stupid,” Naruto muttered thickly. “I know what I saw, what I heard. I know what I felt. People *hate* the way things are, even when they shouldn’t. Hyuuga are stupid, Uchiha are stupid, ANBU are stupid, all the prisoner nin are stupid, even the Old Man’s minions are stupid! Half of them hate what they do, and the other half doesn’t care about anything!”

This was even less what Uncle asked him, but Naruto couldn’t think about it, if he did he’d start crying and never stop. The words didn’t want to stop either, now that he’d started.

“Worse, *everyone* keeps doing the same stuff that makes people hate. Hate their missions, hate their clients, hate themselves, but they still do the things anyway, even when it turns *themselves* into people they hate even more. Meanwhile, the only people who *don’t* hate are the ones that should!”

“Oh Naruto,” uncle said sadly, but not really. It was fond now, if anything, and it wasn’t faked like it used to be. “That’s not hate. If you’d really experienced hate, never mind from so many people, you’d be much more worse off right now, you can’t even imagine. And what happened, it didn’t let you feel much of anything besides the bad things, that ability is literally called Negative Emotion Sensing-“

“But I didn’t! I didn’t just sense bad stuff!” Naruto jumped to his feet and pointed accusingly with watery eyes. “I felt you too! You, and it makes no sense! You *should* hate me, the kyuubi killed your family, not me, but I’m the one who ruined their ashes. I’m the one who put you in the hospital, who almost killed you, me, I did all that, and you feel the same way, I know you do! You were right back then, I only break things!”

“... That’s still all negative stuff, Naruto, just not as strong-“

Naruto burst into tears.

“Okay, kid, come here,” Uncle pulled him over onto his lap and hugged him. It was patient and indulgent and not teary at all, it sucked! Why did it feel so good to cry? “Let it all out, there’s a good lad.”

“I always break things! I never fix anything, even when I’m trying! I’m not like you, I hurt you, made you sad, but still the first thing you said was good job! You *hated* every moment I’m around, I know that now, but you were still so nice! The rest of the village is a bunch of jerks who hate me for no reason, but you do have a reason! It makes no sense.”

Uncle patted Naruto on the head and back, like someone who’d done it so many times he didn’t even need to think about it. “They don’t hate you, Naruto. They shun you, but they have a good reason for that.”

“What?” Naruto asked desperately. “Why? What’s the reason?”

“Shimura Danzo,” Uncle said as if that name should mean anything. “The bad man that Lord Third took down yesterday. He’s the one who leaked the information about you being the kyuubi’s jailer.”

“I know that, everyone knows now! But it doesn’t make any sense either!” It was like his mouth blubbered all on its own, Naruto may as well have been in their heads the whole night, he knew

what he felt! “I’m not the kyuubi, and everyone knows it! Everyone knows how sealing scrolls work!”

“They do, but it doesn’t matter. What matters is *how* they found out. It was not some announcement or article in the paper, it was an information leak that shouldn’t have happened. This basically told everyone that it was either the will of the Hokage, or *against* the Hokage’s will which made it even *more* dangerous if they got at all involved. When a lose-lose situation like that happens, the only sane thing to do is to avoid the problem entirely.”

Naruto sagged, though his body still rocked with sobs and sniffles, and tried to understand all of that. “They... *don’t* hate me?”

“You need someone to do you horrible personal harm before you can hate them. Also, people aren’t stupid. They are, however, resentful of any danger to their lives and their loved ones that they did nothing to earn. They figured out that it was the nin-who-must-not-be-named that exposed you. They naturally wanted to have nothing to do with the mess, which in this case means you. This became even more important after the Third issued the Kyuubi Taboo, which made it so anyone who talked about it would be executed.”

“Executed?!” Naruto balked. “They – they’d have been killed if they just talked about me? The Old Man wouldn’t have – he’d never-”

“He did, and more than once,” Uncle revealed, not sugarcoating a thing. “Worse, the Kyuubi Taboo applies *everywhere*. This is why parents told their kids to avoid you – their kids *didn’t* know about you being the kyuubi container. That meant that if their kids said something about it, the parents were the most likely to blame. By telling them to avoid you, they could give just a general ‘he’s not the right sort’ excuse instead of causing their kids to ask dangerous questions.”

“They couldn’t even talk about it at home?”

“Not if they had kids in the house, no. Parents already fear their kids a bit, kids are expected to tattle on their parents if they plan any sort of treason. Having to also fear *for* your kids’ lives – on top of your own, that doesn’t do any good to anyone.”

“Wow...” Naruto said dumbly. “That... that really sucks.”

“No kidding. You know how annoyed I get when someone sticks their nose into my home or my business? Everyone is like that. Being also under threat of execution because your kid heard some drunkard spill the beans during a shopping trip, well, that makes it ten times worse. Don’t go shouting this from the rooftops, but it’s my highly informed opinion that the Third severely overreacted and the Kyuubi Taboo was the second worst thing he could have done.”

“No kidding,” Naruto sobbed. “What’s the first worst?”

“Giving you to Danzo.” Uncle wiped Naruto’s face and nose with a handkerchief he’d made out of nowhere. “He wanted to turn you into a drone.”

“No!”

“Yes.”

“That jerk!”

“I agree.”

Embarrassingly, it took Naruto a fair bit of time to stop crying, and he had to force himself to stuff it the last third of the way because Crow-guy showed up. Well, came close anyway. Naruto only sensed him through Uncle’s jutsu. The bigger one.

“Alright,” Uncle set Naruto down on the ground and stood from the bench. “You can come down now, Shisui!”

Not-Crow-at-the-Moment flickered into sight quicker than Naruto could keep up even with Uncle’s jutsu. Either of them.

“Shisui, how do you feel now?”

“Strong, after the healing. Stronger every day.

“I keep forgetting to ask, what about Itachi? Did he get any exposure?”

“No, but I’m going to persuade him to go through with it, just you wait. You’ll do it, right? If he asks?”

“If I’m adequately persuaded. It puts a lot of stress on me, and it’s not a good idea to give super vitality to just anyone. I won’t do it for free either.”

“Fair enough. Actually, I think Itachi will be relieved he hasn’t completely lost control over how and he incurs debts with you.”

What was all this about now? Everyone kept bringing up stuff Naruto didn’t know about! He hated it!

Shisui looked from Uncle to the frog. The new frog and the old frog. Fatty. “Is this the ‘special biomatter’ you were talking about?”

Naruto turned away to hide Gama-chan just in case.

“Yes,” Uncle said, motioning for Shisui to follow him to Fatty’s... Former body? Leftover body? Leftovers? Which had been left to lie there so Naruto could have his tearful meltdown, how mortifying! “You’ll handle delivery?”

Crow-guy nodded, flickered across the yard and sealed Not-Fatty-Anymore it in a scroll, which he pocketed. Then he returned and held something out to Uncle. It was his tie. “Here, safe and sound.” Eh? “The other arrangements you requested have been approved, though the cow will take a little longer. Will you tell me what you want it for now?”

Cow? What cow? Where?

“No.” Uncle refused with that same tone that Naruto knew meant a whole day of sorting junk, if he dared to nag one more time. “Thanks, though. An hour you said?”

“Yes.”

“Hey, Naruto.”

Naruto held another spider up for Gama Two to snatch. “Yeah?”

“Come here.”

Naruto obeyed, if only because he’d be able to hide behind him if Shisui tried a snatch and grab, Gama Two was *his* friend!

Uncle put the tie around Gama Two’s neck – it shrunk in front of Naruto’s eyes, it was a *magic* tie, that’s so cool! – and pat the two of them on the head. “I’m going to take a nap. Think you kids can keep the house in one piece for an hour?”

“I dunno.” Naruto looked dubiously at the ninja. And around the place too, just in case. “Is he staying here?”

“Out of sight, but yes. He’s my bodyguard now. Because Obito might come back, among other things.”

“Oh. Right, that makes sense. What about Monkey Face, though? Is he going to come back? He was a real jerk, and, well... he’s a monkey! If he comes around and goes around with a naked red butt, I’m bringing out the glitter!”

Uncle snorted. “Good luck, Shisui.”

“Thanks,” Not-Crow-at-the-Moment said dryly. “I’ll need it.”

“I’m sure Shikaku accounted for this in your hazard pay.”

“I’m not.”

Hey! That was rude! Naruto didn’t know what they meant – again, ugh! – but ‘hazard’ was totally something rude, he was sure of it!

Shisui ignored Naruto’s inner turmoil, how dare he?! “A lot of people are upset with me at the moment.”

“Welcome to independence.”

“Yeah,” Shisui grumbled as he jumped up and away. “Welcome.”

“Don’t mind them, Gama-chan,” Naruto urged. “They’re back to being boring again.”

“Okay.”

“Exactly!” This Gama was a lot better than Gama already, why Naruto might just- “Hey wait a minute, you can talk now?!”

Gama Two beheld him quietly. Then looked at Uncle’s retreating back. “Pops, I’m not so sure about this guy.”

“You *can* talk, that’s awesome! Gama couldn’t talk, and he was huge! This is amazing, this is – that was – G-Gama was...” Naruto’s voice cracked. His eyes teared up again. His nose started to

run again too, oh no! And now he was desperately trying not to cry *again*. He grabbed Gama Two from his head and held him in his palms, he – p-poor Gama, he – he couldn't hold it in! “Id's alride, we gan bourn him dogether!” Naruto blubbered, hugging Gama Two for dear life.

“Help, pops, help, help!”

“Id's alride, it's alride, he – he's gone, Gaba-s god, b-but... At leasd we're dogether!” And - and now they could mourn him together! Him, Gama Two and the magic tie, it just felt right! “G-Gama was...” He wasn't gonna cry! “We were...” Naruto wouldn't cry! He wouldn't! “M-may he rest in p-b-biece – beace! I bean peas, beliebe it!”

“Okay,” Gama two said, drinking his tears. One by one. Every whip of his tongue felt like a slap, ow, ouch, hey!

“Hey, zdob thad!”

“Ribbit.” The frog blinked his big eyes. He croaked. He snapped his tongue out to snatch Naruto's spider instead. He swallowed. He waddled in Naruto's hands. He croaked again. He blinked. The magic tie wriggled. “You got anything else? These things are kinda dry.”

“-. Another hour later .-“

Naruto snored.

“-. Yet another hour later .-“

Naruto jolted awake from a poke in his side, who *dared* disturb the sleep of the Great and Powerful crap, oh crap, oh crap, he fell asleep! Uncle asked him to be the man of the house while he got some rest, but now look at him! He was a failure! A failure! “Gama-chan!” He cried desperately, if he lost him or squished him or Monkey-Face or some one-eyed freak came out of nowhere to suck his blood again, he didn't know what he'd do!

“Hey,” said Gama Two. “Ribb-ack!” He croaked when Naruto desperately hugged him. “Help, help, I'm being distressed!”

“I’m totally asking for more hazard pay,” Crow guy’s voice came from somewhere. “Just as soon as I can stop worrying that my friend is about to kill himself in pursuit of the only miracle that might spare us going down in a literal blaze. Alright, kid, wake up and shut up, your Uncle needs you.”

“Huh, what do you mean?” Naruto asked stupidly. Then he finally realized that he didn’t recognize his surroundings. “What the heck? This isn’t home – Uncle’s place! Not Uncle’s place I mean, where are we? How did we get here? Oh no!” Naruto jumped away and pointed at Still-Not-Crow-at-the-Moment. “You bastard, you kidnapped me!”

“I didn’t. Hanzo carried you here.”

“Uncle? Where is he? I don’t believe you!”

“Mooo,” mooed the cow that lumbered past at that precise moment, herded onwards by a hard-boiled Shisui clone. “Mooo,” the moo continued until it suddenly cut off when the doors to whatever-it-was closed shut behind it. Naruto watched the cow walk into the darkness. He felt the cow through Uncle’s jutsu even after the doors closed. He felt when he stopped feeling it too. His Uncle... he killed the cow? But why? What did it do?

...

Were they going to eat it?

Gama Two made a bid for freedom, which Naruto absentmindedly thwarted. He’d had plenty of practice the past few months. “Where are we?” he asked Shisui. “Why’d you bring me here? Where’s Uncle? It’s rude to just steal someone from their house, don’t you know!” Wait, there was someone else in there too!

Before he could ask more questions, the doors opened again, just a tiny bit this time, making way for the Old Man’s chief minion.

“Pineapple-Hair! What are we doing here? Where is here anyway? It looks like a dump!” It really did, they were on the top step of a run-down maybe-kinda-sorta-something that *might* have been a temple before its roof started caving in. “What’s going on?”

“Kid, believe me when I say that trying to explain anything to you would be useless, and you’d never believe it anyway,” Pineapple-Hair said rudely. “I can barely believe what your Uncle is trying to do, I almost can’t bring myself to think about what will happen if he succeeds. Or fails, for that matter.”

“I’m not scared!”

“I am,” Pineapple-Hair grumbled. “Something your Uncle seems far too good at doing lately.”

“Well *I’m* not afraid!” Naruto scowled, it was hard to remember everything Uncle said, but everyone else just sounded so stupid when they didn’t even know the simple stuff. “Why are you scared? Uncle’s a good guy, he never did anyone wrong, shouldn’t you know that?”

“Kid, you don’t understand anything of what your Uncle’s doing, or could possibly do after this.”

“What’s that got to do with anything? People aren’t afraid of stuff they don’t understand, they’re afraid of danger! You’re the Old Man’s buddy, right? The boring one that always nags him with advice he already knows! You should know this stuff!”

“What does any of that have to do with anything?” Pineapple-Hair raked rubbed his scar. One of his scars. “Shisui, I think I might give you a raise after all.”

“Why is everyone a jerk to me?!” Naruto demanded. “Even the ninja! Are all ninja jerks like you? Am I gonna grow up to be a jerk like you too? I won’t do it! I won’t!”

“Sure, kid,” Pineapple sighed. “Whatever you say.”

“Come now, Nara, don’t undo *all* my progress.”

“Uncle!” Naruto ran past Pineapple-Hair and glomped Uncle Hanzo before he was even through the door. “The cow, you just killed the cow, why did you kill a cow? Are we gonna eat it?”

“Not us, no, but it *was* a meal, of sorts.”

“A meal for the dead,” Pineapple said dryly. “And then some.”

“Oh come on!” Naruto erupted. “What are you guys talking about? Why am I even here if nobody’s gonna explain anything to me? *What’s going on?*”

“What’s going on, Naruto, is that a lot of things are happening that only the Hokage can handle,” Uncle explained, because he never left Naruto hanging unless it was to teach him something, not like everyone else. “And since I can’t magic up Lord Third from wherever Obito has him stolen away, I’m going with the next best thing.”

“That doesn’t tell me *anything*,” Naruto whined. “It’s just more nonsense words, look, even Crow-guy doesn’t know what you’re talking about, isn’t that right Gama-chan – hey wait! Oh crap, where’s Gama?! Where did he go, he was right here!”

“I had my magic tie take him home,” Uncle replied.

“What? When? How? What does that even mean?!”

“Magic, because you were too preoccupied to take care of him.”

“Noo, I’m terrible!” Naruto fell to his knees in despair. “I’m the worst!”

“And loud enough to wake the dead,” Pineapple grumbled from over there where nobody cared what he had to say. “Though it might not be a bad thing, in this case.”

“No,” Uncle grunted. “Not a bad thing at all.”

“... You can still back out,” Pineapple said. Reluctantly. “No one will blame you.”

“That’s a lie.”

Pineapple-Hair was conspicuously quiet this time, he was still being rude, as soon as he stopped feeling sorry for himself Naruto was gonna – hey, no, wait, how did a magic tie carry Gama anywhere? All it could do was change size, right?

“Come on, Naruto.” Uncle held out his hand. “You’ll help me out with the last part, won’t you?”

“Last part of what – I mean, of course!” Naruto bravely declared, rushing forward to grab Uncle’s hand with both of his. “You can count on me!”

“Thanks, kid, though it really is for your own good.”

“Whatever you say, Uncle!”

They entered the temple. Just the two of them. The others stayed outside. When the doors closed behind them, Naruto couldn't feel anything from outside anymore, even through Uncle's jutsus.

Inside was almost as run down as outside, but the middle was recently swept up and tidied. There was a sort of podium there, with a hanging wall full of weird oni-masks. The wooden wall beneath the masks was painted with swirling black flames, while the top side was carved in the shape of three connected swirly symbols. Familiar symbols. The Uzumaki whirlpool symbol! The symbol of his clan! Come to think of it, there was one on the wall outside too, how had Naruto not realized it before?

What was this place? Was it an Uzumaki place? Did Uncle own it? Did Naruto? But then why didn't he know about it? Was it a secret place? An important place?

A dangerous place?

At the foot of the wall of masks and to the left was Fatty's body. It was completely dried up, looking more like a shed skin than anything. On the right was the cow. It was also dead, and sort of dry too, like something had sucked it dry of water and blood through a cut in its throat. It didn't drip anything, and there was not a smear of wet or red under it, or anywhere else. There were roots there instead, looking like they'd grown *into* the cow's throat to drain it clean.

At the very middle was some sort of tree. Sort of. It was more like a square-ish log with a few big holes in it on the front. It was rectangular, but didn't look like it had been cut in that shape. If anything, it had been grown in that form. It was all covered in bark with not a single chip in it, at least not any that would be made by a knife. There were some little branches and green leaves growing out of it too, and the stone tiles beneath it were freshly disturbed and cracked where the roots had come out through the earth.

There was writing on the front of the casket. Not kanji though, or hiragana or even alphabet. It was Uncle's secret code that Naruto had struggled to figure out on his own, written vertically within a rectangle drawn in black ink. From down to up they were ㄗㄢㄩㄝㄩㄥ.

"A-s-k-r," Naruto sounded out the symbols one by one. He squinted. "Is that right? That's not even a word."

“You can read that?” Uncle’s eyes felt eerie and heavy on him. “I’m impressed. It’s not any word, it’s a name. The name of the first man, to be exact, according to ancient myth.” Uncle reached out.

One of the masks flew forward to his hand.

“Huh,” Naruto marvelled. “Neat.”

“Yes,” Uncle sounded strange now, grim and heavy, and his grip released Naruto’s hand to instead grab him by the shoulder. “Okay, Naruto, turn around.”

“Huh? Oh, okay.” Naruto turned around. “What now?”

“Now,” Uncle put on the mask. “You close your eyes.”

Without waiting for him to comply, Uncle covered Naruto’s eyes with his hand, and then he did something with his other one that made Uncle’s entire body flinch.

In *pain*.

Something passed through Naruto, something he did and didn’t feel more keenly than anything before. He did and didn’t breathe, he was alive and dead, he teetered backwards in the seal and out of the seal all at once. He was blind out in the dark temple of masks, even as he could see inside the seal everything that happened. The water. The bars. The Kyuubi. The Fourth Hokage, his – his...

His dad looked from outside to Naruto and smiled warmly as *something* rushed over and through him, big enough to fill the entire space from floor to ceiling with a shimmering haze.

The man dispersed in a puff of smoke.

“No!” Naruto cried out, wracked by a great feeling of loss.

Then he felt the cold stone floor of the temple as he collapsed.

He felt cold, and clammy, and his body shook despite that he’d been through worse many times before. There was no hand covering his eyes anymore, so he looked up. He froze at what he saw. In incomprehension, or dread. He didn’t know.

Uncle Hanzo was on his knees, teetering forward over Naruto, a single shaking arm the only thing between him and the fall. Meanwhile, his other hand gripped tight at his stomach, cut open and

spilling green acid and bile, and red blood on Naruto's feet and the floor. There was heat, and steam, and a bloody knife on the floor beneath next to them. Pain wracked Naruto's whole frame, just a scrap of what his Uncle felt but more than enough to paralyze him.

There was a shimmering sheet of something flowing out of Uncle's stomach, through *Naruto's* stomach and out through his back, through the seal, so tall and thick it completely obscured the Kyuubi's cage inside, flowing. Flowing. Pouring out. *Escaping* from... from...

"Fuck," Uncle wheezed above him, his voice raw and wet with blood and pain. "Not – enough – spiritual power, mnngh!"

In front of Naruto, his Uncle heaved. Behind Naruto, the casket snapped open and the front cover fell to the floor with a mighty crash. Naruto didn't hear any of it. He was transfixed by the horror behind his uncle, a huge, horned, fanged demon dressed in white flowing robes and prayer beads. Prayer beads that were quickly wrapping around the thing's arm, even as its hand went around Uncle's neck, and the other one pulled a knife out from between its teeth, raised it high and made ready to plunge it down into-

"Fuuin!"

From behind. The voice came from behind. Chakra came from behind. Chakra rushed back through the ghostly tendril of spirit, forward through Naruto and Uncle all the way back to the thing. Fuuinjutsu flared to life all over the demon's body. It flinched. It lurched away from Uncle Hanzo, almost dropping its knife as it jolted and shook in the air, struggling against invisible bonds coiling to bind him still.

As if waiting for that moment, the far end of the long shimmering light finally snapped free of the demon's split stomach, rushed out through his Uncle's stomach, and then through Naruto's own to finally burst free and out past both of them.

Uncle threw the mask off his face and collapsed on his side, holding his stomach wound while he breathed the old temple air and fresh pain. The demon disappeared. Finally, the cut began to heal.

Naruto wanted to run to him, to scream, to babble, to stem the blood, but he couldn't. He couldn't move. He couldn't breathe-

“It’s alright now, son.” A new hand laid itself on his shoulder. Startled him. Startled him into breathing again. “It’s alright, the Shinigami tried his best but didn’t get his way this time.”

Shinigami. Shini-gami. Spirit of Death. God of Death. Hanzo had summoned a God of Death. Uncle had summoned a God of Death! Why? Why would he-?

Naruto’s heart lurched. He rolled over. He looked up at the face of the man who’d just come out of the wooden casket, completely starstruck.

“Hey, Naruto,” the Fourth Hokage said awkwardly. “What a day, huh?”

Uzumaki Naruto didn’t reply. He was too stunned.

“Naruto?”

“D-dad?”

“Yes, it’s me, son, it’s really-“

“Dad!” Naruto jumped at his father, clinging to him tight. He wasn’t a ghost come to taunt him and torment him. He wasn’t a dream. He wasn’t a dream. He was there. He was real. “DAD!”

“I’m here, son,” Namikaze Minato said, holding him close. “I’m finally here.”

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