II

“Wowwww, you sure talked a big talk for someone who literally can’t fit into her uniform anymore.”

“TH-THIS IS SERIOUS, INO!” Temari whipped around, big butt sloshing behind her as she turned to face the leaf ninja, “STOP JOKING AROUND!”

After the initial shock of seeing Temari wake up more than fifty pounds heavier than she had been when they had both turned in the night before, it was kind of hard for her to reel in it in. She just looked so *ridiculous* and hippy—less like the elite, trained ninja of the sands and more like the average market woman that she was pretending to be.

The massive tray bobbing out behind her did well to complete the illusion as her cheeks fought against one another for vital room underneath what had once been a fairly roomy peasant coat. Her round face blushed furiously, as she tried desperately to avoid being seen or even perceived by the village folk. Temari wasn’t the type of person to get embarrassed easily, but Ino figured that waking up over seventy pounds heavier than you had been the night before would do that to anybody.

Still wasn’t gonna stop her from grilling this for all that it’s worth.

“For all of your talk about how bad the food is out in the Desert, you sure seem to know how to pack it away, Pineapple Head!”

“Will you please shut *up,* there is *clearly* something else at play here!” Temari managed through gritted teeth and white knuckles as she lead the charge back to the Hot Pot place that they had been at the night before, “We’ve got to figure out what is going on with me and *soon*!”

First she got swatted on the ass by that wanna-be Ashikage, and now Temari was plumping up like a housecat before Ino’s very eyes—this really *was* turning out to be an odd mission…

But upon further inspection, there seemed to be no cause for concern—at least, on the part of the Hot Pot restaurant anyway. There was nothing different from anything that either of them had seen last night aside from the crowd, and the staff were on the up and up. Neither the manager or the waitress from the night before noticed anything odd or seemed like they believed Ino or Temari to be anything other than the women that they claimed to be.

“C’mon Temari, it’s clear that these guys don’t know anything about what’s happening to you.” Ino tugged at her unwilling compatriot in hopes of getting her out of making what was turning into something of a scene, “Let’s just try somewhere else.”

“Where else did we *go?*” Temari smacked Ino’s hand away, “It’s not like we’ve been in town for very long!”

In Temari’s defense, Ino had a hard time placing where something could have happened to Temari to cause such a weird side-effect. They’d only just gotten into town before they arrived at the restaurant together. Granted they’d taken their journeys separately, but considering that Temari already looked heavier the night before Ino figured she would have been a lot bigger than she was given her rate of gain.

They had come into town, ran into one another in the market, and then they’d…

“Is there anything we can help with, ma’am?” came the voice of a somewhat lanky man as he and his fellow Reed Ninja intruded on the scene, “We heard some commotion outside, wanted to make sure everything was alright.”

Presumably, as a way to bolster their manpower in addition to the growing amounts of merchants and investors, the Village Hidden in the Reeds had established its own sect of ninja. Definitely without the Leaf’s knowledge, so presumably without Suna’s too. They didn’t look particularly tough, mind you, but that was still something that shouldn’t have caught them by surprise. The Reed’s diplomatic relations with any of the major surrounding areas would be irreparably altered if they’d declared their own military force, and it was telling that this was the first time either of them had heard about it.

“Oh there’s nothing to worry about here.” Ino said in her least threatening voice, “My friend’s have a very bad day.”

“A *very* bad day.” Temari grumbled, glaring daggers over towards where they’d sat the night before, “…sorry for the disturbance.”

“You were *gonna* have a worse day.” One of the ninja rolled his eyes, “Why don’t we all play nice from now on, alright?”

…okay, so these guys were definitely asking for it. But if they didn’t want to blow their cover—

“I’ve got a *lot* of pent-up aggression right now and *not* a lot of patience for this.” Temari’s chubby body may as well have been agulf in flames as she hunkered slightly into a fighting stance, the chakra radiating from her body in an almost palpable desire for violence, “*Who* was gonna have a worse day, you little river hick?”

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The rest of the rapidly expanding village didn’t really have enough time to register the fight. It was over quicker than it started—whatever Ninja Academy that they had established out here might as well have been in-name-only. Sure, Ino and Temari were from bigger villages, but Temari was carrying eighty extra pounds of chub and only managed to stumble slightly. Adjusting her fighting style to the encroach of chub that clung to her ass and stomach had only cost her a hit or two while the so-called Reed Ninjas were laid flat out on the ground.

“I barely even broke a sweat!”

“Wish… hahhhh… I could say the same…”

Temari’s ample middle tire jostled underneath the obo for the robe, bringing one thick arm up to wipe the sweat that had indeed broken across her brow. She was out of breath from the relatively short fight, but Ino could hardly blame her for that. The thickness and heft to her legs and those monster cheeks of hers would have dragged anyone down.

The minimal amount of jutsu that the guards knew had helped the two of them keep things quiet. There were sure to be some questions asked of them later should they return back to the restaurant or happen to see those particular jounin again, but all in all it had been a pretty easily mounted hurdle in their espionage of the Village Hidden in the Reeds.

“One of them got a cheap shot off on me though—punched me in the *boob.*” Ino scoffed, rubbing a still sore chest that was already beginning to bruise, “These guys are basically just playing dress-up!”

“It… hahhh… still felt good to let off some stress.” Temari huffed and puffed, “I just… oogh… I need to siddown…”

Lifting a chubby arm to wipe across her forehead, Temari arched her back and stretched as best she could in her increasingly tight robe. The fight had forced some tears along the back where it struggled to contain the breadth of her growing bigness, her supple shoulders having spread the outer layer of fabric apart enough for a diamond-shaped rip to mar the otherwise new disguise.

“…and maybe a bite to eat.”

“You can’t be serious.” Ino had meant to sound more concerned than her tone wound up conveying, but her disbelief was still easily registered, “Temari, you ate like a hog last night—*I’m* still full just from watching you eat all that Hot Pot!”

“I *know* I *know,* I just…” Temari looked just as confused and concerned as her fellow ninja was, her dark eyes already glancing around for alternative eating arrangements that could be made, “Whatever’s happening to me is… I don’t think that it’s finished…”

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In a quickly growing city, an aspiring Hidden Village no less, it wasn’t surprising to find many options to eat.

But it was somewhat peculiar that, in a village that prided itself on its collective and long-spanning fishing prowess, that restaurants were almost *all* of the entertainment options that were available for anyone who was looking to have a night out on the town.

One or two places, sure. Even a handful, Ino could understand. But on every city block there were no less than two restaurants to choose from on average, and almost all of them offered more or less the same menu with minor adjustments. The sheer amount of fish that this village seemed to have to *give* away was downright strange in and of itself—surely with all of these places, all offering more or less the exact same thing, there should have been some restaurants that were doing worse than others, right?

And there probably were! But as far as Ino could see, it wasn’t by enough of a margin to really *matter*.

A village that, just a few years ago, prided itself on its hard work and ability to make due now had more leisure time and food to go around than anyone seemed to know what to do with!

“Mmph… lotsh of shelection to pick fromb…”

Temari had loaded up with three kebabs from the nearest merchant stall and claimed a public bench for the two of them to sit down on. Watching the Suna ninja spread across the wooden bench by such a wide margin was enough to make Ino stop and take pause—was Temari even bigger than she had been when they’d left the Inn this morning? Surely not. That would be ridiculous.

And yet…

“Ish all sho… *tashty…*”

Temari had loaded up with three kebabs from the nearest vendor. But that was *after* they’d stopped for breakfast at a restaurant. And that had only been an hour ago! Ever since the night before, Temari had been stuffing her face like her life depended on it, and Ino was beginning to wonder if that had something to do with the fact that she looked to have gained probably a hundred pounds in a little over twelve hours!

“Gotta… mmm… I wanna try it all…”

“Don’t you think you’ve had enough to eat?” Ino asked, nibbling on a dumpling from her palm while she tried to play it coy, “At this point I’m not sure if it’s really all that mysterious you’ve gotten so fat.”

“Aren’t *you* the one who everyone calls Ino-Pig?” Temari scoffed, her double chin now seemingly permanently etched onto her softening features, “I’ve got this under control—we just need to find out what’s affecting me, and then we can continue on with our mission.”

“Uh-huh.” Ino hip-checked the chunky blonde fan ninja, “See, we’re both assigned to this mission *separately* remember? I could just let you figure out what’s going on while *I* take all the credit for espionage…”

Ino took a big bite of her dumpling and watched Temari grumble to herself.

“Do you *really* think that you’ll be able to handle it all by yourself in your *condition*?” Ino teased, playful and catty as she lowered her bright blue eyes to half-slits and grinned deviously, “Or do you think that you’ll eat the marketplace out of stock before—”

“Okay *fine* you’re… you’re right…” Temari huffed, throwing her kebab stick aside with a whole half of a bite left as a show of resolve, I’ve got to… I’ve got to get a hold of myself…”

“You’re damn straight you do.” Ino nodded sagely, finishing off her dumpling, “I’m not hauling your big ass back to Sunagakure—even if you paid me double.”

Taking stock of the town, there wasn’t much to see in the early hours of the noon that wasn’t there in the evening or night. There were more people around, to be sure, and that had helped Ino to see that the average Villager of the Reeds looked to be far more common folk than aristocrats. Broad-featured, heavy-set, and dressed a little flashily in a way that unhelpfully accentuated what was surely new weight in some particularly obvious cases. This place was the definition of a sudden and mysterious increase in wealth, that much Ino and Temari had known before arriving. But seeing it up close in the daylight at least helped to confirm the notes that they had been given.

“Seems like a lot of people with freshly filled wallets running around here.” Ino said aloud, crossing her arms over her still-sore chest as she observed her surroundings, “For a place that used to be overrun with fishermen and farmers, you’d think that there’d be a lot less gaudy jewelry…”

“When a small village in Suna found a gold deposit underneath the sands, much the same thing happened there—people who have worked a hard life don’t exactly want to wait to enjoy the things that they feel like they’ve been deprived of…”

“Even still, it doesn’t give them the excuse of being tacky.” Ino sniffed contemptuously, “Let’s make our way out of the market district for now; there’s got to be more to look at around here than just fish and fatties.”

The Sand ninja reluctantly agreed, hauling herself up to her feet belly-first as she steadied herself on what was definitely a wider stance than before. Temari was probably twice the size that she was when she and Ino had last seen one another prior to this mission, and it was becoming more and more undeniable that the longer they spent in this village dawdling the bigger that she was going to wind up getting. The sooner that they found out just what was so rotten in the Village Hidden in the Reeds, the better.

“You lead the way.” Temari groused, “I’m… huff… right behind you.”

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The upper-class district had been fully constructed, even as the Market District and the housing for the migrating laborers and farmers were still being formed.

Some things, it seemed, never really changed. Even though this place marketed itself on being built by a strong back and a hard past of pulling its own weight, those who contributed to the aspiring political power financially had been rewarded far more handsomely than those who were putting in an honest effort a little at a time. The homes were nice, and clearly inspired by visitation to more developed parts of the neighboring countries—though not without some signature touches that informed everyone passing by just who was responsible for the growth and development of the area.

“That symbol on the banner there…” Ino said to herself, looking at the flag unfurled in the wind as it fluttered off and again from the railing of an aristocrat’s balcony, “I’ve seen it somewhere before.”

“Well yeah, it’s everywhere.” Temari gnashed as she bit into the last of a multi-pack of onigiri, “We’ve probably seen it a hundred times now.”

That wasn’t quite what Ino had meant, but Temari wasn’t wrong—there was no denying that there was something to be said about brand recognition, but whatever organization or clan that the symbol belonged to was running it into the ground…

“It was on that little guy yesterday, I think—he had a patch on his arm that had it on it.”

“The jounin from this morning too.” Temari snarfed, “You think it’s just a clan symbol or something?”

“Hmm… maybe…” Ino thoughtfully mulled over a bite of her own onigiri, touching her chin thoughtfully as she tried to place just where *specifically* she thought that she’d seen the mark before, “I don’t know, it looks sort of… *familiar*…”

*Ugh, Temari’s starting to rub off on me…*

Ino stopped herself mid-bite. She shouldn’t have been hungry, considering that she and Temari had both stopped for breakfast on the way up. In fact, she’d gotten something to eat at every other stop that Temari had dragged her to! Whatever was happening with Temari couldn’t have been contagious, right? The last thing that either of them needed was to return home a walking pile of lard—Ino had a dating life back home that she was *trying* to maintain, after all!

“Here.” Ino passed off the onigiri to her pointy-haired cohort, “Take it.”

“I don neef for fharidy.” Temari pouted, already a mouthful in before Ino’s arm had even fallen back to her side, “…but fank you.”

“Don’t mention it.” Ino rubbed her shoulder, straightening her back uncomfortably as she tried to get a grip on what she was trying to deduce, “You could probably use this more than I can…”

Why did her chest hurt so much? Those guys that she fought earlier this morning could barely swat a fly, let alone one of the Leaf’s most prominent ninja—one third of the Ino-Shika-Cho trio at that! But for some reason she just felt so… *sore.*

And *heavy.*

It was Temari who noticed it first—her dark eyes narrowing at the smallest exposure of skin from Ino’s chest. It had been covered up by the robe that Ino had been wearing as a part of her disguise, but the little flash of flesh that Temari had been privy to while reaching for her snack had been enough for her to notice the dark pigmentation that was forming between Ino’s breasts.

“I didn’t think you were the type of person to get tattoos.” Temari said cautiously, “Is that new?”

“Is what new?”

“The markings on your chest—they look…”

Ino had already been looking down before Temari trailed off. As Ino lowered the collar on her robe, exposing her ninja attire underneath, a pause fell over the two of them as a sickening realization began to churn out from the backs of their mind.

“…and awful lot like the markings that are strung up on banners everywhere.” Ino continued Temari’s thought for her, looking to the banner off the balcony once more for confirmation, “This is around where I got hit by that pretend jounin guy!”

“…and yesterday, that little creep smacked my ass!” Temari’s soft jawline folded over as she opened her mouth in shock, “You don’t think…”

How could she not? There was simply no other explanation!

Whatever was going on in this village… was going to wind up making the two of them fat!