

Interlude: Naruto Uzumaki

Naruto was confused. That wasn't really new. Naruto wasn't really the thinky type. He didn't figure stuff out like his sensei, or come up with plans like Sasuke, or memorize facts like Sakura. Naruto was more of a do-er. He just decided what he wanted and made it happen.

People were way too complicated, most of the time. They didn't say what they meant, and that was exhausting, but Naruto was pretty good at figuring out what people were thinking. Especially since he'd started training with his sensei. All sight made spotting little tells way easier, and it made it so much simpler to figure out what everyone was trying not to say.

Or at least, most people. "Will you hurry up," snapped the pretty dark haired girl dragging him by the hand. "Honestly, you'd think you'd be honored to be escorting a princess around. Why are you dragging your feet so much?"

Naruto chuckled sheepishly, scratching the back of his head. "I'm just not used to all this attention. I mean winning fights in the exam has had people looking at me, but not like THIS. It feels weird." His eyes widened in panic as he realized how she might take that. "Not that I don't like being friends with you-"

She stopped on a dime (not that he knew what that was, but sensei said it a lot and it sounded kind of cool so Naruto had started using it too), spinning to poke him in the chest. "I am NOT your friend," she hissed, her cheeks getting red. "You owe me, and I am ALLOWING you to pay off your debt by escorting me around the village to see the sights. Don't get any funny ideas that I like spending time with you. You're just...useful."

Her eyes averted as she said that, cheeks getting darker. Naruto winced. He'd made her so angry she was overheating. He felt kind of bad for being so dense, it was hard to know what to say, he wasn't used to spending time with girls. Well, Sakura and Karin and maybe Tayuya, but that was different. Karin was his cousin, and Sakura and Tayuya had those big crushes on Sasuke. Obviously Kurotsuchi didn't have a crush on him, so he must have done something really dumb.

When in doubt, always apologize. "I'm sorry Tsuki-chan, I didn't mean to-"

She stumbled, face going bright red. "Wh-what did you just call me? My name is Kurotsuchi, you ignorant lunk!"

"Oh, I know," he said cheerfully. "But it's kind of long. I like to give people nicknames, and Tsuchi kind of sounds like Tsuki, and your eyes remind me of the red moon. They're really pretty. Anyway, I thought it sounded cool, don't cha think?"

She just gaped at him, face burning scarlet, then grabbed his hand again and turned to storm off without saying another word. Naruto just shrugged, following behind her. He guessed she liked

it. He secretly celebrated. She said they weren't friends, but only friends gave each other nicknames. She was definitely warming up to him. He didn't know much about all that political stuff, even though sensei said he was a clan head, he'd never really liked acting all fake and nice when he wasn't feeling it.

But Tsuki-chan wasn't like that. She was hurting, sure, but she was honest. She said what she meant, and that was kind of nice. Plus, his dad had been the one to hurt her. She was right earlier, Naruto DID owe her, and he was going to make things right the best way he knew how.

To do that though, he needed to learn more about her. Not just the normal friend stuff, either. If they wanted to be friends he had to make things right between their villages. Or at least try. "So...do you think your grandpa hates me?" he asked hesitantly.

He was used to people not liking him. Especially for reasons he didn't really have control over. But he didn't like someone hating him because of his dad. He wanted to be proud to be the son of the fourth Hokage. His dad's face was on a MOUNTAIN for sage's sake. But when he thought about the people he'd hurt...it felt bad. Naruto hated the way the world worked. Wars and feuds and blood debts.

That was why he was so grateful to his sensei. Most people would have told Naruto that he was stupid for seeing value in places like the Waterfall village, with their pacifist ways. Sensei hadn't said that. He'd just asked how Naruto felt.

Naruto wasn't really a thinky type of guy, but he knew he would need to become one. Seeing what he'd seen in wave, hearing what his dad had done, his conversations with his team. It was all so much to take in, but it was stuff he'd need to know as Hokage. He wanted to be a better Hokage than his old man, to make the village a better place without having to kill a bunch of people and take away people's moms, and that meant being strong.

Not just with jutsu or punching, but making a lot of strong friends in other villages. Which was why it was important to know if Tsuki-chan's old man hated him.

She didn't answer right away, staring in the other direction, and he started to wonder if she'd heard him when she finally said. "I don't know," she admitted.

"What?" he was confused again. "How could you not know? Can't you just ask?"

"My grandpa isn't happy with me," she admitted unhappily. "He said going after you in the street was stupid. Says I can't be trusted with important information now. And even before...he doesn't talk to me. Not about stuff like that. I know he's angry at Konoha, at your dad, even at you. But I don't know if he hates you. Not like I di-I mean do."

Naruto just grinned at her as he sped up to keep pace so he could see her face. "Nah," he said cheerfully.

She stopped, turning to glare at him. "What do you mean NAH? I think I know if I hate someone."

He shrugged. "I don't think you're that kind of person. You try to be all tough and scary, but you're really kind. I saw you slip that kid at the dango stand an extra few ryo when you thought I wasn't looking. That's not something people who are all filled up with hate do. You're mad at me and my dad, and I get that, but I know we're gonna be good friends someday, Tsuki-chan. Believe it!"

She stared at him, face so red he was worried she might catch on fire. And then she pouted. Naruto swallowed. His heart started pounding. That was...really cute. Was she always that cute? He felt his face start to heat up a little too. He realized they were holding hands. He hadn't really thought about it until he saw the pout, but holding hands with a cute girl was kind of scary.

He considered letting go, but he didn't want her to feel like he was giving up on being her friend. His mouth got a little dry, but he pushed through, keeping his grip on her hand and looking her in the eye.

"You just think you know everything, huh?" she pouted cutely.

"Nah," he grinned, shrugging again. "I don't know most stuff. But I'm always willing to learn. And that's the most important thing. I don't know how to be your friend yet, Tsuki-chan, but I'm definitely gonna learn. And that's not so bad, right? The whole point of the exams is to bring us all together, right?"

Her shoulders tightened, face falling a bit. "Yeah," she said quietly. "All together."

Naruto's stomach twisted. He'd made her sad? How? Why were girls so damned confusing? How did his friends cheer him up when he was sad? Oh, hugs! Well, just hugging a girl he didn't know so well seemed like too much. He knew better than that. Half a hug should be fine. He put a friendly arm over her shoulder, smiling down at her. "Hey, don't sweat it," he told her warmly. "Let the adults worry about the village stuff and all the alliances. We're just here to become Chunin and maybe make some friends, right?"

Her face had cooled a bit, but it heated up again at his proximity. She snorted, looking away, but her shoulders relaxed a bit under his arm. "You're an idiot," she sniffed.

"Yeah, people say that all the time," he laughed. "But idiots need friends too, huh?"

It seemed like that was the right thing to say, because her sulky demeanor cracked, a small snort escaping. The snort turning to a chuckle, which turned into a full blown belly laugh. "Idiots need friends too?" she demanded through her cackling. "Seriously? I lost to THIS?"

"Hey," he said in an offended tone. "I'm really strong, ok?"

She looked back at him, still laughing, and Naruto's mouth went dry. Tsuki-chan's eyes really were super pretty. And her smile was really nice too. "I guess you are," she said wryly. "But don't think that'll work on me next time. Just because you're a smooth talker doesn't mean I can't kick your ass. I've still got moves you haven't seen."

"Same goes for me," he grinned. "Don't think I'm letting you off easy. We'll have a rematch once of these days and I'll be the one kicking YOUR ass."

She gaped at him. "You can't say that to a princess," she sputtered, face going red again.

"You said it first," he snorted. "But don't worry too much about the exam. Remember, the judges decide who gets promoted. It's not all about winning and losing, it's about making the right choices. I think deciding to set down your hate and be honest about your feelings is always the right choice."

Korutsuchi just stared at him. "What the hell are you talking about?" she asked in exasperation. "We're NINJA. This is a ninja exam. Having an honest dialogue about my feelings is not going to get me NINJA promoted you absolute moron." She buried her face in her hands, having released his when he put his arm around her. "I'm going to be a genin forever. I'm going to be the first Genin Tuschikage."

Naruto winced. "Sorry. I'm not good at the whole comforting people thing."

"I somehow doubt that," she said, rolling her eyes. "But it's fine. I guess I can think about something else." She pouted at him again, sending his heart to racing. "But since you beat me you have to keep me entertained. I don't know about us being fr-friends, or whatever, but I don't actually hate you I guess. Mostly. For now. I'll keep my options open, so you better find us something fun to do if you want to stay on my good side."

He grinned at her, stepping back and leaning down to sweep an arm behind her legs, she squeaked in surprise as he swept her up in a princess carry. "As the princess commands," he said pompously.

She rolled her eyes at the theatrics, but her lips quirked up in a smile. "Put me down, you idiot. What are you doing?"

"Taking you somewhere fun," he said excitedly. "I want to show you my favorite spot in the whole city. Do you trust me?" The question sounded casual but the way his eyes bored into her made Korutsuchi swallow the same way he had been.

"I guess so," she mumbled. "Don't know why, but I kind of do. You just seem like that kind of idiot."

He laughed. "I'll take it. Then close your eyes and count to...how about a hundred. That should be enough time." She raised an eyebrow at him, but eventually sighed and closed them, beginning to count under her breath. Naruto cheered internally and turned toward the Hokage monument. One hundred seconds to cross the village. He did love a challenge.