

Naruto had fashioned a makeshift training spear from a sturdy bamboo stalk, cutting it down to a size more appropriate for Inari's height. The coastal breeze carried the salt air around them, and lanterns hung from the house provided gentle illumination.

"Alright," Naruto said, demonstrating a basic stance. "Your father probably taught you the fundamentals of spearfishing, but combat spearwork is a bit different. First, we need to work on your footwork."

Inari, now wearing a light jacket over his clothes to ward off the evening chill, mimicked Naruto's stance. "Like this?"

"Almost." Naruto moved to adjust Inari's position. "Wider stance. You need a solid base. Think of yourself as a tree – your feet are the roots, your body the trunk, and the spear your branches."

"A tree?" Inari's skepticism was evident in his voice.

"Trust me on this," Naruto chuckled. "I spent years learning to literally walk up trees. They know a thing or two about stability."

This earned a small smile from Inari. "Is that what you were teaching that grumpy Konoha ninja earlier?"

"Sasuke? Yeah. Though I'd appreciate if you didn't call him grumpy to his face. He might spontaneously combust from annoyance."

Inari actually laughed at that, a sound that seemed to surprise even him. His grip on the training spear tightened. "Why are you helping him if he's from another village?"

Naruto demonstrated a basic thrust motion. "Because sometimes being strong means helping others become stronger too. Try that movement – but remember, from your center, not just your arms."

As Inari practiced the thrust, Naruto continued. "Besides, just because we're from different villages doesn't mean we have to be enemies. My father – well, the man who raised me – taught me that respect isn't about where someone's from, but what they do with their abilities."

"Wait," Inari said between thrusts, "the man who raised you? Are you saying you weren't raised by your real parents?"

Naruto's expression softened. "It's... complicated. But it doesn't change what he taught me or how he raised me. Family isn't just about blood – it's about bonds."

"Like my dad," Inari said quietly, his movements slowing. "He wasn't my real father either, but..."

"But he was your dad in every way that mattered," Naruto finished. "Exactly. Now, let's work on your defensive stance."

For the next hour, they practiced basic forms and movements. Naruto noticed that Inari had a natural talent for reading body language – probably from years of watching fish movements while helping his father.

"You know," Inari said during a water break, "I used to think all shinobi were just like Gato's thugs – just with fancy powers."

"What changed?" Naruto asked, passing him a canteen.

"Last night, when you talked... you didn't treat me like a kid or try to tell me everything would be okay. You just... listened." Inari took a drink. "And then today, I saw you helping people in the village. You gave your food to that family with the sick baby."

"You saw that, huh?"

"Yeah. Gato's men would never do something like that. They only take; they never give."

Naruto nodded. "Power without compassion is just bullying. Ready to try something a bit more advanced?"

As the night deepened, Naruto introduced more complex movements, teaching Inari how to combine defensive and offensive techniques. The boy was a quick study, though his small frame tired easily.

"My arms feel like noodles," Inari complained after a particularly demanding sequence.

"That's good," Naruto grinned. "It means you're pushing yourself. But let's take another break. I want to show you something."

Naruto held out his hand, and small sparks of purple lightning danced across his palm. Inari's eyes widened in wonder.

"This is my Purple Lightning," Naruto explained. "It's rare, even among lightning users. Want to know why I'm showing you this?"

Inari nodded, transfixed by the dancing lights.

"Because like this lightning, everyone has something special inside them. Something unique. Your father had his way with the spear. You have his talent, plus your own strength. The strength to keep going even after everything that's happened."

"But I cried," Inari said, looking down. "I cry a lot."

"Crying doesn't make you weak," Naruto said firmly. "It means you care. The weak ones are those who pretend not to feel anything at all. Ready to continue?"

They practiced for another hour, focusing on defensive techniques. Naruto noticed that Inari seemed particularly interested in learning how to protect others rather than attack.

"You know," Inari said during their next break, "my mom was worried when she saw us training. She thought maybe I was trying to become a shinobi."

"And what did you tell her?"

"That I'm learning to protect, like my dad did. He protected our village with his courage. I want to do the same, just... in my own way."

Naruto smiled. "That's probably the wisest thing I've heard all day. Now, show me that blocking sequence again, but this time..."

As midnight approached, they finally called it quits. Inari was exhausted but proud, having mastered several basic forms and combinations.

"Go get some sleep. And Inari?"

"Yeah?"

"Your father would be proud of you. Not just for learning the spear, but for choosing to be strong in your own way."

Inari clutched his training spear close. "Thanks, Naruto-sensei."

"Hey now, none of that 'sensei' business. Makes me feel old."

"You are old," Inari grinned, ducking away as Naruto made a mock grab for him.

"Brat," Naruto laughed. "Go on, get inside before your mother comes looking for you."

As Inari headed toward the house, he paused at the door. "Naruto?"

"Hmm?"

"I'm glad I was wrong. About shinobi, I mean. And... thanks for not giving up on me."

As Inari reached the doorway, he paused, his small hand gripping the training spear tightly. The lantern light cast long shadows across the yard, and for a moment, only the distant sound of waves filled the silence.

"Naruto?" Inari's voice was quiet but steady. "Are you angry at your father? The one who raised you?"

The question hit Naruto like a punch. His grandfather's words echoed in his mind: *'You don't want to know, Naruto.'* The way Ay had said it, with that mixture of shame and old anger, made

Naruto's stomach turn. Trying to kidnap his mother when she was just sixteen... and then A taking her son years later, even if it was at her dying request.

Naruto forced a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "It's complicated, Inari. You should head inside. It's late."

But Inari didn't move. Instead, he turned fully toward Naruto, his expression surprisingly mature for his age. "This A and Ay... they might not be who you thought they were, but they're still the people who raised you, right?"

"It's not that simple," Naruto said, his voice tighter than he intended. Purple sparks danced unconsciously between his fingers. "They lied to me my entire life. The village I thought tried to kill my mother... they were trying to protect her from Kumo. From my own village."

"I used to hate Kaiza," Inari said suddenly.

This caught Naruto off guard. "What?"

"When he first started seeing my mom," Inari continued, his grip on the spear loosening slightly. "I thought he was trying to replace my real father. I would hide his tools, put salt in his tea, do anything to make him leave."

Despite his dark mood, Naruto found himself curious. "What changed?"

"He never got angry. Not once." Inari's eyes grew distant with memory. "Instead, he taught me how to fish. He would tell me stories about my real father, things my mom had told him. He said that loving someone new doesn't mean betraying who came before."

"That's different," Naruto argued, though his voice had lost some of its edge. "Kaiza didn't lie to you."

"No," Inari agreed. "But when things got bad in Wave, when Gato first came, some people told Kaiza to stay out of it. Said he wasn't even from Wave originally, so it wasn't his fight." A small, proud smile crossed Inari's face. "But he fought anyway. He protected us because that's what fathers do. Even if they're not your real father."

Naruto sat down on the edge of the porch, and after a moment, Inari joined him. The training spear lay across their laps.

"My father – A – he used to take me climbing. The twin mountains." Naruto said quietly. "Every summer. He'd tell me stories about his childhood, about how his father taught him to be strong but fair. About how being a leader means protecting those who can't protect themselves."

"Sounds like he was trying to teach you the same things Kaiza taught me."

Naruto looked at his hands, where the last traces of purple lightning were fading. "When I found out the truth... I was so angry I couldn't even look at him. But..."

"But?" Inari prompted.

"But I keep remembering all these little moments. Times he could have been training or working, but instead, he was teaching me how to skip stones across the lake or the best way to climb a mountain. Things that had nothing to do with being a shinobi or the Raikage's son."

"Kaiza used to say that anyone can throw a punch, but it takes real strength to open your hand in friendship instead," Inari said. "Even when you're hurt. Even when you're angry."

Naruto laughed softly. "Your father sounds like he was a wise man."

"He was." Inari stood up, collecting his spear. "And I think your father – A – he must be pretty wise too. Even if he made mistakes, he chose to be your father when he didn't have to be."

"When did you get so smart, kid?"

"Probably around the same time you started teaching me about trees and lightning," Inari grinned. Then his expression grew serious again. "Naruto? Being angry doesn't make you a bad person. But don't let it make you forget the good things too. That's what Gato wants – for us to forget what we're fighting for and only remember what we're fighting against. We need to keep Hope. That's the only thing that matters."

Naruto stared at the boy in surprise. "Those sound like Kaiza's words too."

"No," Inari shook his head. "Those were yours, from last night. I just thought maybe you needed to hear them too."

Before Naruto could respond, the door slid open, revealing Tsunami. "Inari! It's well past your bedtime!"

"Coming, Mom!" Inari called back. He turned to Naruto one last time. "Same time tomorrow?"

Naruto nodded, still processing their conversation. "Yeah, same time tomorrow."

As Inari disappeared into the house with his mother, Naruto remained on the porch, looking up at the stars. He thought about his father – both of them – and about choices. About a man who chose to protect a village with his life, and about another man who chose to raise a son who wasn't originally his.

The stars offered no answer, but somehow, the weight in Naruto's chest felt a little lighter.

A familiar voice cut through his contemplation. "Man, I was worried you might accidentally teach him some dangerous technique that would make him want to become a shinobi, and then his mother would blame us, and then the whole village would turn against us, and then—"

"Omoi," Naruto interrupted with a chuckle, not even turning around. "How long have you been catastrophizing back there?"

His best friend stepped out from the shadows, a lollipop stick protruding from the corner of his mouth. "Long enough to see you turn into a regular civilian instructor." Omoi moved to stand beside him, his white hair gleaming in the lantern light. "Though I was concerned that maybe you were being too soft with him, but then I thought if you were too hard on him, he might get discouraged and give up, but if you were too soft, he wouldn't learn properly, and—"

"Do you ever stop worrying?" Naruto asked, playfully punching his friend's shoulder.

"Someone has to think about all the possibilities," Omoi shrugged, adjusting his sword strap.

"But seriously, you did good with the kid. Reminded me of when we were training together back in the day."

"You mean when you spent half our training sessions worried that we might accidentally create a new form of lightning that would destroy Kumo?"

"Hey, that was a legitimate concern! Purple Lightning is very rare, like super rare, but look at you now."

They shared a comfortable laugh.

"The kid's got spirit," Omoi said more seriously. "Kind of reminds me of you when we were younger – always trying to prove yourself."

"I wasn't trying to prove myself," Naruto protested.

"Right, and I'm not addicted to lollipops." Omoi pulled out a fresh one from his pocket. "Want one?"

"I'm good." Naruto looked back toward the house. "You know, sometimes I wonder if this is how my father – how A felt when he was training me."

Omoi was quiet for a moment, contemplating his lollipop. "About that... how are you holding up with everything? You know, the whole..." he waved his hand vaguely, "finding out about your birth parents thing?"

"Honestly?" Naruto sighed. "I don't know. A is still my father, Ay is still my grandfather, and you're still my annoying friend. That hasn't changed. But..."

"But now you have questions," Omoi finished. "Just don't let those questions lead to an identity crisis that makes you question everything you know, which could lead to a complete breakdown of your personality, which could then—"

"Omoi!"

"Sorry, sorry." He held up his hands in surrender. "Force of habit."

There was a long silence between them, and Omoi decided to break it. He never liked silence. "You know I have realized something these past few weeks, Naruto."

"What's that?"

"The people who love us sometimes make terrible decisions thinking they're protecting us. It doesn't make those decisions right, but it also doesn't erase everything else they've done." Omoi popped the lollipop back in his mouth. "Though this could lead to a philosophical debate about the nature of truth and protection, which might cause us to question the fundamental basis of all human relationships, which could then—"

"Omoi," Naruto interrupted, but this time with a small smile. "I get it."

"Do you?" Omoi asked, suddenly serious again. "Because I've been watching you these past few weeks, and I'm worried you're going to do something stupid like challenge Lord Ay to a lightning duel, which could lead to you getting seriously injured, which could then cause Lady Yoruichi to get involved, which might trigger an international incident, which could—"

"I'm not going to challenge my grandfather to a duel," Naruto assured him, though the thought had crossed his mind more than once.

"Good, because I already have enough anxiety without adding 'best friend committed suicide by Raikage' to my list of worries." Omoi paused. "Though now that I think about it, maybe a small controlled fight would help release some tension, but then again it could escalate quickly, and—"

"Thanks, Omoi," Naruto said quietly, cutting off another spiral of worry.

"For what? Adding to your problems with my endless scenarios of doom?"

"For being you. For being here. For..." Naruto gestured vaguely, "understanding."

"That's what friends are for," Omoi shrugged. "Even if friendship itself is a complex social construct that could collapse at any moment due to unforeseen circumstances or—"

The night wind carried the sound of waves from the distant shore, and somewhere in the village, a dog barked at the moon.

"You know what's funny?" Naruto said, interrupting Omoi's dialogue about the end of the world. "Teaching Inari tonight... it helped me understand something. Family isn't about where you come from; it's about who stands beside you."

"That's deep," Omoi nodded. "Though it could also be interpreted as a complex philosophical statement about the nature of human relationships and their impact on personal identity, which might lead to—"

"Want to spar?" Naruto interrupted, grinning.

"Now? It's the middle of the night! We might wake everyone up, or attract enemy ninja, or cause an international incident, or—"

"Race you to the beach," Naruto called out, already moving.

"Wait! We should establish ground rules first! And what if there are hidden traps along the way? And what if—" Omoi's voice faded as he chased after his friend.

Tomorrow

The morning sun painted Inari's room in warm hues as he stirred awake, muscles pleasantly sore from last night's training. His hands bore the tender marks of gripping the practice spear Naruto had crafted for him, each callus a badge of pride. The memory of Naruto's patient instruction brought a smile to his face.

"Keep your grip firm but not rigid," Naruto's words echoed in his mind. "The spear is an extension of your body, not just a weapon."

Inari sat up, his gaze immediately drawn to the wooden spear leaning against the wall. It was perfectly sized for him, the shaft smooth and balanced, the tip carefully carved to a practice point. The crossbow on his shelf, with its five-arrow magazine, seemed somehow less appealing now.

"Naruto-niisan!" he called out eagerly, grabbing the spear. The wood felt warm and familiar in his grip. "Are you up?"

Silence answered his call. Frowning slightly, Inari hurried downstairs, the spear tapping rhythmically against each step. The kitchen was filled with the aroma of his mother's cooking.

"Mom! Where's Naruto?" Inari asked, practically bouncing with energy.

Tsunami turned from the stove, wiping her hands on her apron. Her expression held a mix of worry and hope. "The Kumo shinobi split up this morning. Naruto-san and Yugito-san went to deal with Gato and his headquarters. The others went with your grandfather to the bridge."

"Really?" Inari's eyes widened. "They're going to fight Gato?" His grip tightened on the spear. "I should be there..."

Tsunami's expression softened. "Inari..."

"I know, I know," he sighed, shoulders slumping slightly. "I'm not ready. But Naruto-niisan will win, right? He has to!"

"Of course he will," Tsunami smiled, though concern flickered in her eyes. "Now, could you get some firewood from the back? We'll need it for lunch."

"Sure thing, Mom!" Inari nodded, heading outside with his spear still in hand.

The morning air was crisp, and birds sang in the nearby trees. The woodpile stood against the back wall of the house, partially covered by a worn tarp. Inari began gathering pieces, trying to remember everything Naruto had taught him about awareness.

"Always be mindful of your surroundings," Naruto had said. "A true warrior isn't just strong – they're alert."

That's why, when the temperature suddenly dropped and an unnatural chill crept up his neck, Inari didn't freeze in fear as he might have days ago. Instead, his muscles tensed, and his grip on the spear shifted automatically into the ready position Naruto had drilled into him.

"Something's wrong," he whispered, eyes scanning the tree line. The birds had gone silent.

The scream shattered the morning stillness. Inari's heart stopped as his mother's terrified voice pierced through the walls. The firewood clattered to the ground as his fingers wrapped around the spear shaft, feet already moving before his mind could process the horror.

Bursting through the back door, Inari froze at the scene before him. Two men - mercenaries by their rough appearance - had invaded his home. One stood near the kitchen counter, interrogating about the bridge builders' whereabouts. The other... Inari's vision went red as he watched the second man's filthy hands roaming over his mother's trembling form, her face streaked with tears.

Pure rage overrode his fear. Without conscious thought, Inari's hand found a fist-sized rock by the doorway. With all his strength, he hurled it at the questioning mercenary's head. The satisfying crack of stone against skull was followed by a howl of pain.

"You fucking brat!" Blood trickled down the man's temple as he whirled around, unsheathing a curved katana. "I'm gonna gut you like a fish!"

"Inari, RUN!" Tsunami screamed, struggling against her captor's grip.

Inari bolted for the stairs, heart thundering in his chest. Behind him, the mercenary's laughter echoed off the walls.

The mercenary ascended the stairs with deliberate slowness, savoring each creaking step. Blood dripped from the wound on his temple, staining his collar crimson. His twisted smile grew wider with each step, katana dragging along the wall and leaving shallow grooves in its wake.

"You know what I'm gonna do first?" he called out, voice dripping with malice. "I'm gonna start with those fingers that threw that rock. One. By. One."

Reaching the top of the stairs, he paused, tilting his head to listen for movement. His scarred face contorted with sadistic pleasure as a door slammed somewhere down the hall.

"Then maybe your toes," he continued, stalking forward. "Have you ever watched someone try to run with no toes, boy? It's fucking hilarious."

His heavy boots thundered against the floorboards as he approached the closed door. The blood trickling down his face only fueled his rage, his anticipation building with each step.

"You know what the best part is?" The mercenary's voice dropped to a gravelly whisper. "I'm gonna make your mama watch every second. And when I'm done with you..." He ran his tongue over his teeth, tasting copper from his split lip. "Well, let's just say your mama's gonna wish she was as dead as you'll be."

He stopped outside what must be the brat's room, pressing his palm flat against the wood. The morning sunlight streamed through the hallway window, casting long shadows that danced across his blood-spattered face.

"Ready or not, here I come..." The mercenary's boot crashed against the door, splintering it open with a thunderous crack. His eyes locked onto the bed where a small form lay huddled beneath the blankets. A predatory grin split his face as he raised the katana high.

"DIE!" he roared, bringing the blade down in a savage arc. Steel tore through fabric with a satisfying rip - but instead of the wet resistance of flesh, he met only softness. No blood. No screams.

Confusion flickered across his face as he yanked the blanket away, revealing three pillows arranged to mimic a body. Then came a high-pitched battle cry from behind.

The mercenary whirled around just as Inari charged forward, spear extended like Naruto had taught him. Time seemed to slow as the weapon's tip met flesh - then burst through it.

The sound was horrific - a wet squelch followed by a meaty tear as the spearhead punched through the man's abdomen. Warm crimson sprayed across Inari's hands as the mercenary's intestines ruptured. The spear's momentum carried it clean through, emerging from the man's back in a shower of gore.

"Guh-" The mercenary's eyes bulged, his katana clattering to the floor. Blood cascaded from his mouth, spattering across Inari's face as the man staggered backward until his legs hit the bed. He slumped down, the spear shaft jutting grotesquely from his gut while his innards began sliding out of the wound like wet rope.

Inari stood frozen, his hands trembling as he stared at them - completely coated in hot, sticky red. The metallic stench of blood filled his nostrils as he watched the man's intestines spill onto his bedroom floor with wet plops. The mercenary's hateful glare bored into him, even as the light began fading from his eyes.

"You... little... bas-" The man's final curse died in a bloody gurgle.

A woman's muffled scream from downstairs snapped Inari back to reality. His mother! The other mercenary still had her!

His eyes darted to the cloth cabinet where his crossbow waited. Five arrows in the clip - more than enough if his aim was true. But could he do it? He'd just killed a man... watched his insides become his outsides...

Another scream galvanized him into action. This was no time for doubt. His mother needed him.

With shaking hands stained crimson, Inari reached for the crossbow. The weight of it was reassuring - familiar from countless hours of practice. He checked the clip: five steel-tipped arrows, each one capable of ending a life.

His gaze fell once more on the dead mercenary, slumped against his bed in a growing pool of blood and viscera. The man's unseeing eyes still held their hateful glare, but Inari felt something shift inside himself.

Taking a deep breath, Inari gripped the crossbow tighter. The blood on his hands made the grip slick, but he wouldn't let that stop him. t.

With the crossbow loaded and ready, Inari began his descent, leaving bloody footprints on each step.

Inari crept down the stairs, crossbow held steady despite his blood-soaked hands. Each step brought more of the kitchen into view until finally, the full horror of the scene below revealed itself.

His mother was pressed against the wall, dress torn away, leaving her exposed and vulnerable in just her undergarments. Tears streamed down her face as the mercenary's filthy hands roamed over her body, his cruel laughter mixing with her sobs.

Something snapped in Inari's young mind. Without hesitation, he raised the crossbow just as the bandit turned toward the stairs, expecting his companion.

"Hey, you done with the br-"

THUNK!

The first arrow struck true, burying itself deep in the man's gut. Blood immediately began seeping through his shirt as he howled in agony, eyes wide with shock as they fixed on the small boy with the crossbow.

"You little shi-" The bandit lunged for Tsunami's hair, intending to use her as a shield.

THUNK!

A second arrow punched through his abdomen before he could grab her, the impact making him stagger backward. Blood bubbled from his mouth as he gasped.

Inari's finger squeezed the trigger again. And again. And again.

THUNK! THUNK! THUNK!

Three more arrows in rapid succession, each one driving deeper into the man's stomach. The bandit's body jerked with each impact, his shirt now completely crimson. He stumbled backward until his head cracked against the wall. His legs gave out, and he slid down leaving a wet red streak behind him.

The man's head lolled forward, then snapped back up, twitching erratically. Blood pooled around him, spreading across the kitchen floor in a growing crimson lake. His fingers clawed weakly at the arrows protruding from his gut, but his strength was fading fast.

Inari stood motionless on the stairs, his young eyes wide and unblinking as he watched death take hold. The crossbow hung limply at his side, empty now - just like the hollow feeling spreading through his chest. He couldn't look away from the dying man's face, watching as the twitching slowly ceased and the light faded from his eyes.

The morning silence was broken only by his mother's quiet sobs as she pulled her torn dress around herself. She stumbled toward Inari, wrapping her arms around him and turning his face away from the scene.

"Don't look, baby," she whispered, her voice trembling. "Don't look anymore."

But the images were already burned into his mind: the blood, the twitching, the moment life left the man's eyes. At eight years old, Inari had just killed two men to protect his mother. The innocence of childhood lay shattered on the floor alongside the bloody arrows and cooling corpses.