Yo

Chapter 16 over here.

Enjoy and let me know what you think.

Start:

GAARA'S POV
DAWN, THE NEXT DAY

In the suffocating darkness of the wooden prison, awareness persisted where it should not have existed.

Control had been stripped away layer by layer, chakra threads weaving through nervous system and muscle tissue until voluntary movement became impossible.

Thoughts had been invaded, emotions suppressed, identity buried beneath layers of foreign manipulation.

Yet something remained.

A tiny spark of self, preserved through sheer desperate will in the one place his captors had never thought to look.

The monster, came the thought from that protected space. *They wanted to control the weapon, so they never imagined the weapon itself might become a sanctuary.*

The One-Tailed beast that Sunagakure had desperately tried to weaponize, that his father had cursed him with in hopes of creating the perfect tool - that ancient entity had become the last refuge of what made him who he was. The irony would have been amusing if it weren't so devastating.

They spent years trying to control Shukaku through me, he thought from his mental sanctuary. *Never realizing that Shukaku might choose to protect me instead.*

In this protected fragment of consciousness, memories played with crystalline clarity despite his body's complete lack of response.

He had heard everything, seen everything, trapped behind his own eyes like a prisoner watching his life through a window.

The storming of the Kazekage's office remained vivid in his recollection.

Ibuki's forces had moved with practiced coordination. It was obvious their new techniques were designed specifically to overwhelm his sand defenses before he could mount effective resistance.

They knew exactly how to fight me, he remembered with bitter understanding. *Every defense I'd developed, every tactical approach I favored - they had studied it all.*

When he learned the traitor Sannin had been an ally of the Shirogane puppeteers, he immediately understood.

The betrayal had been total, systematic, speaking of months of preparation.

And the threats against Temari and Kankuro had also been delivered with casual cruelty.

Orochimaru's serpentine voice explaining in precise detail how operatives were positioned to strike his siblings down if he resisted.

How their lives hung by threads thinner than spider silk, and only his cooperation could preserve them.

Cooperation, the word tasted like ash in his mental voice. *Everyone knew it meant surrender.*

He'd had no choice.

Not really.

His siblings' safety had always been his weakness, the vulnerability that his enemies could exploit with devastating effectiveness.

So he relented. Agreed to take part of… “experiments” while taking charge of the village as the Kazekage.

The premise was the “study” of his Tailed Beast.

But Gaara knew full well this was imprisonment.

The experiments had begun immediately after his capture, each session stripping away another layer of autonomy.

First came the physical control - chakra threads woven through his nervous system with surgical precision, turning his body into a puppet that responded to external commands rather than internal will.

I could feel every thread as they inserted it, he remembered with phantom pain. *Could sense my own body becoming foreign territory, occupied by invading forces.*

But the physical control had been merely preparation.

The real violation came when they began working on his mind, using techniques that rewrote neural pathways and suppressed cognitive functions that might resist their programming.

Memories fading, he recalled the sensation of losing himself piece by piece. *Emotions dulling. Everything that made me who I was slowly eroding like sand in wind.*

That was when Shukaku had acted, using reserves of power he didn't know the beast possessed to create this sanctuary deep within their shared consciousness.

A space too small for their captors to detect, protected by the very entity they sought to control.

But as he “felt” his lifeless body inside this new wooden coffin, Gaara could only wonder if this final sanctuary inside Shukaku’s essence is still worth it.

NARUTO’S POV
AROUND THE SAME TIME…

The ancient trees rose from the desert sands like monuments to a time when this wasteland had supported more life, their gnarled branches providing brief shade as Naruto leaped from trunk to trunk with practiced efficiency.

The desert air still felt foreign despite months of travel, dry and harsh against his throat with each breath.

Maybe having the pretense stripped away changes how I see things, he thought as he pushed himself harder, faster, refusing to let exhaustion slow his pace.

No more Menma. No more merchant disguise.

Just Naruto trying to save a friend.

Just me, finally being honest about who I am and what I'm trying to do.

They'd been moving since dawn broke across the horizon, wasting no time once Jiraiya had outlined his plan.

Naruto had made absolutely certain of that, his determination overriding any suggestion of caution or rest.

Gaara was out there somewhere, trapped and helpless, and every moment they delayed was another moment his friend suffered.

We're coming, he thought with fierce resolve. *Hold on just a little longer.*

Jiraiya kept pace beside him without apparent effort, his breathing steady despite the hours of sustained movement.

The Sage Mode transformation had taken its toll, but the legendary Sannin's stamina remained impressive even in recovery.

I’m supposed to learn that? Naruto thought from time to time, recalling the way Jiraiya - in all his transformed glory, warts and all - managed to go toe-to-toe against that many number of enemies.

And Orochimaru.

The same Orochimaru that had killed the Third and tempted Sasuke.

The memory left a bitter taste in his mouth. He would have been more affected, had it not been for the chill around them of an air quite unlike the desert they were in.

Behind them, Mirajane activated her ice armor periodically to give herself the boost needed to maintain their speed.

Each manifestation of her power brought a chill breeze that cut through the desert heat, frost forming briefly on nearby surfaces before the sun evaporated it.

Mirajane looked like a wolf made of ice, glistening quite marvelously as she leapt in front of the sun. It was a sight Naruto couldn’t quite get enough of, had he not needed to look forward to where they were supposed to go.

She's pushing herself hard, Naruto observed with gratitude and guilt. *After everything she learned about my lies, after witnessing me lose control, she's still here. Still helping.*

I don't deserve that kind of loyalty.

His mind drifted back to hours earlier, when he'd first questioned Jiraiya's plan to rest when the Akatsuki could have established their camp in practically any direction.

The desert stretched endlessly in all directions, offering countless potential hiding spots.

"You have little faith in your master," Jiraiya had said with mock hurt, pulling something small from his pack. *"Did you really think I wouldn't have a way to track them?"*

The puppet Baki had given him was tiny, no larger than a child's toy, but its purpose was clear.

A tracking device designed to help them locate each other if their plans went awry and they needed to regroup somewhere safe.

He never imagined we'd be using it for this, Naruto had thought, studying the delicate craftsmanship. *To hunt the people who stole Gaara instead of celebrating his rescue.*

The memory of Baki brought fresh pain, a weight that settled in his chest and refused to lift.

The loyal jonin had risked everything trying to reach Gaara during that chaos, had put himself directly in Orochimaru's path knowing he might not survive.

I hope he made it, Naruto thought desperately.

I hope he's somewhere safe, recovering, planning his next move. I can't handle being responsible for another person's death.

But even if the worst happened, even if Baki paid the ultimate price for his loyalty, I can't let that sacrifice be meaningless.

I will persevere. I will save Gaara.

I will prove that bonds between people are stronger than any technique designed to break them.

The sun climbed higher as they continued their pursuit, heat shimmering off sand dunes in the distance while ancient trees provided intermittent shade.

Naruto's muscles burned with sustained exertion, his chakra reserves depleting gradually from hours of enhanced movement.

Doesn't matter, he told himself firmly.

Pain doesn't matter. Exhaustion doesn't matter.

Only reaching Gaara before it's too late.

Then he felt it.

A sudden shift in the atmosphere, subtle but unmistakable to someone who'd spent years training their senses.

The air pressure changed, carrying a presence that made his instincts flare with warning.

Enemy?

"Stop," Jiraiya commanded before Naruto could fully process the sensation, his voice carrying urgent caution.

They landed on a particularly large tree branch, all three of them immediately scanning their surroundings for threats.

Mirajane's ice began forming defensively around her hands while Jiraiya's posture shifted into combat readiness.

Are they here? Naruto wondered, adrenaline flooding his system.

The Akatsuki?

Orochimaru's students?

Another enemy we haven't anticipated?

But as he focused on the sensation, something familiar registered beneath the initial alarm.

A chakra signature he recognized despite the months since he'd last felt it.

Precise, controlled, carrying the distinct flavor of someone who'd perfected lightning manipulation through years of dedicated practice.

Hunter-like, his mind catalogued. *With that characteristic hint of charred ozone that comes from advanced lightning techniques.*

Wait.

I know this presence.

A figure materialized from behind one of the ancient trees with the casual ease of someone who'd been tracking them for some time.

Silver hair caught the morning light, and that distinctive mask covered most of his face, but the exposed eye carried warmth despite the tactical assessment happening behind it.

"It's been a while," Kakashi said, his voice carrying that familiar lazy drawl that somehow coexisted with absolute combat readiness. "Seems we're after the same thing."

Kakashi-sensei, Naruto's thoughts tumbled over themselves, trying to process this new development.

He's here.

How is he here?

Why is he here?

The questions hung unspoken between them as morning light filtered through ancient branches, casting shadows that made it impossible to read anyone's true intentions.

SAKURA'S POV
AROUND THE SAME TIME…

The Kazekage compound felt like a tomb as Sakura stepped carefully over debris that had once been architectural masterwork.

A full day had passed since the explosion that brought down the central chamber, and only now were they being permitted access to what remained.

The battle from last night still played in her mind with vivid clarity.

Sasuke facing off against that mysterious swordsman with techniques that seemed to defy normal combat logic.

Naruto standing beside that girl with ice powers that reminded her uncomfortably of Haku, both of them looking like fugitives caught between impossible choices.

The pain in Naruto's eyes, she remembered, her chest tightening with guilt she couldn't quite name. *When he looked at me, all I could see was betrayal.*

Years of it, accumulated and raw.

Her hand moved unconsciously to her throat.

Sakura hadn’t noticed it at first, because the girl Naruto was with had used her ice powers to stop the enraged Naruto from actually killing her.

It wasn’t until the debriefing when she noticed one of Kurama’s claws had actually touched her.

Just the slightest touch. Sakura’s fingers traced the spot where chakra claw had torn off just a bit of skin. A horizontal line - proof of her short brush with death.

The wound had been healed immediately thanks to her medical training, leaving no permanent damage beyond the memory of how close she'd come to…

He almost killed me, she thought, and the worst part was understanding that in that moment, consumed by the Nine-Tails' rage, he probably wouldn't have recognized her at all.

I would have just been another obstacle to destroy.

The memory of what happened after Naruto disappeared into the compound's depths remained equally vivid.

The explosion had been catastrophic, shaking the entire structure and sending debris raining down like judgment from above.

She'd been preparing to pursue when Temari and Kankuro had arrived with Sand forces, their expressions carrying the kind of fury that preceded wars.

"This is Hidden Sand Village business," Temari had declared, her fan already partially unfurled in warning. *"No other village is permitted to intervene."*

"We're here on official investigation," Yamato had protested, but the acting Kazekage's glare had been absolute.

"Official or not, if you attempt to enter this compound without explicit permission, we will consider it an act of war," Kankuro had added, his puppets already positioning themselves threateningly. *"Your village already harbors one fugitive. Do you really want to add international incident to your crimes?"*

So we waited, Sakura recalled with frustration.

Waited while who knows what happened inside. Waited while Naruto faced whatever nightmare he'd walked into.

The chamber had only been "cleared" for entry this morning, after structural engineers confirmed the remaining sections wouldn't collapse immediately.

Even now, support beams groaned ominously overhead, reminding everyone that they were standing in a disaster waiting to complete itself.

Kankuro and Temari were nowhere to be found. The Sand said they were tending to Kazekage business, but Sakura noticed Ibuki was doing a lot of that around here already.

Which only meant one thing.

They probably have a lead, Sakura thought. *I couldn't exactly blame them for pursuing it by themselves.*

Yamato's eyes swept the ruined space with professional assessment, and Sakura caught the look he exchanged with Sai. They had their own agenda here, separate from the official investigation.

Root business that she was slowly learning to recognize and document.

"Sakura, Sasuke," Yamato commanded with the authority of mission leadership. "Check the battlefield for any useful intelligence. Document what you find."

Translation: look for anything that might reveal what Danzo wants to know about these control techniques, Sakura understood, even as she nodded compliance.

She tried to analyze the space systematically, applying her medical training to read the battlefield like a patient's body.

Chakra signatures lingered in the air like ghosts, so many different flavors that it was difficult to isolate individual combatants.

Too many fighters, she realized with growing concern. *This wasn't a simple extraction or even a standard battle. This was a convergence of multiple factions, each with their own objectives.*

Near what had once been the chamber's center, Ibuki stood arguing loudly with Yamato, his voice carrying the kind of indignation that came from having plans catastrophically disrupted.

"The Konoha guests should leave immediately," he declared with barely controlled fury. "You have no jurisdiction here, no authority to investigate our internal affairs."

"We're investigating reports of illegal experimentation," Yamato replied with professional calm that only seemed to infuriate the regent further. "Techniques that may violate treaties between our villages."

Illegal experimentation, Sakura filed that away for later consideration. *What exactly was happening here?*

Her attention was drawn to a quieter scene across the chamber.

The older woman - Chiyo, she’s been told - knelt beside a familiar figure, her weathered hands glowing with medical chakra as she worked on injuries that looked severe even from this distance.

Baki, Sakura recognized the Sand jonin who'd been instrumental in coordinating the Chunin Exams.

He's alive. Badly hurt, but alive.

She approached carefully, her medical instincts overriding political considerations.

"Do you need assistance?"

Chiyo's sharp gaze fixed on her with immediate suspicion.

"Go away, Konoha girl. This doesn't concern you."

"I have medical training," Sakura insisted, kneeling despite the dismissal. "I studied under the Fifth Hokage. Please, let me help."

The elderly puppet master's eyes narrowed with what might have been grudging respect.

"Fine. Show me what Tsunade's brat has learned. But if you slow me down, you're gone."

Permission granted, Sakura thought as her hands began to glow with healing chakra.

Now to see what I can learn while helping.

As she worked on stabilizing Baki's internal injuries, she began making casual conversation. She almost chuckled at the thought - two years ago, she could barely whisper lest it broke her concentration while healing fish.

"The damage is extensive. Multiple broken ribs, internal bleeding, signs of chakra exhaustion. What happened here?"

Chiyo remained focused on her own techniques, but Sakura noticed the way the old woman's expression tightened at certain questions.

She's uncomfortable, Sakura observed. *Not with the medical work, but with the situation itself.*

Baki's eyes fluttered open briefly, consciousness returning in fractured moments.

"Thank you," he whispered hoarsely, his gaze unfocused. "But why would an enemy like Chiyo try to help me?"

The old woman's hands paused for just a moment before resuming their work, but she said nothing.

He treats her like the enemy, Sakura noted, filing away the information. *This clearly isn't something the other Sand personnel know about. Some kind of internal conflict or division.*

Best keep this to myself until I understand what's really happening.

Baki's hand suddenly shot out, grabbing Sakura's arm with surprising strength for someone so injured. His eyes were wide with recognition, his breath short and panicked. Like he'd realized something crucial.

"Where is Gaara?" he demanded, his voice carrying desperate urgency. "Did they manage to chase him? Did they help Naruto save him?"

Save him? The question caught Sakura completely off guard.

Save Gaara from what?

"I... I don't understand," she said carefully, her medical work continuing even as her mind raced. "What do you mean save him?"

Naruto came here to rescue someone?

Not to cause chaos or be a threat, but to help?

Relief flooded through her despite the confusion.

He wasn't here to hurt anyone. He wasn't the enemy they made him out to be.

But if Gaara was a target... if multiple factions were after him...

The pieces weren't fitting together yet, but the picture they were forming was far more complex than anything their mission briefing had suggested.

Things are getting complicated, she realized as she continued working on Baki's injuries while Chiyo maintained her pointed silence.

And I have a feeling I'm only seeing the smallest fraction of what's really happening here.

Around them, the ruined chamber held its secrets close, while multiple factions pursued their own agendas with increasing desperation.

Sakura's eyes darted over to the opening on what's left of the ceiling, where the faintest chakra signature indicated the… captors had used this pathway to escape.

The kunoichi knew they couldn't pursue the people who took Gaara. It was the Akatsuki, no doubt, but they had to confirm it from the Sand itself. And they are proving painfully difficult to work with.

Which leaves only one factor left.

Kakashi-sensei, Sakura thought. *I hope you made it in time*.

In time to catch up to them.

To see if you could take back Naruto…

NARUTO'S POV
AROUND THE SAME TIME…

They landed on solid ground in a small clearing surrounded by ancient trees, Jiraiya immediately positioning himself defensively while Naruto moved forward to confront their new arrival.

Mirajane hung back slightly, her ice armor still partially manifested as she assessed this silver-haired stranger who'd emerged from the shadows.

Kakashi-sensei, Naruto thought, emotions warring in his chest as he faced the man who'd once been one of the few people in the village who seemed to care about him. *The first time I'm seeing him since...*

Since everything fell apart.

Since the trial.

Since his entire world had been stripped away because he'd dared to care about someone.

His former mentor stood relaxed but alert, wearing the standard Konoha flak jacket that spoke of official business.

But what caught Naruto's attention was what was missing - there was no orange book tucked into his pouch, no sign of the perpetual reading material that had characterized so many of their training sessions.

He's here on serious business then, Naruto catalogued. *Not pretending to be distracted or lazy. This is mission-focused Kakashi.*

The mask covering the lower half of Kakashi's face remained in place, which meant his Sharingan eye stayed concealed as well.

He wasn't preparing to use it, wasn't treating them as immediate threats that required his bloodline advantage.

That's... something, Naruto thought, though he couldn't decide if it was reassuring or insulting. *At least he's not looking at me like I'm a monster that needs to be put down.*

"The black hair is new," Kakashi observed with that familiar casual tone that somehow coexisted with razor-sharp assessment. "Though the blonde is starting to show through. What name are you using these days?"

The question hit harder than it should have.

Names, identities, the constant need to hide who he really was - it all felt like layers of lies stacked on top of each other until he couldn't remember what the truth looked like anymore.

"Menma," Naruto replied, then stopped himself.

No. No more hiding.

"But I prefer Naruto."

My real name. The one I was born with.

The one they tried to make me ashamed of.

Something shifted in Kakashi's visible eye, an expression that might have been approval or sadness or some complicated mixture of both.

"I understand. You're one of the most honest people I know, Naruto. Hiding behind false identities has never been your style."

Honest?

The word sparked something volatile in Naruto's chest.

Honest like when I followed the mission parameters exactly as specified?

Honest like when I did everything right and was still punished for it?

"What exactly do you know?" Naruto demanded, his voice sharper than he'd intended. Years of suppressed hurt and betrayal came flooding to the surface, impossible to contain now that he was facing one of the people who'd sat silent during his trial. "It's not like you and the others did anything when I was being condemned for doing exactly what my mission indicated."

You just sat there, he thought with bitter clarity.

All of you. Watching them tear my life apart.

"People always said I should follow the rules so they would like me," he continued, the words gaining momentum as emotion overrode caution. "So I did. I followed every regulation, completed the mission objectives, brought Sasuke home just like we were supposed to. And what did I get? Scrutiny. Fear. Being branded a threat that needed to be controlled."

His hands clenched into fists at his sides, chakra beginning to flare unconsciously around him.

"That's exactly why I want to save Gaara. To stop him from being controlled the way they wanted to control me. I know what persecution feels like, and I never wanted anyone else to experience the actual reality of it instead of just the fear."

Someone who understands what it means to be seen as a monster, he thought, remembering Gaara's quiet comprehension during their first real conversation. *Someone who knows the weight of carrying something everyone else is terrified of.*

"So if you're here to stop me," Naruto finished with quiet intensity, "you can just shove it. I'm not going back. I'm not abandoning him. And I'm not letting anyone tell me that wanting to help a friend makes me a criminal."

Silence stretched between them, broken only by the desert wind whistling through ancient branches.

Kakashi's visible eye remained fixed on Naruto, and for a long moment, his former sensei said nothing.

He's going to try to capture me, Naruto thought, preparing himself mentally for the fight. *He's going to say duty requires it, or orders demand it, or some other excuse for betraying what he knows is right.*

"I understand your conviction now," Kakashi said finally, his voice carrying something that sounded almost like pride.

"And I'm here to help."

What?

"Sakura called me," Kakashi continued, as if explaining the most natural thing in the world. "She was worried about what you'd walked into. Worried about what might happen if no one was watching your back."

Sakura called him? Naruto's mind struggled to process this information. *She was worried about me? After everything that happened?*

"Have you been tailing me this entire time?" he asked, suspicion warring with confused gratitude.

"No," Kakashi replied with a slight shake of his head.

"I was following Tsunade's unofficial orders to tail the new Team Seven. If you've been to the Hidden Sand, you've probably already met them. Sakura, Sasuke, Sai, and their new captain Yamato."

New Team Seven, the words stung more than Naruto expected. *They replaced me. Made a whole new team and just... moved on.*

"Captain Yamato is probably the wood user," Naruto said, forcing himself to focus on tactical details rather than emotional wounds. "The one who tried to restrain me in the courtyard."

And Sai... he paused, trying to remember through the haze of rage that had consumed him during that confrontation.

Everything was a blur. The anger, the red chakra, Kurama's fury bleeding into mine...

"Sai was probably the one who could turn ink into creatures," he continued slowly, images surfacing from memory like debris floating up from deep water.

Now that I have a moment to think about it clearly... they were actually impressive.

Skilled, he admitted reluctantly. *Well-coordinated. The kind of team I'd always hoped we could become.*

Deep within his consciousness, Kurama stirred at the mention of that night. The Nine-Tails' presence felt different somehow - less hostile than usual, more contemplative.

We'll talk later, Naruto thought toward his tenant, sensing the ancient beast had opinions about recent events.

"It hasn't been the same since you left," Kakashi said, his voice carrying genuine regret. "Sasuke went into Danzo's care to be made into... whatever he's become. Root has been more prevalent in Konoha's operations. Your name became practically a forbidden subject - people were instructed not to discuss what happened."

Forbidden, Naruto felt something cold settle in his stomach. *Like exile wasn't enough. They tried to erase me completely.*

"Sai and Yamato were my former allies in ANBU," Kakashi continued, and there was something in his tone that suggested this was information he was sharing deliberately. "Which means Team Seven is practically another one of Danzo's teams operating right under Tsunade's nose."

"That's unlike Tsunade to let Danzo push her around," Jiraiya interjected, his voice carrying concern. "She's never been one to back down from political fights."

Kakashi's eye shifted to the Toad Sage with something that might have been weary understanding.

"You know better than anyone that Tsunade's direct approach doesn't work well with the Konoha elders. She confronts, they deflect. She demands, they delay. Meanwhile, Danzo is a seasoned bureaucrat who's spent decades learning how to manipulate village politics."

“Shadow of the Hokage,” Kakashi said the title with obvious distaste. "That's what people are calling him now. The power behind the throne."

"Thanks for the rundown," Naruto said with bitter sarcasm. "Really appreciate knowing how thoroughly my village has been corrupted. But I have no interest in what's happening to them now."

They made their choice, he thought with finality. *They chose fear over trust, control over freedom.*

That's on them.

"You should be interested," Kakashi replied with unexpected firmness. "Because it's becoming increasingly clear that Danzo has ulterior motives that extend beyond Konoha's borders. That's precisely why Team Seven was sent to the Hidden Sand - because of rumors about experiments similar to what they wanted to subject you to."

His visible eye fixed on Naruto with uncomfortable intensity.

"Only these experiments were supposedly successful. Performed on Gaara. Is that true?"

Experiments. The word tasted like poison in Naruto's mind.

They wanted to do to me what they actually did to Gaara. Turn us both into controlled weapons.

"Yes," he said flatly, offering no elaboration.

Jiraiya filled in the gaps with professional efficiency.

"The situation is complex. Multiple factions are involved - the Shirogane clan within Suna who initiated the control techniques, Orochimaru providing expertise and resources, and the Akatsuki attempting to steal Gaara for their own purposes."

"The Akatsuki," Kakashi repeated, his posture shifting slightly. "What can you tell me about them?"

"A puppeteer and an explosives expert," Jiraiya replied. "Both S-rank in capability. The puppeteer displayed mechanical enhancements I've never seen before, while the bomber created sculptures that functioned as strategic demolitions."

"And Orochimaru's students were there too," Naruto added, remembering the three young operatives. "The ones your new Team Seven was fighting."

"Yes," Kakashi confirmed. "I observed that engagement while maintaining surveillance. They're formidable for their age."

Child soldiers, Naruto thought with familiar anger. *More kids being used as weapons by adults pursuing power.*

"That's a lot of moving pieces," Kakashi observed with professional assessment. "Multiple factions with competing objectives, all converging on the same target."

"It gets worse," Jiraiya said grimly. "Even within the Hidden Sand, there are divisions. Ibuki Shirogane was working directly with Orochimaru to perfect these control techniques."

"Ibuki as in the puppet master?" Kakashi's voice sharpened with interest. "The one from the prominent Suna clan?"

"The same," Jiraiya confirmed.

Kakashi fell silent for a moment, clearly processing the implications of factional conflicts within an allied village.

"So where do you head next?" he asked finally, his tone carrying the weight of someone making a decision.

Naruto and Jiraiya exchanged glances, years of partnership allowing them to communicate without words.

"I doubt the three of you are traveling without a lead," Kakashi continued, his gaze including Mirajane in his assessment. "You wouldn't have come this far without some way to track your target."

"Are you going to get in our way?" Naruto demanded, preparing himself for confrontation if necessary.

"No," Kakashi replied with surprising firmness. "But considering the threat level, I'd like to observe the Akatsuki's capabilities on behalf of Konoha. We need intelligence on their techniques and objectives."

He's asking permission, Naruto realized with surprise. *Not demanding. Not trying to take command.*

Actually asking if he can help.

"Fair enough," Jiraiya said after a moment of consideration. "The more experienced fighters we have, the better our chances."

And having Kakashi means we have someone who can potentially hold off serious threats while we focus on extraction, Naruto thought tactically, despite his emotional reservations.

"Then let's continue," Kakashi said, falling into position alongside them with practiced ease.

They resumed their pursuit, four figures moving through ancient trees with renewed purpose. The dynamic had shifted, complicated by history and hurt but united by common objective.

Gaara, Naruto thought as they raced toward their destination. *Hold on. We're coming, and this time we have a real chance.*

Behind them, the sun continued its climb across the desert sky, marking time that felt both infinite and desperately limited.

KANKURO'S POV
AROUND THE SAME TIME…

The desert terrain shifted as Kankuro and Temari moved with practiced coordination through terrain they'd known since childhood.

Every rock formation, every wind pattern, every subtle shift in the sand told them stories that outsiders could never read.

As soon as Naruto and his companions left Suna, we knew they'd be pursuing Gaara, Kankuro thought, his fingers already checking his puppet scrolls out of habit.

Which means we need to follow our own leads.

Can't put all our hopes on outsiders, no matter how determined they seem.

The intelligence they'd gathered from Sand ninja still loyal to the Kazekage bloodline had been fragmentary but useful. Get enough connections, and just a few hours' worth of activity could be cataloged in a few words.

Scattered reports of three young operatives moving with purpose through the outer territories, heading in a direction that suggested they were tracking something specific.

Orochimaru's students, Kankuro had concluded after piecing together the descriptions. *The same ones who'd been in the compound during the chaos.*

Whether they were working with the Akatsuki or pursuing their own agenda remained unclear, but any lead was better than sitting idle while their brother remained captive.

All leads are as good as any, he reminded himself, though doubt gnawed at the edges of his certainty. *We have to try something.*

They'd been moving in silence for hours, tension radiating between them like heat from sun-baked stone.

The Sand Siblings had always been coordinated in their missions, their different personalities somehow meshing into effective teamwork despite frequent conflicts.

Temari's always been the hasty one, Kankuro reflected, watching his sister's impatient movements. *Ready to charge in and deal with consequences later.*

I'm stuck being the one who has to think through every angle, plan for every contingency.

"Was leaving Suna really a good idea?" Temari asked suddenly, breaking their extended silence.

"Ibuki's the only one there managing affairs now. Who knows what he might do while we're gone?"

She's worried, Kankuro recognized. *Not just about Gaara, but about what we left behind.*

"This is the only time we actually have freedom to move," he replied, keeping his voice low despite the open terrain. "The only time we have legitimate reason to act outside Ibuki's orders. Gaara being missing isn't suspicious behavior on our part - it's a genuine concern that any siblings would have."

And it gives us cover to pursue our own investigation without revealing that we're working against the regent, he added mentally.

"What about Baki?" Temari pressed, her voice carrying the kind of worry that came from leaving wounded allies behind. "Are we really just abandoning him there?"

Kankuro had considered this question extensively during their preparation.

"Knowing Konoha, they'll likely keep an eye on him. Kakashi seemed competent, and that medical ninja - Sakura - she was skilled enough to stabilize serious injuries. Baki's probably safer with them watching than he would be with us drawing attention to him."

Plus if we stayed, Ibuki would wonder why we were so concerned with one jonin when our brother is missing, he thought pragmatically.

Better to maintain our cover and trust that Konoha's presence will protect him.

Temari laughed, though the sound carried more tension than humor.

"You really do think of everything, don't you? Always three steps ahead, always calculating odds and contingencies."

That's all I can do, Kankuro thought with familiar frustration.

Think. Plan. Strategize.

I'm powerless to actually help Gaara directly. Can't fight off S-rank criminals or match legendary Sannin in combat.

So I have to rely on outsiders to do what I can't, while so many forces try to steal him away.

"Cut yourself some slack," Temari said, her voice softening slightly. "Think of Naruto and the others as allies doing what they can. Which means we should focus on doing what we can too. And look - "

She pointed toward the horizon where three silhouettes had become barely visible against the afternoon heat shimmer.

The figures moved with purposeful coordination, clearly tracking something.

"That's them," Kankuro confirmed, his tactical mind already processing approach vectors and engagement strategies. "Has to be. The movement patterns match the descriptions."

Three young operatives, he catalogued. *Probably around our age.*

Working for Orochimaru, which means they're dangerous despite their youth.

They accelerated their approach, closing the distance with practiced stealth.

But as they drew near enough for engagement, Kankuro noticed something that made his stomach sink.

The red-haired one.

She's not surprised.

She knew we were coming.

Temari lunged forward with her massive fan already unfurling, wind chakra building for a devastating strike.

But before the technique could fully manifest, the hulking operative moved with impossible speed to intercept.

His arm transformed mid-motion, flesh and bone reshaping into something grotesque and powerful.

The limb that caught Temari's wind blast looked barely human, enhanced by curse mark energy that made Kankuro's skin crawl.

Curse marks, he recognized with growing alarm.

Just like what Sasuke had during the Chunin Exams.

Orochimaru's signature enhancement.

Kankuro's puppets launched from their scrolls with mechanical precision, attack patterns honed through years of practice.

But the sword-wielder intercepted them with fluid grace, his blade seeming to flow like water as it deflected the puppet's strikes.

Fast, Kankuro assessed. *Too fast. And that sword technique...*

"What are you doing here?" he demanded, buying time while he recalibrated his approach. "You've trespassed in Hidden Sand territory."

The swordsman's grin was all sharp teeth and adolescent arrogance.

"Not really at liberty to say, unfortunately. Got orders, you know how it is."

"Suigetsu, shut up," the red-haired girl snapped, her voice carrying command despite her youth.

Suigetsu, Kankuro filed away the name. *And she just gave away her own irritation by using it.*

"Well now they know my name anyway, Karin," Suigetsu shot back with obvious annoyance.

Karin, another piece of information.

A sensor, judging by how she knew we were approaching. Probably the team's reconnaissance specialist.

"That's inconsequential," Karin replied with forced calm. "They already reached us. Our identities will eventually be known regardless. We're all ninja here - no point in pretending otherwise."

Her eyes swept over them with analytical precision.

"And judging from your appearances and fighting styles, you're the Sand Siblings. Though I suppose technically just two-thirds of them now."

She's trying to provoke us, Kankuro recognized.

Get us emotional and sloppy.

"So our reputation precedes us," Temari said with false pleasantness, her fan positioning for another strike.

"Hardly the Sand Siblings without Gaara to save your asses," Suigetsu laughed, clearly enjoying the psychological warfare.

"Suigetsu!" Karin hissed, but the damage was done.

He mentioned Gaara specifically, Kankuro's mind raced. *Which means they know about the situation.*

Know about the capture.

"What do you know about Gaara being missing?" he demanded, his puppets repositioning for coordinated assault.

"Not at liberty to say," Karin replied with infuriating composure.

"Stop stealing my lines!" Suigetsu protested.

"Though I will tell you this," Suigetsu continued, his grin widening. "Don't expect any help from us. We're going to secure Gaara for our master first. Lord Orochimaru has plans for him that don't involve family reunions."

Secure him, the words hit Kankuro like a physical blow.

Not kill, not eliminate. Secure.

Which means they're planning to recapture him from the Akatsuki.

Which means they're another faction we have to fight through.

Rage flooded through him, hot and immediate.

These teens - because that's what they all were were, children like him and Temari - were standing between him and rescuing his brother.

Were casually discussing claiming Gaara like he was a prize to be won rather than a person to be saved.

"Temari," he said quietly, chakra strings already extending toward his puppets. "Prepare for combat."

His sister's response was immediate, her fan snapping fully open as wind chakra built to devastating levels.

"Engage," Kankuro commanded, and the desert terrain erupted with violence.

For Gaara, he thought as his puppets launched their coordinated assault.

For our brother who never asked to be turned into a weapon.

For the family we're trying to save.

We're not letting anyone stand in our way.

Not Orochimaru's students, not the Akatsuki, not anyone.

The battle had begun, and only one side would walk away with the information they needed.

GAARA'S POV
AROUND THE SAME TIME…

The wooden coffin lurched again, and Gaara felt the distinctive sensation of momentum shifting as his captors leaped across what must have been rooftops or rocky outcroppings.

The movement was precise, controlled, speaking of operatives who'd spent years perfecting their escape techniques.

Like trying to see the surface from the bottom of a lake, he thought, processing the muffled sounds and vibrations that were his only connection to the outside world.

Everything distorted, distant, filtered through layers I can't penetrate.

He'd heard about the Akatsuki before, of course.

Rogue ninja who'd abandoned their villages to pursue some shadowy agenda that remained unclear to the major powers.

Terrorists, some intelligence reports labeled them. Mercenaries, others suggested.

S-rank criminals whose very names inspired fear among even experienced shinobi.

What do they want with me? he wondered, though part of him already knew the answer.

What else would criminals of their caliber pursue except the power contained within jinchuriki?

They want Shukaku.

They want to steal what was forced into me before I could even form memories.

The irony wasn't lost on him that he was being kidnapped for the very thing that had made his entire life a waking nightmare.

Are you alright? he asked internally, directing his thoughts toward his ancient companion. *With what happened before they took us?*

Shukaku's laugh echoed through their shared consciousness, weak but genuine.

This? This is nothing, kit. We've both suffered far worse than a chaotic escape and some rough handling.

Right, Gaara thought, and memories he'd tried to bury came flooding back unbidden.

Training to be a weapon.

That's what his father had called it, though the reality had been far more brutal than any euphemism could convey.

From his earliest memories, he'd been forced to try controlling the One-Tailed beast sealed within him, and Shukaku had responded to those attempts with berserk fury that had endangered everyone around them.

Mother died bringing me into this world, he remembered with the familiar weight of guilt that never quite faded. *And Father spent years trying to tame the beast for the village's sake, turning his own son into a laboratory for weaponizing power he barely understood.*

The experiments, the training sessions that were barely distinguishable from torture, the way guards would flinch when he approached – all of it had been aimed at making him the perfect weapon for Sunagakure's defense.

Temari and Kankuro were the only ones who saw me as a person, he reflected. *Who looked past the monster and found their brother underneath.*

I don't know if they're safe. Don't know if they survived whatever chaos erupted after the Akatsuki took me.

A darker thought crept in, one he'd been trying to suppress but couldn't quite silence.

Maybe they'll be safer with me gone.

Maybe without the jinchuriki in their lives, they can finally have normal existences.

Maybe my absence is the best gift I could give them.

Stop that.

Shukaku's voice cut through his spiraling thoughts with unexpected firmness.

You shouldn't give up hope. I know you let go of your rage years ago, learned to find peace with what we are.

But hope? That's something I never thought the Kazekage would surrender so easily.

Gaara almost laughed at the absurdity.

One can't exactly hope when you can't move. When your body is a prison and your future is extraction that will probably kill you.

Fair point, Shukaku conceded. *But you should remember – there are people who seem very eager to save you. Even now, probably planning their next move.*

Baki risked everything trying to reach you during that chaos. Your siblings haven't abandoned you despite years of danger that came with being associated with a jinchuriki.

And then there's that boy from Konoha.

The one with the whiskers and the impossible determination.

The one who came all this way, entered a hostile village, walked into a room full of S-rank criminals, all because he refused to abandon someone he considered a friend.

Gaara understood.

He’d heard it, the shrill scream of his name as he had been whisked away by the Akatsuki. The way it faded with the wind, anguish and fury dancing in the hot desert air.

Naruto.

The name settled in Gaara's consciousness with unexpected warmth, cutting through despair like sunlight through clouds.

Naruto.

End.

I hope the chapter was to your liking.

I know the ending was certainly good for me (as I hope that to be the case for you guys too).

See you all on the next update.