

**Title: The Pillar**

**Hentai Shinobi Rule 18:** Never back down from a willing, slutty kunoichi. Destroy her, take her, and make a wholesome harem fanatic out of her.

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**“One step.”** The tempting, husky voice whispered into Mito’s ears. **“Take one step. How cold can you be, Mito? It’s your grandson’s—”**

Mito knew how to ignore the beast’s temptations. *‘It’* was as dangerous with its claws as it was with its words. Those tempting words almost swayed her. The beast within Mito had a way with its words when it wished. The husky, desirous snarls echoed in her core. One step, and she would be free from everything.

Mito would be by her granddaughter. Mito could offer Tsunade a shoulder to lean on as she watched her brother’s, Mito’s grandson, corpse burn into ashes according to the shinobi customs. However, her weakness would cause thousands of deaths. More blood will spill, like Nawaki’s.

The thought made Mito shudder. Her weakness must be known since Mito felt Kushina’s invariable sadness and Kai’s helplessness. The two quietly sat beside her as Mito spread her senses.

She hadn’t performed incredible feats of sensory for some time. However, her skills hadn’t rusted. Mito closed her eyes and ‘saw’ the small group gathered around the shattered Tsunade. Her granddaughter was inconsolable as she watched Nawaki burn to nothingness.

Just one accident.

That’s all it took.

And all Mito recalled was the grinning boy. That smile overlapped with the charred, defaced corpse. Nawaki’s state was unrecognizable. Whatever his team could retrieve was in *chunks*.

*\*Sniff\**

It wasn’t Kushina. The girl was out of tears for Mito as she sat beside Kai, not knowing what to do.

It was Mito.

She could not hold it in. It was Nawaki's birthday yesterday. Yet, today—

Mito covered her lips, whimpering with such frailness overcoming her that she could not care for her image. It wasn't fair! Why today? Mito understood it all.

She understood how a person could die within minutes after the best achievement of their life.

She knew not everyone who met her would return.

But why her grandson?!

Her sadness was an opening her furry tenant would not squander. Jets of unhindered rage fueled mapped her veins and offered her a way out. It would be as simple as a snap of her fingers. She would cease to feel all this.

—all this *fury*.

Mito's lips trembled as she wept, like her granddaughter.

She had just reconnected with her grandson, and he was gone.

—*Just like that*.

Recollection of the boy, from his young mischievous years to distant academy days, failed to simmer the boiling rage. Mito always felt she controlled this corrupting power—not today. Mito knew the '*force*' within her wasn't only a master of all negative emotions but also the positive ones. It pulled her deepest memories and desires and shook them into a cocktail of pain, regret, and rage.

All Mito could do was let out choked sobs. There was nothing else within the silent room aside from the trembling Kushina.

Mito didn't know what to feel. For once, she was scared. She felt like the cocky girl who volunteered to tame and seal the beast because she thought she could take on the world.

Mito feared she would slip and lose control.

She was—

*\*Krrrgggg\**

The sound of the dragging chair scraping its leg against the floor cut the tense, mournful silence as Kai sat between Kushina and Mito.

He hesitated before reaching out for Kushina's hand. Mito felt the boy's helplessness intensify as he looked at her. Mito knew Kai wanted to reach out to her. He just didn't know how. Still, she felt within Kai—beyond his helplessness—what she needed.

*Hope.*

Kai hoped to help her. And now, Mito hoped to grieve without fearing.

She quietly stretched her hand, allowing Kai to take it.

So, there, the trio sat in empty, grieving silence—hand-in-hand.

Mito didn't know what to feel about something else teeming within Kai. Beyond his helplessness and hope lay a pool of bottomless indifference. He cared for her. Mito also knew Kai did not dislike Nawaki. She was sure. Otherwise, she would not have been eager to make Kai do anything for her grandson.

Why wouldn't she want her grandson to get along with Kai? They both held irreplaceable positions in her heart.

Yet—

All she sensed within Kai was an utter indifference to death.

Death did not scare the boy. The realization must have struck the creature inside Mito as the poisonous emotions momentarily stopped corrupting her thoughts.

And as Mito calmed down, she only felt profound consolation within Kai.

He was indifferent to Death yet not a stranger to it. Mito was sure. Still, she refused to pry further into Kai or let his different outlook on life and death scare her into forming a wall between their relationship.

If anything, at this moment, Kai's existence was a tonic to her aching, shattered heart—just like it was crucial in easing Kushina's sadness. Despite his short stature, he was an unbending pillar that did not falter under the weight of their emotions.

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There was a reason why Konoha's Cemetery was built on its outskirts. For one, the cemetery did not store any bodies. To not burn the bodies but place them six feet under the ground would be the highest form of stupidity and the most gracious gift to several grave diggers and spies who wished to get their hands on the valuable research material in the form of the cells of the Kekkei Genkai users within the village.

The second—and more pragmatic—reason for its location was that the dead do not care where they are buried, even in name. There was no reason for Konoha to spend land on empty gestures.

Dead never cared about any of it.

That's why death scared Orochimaru.

His goals and accomplishments would become meaningless should he die, and Orochimaru did not want that. It wasn't the fear of the unknown. If anything, Orochimaru knew what came after one's life. He had read mentions of a peculiar jutsu in the Forbidden Scroll guarded by the Third Hokage. However, death was an obstacle to Orochimaru's dream.

And knowing what came after death, he did not feel sad for Nawaki. Even if he saw a familiar figure stroking the slab of rock with Nawaki's name, Orochi merely lamented the frailness of a human's body. He did not bother with the pretenses.

Orochimaru expected to find himself in a secured ward once he woke up. Yet, there was a reason why nobody moved him from the hospital ward.

"Tsunade," Orochimaru called out to the disheveled woman. She slightly stirred at his words. However, Tsunade kept stroking the piece of rock.

Did she hope for the rock to speak in Nawaki's likeness?—Orochi wondered. Or was Tsunade expecting Nawaki to pull the dirt apart and rise from the ground?

"I'm sorry for—"

Tsunade's hoarse voice softly interjected. "Shut up."

Orochimaru's shoulders sagged as he exhaled the breath he didn't know he'd been holding for a while.

"I read the reports. That trap seal was—"

Tsunade quietly tilted her head as haunted winds rustled her errant, messy bangs. Orochimaru could not look past the blonde locks hiding Tsunade's gaze, but he saw

Tsunade's pursed lips.

"I told you to shut up. I'd hate to experience my friend's funeral on the same day as my brother's."

For all their banter, Orochimaru knew Tsunade was not threatening him but promising how the day would end should he speak again.

Yet, in the back of his head, Orochimaru questioned the validity of such a statement.

Could Tsunade kill him?

"Could I kill you?" She whispered.

'Did she read my—'

"No, I did not read your mind," Tsunade answered as the winds blew under the darkened sky. Dark, heavy clouds curtained the moon as soft drizzles followed the low, raging grumbling of the flashing lightning.

"For all your arrogance about being smarter," Tsunade's hoarse voice felt more haunting than the darkness and the eerie wind. "You were always an easy read."

Tsunade turned around and looked at Orochimaru. Her eyes were red, and Orochimaru felt a pang of *'something'* when he looked at the dried tearstains on Tsunade's face. For once, Orochimaru's intent faltered as he glanced away.

Tsunade never looked so vulnerable. There was no anger on her face but utter despair—and that—Orochimaru could not bear to look at Tsunade's face.

"What is going on?" Tsunade fished out a bottle of purple pills from the pouch strapped on her thigh. Orochimaru's pupils momentarily contracted.

"It's none of your business, Tsunade," Orochimaru replied.

"You were always the smart one," Tsunade looked at the pills. "And I know you cared for Nawaki. Risking his life, or any of your teammate's life for that matter, isn't your way of doing things. I'm sure you thought everything was under control. But—"

She sharply inhaled.

"I need to know you did not lose focus!" Her voice rose a notch.

"I need to know you didn't intentionally do it—"

“Nawaki died due to an Uzumaki’s trap,” Orochimaru interjected. “I do not know what it was doing there. And I’m not keen on understanding the implications of such a trap. What happened to me—”

“You’re dying!” Tsunade gritted her teeth.

“It’s only a poison,” Orochimaru looked away. “I have it under control.”

“I ought to reveal this to Sensei.” Pent-up hatred flickered in Tsunade’s gaze as she clenched the bottle.

Orochimaru met Tsunade’s gaze before nodding.

“That would be your duty as a shinobi, yes. However, I hope you don’t reveal my condition to anyone. Tsunade... did you run tests on me?”

Tsunade’s gaze turned complicated before she looked at Nawaki’s tombstone.

“I didn’t need to. It’s something I couldn’t sense. So, I have a good idea about its origin. Besides, I was with Nawaki the entire time.”

She reached out to touch her locket.

“I used to think death isn’t scary. But the thought of Nawaki feeling what I am if I passed before him is... scary. Here.”

Tsunade tossed the pill bottle to Orochimaru before smiling gently.

“I know you never cared enough about anything around you. So, you don’t have to pretend around me. You can leave.”

It was wrong and ugly. Tsunade knew she shouldn’t lash out at Orochimaru like this. However, she felt hateful. Orochimaru should have saved Nawaki!

Even if every clue from the post-mortem suggests Nawaki’s death was instant, Orochimaru should have saved him! He should have saved her brother!

Orochimaru hesitated before taking a step forward.

“Don’t!” Tsunade snapped. “Please, just leave me alone.”

Orochimaru clenched his jaw before whispering, “I’m sorry.”

He turned around and flickered away.

Tsunade stayed near Nawaki until soft steps dampening the rustling of the damp grass woke her from her stupor. It had stopped drizzling. However, dark clouds persistently hid the moon. The soothing scent of the wet grass and dirt did not uplift Tsunade's spirits. She felt her damp hair matt her forehead and her clothes cling onto her body.

"Mito-sama wanted me to deliver this to Nawaki's grave. I think this was meant for you."

The quiet voice attracted Tsunade as she looked at the boy, who hugged a bottle of sake to his chest.

"Oh, it's you." She nodded at Kai before questioning. "How is grandma?"

"Mito-sama calmed down," Kai stayed put. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Are you?" Tsunade smiled. No. She did not want to say this. However, the more vulnerable she felt, the easier targets she desired. And Kai looked prime for pickings and emotional violation as her lips curved into an ugly sneer.

"Aren't you happy now that you get grandma's attention?"

Kai looked at her before glancing at Nawaki's tombstone.

"I'm not," he replied. "I once told Nawaki something and had those exact words spoken to me—none of us are replaceable in Mito-sama's heart. So, no. I'm not thrilled about how sad Mito-sama is."

He walked forward and gently placed the bottle on the ground.

Tears began to form in the corner of her eyes, and Tsunade's eyes wet again as she felt how much of a monster she sounded.

"Kai," she choked back a sob. "I'm..."

"It's alright," Kai smiled. "It doesn't bother me."

Tsunade felt even more bitter. Just some emotion would have been pleasant. However, she knew Kai didn't care about Nawaki.

"Do you know what comes after death?"

Tsunade glimpsed as Kai stared at Nawaki's grave.

“What?” Tsunade wiped her tears before picking up the bottle.

“I don’t understand why someone should ever cry for something inevitable. Perhaps there’s a jutsu that defies death, making my point moot. For instance, should I cry for someone I lost? Should I not be prepared to lose someone because everyone dies? However, I can’t look down on others who shed tears for their dearly departed. Not anymore. After all, I’m also sad. Seeing you, Kushina, and Mito-sama so heartbroken shouldn’t have affected me. I know everyone would have moved on.”

“So…”

Kai looked down at his unclenched hands. His vision momentarily swam.

“Why does it suck so much?”

Kai exhaled. He just didn’t know what to do. And he has never felt anything like this before.

\*Tip\*

A drop of water fell on his right hand, making Kai look at the dark sky.

*\*Pitter\* \*Patter\* \*Pitter\* \*Patter\* \*Pitter\* \*Patter\* \*Pitter\* \*Patter\* \*Pitter\* \*Patter\**

Kai looked at the dazed Tsunade before nodding.

“I hope you feel well soon enough—”

Tsunade grabbed Kai by the shoulder before kneeling. She looped her arms around his head as Kai found his chin resting on Tsunade’s shoulder. Kai felt warm despite the rain. He felt Tsunade tremble against him before he heard her sob.

“When you don’t know what to do,” she cried. “And when it sucks so much you don’t know what to feel, just do this.” Tsunade’s embrace tightened as Kai opened his mouth worldlessly. He recalled how much it sucked as Kushina and Mito began crying soon after he held their hands.

Kai wanted to assure them. However, he also had such questions. Asking them all these and invalidating their emotions would have hurt them—and Kai. So, he was lost. For all his rationality, he only knew how to avoid or eradicate emotions, not understand their depths and the gashes they leave on one’s heart.

He coiled his arms around Tsunade’s shoulder before nodding.



“Noted. I will start doing this.”

However, Kai refused to believe his voice wavered when he said so.

Tsunade didn't say anything as she sobbed in their shared embrace.

Eventually, Kai felt Tsunade gently pat the back of his head.

“Thank you, Kai-kun. For the bottle, I mean. You should go back. You've got academy tomorrow, right?”

Kai nodded and let go of Tsunade as she smiled.

“I'm sorry for what I said.”

Kai glanced at Nawaki's grave before speaking.

“For what it's worth, I think we cared for Mito-sama and those around us just as much.” He looked at Tsunade. “I hope you rest, too.”

“I will,” Tsunade took a sip from the bottle before exhaling. “Just a few more minutes.”

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Kai returned to his room after drying himself. Without any mood for other activities, he shuffled through his cupboard before fishing out a box.

He opened the box before pulling out a peculiarly ‘soft’ mesh shirt. Unlike other mail shirts, the ‘wirings’ looked ultra-thin. The metal was as thin as a silk's thread.

This mesh shirt was Mito's gift to Kai—a training shirt.

These things aren't available in the market and are only custom-ordered by the rich Uzumaki or those who could get it for free with a word—someone like Mito. Kai turned the shirt inside out. Instead of the dull silver gleam, the shirt looked pitch-black.

Kai sat on the edge of the bed and observed every pattern on each individual thread. However, the markings were too thin.

These thin markings packed onto individual threads were none other than seals.

Mito had custom-ordered a mesh undershirt for Kai's physical training.

Fuinjutsu had two broad classifications—inking peculiar seals before flowing chakra

through them and creating seals out of pure chakra manipulation, aka the Chakra Infused Seals.

The applications of the inked seals were primarily seen in explosive tags or ankle and wrist weights. These applications ensured the usage of seals even by the most inexperienced Shinobi since all they had to do was run their chakra through the item. For instance, the explosive tags formed through an inked sealing matrix involving a set timer and limited chakra absorption allowed the users to time their attacks where the explosive tags exploded after a few seconds. Meanwhile, the restriction of fixed chakra absorption kept the seal from overloading or fizzling out due to the varied skills in chakra control amongst the Shinobi-kind.

Kai knew how to form such seals using **[Sealing Matrix.]** All he required was chakra paper and ink. Kai had immaculate control over the brush strokes since the tiniest details mattered in Fuinjutsu.

Kai's swift mastery of this skill was also one of the reasons Mito didn't have anything else to teach since this lesson was supposed to continue for a little over a year.

However, these were the basics.

Kai didn't have the raw qualities needed to step his game up. After all, master fuin practitioners could convert their chakra into seals, allowing them to manipulate the size of the ink, its nature, and even its compatibility with the material.

The mesh shirt in Kai's hand was a product of such ingenuity.

The sealing matrix on the shirt increased the item's weight and maintained the soft feel of the material, or else it would bite into the skin. Mito specifically prepared this for Kai since she noted how the latter specifically trained till Chakra exhaustion and desired to hone his physical strength.

The continuous chakra consumption needed to maintain the seals and the shirt's weight helped Kai check most of his boxes regarding the grind.

He calmly wore the shirt underneath.

There was only one issue with the item.

Customizing the shirt's material through threads molded from the chakra metals made it vulnerable to damage. Wearing it outside of physical training risked damage to the delicate seals, even if the item could change its size for the user within reasonable limits.

Kai was grateful for such a gift.

So, he meant every word he said to Tsunade. Kai wasn't worried about Nawaki replacing him in any capacity.

He sighed and lay on the bed.

'Damn,' he grunted. 'I don't wanna train tonight.'

He stayed in a spot before sitting up and running his chakra through the underlying seals.

He would train the more his mind didn't want to.

The one thing he refused to do was give in to his mind's irrational demands.

Kai wasn't tired. If anything, he felt refreshed after Tsunade helped him navigate through some of his emotions. How could he waste such effort and sleep?

No.

He had to train.

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The smell of Hiruzen's smoke filled the Hokage's office as the Third Kage calmed his tense nerves. Nawaki's death came as a shock to Konoha's higher-ups. There were various reasons for this. However, despite his station, Hiruzen couldn't help but let his focus gravitate around how terrible Tsunade must be feeling.

Yes, there were several political concerns about Nawaki's demise. For one—Nawaki met his demise due to an Uzumaki's explosion trap. Yet, Hiruzen and others knew that Uzumaki Clansmen were many things, but being irresponsible of their Fuinjutsu wasn't it.

Was Nawaki the target if it was indeed a trap? It all seemed coincidental except for the Uzumaki's sealing trap. No, someone planted the latter into Team Orochi's path.

It also opened another can of ugly worms—a traitor amongst their kind, Konoha's administrative forces.

Who could do such a thing?

And why?

The offending party must know such an apparent trap would not disrupt Konoha's

alliance with Uzushioakure. So, the plan must be something else.

Hiruzen wasn't even willing to think how Nawaki was Hashirama Senju's blood. Within him and Tsunade lay the future of Wood Release. Further down this line was Dan Kato's failure to form any meaningful relationship with Tsunade.

Everything became a whole lot more complicated with Nawaki's death.

The only silver lining was the lack of any extreme reaction from Mito's side. Hiruzen knew how Mito and Nawaki reconnected. So, Hiruzen wisely appointed a few Anbu to the residence with the explicit order of returning should Mito disagree with the judgment.

After all, Mito knew more about the beast within her than Hiruzen. He was willing to defer to her judgment since Mito never gave him any reason to think otherwise.

Hiruzen inhaled from his pipe before leaning back in his chair.

Unlike others, he didn't even have the time to grieve with Tsunade. Too many responsibilities burdened Hiruzen's shoulders for him to relent to such luxuries.

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"Here." A distant, stoic voice bloomed in the darkness as a few charred fleshy bits in a plastic bin. "Start working with these. To think we would get a result is nothing short of blessed fortune."

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**Alternate Title:** Depraved Temptations; A Step Away From Carnage; Unjust Life; Taken Early On; A Cocktail Of Everything Worse; The Tempting Beast; Helplessness; Hopeful; Taking Charge; Uncharted Territories; Beyond The Curtains of Helplessness and Hope; The Unknowing Kind Heart; Indifferent To Death, Not Sadness; Kai: I Can Deal With Death, But Kushina Crying Is a Whole Different Beast; The Sensory Skill; Devastated Tsunade; Inconsolable; Grief; When It Sucks Too Much; Orochi's Incidence; Hateful of Death; One Saw Fragility, The Other Understood Death's Peace; The Sake Bottle; What Lies Beyond; An Emotional Perspective; Shared Irrationality; Ugly Scars; Venting; Broken; Rain Hides Many Things; Focus On The Positive; Unbothered Kai; Hug It Out; Gamer Mind Can Block Emotions But Not Deal With Them; Suited Arms; The Present; Different Realms of Seals; Thoughtful Mito; Train Harder; The Hidden Issues; Luxury of Grief; Almost Lost Lineage; Hiruzen To Dan: You're a Failure; The Lucky Assaulters