Doing it Backwards

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Doing it Backwards

by hands_off

Summary

In which there are plans laid, machinations diverted, and Tsunade is just a bit of a mother-hen. But it all works out for the best, mostly.

Notes

So this is something that has been sitting on my computer for AGES, unfinished and collecting computer dust. But when people started talking Boruto and like all the wunder-kids and it kind of like made me ugh and then the writing bug bit me on the ass and I was like why the hell not? Can't be any worse, right?

This is taking period during the time-skip, focusing mainly on Kakashi/Iruka. Iruka will have bad memories/flashbacks to Mizuki and so that's what that tag is for. I'm new to this site as a poster, so I'm sure they'll be some formatting mistakes.

Making small changes to the other jounin ages in regards to like if Kakashi was six and they were nine like how can they all be 27? Also like, Mizuki is supposed to be their age according to databooks? UGH NO.

One more thing; I've decided as the school format is as follows:

4 month sessions standard lessons etc…
2 month sessions for special chakra development/ class switching/ remedial lessons for more one on one

Academy Graduation Ceremonies in JUNE and DEC
december-January off CHUUNIN EXAMS TIME
sept-dec ON
jan/feb 2 off CHUUNIN EXAMS TIME
march-june ON
Kakashi moves in waves around people, never staying long enough to get attached.

Attachment is something different for him. A realization of sorts; a recognition that deep inside that someone has claimed a piece of him; a piece that will always be claimed no matter the weeks, months or years of distance or death between them. They never leave, always swirling around his mind, remembering.

So he doesn’t make new attachments. It doesn’t always work; sometimes he finds himself talking to them at the stone long after they’ve passed; but mostly it helps keep a necessary distance. It’s not the best way to live, but it works for him.

Although most are dead, he still has his few, friends from before- even a friend or two from after- Yamato was proof that he wasn’t completely broken.

But these kids-

These little shits-

Team Seven-

*His kids.*

They’d gone and dug out and claimed pieces of his heart that he didn’t know he had.

But Naruto-

Naruto is *different*, will always be different, he can see reflections of Kushina and Minato every time he smiles, every time he laughs; pieces of parents he never met. But even past that-

Kakashi listens, hears every word about Iruka-sensei and *knows*. Knows that the reason Naruto is the way he is- no matter the obstacle, no matter the despair, that heart of goodness that just doesn't *quit*—that the chunin sensei played a huge role in that.

Someone that managed to look past what was inside of Naruto and love him anyway. Someone that loved the village as a whole. It is rather like Minato, but not learned from him.

It’s beyond him, thinking like that most days.

But just like a sunrise, Kakashi can admire it; like a sunrise, he can bask in the warmth. He knows within himself that Naruto could have been dark.

He sees the man, watches him interact with all of his students, past and present. Watches the same goodness that emanates from Naruto.

He is content to watch the sunrise.

But just like Naruto, the man doesn’t back off. Circumstances be dammed, a room full of jounin— why was he even here, really?
Those eyes are fierce and protective. Kakashi can admire that, even if the words fire him up in ways he’d forgotten that he could feel.

It is interesting to watch the eyes of the room. Asuma and Kurenai telling him to call himself off, Hayate looking alarmed, even the eyes of Sandaime look disappointed.

All over one person?

They discuss a preliminary activity, which seems to settle the chuunin.

It’s not until later that he realizes that all nine genin that passed the last set of genin graduation tests belong to Iruka-sensei.

That’s a hell of a record.

“What do you know about him?” he asks Gai later after they spar and go out to eat.

“Iruka-sensei?” Gai laughs. “He’s very protective of his students, isn’t he?”

“That goes without saying.”

“I do not think I have ever seen anyone issue you a direct challenge like that in years. It was very passionate and entertaining to watch! A prime example of the strength of Konoha!”

“Not what I’m asking.”

“Getting to the point, how hip.” Gai says, but the infuriating twinkle is still there. “He tutored most of my team as well, although the one that remained in his class longest was Tenten. Lee and Neji were temporary additions and he intervened several times over Lee’s years to keep him in the program.”

Kakashi looks over from his book. “So you are telling me that all twelve of the nominated genin this year were taught by him at one point or another?”

Kakashi knows that only seven teams made genin from both graduation sessions. He checked the records. But four teams—more than half—are his?

That’s beyond anything he thinks he’s heard before.

“Iruka-sensei is enormously dedicated to his position. I myself teach a few classes on taijutsu for the academy and hold some familiarity with the man; Hayate has been a part of the lesson structure for several years now.”

Kakashi takes the lead for what it is and finds his way to Hayate. He hasn’t spoken to Hayate for some time, but that doesn’t seem to matter to the man as he goes to fix tea, coughing all the while.

He sees Badger (he thinks her real name might be Yugao) sitting on the sofa. She greets him with a stiff nod but says nothing. He supposes that he may be interrupting something between them, as Yugao is still active in ANBU.

He ignores that voice about manners and propriety that he has learned over the years. Hayate is
familiar enough with him that he could tell him to leave.

“Lack of a working lung does that.” his laugh is wheezy. “Kind of stupid really that I go and finally pass the jounin trials and get out of tokubetsu status only to lose to a cold. My sword Arashi cries for training.”

“A few more surgeries, perhaps.”

“One hopes.” he smiles, small. Hayate is young, but he’s been contracted out as additional help for the ANBU before. Also one of the few that Kakashi can (or could) practice kenjutsu with. Another attachment he did not realize he’d made. “It’s been nice, this job.”

“The village utilizes all it can.”

“That is true. So why are you here, then? You know I can’t tell you anything about the exam or even plans for the location.”

“I want to know about Iruka-sensei.”

His eyes widen a bit, glances over to Yugao. She purses her lips and leaves. Kakashi follows the movement before his eyes turn back to Hayate.

“That part of the story is not mine to tell.” he picks up his tea. “But Iruka well- we graduated together back in the day. Never spent much time with him, not until I was on rotation at the academy myself. I still teach lessons on the regular.”

“All nine genin that graduated this past session are his.” Kakashi informs him. “And he spent time tutoring Gai’s team as well.”

Hayate nods. “Unsurprising. Those nine were his from the start. He’s been their sensei for over six years now. They’re his kids, so he’s pretty protective of them.”

*His kids.*

Kakashi understands that, at least.

Hayate drinks, puts his cup down. “I’d say that they’ll make it pretty damn far in these exams, greenhorn or not. Watch for their specialties, Iruka spent plenty of time making them as prepared as they can be.”

Kakashi does watch.

He watches all nine pass the forest of death. Watches as the four genin teams show up teams with years more experience. Watches the individual matches. Watches Naruto, Shikamaru, Sasuke, and Shino make it to the finals.

Watches Shikamaru make chuunin at age twelve.

Within a year of graduation from academy. *unheard* of in peacetime.

And even though Hayate doesn’t live to see his predication through to the end, Kakashi watches for him.
“How would you feel if I killed your most precious person?” Sasuke asks, eyes dark and afraid.

“Everyone is dead already.” he says, leaning in. Not completely true, but there is no one new-no attachments-

Iruka flashes in his mind, brief and bright.

He’d probably be better at this, Kakashi thinks as he dispels the image and releases Sasuke.

His words don’t get through. He loses Sasuke.

It hurts. It is a different sort of hurt than separation by death, but it still guts him. Perhaps even more because he doesn’t know if there was more that he could have done. More jutsu, less jutsu, more attention, more-

He’s fallen down this hole before. The hole in which dreams and pain and blood drag him down, down-

But this is also different. There is no lingering war and despite Orochimaru’s best attempt, the destruction was not even in the same league as the attack of the Nine Tails.

Tsunade also watches, refusing to let him fall off the path. She summons him to her office; insisting on handing him missions herself; checks him and vets him personally more often than not. She gives him missions that keep him in the circle of his relationships, worries about his posture and diet and constant overuse of chakra.

Far more mother-hen than Sandaime, although she would clock him one if he ever voiced such a thought.

“I’ve got a mission for you brat. House Warren. Several weeks. Get out of this mess before it blows up in my face.”

He turns to the door, sees Iruka standing there.

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-to be continued-

Okay, so here we go. I made a deal that'd I start putting up some of my writings and I feel my beginning might be a ltttttttttle weak but please stick with it, there's more on the way.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

In which Iruka knows more than he should and Kakashi knows less than he thinks he does.

We’re going to talk about some boring things here, like the issue with water being a huge stack of dominos and the fact that Konoha knows about the domestic civil issue (civil war) of Amekugure and the fact that Kirikugure being a huge bloodbath of blood.

Also bringing up the elders. I’ve gone and expanded them to form a real council, although the main three advisors are still the old evil fogies we’ve come to love/hate or hate/hate, whatever your preference.

Also they call the villages Ame and Kiri because it gets the point across. Or maybe I’m just I’m lazy.

We’re gonna hang out with Kakashi’s POV for a bit, but I’ma switch it up at some point. Also like this old stuff makes me cringe and need to rewrite like all the things, because I jumped POVs so fast I’d make my head spin. So maybe not as quick updates as I’d thought before.

ALSO CAUSE I'M NERD: ANBU get animal names, ANBU houses get names of groups of animals. ALSO I've gone and taken the term convoy and appropriated it to armed humans. Because a friendly gathering of armed humans...? BEST IDEA EVAR AND ALWAYS

Kakashi watches as Iruka shifts his weight, trying to decide if announcing himself is the best idea. It’s also debatable how much he had overheard.

Kakashi isn’t really worried about names like House Warren; those are ANBU names for the various safehouses. There are probably different names when chuunin do restocking missions.

But Tsunade has not dismissed him yet either, so perhaps the chuunin has some information about the location.

Tsunade calls Iruka in, the ANBU closing the door shut behind them.

“If you would...” she says, waving her hand, gesturing at both nothing and everything. Iruka nods and performs several hand seals as extra wards settle in around them. She nods, satisfied.

Kakashi is not satisfied as he watches the wards flare to life with additional protection. Permanent ward additions if they came to life with that kind of ease. He wants to uncover his eye and strip down the wards and see exactly what’s been done.

“Well that settles that. Sake?” Shizune seems to be nowhere to be found at the moment, which is most likely why Tsunade has even brought it out, this being this early.
Iruka shakes his head. She fills one cup and then a second, probably for him, although he does not move towards it.

“First off we have an allied convoy that shall be here in a few days, although some are apparently arriving sooner than anticipated,” she drains her glass, sighing as she pours herself a refill with her other hand. “Second, the extended gathering of elders have finally gotten off their asses and mostly agreed on something. Majority agreement, anyway. Not really what I was hoping for, not yet. But since the last official Uchiha has left us—” she tips the cup back and refills it. “Therefore you will be making yourselves scarce. I seem to have lost my memo about keeping you two in Konoha.”

Kakashi looks back at the teacher again. Making himself scarce is usually a priority in terms of meetings, whether it be a mission or behind a ceramic mask. What does a teacher have that would need to have him off the radar?

Tsunade isn’t offering any more hints, however. She fills both cups this time before putting the bottle down and reaching for the scroll in front of her.

She throws the scroll at them, which he catches. “The brat knows where to go, and I’ve already arranged your missions. You are to be trained to become a jounin. So says the official report anyway.” she smirks, picking up the second untouched cup.

“Get yourself some provisions and get the hell out. Iruka, leave the wards if you would. Different exits. Kakashi you pick up the supply packs. Dismissed.”

“Yes, Hokage-sama.” he bows.

Kakashi opens the window and jumps onto the ledge, catching the tail end of conversation between the two.

“Be careful.”

“I will.”

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Kakashi finds Sakura outside the mission office before he arrives, passing him another scroll; this one a slug summon, he knows from experience. He tucks it inside his jacket and grabs two standard supply packs from the mission office.

He meets up with Iruka at the standard rendezvous point beyond the regular patrols. He shoulders a pack, passing Kakashi the scroll.

It was vague, vaguer than he was used to, which was probably the point. She would send more details later on through the slug summon.

He’d thought they would need a full three days to get to House Warren. But their pace is good, better than he’d expect of someone not used to regular missions, so he thinks they’ll get there sooner.

They pick a spot on just outside the edge of Konoha territory that the Inuzuka clan patrols regularly. They set up camp and Iruka goes to place some temporary-yet still advanced-wards once more on the surrounding trees.
“So Iruka-sensei, would you care to tell me how you know to set such advanced wards?”

“Not so advanced,” Iruka disagrees, shaking his head, “but my placement is secret.”

He’s wrong there, those were fairly advanced and most likely semi-permanent standing wards if only activated with a few hand seals. Not that he expected the teacher to share.

It had been a late start to the day and they didn’t want to raise any flags if for whatever reason the allied convoy had exploratory nin.

It wasn’t uncommon when convoys came to have people mapping out territory, taking notes of positive and negatives of the landscape if negotiations ever turned sour. It was also a way to see just how much time and effort was spent in the village as preparation for the visiting shinobi. There were drawbacks to both visiting and hosting foreign nin.

“Where is this safe house, anyway?” Iruka asks as they set up camp.

“It’s mainly for ANBU. It’s past Konoha in neutral territory.”

“We shouldn’t have any contact with the envoys then?”

“If they travel their normal route, no. There is always the possibility of a mapmaker in convoy missions like this, however.”

“Do you have any spare masks then, Kakashi-san?”

He pulls out another from his vest. Iruka’s scar itself was an identifiable marker, but as far as he was aware, the teacher should not have been worried about foreign nin recognizing him. Missions that far out were often for higher class ninja than chunnin.

But then again, Sandaime had always had a special relationship with this chuunin, Kakashi knew that much. So perhaps not too cautious a move, hiding his face.

It was surprising how different a mask made one look. Iruka no longer appeared a safe and caring schoolteacher, eyes flashing as the mask settled into place.

“How much longer until we get there?”

“At this pace…tomorrow evening I should think. The following morning, at the latest.”

“What of Tsunade-sama’s instructions?”

“She gave me a slug summon.” he taps his vest where the scroll lays. He knows where House Warren is, even now. The lack of instruction is more for their benefit than not at this point.

Iruka nods, understanding. “It is impressive, how Tsunande-sama manages to bend the rules. So do you want to take the first watch or shall I?”

It is an offer to a superior rank, something that is not usual among chuunin and jounin mixed missions. Written rules state that that lower rank (or the one with less years of the same rank) are first to watch. But jounin two cell missions are different. To be aware of such matters is beyond what he would assume a chuunin to possess; especially one delegated to simpler missions.

But Kakashi prefers first watch. Prefers to take in their surroundings with one (and then two) eyes; prefers to watch the sun sink and firmly place himself within their space as the darkness claims their surroundings. Prefers to hear what his partner’s breathing sounds like before it can be
replaced with that of an enemy.

It speaks of a sense of professionalism.

“I will take first watch.” he says and Iruka nods, turning over in his bedroll to sleep.

Kakashi watches with one and two eyes, watches the final piece of sun dip out of the horizon as the moon takes its place. He stares at the moon, wondering just what this trip has in store for him.

He tries not to think too much about the teacher, about the waves that the man has caused among his students, among the people of Konoha.

He’d done fairly well at it, once Naruto had left; taking his stories about Iruka with him. But now, thoughts swirl. He remembers the concern; concern from his own group. Asuma’s concern, even. Out of place, now that he thinks on it.

Why would such a teacher need to leave Konoha during a simple meeting of allied nations?

Thoughts drift across his mind, not unlike the clouds in the sky.

The rain wakes Iruka up, the drip-drip-dropping just enough to disturb his rest. It is not quite time for him to take over, but it is close enough for the difference to matter.

The rain falls, the clouds low, lower than they should be. A strange sort of feeling creeps inside of him as the rain falls; he reveals his eye.

“The rain isn’t natural,” Iruka says at the same moment the Sharingan confirms his suspicions. Kakashi turns to look at him.

Kakashi knows the rain is not natural, his eye showed him as much. But this chuunin had determined it with a speed that would outpace his own. Kakashi could sense the chakra within the rain, but even he could not determine it at such a speed, not without his eye.

Such precise determination also speaks to fine chakra control, something beyond skill level for a typical chuunin. Again, he reminds himself that Iruka had been in the third’s confidence, so perhaps it was not too surprising.

“It is a powerful technique.” Kakashi says.

“Nothing less than the Mizukage could summon a rain of this caliber that we know of.” Iruka answers as he starts to roll up his equipment.

This also is outside of what Kakashi would consider to be normal knowledge, but they really don’t have the time to discuss sealing skill sets and water techniques; he’s willing to let the matter drop. For now.

“It seems strange for a Kage to come as part of a friendly convoy.” Kakashi muses, wondering if it was better to stay in Konoha after all. “Perhaps one or two of the highest ANBU.” That is also dangerous, but there are still enough skilled ANBU in the city that he doesn’t really worry. Tsunande knows what she’s doing.

“Or it could be someone from Amekagure.” Iruka says darkly as he wipes rain from his forehead, looking left. “They’re traveling, coming this way.”

That is what the technique is for, to sense the disturbances in the rain and knowing of the technique
means you can understand what it is for and it is likely that they are coming to see what two ninja are doing this deep in the woods.

And yet, Kakashi gets the feeling that Iruka is *reading* the rain to locate the other ninja the same way they’re doing it to find the two of them.

Again he keeps these thoughts to himself.

“We had no word of Hanzo.” Kakashi says instead. He wants to glean as much as he can.

“He has enough enemies, enough bloody policies of his own if not as bad as Kiri’s. The ongoing civil dispute—such a thing could mean that Hanzo is defeated,” they finish packing up camp.

“And what should our reasoning be that we are so far out if they are coming this way? There is no safe house nearby to call this a restocking mission.”

Kakashi is not a particular master of creating such fabrications. He is more familiar with the act of killing to silence the need for such things as reasoning.

Iruka shoulders his pack, looks left again.

“We should start moving as if we are going to another place, a drier one. They’ll catch up to us soon enough. You should henge into someone else. Another teacher. I’ve been out this far for teaching excursions before. We’re scouting the land for one such excursion. I don’t have the time to give you all the details, so let me talk to them, all right?”

Kakashi henges into Shikamaru and they start moving through the trees; their pace is standard as they move towards a rock outcropping.

Iruka keeps him posted on the others’ movements. The unknown ninja are moving faster then the two of them, but then again, they are supposedly teachers that are out on some sort of teaching assignment that are unaware of foreign shinobi in the woods. Outpacing them would not do. It only takes several minutes for them to catch up; a male and female pair approach from the left.

Kakashi looks them over, wants to let his eye bleed through the henge. He doesn’t dare, however, since they are not aware of their abilities. He defers this to Iruka, who seems to have a plan. More of a plan than killing these supposed friendly shinobi, anyway.

“What do we have here? Some Konoha shinobi? Shouldn’t you be at home catching leaves?” she laughs at her own joke like it’s original or something. The man is less inclined to make a joke, impatient for an answer to his partner’s question.

They both wear Kiri headbands, although they seem on edge, primed and ready for something. They keep glancing back and forth, as if trying to figure out what to do in such a situation, which tells him that they didn’t bother to discuss any sort of plan. He gets the feeling that the woman, despite her jokes, is a bit of a loose cannon. Her chakra is oppressive and she’s doing her best to restrain herself. She didn’t want to stop. He doesn’t really see the standard supplies needed for mapmaking either.

“Just a couple of teachers. We’re setting up a lesson plan to teach the pre-genin survival skills.” Iruka says, smooth, reaching his hand behind his head.

“Keep your hands where I can see them,” the man snaps and Iruka holds them up, giving a half bow as he apologizes.
It is a terrific play, looking for all the world a soft-skilled new teacher chuunin, making a simple mistake like that.

“Isn’t this a bit farther away from Konoha than usual for such a trip?” the man says, still somewhat suspicious, although he’s so full of arrogance that Kakashi thinks it might bleed from him.

“Ah, for most classes you would be right.” Iruka laughs a little, “but we do have some classes that are more ambitious than others. They’ll have to get home on their own. Some have already explored these woods far more than others. The Inuzukas for example.”

“Ah, the dog nin,” the man nods, finally placated by Iruka’s reasoning. “You would want to be farther away from the smells of the city for that. Good thing you have this rain then.” He grins as his eyes look towards the artificial rain. “Best of luck to you.” he glares at the woman, “Let’s go.”

“Fine, fine.” she agrees and they move on.

“That was an interesting cover story.” Kakashi says as he watches them fade from sight and then as their presences fade from his eye, which he has let bleed through the henge.

“It’s true,” Iruka says as he also watches the direction the two ninja left before looking back at him, eyes bright. “We have come out this far for the older Inuzuka clan pre-genin. Granted, it’s a special class only for the Inuzuka pre-genin, but they didn’t ask.”

“Do you want to keep moving then?”

“Just until we hit the closest cave or rock outcropping. The summoner might still be tracking us with the disturbances in rain. We are such disturbances.”

“Do you think they would still be watching us? Such a technique would take a great deal of chakra. Especially since they just checked us out.”

“I’d rather not take any chances.” Iruka says as the rain continues; heavy, fat droplets of rain that soak them through.

They continue traveling, finally arriving at the outcropping. It possesses a shallow cave, which doesn’t give protection, but it will keep them out of the rain well enough. The cave is fairly dry, although shallow, which is fine by him. Kakashi prefers caves that he can see the end of. He drops the rest of the henge.

“How does a teacher-nin know of such advanced water techniques?”

“It’s a secret, Kakashi-san.” Iruka says, smiling as he strips off the wet mask. “Do you want to bother with a fire?”

“I suppose we can attempt to find some dry kindling.” Kakashi finds himself agreeing. Iruka makes a point; their general location has already been made by the convoy anyway.

“There should be some stashed out here somewhere, sealed and dried. I’m not sure how close, however. We don’t usually use this cave, it’s not big enough for larger classes.”

“I’ll check.” Kakashi says, heading back out. Iruka isn’t far behind.

“There should be one a few minutes south of here.” Iruka says, thinking. “That’s where we had the lesson last year. I’ll get it if you clear out the cave?”
One whirlwind later and the cave is clear. Iruka returns and dumps the wood in the center. Kakashi gets the fire going as Iruka starts to peel off his wet things, draping them on a piece of wood near the fire. "No need to be uncomfortable inside our own borders."

He drops his pack and flak jacket before undoing his hair. Kakashi might be drawn briefly to watching those shoulder blades move as water dripped downwards from the long hair, but those thoughts changed as he saw just what Iruka had on his back.

It was a large swirling mass of blue and black ink. As Kakashi looked further, it seemed to be a dragon that started up near his shoulders and gracefully trailed its way down the length of his back. There was a long, raised pink scar across the middle of the dragon, probably from Mizuki-sensei’s attack (of which Naruto and Iruka were the most awesome duo that saved the day in the most heroic way possible).

It wasn’t that odd he supposed, most ninja had ink; but not something this distinguishable, and certainly not so large. It spoke of a sense of contentment within his rank. He wonders if Iruka has even attempted the jounin trials before.

"Here." Iruka says, smiling as he held out a dark blue length of cloth. "It’ll be easier on you than the wet cloth." Kakashi reached forward, taking it as he looked over the chuunin. "I can work the fire for a bit."

"You don’t want to see my face?"

He blinks, eyes wide. "I’m not going to say I’m not curious. But I’m not going to pressure you into something you don’t care to do."

"What about my mission reports, sensei?"

"That is entirely different. Everyone should have legible handwriting and pass in clean reports. That I will continue to impose upon you.” those eyes sparkle with laughter, a tendril of heat curling pleasantly in his stomach.

Kakashi stands, Iruka sits by the fire. Kakashi changes out of his own wet things. He holds on the strip of cloth for a moment, before tying the other cloth in its stead. It does grate less than the cold, wet metal. He looks outside the cave, although it seems the school does use this area. It’s clearly organized, marks of training on the surrounding trees. He turns back, coming to sit near the fire.

"So what is this plan that was so important that you had to be out of the village for it? From what I can see, you are more or less retired from active duty.”

"I know it looks bad, but my injury isn’t all that bad, I’ll have you-.” Iruka pauses as Kakashi turns his eye at him in question. "You mean the ink."

"That is a part of it.” he agreed. “Nothing as distinguishable as that would be allowed for an active mission rotation.” Unless it was possible to hold a sustainable continuous henge anyway.

"It didn’t start out that way, but getting ink done was my way of unwinding after a stressful mission. Soon enough, Mizuchi was there.”

"Mizuchi? Is that meaningful in some way?” Was naming a tattoo common?

For him, ink was what tied him to the hokage; a special mix of ink and chakra that only the hokage could invoke. It prevented imposters trying to slip into ANBU ranks. It was also a secret known only to the Hokage, despite Danzo’s attempts at otherwise, although Kakashi did not doubt that
Danzo kept some of his own from having the tattoos redone with Tsunade’s signature.

Iruka scratches at his scar, “Well it’s a water dragon of sorts. Or a river god, depending on the story. A creature that is just as temperamental as the sea. It featured in a number of stories I had growing up. Do you know of any stories like that?”

“I think I’ve read a book where a maiden was sacrificed to such a god.” he says, trying to think of some of the stories he’s read. He doesn’t think it’s an Icha Icha, he’d remember more of the story that way.

“Yes, the more violent aspects are highlighted, as usual. But water is life as well as death, many tales...” there was a faraway look in those eyes for a moment, as Iruka drifted in memories.

He is familiar with the feeling.

A moment later, Iruka’s eyes were clear and focused once more and his smile was wry as he works on the fire.

“I was not aware that you had been on such an active mission rotation.”

“ANBU keep track of lowly chuunin rotation schedules?” he asks, interested. “And no, I really don’t take many missions or leave Konoha’s borders.”

Kakashi had in fact, it was a part of ANBU duty to take on lower missions on a regular basis to see their skills firsthand and recommend them for other tracks as needed. He’d been watched hundreds of times between the ages of six and nine. He’d never been assigned to this teacher, however. He’d have remembered.

“Then what of this hiding you away? Surely they don’t know of you.”

“The village couldn’t create a past for me that didn’t exist. My parents were not originally from Konoha, anyone in their age group can confirm that. And in a period like this, when parts of the village are still being rebuilt-

Kakashi’s mind is whirring, pieces of information swirling and falling into place with lightning speed, nauseous in their intensity. The only one that didn’t still quite fit was the sensei sitting across from him.

“They want their refugees back.”

“Ah, nothing as violent as that.” Iruka agrees, “but they do want to give their refugees an option, yes. With their purges and high death tolls amongst the ninja ranks- the nation of Water has lost significant standing in the shinobi world. Factor in the high propensity of missing-nin and you have.”

“An unstable conglomerate just waiting to fall to other nations.” Kakashi said, as something like nausea settles in his gut. He knows well of the instability that Water presented to the delicate balance between the nations.

Iruka nodded. “And Fire does not wish that to happen. There is also the possibility that meetings will happen and perhaps some of our own will decide to move. Both civilian and ninja.”

Meetings, moving.

Marriage.
“Does water really expect to get many people deciding to leave konoha, even if they place marriage deals on the table?”

The look in those golden brown eyes is impressed, and Kakashi feels a trill of satisfaction curling inside his gut.

He doesn’t get the chance to impress often. Terrify, overpower, imitate, he does that on the regular. Impressing? Not so much.

“Well, I think some will, yes. Konoha has always had a high percentage of those with chakra ability, even if not all of them decide to take the ninja path. Seeing the village unity would do them good as well, being a clustered group of autonomous islands is not conducive to a proper structure. The methods of communication need to be fostered.”

“That still does not quite explain why our Hokage is sequestering an incredibly talented chuunin sensei away from the public eye.”

“More noticeable than talented,” Iruka deflects. “Water signatures as primary orientation are rare. My name still holds water origins as well, although I would not be surprised if my parents changed their name somewhat upon arriving in Konoha.”

It still doesn’t add up, not really. Because while Konoha has only a few water signatures currently they are not unheard of, both the first and second hokages were famous for water techniques. But he lets it go for the moment as he undoes his own bedding, because the rain is still going, although much weaker now. He’d been hoping that since they were awake they could travel and cut out some time. This will be pushing their trip back until morning at least.

“Perhaps Tsunade-sama has some reasons we are unaware of,” Kakashi concedes for the moment. Because he still doesn’t know why she has sent him off. He usually has to make himself scarce when delegations are about, even hiding himself behind the ANBU mask, but to send him out entirely is another matter. The scroll has some explaining to do when they reach the safe house.

It takes him a long time to settle enough to close his eyes in sleep. Normally he would not bother, but this mission was on the heels of another and he was tired.
Waking up as the sun rose was not something that was surprising to the Kakashi, despite his personal dislike of such things.

He’d woken even earlier than perhaps the sun would have woken him because he heard Iruka curse outside the cave.

It said something for skill that Iruka had managed to even leave the cave without waking him.

Iruka ducks in, smiling.

“I guess you heard that?” he smiles and heads to the fire. “Mind getting this back up for me?”

Kakashi does, packing up his things as Iruka starts in on breakfast. He’d even gotten his hands on some eggs, by the looks of it. He was still dressed in regulation; it didn’t hurt to be cautious after their encounter the night before. However, the chuunin abandoned the high and tight ponytail for something looser and lower, the brown hair swaying at shoulder length.

It was an extravagant thing to possess, long hair. When one was desperate or if they simply had no scruples, hair was a great way to bring an enemy down.

Iruka finishes up with the eggs and something that came out of a can. “We don’t have much in the way of food here, but I still think I did a better job than ration bars.” He laughs to himself as he turned around with two mess kits of breakfast hash onto the cave floor. Kakashi stares at his bowl, wondering just how Iruka managed to set this up. He doesn’t think he’s ever seen the canned stuff come out good looking before.

When he glances up Iruka has picked up an empty scroll and is balancing it between two rocks.

A screen.

“Maa, sensei, you don’t have to go through the trouble-”

“It’s no trouble for me to talk through a screen rather than force one of us outside. You should eat at a table, Kakashi-san. You probably don’t get to do it very often.”

“It’s not a table.” he finds himself saying, but there is a look in those eyes, and he can see irritation because the teacher certainly didn’t expect him to argue the point of a table. But there was something else there, something more like concern, a sort of sadness, although he wouldn’t call it pity.
Kakashi isn’t new to such looks, but never one quite like this; and certainly never over something as trivial as whether he ate at a table or not. That, more than anything, made him sit behind his part of the partition.

“Also, your bird is back.” Iruka says as he sits down, as a bird comes swooping in the cave, perching on the rock next to Kakashi. “Looks like he finished his breakfast.”

“Hello, Shoji.” Kakashi greets the bird as he extends his fingers. Shoji holds out his leg, somehow still managing to look put out, leaning towards the plate of hash.

“Such a glutton,” Kakashi says as he undoes the scroll and scans it over.

“Is Shoji yours, then?”

He looks up. The village has chakra birds that anyone can use, this much is true. But birds that are chakra-locked to a specific person are still somewhat of a secret, if not a primary one. Wonders what prompted such a question and wanting to see the intelligence in those eyes.

The thing about partitions is that they work both ways.

“What makes you ask that?” he pulls up his mask, rolling the scroll closed. They could finish the trip today he thinks, already starting to plan which town would be closest when they get to House Warren.

They would have to go into the local town if they were going to be at the safe house for any extended amount of time. Rations were not a necessary evil on something like this.

Iruka holds out his hands. Kakashi can see a few lines of new skin, claw marks from Shoji, most likely. The cursing makes more sense now. “Only a chakra-locked bird would retaliate against a fellow Konoha shinobi.”

“You can heal yourself?” More surprises. So many surprises that he think he shouldn’t be surprised any more at this point.

“Just enough to stop the bleeding,” Iruka admits, “After a few more serious incidents at the school they taught us permanent members basic chakra healing. The fact that bodies are mostly water helps.” he shrugs, like this is a basic skill set.

It is not a basic skill set, water nature or not. Bodies are made of electric impulses as well, and you won’t find him trying to reroute a body’s signals like Tsunade can. But they really don’t have time to argue such points at this time, they need to get going. He undoes the scroll.

“There’s a second scroll.”

“That’s something else that he always carries.” A special slug summon for when Kakashi can’t manage to drag his ‘half-dead chakra-depleted carcass’ back to Tsunade. Kakashi reads over the scroll, written in Shiunze’s handwriting.

Iruka doesn’t press the issue, looking over the bird. “Shoji seems rather young.”

“Just about two years, now. Shoichi was getting on in age, long range missions were no good.” he stops reading, glancing up at the chunnin.

Why had he gone on to explain about his first chakra bird? Such details were unnecessary.
“What does it say?”

“Nothing much, sensei.” he says, passing it on as he reaches into his jacket for something to write with. “Tsunade is asking if we had any encounters in the woods last night. They arrived in Konoha not long after. Any intel is appreciated.”

He writes, faster than his usual and hopes that it isn’t too messy as he tries to shove as many questions as he can fit about the reasoning for such a mission and the necessary reasoning behind it.

“If you could mention that you henged Shikamaru? I don’t want them giving him trouble if they happen to see him.”

“Will do, sensei.”

“You don’t have to bother with calling me sensei all of the time.”

Kakashi keeps writing, hoping that Tsunade decides to give them some real answers. He rolls the scroll up again and motions to Shoji.

Shoji, digging in Kakashi’s leftovers, seems even more offended now that his master has a job for him.

Kakashi ties the scroll and nudges the bird gently. Shoji snaps, taking off in indignation.

“A very personable bird, isn’t he?”

“He’s quite reliable when the situation is serious, but in low-risk situations he happens to be a bit…” Kakashi stops. He’d done it again.

Maybe that was the Iruka’s power. He made you want to talk.

“We should head out, we can discuss the plan to go into the nearby town for some real supplies since she intends for us to be out here for a while. There is only so much hash one can handle after all. We should get there sometime during the night if we pace ourselves accordingly.”

---

They get to the house just after sunrise, when the sky is still orange and hazy as the sun starts bleeding into the horizon. They eat a few ration bars as they open up the house. There’s a stiff air throughout the house, which means it hasn’t been used in a while. Neutral territory doesn’t call for safe houses the same way.

It is a good size, with a several rooms and a decently sized kitchen. Standard seals to keep out wanderers, nothing too complicated.

He comes to Iruka’s doorway, the man staring out the window before turning to him. “I think there is an open air bath nearby.”

He looks towards the mountains, sees what Iruka is talking about.

“That sounds good.” he admits, because the bathroom here seemed more like an afterthought, even more cramped than his own apartment. “We can set up some wards and plan a trip to the closest town for some supplies. I think it would be several hours’ walk if we are to be civilians. Now that we’ve checked the house over, we should see what our leader has in store for us.”
Iruka looks the kitchen over as Kakashi approaches the table, undoing the scroll. He remembers Naruto talking about Iruka’s cooking being good. Then he remembers Naruto being surprised at unburnt toast, so he wonders if that is a decent benchmark from which to judge one’s cooking skills.

He threads the briefest amount of his chakra into his fingertips, placing them on the scroll, keying in the remainder of the seal. A slug appears, and not for the last time Kakashi wonders how a slug with no facial features manages to convey annoyance.

“ Took your sweet time getting there didn’t you brat?”

“They had a rain sensor. We had to adjust our pace accordingly.” Kakashi answers, not bothering with excuses.

“You bird told me as much. Sakura says he’s a devil.” the slug wriggles. “The reason for the mission is the same, but avoiding the convoy is only part of this. My advisors have revived the full council, outvoting me on the revival of a law regarding certain Konoha bloodlines. I’m stalling them at the time being, given that there are many details to argue over, but you are not to be a test case if they decide they want a test case. You’re in neutral territory so I don’t expect you to overdo it, but I cannot send any medi-nin out if you do. Call for the bird or relay a message with your dogs to the Inuzuka patrols. Same goes for you, Iruka.”

“Understood.”

The summon disappears, leaving a blank scroll.

“Well then. Civilians it is.” Kakashi muses as he turns to the backyard. “How well does water chakra help with gardening?”

“Not as well as earth chakra.”

“Ah, well. Between the two of us, we’ll have something soon enough I suppose.” He bites his thumb and summons a group of dogs, Iruka looks a bit startled at the number, but not so much so. Naruto probably told him about them.

“Yo boss. What’s the deal?” Pakkun says from Bull’s head, the other dogs behind him.

“We’re going to be staying here for a while so I figured I might as well introduce you guys to him.”

“How kind of you boss.” he says as he looks over at Iruka. “You’re the teacher, right?”

“Yup,” Uhei says from the side as she stretches out.

Iruka nodded. “Hello, Uhei. And you must be Pakkun.” he says as he looks at the smaller dog.

Kakashi supposes the information well that is Naruto goes both ways. It hadn't been the first time that he’d sent one of his dogs to take the kids home before. Naruto had probably gone to Iruka’s at least once.

Pakkun smiles, looking back at him, far too many teeth showing. Insufferable creatures, his dogs.

“You should keep him boss. I like this one.”

“This is a mission, Pakkun.” Kakashi insists as he introduces the rest to the man. “You guys can enjoy yourselves around here for the most part but we need to set up the chakra borders and I want you to report any water-nin you smell. They shouldn’t be coming this far out here, but they could
Bull lumbers up next to Iruka, “W’t’r ch’kra, Boss.”

“Aside from him, then.” Kakashi amends; Bull is straightforward like that. “We’ll be going into
town within the next few days so—”

“Steak?!” Guruko pipes up and all the others take up the chorus as if Kakashi hadn’t fed them in
weeks. Beggars, the lot of them.

Iruka laughs, reaching his arm down as if to pet them, but pauses, hesitant. He looks back up at
Kakashi.

But the look in those eyes isn’t fear. It’s respect. He knows about dog-nin well enough to
understand that they aren’t ‘pets’ in the way that some people keep dogs. Kakashi doesn’t bother
with permission. Guruko, as usual, takes it into his own hands and jumps at the chuunin who falls
backwards laughing as the rest of his dogs made a move to pile on the teacher.

Pakkun jumps up on his shoulder, looking over the rest of them.

“I like him boss.” he repeats and Kakashi sighs. They’ll be everywhere in the house now.

He doesn’t mind as much as he should.

---

After dinner, which was not much better than breakfast or lunch, Kakashi played with his food
from behind the partition. The dogs were giving (supposedly) short reports regarding some of the
weaker areas of the field.

“You need to get some real food, boss.” Guruko says from Iruka’s lap, the sensei had taken quite a
liking to the little dog. Not that Kakashi really expected any different. The dog resembled Naruto in
a lot of ways.

He’d chosen the dog for his likeness to Minato, after all.

“How did you get so many dogs, Kakashi-san?”

“Well, ninken and the Hatake-clan are not unusual pairings.” Pakkun answers for Kakashi,
stretching out as he takes down the partition. “Any one master usually has three or four. Few have
the capability to possess eight of us though. Especially considering that Urushi and Shiba are
technically from the Inuzuka clan.” Pakkun knows exactly what he’s saying as he looks back to
Kakashi, smiling that toothy smile.

Absolutely insufferable.

“What?” Iruka says, eyes locating each of his dogs and comparing them to what he probably knows
about Inuzuka dogs.

“They lost their masters during the attack of the Nine Tails.” Kakashi says, careful. “They were
young enough to not be irrevocably bound to their chakra.”

“No one else wanted us.” Urushi moans melodramatically from his place under the table.

“Hatake usually don’t have too many large dogs, Bull being the exception.” Pakkun continues,
Bull grunting in agreement. “We were originally intended for reconnaissance, not as fighting
partners. Boss likes to make us work.”

Iruka smiles as Guruko groans, scratching at his ears.

“And how did you end up with Bull, then?” Kakashi smirks. He would not give this one up. Not really. He gives Pakkun a look, and the dog doesn’t move to answer the question.

“Mostly to spite the rule that we had to have small dogs.” That wasn’t the full reason, not in the least. But neither was it a lie.

Pakkun looks at him, eyes serious. Bull also seems surprised, but it was hidden from the teacher as he was partially under the man’s chair.

“You adopted him too, then?”

Bull grunted a ‘yes’ from under Iruka’s chair, which surprises Kakashi. Even Bull seems to like the chuunin teacher more than the standard.

“So the other five of you are from-”

Guruko starts in on the answer this time.

“Hatake stock. They raise their own ninken. Uhei was boss’s second, while Bisuke, Akino and I are pack-siblings.” Guruko spoke, rolling over in Iruka’s lap, soaking up the attention like a sponge and groaning in satisfaction as Iruka rubbed his stomach.

“I see.” he smiles at Kakashi, who found himself smiling back before realizing what he was doing. It was good that the mask hid it to some degree, but he couldn’t become dependent on the mask hiding his expressions either. Not for those who looked for them. He’d been told by Gai, on more than one occasion, that his eye held a ‘touching emotional breadth of expression’.

“And you Pakkun?”

“I’m the alpha.” he looked over to kakashi. “And the oldest. Boss’s first ninken.”

“We’ll get food the day after tomorrow in the nearby town. It’s several miles away from here and we’ll have to bring some sort of carrier with us in order to keep up local appearances. It’s not a trip I’d like to walk too often.”

“C’n c’rry it Boss.” Bull grunted and Kakashi nods, thinking aloud. “Perhaps I can henge you as well…”

“Why not tomorrow?” Guruko whines, asking about steak.

“Because tomorrow Iruka-sensei and I are going to train. And if he can land a hit on me within…” he tilted his head, “three hours sounds good...then I’ll henge as the woman when we go into town.”

Iruka blinks.

Shiba whistles.

---

“You know that you don’t have to bother with this.” Iruka says the next morning as they stretch in the yard, the sun shining down. They’re north enough now though that the weather won’t be getting extreme- not like the brutal heat waves that can hit Konoha.
“Do you want to henge as the woman then? You can forfeit now.”

Iruka’s entire face is annoyed and caught. He doesn’t want to of course. But there really aren’t any other options, because if they were setting up a farm or some other business venture they would expect visitors. Newlyweds who left their hometown ‘to be alone on the house on the hill and a miles away from the nearest town’ is about as close to a ‘don’t bother us’ as either of them could come up with.

Besides, Kakashi likes this bet. This isn’t the first time he’s made a similar bet, but he doesn’t think he’s ever been quite as invested in seeing what the other could do.

“Even if I go up against you-” Iruka starts, but he’s just stalling at this point.

“Ah-ah.” Kakashi wags his finger, “I think you underestimate yourself, sensei. If we go on brute strength alone, I’m betting you’ve got a leg up on me. And I’m positive that your chakra control is quite refined. But three hours is a long time, too long for me to bring out the Sharingan for sport. I won’t bother with genjutsu for the same reason. You, however, are welcome to surprise me in any way you can.”

Iruka drops his hand mid-sentence, spinning out to kick at him. It’s more muscle memory than anything else that makes him lean back to avoid the unexpected kick. He twists, keeping one foot firmly anchored with chakra as the other comes up, kicking Iruka in the chin.

It’s only at the last second that he manages to divert some of the power he’d fueled into the counterstrike, changing trajectory just enough so as not to break Iruka’s jaw.

Iruka takes the kick, using it to propel himself backwards, flipping in the air. He lands on his feet, rubbing his chin. “Pretty serious kick, that.”

Kakashi thinks that Iruka understands just how much power there was behind it, whether or not he’d gotten the full force. He wasn’t one to go ‘easy’ on others, even if he limited his repertoire of techniques and jutsu.

He doesn’t really get a chance to lob a witty retort back, crouching down low to dodge the array of senbon Iruka sent his way.

It continues like this for a bit, as Iruka tries to get a handle on what he can do as Kakashi dodges and spins out of reach over and over again.

It’s fascinating to watch as Iruka proves himself talented (very talented) with both summon scrolls and barrier ninjutsu, which further helped him pinpoint the precise amount of chakra control the man had. Scrolls were time consuming to create and set, nearly impossible to make correctly when one was out in the field, but they took usually very little chakra to activate and lowered the weight one carried on their person. At one point he’d even summoned a sword, proving some skill in kenjutsu, although Kakashi had made sure to get that weapon off the ‘battlefield’ and quickly.

He’d always wondered where Tenten had learned it; Gai simply didn’t think that way (it is better to be a weapon than have a weapon was just one of many many Gai-phrases) and Tenten’s chakra reserves were weak. He wondered just how much this sensei saw in his students if he was able to teach them how to compensate for what would be a significant fault otherwise. Even getting Lee to pass, it must have taken significant effort to arrange for the boy to be allowed to graduate.

There was no way that he was going to get to read Icha Icha, that was certain.

He smiles as Iruka’s flinging chakra wires purposely trip another exploding tag, Kakashi deflects it
with a kunai, causing it to veer left towards the house. Iruka tugs a chakra thread back, trapping it inside a barrier, containing the explosion, saving the ground from a boulder sized crater.

It’s an impressive trick, changing it to containment on the spot like that.

Iruka knows that he isn’t going all out, but he’d said as much and that wasn’t the point of the sparring anyway. But he isn’t going easy, not at all. He’s made eight ‘kills’ on the chuunin, and at least three injuries that could be life-threatening on top of that, but Iruka kept him on his toes, which was enough for a first match.

More than enough, really.

He’s already thinking of what to do for the next one.

Despite Iruka’s earlier protests, he’s not giving in either, rushing in and not giving him much time to plan. It’s impressive. Iruka rushed him again, throwing some senbon attached with chakra strings.

Iruka keeps pulling certain weapons back to him, using them repeatedly while simultaneously abandoning others. The ground is littered with them, and he was clearly hoping to take advantage on the ‘surprise’ element of Kakashi’s challenge.

The repeated use of senbon and chakra threads- he’s laying some sort of trap here, although he’s sure the end goal is Iruka planning to catch him in close combat. The closer the fighting range, the more chance to hit him, after all. There was also the simple fact that Kakashi didn’t particularly care for prolonged hand to hand combat, which Iruka realized faster than most.

He deflects a kunai as Iruka rushes him again, blades clanging together with enough force to send aftershocks up his arm. He he spins away, trying not to let his shortness of breath show.

There was no way in the five nations that the teacher was this good without some sort of constant training. Preferably with skilled jounin. There were several jounin and tokubetsu teachers on rotation, maybe they had weekly sparring sessions or something.

Even with his handicaps, Iruka was well on enough to be a jounin, or at the very least tokubetsu. Which pressed the question why the man was not, even if it Iruka only possessed one chakra nature. This was especially true now, due to their current lack of able-bodied fighters.

“Hah!” Iruka cries as he pulled on his chakra, hard. Chakra flares around them both, trapping them in a net of chakra thread, forcing them inside a space that was now less than thirty feet of distance. A barrier for two, created without actual paper seals.

He grins. Iruka had set a plan and trapped him. The follow through was both interesting and surprising. He could have broken out, but such a technique was draining; overkill for a practice session. Lighting and water didn’t mix well, after all.

Besides, the sun showed him that the three hour was nearly over. They just had to wrap it up.

Iruka rushes him again, kicking out at him this time. Kakashi is forced to spring forward instead of jumping back; the chakra net behind him is a wall at his back in such a situation, preventing a regular dodge. He barely manages to avoid Iruka’s fist as he twists sideways, so close he feels the hand sweep his hair.

He reaches out, catching the fist; twists the arm behind Iruka’s back. He yanks the other behind his back as well, pulling the body flush against his chest as he wraps his free arm around the tanned
“Finished?” he says, trying not to pant as he tightens his grip, coaxing the teacher to concede defeat.

“Not quite...” Iruka replies, flinging chakra through his captive hand _into_ Kakashi and making his body go lax at the same time.

It’s startling, this sort of technique. The distraction is momentary, the shock barely traveling through his clothing, but the advanced technique had given the teacher what he needed, a less than perfect hold.

Iruka took full advantage of it, wrestling out his grasp. He leaps away, trying to put some distance between them again, although he doesn’t move to dismantle his net.

Kakashi won’t give him the chance, dropping down and sweeping Iruka’s feet from underneath him, trying to pin him. Iruka fights it, grabbing onto his wrists as they tumble and flip one another over on the hill. Something pricks him as they roll over, possibly a senbon that digs into his thigh.

Kakashi stares down at Iruka, the eyes flashing in fight before he admits to himself that he’s not getting out of this one. Kakashi had him this time, one of his hands trapping his wrists above his head, the other arm pressed against his throat, his weight distributed evenly on Iruka’s legs, leaving no chance at escape.

Kakashi watches the chakra swirl around Iruka and realizes that his headband must have shifted a bit due to the rolling about.

“Give?” he growls, pressing Iruka’s arm a bit more firmly against his throat.

The eyes flash and Kakashi pulls back, ripping himself out of the haze that close combat and the scent of blood had put him in. He made sure the Iruka has enough breathing room, but doesn’t let up the position.

Iruka had blood trailing out of the corner of his mouth, he’d probably bitten his cheek from his first kick and there was a few lines of red on the man’s left cheek, probably from one weapon or another, although they aren’t deep, possibly senbon. Now that he thinks on it, Kakashi can feel two in his left thigh.

He looks back up the hill before looking back to Iruka. Somewhere along the way the hair tie had fallen out and the brown hair surrounded his face as their chests heave for breath. The face before him is flush with exertion and his eyes are laughing.

Kakashi breathes out a laugh as well, thinking about how foolish they must look, rolling about the grass like children who’d abandoned an attempt at sparring for a fistfight.

“You lose.” he says, but doesn’t move, doesn’t let up.

“I give.”

Kakashi lets him go, rolling off him. Iruka stands, disbanding his chakra net, reaching for his water canteen and drinking.

Kakashi lifts his headband, watching as Iruka dismantles the setup. Intricate and time consuming, but again only a minor amount of chakra to activate, which is also impressive considering he developed it in the middle of their sparring.
He shifts his weight and his leg throbs in response, far worse than a couple senbon pricks call for. He pulls one out, the pain radiating outward. He grits his teeth as he yanks out the second.

Although Tsunade tried to vet him personally more often than not, she was still a busy woman; he still managed to slip an injury by every now and again without being checked. The pain in his thigh makes him think that may have been a bad decision on his part.

“You got stuck with senbon, right?” Iruka turns back to him after the net is disabled. “Let me take care of it.” Kakashi goes to stand, but Iruka is there already, pouring water on his leg. He doesn’t doubt that Iruka can heal a couple of senbon pricks, so he sinks back to the ground as he watches.

He probably couldn’t truly replicate this, not in a true sense, not if Iruka was using water as the base, but it would be interesting to watch anyway.

The hand was warm against his thigh as he makes a few signs with his free hand. Kakashi grimaced as the water pulled itself under the chuunin’s hand, sending sparks across his skin.

Iruka frowned for a moment, thinking. A quick apology when he realizes that the difficulty comes from their natures clashing, before he doubles the effort.

The senbon pricks are healed almost immediately, but Iruka stays there for a moment longer, the water swirling between Iruka’s hand and his thigh before the water burrows into him, deep and painful. It’s blindingly hot for a moment, searing his leg and then it’s over; the radiating pain gone, aching like an overused muscle rather than an agonizing injury.

He jerks his leg away, breaks the connection as he flexes his leg, stretching it out. He can’t believe that Iruka was able to do such a thing.

“Sorry it took so long.” Iruka says, pulling away as he rocks back on his heels. “I had forgotten that our chakras are opposing. Senbon incidents don’t usually take that long.” he turns to his own face, where the lines disappear show a film of new skin within a few seconds.

“You still lost.” Kakashi says, because he needs something to focus on besides his leg.

“I am aware.”

“You still managed to land a hit and surprise me. That was a skillful net you laid. You should stretch out your muscles, I’ll find us something for dinner.”

Pakkun was waiting on the table and gave Kakashi a long hard look as he started to dig through their food stores.

“That was an interesting match, boss.”

“What do you want, Pakkun?”

The dog lay down on the table, “Food, shelter, warmth...” Kakashi doesn’t bother to turn around, still shifting through the cans.

“And a happy boss.”

Kakashi turns, but the dog is gone.
I've some headcanon about Kakashi and the dogs. Little bit. Tic tac. Thinking that he gets them as a way to keep himself busy after really important deaths. I also kind of wanted Bull to be the baby.

Pakkun-his first
Uhei-after dad
Bisuke, Akino, and Guruko-after Obito
Bull- after Rin
Shiba and Urushi -after Minato
AND because I spent way too much time playing with names and colors and translation websites and please don't break my bubble that I've gone and done this the wrong way cause it was so long ago and i want to believe these are colors, dammit :p
Shiba: lawn green
Urushi: lacquer color aka brown

Also I'm thinking Wednesday-ish updates? Maybe Tuesday nights like this chapter was if I'm ahead of my editing. Starting a new job soon so we'll see how that all pans out. I've got the first arc of this finished anyways.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

He slips his hand into the loose folds of the shirt, his other hand reaching up to the pulse point in his neck, counting beats.

It’s too slow.

Chapter Notes

I imagine the cloak sweeping to be somewhat like this, just more badass because its from one person to another and because well cloak sweeping is pretty badass, let’s be honest. And before midnight counts still counts as Wednesday, yes?

https://m.popkey.co/52216f/XmYGo.gif

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Is this really all we have?” Iruka says as he looks at the clothing. The whole idea of their cover makes sense, he gets that. It doesn’t change the fact that he really doesn’t want to.

“For something that can be considered women’s clothing? Yes. I don’t really see the need to go into the village more than once, but we can pick up another outfit if you want.”

“That is not what I was saying at all.” Iruka huffs, still staring at the clothes. “We aren’t even sure how long this is going to last, after all.”

“The convoy will be a few weeks at least. Rations won’t last us that long.”

“Fine.” Iruka snaps, resigned to the logic. Also possibly because ration bars suck. “But I want to see your female form. And don’t you dare try to tell me you haven’t tried it.” The argument sounds petty, even to Iruka’s own ears, but he can’t really think of anything else. If he has to be female, he wants to see Kakashi as one as well.

The flush of embarrassment covers more of Iruka’s face than one would expect, at least more than Kakashi expected. He has henged himself into the other sex, he thinks that most ninja attempt to henge into the opposite sex at one point or another, although Naruto always had to take things a step further, what with the nakedness and the clouds. He knows that Jiraiya considered it brilliant.

Naruto did have his moments, after all.

“All right.” Kakashi agrees, pulling down the zipper on his flak jacket. He isn’t sure why he
agreed, he had no real reason to, doesn’t particularly want to transform either.

“What are you doing?” Iruka says, nearly choking on his words. The confusion in the face is almost worth the fact that he actually agreed to do this.

“Making room, sensei.”

Iruka stares for another half-second, flush creeping along the edges of his scar and down his neck, before he forces his eyes to the floor out of some deranged sense of modesty, Kakashi supposes.

Such a thing only takes an instant after all, but Iruka waits several seconds before his eyes come back up to look him over. He hadn’t bothered to change anything significant the way Iruka would have to do for himself (his scar for one) but the transformation was significant enough.

Iruka stares, taking in the differences. Kakashi hadn’t changed too many details, not that he had to. The height was the same, as was the mask. The biggest change was the hair, which now fell in waves of silver down to the middle of his back, the weight preventing it from defying gravity somewhat, although it was making an effort. And while the chest wasn’t huge, ‘room’ had certainly needed to be made considering how tight flak jackets were. The shirt had lifted some, revealing a small strip of stomach. He drags his eyes back up to the single grey one. Kakashi is smirking, but something seems off as well.

“So do you like it?” Kakashi asks, and his voice is a bit rusty from changing pitch like this, but he thinks he still nailed the ‘inviting’ tone.

And that was too much, because now Iruka frowns. Something more than flustered, figuring out something or other. Kakashi barely holds back a flinch as the look changes, something similar to the look in the cave. The man isn’t stupid, he knows their ages and can calculate what age Kakashi was during the war.

Iruka knows that constant henge is popular for concealment, especially for missions. However, fully transforming into someone else or into the opposite sex was frowned upon. If one forgot who they really were, such things posed problems.

It was also common to perform dispelling jutsu in warded places and war was no different. Kakashi was young, would have been young enough at the time to pass as a female without henge alteration.

“So your turn, sensei.” he pushes, trying to distract Iruka as he ran his fingers through his hair. He’d always liked long hair, but letting his own grow out to such a length would be tantamount to suicide. He wouldn’t release the jutsu until Iruka transformed.

Iruka grumbles, but says nothing else as he performs the jutsu.

Kakashi knew he wasn’t going to see the scar across the face, but aside from that, Iruka didn’t seem too dissimilar. He catalogued the differences, which weren’t many. Perhaps his chin was not as strong, but he really didn’t scream different, which was odd.

Kakashi always felt hyped up when he held a female form, like he’d been on solider pills for too long, a tad too anxious. But aside from looking embarrassed, the man didn’t seem any different. His aura remained the same.

“So do you want help getting dressed?”

“The clothes are basic enough, Kakashi-san. Please drop the henge now.” Iruka starts in on the clothes as Kakashi pulls out his book, dropping the henge.
“What do you want our names to be?” Kakashi asks from behind his book.

“We’re supposed to use parts of our real names, yes? In case we slip up? What do you usually go with?” Iruka knows protocol, but he’s willing to continue the conversation anyway. He shifts his weight, trying to get used to the new distribution of weight. He’s still annoyed and embarrassed, but he thinks that it’s for the best, now. Kakashi’s reactions, trying to fill the silence and holding the book up- it’s a bit more telling than he thinks Kakashi realizes.

“I usually go with Takashi. Or Takeshi.”

“How about Keiko?” he asks, fumbling with the sash around his middle.

“We should probably avoid names that could be brought back to the village. A tree isn’t the best name.”

“Water names are out for the same reason, I suppose” Iruka manages to tuck in the material before sitting down to remove his bindings “…how about Kayo?”

“She was a character in Icha Icha Whirlwind.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Iruka huffs as he slides off the pants. He hopes his sandals aren’t too noticeable with the outfit, because they don’t have any backup shoes.

Kakashi looked over his book as Iruka turned to face him. His hair was a bit of a mess still, but that was easy enough to fix. And the shirt was snug around the chest without being forced. It was clothing that would not cause any raised eyebrows or remembrance. Which is what they were going for, of course.

“Boss?” Bull said from next to him, coming in the open door. He didn’t say anything else and Kakashi rubbed him behind the ears for a moment.

“Let’s go outside and get you ready, Bull.”

When Iruka came out of the house, Kakashi was waiting in front of a wagon, Bull, who was now a donkey, pulling it along.

Kakashi was now a brunet, his hair falling messily across his face, although especially across his left eye. He’d also tugged the collar of his cloak up, enough to hide his lips.

“Come along darling.” he called, “We don’t have all day.”

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“So what’s our story then?” Iruka asks as they walk on the road.

“Newlyweds living in the house over the hill. ANBU usually don’t stay there long term. People generally don’t ask beyond that. Takeshi and his wife Kayo. We’re farmers. Planning on living here for a while.”

“We already decided our cover,” Iruka shakes his head. “Your boss isn’t one for stories is he?” Iruka asks, scratching his temporary donkey ears as he pulled the cart along. “Which I find rather interesting, because you’ve told some serious ones at the mission desk.”

“He g’t you, Boss.”

Kakashi looks up from his book. “Then what do you suggest? I can read something out of this,
something about a princess and an evil witch and a voracious love affair where the prince gets thrown out the window and her tears heal his dying body...and sex.”

“Righttttt.” Iruka says, unimpressed. “Well how about I tell the story and you be surprised at my beautiful retelling of our,” he paused, smirking “how did you put it...‘our voracious love affair’.”

"All right, then."

Later, Kakashi does have to admit that Iruka can spin a story. The teacher was good at what he was doing, laughing and smiling with the villagers as Kakashi was relegated to loading up the cart with items that seemed to just be multiplying every time he turned around. It’s a little more noticeable of a story than he would typically like, but the story will also keep people away from House Warren, so he thinks that works out as well.

“So what do you do, Kayo-san?” the vendor asked as he leaned over into the chuunin’s space. Kakashi watched as Iruka put distance between them with a simple sidestep, placing more attention on the small girl beside him rather than the vendor.

“Oh, well. Nothing much really. I was always a bit on the weak side. I always wanted to be a teacher though. I love children.”

“I’m sure you’d be a great teacher Kayo-chan!” the little girl cried as he smiled down at the girl. “I wish you were my teacher....”

“Now that’s not very nice to your teacher, now is it?” Iruka says, serious tone now as he lowered himself to her level.

This, Iruka thinks to himself, isn’t a lie at all. Everything so far has been just fine. They’ll get through this. He nearly loses his balance as he sinks down, chakra slipping from him as he reorients himself. He calls it back, hoping there isn’t anyone with chakra talent in this town. He knows that Kakashi caught it, anyway.

“Well…Mio-sensei is good too.” she admitted sheepishly before hugging ‘Kayo’ once more and running off with her mother.

“I think we should be getting back. Our donkey is a bit old.” he gestures to Bull and Kakashi nods.

“You simply must come to dinner with us though, we get visitors so rarely after all.” The vendor said as he leaned in close again.

“Maybe another time Hiro-san.” Iruka smiles as he turned back to the cart. “We should really get going before the chill starts to set in...” he gave a slight cough and Kakashi doesn't bother to hide his grin as he swept his cloak off his shoulders and onto Iruka’s in one smooth movement as Hiro stood there half scrambling to find something and half in awe at ‘Takeshi’.

“We’ll visit in a few weeks, perhaps.” Iruka said as he pulled the cloak tighter around himself, shivering again. They’d been out too long, he thinks as he feels his chakra reserves getting low. First the slip, and now the cold. Even a few hours of henge shouldn’t have made him feel like this. He rubs the bridge of his nose, a headache forming.

Kakashi seems to have noticed something, asking him to sit in the cart, for now anyway. He can’t drop it, not yet. There’s still the odd traffic coming in and out of the town. But even the cold and the headache can't prevent his smile as though as they slowly tread out of the town.

Kakashi does notice the chakra slip, sees that Iruka is shivering even if no one is watching. Thinks
the act is off now. He doesn’t want to alter his own henge, not when they aren’t far enough away just yet. The path to House Warren will spilt off soon enough.

There’s still a smile on the face though, despite the shivering.

“That was pretty good wouldn’t you say, Takeshi-kun?” he bats his eyelashes a few times, smile growing wider.

“Yes it was Kayo-chan.” he shoots back, deadpan. “That man though-”

“Oh, you mean the vendor.” Iruka agrees, “I don’t have a good feeling about him. Something felt...off. You should probably check those items over carefully.”

“Those items are too nice for what most of the people would be buying or selling. He deals with stolen goods most likely. But he doesn’t have any chakra abilities of his own, so most likely just a vendor for someone else.”

Iruka is rubbing the bridge of his nose, where his scar would be if he wasn’t ‘Kayo’. He wonders if an all day henge was too much for the teacher after all. Although he has enough experience with chakra exhaustion that he thinks he could treat it well enough.

“Does that henge work for you?” Iruka asks, trying to fill the conversation. Trying to distract himself as he shivers again, pulling the cloak tighter around himself. He must be approaching his limits, but it’s too soon, the symptoms coming on far faster than usual. The feeling is undeniable, however. He’s anxious now, trying to last until they return to the house.

“I usually use an eye patch instead of the headband, in case of bleed through.” Kakashi starts explaining. “I don’t really have trouble walking into villages, henge or not.”

“I don’t usually take missions like this.” Iruka says. They’re moving faster now, Bull is stronger than the donkey he’s pretending to be. “Teachers and other permanent staffers like me take what we call ‘weekenders’, missions that don’t really interrupt the flow of normal life. Sometimes something longer like a restocking mission if there’s a bit of a longer break from school.”

“Keeping the safe houses stocked is always important.” It was a punishment Kakashi was familiar with handing out as an ANBU captain when some recruits tried to complain about stores or medical supplies. Iruka leans too far forward, his position close to tipping over before snapping himself ramrod straight again.

Kakashi lets his eye bleed through the henge,flips up the eye patch. They haven’t seen anyone for several minutes now. He stares, trying to figure out what the chakra is doing. It’s flaring dangerously, too restrained one moment and too bright the next. Unstable.

“Are you all right?”

“I think after yesterday and today I pushed my chakra limits a bit, Kakashi-san.” he admits, vision tilting sideways. He groans, because this is a really bad time for his chakra to be failing him. “Sometimes my chakra does-” he sways again. He should say more, can feel that this is going to be a bad one, but trying to keep straight is taking more effort than usual. He doesn’t even know if he can make it back to the house, now.

“You can drop the henge, we’re far away enough now.” Iruka makes the motion to release, but nothing happens, the chakra flaring again. Iruka pinches the bridge of his nose as he makes the sign for release again.
Nothing happens.

"You still have chakra," Kakashi insists, eye roaming now, trying to take in the erratic chakra, "did someone attack you-" he hadn’t seen the slightest hint of anything, hadn’t felt any intent. But who would have had the time, he’d been there the entire time. Something subtler, poison maybe?

Iruka shakes his head. “Not an attack. And if you can see the chakra, you can see that I can’t access it, not right now. It’s pretty bad this time but-” Kakashi watches Iruka tip sideways, knows that he can’t possibly reorient himself without putting chakra in his feet and moves closer, breaking the fall. Iruka leans against him, breathing deep and measured.

Whether or not Iruka knows what is going on, whatever grip he had on his chakra is fading, fast. If there is anyone in the town with chakra abilities, they’ll be found out if this goes on for much longer.

“I’m taking him back to the house.” Kakashi says to Bull, who nods. Kakashi debates trying to see if Iruka could grip his shoulders and ride on his back so his arms could remain free but that doesn’t seem a viable option. He picks him up, running.

The chakra continues to flare, although it doesn’t seem directed at him. More like Iruka’s chakra is attacking itself.

After several minutes, Iruka shoves himself away. It’s a startling move, more than even the attack from yesterday and it causes Kakashi to falter in his running, if only briefly. This wave of chakra was more than forcing it through the chakra points in one’s hands. He had forced the chakra surrounding him to move, and it came at him in a wave.

He doesn’t really have much time to think on it, because Iruka is doubled over by the side of the road, heaving. It doesn’t seem to do much for him as he shivers and pulls the coat higher around himself.

He’s trying to release the henge, but it doesn’t go. Kakashi hadn’t seen chakra ever disobey quite like this. Pushing limits, draining oneself to the point of almost nothing- that he’s seen. This is different. The chakra moves around Iruka, swirling and wrapping tighter and tighter, taking on a life of its own.

“I could release it.” Kakashi finds himself saying, but Iruka turns away, trying to stand.

Iruka hears Kakashi offer to release the henge, but it isn’t worth the effort, not now. He’s too far gone at this point. He gets up, unsteady, clutches at his stomach. It doesn’t help with the coldness creeping into his bones as he tugs the coat tighter around himself. He wonders briefly what Kakashi can see with that eye of his as the cold wraps him tighter and tighter.

He stumbles off the path, letting the chakra pull him where he needs to be. This isn’t the first time it’s failed him like this, probably won’t be the last. It whirls around him, rushes him like ocean waves, not giving him the chance to breathe, never mind speak.

He lets it happen, lets the chakra rip itself out of him, pour itself into the earth and take his voice with it. The ground opens, water pouring forth. It latches onto a small sapling, which shoots up, growing and growing and growing. He wonders what will happen this time, wonders if the chakra will spend down before his body, although he thinks it’ll be him, the world is already drifting in and out of focus, the edge of his vision sliding away.

Kakashi watches as the chakra continues to swirl, waves of power now, settling around Iruka’s fist,
looking for an outlet. The chakra continues to move, piling wave after wave of chakra, until it was as visible as his Chidori. Iruka stops moving and then shoves the wave into the earth, crying out as if he’d been burned. The ground shakes, the earth opens; a tree shoots out of the ground, growing at a furious rate, perhaps even faster than Yamato could make a tree grow.

This isn’t something he can copy though, because the chakra is ripping itself out of Iruka, forcing it though chakra points that most ninja simply cannot handle. Iruka’s entire being is bleeding chakra everywhere, dumping it into the tree, which continues to grow. The cloud of chakra starts to drain away. Iruka’s body gives out before the chakra is completely spent, falling to his knees. The chakra still wraps itself around him, waves of blue washing over him. He rushes to the man, catches him as he falls. Kakashi watches as the henge ripples, finally fading away. His body is cold. So cold.

Deathly cold.

Kakashi picks up the man and performs the transportation jutsu. He’s already set the location of the house for emergencies, but he had not thought he’d need to use it. If, by some chance, other ninja were looking for chakra footprints his own would be overrun by the field sized footprint that the teacher had left behind.

Iruka blinks, realizing they are back at the house. He must be drifting in and out even worse than usual. He can hear the cadence of Kakashi’s voice, giving orders to the ninken most likely, but it’s a dull sort of awareness. His throat aches and he knows what is happening, but he was in no state to try to give Kakashi reassurance; it was all he could do to stay awake and cling to the one source of warmth he had as his liquid ice traveled through his veins.

“Boss-!” the dogs surround him when they arrive. He looks, sees that Uhei and Shiba are missing, probably running towards the disturbance. They’d meet up Bull who would fill them in as best as he could.

“We weren’t attacked, but something happened with his chakra.” he tells his dogs as he carries Iruka into the bedroom. The swirling mass had settled back inside the teacher, although his core temperature seemed to be dropping by the minute. Temperature drop isn’t unheard of for overuse of chakra, but this was far beyond even that. The trembling had only increased and even his breath was rattling in the way that one’s breath did when it was too frigid to breathe normally.

He’d seen people die of hypothermia and this was progressing too fast-he watches as Iruka struggles, those brown eyes blinking, unfocused.

He gets the feeling that whatever is happening may not be completely unknown to Iruka, from his words earlier and even now, as he tries to communicate something. But Iruka’s in no state to tell him much of anything, it seems to take every last scrap of consciousness to hold onto Kakashi’s flak jacket.

“It looks like he’s going to freeze to death.” Pakkun says as the dogs bring whatever they found and he starts to pile the blankets on top of the teacher.

“It’s chakra induced and from what he said it seems like this isn’t entirely new.”

He doesn’t like this, doesn’t even know what he should do in such a situation. The only thing that is even the least bit comforting is that Iruka seemed to know what was coming so he thinks that he’ll survive this.

If not, well there wouldn’t have been enough time to get proper medical attention in time. He’s
seen others die with warmer core temperatures than this. He slips his hand into the loose folds of
the shirt, his other hand reaching up to the pulse point in his neck, counting beats.

It’s too slow.

He breathes, clearing his mind, focusing his chakra. He sends power to his fingertips, then spreads
it outward to the rest of his palm. He concentrates, sending out a faint pulse of chakra as he finds
his rhythm.

He’s done this a couple of times, electric chakra is perfect for sending discreet pulses into bodies to
stop their hearts, but he’s restarted them a few times as well over the years. It takes a different sort
of control, but it’s not impossible.

The only issue is that he doesn’t know how their chakras would react because of it. Doesn’t know
if this will help or hurt in this situation. Kakashi focuses on the pulses of chakra, hoping for the
former. The pulses do something as he continues to count beats. More than he expected, now,
considering how cold Iruka still was.

His mental peace lasts about a second because those eyes snap open, Iruka fighting for air, jerking
against him. He pulls his hands away, wondering if he’d caused more harm than good, but Iruka is
reaching for him, so he pulls off his gloves and returns his hands. He focuses, pushing just the
faintest amount of chakra though them, into Iruka’s body.

Kakashi’s hands are electric, forcing Iruka’s eyes open and causing him to gulp for air as his hands
clutch the mess of blankets surrounding him. It was just easier for him to fall into a coma- not that
he can share that now- his vision blurs as Kakashi pulls his hands away-he was hyperaware now of
the lack of warmth now and he reaches back, grunting as his hands refused to obey.

Kakashi must see the aborted movement, because the hand is back, pushing just the faintest
amount of chakra though them, into Iruka’s body. Iruka wanted to sob in pain and relief. Kakashi’s
chakra burned in a way that medi-nin didn’t but it was both good and bad. It burned, but it burned
well. He opens his eyes, trying to focus. The Sharingan catches the movement, because both eyes
were looking at him now and tries to plead that this is all right, that Kakashi can give him more.
Soon, Kakashi seems to find a pace that works and Iruka basks in it. Kakashi’s chakra was sharp
and burned, but it was so warm that he couldn’t be bothered to care. The eyes were still on him and
Iruka he took comfort in the hands on him and the concern in those eyes his own close.

Sharing chakra like this was dangerous, Kakashi knew, even as he continued to do so. There was a
reason that one had to undergo severe training to become a medi-nin. Give too much and you’d
overload the chakra points, or worse, burn out your own. He wasn’t worried about himself, it
would take some serious effort for him to completely deplete himself of chakra in this manner. But
even he’d never had much experience with something continuous like this.

Stopping a heart- overpowering the body was key. Restarting one, that was fairly easy as well. This
sort on continuous sharing- it’s different.

Iruka’s core temperature rose, bit by bit. The shuddering breaths lessened and eventually evened
out. The tenseness drained and those golden brown eyes closed, falling into sleep.

Kakashi pulled his hands away, strangely reluctant to do so as he looked over at his dogs. They had
all returned, including Bull, which made him wonder just how long he’d been with Iruka.

“I think he’ll be all right now.” he says as he looked back. He really was just sleeping now, which
is a strange contrast to the pained face that was cold as death.
He stands in the doorway, knowing that he needs to unpack the contents of the cart, the food would be no good if he let some of the goods sit and what would have been the point anyway if he let them spoil?

“We’ll stay with him, boss.” Pakkun says as he walks over to Iruka. Guruko is already curled up beside the man and the others are finding themselves spots as well.

It will have to be enough.

Kakashi turns, leaving the room.

===

When he returns, he finds himself staring at Iruka, surrounded by ninken and blankets, lying half on top of Bull, sleeping. Just sleeping, no imminent death shadowing.

Pakkun was still awake, although he’d made a sort of bed from a discarded blanket. “He’s been fine. Temperature dropped a bit, but that’s to be expected.”

Bull opened an overly large eye, looking up at him. Bull looked far less intimidating without his collar, Kakashi thought and not for the first time.

“I c’n m’ve boss?” he questioned.

Kakashi played with the thought in his head for a moment. It would be beneficial to do so, the man had possessed a significantly low core temperature and it would be helpful to remain on hand in case anything happened.

Those were rational thoughts.

The thoughts of wanting to feel more of the pleasant feeling of their chakras entwining, the thought that it would be pleasant it would be to just sleep next to someone for once without having to give parts of himself away to wake up and not have an argument about faces and sex and wounds that he didn’t want to share-

He shook his head. “I’ll move my stuff in here, but you stay where you are. If his temperature drops significantly-” Pakkun nodded. He drags in his bedroll and sets up.

When he lay himself down, Pakkun came beside him and laid his head down on his chest, Kakashi didn’t normally allow such contact simply because it was just so damn difficult to try to accommodate eight nin dogs in your bed, and once you let one stay, they all had to stay, but Pakkun seemed to know that Kakashi wouldn’t push him away.

“You should be over there,” he says, scratching the dog’s head absently.

“He has the others. I can be spared for boss.” Kakashi didn’t refute that, scooping the smaller dog onto his chest.

“I was worried.” he admitted, feeling worn from using his chakra in an unusual way, yet still feeling jittery, letting his hand scratch behind the pug’s ears.

“What happened?”

“He couldn’t access his chakra. Not until I gave him some of mine.” The swirling blue mass of
chakra, far more than what he assumed to be Iruka’s standard had danced out of reach when the man had tried to dispel the jutsu. The attack to release him had been wild, a push outward that he’d merely been caught in rather than directly against him.

And the incident with the tree-that had been the man forcing the energy out of him, forcing it to take shape and direction, a massive creation of energy that was not specific in purpose, reminding him of Chidori before he’d acquired the Sharingan.

It reminded him of the time where he had seen the nine tail’s chakra briefly during their trip to mist. And again, when he’d gone in and seen the cage. A raging mass of chakra that was just beyond the accessible threshold. But Naruto would be able to access his chakra, eventually. He’d already seen that Jiraya had worked with the boy on that, allowing Naruto more access as he grew; the chuunin exams had proved that successful. He hadn’t thought to look for a seal, not when he was trying to keep the other from dying.

Pakkun seems to be of the same mind, because he asks. “Do you think it was sealed?”

“I can’t be certain. People must have been aware of the instability of his chakra. But the reason that no one’s tried to fix it is worrisome. Makes one wonder if it is something that can be fixed.”

“You think he might be an experiment?”

“Of Orochimaru? The thought crossed my mind, but I don’t think he is. There’s Yamato, but all ANBU are aware of possible experimentation, so unless this side effect came into being after I left...which doesn’t make much sense considering I don’t remember being in his chuunin team rotations. So he must have already been hidden.”

“His parents were-”

“Refugees, from Water most likely, considering they were both water orientations. Although he was too young to remember exactly where he came from. It’s why Tsunade sent him off.” he explains the convoy and the bloodline laws.

“Would they be looking for something particular?”

“I doubt it. Hiding a particular ability is far easier than hiding a chakra water affinity. As he said, he can’t make up a past that doesn’t exist. Konoha has always been more open to refugees and inter-marriage alliances. Water is probably trying to see if any of our water signatures can be traced back far enough. Or give them a marriage offer they can’t refuse.”

“Which of us are going?”

“I’m calling for Shoji and I’ll send out Shiba and Urushi to relay a message with the Inuzuka patrols.”

Pakkun agrees with the plan as he lowers his head, closing his eyes. “But for now you should get some sleep boss.”

Kakashi knows he should, but he can’t resist turning to look over at Iruka again, where the blue chakra seems to have wrapped itself around him like a snake, except that doesn’t seem like an apt description as he thinks on it. The movements are too lazy, not full of purpose like snakes he’s seen-

More like a winding river than a snake, he amends to himself as he closes his eyes.
UGH THIS WAS HARD PEOPLE.

I've a lot of things I'm trying to fit in this thing and we're getting somewhere I hope? I've gone and looked up some other story type formats that I liked, so I'm keeping the back and forth for the moment, cause I just don't think I'm quite patient (or talented) enough to do full chapter back-and-forths. Is it too confusing?

ALSO JUST TO SHARE: NEW JOBS ARE ALSO HARD.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Kakashi shifts, waiting for her to elaborate. She has to have some theory about this. Multiple theories. This was a medical mystery, after all. She tried to solve those, didn’t she?

Chapter Notes

Ugh, sorry sorry. It’s Thursday again. Been working a bunch of Wednesdays even though I never usually work them.

Can we just flail at how amazing a teacher Iruka is?!?! Like um- pretty much teachers to heirs of like every clan EVAR. I don’t get tired of bringing it up (neither does Kakashi).

Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Iruka wakes, his whole body aches and his head throbs like he’s been out drinking. Those were things that he was used to. However, The fact that he didn’t feel as cold as he usually would after this happens is surprising.

He smiles as Guruko licked his face, memories falling into place. That probably had something to do with it.

“Morning,” he says sleepily to the dog, who licked him again, burrowing closer under his chin. “Boss is still asleep, so you should cuddle and sleep some more.” he urged as Iruka swiveled his eyes around to look at Kakashi, who was sleeping several feet away, Pakkun on his chest. He counts, but only comes up with six. Counts again, placing names to faces and sees that Urushi and Shiba are missing.

He’d sent them to relay with the Inuzuka then.

“But I need to move,” he says, turning his attention back to Guruko. He does need to move, he knows this to be true. He doesn’t want to lose this heat, the comfort that he has or wake Kakashi, even. But not moving was worse for him in the long run, he knew that. He’s nearly lost fingers once because of not moving after an episode before.

“Pushy, pushy...” Guruko mumbles, sliding off Iruka. He curls into a ball as Iruka struggles to sit up. Bull sits up and Iruka is glad for the the support as he leans against the dog.

He looks back at Kakashi, who still seems to be asleep for the moment, which is odd enough but
Pakkun’s eyes are open and staring at him.

“Is he all right?” he asks, dry mouth sticking on his words.

“He’s not used to using chakra like he did.” Pakkun confirms and Iruka winces. “We thought you were going to die.”

“How long?”

“Nearly a full day.”

“I would have told you-”

“Don’t give your reasons to me.” the dog cuts him off.

Iruka nods, wincing again. “Can you let him know that I’m going to end up like that again, nowhere near as drastic, but the loss of heat will be there. I’ll be more coherent though, this time. If I don’t move the joints-” he shrugs, the movements causing several cracks.

Iruka stretches until the point that everything doesn’t pop when he moves before rising unsteadily to his feet. He walks out of the room, using the wall as support as he walks. It’s slow going, but he manages to walk the length of the hallway several times, stopping at the bathroom to wash his face, hoping to dispel the tiredness. He can feel the heat leaving, coldness creeping along the edge of his senses, but still. The feeling inside his gut- that shivery sickly feeling is absent. Not even a full day, according to Pakkun.

It has to be because of Kakashi and his chakra. The medi-nin chakra was never as warm, perhaps he’d ask Tsunade to try to let them try an elemental type the next time, it couldn’t hurt.

He can still feel a part of chakra that isn’t his, can feel his own curling around it as his chakra starts to truly settle for the first time in months.

He forces himself to complete one more lap before he does a basic set of exercises. His muscles felt like jelly from overuse, walking back to the room was even more slow going than the walking, he’d pushed himself too much. The distance to the bed suddenly seems vast without a wall to lean on. Bull offers and they start.

Kakashi is awake now and conversing with his dogs in low tones. “I’m not a messenger dog,” Pakkun huffs before they all turn their attention back to him.

“How are you?” Kakashi asks, after Iruka manages to get himself back onto the bed without any real issue because even though he can tell Iruka isn’t well, he does seem better than the previous day.

“I overdid it a bit, again.” Iruka laughs as he pushes himself into a more comfortable position on the bed. Uhei leaves him, jumping on the bed to be beside Iruka, releasing Bull for the moment, who plods out of the room.

“I don’t wake up so early usually,” he continues, trying to explain, “it’s never been less than a day since I was a teen.” he gave another wheezy laugh, “should have taken that into account with my routines.”

Kakashi steps closer, shifting his headband, trying to catalogue what was happening. The chakra was swirling, but nowhere near as violent. It almost seemed like it was settling now. A bit like how nature could roll out a storm so violent that it blinded you, and yet minutes later show you with the
most beautiful rainbow.

It makes him think again about chakra natures and Naruto. Iruka looks tired, shivering again. Kakashi holds out his hand, letting it light up with chakra.

“Do you need-?” he asks. It’s a bit of a foolish move now, knowing that this is something that really can’t be prevented, but if he can do anything, he will.

Iruka starts to shake his head, but he can see something in those mismatched eyes. Concern, nervousness, worry. He can tell that Pakkun has passed on the information, but Iruka tries to think about this from seeing it from the outside. Even with those that do know, most were startled when they saw the intense severity of some of his symptoms. He still got yelled at over it by Kotetsu on a regular basis, in fact.

That look pins him, and he finds himself nodding instead. “I really shouldn’t,” he says instead as the hand slips into the folds of his clothing, the steady push of chakra starting up once more.

Kakashi had seemed to find a balance that was good for the both of them, as his body wasn’t protesting the lightning element as much as it had earlier. Either that or it had already become accustomed to the other’s chakra. It might have been a little of both, Iruka muses as he shifts, trying to fight sleep again. Being so warm was working against him. He sighs into the feeling.

It looks like Iruka is going to refuse, but he ends up nodding, even though he says he shouldn’t. He slips his hand inside the folds of the too loose shirt, picking up the thread of chakra output easier than he had the day before. His other hand was counting beats again. As he does so he wonders what Iruka means by shouldn’t. He supposes that it would be frightening to have the same hands that summon the chidori on your chest, but Iruka sighs into the sensation instead.

“I’ve never felt so good before after an episode, you’ll spoil me...” the shivering was all but gone now, and it seemed like this was indeed less than before, his eyes sliding closed.

“So this is common, for you?” he asks, part wonderment and part awe over the fact that the man let him put those hands against his body, hands that had been through the chests of countless others and even now all it would take was just a bit more pressure...he closes his eye for a moment, looking only with the Sharingan. The feeling is back as he watches their chakras curl together, twining and sparking. This sharing- it’s different.

Sharing chakra was something that had a consenting aspect to it; and for a society in which almost anything you possessed in fact belonged to something or someone greater than you, chakra went beyond that physical dimension of possession.

Your body belonged to the village, and if you managed to make it to the level of precious commodity, then even in death your body would have to be confiscated and burned. Your mind, your abilities all were for the village, even every drop of blood one could give could be taken for another if the hokage demanded it.

Chakra though, most viewed that differently. Something had to be different, because if that was all you were then what were you really?

The thing was, that you couldn’t simply place your chakra in another person and they would know your abilities. Chakra could be bound or depleted, but it was yours. It was as intwined within a person as air was with your lungs. If your chakra ran out and you pushed yourself you could die. Having your chakra forcibly removed (or forcibly placed into another) was akin to rape; one that had significant chances of killing you; it was one of the reasons that made Orochimaru so
dangerous. One of the reasons that Yamato was only one of dozens to survive the wood based chakra of the First.

But sharing chakra had another dimension, Kakashi knew. Sharing was different. Medi-nin shared chakra to heal; sharing among non-medical personnel was something that was advanced, something only close relationships did. He knew several who believed that chakra-sharing was even more personal than sex because even Konoha had ninja whose job was simply to seduce.

This is even better than last night, because he knows there isn’t an imminent death approaching. He can actually enjoy the feeling and mull over the sensations. As Iruka’s body started to warm beneath him, Kakashi could acknowledge the fact that sharing his chakra, his life force with another, feeling Iruka’s chakra twine and mesh with his own was a heady feeling.

“It’s something that I’m aware of,” he laughs, and Kakashi noted that it was a bit fuller this time, less wheezy.

“But not common?” Kakashi knew he was pushing, but he’d never seen anything quite like this before. “And you can’t be healed?”

Iruka’s eyes opened a bit and he sighs, placing his hand over Kakashi’s. The spark from the touch trills through him, but Iruka doesn’t seem to notice, or maybe it just feels like what he’s already doing.

“If there ever was a chance of that, it died with my parents.” There isn’t any malice behind the voice, just recognition of the facts. “Tsunade-sama has pinpointed some theories down as to what it is, which is more than anyone else has done; although she hasn’t had the chance to see chakra depletion like what just happened. Sandaime had some theories of course but she was able to recommend a course of treatment that has been better than what we did before.”

“So what is it?”

“I’m sure Tsunade-sama will tell you more than I can, Shiba and Urushi went off for that reason, didn’t they?” he closed his eyes again, “let me keep my secrets for a little longer. Just like your eye, it’s a rough piece of me than demands just a little more than what my body is prepared to give.”

He continues to send pulses of chakra until he feels the breath even out into sleep again before he brings down his headband.

He sits there for a while, watching. Kakashi had never considered himself a person that would wait beside people’s bedsides, he usually doesn’t consider himself attached until he visits the memorial stone. But even so, he finds it strangely difficult to pull himself away from the teacher.

A rough piece that demands more than the body is willing to give. What a poetic way to put it, he thinks.

He’ll never forget that wording, either.

———

He had slept a bit too long as it was, there was no way that he would be able to sleep any longer. So he takes his energy and puts his efforts into sorting the rest of the stores they had bought. He’d only spent just enough time on the perishable items yesterday.

He hasn’t done a long term mission like this in a while, but there was something to be said for
setting up a life, no matter how brief. Bisuke and Akino were out in the yard, digging up the dirt for the temporary garden. Bull, Uhei and Guruko were still with Iruka, while Pakkun did rounds, checking on everyone and reporting back.

Shoji appears before dawn, perching by the window, displeased. But he isn’t pecking for food, so that’s something. Like he'd told Iruka, the bird was good in more serious situations.

He opens the scroll, activating the emergency summon.

“Can’t even go a full week without trouble, can you? The handler had some chunks missing from his fingers by the time I got to the aviary.”

“You made it so he had to go through you every time I summon him.”

“That’s because you’re usually a half-dead chakra spent slab. Sending him out with a summon is better for all parties involved. You’ve got a couple kids that are pretty fond of you. Dying on them makes me look bad. But if you’re the one talking then-” he can hear Tsunade click her tongue, annoyed. “So the kid had an episode,” she said; a statement rather than a question. He waits for her to elaborate.

Instead, the slug wriggles violently and splits into two, one of which goes and dashes off in search of Iruka.

“If it’s not one thing…” she huffs, calling for sake and Iruka’s medical file.

“So the convoy is going well?”

“Yagura is dead.” she says, referring to the Mizukage. “We are not the only nation to get a friendly convoy. Kiri is trying to rebuild the bridges that Yagura burned, trying to call back their bloodlines as well.”

“Was it Akatsuki?”

“Too many people, too many grudges, too many willing to take credit. But there have been rumors about him for years, and the fight wasn’t much of one, apparently. And we know they’re after the tailed beasts, so it is a possibility. We’ve no word as to the official appointment of their next Mizukage, although it seems as if another woman could get the job, this one with two bloodline abilities. But enough politics, I’ve got the file. Shizune-” she calls again, then sighs loudly, so she probably didn't get the sake.

Tsunade is quiet for several moments, scanning over the chart and taking down notes as her other slug reports pack to her.

“He seems relatively stable, and further along in his progression than my notes say is standard, how long did you wait before calling-” her voice stops as the slug wriggles again, transmitting more data, “you gave him some of your chakra to stabilize him.”

“I was unaware of the common nature of these ‘episodes’, I thought that he was going to freeze to death.”

“Not too far off from the truth, actually.” she sighed. “And there’s nothing I can do for the kid, because it’s in his blood.” he hears Tsunade sigh, can imagine her leaning back and reaching for booze that is not booze but tea.

“What is wrong with him, then?”
“He’s got a bloodline ability, there is no other way he could survive such a drop in core
temperature. No, I can’t be sure exactly which one it is; his parents changed their names and Water
destroyed so many records I can’t even begin to try to figure out what it could be either. But
someone tried to seal it. It’s impossible to permanently seal of course, since it is your blood but the
only people who could have known why were-”

“His parents.”

“Right. There are parts to the seal; the first was placed when he was born through the umbilical
cord, much like Naruto. There seem to be overlaying seals though, and at least one can only be
removed by his own blood, so that in itself is a bit odd, because I have not found records that
confirm this is possible. But the seal repels all attempts on it. I’m sure that his parents had every
intention of removing it when he got to the proper age, but abilities don’t always wake up
immediately and he was too young for it to be something that needed to be figured out and
assessed.”

A weapon for war, she means. Too young, even by village standards.

“Right. It seems that old man Sandaime knew about the seal, but there were so many
inconsistencies and Iruka hadn’t shown possession of ability, it was assumed that the seal had been
more of a protection measure than anything else. The seal seemed to be an unnecessary precaution
until he went into active rotation and spent down his chakra for the first time.”

“So what is wrong?” Kakashi asks again as he leans back on the counter.

“It’s his chakra flow. He has a large amount of raw power, far beyond his standard reserves. But he
can barely access any of it due to the seal. What he actually can access also seems to change over
time, so it’s not like there’s much of a warning for the kid, either. You know your limits, for the
most part. Him, not so much.”

Kakashi doesn’t like the sound of that. If his limits fluctuated like that there wouldn’t be much
point in being on active duty; it was too much of a liability. That could very well be a reason to
remain chuunin and take only ‘weekender’ missions with little to no chance of combat or any
significant chakra usage.

“So his unused chakra-”

“It just sits there, which isn’t how trained and developed chakra works, of course. It’s made to be
used, so it eventually lashes out, his physical and spiritual energies turning on one another.
According to my notes sometimes the reaction is small, but usually it’s something devastating. He
drains the overflow and the rest collapses inward onto him. He stays in a very precise state of
freezing for anywhere from a day to a week-that burns up a decent amount of the excess as well.
But you can see there is still more.”

“Yes.” Kakashi agrees, because even now he wouldn’t say the chakra had been spent down. “So
this is a result of the inability to access it.”

“It will kill him, eventually.”

Kakashi shifts, waiting for her to elaborate. She has to have some theory about this. Multiple
theories. This was a medical mystery, after all. She tried to solve those, didn’t she?

She doesn’t give him a theory, she just sighs. “I’m certain that one day his body won’t be able to
support the inward collapse.” she sighs again, “I’ve looked for ways, but there doesn’t seem to be much of anything that I can do. His chakra is simply too dangerous. Even I don’t pour too much of my own into him, he regulates his temperature his own way. What you did was foolish.”

“But it worked.”

“...it did. Makes no sense, considering your natures, but it did. I’ll have to do some studying, maybe if-” she mutters something that he can’t catch through the summon as she moves away from her own summon. He thinks he hears a shuffling, thinks that she is flipping through papers. Perhaps a theory is forming.

“I sent Shiba and Urushi to meet up with the Inuzuka patrols. Is there anything else I should do at this point?”

“Noted. I can run another diagnostic in a week or so. For now the best thing is to keep him warm. It’s dangerous for his body to fall back into sleep when he’s like this. Closer to actual hypothermia at this point. He’s past the worst but his chakra won’t keep him from losing body parts any longer. The plans for House Warren say there should be an open air bath out there? Do that. I’ll send another summon through the dogs. Let your bird return at his own devilish pace.”

The slug vanishes.

Kakashi walks toward Iruka’s room. This really wasn’t what he was expecting from this. Not that he every truly tried to expect things from missions, because that was how complacency happened; he thinks again of Zabuza.

Still, a mission like this had conjured up ideas. Training regimens, sparring sessions, almost a paid vacation of sorts from the fact that there was no one to kill and no one to transport through dangerous lands, simply hiding out until the water-nin had passed.

But this, he can safely say that this had never crossed his mind. It had also been uncomfortable and just a little terrifying. Kakashi is unfamiliar with being confronted with things he could not do much about.

_It will kill him, eventually._

He stands in the doorway and it takes longer than it should for Kakashi to recognize Iruka’s breathing pattern and determine if it is normal. He does a sweep of the room, but it seems as if this slug has vanished as well. He wonders if Iruka slept through the slug diagnosis and reaches down to pull the man up. He opens his eyes, bleary.

“What better way to get warm than a bath?” he cajoles, trying not to worry at the coldness he can feel in the fingertips.

“Tsunade-sama talked to you?” Iruka asks as he pulls his hands away, struggling to sit up. He wonders what the slug said to Kakashi to make him look like that. All he got was a diagnosis and a serious talking-down about keeping people in the dark. He probably should have known better, with Kakashi testing his limits, he can admit that much.

But still, he doesn’t really like Kakashi’s tone. It doesn’t really fit and he hates it. He is a ninja, damnit, even if he was a bit too much of a liability to be active.

Kakashi sees the wariness in Iruka’s eyes, the tenseness in the stance. It had been the wrong approach to take; which is well enough. He’s not really much of a coaxing type.
“Tsunade-sama talked about a few things,” he admits, “but I have orders that external warming methods are best for you at the moment, so open air bath it is.”

Iruka groans, leaning into Bull and turning away from Kakashi.

“Everyone out.” Kakashi says to his dogs, who leave. Except Guruko, who refused to get off Iruka’s lap. But that’s well enough also, since Guruko doesn’t have the bulk to provide much warmth.

Uhei seems annoyed with him as well, sitting in the doorway. He’s probably done something wrong again if she’s looking at him like that.

Iruka isn’t sure he likes this tactic any better, annoyed now at having his hand forced. He wants to burrow in the blankets, fuck the possibility of losing his fingers. It’s not the best attitude to have, he knows.

“Well you go for a bath,” Guruko asks from his lap, “we’re pretty worried about you.”

And the fight drifts away from him. Worry is something that he can understand. He nods to the small dog, who gets out of his lap.

He gets himself out of bed with some effort and stands, shaky. Kakashi doesn’t move to help him and Iruka can see something going on in that genius head of his. Iruka supposes Kakashi hasn’t really ever been on the medical caring side of things, just the dodging medical care and escaping the third floor window kind. He supposes that Kakashi is trying on fellow medi-nin tactics, most of which suck.

He shifts his weight around, rolling on the balls of his feet and trying to think through the fog in his brain. He is so tired, but still feels good about himself. This is far ahead of his usual recovery curve. Almost like he’s sixteen again.

That concern from Guruko does something more than niceness or harshness combined as Iruka moves to get up. Kakashi thinks he gets it now. He was a pretty terrible patient himself, or so he’s been told more than once and knows what he wouldn’t want out of a stay in the hospital. So he decides he won’t bother trying to force the man to move or try a transportation jutsu. Instead he goes to gather some things for the bath while Iruka works on getting out of the house. Uhei approves of this, heading outside herself.

Once outside, he walks alongside Iruka, book out, not reading a word. Close enough to catch a stumble. Iruka does stumble once, but Kakashi decides at the last moment to tug Iruka back by his shirt just enough to counter his balance.

Iruka seems to appreciate it.

Kakashi seems to have stopped with the strangeness, simply watching him over the edge of his book, ready if he falls. But Iruka knows that he’s not going to try to hold his hand, letting him move at his own pace. It’s far better an approach than earlier. The walk to the bath is stupidly long and tiring but he loses his footing only once, Kakashi reaching and tugging his shirt back just enough so he rights himself.

The bath is large, Kakashi knew as much from his perimeter around the property. While the house is on a hill, this is even higher in height, although flat. It seems a bit out of place, but then again the mountains are close enough that the odd hot water vein probably isn’t so out of place.

Iruka starts to strip off the clothing. He’s almost thankful for the fact he doesn’t have to deal with
the regulation uniform and that he can slide out of the clothing from yesterday. The intricacies of
the wrappings would have irritated him more than anything else, probably to the point where he’d
have cut them open, which was wasteful. From the corner of his eyes, he sees Kakashi starting in
on his own bindings. He looks over around the bath, impressed by the size.

“Why was this made?” he asks as Kakashi works on taking off his uniform. As soon as Iruka had
been out of immediate danger, he’d gotten out of his own civilian clothes. Didn’t much care for
them, after spending years in one uniform or another.

“This used to be a house before it became a rest house for ANBU.” Kakashi answers, unwrapping
his binds. “Before the land was neutral territory. There are a few, but this is the only house left in
this area, although it really isn’t used as often anymore.” Neutral territory didn’t really call for safe
houses the way enemy territory did.

“This is good work. Looks like they tapped into a heated spring vein.”

“Most likely” Kakashi agrees, looking out at the bath and the mountains beyond it. “Clever work.
Not quite hot enough, though.”

A few hand movements later and the water is steaming.

“The heat wasn’t just for my benefit.” he says and he knows that Kakashi is grinning the mask
shifting beneath the movement.

“Why should I deny myself the pleasure of the bath?”

Iruka snorts, pushing himself into the bath. That seems more like Kakashi than before.“You don’t
have to worry about me passing out in water, just so you know.” he sinks into it as he sighs.

“Mountain water, definitely.” he moves toward the edge of the pool, closing his eyes.

“Is your water chakra so developed that you can tell?” Kakashi asks as he fastens the same strip of
cloth from several days ago around his face this time, keeping his eye closed as he removes his
headband. He knows that determining naturalness and unnaturalness is something different, but he
hadn’t been aware of the ability to determine the source of water.

Iruka props himself up against the edge of the rock formation that makes up the wall of the bath,
thinking.

“I suppose it is. Different types of water have different...signatures I suppose. Different notes that
allow me to sense what it is.”

“And does the access to your reserves help with this?”

“No, I can always sense water. Access to my chakra allows me to do this.”

Iruka dips his hand into the water; Kakashi opens his eye.

With only a few signs Iruka coaxes a spiral of water around his arm until it reaches his shoulder
and then makes it swirl higher, higher. Another sign; the water goes even higher, off Iruka and into
the air, twisting like the dragon tattoo on his back before coming to rest in his hand, condensing
into a ball. Another sign before he moves his other hand and flattens the shape, manipulates it into
a knife and lets it freeze, before twisting it in his fingers as it melts, raining back into the bath.

“Impressive, sensei.” he means it and he thinks that Iruka didn’t need the signs, which makes him
think that it could be a bloodline ability of some sort, but it also seems to be based on water alone.
He’s seen ice jutsu, combinations of water and air. He’s seen combinations of fire and water for boiling jutsu. What had just happened was neither of those or even a combination thereof. Iruka seemed to manipulate the water alone, which shouldn’t be possible, but he’d just seen it. Even the outburst of chakra energy from the other day, latching onto the tree, Kakashi hadn’t recorded any earth jutsu in play. Just water.

“This is the only time that I can work with the water like that. Just after an episode, I mean.”

“Even more impressive without consistent practice.”

“Pretty useless.” he says, more to himself than Kakashi.

Kakashi tilts his head, wondering where those words came from. It doesn’t seem useless, not in the least. And the fact that Iruka doesn’t have much in the way of chakra that he can use everyday suddenly makes more sense. When your chakra reserves are mostly out of your reach, well- one has to get creative.

Iruka certainly was creative, if the sparring had been anything to go by. Kakashi wanted to see more of it now that Iruka had chakra at his disposal. Thinks three hours may be too generous now that his chakra is in play.

“Chakra control like that is not useless.” he says, because it isn’t. “Knowing one’s limits is critical. You may have your own chakra issues, but I can see where your students have learned. Neither Sakura or Tenten have strong chakra reserves, yet they both have excellent control.”

Now that he thinks on it, pieces start to fall into place. “And you worked with Sasuke and his affinity.” Mentioning the name hurts, but he had always been interested in some of the fire techniques that Sasuke had trotted out. “You figured out that his chakra affinity was fire, or you wouldn’t have taught him techniques like that. I know standard Uchiha clan fire techniques and he had more than those in his arsenal.”

“My students-” Iruka turns away, a swell of emotion rising inside him. He does the best he can for his students, tries to give them the tools and the skills (and yes sometimes even more than that) to go on because he wants them to be the best they can be. even introduce them to different paths if the ninja way isn’t for them-he just wants them to live.

“My students-” Iruka says again, eyes caught in some emotion and he turns away. Kakashi realizes that the water is reacting to Iruka, swirling in an unnatural manner. Iruka breathes, the water settles. When he opens his eyes, it still looks like he’s trying to hold back tears.

“I want my students to live. And if I can teach them anything that helps them-well I will. Teach them. And any time they come to me afterwards for help-or to practice a new technique-”

And that’s where he gets all that sparring practice from. This man is more than just a teacher, he’s become an integral part of Konoha’s ninja population. No wonder he had Sandaime’s confidence. He’s starting to wonder just how he didn’t know about this teacher.

“Your students are the best that they can be when they graduate. I see that now.”

Iruka blinks, the tears welling in the corner of his eyes but he sinks into the water before any spill over.

Kakashi watches Iruka sink into the water, stay underneath it for far longer than he thinks even a ninja should be able to, but then again, he hasn’t timed a water orientation on such a thing before.
Kakashi finishes his bath and steps out. Dries himself and dresses before Iruka resurfaces. Watches as Iruka moves, steadier on his feet now. Decides to start back on his own and leaves the dogs to walk back with him.

Chapter End Notes

So...explanations, kinda.
Sorta.
Not really so much.
Iruka is basically a water-bender.
BUT NOT REALLY.
MAYBE.
No, not really. Some crossovers are amazing and life, but I am not going there. But he's a special duck, yeppers. (I promise no crossover (unless complete bastardization of mythology and the tale of Rapunzel count (Kakashi's story from Icha Icha that he tried to turn into their 'story'))

Although I do not promise that some names from other things may or may not cameo.
He thinks this must be what a moth sees in a flame as he holds out his hand.

He isn’t one hundred percent, but he feels amazing when he wakes later on. He thinks he’s slept most of the day this time as he looks out at the sky, but even that doesn’t bother him much. He hasn’t been able to bounce back like this in years. He hums to himself as he starts up dinner, excited for some food that isn’t soldier rations. Kakashi seems to be out with most of the dogs, save Guruko, who seems to have appointed himself as Iruka’s personal watchdog.

He’s still not really well enough for his standard workout, so he scrubs down the kitchen instead. He lets his chakra do small things, boil the water, keep their tea a perfect temperature and revels in the control he has over his chakra, smiling as he looks at Guruko.

“You smell happy.” Guruko says as he chops up vegetables.

“I am.” Iruka agrees, smiling. “It has been years since I’ve been this well.” He’d gotten a serious scolding from Tsunade-sama about his refusal to discuss the possibility of draining himself to Kakashi, but the lightning chakra had been- amazing, for lack of a better term. He felt warmer than he had in ages, his chakra settled in a way that had his whole body thrumming with energy.

“I could probably start on the garden tomorrow. Get some of the stuff growing while I’m like this anyway.”

“Does this mean we’ll have a full garden soon?” Kakashi asks from the doorway.

“Not sure about that, honestly. Can’t say I’ve ever tried to make something grow on such an advanced timetable. Can you wash the rice?”

Kakashi heads over to the rice, starting in on it.

“So what is standard for this sort of thing? Being at full power, anyway? The rain jutsu?”

“Not so much, no. That is something a bit beyond me. I can read natural or unnatural rain though. But I guess the best thing is to say that I can sense water. It’s not a sensory ability, but because people are mostly water and when you mix it chakra it sort of-resonates I guess? Izumo calls it chakralocation.” he laughs a bit.

“I noticed as much when we sparred.” Kakashi drains the rice. “You followed me easier than I would have liked.”

“It’s more of a reconnaissance tool than a combative one. It takes more effort to distinguish friend or foe, because possessing developed chakra and a body is the same, even in enemy nin. It also doesn’t distinguish a difference in shadow clones or water ones, although the ratio of water to
chakra in water ones usually give them away.”

Kakashi sets the rice on to boil before walking up to see what Iruka is doing with the food they’ve picked up.

“Where did you learn to cook?”

“Ah, well. A couple years back several of my students insisted on getting me presents. I have enough mugs for both my apartment and to stock the mission desk for several years, so I went and asked for recipes. I like to cook.” he says, a bit of a flush to his cheeks, “and the students love the chance to teach me something, so it works out.”

Kakashi watches him as he finishes up the vegetables and checks on the rice. Iruka can get lost in this, the preciseness that is cooking. Kakashi just sits in a nearby chair, watching with interest. The dogs come and go, although they are staying out from directly underfoot, which is probably for the best. Iruka knows his reflexes are less than perfect right now.

The kitchen is a bit too small for a normal table, whoever designed the house originally had made the kitchen its own sort of unit. Probably so that the help wouldn’t intrude on dinner. There is a bigger table just outside the kitchen, but they don’t need it as Iruka places the plates on opposite sides of the smaller table inside the kitchen. He sets up a scroll again.

Kakashi watches as Iruka sets up the scroll, but he’s starting to get annoyed by the fact that it works both ways, keeping his face a mystery and yet keeping Iruka from him as well.

“So are you going to collapse again?” he asks as he pulls down his mask to rest around his neck and starting in on the food.

“I could.” he says, truthful. “But I don’t think I will, not this time. I can’t be sure, though. I’m older than I used to be.”

“You don’t look old, sensei.” Kakashi teases as he digs into his food. It is delicious in a way that reminds him of family meals. Probably some home recipe that a student has shared over the years. There are a few people left at the Hatake compound, people who still work for the family even if he’s the only one left. But he leaves them alone most of the time, so it’s been a while since he’s had a home-cooked anything.

“The time spent in the coma has been increasing over the years.” he admits, “They usually last several days now. Takes me even longer to recover from them. It’s usually a weeklong process start to finish.” he admits, “and then probably another week before I’m stabilized with my chakra. This turnaround is better than the usual.”

“Is it due to my excellent chakra skill?”

Kakashi finishes for now, thinking that he’ll probably be helping himself to late night seconds later, but he pulls up his mask and lets the scroll fall. Iruka eyes flash, startled from the sudden movement, but Kakashi can see the flush in those cheeks. He hopes that the chakra sharing doesn’t just get to him.

Iruka doesn’t answer his teasing, instead chastising him about his eating speed, the flush settling into something else, a sort of caring look. He decides that he likes that look on Iruka. He hasn’t had anyone care about him like that for a while. Worrying about eating at a table, concerned at his speed eating, not bothering with questions about his mask and making ways for him to work around it.
He thinks he really understands why Iruka had been so annoyed at the treatment earlier, now. The chakra drain is something Iruka can’t control so he takes whatever control he can in regards to it. Trying to be coaxed or tricked or forced into it wasn’t the answer.

He offers to clean up the plates. Iruka takes him up on it, going outside to grab the things he’d hung out to dry earlier.

Iruka is excited to sleep in the bed with real sheets this time, not his bedroll and strange pile of dusty and disused blankets. Not to say that he doesn’t like his bedroll, except he really doesn’t like it.

The room still smells a little like dust and disuse, but another cleaning should fix that. He slides off his shirts, looking out his window, breathing in the night air. He senses Kakashi on the roof.

“It’s getting a bit dark to be reading, I would think.” he calls out.

“Ah, not if you’re just looking at the pictures, sensei.”

“Never mind the illustrations. It’s bad for your eye either way, in this light. You should come inside.”

Kakashi swings down into Iruka’s room, holding the familiar orange book.

“Is that an invitation?”

Iruka can feel the heat creep into his cheeks, sees the teasing look in that eye.

“No tonight.” he says instead, lobbing back the only answer he thinks might throw the man off as he steps away. It does, but only for a moment, eye widening just a fraction before the teasing tone is back.

“Maa, sensei.” the voice says from behind him now and Iruka wonders if he should have started this game. “Does that mean I should ask again tomorrow?”

He started this game, might as well up it. He tugs his hair tie free and gives a smile. Not just any smile, smile ‘liquid bruise’ (Iruka and Anko had named both his and hers all in a drunken snit, once) the one that promises all the things (so she said, anyway).

“You are welcome to ask.”

The eye is blown wide this time, both with surprise and a touch of want he thinks. He likes that look, he decides. He probably shouldn’t, considering that Iruka tries not to sleep with people in his circle of friends (not counting young and drunken encounters). Wondering just when Kakashi became a friend, but they’ve had Naruto bridging them for almost a year now and were friendly enough, he supposes.

He likes the look anyway.

Kakashi blinks, stunned by the transformation before his eyes. It’s more than the hair, more than the smile, but he can’t pull away from the the eyes, intense and focused, practically glowing with life. He thinks this must be what a moth sees in a flame as he holds out his hand. He focuses, lets the sparks travel over his hand, between his fingers.

“Should we start with some chakra?” he manages to ask, hoping his voice isn’t too strained. He watches as the gaze follows him, seeing his hand. The smile fades, but the eyes are still brilliant,
almost gold.

Iruka wants. Wants it more that he should. His body thrums with heat, but he can feel the drain of his chakra on the edge of his senses, can feel cold numbness in his fingertips and toes. He turns away, swallowing.

“I think I can make it on my own at this point, Kakashi-san.”

“You said that you’re not sure how you’ll recover from this point forward. Wouldn’t it be best to try this again rather than possibly fall back into a coma?”

The excuse is there, and he wants to cling to it. Kakashi has a point and maybe he could fall back into a coma. He’s never had this sort of thing before, who knows how much he needs.

“Perhaps you have a point, Kakashi-san.”

“Don’t you know?” Kakashi says as he steps closer to him, close enough that Iruka can feel his body heat, can hear the sparks of lightning crackle. “Geniuses always make valid points.”

He huffs out a breath of laughter, nodding. He feels the hand press itself between his shoulder blades this time. The sensation starts, Iruka wavering on his feet as the sensations grip him. Kakashi moves him towards the bed and he finds himself facedown this time as the hand moves lower, over his scar. It’s too much, too sensitive, but before he can say anything Kakashi is moving it back up between his shoulder-blades.

Kakashi lets his free hand come up to reveal his other eye, wanting to see how the chakra reacts. It’s swirling, reacting to his own. Kakashi tries to move his hand closer to the center of Iruka’s back, towards the center of one’s chakra, but the chakra snaps, coiling tighter as Iruka tenses. He moves it back up, the chakra relaxing again.

Kakashi likes having his hands on Iruka. Wants more of it, in fact. Which is surprising enough in itself, wanting someone like this. He looks over the ink again, but focuses on the scar this time. He’s half-hard, has been hard since he held his hand up and the scar distracts him.

Somewhat.

The scar ripples across the tattoo, but he wouldn’t call it damaged. It adds to it somehow. The scar is large, about as long as the length of his hand. Kakashi knows that it had to be serious, it’s too close to the spinal column. In situations like this, skin scars were superficial consequences, the outermost layer receiving the least amount of attention. The scar had healed well, considering the probable massiveness of the wound, but the skin was still still raised and warped, still overly sensitive.

“This is the injury that you got protecting Naruto, right?” The story that Naruto can’t tell without crying. The story in which Iruka takes a giant fuma shuriken to the back and somehow manages to stand and give Naruto the headband. He understands anatomy, thinks of the odds that this didn’t cripple the man if outright kill him.

Iruka’s breath hitches and his voice is thick with emotion as he confirms his question. Kakashi would wager that in addition to a love for ramen that Naruto’s propensity for crying comes from this man as well.

He continues to share the chakra, watches as the two threads of chakra connect and sees the chakra settle down as Iruka relaxes into sleep. It appears to have infused itself within the ink, glowing blue to his eye and he watches it undulate across the tanned skin, curling around what he feeds into
Iruka. It seems to have a mind of its own, which makes him think again of Naruto and the nine tails chakra.

He thinks there must be more to the world, that there must be ideas about chakra that are beyond current understanding. Thinks about small villages and towns, thinks on tales and folklore about mythological beasts that are not the tailed beasts they’re come to know. About creatures and summons that can wield chakra on their own.

He has seen some of what Iruka can do and it reminds him of certain bloodline abilities, but it is also different enough that he cannot be sure. The image of the dragon won’t leave and he finds himself studying the tattoo in his mind’s eye long after Iruka has settled into sleep and after he's left the room.

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In the morning Iruka stretches, hearing his joints pop. He watches his chakra move between his fingers, rolling it back and forth like the tide. He’s going to miss the control so much when everything falls back into place. Miss the rebound from the chakra sharing.

*Just the chakra?* His mind asks and he flushes as he remembers those hands on him last night. It had been the first time he’d been truly aware for it and remembers the burn, remembers the chakra dragging along his skin, falling into the rhythm of Kakashi’s hands and the sensation of their dueling chakra natures. He’d been glad that he had been facedown last night, because he’d have embarrassed himself otherwise.

Hell, he’s half-hard just remembering it, shuddering as he thinks about those hands on his scar. He’s no stranger to sex, but the scar is a something of a tale he doesn’t always want to share with people on the short term. Being able to have it fully exposed under someone else was different, in a good way.

Thinks about Kakashi sliding in his window, thinks about him moving in general. Kakashi in motion was perfection, glinting and dangerous. He’d only been in his blacks the night before and it had been the first time he’d seen the man in anything less than full uniform when dressed.

He knows that most ninja prefer nudity when it comes to sex and wonders if Kakashi is the same. His cheeks burn with the thought, because he’s already told himself off for this. Their personal circles are too close, their lives overlap in too many areas. It doesn’t matter that he’s had a bit of dry spell.

Furthermore, they’re on mission. Iruka frowns as he regards the rules of conduct. Technically Kakashi is superior for this, so that in itself could present an issue. But when the world is empty, does something like that matter? He knows that many take advantage of two man teams when the mission isn’t critical in nature for the village, standard restocking and routine deliveries. He is even familiar with the concept of missions like their own, weeks hidden away and training, preparations for the jounin trials or other training exercises.

Not that any of it matters if Kakashi isn’t interested. Words and innuendo are not to be taken for anything more.

His brain, however, has other ideas as he thinks back to their sparring. Remembers looking up at the narrowed grey eye, lost in their fight, just the barest sliver of the Sharingan visible. Pinning him down, but backing off when he’d realized he’d been using too much force.

He reaches down and grasps his cock. Sweeps his thumbs across the tip, spreading the wetness. He
lets his grip get tighter with each stroke, each pass.

He thinks back, remembering the looks that Kakashi has given him over the past several days. The eye was unexpectedly good at conveying emotion and Iruka thinks that was never the point of the mask. A bonus maybe, but not the real reason. He wonders what Kakashi would say if he told him such a theory.

*Impressive, sensei.*

The words crawl up his spine and he shivers. He might be good at pulling away from such things, but praise still does something to him, deep inside.

He doesn’t mind being pinned. He doesn’t mind a lot of things, not when Kakashi backed off like he did. He imagines being pinned, with these slow strokes being his only method for release. He curls into the feeling, closing his eyes as he focuses on the remainder of the lightning chakra sparking inside of him.

Even dragging it out like this, he knows he won’t last long. He leans back, eyes fluttering closed against the onslaught of feeling, trembling. A few more slow drags and he feels himself tense up, pushing, just a few *more* before he sinks into the feeling, spilling into his hand.

It’s a terrible thing, thinking of Kakashi like this.

He doesn’t really regret it though.

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Iruka continues to work on the house, cleaning it as Kakashi trains with the dogs. He’s nearly finished with breakfast when they tumble in, clouds of dirt following them from ‘gardening’. Iruka is fairly certain he heard them rolling about in the dirt at some point. His kitchen is already trashed again, but he finds himself smiling at them anyway.

“Couldn’t stop at the bath?” he chides and Bisuke in particular gets a look of terror at the very mention of the word ‘bath’.

“No change of clothes sensei.” Kakashi answers, walking over to next to where he’s chopping. He washes his hands in the sink, eye smiling. “Wouldn’t want to come back nude, would we?”

He’s had enough thoughts of nude today already, he thinks as he shakes his head, exasperated.

“I suppose the garden does need tilling, after all.”

“Perhaps we can have a bath after?” Kakashi says as he goes to sit at the table. “I may remember to bring a change of clothes.”

“Perhaps.” Iruka nods as he places down their plates, reaching for the scroll. Kakashi takes it instead, tucking it into his waist.

“I think you’ve made your point, sensei.” he says as he folds up his mask, just enough to uncover his mouth. There seems to be nothing wrong with the face that Iruka can see before he busies himself with the food.

“I took the screen down so we could talk, sensei. Eye contact is a part of talking or so I’ve been told.”
“Ah, well.” he scratches his scar, forcing his eyes up. The grey eye looks at him with interest. Iruka does second sweep of the part of the face he can see. Kakashi wears an additional piece of the ninja standard uniform, the neck of his black shirt is form fitting and goes up to his chin, so there really isn’t much to see.

He takes in a thin scar, a line along the right side of his jaw, almost silver when compared to the paleness of Kakashi’s face. There is also and a beauty mark under his lip, but nothing else that he can see.

But then again people wore masks for any number of reasons, and not just to hide things. He understands this.

He’s a little preoccupied with those lips however. They are also pale, paler than they should be, and fuller than he would have guessed considering the gangly angles that Kakashi has when he stands still.

No buck teeth, he’s happy to report as he smiles to himself.

“Something funny?” Kakashi asks, interested. Iruka tells him about the week of Team Seven and their need to uncover the mask and all their theories. Kakashi listens, a small smile on his face as Iruka tells the story as he’s heard it.

To actually see a smile on that face makes something curl in his chest.

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Shiba and Urushi return, another scroll with them. Another report, Tsunade checking in on his status and taking more notes.

They have a few days like that, slow paced and filled with cleaning, gardening, nin-dogs and baths that are filled with more innuendo than Iruka thinks he can handle, sometimes. But Kakashi seems content with words and distance, so Iruka is as well.

It had been hard enough turning Kakashi down the fourth time he’d offered his chakra, because he couldn’t become used to it.

He already has, but if he cuts it off now he thinks (desperately tells himself) it would be better. He can’t be dependent on something that won’t always be there. It’s better this way, he tells himself.

Kakashi goes out each morning, switching out his dogs and following whatever his regimen is. Iruka thinks it would be nice to try it out, but he knows that he has to pace himself if he doesn’t want to relapse and seems better for it.

Kakashi returns to the house for meals and they eat together more often than not. Iruka likes to see what Kakashi thinks of the food. He doubts that Kakashi has had much chance at real food during the past few years, if not longer.

He spends a lot of time cooking because of that very reason, although there isn’t much in the way of meat out here. They’ve got some stores, but he doesn’t think they’ll last too long. Not that the garden produce won’t be worth it when it ripens.

When he isn’t gardening, cooking or cleaning; he likes to plan his lessons. He talks about his class distribution with Kakashi.

He’s going to have a rowdy bunch this time around since there are a number that had to wait the
additional six months while the school was closed and he has three Hyuuga that he has to factor into his lessons.

“You seem confident that the Hyuuga will be in your class.” Kakashi says one evening as he works on his charts.

“Oh, I always get them.” he says offhand, chewing on the pencil. “Been that way for several years now, but three plus Hanabi is going to be a challenge for sure.”

“You teach the Hyuuga clan exclusively?” Kakashi says softly, standing closer now.

“Ah, well. Yes and no. They always start with my class, the chakra drain is hard to keep a lookout for unless you know what to look for and what to do. They also function better together, at first anyways. I even do house lessons, sometimes, for the youngest ones. The chakra drain can a real problem because each child has to learn how to shut it off themselves, once they wake up the Byakugan.”

There is something there in the look Kakashi is giving him, but Iruka can’t pinpoint it, not exactly. A sort of appraising, but yet something more, also.

“Impressive, sensei.” he says at last, and Iruka tries not to squirm under the look. “Hyuuga isn’t one to share easily. I remember that some arms had to be twisted before they allowed me to study with them.”

That’s right. Kakashi can’t turn off his Sharingan, so while the Uchiha clan could help him develop the ability the Hyuuga clan were the ones with excessive chakra drain experience. They also had a higher instance of developing the ability as a monocural one. He knows that the elder Hyuuga had still held significant power even though he was not clan leader. He had been very adamant about such things and Iruka’s tutoring sessions had been contested up until his death.

“Ah well. Hopefully the compound is opening up more. The rigid rules are bending a little, I think. After-” well after the breaking point and the decimation of the Uchiha clan under such strict rules.

“Groups have a hard time growing if individuals are prevented from self-growth.”

He turns up from his paperwork, because those words aren’t Kakashi’s. He remembers hearing something similar from Hiruzen. His heart aches for the man, both the one dead in the ground and the one sitting across the room from him.

Perhaps more than the Uchiha line suffered from such a thing if he really wants to think about it.

He doesn’t.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, okay. So when I returned to this like back in april-ish I went at it with some serious sexual ideas. One of them being self-pleasure. Maybe I'm just crazy, but I've been digging (in multiple fandoms even, and like haven't found too many or like they're all like while someone else is watching and joins in, which is all well and good, but not what I'm going for) so I'm like uh, yeah I wanna work on this, on my skills. (I've done sex scenes before, but not self on self). So I hope it was okay.
Also, also. The old hyuuga guy- i never got why he wasn't an elder, so he's dead because it makes no sense otherwise to me. I think he was only in like flashbacks anyway so- tralalalala, not caring.

On another note: when you're writing something and then some character is like OH HAI THERE! I AM NOT IN THIS THING ENOUGH, I THINK.

And I'm like nope, it's okay, I like what I have thanks.

I THINK I WILL PUT MYSELF IN THIS SCENE I THINK.

...fuck. that works. ugggggggh.

YOU ARE MOST WELCOME <3

...I hate you. (This is like way way down the line, but yeah. That's my mental state atm.)
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

"This isn't one of your excuses when you lose your mission reports is it?"

Chapter Notes

Wednesday again. Already. Like ohmygod really. Had a birthday, I would be older than Iruka now. Ugh. What have I done with my life. I guess I'll write some fanfic to deal with being old. Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Iruka notices Kakashi with the Sharingan out several times, monitoring his chakra and fluctuations. Hiruzen once had a Hyuuga medi-nin do something similar a while back after one of his episodes. He wonders if Kakashi will see anything different.

But that morning as he sets out breakfast for the two of them and Kakashi reaches for the pastry first, he’s as bad as Naruto, really.

“I think you could train today.” he says, looking him over. Iruka agrees, sliding the pastries closer to him to force Kakashi into eating some real food first. Kakashi is still staring as he finishes the pastry. The look is methodical, calculating as it sweeps across his skin and it’s far too easy to imagine the look shifting into something else.

“I think I would like to be inside you today, sensei.”

Iruka chokes on his tea, dizzy. He puts the cup down and his eyes are on Kakashi now. Those eyes are blown wide in surprise as he tries to correct his phrasing. He’s not getting very far and it’s actually sort of endearing.

“I meant inside your chakra barrier,” Kakashi manages to finally get out.

Iruka still doesn’t follow those eyes, those thoughts. Knows that phrase will highlight in future sessions, whether the words were meant in such a way or not. Can already imagine the words wrapping around him as his hand stokes himself off.

“Please explain.” he manages to ask.

Kakashi seems to have gathered some thoughts as he drums his fingers on the table.

“I’ve been inside the cage that holds Kyuubi. Well, what Kyuubi views as a cage, anyway. I can feel the division between the two chakras. Naruto’s seal is structured in such a way that he’ll get access to more of it as time goes on, however. He’s even been able to consciously tap into it, such as with the chuunin exams. You don’t have that access, but have a similar division.”
“I have never felt-” he stops, suddenly knowing that isn’t quite true. When he is on the verge of collapse, whether from chakra drain, injury, or some life-threatening event he can feel something beyond his own self. “I’m not a Jinchuuriki-” he says instead, because he knows that much about himself.

“No, you’re not.” Kakashi agrees. “They are all accounted for. Besides, the village would have known. Kyuubi would have known. I’ve an idea that it may be something else, other chakra wielding creatures exist in this world and not just those that feature in summons. I doubt we have a complete record of such things. Or perhaps Tsunade’s theories are correct and it is an attempt to seal a bloodline ability. I would like to try to see if the division belongs to something.”

It makes sense, laying it out like that. Iruka does have a chakra division, a piece that he cannot access. Despite his fluctuations, no matter how muddled the lines may get, there is a piece that is beyond him. He wants to know if it belongs to something else, whatever that else may be.

“…all right.” he agrees. “There was a time where Hiruzen-sama had a Hyuuga monitor my chakra. If this was a theory of his, he never shared it.”

“I do not think this is something that just anyone would think of,” he says, but it isn’t a boast, simply fact. “My eye views chakra differently than the Byakugan and I’ve had the experience of meeting two hosts for Kyuubi and have also seen the chakra pattern. This is not overly similar, but neither does it behave like any type of seal I have encountered.”

That is a lot of seals, Iruka has to admit. More than the Hyuuga medi-nin, at any rate. But even if they figure out the reasoning for such a divide, the fact remains that parts of his seal are irremovable.

“Does it truly matter what we are really looking for in this case?” he voices his thoughts. “One thing that has been consistent is the fact that my seal is bound from either one or both of my parents and only someone with my blood can undo it.”

Iruka watches the tomoe spin lazily in the Sharingan; he thinks he’s taken the wind out of Kakashi’s idea and feels bad for it. Iruka has spent a long time thinking about such things as people lob ideas and theories at him. He knows that his body is taking longer and longer to recover-knows that one day his body won’t be able to keep up with the demands of his chakra comas. He takes a pastry, breaks it open. It really wouldn’t hurt to place hope in such an idea. He’s done it plenty of times before.

“Perhaps it won’t do anything.” Kakashi admits. “But even if it doesn't remove the seal, perhaps it could help with your control.”

The idea lingers, Iruka thinking that maybe they could develop some sort of failsafe- something that gives him enough of a warning to pull back. It wouldn’t stave it off indefinitely, but Iruka thinks he’d like to see his kids grow up. It solidifies his participation, because that alone would make it worth it.

“So what is your idea, then?”

"Have you ever encountered genjutsu?"

Iruka gets a bit of a look then as he talks about mandatory chuunin sessions, which Kakashi knows about; he’s run them even. He also talks about some experience with opposing chakra natures and genjutsu. Kakashi understands this as well. Clashing chakra natures make subtle arts such a genjutsu even harder to set.
It all makes him think that Iruka has even more experience with such things than he is admitting to. A developed experience to notice it even. People with developed experience with genjutsu often have a higher threshold for it and are quicker to notice it. Catching an opponent off guard makes it harder. Kakashi has experience in both standard genjutsu and Sharingan aided genjutsu, thinks he may have to trap Iruka with his eye.

Iruka stands, Kakashi’s eyes follow his movement. He says something that Kakashi misses and he has to watch the interaction again with his Sharingan. Asking about the seal, Kakashi figures he should look at it before they start this.

Iruka strips off his flak jacket and pulls off the black shirt underneath, followed by a second shirt of woven chakra threads for additional protection. His eye catches the work, sees water chakra threaded in it. It is an exquisite piece of work, an expense that a standard chuunin salary could not afford, making Kakashi think that Iruka made it himself. He can look into it later, he decides as the expanse of tanned skin becomes visible. He can see where the seal is hidden from view, much like Naruto’s in this manner. Hidden until visible.

Iruka tugs at his chakra and the seal starts to appear, darkening in color until it provides a contrast that he can read. The seal is centered around his stomach, probably placed when the placenta was still attached and it seems— sloppy, for lack of a better word. It was a rushed job, which makes him think that this was something that must have been alarming to his parents. That in itself seems strange, because a bloodline ability shouldn’t have been an issue, not so soon after birth.

“The scar on your face, do you remember how you got it?”

“I don’t. I’ve had it as far back as I can remember.”

Perhaps Iruka displayed a trait that was hard to hide such as the Hyuuga dojutsu, which was a physical trait of the clan that didn’t always manifest as the bloodline ability? He looks at the scar across Iruka’s nose, an injury that had probably sliced through his face if the scar was still so prominent years later. Either way, it doesn't seem to be dissuading his theory much.

He looks over the seals, but they are fairly different from what he has seen with both Naruto’s and Kushina’s. He knows that Minato had developed the seal even further from Kushina’s with the intention for Naruto to gain access to the chakra over time. This seal doesn’t have that. It seemed more of a permanent lock as he studied it. His hand comes closer and he can feel the power behind the seals, reacting to his own chakra. But it’s not defensive, not any longer. It recognizes him, which adds to his theory. Living seals are not unknown to him, so perhaps it is as Tsunade said, a seal for a bloodline.

"Any theories?" Iruka says from above him and Kakashi looks up. He smiles a bit and decides he likes this angle, he can see more of the tanned skin this way, realizes just how close he is to the Iruka and doesn't dislike it.

“It could be a division as I think, or perhaps it is a bloodline sealed, like Tsunade seems to think,” he admits, "I think that I will try to knock on the door when we train."

"I thought you were more partial to windows."

He rocks back on his heels, raising himself back up to full height as he watches those eyes follow him. They follow the movement and it strokes his ego a little bit. People really don’t spend much time looking at him. Trying to take him apart, trying to see beneath the mask, but not like this. He’s found that he’s not averse to being watched. Not by Iruka anyway.
“Have you now?” he grins and likes the flash in those eyes, golden for a moment in the light. Iruka is the one who has been leading this game between them, taking Kakashi’s teasing and turning it back with those smiles, slanting his eyes and bleeding sexuality in a way that Kakashi didn’t think was possible outside of books. That is a game of sorts. This, whatever look Iruka is giving him right now, is different.

He wouldn’t mind if it was more than a game.

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Iruka dodges, ducking behind a mud wall Kakashi had raised earlier in their fight. Kakashi takes the pause it gives him to reset his tactics. Iruka has managed to avoid some of the more basic mental entrapments he’d tried so far, which makes him wonder if Iruka had shown talent for genjutsu, because the village had funneled potentials into certain fields with aptitude tests until recently before abandoning that idea.

Either way, Iruka is more familiar with genjutsu than he let on, Kakashi thinks as he moves out of the way of another wave of senbon that the chuunin sends his way.

He rushes in, coming into close contact with the other, hoping it’s surprising enough of a move. He slides by the other, lets his palms flare up with chakra and then feels the tug of the other’s chakra pulling at his own as the genjutsu finally anchors, dragging him down.

He stands on a beach, black sand underneath his feet, water lapping gently along the shore. There isn’t much light to speak of, but there hadn’t been much light when he’d visited Kyuubi. The world is shrouded in a mist of sorts; to his eye, everything seems to be touched with the blue that he has come to associate with Iruka’s chakra.

He sees a shadow, coiled and sitting on the water.

“Welcome.” the voice calls, and Kakashi can admit that he feels just the tiniest bit afraid. The aura here is powerful, although not murderous like Kyuubi’s. There is something in the voice, something oddly familiar, and yet the voice creaks, as if unfamiliar with itself.

There seems to be more light now, shining from behind what Kakashi guesses are clouds. The shadow becomes clearer as Kakashi stares.

The creature is coiled tightly, reminding him of a snake, but at the same time a bit unlike one. It looks like it has too many limbs and a tail that is far too long for its body, at least in this coiled state. He studies it for a moment before the image of dragon flares in his mind.

The dragon lifts its head and Kakashi wants to step back, but he holds himself still. “We haven’t had visitors in so long.” The dragon turns to the sky and makes a noise toward the sky. The croon is wrenching, lonely. The body shifts, the head turns, facing him again.

“Silver haired,” it starts to uncoil and uncoil. And uncoil some more. He was not expecting the creature to be so…free. Kyuubi had been behind a cage of sorts, a physical representation of the seal. This seemed to be more a different realm entirely inside Iruka’s subconscious.

It is easily forty to fifty feet in length as it lunges over the water to the beach where Kakashi stands. The speed of this creature is terrifying and Kakashi is tempted to force himself out of the chakra space. He doesn’t, because he isn’t sure if he can make it back a second time.

The dragon stops only inches from him, considering. The tongue is in the air, scenting him. “You smell like lightning.” The eyes flash gold with recognition, similar to the seal recognizing him.
earlier, teeth gleaming in the low light. “Thank you for your care.”

The dragon stretches out further, head drifting around him, coming to rest beside him, forming a semicircle.

“You have questions,” the dragon says. “We will try to answer.”

“What beast are you? Who sealed you inside?”

The dragon chuffs a laugh, and opens an eye, which he realizes is the same shade as Iruka’s. “You confuse the legends of the Bijuu with us. We are similar in ways, I suppose; yet vastly different in others. We are not the fox-boy. As for a name…Mizuchi.” Kakashi thinks back to the dragon tattoo on Iruka’s back and can see the resemblance. Thinks that the dragon may be closer to Iruka than the other man realizes.

“The chakra you possess, Iruka cannot access it.”

“We were sealed apart. It is not possible for control at such a young age. To keep us apart-” the dragon’s eye closes and its body ripples, scales glinting in the light. “The separation strains us, breaks us.”

“So you wish to be free, then?”

The dragon chuffs again, steam coming from its nose and he gets the feeling it is admonishing him this time.

“We are the same.” The dragon shimmers again, scales rippling for a moment and then Iruka is standing before him. Iruka grins and Kakashi watches as the tanned skin changes, becoming the same color the dragon had been, scar shining like moonlight in the darkness. “We have always been one. There is no separating us, no transplanting our power into any other. We were born as one and will die as one.”

“So then-” he pauses, thinking. He looks Dragon-Iruka over, trying to understand. One being, one shared creature. The Kyuubi had been transplanted at least three times in Konoha’s history and most likely before that as well. All of the tailed beasts were the same in that regard, living on when their host died.

“You cannot exist on your own?”

“You are thinking of the Bijuu again.” Dragon-Iruka steps closer, eyes shining. “Humans have tales do they not? Woodsmen that find goddesses bathing? Women that marry soldiers from the stars? Children abandoned and raised by gods? Animals that shed their skins and become human?”

He remembers Iruka talking about the mythology that is Mizuchi. A master of the sea, and godlike creature in its own right. Kakashi knows the theory that bloodlines of these creatures mixed with the chakra of humans and created the abilities that they attribute to bloodlines- it is one things to be aware of such a theory, but another to be confronted with it. Kakashi can’t quite wrap his head around it.

“The two of you were separated?” he asks, because the chakra is the same, he realizes. He’s been staring at the chakra for over a week now, and there is no difference. The chakra had always been the same, just simply out of reach. It hadn’t belonged to anything else. It could very well be the reason that Iruka’s limits fluctuate.

“Seas can be parted.” the voice says, saddened now. “And perhaps it was for the best at the time.
But now—we are dying. Each of us alone.” the crooning noise again, dragon-Iruka looking to the sky.

“So did Iruka’s parents—”

“Our parents,” Dragon-Iruka corrects, eyes back on him. “and we are different. We are true in ways that neither of them were. We are bound to one another in ways neither of them were.”

another step closer to Kakashi, eyes bright.

“I sleep. I spend much time sleeping, these days. Only when he reaches for me do I wake now. It has been over a year since I last woke.”

“Can you talk with him?”

“I do not know.” Dragon-Iruka answers, looking away. “We used to, once. And we dreamed together, but not in years have we dreamed.”

“Could the seal be adjusted?”

“You could try,” the voice does not sound hopeful. The dragon steps closer again and touches Kakashi’s shoulder. Sparks of chakra fly between them and the dragon chuffs again, which looks more like a laugh in Iruka’s form. “But you have kept us awake. Please continue to care for us.”

Kakashi lets his palm flare up with chakra and Dragon-Iruka grins wide. It isn’t any different from Iruka’s own smile.

“Perhaps we could connect again if we can stay awake.”

There is the slight complication that Iruka doesn’t want his chakra, not anymore. And Kakashi isn’t sure he should share it on the long-term. Tsunade has the ability to wield lightning, so it isn’t as if he could become worse off without it if he was not readily available.

“Iruka doesn’t want—”

“We want.” Dragon-Iruka says, the hand on his shoulder squeezing tight. “Truth is not always Truth.”

Underneath the underneath.

And Kakashi knows this. Knows that in a world of misdirection and lies that sometimes truth is not always truth. It is one of the fundamental lessons that the teachers give in school, even someone with as little structured school as him, knows that a masterful liar utters no falsehoods. These words more than anything else, makes him think that the dragon has lived with Iruka for a long time rather than behind the scenes or waiting inside a cage to claw its way out.

“You are tired.” the hand squeezes his shoulder once more and then pushes him back, and Kakashi lets himself fall into the blackness.

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When he comes out of the realm, he can feel the chakra drain slam into his senses. Far more drained than such a chakra trip should make him. But then again, he doesn’t think he’s ever shared space in a subconscious realm before. He cannot place how much time he’d spent on that beach.

Iruka is moving with his previous attack, bringing his leg up for a kick. Kakashi lets the blow slide
over him, ducking with muscle memory before jumping back. He’s ready to continue the fight. He’s not so far gone that his limbs don’t obey him, so he’s ready to see what Iruka can do.

He grins to himself as Iruka lunges for him. The man stops short of hitting him, putting his hands on Kakashi’s arms instead. Kakashi goes to twist out of the hold, but Iruka’s eyes hold him tighter than his hands are.

“Kakashi,” he says, looking him over, recognizing the signs of chakra exhaustion. Kakashi straightens, the grip loosens. He knows that for Iruka no time has passed. Watching that happen to a teammate is a jarring experience, he knows this.

It also is praiseworthy that he noticed so quickly. It is no accident that he is in charge of the Hyuuga, had been in charge of Sasuke on the chance the Sharingan woke early.

He can feel chakra pressing from Iruka’s palms, mild and searching. Not unlike the way a medi-nin would try. It’s different though, the contact sparks something inside of him and he likes the feeling. Wants more of it, even thought he pause in the fight means that weariness starts to settle in his limbs. He waves his hand, the chakra stopping.

“Maa, sensei. Just had a chat is all. I found that window.”

Iruka follows him into the house, heading for the kitchen. Kakashi, for his part, manages to walk himself into the house, although he only gets as far as the couch before dropping down onto it. His dogs squawk like hens and pile themselves on top of him.

The couch is clearly not made for eight dogs, but they sort themselves out well enough, trading bribes of bones and steaks and training schedules and grumble about having to stay on the floor. It’s a welcome distraction as he scratches Bull’s ears. Bull doesn’t bother trying to fit himself on the couch, instead leaning his head on the arm, near Kakashi’s elbow.

“Boss.”

“Just spent a bit more than I’m used to in one shot, is all.” he’s nowhere near completely drained, but it was more than a chidori shot, possibly more than two, in conjunction with the Sharingan and all at once. It’s a staggering amount, a gut punch to his chakra levels.

Iruka is in the doorway, holding a cup of tea.

“Is that for chakra exhaustion?”

“We don’t have that, so it’s just regular tea. Besides, that root tastes like dirt, no matter how much you wash it.”

“It does taste like dirt,” Kakashi agrees as he sips the tea. “Not particularly fond of it.”

“I’ve never met anyone fond of eating dirt, even first years don’t like it. Now glue on the other hand…” he laughs to himself. Kakashi picks up his tea, shifting himself on the couch.

“So you mentioned something about a window?” Iruka says as the dogs start to scramble again, this time to give Iruka enough space on the couch.

Kakashi starts in, trying to tell the story as best he can. As he starts about the beach he can see a glint of recognition surface and pulls back some of the more specific details. If they were supposed to connect- giving out such things might mean less if Iruka doesn’t think of them himself.
Iruka sits there, mind stuck on one word as Kakashi talks. *Dragon.* It’s too much, too outlandish. A subconscious of a beach at night— that isn’t so odd, he dreams of water frequently. *Dragon.* Kakashi clearly went somewhere though, his chakra levels plummeting in the time it took Iruka to counterstrike. *Dragon.* People don’t just lose chakra like that and he certainly doesn’t have the ability to cast a genjutsu that could trap the Sharingan.

*Iruka sits there, eyebrows furrowed and frowning in thought; it is a serious look for the man. Too serious, even. Kakashi dislikes that face, dislikes serious looks on people who are always smiling. Somewhere along his thinking he brings his hand up and rubs the bridge of his nose.*

Kakashi watches him continue to think on it long after the tea has gone cold. He cannot even begin to imagine having something like that with you and then- losing contact? Mizuchi made it sound like something had divided them. Iruka eventually leans back against the couch, rubbing his temples as he looks over at him.

"This isn't one of your excuses when you lose your mission reports is it?” he finally asks, the serious look still there.

"Have I ever told you a story about a dragon, Iruka-sensei? I also don’t know if my storytelling skills are quite up to such a level.”

That breaks the seriousness, Iruka dropping his hands and shaking his head.

“I think you underestimate your ability to tell a story. Maybe when pressured, your idea of a story sucks, but I’ll have you know the story you told about the boat made of leaves is still talked about in the mission office.”

Kakashi does remember that one, actually. A flash of brilliance, that story. Pinnacle of mission room gossip if they still talk about it. The distraction is only momentary however, for Iruka’s eyebrows furrow, the serious look returning.

“So I have a dragon sealed inside me?”

“Not from what I was told. It’s not sealed, not in the way Naruto carries the Nine Tails. You have a seal, but the seal divides you, somehow. That's why no one ever noticed before. The chakra division is a byproduct of the seal. Each piece is indistinguishable from the other. Kyuubi and Naruto each have their own distinct chakras. This was not like that.”

“So we are the same?”

“According to Mizuchi, anyway. I see no reason to disbelieve such words.”

“…did it really call itself Mizuchi?”

Iruka sits, trying desperately to think of this thing inside of him. How does one carry something like this and *not know*? Have a noticeable chakra division for years and not even have an inkling-

But his chakra drains and resulting comas are fairly recent, considering. He’d done plenty of missions before and after making chuunin and the medical opinion was that the seal division had been more fluid as he developed, which was why it didn’t start becoming more than a strangely serious reaction to chakra exhaustion until he was done growing.

Kakashi says something about the tattoo and connecting with Mizuchi and Iruka thinks that he is
probably right. That whatever place he’d been in at the time could have been closer to Mizuchi. But even if that is true, none of these things solve the problem that the seal is bound in blood.

Yet, if they can open communication, if there is some way to connect- then the idea of a failsafe isn’t so farfetched. But the name- the name has always been there. Always. Even the first few inking sessions- it had been a joke almost between him and the artist.

“My tattoo, does it look like Mizuchi?”

“Yes and no.” Kakashi answers, and that is unhelpful. He presses for more information and Kakashi shakes his head. “Everything was covered in a mist of sorts. And the realm seemed contained, even if Mizuchi wasn’t.”

Kakashi withholds the extra details again, because he thinks this may be another piece of this puzzle. And even though he recorded the encounter, he thinks that some of the details are purposely sliding away from him, the mist helping to occlude the image of a dragon. Instead he keeps returning to the moonlight colored scar, highlighting the darkness of the face. Wishes he had spend more time staring at the dragon itself, wanting to see what the scar was on the creature.

“It wasn't locked up and you didn't break out?! You said Kyuubi was in a cage!”

“Kyuubi was.” he shrugs, then adds, “Mizuchi didn't seem dangerous.”

He’s not lying. That first instant, when it lunged- that had been terrifying. But once it had recognized him well- Mizuchi was still dangerous. Even when it thanked him, Kakashi could see danger written in every scale. Always dangerous, but something else underneath. Something that wasn’t going to hurt him.

Underneath the underneath.

“That was-” Iruka huffs, fuming, unable to form words he’s so angry. Kakashi hasn’t seen him this pissed since the the chuunin exams. This is the anger he’s only heard about from the occasional gossip, the anger that is directed at those who turn in mission reports while carrying visible (often still bleeding) injuries.

He doesn’t think he’s ever seen the anger for him. Directed at him, not unlike the exams, but also for him. Worried for him, even after the fact.

But there is something else there, something Kakashi wants to dig at further. He knows he was irresponsible when he realized that Mizuchi was not inside a barrier or a cage.

“It was what?” he questions, and Iruka’s eyes seem to lose the fire as he registers Kakashi’s question. Registers that Kakashi is actually waiting for an answer, willing to continue to conversation.

“Dangerous.” Iruka seems to settle on the word, scratching Uhei’s ears. “We didn’t know what would happen.”

“That is true, and if either of us had considered the reality of encountering something, then we could have planned an escape route. But we did not, so I followed the course of action that best suited me at the time, even at personal risk.”

He seems like he’s justifying the reasons for divergence in a mission; a mission that had deviated from the original objectives to the point where he had to keep the spirit of the mission alive if not the letters on the scroll.
It feels similar, at any rate.

“It was irresponsible,” he continues, “However, we do have some answers. Naruto’s two chakras are clearly different. Your two are the same. I failed to notice, focusing instead on your division. I acknowledge my own personal error in this matter, for I let my own preconceptions color my ideas.”

He had thought that he was more open and yet he’d let his ideas of the bijuu (and specifically the Kyuubi) give direction to his thoughts. An error like that in the field could get you killed.

Iruka seems surprised by the admission as the last of the tension leaves him and he sinks into the couch. “I didn’t really think to consider the possibility of anything actually happening. What else did you learn?”

“When was the last time you spent down your chakra?”

“A little over a year now. It happened not long after Naruto and I were attacked- but it wasn’t as bad. I was put into a medical coma before I fell into my own. The medical opinion was that trying to heal took priority.”

Kakashi pushes himself up, the exhaustion causing a sense of vertigo, he pushes past the dizziness away to turn more fully to stare at Iruka. He’s seen the scar on his back- puts the tiredness in his mind to work. How bad does an injury have to be for it to end up looking like that if he was inside the village’s borders the whole time? He’s obviously healed enough that he can spar.

“That aligns with what I was told. The last time Mizuchi woke was over a year ago. It is quite possible that Mizuchi wakes when you reach for your shared chakra. Or at least that is what happens now.”

Iruka sits back, staring at him. “So saying this is real…what am I supposed to do with this? That I’m part dragon? I still can’t remove it, and it’s tied to my blood.”

Kakashi can feel the drain on the edge of his senses. He could force himself past it, but there is no need, not in this situation. His body seems to realize that, the world going a bit fuzzy around the edges.

“Perhaps you can control yourself better. Chakra exhaustion is something you are familiar with and if Mizuchi could give you notice then maybe-”

“You still have chakra exhaustion on a regular basis.” Iruka says, and he knows it’s petty, but he’s heard from Naruto that Kakashi gets laid up more often than not, especially because the man would take on other higher level missions in-between tutoring Team Seven.

“I still don’t understand the limits of my eye.” he snaps. He is not unfamiliar with chakra exhaustion, but the Sharingan is an always present, mild ache at the edge of his senses, because despite the fact that he trained under Byakugan and Sharingan users, the fact remains that he is the longest living transplant of an eye dojutsu. It is not the same as Iruka, but he can understand the want for a warning- a true understanding of one’s limits. He continues to develop his eye, but it is all trial and error, no one handed him instructions.

This discussion, his annoyance, only proves that he still carries some bitterness over that fact.

“There was a battle over allowing me to keep it in the first place and even once I was granted permission I think most of the Uchiha clan thought that my body would reject it eventually or overdo it and blind the eye. I learned myself. Still learning, actually.”
Iruka stops speaking, turning away. He drums his fingers on his knees. It is a strange thing to consider. Eye dojutsu were notoriously selective, even amongst members of their own clansmen. His tutoring had been contested as a possible breach of security, so he doesn’t doubt that there would have been a fight about allowing Kakashi to keep the eye, when the Uchiha clan has been at the height of their power.

He doesn’t know about this and he wouldn't have learned it if not for this conversation. Kakashi and his eye were a secret of Konoha for many years. Origins of it were still shrouded in mystery, for the most part.

He can see that Kakashi is struggling, pushing himself in ways that he shouldn’t. They are not being attacked, there is no reason for the other man to push himself. The fact that Iruka has is a dragon does not change that. If it is to be believed, Mizuchi has been there all along. A few hours of rest won’t change that. He can wait that long.

“That’s a very teacher-like thing to say.” Iruka says, instead. Admitting that one can still learn, that is. Most like to think mastering something is the pinnacle of knowledge, but knowledge is ever-expanding and he can admit that much, at least.

Kakashi takes the shift in topic, eye crinkling in a smile. “It is, isn’t it? Perhaps you should call me Kakashi-sensei then?”

“You work with forty pre-genin with weapons for a week and then we can discuss it.” He stands, touching the teacup, bringing it to a reasonable temperature once again.

“You wound me Iruka-sensei,” he says in mock hurt as he sips his tea.

Iruka can’t resist, turning in the doorway. “You can call me Iruka,” his smile is mischievous; the one Anko calls ‘gotcha’, “You were inside me after all.”

And now it’s Kakashi’s turn to choke on tea.

Chapter End Notes

All right. These are really my biggest sticking points of like, all.

I can't tell you guys how many times that I wanted to change the name of Mizuchi, but it stuck. It wouldn't leave me like not at all. Nothing else fit. And while Mizuki and Mizuchi might be similar-ish, they really aren't. Mizu in mizuki has nothing to do with water, while Mizuchi does, historically even, which leads to some of my ideas about it as well. So I really hope this doesn't seem confusing to anyone, because it is seriously the biggest and most random thing that I'm worried over in my corner.

Also I'm pretty sure my idea stemmed from some sort of fanart at one point. Pretty sure it was like a happy beach scene and Kakashi and some woman I think with the tattoo on her back and maybe some kids? (Is it still on the internet? Is it a thing? Does anyone know of this? I don't think I dreamed it, cause why a woman and not Iruka??) But yeah, that image probably set the bean of an idea in motion that became this
beanstalk of now up to 30k thing.

Secondly, how I view Kakashi. I see him as someone who knows himself, for the most part. Someone who can come out and say to the three brats that his best friend is on the memorial stone and can turn around and kill two ninja in front of them without bringing any real attention to it except in explaining how he noticed them. He kills and has accepted this as a thing that he does. He doesn't really have a problem with communication, aside from the fact that he doesn't really have people that he wants to communicate with aka the 'I don't want to talk about my likes/dislikes/many hobbies bit'.

FEEEEEEEELINGS. I HAS THEM.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

“One sulky and tired jounin is no competition for forty plus pre-genin.”

Chapter Notes

Yo. Another week, another Wednesday. I want to first thank everyone for their wonderful comments and they make my day brighter and all the good feelings for everyone wherever you are.

Also want to do a shoutout for the awesome fanart that was made for this by jazzy2may. Super intense drawing everyone. It’s linked back at the end of chapter 7.

Y’all spoiling me, makes me want to post other things.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The satisfaction from the impromptu prank fades as he sits on his bed, trying to sift through the day.

*Dragon.*

Not a creature sealed, a creature shared. He is a dragon. It is so impossible he can’t wrap his mind around it.

*Mizuchi.*

He drags his shirts off, turning to look. He stares, taking in the design on his back in the mirror. He remembers spending hours designing the head, knowing exactly what he wanted before he let them ink him. Wanting the body to twist just so-

He closes his eyes, trying to think. He used to be able to use more jutsu, once. Had better control, so much so that Kousuke-sensei in school had joked that water jutsu followed from his fingers. And after graduation, his jounin sensei had never contested Iruka’s abilities to sense water. Had he been in contact with Mizuchi somehow then?

He thinks farther back, trying to remember before. Before the attack, when he’d trained with his parents. He really doesn’t remember much back then, besides the general feeling that he was happy and loved. He knows his parents were both water orientations-

He stares at the water bottle that is a part of his standard gear, hooked against his weapons pouch.

“Now, now. Here.” His father had called, summoning the water from the water bottle at his thigh
and whipping it around his head like a rope before coaxing it back into the bottle, a few drops splashing out at him.

“Again!” Iruka cries, trying to call his own water forward. His own bottle, on the ground, just shook back and forth violently shooting out water now and again and getting the both of them wet as they laugh together.

He’d spent more time with his father than his mother, remembers him more. His mother had more missions, longer ones than his father.

“Tell me a story,” he whines. He missed her, missed her lots, but Dad didn’t make him eat all of his vegetables and let him stay up later and took him to the fish market and told him the best stories. Especially on nights when she was supposed to be coming home.

Mom rarely told stories, and even less at bedtime, they made him ‘too excited’ she said.

“Tell me a story.” he asks again as he sinks into the blankets. “Pleasepleaseplease.”

His father comes to sit on the edge of his bed, thinking.

“I’m not sure. If you stay up, you might be too tired to come to the fish market with me tomorrow.”

“Daaaaaad.”

“Okay, okay.”

He shakes his head, thinking about his father leads him to think of his mother, feeling a headache start to form. It’s some sort of emotional defense, because his mother took more missions than his father, he remembers less of her; memories of her brushing his hair and singing softly always fade into the attack.

_The smoke is cloying, thick. He has trouble breathing as he runs, faster, faster. Faster faster he has to get to his mother._

She'd been in rough shape when he broke through the resistance to get to her, and he remembers being taken away by Kousuke-sensei while clawing to get back to her. Almost all of the water-orientations had fallen that day, trying to put out the trail of fire Kyuubi had left in its wake.

Remembers being alone after their deaths. So alone. The academy had closed for a bit, and he’d been shuffled around, practically homeless most days, before the academy had opened again. No one had cared to look for him, to look after him, because nearly everyone had been touched by the destruction in their own way.

Nearly a year like that, shuffling back and forth from school to places that he slept, houses with people that didn’t really want to care for him, the son of defectors. There’d even been rumors of turning them out, the refugees and defected nin. He knows now that these were just vicious rumors and outlets for hatred, but it had been terrifying then, thinking that he’d be turned out, making himself scarce, not even returning most nights once winter ended.

In the beginning, he’d had things to do at least. He dug through the rubble of their tenement, trying to salvage as much as he could. But once that was over…

He’d spent hours at the stone, some days. It’d been a dark place, that year. Eventually he’d been taken in by Sandaime and his family, although they too had been touched by the destruction of the Nine Tails.
When school did start up again, there was an uneven distribution of students. Many had withdrawn, several had died, and most of the others had been graduated on a progressive timetable and only returning for advanced class sets.

Iruka hadn’t had enough control to graduate on an accelerated timetable, not like most of the others. But his control had been advanced, even then. So he’d been shoved into some of those advanced chakra manipulation classes with some of the others. That was how he’d met Izumo and Anko, despite the age difference.

He remembers dumping frogs in the practice pond for advanced water chakra walking. He grins a little bit at that, because it had been a beautifully orchestrated prank. Anko thought so too, because she’d followed him after class, wheedling him until he’d admitted it and giving him some dango for the effort. With Anko’s help, no one had ever been able to fully pin that one on him.

Remembers very little outside of those special classes, because school had turned into one big grab for attention, full of pranks. It had gotten to the point where he’d show up every day (never missed a day, because he didn’t have anywhere else to be) but he never was really there, either. He failed twice, was on the verge of failing again, making him a late graduate already. He remembers Hiruzen sitting him down, trying to coax him back from the dark.

“You parents left everything they were for you, Iruka-kun. To give you a life here.” he says from the other side of the shogi board.

“Then they should have stayed with me! Forever!”

“That is an impossible promise, Iruka-kun. I wish to protect the village from harm, but I cannot promise that nothing bad will ever happen, that no one will ever be hurt. Or even just one person.”

He deflates a bit then, because he knows that the old man had lost his wife, the Lady Biwako. That Asuma and Kita had lost their mother also. That he isn’t the only one hurting in the village right now.

“They were willing to do anything for you, Iruka-kun.”

He touches his face, unsurprised at his tears. He’d cried back then, cried so hard that it felt like the tears of everything all at once, Hiruzen’s words unlocking him. He buckled down then, managed to barely graduate.

His team-

He closes his eyes. He doesn’t want to think about them now. He remembers trying hard, trying so so hard. To prove to Naoki-sensei that they were good together, that he was more than the dumb prankster that his record said he was.

He’d still spent most of his time at Hiruzen’s, but Naoki-sensei helped him to get housing, helped rebuild the resource network for orphans that had died with Lady Biwako.

And they had been good together, the three of them. Good enough to impress Naoki-sensei to recommend them for the chuunin exams at eleven.

The failed disaster of an exam that people still whispered about.

And then-
More death, losing his teammates, putting his sensei out of commission for a while.

A new group, a ragtag group with another jounin sensei. He thinks that maybe that was when the water jutsu had stopped flowing from his fingertips.

Reuniting with Mizuki, the childhood friend that had never really been a friend. Not the way that Anko was, but she’d already passed her chuunin exam and had started specializing her ability, on the tokubetsu track and drowning in her sensei, Orochimaru.

Mizuki had been all he’d had left- something that reminded him of the time before- of being happy and loved- and Iruka had let him become everything.

He wipes his eyes again, drained. Thinks of what Mizuchi was then, if they were close. An imaginary friend? Wonders how Naruto does it, but then again that probably wouldn’t work anyway. Tries to feel the being inside of him. Closes his eyes.

He dreams of water, swirling around his legs, rising and falling with the tide.

---

Kakashi sits on the couch, finishing up his tea.

Thinking.

A dragon.

He can tell that Iruka didn’t want to believe it, that he was willing to grasp at other straws and other explanations. He was more open to the idea, because you don’t get to live as long as he has if you box yourself in categories of possible and impossible.

He asks for a scroll, which Uhei brings and Guruko brings the pencils, trying to write out some of the ideas as he thinks. He wants Iruka to think on the beach, think on what Mizuchi is and draw it out.

Creatures outside the bijuu.

Kakashi has seen a number of things over the years, knows of the toad sages of mount myoboku, animals capable of wielding chakra. He’d seen pieces of the snake descent of Orochimaru, seen people who give too much of themselves over to summoning jutsu and the end result of a semi-permanent warping of their bodies.

Naruto even possesses whisker marks from too much contact with Kyuubi and its chakra from inside the womb, before it’d been sealed inside him.

If there are creatures that can wield chakra besides the bijuu, the leap to believing that such creatures can influence the world of chakra is an easy one.

He closes his regular eye, thinks of battles that he’s recorded, images flitting by. Thinks back to Kisame, with his blue grey skin and gills. He’s read the reports, reports that call him the bijuu with no tail. As far as their intel is aware, Kisame was not the result of experimentation.

Kirikagure was in a place of flux, their Mizukage defeated. And yet, flipping the attitudes so significantly- one of the names put forth for the next Mizukage was a woman possessing not one, but two bloodline abilities and three chakra affinities- it may be too much of a change. But then again, the Land of Water had always possessed a strange dichotomy in terms of bloodlines and
abilities.

Bloodlines had been purged; but creature-types, those were different, somehow. Abilities that manipulated the body— he knows that the Hozuki line has managed to survive, had achieved status even as one of the swords in the mist during the time of the purges. His thoughts come back to Kisame; the man had not been the first truly strange ninja he’d come across over the years. There had been others with talents, others that possessed elements found in creatures rather than humans. Water seems to possess more of them, now that he thinks on it.

Thinks maybe a dragon isn't so outside the realm of possibility.

He writes some more ideas, but his thoughts are even more disjointed than before as he leans his head back, closing his eyes.

---

Iruka wakes later than normal, sun shining brightly in the room. Uhei is on the bed, stretched out and a scroll is near his head.

“Boss had some ideas for you before he went to sleep. He’s still sleeping,” she informs him as she stretches, stands. She leaves, probably to go check on Kakashi.

Iruka works on the house some more, gets started on breakfast. Starts prepping some things for chakra exhaustion, although the garden doesn’t have much in the way of raw foods just yet, although everything seems to be growing nicely. He thinks about heading to the stream to see if there are any fish worth catching.

He looks back to the scroll, deciding to read it first. He recognizes the messy writing in a way that he never spends time trying to recognize when he works the mission desk. Those missions are routine and the most important thing is making sure that everything is filled out correctly before moving on to another scroll, another mission.

Not much time for handwriting analysis, there.

But Iruka has been part of the fabric that makes up the mission desk for many years now, longer than most. Allowed to read and make his own reports to make sure that each individual mission report matches one another in terms of both key details and minor ones—

Part of Hiruzen’s way, trying to make him feel useful in other ways even if he could be on active rotation the way others were.

And this writing—

It matches the writings of codename ‘Planner’. Iruka understands the need for multiple layers of security in such things. That who he has come to know as ‘Planner’ could indeed be anyone. It helps to prevent security breaches and helps to narrow down the potential location of possible security breaches. Those who deliver the reports to him do not have a name to call them by, they are color coded numbers, repeating in a sequence unknown to him.

He knows more than he probably should now, will have to report this break in security to Tsunade when he returns. To know even a piece of the puzzle that is a jounin’s identity could be exploited.

But he cannot unlearn this, not now.

Planner takes a frequent number of missions each year, almost as often as his body allows,
although that had seemed to drop off some as of late, although Iruka understands now it is because Kakashi took on Team Seven.

He focuses instead on the writing in front of him. It does not describe the removal of enemies or the need for Retrieval or Disposal units. Instead it presents a sort of disconnected train of thought, brought on by tiredness and exhaustion, with the key idea being that Iruka attempt to draw Mizuchi and then Kakashi can try to match those details with what he had seen inside the realm.

The idea holds merit, because he had once spent hours figuring out exactly how he wanted his ink to look. Maybe that encouraged closeness.

It still sounds outlandish, but then again, hadn't he always had an interest in dragons? He had dozens of books on them, knew complex dragon hand seals just because and there was the ink after all. It sounds fantastical, like one of the novels that Hayate had liked to read. He thinks that maybe Hayate and he could have had a good discussion about this, the history and mythology of dragons and their world.

Another friend, gone.

Instead of heading out to the stream, he pulls out a stack of paper and starts to draw.

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When Kakashi finally does wake a few hours later there are several drawings surrounding Iruka at the table, most of them invoking the idea of the dragon he saw yesterday. There are a few that are different, but they are far less detailed and are on the outlying edges of the pile, things he had started drawing in the beginning. Even the scar seems to shine through on several of them.

"How are you feeling?" Iruka asks, looking up from the drawings.

"Better."

"Sit, I'll get you some soup." Iruka pushes the papers into a messy pile before heading into the kitchen, to the stove. Kakashi follows.

"I'm not a fan of most of the chakra depletion foods."

"You've never had mine." Iruka says as he puts the food before him. And Kakashi has to admit, he hasn't. It isn't his favorite, even dressed up like this; but it is better than most other chakra exhaustion foods.

"I have to deal with picky eaters on a daily basis, you know. You should hear the whining when we have to make things in the field. Some of them are very unfamiliar with outdoor procedures. Hyuuga especially, even if they don't say anything and eat it all out of politeness. I don't see the point in some of those rules."

"Neither do I." he agrees. "Dividing and trading rations is acceptable in the field. I wouldn't touch the dried waffle crisps unless I was literally dying of starvation."

Iruka laughs, because they are fairly terrible, although he wouldn't call them the worst.

"This though, is not terrible," he admits. "Still, you spotted the exhaustion almost immediately. I can see why they place the Hyuugas with you."

"It's not much really." Iruka deflects the compliment, turning to get some food for himself. "There's
just something different about people when their chakra is low is all. Same with standard dehydration, actually."

Iruka just notices? Iruka can simply notice chakra exhaustion? Even when personally experiencing it, it doesn’t just happen, it creeps up on you, rather like eventually realizing that yes, you are drunk. People can see it when it’s bad, but if you hold yourself well enough you can fool most people, at least until the point when you can’t stand anymore. But to get it from a look—well that’s on par with Sharingan. Better even, since it doesn’t need chakra to be utilized.

“That is not a common skill.”

“Tsunade-sama thinks it may be something to do with my chakra recognizing chakra levels as a sort of dehydration. Also chakra depletion and physical dehydration often occur simultaneously so there is that.”

People don’t often notice dehydration from a look either, not even water orientations.

"I think you could pass the jounin exams. Track yourself as tokubestu with that skill alone.”

It’s not praise, not really. From Kakashi it is more a statement of fact, but it still feels like praise, somehow. It settles somewhere inside making him flustered more than the banter or innuendo has. He still likes to be praised, to be noticed, even if he's grown out of the desire for any kind of notice good or bad. Kakashi seems to be noticing a lot of things with or without his eye.

"Ah well,” he stirs the soup, trying to distract himself. "I like being a chuunin sensei. Besides there's a threshold requirement for missions even for tokubestu. That many missions would be more than I could balance; it’s hard enough with the mission desk and teaching.”

“I suppose there is that.” Kakashi agrees, “But there are exceptions. It wouldn't be impossible to track, and tokubetsu has more exceptions than standard jounin class. The threshold requirement can be adjusted. Ibiki is too damaged for long term missions anymore and spends most of his abilities with research and interrogation. He doesn’t take genin teams either.”

Iruka knows that tokubetsu does offer more exceptions than standard jounin track. He is even knows of Ibiki from the times he’s been on the chuunin exam board in addition to Anko’s constant complaints about the man. Knows that Ibiki suffers more than just a headful of scars from torture. And yet, tokubetsu isn’t really something he’s aiming for in his career path.

“Still, I don’t think tokubetsu is a good fit for me at this time.” he says, bringing two plates to the table.

Kakashi looks at the food and folds his mask up, seemingly content to let the topic of tokebetsu drop for the moment.

“Any other hidden talents, sensei?”

Back to teasing, then. Iruka can handle that much. He grins as he sits down.

“I’m sure I have a few.”

---

Kakashi doesn’t want to sleep again, so Iruka relocates them to the study, where he can work on
replenishing his seals and scrolls and Kakashi reads his porn. When Kakashi does eventually doze off, Iruka counts it as a win.

“You are pretty good with boss.” Uhei says as she looks Kakashi over, before striding over to the table where Iruka was sitting, ears twitching. Iruka grins at her and scratches behind her ears.

“One sulky and tired jounin is no competition for forty plus pre-genin.” he chuckles to himself a bit as he looks over his drawings. “Where is everyone else?”

“Checking the perimeter. Pakkun and I decided that the fewer of us around, the more chance boss would have to sleep.”

“I still have a hard time trying to understand the idea that I have a dragon inside of me.” he says to no one in particular, but Uhei nudges his hand.

“Boss will come up with something.”

“I’m sure he’ll come up with a number of ideas.” Iruka agrees with her. “But that doesn’t mean my body can handle them. Even now, I still don’t really understand how the lightning chakra helped so much. I guess that’s something for Tsunade-sama to figure out.”

“Did you not like it?”

“It’s not so much that I didn’t.” he answers, more to himself than Uhei. “It helped. More than most of the treatments I’ve had before. I mean Tsunande-sama never got to see me severely drained like I just recovered from, but there have been other times where I had drained myself and just fell asleep. I think that this may be worth it if I can learn how to avoid some of the lesser attacks.”

It also doesn’t help that he liked it, maybe even more than he should have. Iruka is no stranger to foreign chakra, due to his condition. But this sharing, this is different and he knows that there are other aspects of it and he doesn’t want to ask simply because it feels good.

“Boss wouldn’t offer just to be nice.”

“I suppose not.”

Sometimes there was just this cold that crepted up from inside him when he started to recover. It started slow in his fingers and toes, and spread throughout until he was back to what he considered ‘normal’. The lightning chakra had delayed that. Had given him more control than he’d had in a long time.

He wonders if it can be delayed indefinitely because he still doesn’t fully understand the limits of what drains him. The training fight had used some, as did healing, as had the long term henge, but even combined he had spent down more on other occasions with less depletion.

“Not everything in life can be measured as if one is taking a test.” he says to himself as he returns to his scrolls. “Perhaps I will take Kakashi up on it. When he’s better of course.”

Uhei seems satisfied with that, stretching out underneath his chair.

---

Kakashi is annoyed that he fell asleep again as he hears Iruka out in the kitchen, working on dinner. More than annoyed really because this isn’t even that bad in terms of exhaustion. He’s had worse and slept less.
Uhei looks up at him from under the desk as he stands. It seems the dogs had figured out some sort of ‘keep an eye on boss’ shifts. Pakkun may have been Alpha, but this sort of thing is all Uhei.

“Offer your chakra again,” she says opening one eye.

“I’m still drained.”

“He won’t take you up on your offer tonight,” she says, closing her eye again.

“Good talk.” he says as he looks over the scrolls and seals that Iruka has been working on. The work is good, not that he expected any less really. Things like this require precise brush strokes and chakra intent. He looks over the drawings of the dragon again as well and they are not anything to sneeze at either. They all have basic drawing skills for mapping out territory but this is better than that as well.

He heads into the kitchen where a handful of barrier seals are laying out to dry.

“You think the barrier seals need to be replaced?”

“It’ll start raining soon, I think. Better to have them dry and not need them than the other way around.” Iruka says from the counter where he is straining some of the vegetables out of the soup, changing the dish up.

From someone who is used to the horrid taste and texture of chakra restoration bars and the hospital’s idea of a raw chakra diet, he should be grateful. But this is still sub-par to everything else Iruka has made up to this point.

“I’m thinking about going to the river for some fish tomorrow.” Iruka says, and Kakashi looks up from the barriers. “There is only so many times one can eat this stuff after all.”

The river is the northernmost edge of the territory belonging to the house and while not necessarily out of the way- setting up traps and catching fish- that speaks of maintenance. Kakashi can make do with bland, nearly raw vegetables and rice. He hadn’t completely drained himself after all.

“You don’t have to fish.”

“I want to,” Iruka says, “setting traps and checking on them isn’t much of an issue. I should be building up my workout regimen again anyway. I might only be able to net a few that are worthwhile, but raw fish is a great alternative to most of this.”

They start eating and the rain starts up as well. Wonders how in tune Iruka is with weather. Sometimes, he can feel a static charge to the air before a storm and wonders if this is similar.

“When I spoke with Mizuchi-” he starts, stops. Tries again. “Mizuchi thanked me for the lightning, for taking care-for keeping you both awake. Mizuchi suggested that it might keep the two of you awake for longer.”

Iruka looks back at the food, and Kakashi gets the feeling that he’s going to refuse again, Mizuchi and Uhei be damned.

Instead, Iruka gives a sort of half-smile, more embarrassed than any of the smiles Kakashi has seen so far. It also makes him think he’s not the only one unaffected by the sharing.

“Would that be too much trouble? It can’t be easy for you with our natures-”
“I can do that much without issue. Would you be willing to try it again?”

Iruka turns back to his dinner, shifting the food around. He doesn’t say anything for a long while, long after Kakashi is finished. He clears his plate, cleans it and sits back at the table, pulling out his book.

Iruka sits, staring at the plate. Wondering if it will give him an answer. It’s been a long time since he’s considered his chakra a true piece of himself and these past few days have made him want possession of his chakra like he hasn’t wanted in years. He doesn’t want to give that up. Not without trying. He still isn’t completely sure about it, but the reasons against sharing seem weaker every time he thinks on them. Anything that could help him manage this could be worth it.

“All right.” Iruka says, as Kakashi lowers his book. “If that is what Mizuchi said, then I would be willing to try it.”

“But first-” he looks over at Kakashi. “You are in no position to be sharing any of your chakra with me just yet.” He thinks on the coldness in his fingers, ignores it. He’s not taking more from Kakashi just yet.

“I suppose that’s a fair assessment.” Kakashi agrees, putting Iruka on the defense. That seems a little too easy, he thinks. “But this is fairly mild case-”

“Don’t say that, chakra exhaustion-” he starts.

“-of chakra exhaustion, I could even take a mission-” Kakashi continues.

“Mild chakra exhaustion is not a case of the flu! Fucking stupid jounin, the lot of you!” Iruka’s eyes flash with irritation. “Why do you think you have to check in at the hospital on the way back from a mission? Why do you think you can only turn in high level missions to certain staff in the mission room?”

“Bureaucracy.” Kakashi says, as Iruka starts scrubbing his plate like it had personally offended him. He always figured it was part of the defense so on the off chance that someone infiltrated the mission desk they wouldn't get their hands on the higher class reports.

“No, that’s not it. Not entirely, anyway. It’s because only a few of us are trained enough in seeing chakra exhaustion because sometimes you idiots skip over the hospital requirement. Have you ever been handed a second high class mission from official channels when your levels are low?”

He hasn’t. ANBU was different, but the official channels do give days off. Required them, even. Wonders how long that Iruka has been judging ranked ninja chakra exhaustion along with that of his students. Thinks back, wondering how many times he turned in a report without a care for the person on the other side of the desk. Probably even Iruka, even.

“You will not share chakra whether you think you can or not at this point.” Iruka continues, “Just because you have enough to get by does not mean you are well.” he shakes his head, muttering as turns back from the dishes to make tea. “Hiruzen-sama was right, you’d all be dead by now if he’d let you decide for yourselves your level of exhaustion.”

Kakashi agrees with that assessment; he would have let it kill him when he was younger. Would have kept pushing and pushing until he couldn’t lift his limbs from the physical, mental, and chakra exhaustion he put himself through. He still pushes past his boundaries more than he should. Thinks about how often someone kept him in check at the mission desk.

“So what do you consider adequate recovery time then?”
Iruka turns, not bothering to hide his laugh as he steeps the tea.

“Have you ever let yourself recover? And I don’t mean forcibly bound to a hospital bed.”

“That sounds kinky, sensei.”

Iruka flushes, but doesn’t let the question drop. Kakashi doesn’t have an answer. Medics talk consistently about chakra depletion and recovery and Gai sometimes spotted nonsense about health, rejuvenation, and the power of a good rest, but he thinks that it might be from before Rin, certainly the last real advice he’d ever taken to heart.

“Exactly.” Iruka says when he doesn’t answer. “That is how chakra grows, you know. I’m sure that you have even more than you think you have. So I’ll let you know when you have enough to share. Sound okay?”

The smile Iruka gives this time spreads slowly across his face and is only a bit terrifying. It reminds him of the grin that Tsunade gets when he’s laid up to the point where he can’t move and therefore has to undergo whatever tests she finds necessary.

He finds himself nodding anyway.

Chapter End Notes

In case anyone cares about how I view the measures/countermeasures of scrolls it goes a little like this:

Missions that have more than two jounin or multiple chuunin have to each submit their own reports on the same event.

In cases of A and above the missions get turned into specific people, who stamp them with specific marks. (1st set)
These marks translate into a delivery system that then gets delivered (2nd set).
A specific person then looks over the information. So that even minor details (like a snow colored rabbit in summer) is not overlooked. (3rd set),
If anything seems truly out of place, then the scrolls are flagged for a second set of eyes. If the issue is still not resolved then Hokage.

There's no way that any one person can corroborate all such missions on their own, so that's how Iruka and others help out in terms of difficult/elite but not super elite (this mission doesn't exist) missions.

Also because nerd: The first character in Kakashi's name (案) is read as "An" by itself which means plan. However, 'An' is just too confusing, so I went with 'Planner'.

So, there will be more flashbacks in the future. Does anyone have like a rec or idea that did this like super well? I'm not completely fond of the italics, but I think it does what I need for now.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Perhaps teaching isn't really something with a tangible end, like a contest or mission or even one of Gai’s challenges.

Chapter Notes

So yeah. I has no computer for the foreseeable future (2-3 weeks) T_T

UPDATE 8/26: I guess they give you the worst possible time scenario ever because I'm picking it up Monday and super estatic about it! I don't know if I'll edit/make an update for Wednesday but hoping to be back on track soon-ish.

So I guess this will have to tie everyone over for a bit. I will leave the banner note I guess until I have a computer back in my possession. There may be some formatting issues, but I tried my best via phone.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The rain continues and they go out to check the perimeter and barrier seals, but they hold for now, although they mark off which ones will most likely need to be replaced.

Kakashi is fairly certain that Iruka has been giving him foods to make him sleepy. Not drugs, because he’d taste those and has a developed resistance to most of them. But Iruka probably knows the best ingredients to make someone tired without the use of drugs. He sleeps on and off the rest of the afternoon while Iruka continues to draw and replenish his stock of supplies.

He knows that Iruka goes out for his training regimen, the dogs tell him as much. Today Akino is with Iruka as they head up to the river. Apparently, much to Akino’s dismay, the river’s current had been too swift and swollen from the rain to catch anything.

Iruka instead is preparing yet another dose of nutritious and not tasty chakra exhaustion foods.

He looks over his own letter that he’s been crafting for Tsunade and trying to recall everything that he’s seen regarding the swirling blue chakra that Iruka possesses. He’ll send it in with one of his dogs in a few days. Birds consistently traveling in the same direction from the Hokage’s office could be noticed by the visitors. He’ll send it on with Shiba and Urushi later.

Bull snaps his head up from the floor where he’s been spread out for most of the afternoon.

"Boss! Ninja!” Shiba calls and Bull lifts his head. “W’ter sm’ll.” he grunts. Kakashi is out the door and heading through the rain in seconds. Iruka is beside him, eyes scanning the rain. Kakashi watches, Sharingan scanning the landscape, telling his dogs to fan out. Their wards haven’t triggered, which could mean that their friendly or that the ward is just too weak from the rain. He doesn’t see anything, yet. But his eye pinpoints the exact moment that Iruka’s stance relaxes and he
knows who is out in the rain. He was right, he is better than his eye.

"It's a supply run. Tsunade-sama probably couldn't take their whining anymore. I'll put on tea." He sighs and turns to head back to the house.

Iruka doesn't wait for him and heads inside grumbling about stupid friends. Kakashi stays outside, until he can confirm that the two are indeed ninja of Konoha, heads inside.

Iruka has changed already and is drying his hair with a towel and a stack of others, probably for the dogs. He throws one at Kakashi. "Might as well change. They're still a ways off. They seriously have the worst timing, just finished cleaning up dinner and everything. Now what can I make-" he walks back into the kitchen, muttering to himself.

Kakashi changes, the others arriving not too long after. He knows of them; Izumo and Kotetsu are Tsunade’s current assistants after Shizune. One of them also must possess water affinity, otherwise Bull wouldn’t have been so alarmed.

They are also apparently dripping all over the place, as Iruka snaps at Izumo to send the water back outside.

"Told you that she wouldn't have put this house on the list if he wasn't here!" Kotetsu says, smugness in his tone.

"So Tsunade-sama sent you two out here.” Iruka says as Kakashi comes in the other side of the kitchen and sits at the small he usually uses when he watches Iruka cook. They haven't seen him yet, but they do seem distracted by Iruka.

“What do you two want? I hope you actually have supplies for us by the way."

"Making sure you're alive basically." Kotetsu says as he shrugs off his pack.

"Tsunade-sama would have told you I was alive. How long did you beg?"

"He started up three days after you left.” Izumo says.

"Shut up! You weren't any better!” Kotetsu snaps but there isn't any real bite to it, it’s just loud. Reminds him a little of Naruto, actually.

"So who'd she send you off with?!” Kotetsu asks as he pulls out a chair. “There's an official mission scroll but the other name is redacted. Yours too for that matter but she let us know about you. It says jounin training, do you mean it?! I mean I’ve been saying that for years but is it real?"

"You know I couldn't keep pace between teaching and the mission desk and being a jounin with the threshold requirements. It’d be too much to balance, everything would fall apart.”

There it is again, almost the same reasoning. Also worded almost the exact same way. Iruka has already proved himself an excellent at juggling multiple things, including extra teaching lessons in the off seasons and helping out with the chuunin exams. A few missions here and there over the years would place him in tokubetsu territory easily. This idea that he couldn’t even handle a higher status just doesn’t fit.

“That's bull, they make paths for them and Head Teacher Minoru would never let you go, but whatever.” Kotetsu says, sounding bored. “I’m more interested in why she shipped you off then. To avoid the convoy and conference, I guess? Makes sense because they would have chased you down so hard. they're practically stalking Izu and he doesn't have any family history with water.
Your name alone would tip them off and pretty much anyone can confirm that your parents came from water.”

“Does she suspect that one of them came from Kiri?” Izumo asks.

“I have no idea.” Iruka says. “I mean it, Kotetsu, don’t give me that face. I didn’t get a dossier on their history. That’s how they wanted it.”

“Fine, then.” Kotetsu groans. “It sucks without you, lemme tell you. But what I really want to know is who’s out here? Anyone fun? Or has it been total shit show, what with-“

"Mostly boring." Iruka cuts him off. “I mean he knows that I’m not really going to be a jounin, but he’s been putting me through the paces of training. Let me get some tea.” Iruka’s grin is fierce and only bit terrifying as he enters the kitchen for the tea. It’s similar to the look Naruto gets when he has a prank planned. Iruka pours out four teacups and leaves one for him.

It’s really up to Kakashi to decide what he wants to do. He takes the cup and lets Iruka plan his prank, interested.

"I hope you keep him on his toes, at least. Most jounin think we’re one-trick wonders.”

"It's been all right.” Iruka says as he sits at the table.

“Where is he by the way?”

“Checking the perimeter with the dogs. We had wards in place. I’m sure he’ll be along. Thanks for the scare by the way.”

Kakashi grins, sends Shiba into the kitchen. The dog walks to Iruka, sitting down beside the table. “Almost done with the check.” Shiba lays down under the table and stretches out.

“Inuzuka dog.” Izumo says and he’s not wrong.

"It's not Kamu is it?! That would be super awkward after you didn't even give him-“

“That isn’t Aomaru and no, it’s not Kamu.” Iruka cuts him off again. Kakashi decides he likes the openness of Kotetsu. It also reminds him of Naruto. He also has some interest in this story about Kamu. He’s not too familiar with Jounin that are younger than him. And Inuzuka were good partners for missions but rather forgettable in his opinion. They did a good job, worked well with his dogs and that was about all he could say of them.

“Did you end up with any of them?” Kotetsu asks.

“No,” Iruka snaps. “And even if I had, I’m not you.”

“Ouch.” Kotetsu groans. “And it’s not like getting laid on a boring restocking mission instead of sleeping is that bad in the scheme of things. I mean it’s not like we would try it in enemy territory. Although I remember that time with the-“

“Shut up!” both men yell this time and Kakashi wants to know that story.

It is interesting that Iruka apparently knows more than a few jounin that could have been his partner on a mission like this. Jounin that Iruka knew well enough to sleep with, even.

He knows that Iruka works at both the school and mission office. He probably knows dozens of people. And because he has a mostly-permanent rank and job station, he has more opportunity to
have relationships. To make attachments with other people.

He really had been out of the loop of the general population of the fabric that made up Konoha, perhaps too long, he thinks. Especially when he can’t put the newer faces to names. Too many solo missions, even after his deactivation.

“So who is it really?” There aren’t too many active jounin Inuzuka without genin teams right now.”

“I doubt you know the whole roster of possibilities.”

“Oh man! You’ve got the face! So you totally have someone good then.” Kotetsu laughs and claps his hands together. “Wanna bet on it?”

“I bet that you won’t guess. Not at all.” Kakashi can feel the smugness in Iruka’s tone and wants to laugh.

“And what can you give me?” Kotetsu laughs again, playing along.

“I’ll give you whatever you want.” There is a promise in Iruka’s voice, one that makes him think that Iruka does mean whatever. He can guess at which look Iruka has now, but it isn’t directed at him, which cuts a bit, but he likes the sound of it anyway.

“Someone really rare then.” Kotetsu laughs again. “But not someone that we’ve never seen before, right?”

“Oh, you’ve definitely seen them around. I’ve yelled at them in the mission office even.”

“That’s not much of a limit, you do know. You yell at basically everyone, especially on bad days. Which happens a lot since—”

“I’ve never had a bad report from Gai-sensei.” Iruka says, perfectly poised to cut off Kotetsu anytime Kakashi thinks he’s going to learn something else. It’s probably a teacher thing, which is annoying. “Perhaps it has far too much detail, but never poorly done.”

“Ok so that’s one person that it can’t be.” Kotetsu rolls with it, which is even more annoying than being cut off. “Is it at least a person? You get ANBU reports sometimes.”

“It’s not ANBU.” Iruka sighs. “And I don’t get the reports, I just am authorized to carry them to the hokage. Like you two are now.”

Which is pretty high up the chain in mission room report receiving, even Iruka has to realize that.

“Ooooooooooh, Izumo’s thinking!” Kotetsu calls. “I mean an Inuzuka dog and rare level– I give up. That clan is pretty good with their reports for the most part, can’t says they stick out in my mind. Unless they eat out of my lunchbox. Seriously, it’s like the worst.”

“It’s cause you like your meat rare.” Izumo says as he laughs with Iruka over Kotetsu and the lunchbox escapades.

“You’ve a guess?” Iruka asks.

“When you’ve got that look, it’s not worth trying to bet.”

“I find the fact that you even consider betting rather upsetting, Iruka-sensei. I don’t think teachers should condone such behavior.” Kakashi says as he steps into the room.
But he understands what Izumo meant now. The look in those eyes is terrifying in their glee. More than he’s seen from Naruto even.

Kotetsu is laughing so hard now he’s doubled over on the table. Izumo just seems stunned, looking back from Shiba to him and back again. That is a confusing bit of information because Shiba is Inuzuka. But just because that is true, doesn't mean that Kakashi has to be an Inuzuka. There are circumstances of other ninja getting Inuzuka partners. The clan is one of the more open in that way, especially when it is the dog choosing the ninja.

“You got me, oh man! But really, Iru. Who is he?”

“I can’t think of anyone bold enough to henge as me on a mission.” Kakashi says as he leans across the counter and looks at Iruka and the other two. He knows of these two, has seen them working for the hokage. They’re an interesting duo and he can tell that Izumo has the water chakra orientation so he can see where Iruka would know him even if they are older. Chakra type elemental classes are small and span a wider range of ages because most children don’t always figure it out while in school, although Iruka had noticed some of them, because teaching fire skills to pre-genin is a terrible idea unless that is your affinity.

“…wait. Really?” Kotetsu says as he catches his breath. He looks back and forth and when no henge dissipation comes, he leans back into his chair. “Well then.” he looks back to Iruka. Then back to Kakashi. Back to Iruka. “Wait, wait, WAIT.”

“I’m not answering that question. Do not go there.” Kotetsu opens his mouth.

“But what if-”

“That is definitely an Inuzuka dog.” Izumo says.

“Shiba is from Inuzuka stock.” Kaksahi agrees. “And so is Urushi.” he enters the kitchen from behind Kakashi and Izumo’s eyes go wide.

“You took them on after their partners died.”

It’s a bit surprising of a leap, but then again, perhaps not so surprising. They had names when he took them on and most of Iruka’s age group wouldn’t have ranked high enough to have been behind the barrier when the Nine Tails attacked. Their pervious owners could have very well been in their age group.

“THAT IS SO FUCKING CUTE.” Kotetsu shouts as he lunges for Izumo. “I love happy endings.” he grins. “of all kinds.”

“Get off you lech.” Izumo gives a halfhearted shake but Kotetsu doesn't let go, resting his chin on Izumo’s shoulder. Izumo doesn’t take his eyes off Urushi for a long moment, but Kotetsu is already moving on, dragging one of the packs to the table.

“We’ve got mail for you.” he says, dropping the pack. "You should have heard Izu lecturing me about taking them along but I checked; this house hasn’t been on the restock roster for at least two years so I knew you had to be out here.”

All those were letters? For Iruka? They'd barely been out three weeks. Not even.

"I figured they'd be piling up.” Iruka says as he heads back into the kitchen, checking on the rice and chopping up some vegetables. “How many days do you have? I’m also assuming that you brought us some real supplies as this is an official mission.”
“Two. We had to hit about half dozen other safe houses also. And yes, we have the standard provisions. Brought extra fruit even.”

"Thank the First." Iruka says, which is interesting. They’d already gone through what they’d picked up in town. Kakashi knows from Yamato that fruit is far pickier to grow on an advanced timetable than vegetables.

"Figured you could make me some candy with the extra I brought."

“You shouldn’t be asking him to make things for you, he’s on mission.” Izumo says.

"Maybe I will make some." Iruka laughs.

Iruka seems content with digging through the pack, looking though the provisions and the letters, occasionally walking back to the kitchen to prep something else. He returns with a large bowl of water.

"He's part hoarder." Kotetsu says from Kakashi’s left. "He can't ever get rid of anything, not really. That's why he started asking for recipes years back. He has enough mugs to stock his apartment, the mission room break room and three of the teachers lounges. He's working on the fourth. It’s why he started cooking. Not that I mind because Iruka makes a damn good meal. Better than you at any rate.” he turns to Izumo.

"Shut up." Izumo mutters. "I could get better at it if I didn't spend my free time-"

"Screwing each other? I know."

And it’s kind of hilarious to watch the color drain from Izumo’s face as he shakes his head.

"You don't just say things like that out loud, Kotetsu." Izumo whines but Kakashi can tell he's pleased.

"Oh!" Kotetsu grins and starts digging into his flak jacket. "I guess this works out then-" he holds out a book. "I mean this is like we basically got it for you."

The.
New.
Icha Icha.

This was unexpected and great.

Unexpectedly great.

“One of the houses was pretty close to the capital and we went for-“

“Dinner. We went for dinner.” Izumo cuts him off.

And Kakashi thinks that maybe it isn’t a teacher thing, but a self-preservation-against-Kotetsu-technique developed by both Iruka and Izumo.

“We did get dinner,” Kotetsu admits, “We got it for Anko but this works out better I think. The delivery schedule to us isn’t that far off.”

Kakashi takes the book and doesn't feel the least bit bad about Anko not getting it. They didn’t have much of relationship besides a mutual appreciation for the novels. This would even out the ending she’d ruined a few books back. He likes Kotetsu even more now.
Iruka is back, with some plates this time and looking through the tins of dried fruit again. Kakashi waves his book.

"You want a read, sensei?"

"Iru totally reads them" Kotetsu stage whispers, “although he thinks if he doesn't buy them himself it makes it better, somehow.”

“First forbid if I kept those in my apartment. I have students that visit me on the regular, you know! It’s hard enough keeping them reigned in them as it is.”

“Don’t let that fool you, he hides them under the loose floorboards-“ Kotetsu continues talking to Kakashi.

"I don't think you should get any of these when I finish with them.” Iruka says, gesturing to the tins.

"Noooooooo." he cries, "I'm sorry, Iru.”

Iruka moves on, attention back on the bowl. “What is the status of the conference then? We’ve been out of the loop, obviously.”

“It’s been such a pain I can’t even-” Kotetsu lets out a long suffering groan as he sinks his head into his arms.

“This thing is literally the worst. They keep coming round to our apartment for Izumo even though he's clearly not from water. Also, there’s the fact that happy stable relationship means shit to them.”

"They've gotten a few refugees back,” Izumo continues as Kotesu mutters and grumbles to himself for a moment. “but most are stable enough in their lives to not bother risking it or have been here long enough that they’re like you and were basically born and raised here. There is still a few more weeks before the terms of the conference are over.” Izumo adds. “And we think that Godaime-sama will grant a request for an extension if they ask, considering the issue with the succession of the new Mizukage. They’re still in talks about appointing a new one.”

“We are the most reasonable ally,” Iruka says, “From what we know they lost a lot of their high ranked ninja to defection, but one cannot rule out the possibility of attack. This doesn’t seem like a move from what we knew of their power structure and dynamics. It is also worrisome if they are planning an attack.”

“There is some concern to that, but the guard that watches them hasn’t found them in compromising places or in places that have no purpose to their stated objective.”

Iruka makes a thoughtful noise. “Then why would they have such an interest in water orientation? A few refugees won’t make much difference.”

“It really seems as if they are trying to foster a sense of goodwill.” Izumo says and Iruka nods.

It isn’t the strangest thing, Kakashi knows. Power shifts result in such things. And The Land of Water doesn’t have the cohesiveness that Konoha does. If this was something more devious masquerading as a goodwill effort would be nearly impossible for them.

“Any news of Ame and the civil dispute?” Iruka asks, and Izumo shrugs.

“Nothing from official channels. The two of us weren’t on the roster to travel for this upcoming set
of chuunin exams, but the roster submitted shows that they sent out another seven teams.”

“That makes four times now.” Iruka says. “Pretty stable for a supposedly unstable village.”

“I’m sure it’s being looked into, but I don’t have anything to tell you about it.”

“Me either.” Kotetsu cracks his knuckles. “But I can tell you that the elders are also being fucking obnoxious. They were almost as bad as the convoy for a bit, although Tsunade-sama has halted they inquires from that angle for the time being anyway, thank fuck. I don't know if I could handle both foreign nin and old farts looking at us like it's a phase and trying to set us up with people for children.”

Kakashi glances at Izumo and guesses that the elders are pressing a bit harder than Kotetsu has let on. Water chakra is rare enough in a country with many earth and fire types. Rarer still since the attack of the Nine Tails. He thinks that Iruka is probably on their radar as well. Keeping something like his condition secret, that isn’t easy. Not that he expects any different when he returns to Konoha. They’ve been after him for years and now they have a law.

For now it’s just heavy handed suggestion but Kakashi knows that they could very well make it a mission to conceive and birth a child. The very idea rankles him.

"How are the classes?” Iruka asks.

"I took on Natsumi for the time being. She wants to be a part of the next set of chuunin exams and wants better control of her water chakra."

"She's been all right, then?"

"I mean the recruiting forces have been after her too, but she's the same in the same situation I am so I don't think she'll be leaving Konoha. She’s pretty strong in her own right, you know that.”

“I do.” Iruka agrees. He’s got this satisfied look, proud of his student.

"And don't worry!” Kotetsu says, "we've been continuing your class about consent so you don't worry about that.” Kotetsu waves his hand. "It's important for the kids to know that the elders throwing around the word ‘duty’ doesn’t make it an excuse."

Iruka nods, and Kakashi can see some of the tension in his stance relax somewhat.

It's a interesting idea to be sure. Kakashi had certainly never had a real conversation about consent until it had nearly smacked Minato in the face. He knew there were classes now, but graduating so early didn't leave much time for such things.

The mindset of most was that if you could kill and be killed for konoha then such things as drinking and sex were up to your own decision making abilities.

Except that was flawed thinking in and of itself, he can understand that much. Thinking with your dick could get you killed, but as a teenager, he really hadn’t known any better. Wonders if it was the same for Iruka.

And he really hadn't thought about teaching his students that lesson ether. At least not yet, anyway. He’s glad that Iruka took up that job before he’d even had the thought to bring the topic up.

Not that it mattered, since there wasn't much of a team seven left to teach.
"Well that's good at least." Iruka said as he started shifting through the letters. "Natsumi probably needs the training, but let her know that there are other ways to use her chakra than battle. Water adapts and she hasn't found which way hers flows yet. I may have been too hasty showing her my water whip…"

"She's moved on from that. I think her seeing how difficult that is for me was good for that. We're working on the puddle body flicker."

His grin lights up his whole face in a way that Kakashi doesn't think he’s seen yet. It’s obvious that Iruka truly loved teaching in a way that Kakashi has only just learned to appreciate.

He sees the piles that Iruka is making, and can already tell that there are a few letters from Naruto and Sakura as well. A few other multiple letter writers it looks like, people he doesn't know. But he's not tearing into them, simply organizing. And then he stacks them back into the large envelope.

It's a bit infuriating. A lot infuriating, actually. Kakashi isn't one to care about ignoring others to read (he carries his book around for more than one reason, after all) and he wants to know if Naruto has anything to say about the toad sage. Thinks that Naruto could give enough clues about their location so that Kakashi can get a letter to Jirarya.

Iruka snorts, shakes his head. He stirs the water again and starts pulling out the pieces which are now full and delicious looking, almost as if they'd just been picked.

He takes a piece of orange, biting into it.

"You rehydrated it." Iruka seems to have endless adaptations of his abilities and this is something that speaks to finer chakra control than most people have.

“Almost like it came off the tree yesterday. Lemme tell you, it helped stretch out the budget like by a ton when we were younger.”

“Izumo can do it too.” Iruka says, looking back to the bowl.

“Nowhere near as easily,” Izumo points out, “and if you have water nearby, you can do it to just about anything. It’s an amazing skill.”

Iruka is flustered, taking the plates of fruit back into the kitchen and moving on with whatever he’s cooking. Kakashi gets the feeling that praise does that to the chuunin.

But Izumo is correct. It is an impressive skill that speaks of minute chakra control.

The three of them continue to talk for a while and Iruka laughs and chats with them freely. Kakashi reads his new book, listening in as they talk about teaching schedules and what the children are doing as Iruka returns to the kitchen several times to work on whatever he happens to be cooking.

Kakashi knows that the pair of them are A-rank chuunin, but Kotetsu seems even more observant than one would guess, eyes flickering to Iruka every time he moves, noticing Iruka's use of chakra.

"You had an attack,” he says, leaning forward. "The training pushed you over?"

"It was a combination of things, really." Iruka confirms.

"Must have been right after you arrived then, if you're up and walking about. You didn't bother to share did you?” he might be directing the question at Iruka, but now he’s looking at Kakashi.
"He did not." Kakashi says as he closes the book.

"That's no good Iru." Kotetsu's eyes are sharp, back on him and doesn’t seem swayed by the sheepish smile Iruka has. "It's fucking terrifying to watch that happen and have no idea. I mean the first time we saw it you really didn’t know either so that’s different."

"It was rather sudden. You know my limits fluctuate-"

"Still terrible to keep that to yourself. Dangerous, also. That isn't a secret weapon or some trade secret. It could be a potential liability in the field for us if our fellow shinobi don't know. Could have blown this civilian thing you’ve got going on."

"You're right of course." Iruka says as he looks over at Kakashi. "Hoping that it won't happen hasn't ever stopped it before. I should have said something more regarding this issue and I apologize for that."

Kakashi nods, taking the impromptu apology.

"But how are you?" Kotetsu asks, sharpness gone. It's been over a year and last time you almost died after that fucker Mizuki."

"It was better this time, obviously because I didn't have a fuma shuriken in my back for starters." Iruka’s eyes are flash with anger but it drains out of his face almost as quickly as it flared. "Thank you for your concern but Tsunade has communicated with me and has some theories. Kakashi's abilities have helped as well."

He likes that phrasing so much better than any reference to his eye he think he's ever heard. Perhaps his chakra as well.

"That's an idea, with the eye and all. But that also means she didn't see you. There was no way for her to leave, not now."

"She did not see me." he agrees, starting to pull the fruit out of the bowl. But it’s different now, and Kakashi sees that he’s candied it. "We have some ideas that I'll write for you to take back to her."

"You won't tell us?"

"Not yet."

Kotetsu groans, but takes the answer, looking at the candied fruit, which Iruka has started to pack them back up in the original containers.

"You said you have one more safe house on your way back?" Iruka says as he closes one of the tins.

"Just the standard overnight bunker on the south edge. And I didn't say.” Kotetsu pouts.

Iruka grins. “That's always on everyone's list because it gets such frequent use. There’ll still be enough for you. However, this one is for the bunker." There’s a small handwritten note on it and Kakashi blinks as realization comes to him.

"You stock the safe houses with gifts."

"Nothing so extravagant as that-"

"He totally does!" Kotetsu cuts him off, grinning. "One of our first missions together was on my
birthday and it got him thinking and since he's always been good at that and they can last pretty damn long-he makes presents!"

Kakashi has indeed been on the receiving end of such a gift, wondering who would waste their time on something they wouldn't get acknowledged for but now that he knows it's Iruka-

He still doesn't get it.

"Don't be telling everyone now, Iru wouldn't ever be left alone-"

"Like you leave him alone as it is." Izumo says.

The conversation winds down and Iruka sets up the couch for himself which Kotetsu and Izumo take the bed after only minimal arguing. Kakashi gets the feeling that Iruka knows how tired the two must be if they packed the schedule with enough time to give them two full days here.

"They might be exhausted, but I think you might not want to head upstairs for a bit anyway. They don’t waste opportunities, those two."

Kakashi nods as he comes to sit on the couch taking a candy. He eats one.

"You don't sign them." he says, because he still doesn’t get it.

"That was never the point. We have busy lives, we lose people-some more than others. Things like birthdays and holidays aren't free days off work for us like civilians. I like to think that such a gift could make you think about those that could be sharing that special day with you. Sometimes, that’s the best part of a gift. That's why I don't sign them."

And Kakashi stares at the candy. There had been times when he'd been at the safe houses with others-remembers Gai and Genma in an ever increasing game of launching them at one another and catching them in their mouths.

Remembers sitting in another safe house, alone, staring at the container. He supposes he did think of what would have happened if the four of them had come across a jar like that in one of the safe houses once upon a time. He had thought of Obito, Rin, and Minato fighting over the candy while he watched and had a good time enjoying their antics.

To think of someone else like that? Someone that you don't even know and just want them to be happy for a moment-

It is a nice feeling.

"And you?"

"That recipe was one of only a few my mother taught me. We didn’t spend-she had more missions than my father- things like cooking and-" he shakes his head. “Making these makes me think of making them together. I've shared them with friends and students and many others over the years and I've made many memories that way, so I enjoy making them and making memories with them. Even now, sharing them like this, it's a nice memory isn't it?"

Kakashi supposes it is as he looks at Iruka. His hair is undone and the ends settle around his shoulders. He likes the look, the relaxed nature of it. Kakashi doesn't know if he's been that relaxed in a long time.

He wants. The fact twists inside his gut and he looks away.
Iruka opens the pack again and pulls out Naruto's letters. "I wonder how his training is going?" he
looks them over, chuckling to himself. "He calls Jiraya-sama ero-sennin."

"That doesn't really surprise me."

"He's doing well. Misses Ichiraku's."

"They make good ramen."

"He's dragged you along then?"

"Several times."

"Sounds like him."

"Anything else?" He asks because he wants to know even if he's not his teacher anymore.

"Actually..." Iruka snorts as he pages through the letter. "I've a page for you. Thought I was the
best person to deliver it, apparently."

He passes over the last page and Kakashi takes it, scans it over. It's pretty much the same thing he'd
written Iruka (although without as much lamenting over ramen and Iruka's cooking).

See you soonish, Kakashi sensei.

Naruto writes at the bottom of his letter and he stares at the writing. Naruto still considered him a
sensei even after the collapse of team seven?

He wonders if being a teacher is really something that one 'finishes'. He’d thought that maybe
when one of them became jounin, like his team, but he wonders if that was really an 'end', because
Minato had kept up with both of them after Obito died, and didn’t leave Kakashi alone after Rin
either. Asuma still talks with his old genin teams on the regular.

Perhaps teaching isn't really something with a tangible end, like a contest or mission or even one of
Gai’s challenges. Iruka has kept on reading his letters, leaving Kakashi to his thoughts.

"When does one stop being a teacher?"

Iruka looks up from the letter.

"That one's easy. Never. Even after watching them grow up and follow their own ninja path or not,
get married and have children of their own- it never really leaves you. At least, not for me."

"That sounds more like a parent than a teacher."

"It sort of does doesn't it? Parents never fully graduate from their job either. Well that's my ninja
way of teaching I guess."

It's a good way. Far too many children are missing a parent or even two and being on active duty
takes away from that as well. Having a teacher fill in the gap, even a little-well that seems like a
good thing. He doesn't even know if he remembers any of his academy teachers' names and he
certainly never spent the thought or the time to write them letters.

"I rather like your ninja way, Iruka." He watches the skin flush, but it stands out more near the
sensitive skin on his scar.
"T-Thank you." He murmurs in response and looks back at his letter. Kakashi grins to himself. Being complimented for his efforts get him like this?

"I think that your style of teaching is good for the village." he adds, watching Iruka redden further. The best part of this is there is no lie to his words. He's spent a long time watching the village and the chuunin exams only confirmed that this group of students are far more prepared than he's seen before.

"I try." he says, busying himself with another letter, holding it up as if to decipher some writing. He could be doing just that, but it also hides his face.

"You do more than that," he says, "Despite these conferences, despite the treaties, another war is coming. More than Orochimaru, more than scheming elders. And I think these kids have a better shot than we did to make it and grow old."

And that kills the blush somewhat, but Iruka's eyes are serious as he lowers the letter. Most people don't even want to consider the possibility of more war, more destruction.

"I hate to think it, but you may be right. The nations are not balanced and that instability could very well topple us into each other like dominos."

It's a good assessment because while Konoha does have measures in place for the development of future generations there are children who don't get a day of formal education or assessment. Children that slip through the cracks and are picked up by people to be used, people who see their talents and take them for their own ends, like Yamato and several other members of Root Foundation.

"You surprise me," he says, "Most do not want to consider the possibility of war."

"I don't want to consider it. I must if I want as many of these children to live as possible."

"Pragmatic."

"I have to be." He sighs and the look in his eyes is full of loss. Kakashi knows that feeling, spends time mediating on it every day that he can.

"Sometimes." he stops, looks back at the letter.

"Sometimes what, Iruka?"

"It's hard sometimes. To look at my class of kids and know some of them aren't going to make it. Even if you try your hardest-well that isn't always enough. Sometimes the mission has complications, sometimes the client lies-" he looks at Kakashi, eyes wet. "I never thanked you for bringing them back."

"You don't have to." That was always an unspoken part of the job, to come back as safe and whole as possible.

"But I want to thank you." he says, the emotion in those eyes bowls him over. He knows they always wish them safety and thank them for returning, but this is different. He wants, wants that emotion for him. Iruka whispers his thanks and Kakashi leans forward.

"You are most welcome." he says, presses his mouth against Iruka's. The lips are chapped and the body slack, he clearly wasn't expecting this. There is a slightest pause as Iruka takes in what's happening and then he tilts his head, slots their lips together.
It's slow and satisfying and wonderful. He lets himself get lost in the sensation of kissing, leaning in further. He wants like he hasn't had in a long time.

Iruka hands are sliding up his flak jacket and Kakashi wants it off- wants to feel those hands on him. Iruka slides one hand further up and he tenses; it's too close to his neck. Iruka slides the hand up further running through his hair. Kakashi feels a jolt of static from the movement and he bets Iruka does as well.

Iruka pulls away, huffing a laugh. "That was interesting."

"Too many lightning based attacks I think."

Iruka laughs, breathless, runs his hands through his hair again, sliding down until his fingers tease along the edge of his bunched up strip of mask, following the line of it, before moving past it, fingers trailing lower to follow the line of the scar along his jaw.

It does something to him inside, the respect and boundaries that Iruka has regarding his mask. First the scroll-screen, the makeshift bandanas, even now where most people would demand for removal-he shifts, turning to the side. Iruka moves with him and lays back, his legs resting on Kakashi’s hips.

Kakashi reaches up and pulls down, letting the mask pool around his neck. He cups Iruka's face with one hand, thumb on the edge of the scar. He brushes it along the edge and Iruka turns his head into it. Kakashi sweeps his thumb across the bridge of the nose and Iruka shivers.

He turns, catches Iruka’s lips again, gasping as Iruka dives in, surging his body up and tugging him down, sinks his teeth into his lower lip.

Kakashi isn’t unfamiliar with sex and the fact that Iruka isn’t afraid to push at him, an elite jounin is arousing. At the same time, he isn’t sure that he wants something like this. This feels like too much, too desperate, too similar to the life affirming *we-didn’t-die-thank-the-fucking-First* variety. That isn’t what he wants.

He pulls back to catch his breath, noticing his flak jacket is already undone and Iruka is arching up to slide out of his as well. Iruka manages to slide his out from under him and pushes it to the floor before reaching for Kakashi’s, which hangs at his elbows. It’s awkward and bulky and heavy when not distributed across his chest. He lets it fall to the floor as Iruka’s hands dig into his shirt, trying to drag it up.

“Kissing is nice.” he says as he leans back in, brushes his lips over Iruka’s before kissing him again, a softer one. He really doesn’t want to do anything else right now even if he is half-hard and Iruka’s hands feel warm and solid. The hands curl into the fabric as Kakashi continues to kiss him, slow and searching.

“Just nice?” Iruka murmurs, looking up at him. He’s stopped trying to yank of the shirt, grip relaxing.

“Very nice.” Kakashi amends. Iruka sinks back into the couch, breathes out a laugh as they kiss again.

He sits back, places his hands on Iruka’s hips. The dark shirt has ridden up some, allowing him to feel the chakra that is embedded into the second shirt and something sparks, not unlike the static shock from earlier.

"Is that a lightning affinity thing?"
“I do wield lightning on the regular and I think I carry more of a charge because of it,” he moves his hands away, initial shock fading. “Maybe it is like that to a low degree for most,” he traces his thumbs along Iruka’s hips again as he feels a smaller jump “but one gets used to such things.”

Something changes; he can feel Iruka tense underneath him. He leans back, taking most of his weight off Iruka, although Iruka doesn’t make a move to separate them completely. He looks the man over, wondering what just happened. He might be good at reading someone to assess their threat level, but emotional levels are something completely different.

“What is wrong?” he asks, because he can tell something is wrong and asking is the best way to learn something like this. Iruka may have been able to notice his neck, but he’s not quite sure what resulted in this change.

"No that’s-well-" Iruka stumbles over his words, stops. Breathes in and out, in and out, before he brings his hands up to settle on Kakashi’s hips, thumbs brushing underneath the shirt and sensing Kakashi’s own chakra threaded protection.

"This has water chakra threads in here.”

Iruka wants to move past it, whatever it was. Ignore it. Perhaps a memory, something that was not brought on by anything he did. He’s had those moments as well.

“How do you not want to talk about it?”

"There’s earth chakra in here also.” Iruka says, more focused on the chakra threaded protection than answering the question, which is an answer all on its own, Kakashi supposes.

"A friend made mine.” he agrees as Iruka relaxes under him again. “My guess is you made your own.”

"Yes, it’s a good chakra exercise that can be spread out without ruining the project.”

"I have no idea how I never heard of you before." Kakashi leans back over Iruka, letting his hand settle against Iruka’s chakra shirt. There’s another minor shock, but Iruka doesn’t tense up from it. “It seems that everyone knew you. At the exams- he shakes his head, “the way Sandaime got pissed after you yelled at me should have gotten me to notice sooner, I think.”

"He did not."

"Asuma joked that his dad was going to cut my paycheck. I had messed with the wrong ninja, apparently.""

"Well you did." Iruka laughs now, the last of that look gone, his hands inching up a bit further Kakashi’s back.

"I know that now."

“I didn’t think they were ready.”

“Why is that? You trained them yourself.”

“Training and measurable experience are two different things.”

“They are. However, I believe there was more to your objection than just a list of missions completed.” Kakashi had thought it had been just a reaction to Naruto, but only at first. Iruka had
become increasingly agitated as the three of them recommended their teams for examination.

“I just-well. There was more to it than that.” he agrees, pressing his lips together. “Just-I attempted my first chuunin exams at eleven within a year of graduation.”

"You didn't pass."

The destruction of the village and the loss of multiple ninja would have pushed some of the graduations and exam dates up, Kakashi remembers that much, the push to fill in gaps that Konoha had lost. Yet, even with a loss in fighting strength, Konoha had not been at war. There had been border disputes, covert missions, and assassinations, but no outright war.

It had still been peacetime, officially. Kakashi knows that only severe threats push the graduation dates up. At any other time, the earliest one could graduate was nine. But he’d been born during a war and came into his own during another one so exceptions were made, rules broken.

And Iruka’s education would have been disrupted because of the attack- Kakashi remembers that part of the school building and training grounds being rebuilt. Eleven would be an understandable graduation age, considering the circumstances. Eleven would also have been early for chuunin recommendation.

"I never said I did." he snaps, defensive; drops his hands. He does move to sit up this time and Kakashi moves back, giving him the space to turn away.

“I know that things were different when we were younger, but at that time-they were-I was not thinking clearly at the time I made my argument. I know that now. Still, it had been less than a year since they'd graduated. I couldn’t believe that all of them were all ready for the challenge of the exams. I had a hard enough time believing that Team Three was ready.”

“Gai’s team? So all the rookie genin were yours at some point. Gai told me about your efforts with Lee.”

“The school makes exceptions in other categories of jutsu arts, which the education board seemed to forget in Lee’s situation. I was there to remind them. Repeatedly. But my taijutsu wasn’t enough for what Lee needed to compensate for a lack of ninjutsu.”

“So you dragged Gai in?”

“I did no such thing. He’d come to the school for taijutsu demonstrations before. I simply made sure the staff room was circulating the right rumor on the right day. He found Lee out of his own curiosity.”

“Is that all?” Kakashi says, impressed.

“I had no real reason to transfer him into my class. His written exam scores were fine, as well as weapons training. There was nothing I could teach him in terms of other ninjutsu arts, so my colleague refused to sign the transfer paperwork. I had a pretty full roster myself at the time so I simply tutored in the off sessions when I could if I wasn’t on a chuunin examination board.”

Iruka hadn’t just ended up with a group of well rounded students, he’d ended up with multiple heirs to the clans of Konoha. That had been no accident. And yet he’d still had time to work with others and participate in multiple examination boards?

Twelve students. All of which had passed the genin evaluations from their jounin sensei, an evaluation with a sixty-six percent failure rate. All of which had made the cut for the chuunin
exams within the year and held their own through the first and second stages. It is an impressive record. The fact that one of those twelve actually made it to chuunin is even more impressive.

"You were also an unknown to me as a teacher, you know." Iruka continues, looking at their jackets. "The others had all had teams before and I was at least somewhat familiar with Kurenai as a teacher even if she hadn't been a jounin sensei."

"None had passed my test before."

"None had been from my class." Iruka looks up at him, eyes shining. "I emphasize teamwork in my units. I'd like to see you try that again with any of my students."

“I hope you don’t plan on testing that out anytime soon, since I've been put under review." Not that he particularly wants to try again just yet anyway. His teaching record was pretty low in comparison, considering team seven had been disbanded already.

Iruka's eyes fill with something Kakashi hasn't seen from him yet, something far angrier than he's seen before, but it's directed elsewhere. Kakashi wonders if Iruka knows anything about the elders and their scheming, their plans and countermeasures upon countermeasures.

Sandaime had kept them at arm's length and now they had gotten a taste of running the show and didn’t want to let that extended control just disappear. They were pushing back at Tsunade, her job made harder by the fact that she had been absent from the village for so long. Kakashi had no doubt that she'd eventually cultivate a sense of goodwill within Konoha and overturn their demands but it would not be a quick process.

"Can we kiss again?" he asks because he wants to. He doesn't want to think about elders and power struggles right now.

“I think that's enough for now.”

He picks up their jackets, passes Iruka's over. "If you say so, sensei." he teases, watching the look in those eyes fade to something he's more familiar with."Perhaps just one for good luck so I don't lose myself on the way back to my room?"

"Wouldn't want you to get lost." Iruka whispers and turns his head into the kiss.

Chapter End Notes

Oh man is my inner nerd trying to make sense of the Naruto universe and the like forced retconn of like the fact that people only have kids in certain years? Um, yes. Yes I am.

And addressing the fact that six/seven/eight and up year olds can kill people and let's not address the fact of alcohol and sex. I'm addressing it and maybe that's kind of cray, but Iruka is on the case!

I also want to do a shout out to a pretty cool resource for a stuck story, which has categories like diversify your characters motherfucker! Called 25 ways to unstick a
stuck story and is like so much better at pointing out other things to write rather than 'keep writing' which is great advice to be sure as a general rule, but also like unhelpful when you've got two people in the middle of nowhere and going nowhere faster ;)

Pretty sure I bookmarked it on my computer so I guess I'll link that back later. Now I'm sad again, dammit.
The next morning, Iruka and Izumo go off to the river for fish after they take care of the plants in half the time it takes Iruka alone. Kakashi, Kotetsu, and the dogs go to check the wards.

"You be nice to him," Kotetsu says as soon as the others are gone. "Try not to break him with training."

"We've been doing all right. Chakra incident aside."

"Do you like him?" he asks. Kakashi looks over at him, not entirely sure where the question is coming from. "He's more than just a career chuunin you know."

"Do I have a reputation for disliking chuunin?" Kakashi knows he hasn't really worked with many recently, which could give that impression. Some jounin have reputations for such things.

"No, but you two totally get into an epic fight about the exams. We were on the exam board so-" he shrugs, "Iruka's got a temper for sure but you-"

"I don't dislike him."

"I suppose that's fair." Kotetsu nods. "I felt that neither of you were going after each other anyway."

Bisuke comes by to give a status report and Kotetsu seems a bit awed, probably not familiar with the talking. Most animal partners don't speak freely in front of others; certainly nowhere near as much as Bisuke. There are a few others that need replacing, so they head in the direction that Bisuke came from.

The barrier is fairly stable, but the rain had caused several of the paper seals to weaken so replacing them was slow going.

"Do all your dogs talk?"
"Almost all hatake ones do. Many ninken partners can, but Inuzuka can communicate with their partners regardless of the ability for speech. They also have limited communication with some of the wild wolves that roam the woods surrounding Konoha."

"That's pretty cool." Kotetsu says as Bisuke runs off to meet up with Guruko off in the distance. "I didn't know they could talk with the wild ones. But then again their first matriarch was the mate of a wolf god so I guess that's the reason."

Kakashi looks down at one of the wards and swaps it out with another. He was unaware of such a legend. He knew abilities and some basic information but not the legends that clans had regarding their own beginnings. He was even a bit hazy on his own, even though his clan also had shrines of wolves.

"A wolf god?"

"Yeah." Kotetsu says. "Something about the bridge between people and nature, I think. I don't teach the history lessons, those were Hayate's-" Kotetsu gets a look and Kakashi understands. Loss is unique to each person.

Kotetsu looks back at the barrier, swaps out the next seal. "I mean Konoha isn't as advanced in technology as some of the other villages but it works for us, you know? And we have more chakra connected animals than any other village as part of our daily structure."

Kakashi had seen a lot over the years and animal partners were uncommon in other villages. Even when he did encounter them they were more of a case by case basis rather than the development of an entire clan with the same abilities. Although, as he thought on it, the case by case had him thinking of opponents from the Land of Water again. It was something to think on. Something else to question Tsunade.

"What do you know about this Inuzuka legend?"

"Not much, really. I do my teaching rotation as required and dumping them on someone else for a lesson is always a welcome break. Iruka might know more because he's been a permanent teacher for years now, and before that he was a teaching assistant. He might know more because of Kamu, since they were together for a bit, but who knows how much they actually talked about things like that?"

Kakashi doesn't respond and Kotetsu keeps talking about legends and dogs eating out of his lunch box but he's not really paying attention to what he's saying because he's pinioned by the fact that he's pissed at thinking about Iruka with anyone else. Thinking about Iruka laughing and kissing and relaxed like he'd been last night with anyone else.

He's not unfamiliar with this sense of panic. Attachment, when it came, was hard and painful, jolting his reality and making it larger.

It's too late to take it back- Iruka will be an attachment forever. He supposes he could attempt cutting it off, but he doesn't want to. He doesn't want to sit at the stone and realize too late that he'd gone and cared about someone else.

However, the jealously is less familiar. Not unknown, but odd, considering that they weren't even much of a something.

Not yet, his mind says and he closes his eye. He wants more. More than a handful of kisses.

He wants to see where this can go.
He thinks it may even be more than that. Kakashi didn’t go out of his way to get to know people even after being discharged from ANBU. Part of the reason for that was his mission assignments, but he also never really cared to go out and be sociable.

But here he is, having a chat with Kotetsu about history and Konoha and ninjutsu when the task could be performed in silence. He doesn't like it.

“That’s the rest of this side.” Kakashi says as he slaps the last seal in place.

"I'm gonna go check on them.” Kotetsu says. “You should come and see-they do this water net thing together to catch the fish and it's kind of awesome."

"I'll come."

"Okay." Kotetsu starts toward the river and he follows.

"So how do you feel about not announcing our presence like right away?” Kotetsu says after a minute.

"Playing a prank then?” Kakashi asks.

"Maybe." Kotetsu answers. "It depends. I don't want them to lose dinner so-" he shrugs.

"I will stay quiet," he says, starting to reign in his chakra even more than usual.

Kotetsu pumps his fist in the air. "All right!"

They come up to the stream and slow their pace, choosing a high and leafy vantage point to watch them. Izumo and Kotetsu are both shirtless, hands in the water as it swirls around their thighs.

Kakashi lifts his headband up and sees the outline of a water net, that seems to be catching the fish as they swim through it. At least the ones that are big enough to be worth eating. It's fascinating to see on a small scale and he knows this is how some of the more secluded water villages protect their waterways from other ninja.

He looks down and sees Uhei laying out on a rock, turning toward him before laying her head back down.

He wonders how much effort this water net takes, as he watches Izumo check the net and start putting fish into a basket. One on the shore seems full; this is the second.

"It's a pretty cool technique, right?” Kotetsu whispers. "That's years of work from the two of them. They were in the same advanced chakra class in the academy. Iruka had connections with the men from the fish market so it was also a great way to make some extra cash when we were broke genin. It took us a long time to get enough money together to get a real apartment."

"How long were you genin?"

"Izumo and I? A few years. Iruka waited almost five. We lost a team member and since the first part is in threes we basically had to wait. And then they didn't want to put two water affinities on the same team so we waited some more-and then they put us with someone else and we passed and Iruka was fine to keep waiting."

“That doesn’t seem right.”

“It wasn’t. I mean Izumo and I think dickbag mizuki played a part in that but really Iruka didn't
want to fight to face the exams again after the first one. We weren’t in that one but I’m sure you heard about the one with the design flaw, yeah? Well it wasn’t as big a deal as getting it infiltrated by Orochimaru or anything, but it was pretty bad.”

“The one with the waterfall? The stampede?” He had heard of this. The Onbaa; giant, tame creatures that lived on the edges of Konoha. Tame, gentle and non-problematic until their land was threatened by the chuunin exams, anyway.

“Yeah, that’s the one. The chuunin exam arena setup was too close to them. His team was caught in it. They were fine and all, but—” he shrugs. “and then his team—well—Iruka was in the same boat as us. Not enough teammates and at the hands of whoever decided to throw us together in order to pass. He wasn’t really interested in taking them right away after that. Waiting for a third team member is long and can be a sort of morbid process you understand.”

Kakashi really doesn’t understand. As someone who had the rules broken in order to speed up his career, being prevented at the chance for advancement over something like a group of three is beyond stupid. Teams could lose members early on, this was true. But even then, not all three person genin teams stayed that way. And the first part of the chuunin exams was displaying teamwork, so kids did have to work harder with other genin that were not on their team, simulating more real-time missions. Waiting—especially waiting over something like balancing a team out when there are a fair number of genin each session—sounds idiotic.

It sounds like excuses. Like there is a another story in there somewhere. Like someone was delaying his advancement on purpose.

“I think he would have been happy being a career genin if not for the fact the academy only had a spot for a permanent chuunin sensei. He’d been an assistant for a few years before that. Head Teacher Minoru loves Iruka and I’d bet my salary on the fact that he talked with Sandaime who made them open a spot up for Iruka. The job application was basically a formality after he made rank although the shitmunch—” he grins. “They’re done. Time for a swim!” he launches himself off the tree and into the river. Kakashi watches as Izumo and Iruka spin in alarm, sees the two of them start to call the water in a swell, ready for a defense before dropping it as Kotetsu hits the water.

“Got us some good fish!?”

“I don’t know if you should get any after that stunt. We could have lost them.”

“Maa, that was his first concern, sensei.” Kakashi says as he appears, flickering to existence on the riverbank. “Interesting application of a chakra net. I think that’s a variation of what some of the water villages use to detect us.”

“Probably. Water has many uses.” Izumo says as he looks away from Kotetsu, who is draped over his shoulders. “But really only someone with serious chakra refinement can work water like Iruka can. I couldn’t sustain it for more than a couple hours at most. Water has a life and will of its own.”

Iruka walks out of the river and Kakashi watches as Iruka waves the water off him and back into the river before pulling his shirts and flak jacket on. He shakes out his hair, which is still damp. Picks up a basket of fish and deposits it into Kakashi’s lap. “You can strip a fish at least, right?”

“They teach that in basic survival classes.”

“Who knows what you actually learned in such a truncated school program, Kakashi. And basic survival skills is not my class.”
“You absolutely can teach it though! And you totally teach your kids all that stuff!” Kotetsu shouts as they get out of the river. “I always manage to get my classes in his camping units. He can basically do it all.”

“That’s not true.”

“Oh yes it is~” Kotestu sings. Iruka pushes him in the river.

“I expect you to help me with this, at least.” Iruka turns back to Kakashi. “You two should hit the bath now. We can go after dinner.”

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Kakashi can indeed strip and scale a fish, but then again it is a basic survival skill. Kakashi is impressed with the fish.

“We’ll see how they taste. Just because they look good doesn’t mean much.”

Kakashi doubts they’ll taste terrible. Iruka sets up rice and vegetables. He can’t quite make sushi because seaweed isn’t readily available, but it still looks delicious.

Iruka puts two plates on the table. “We might as well eat now, because I’m sure you’ve found other things to do.”

“I think we could also find something else to do.”

Iruka flushes, but doesn’t play along. Kakashi takes a place at the table and brings his mask down.

“I don’t think you give yourself enough credit. This is good. So was the concept for the chakra water net.”

”Make do with what you have.” Iruka says. "The payouts for genin and pre-genin are minimal and were worse back then. Even the additional stipend for being an orphan-well-” he shrugs, “It’s not much. We found things to do with our time, money, and chakra skills. Catching fish and rehydrating dried fruit were things Izumo and I could do. Kotetsu and a handful of his siblings did street art.”

“And Naruto?”

“I went and petitioned the Third for a larger stipend, helped him get settled so he wouldn’t need to do extra work just to eat and then he goes and creates the Oiroke no Jutsu- I could’ve killed him!”

“It is an admirable demonstration of technique.” Creating something like that on one’s own is admirable, one worthy of the moments of brilliance that Naruto showed on occasion.

“Fucking First, it scared me so bad the first time he used it. I made him tell me how he did it and I know he thought I was a giant pervert but I was so relieved when it was just him pranking rather than trying to make a profit off it. I mean I really shouldn't have been because I'd been talking about consent for a couple years at that point but still- I was worried.”

“Your class on consent? Years?”

"I usually buy or make dinner for that conversation, so Naruto and free food meant he came to enough of them that I think he learned something, at any rate."
“It is a good idea. I could have used a class on that topic.”

“You and me both. Along with pretty much everyone from our generation. I started that on my own and I give official talks to all my classes about it and hold the informal sessions for anyone else that wants to come. There were a few incidents shortly after I was promoted to chuunin and I wasn’t going to let them make my mistakes. Not if I could help it.”

Iruka runs his hands though his hair, groaning. “And now when they have the elders throwing out words like obligation and duty and clan loyalties—it makes me pissed. Beyond pissed. These kids have enough on their plates as it is. And then you’ve got people like Kotetsu who aren’t interested in women in the least and they don’t like that at all. You can play house with whoever you want but you better have a kid eventually.”

Iruka is ranting now, more at himself than at Kakashi but he listens, interested. He’s always felt a excessive amount of pressure regarding succession because he’s the last true Hatake, but he knows that their ninja population can’t keep up with what they lose, so there is pressure is everywhere it seems. There are multiple reasons that water is making such a bid for their refugees, after all.

“It’s gotten better over the past couple years,” Iruka continues, “but you’d think shinobi parents would be better at this, but they’re not. I swear that some try to get missions in order to get out of the sexual education component of my class unit.” he laughs to himself. “But then again some of the parents have their own ideas about succession so I’d rather teach it from start to finish myself rather than have to fill in gaps from one parent to another.”

“I didn’t even consider this with Team Seven.”

“And most twelve year olds shouldn’t have to. But that’s also the age when you desperately want to be an adult— it’s a combination that people take advantage of.” he sighs and picks up his plate.

My mistakes, Iruka had said. Kakashi isn’t sure he remembers the incidents that Iruka mentioned, but then again, he hadn't cared much for anything besides the missions that were handed to him.

"Is that what happened with you?" he asks as Iruka turns around.

"Horny and lonely teenagers don't make the best decisions. And the laws didn't use to distinguish between levels of rank."

It sounds more like deflection than a real answer, but it gives Kakashi something to think about.

He helps Iruka clean up and hears Izumo and Kotetsu long before they enter the doorway, laughing and shoving each other outside. Izumo seems to quiet them before they enter the kitchen, although they both are still grinning.

“Had some fun I see.” Iruka says as he lays their plates on the table. “we already ate, so we’ll be heading out now.”

Kakashi leans back in the bath, sinking into the warmth. Iruka is leaning over the side of the bath, back to Kakashi. He lets his eyes linger over the dragon, watches the water drip from Iruka’s hair and down the tattoo.

“Are we going to kiss again?” he asks, watching as Iruka spins his head around to face him.

He likes watching the way Iruka’s body moves. It moves the way one would expect, predictable almost. That is not always the case, especially with ninja.
"You-" Iruka mutters and Kakashi likes the flush. He’s glad that Iruka was never forced through classes in schooling expressions.

"I enjoyed myself and thought you had also."

"You don’t just say things like that." He mumbles and Kakashi slides closer.

"Why not? We are alone. Nor am I lying. I did enjoy it and would like to do so again if you are willing."

Iruka blinks, stunned. Then a slow smile spreads across the face and Kakashi finds himself smiling back as he leans in.

"I give." Iruka whispers against his lips before he kisses back.

Kakashi doesn't really get it, but the kiss is just as good as yesterday. So he does it again.

And again.

He'd keep going, but Iruka pulls away and rests his head on Kakashi’s shoulder, breathing heavy. He's a bit winded too, when he thinks on it.

"What are we doing?"

"Having a bath. We were kissing. We could do that some more.”

That might not have been the right thing to say, because Iruka lets out a sigh. He’s not really sure how to fix it though, because he’s never really wanted this, whatever this is.

“I like kissing.” he says instead. You’re pretty good at that.” He says and Iruka groans into his shoulder.

"Stupid-"

"Genius, actually."

Iruka laughs and pulls away a bit to look at him. “So kissing then? Is that all you want?” There is a gleam in those eyes that does make him think of doing other things.

“I like kissing.”

“We’ve established that.” Iruka says as he swings a leg over Kakashi’s, hand on his shoulders for balance before trailing down his arms. “Are you interested in more?”

“I like you and would be interested in pursuing a deeper relationship at this junction-” he stops talking, because that was definitely the wrong thing to say as Iruka stops moving his hands. He pushes a lock of Iruka's hair away. “If we are discussing sexual proclivities then-”

“Oh, okay. Okay.” Iruka says, shaking a bit as he ducks his head, pinching the bridge of his nose. Kakashi can see that Iruka is more flushed than ever, the flush trailing down his neck and back.

“I think I want to kiss you again.” Kakashi says as he lifts Iruka’s head back up to look at him.

He kisses him again.

---
Iruka is still reeling after they return to the house and he returns to his scrolls. He can hear Izumo and Kotetsu going through their own supplies. Kakashi is off reading his book somewhere, probably the roof.

Innuendo, looks, touching, sex. Those are all things that he’s familiar with.

*I like you.*

He looks down at his shaky brushstrokes, face burning. Words. He’s not as familiar with those, words like that and the feelings behind them. He doesn’t know what to do with those.

He should have known better that to give in on the couch. But Kakashi has been the one to kiss him.

*I like you.*

He closes his eyes. He shouldn’t have given in again today. It's been a while for him, longer than he thinks he gone without sex for a long time, but he's familiar with the itching need that settles between his shoulders.

He has that need, but this is also different, somehow. He likes contact, enjoys sex and still-

Kakashi had seemed content to just kiss, which was also something he really wasn't familiar with.

He wants more, but he also doesn't want to push, which is also something he's unfamiliar with.
He's used to a few beers before a consenting sexual act. This, whatever this is, feels more like a relationship.

He isn't so sure about that. He doesn't really do those. He really hasn’t spent all too much time attempting anything that could be called a relationship. He’d tried with Kamu and that had failed spectacularly.

And yet. Iruka liked what they were doing and he really liked the look in the grey eye, the focus on him. The fact that Kakashi would say something and *mean* it.

“Not your best work, Iru.” Izumo says as he comes into the den and stands beside him, looking over the writing.

“Where’s-”

“Eating his foot. Sometimes, the things he says, seriously.” he shakes his head. “Are you doing all right out here?”

“The schedule is different.”

“That’s for sure. I don’t think we’ve had free time like this since the chuunin exams. We might sign up for some more supply runs. It’s a nice change of pace. Gets us out from the elders also.”

“They’ve been more insistent than Kotetsu thinks?”

“Something like that.” Izumo agrees. “The worst part of it is that I wouldn’t mind a brat or two of our own. But even if we talk about it that would be most likely my decision because…” he trails off.
Iruka knows. Most shinobi aren’t particular about gender or sex, not when their lives are at the mercy and the whims of their clients. But Kotetsu has always been unapologetic about his preference for men and about his preference for Izumo in particular.

“He wore me down and I don’t regret it for a second. But I wonder what a child would do to our dynamic.”

“That sounds like a discussion for the two of you to have.”

“I know that, Iru. I also know the days of you being our mediator are over. But I don’t like you denying yourself, either. You should try to go out with Kamu again when you come back, you were doing okay as far as you told us.”

“We were. Doing okay, I mean.” but Iruka doesn’t want okay. He wants what his parents had, wants to have his eyes shine like his mother’s when she looked at his father. Wants the together-but-not that Kurenai and Asuma have. Wants the stupid comedy skit routine that Izumo and Kotetsu have.

Okay isn’t any of those things.

*I like you.*

He curses as he screws up the exploding tag beyond fixing this time.

“I mean you could at least go out with Anko. You might meet someone.”

“Getting laid has never been my problem, you know that. It’s the relationship bit that follows. That’s her problem too, it’s why we do so well when we go out together.” He dips his brush in the ink, pulling out a new sheet. “When did you realize you loved Kotetsu?”

He says the words before he even considered them, surprised at himself. If Izumo is surprised by the question he doesn’t show it, instead leaning against the table as he watches Iruka work.

“We’d always been friends, you know that. My family wasn’t great and he was one of eight so I was basically number nine most nights. But- the first time he confessed to me-” Izumo snorts, “we were six or seven I think. They’d officially moved us into our permanent pre-genin classes and we ended up together. But he did it so many times over the years I almost expected the confessions, you know. You take things like that for granted.”

He shakes his head. “I know this makes me sound like such an ass, but I didn’t even think of him in that way, not really. We were good friends, great friends and were always together, even once they made our genin teams. And then, when someone eventually confessed to him-” he’s shaking his head and smiling but there’s something more there, a softer look that Iruka has only ever seen him give Kotetsu. “I realized that he couldn’t wait for me to get off my complacent ass forever. So I kissed him. It’s not the most romantic start, but it worked for us.”

Iruka thinks, thinks of Kamu and tries to think about someone confessing to Kamu and wishes him the best. It’s not really the best attitude to have for someone that you dated for the better part of a year, he thinks.

He tries to imagine someone confessing to Kakashi and wants to laugh at the image. Most people give Kakashi a wide berth, whether it was the awe, the porn, or just the slight fear of someone so powerful. And Kakashi liked it that way, according to Naruto and Sakura.

“Any reason for asking, Iru?”
“I can’t say I felt much of anything when Kamu confessed.” he says, which is both truth and deflection.

He’d been dreading it a bit, actually. He’d known it was coming, but he’d liked the simplicity of their relationship. He’d never wanted to really ‘date’ Kamu, but he’d been nice, had been the right kind of persistent and Iruka had been lonely. He’d liked the fact that there was someone that he didn’t have to go to a bar to find, someone that he could cook for and just not be alone. Not the best reasons or foundations to develop a relationship off of.

He’s already thinking about Kakashi and the past weeks. He liked his company, liked the dogs and pushing him around, making him help with dinner and training. Liked to discuss things, fun stories about his students and more serious ones like politics and the possibility of war.

He had never trained with Kamu, never cooked with Kamu, never really spent time with his ninken either. He had never even considered those things because he knew that he’d fuck it up eventually.

He'd probably fuck this up too, but it was a bit late to pull back now.

He definitely liked having those eyes on him, liked the words that Kakashi used, direct and unflinching, and most importantly, honest.

_I like your ninja way._

He looks back at Izumo. “Kamu is great, but he isn’t for me. I don’t know if there is anyone that I could want like you and Kotetsu have.”

“People love in different ways, Iru.”

“I know that.” he says, his tone is a little more defensive than intended. Izumo isn’t stupid, raising his eyebrows at Iruka’s agitation.

“You don’t have to do things in order, Iru. Our lives are too messed up for that stuff. We didn’t and we’re okay. Hayate did it a bit backwards too and I know that Yugao didn’t mind. Especially now that she has Kazane.”

Kazane, a daughter that would never know her father.

“You should try out the brat thing with hers. She should be cleared to take missions again soon.”

Izumo grins.

“It’s an idea.”

---

Iruka spends most of the night writing out the letters for Tsunade. The morning passes and Izumo and Kotetsu leave shortly after lunch, taking Uhei and Shiba with them.

Iruka follows Kakashi to his room afterwards.

“Did you want to read it?” he holds up his new Icha Icha. He’s read through it once already and was working on a second read through.

“Not especially.” Iruka says as he starts to undo his bindings. Kakashi puts the book down, watching.
“Is this supposed to be a sexual atmosphere?” It doesn’t really feel like one, but he supposes the methodical way Iruka is removing his wraps could be. Now if he was removing the bindings- It looks like he guessed wrong as he watches the flush creep up Iruka’s neck.

“Oh, right. Right. I was- never mind.” Iruka shakes his head, not looking up as he continues to work on the bindings. “I think I’d like to try chakra sharing if that’s okay with you.”

A bit of a presumption, since he’s already here. Kakashi finds he doesn’t mind though, tugging off his gloves and putting them off to the side along with his book. He waves his fingers. “I’ve been waiting for you to tell me when I was ready to share, sensei.”

Iruka watches sparks of lightning travel between Kakashi’s fingers and swallows. He pulls off his shirts and spends longer than it should take folding them and placing them with the jacket and the wrappings. Iruka sits in the middle of the bed, watching as Kakashi slides off his own flak jacket.

When Kakashi is at rest, something seems almost off about the way he holds himself. He slouches too much, holds him limbs at wrong angles. Bad posture overall. But when he moves, nothing is wasted. He thinks he could watch Kakashi slide off the jacket a dozen more times in the same way.

The hand comes to press itself against his chest and he exhales, shaky. The pulse of chakra is less and seems smoother in a way, but the sparks still settle in his gut. He lets Kakashi push him back and shivers as the hand settles over his lower belly, where the seal rests.

“How do you want it?” Kakashi asks and Iruka opens his eyes. He’s thinking that Kakashi seriously doesn’t understand the tones of what he says sometimes, which makes the whole thing more humorous than arousing (but not by much).

“This is fine.” he breathes, trying to focus on the feeling. It’s different because he doesn’t really need it this time, or at least what he’s been telling himself.

He wants to squirm, wants to shrink away from it because the sensation is electric, his whole body singing from the chakra. But Kakashi at least seems focused enough on the task to not bring attention to his hard on.

Thinking about the difficulty level that something like this presents helps kill the arousal somewhat. The body is complicated and there is a reason why medi-nin have special training programs, more so even for those with electric and water chakra natures because too much or too little of either could kill a body easily.

He doubts Kakashi has more than basic field medical skills, but then again neither does he. He can feel the chakra responding and sinks into the feeling. He tries to think of the creature that is supposedly inside of him, but only imagines the tide.

Eventually the hand pulls away and Iruka opens his eyes, bleary.

"How are you feeling?"

He smiles, but it feels lazy. He feels lazy and wonderful. Wants to kiss Kakashi again even though he really shouldn't and he doesn't think he's kissed so much-well-ever.

Wonders briefly if he'd said any of that out loud because Kakashi is kissing him again and he sinks into that the way he sank into the chakra.

He dreams.
He dreams of being a child and practicing with his father, watching his father whip the water around his head and back into the bottle.

This time he **knows** he can do it and he calls forth the chakra makes the signs and the bottle shakes and shakes and then it explodes. He doesn't mind though because he's shouting in delight as the water comes back together and forms a dragon, spiraling around him like his father’s water whip had.

Mizuchi!

And he is looking out on a dark ocean, a silver of moon hanging in the dark sky but he doesn't feel alone.

---

"Awake yet?" The large eyes of Pakkun stare down at him.

"More or less," he answers as he blinks away sleep.

"Falling asleep in someone else's bed is rude among humans."

"Shut it Pakkun!" Guruko comes to his defense before Iruka even finishes processing the thought that yes, he did fall asleep in Kakashi's bed. "boss doesn't mind you're just annoyed he didn't want any of us with him last night!"

Pakkun grumbles and Iruka stands, starts his morning stretches. "Is Kakashi up?"

"Took bull and went for a run."

"All right then," Iruka yawns and moves into another position, looking at the sun in the sky. "So two more hours then?" It gives him enough time to throw something together and he doesn't know how much chakra the other used.

Pakkun is still staring.

"How do you feel about some fish? Meat is a bit harder to come by out here than we thought." He knows the dogs have been catching rabbits and things but he still feels bad. They had discussed steak at one point, something he intends to get them when they get back.

"Love fish."

"Great."

Kakashi returns almost exactly as Iruka predicted and it's just enough time for him to whip up a quick lunch and most of the fish into something that Guruko assures him is delicious.

"I want to try something." Iruka says when they're finished. "Naruto told me that you summoned a water dragon?"

"I have a justu."

"Do you think I could summon it?"

Kakashi tilts his head, thinking. He doesn’t doubt that Iruka could summon a water dragon, but he also isn’t sure about how much chakra such an endeavor would take. But then again, if Iruka feels that he could, then Kakashi would like to see it.
“It takes a fair amount of water,” he says, “I suppose you could use the water from the river or the bath, if you wanted to try to summon it.”

“The bath would probably be easier,” Iruka says, “it’s not as fast as the river.”

They head out towards the bath, and Kakashi shows him the order of the signs. Iruka watches, asks for a second demonstration and then matches him for a third. It's more for sequence than guidance, most of the hand seals are standard level. A few more complex ones, but most of his eldest students could perform this sequence.

“Did you get this from a water nin? It's different than the texts.”

Kakashi nods.

"It is more efficient than what I was thinking of. Less wasted signs." He closes his eyes and shifts his hands through the seals again and Kakashi can already tell Iruka is making changes to the sequence.

This makes sense, because the baths have enough water for the task and would be easier to manipulate than the river. He starts again, and Kakashi notices the water responding only a few signs in, like it wants to do what Iruka is asking of it.

The water swirls, rising up. Faster and faster it churns and churns, rising and falling, slowly condensing into a shape, into a water dragon. Kakashi is not unfamiliar with this, but this dragon is much larger than any he's seen before even from water chakra users, thinks it would be even larger if there was more water available. It also has more presence than any water dragon he’s seen before, more than a coil of water. It even looks a bit like Mizuchi.

The water spirals a few times, the movement settling as Iruka gets used to controlling it. It spirals a final time before gliding over to Iruka. The dragon twists around him and the smile Iruka has-

It's breathtaking.

And then Iruka loses grasp on his control and the whole thing collapses on them, soaking them. Iruka laughs, so surprised that he didn’t even have time to summon a shield to block out the water.

They head back to the house, still soaked. There isn’t much water left in the bath, certainly not enough for them to take one. There is a chill in the air today for summer and Kakashi is glad to get back to the house.

Iruka is grinning and laughing at different turns as they enter the house. "That was brilliant. Does yours look like that?"

"Not so much, no. What brought this on?"

Iruka makes a noise as he thinks. “I had a dream about the first time I called forth a dragon. I was young, maybe eight or nine? Mizuchi exploded from the water bottles my father and I were working with. I thought that if you had a jutsu maybe I could tap into that.”

Exploded? With incorrect signs, a dragon had exploded from a water bottle?

"What were you trying to do then?” Iruka does a few one handed signs, and the water in the rice washing basin shoots forth. He whips it around his head a few times and deposits it back in the basin. “Basic water whip, actually. It was really hard for me, most water jutsu were, in the beginning anyway. It took me a while to figure out I couldn't do it exactly like dad or mom. Water
has each of its own adaptations and requires different energies from different people. I think that's one of the reasons that the nation of water is so spread out."

"It's a theory."

He leans over the sink, wringing out his hair. "You want the bath first?"

"We can't bathe together?"

"I don't know if you've noticed the size of that bath, but two grown men are not going to fit in there, I don't care how much genius you apply to the problem."

"That sounds like a challenge."

Iruka smiles at the intense look Kakashi has. "You can work on figuring it out then and I'll go first."

Iruka sinks into the water, pulling his knees to his chin. There was just something so earnest about that face he almost wanted to know what Kakashi would come up with. Everything he’s thought of doesn’t really involve bathing.

He stretches out and twirls the water with his fingers. It's been so responsive lately and he thinks back to before. Back to when he’d had a team and confidence in his abilities.

He doesn’t like to think of his teammates, of losing them. Doesn’t like to think about the failed chuunin exams that he somehow saved them from and the limbo he was stuck in for years while waiting for a spot for the next set that he could participate in.

Doesn’t like to think about Mizuki and the person he’s been then, the child that wanted attention at any cost.

But he forces himself past that. Thinks of times that were good, of Miki’s smile and Aki’s laugh. He still has a photo or two in one of Asuma’s scrapbooks he thinks. He’d gotten used to things going missing when he lived with Mizuki. He’d gotten used to a lot of things then.

He feels a rumble deep in his chest and it catches his breath. He closes his eyes and sees Mizuchi.

There isn’t much that he can pinpoint, it almost seems like the dragon is miles away but Mizuchi is still there and he can feel it. He watches the dragon spiral and the lines get sharper, the motion clearer. He reaches and the image fades. He slams his hand into the water, annoyed with himself.

“Are you playing in there, sensei?” Kakashi’s voice calls and Iruka startles. He steps out of the tub and grabs a towel. He doesn’t know how much time he’s spent in the water and curses to himself.

“Sorry, sorry. I’ll run some water for you.” he calls and turns to see Kakashi in the doorway.

“Maa, I can heat it back up fine. You weren’t doing anything…untoward were you?” And that face, those words-

Iruka bursts out laughing.

“Untoward? What is this, a period drama?” he laughs some more but it just fits with Kakashi, somehow.

“Is it so dated of a word, sensei?” Kakashi smirks and Iruka is glad that the jab doesn’t offend.
“A bit.” he agrees and steps into Kakashi’s space. It’s the first time he’s been able to really look at
Kakashi. They’ve been together in the bath a few times before, but he’d been trying to avoid
staring too long. This is different, he wants to look.

He doesn’t know want he wants for the long run, but he doesn’t have to consider it right now. His
fingers trail over Kakashi’s ink, the mark of ANBU. It’s dark, almost as if it was redone and he
thinks Tsunade-sama would have chosen to have them re-inked, because Sandaime’s mark would
not be easy to transfer.

“She did have them redone shortly after she was instated as Godaime.” Kakashi says, as if he
knows what Iruka was thinking. “There was potential for a breach if anyone had stolen Sandaime’s
blood. Caused both of us a bit of trouble. Lightning doesn’t really care for lightning.”

Iruka nods and traces the mark again. “You’re not active.”

“Not for a few years now.”

Not that it means much. Reactivation (or deactivation) wasn’t really a personal choice, it was based
on the will of hokage and one’s personal strength and physical capability.

Kakashi’s arm slides along his waist, pulling them flush together. His other hand cups his face,
strokes his scar. He shivers into the touch, the warmth of Kakashi. He’s aroused, he wants. He
turns his head and lets his lips kiss the chin before him, the thin scar that stands out against the
pale skin. Kakashi turns his head and Iruka catches those lips with his own. He gives a nip, a little
harsher than their usual and urges Kakashi to open them.

He gives in to the sweeping tongue then, reveling in the warmth and urging Kakashi to kiss with
him. He’s gotten the feeling that maybe Kakashi isn’t the most skilled in terms of kissing, but he’s
fine with that.

More than fine, really.

He takes whatever unspoken prompts that Iruka gives and remakes them in that genius head of his
and comes back with something that manages to set him on fire.

He’s hard and can feel Kakashi’s erection as well. Kakashi’s hand is still holding his his face and
the look in his eye is warm.

“I would like to have a bath, sensei. I still have a bit of a chill from earlier.”

Iruka swallows, turning his head away. He feels so stupid, because Kakashi really hadn’t seemed
like he’d wanted anything more than kissing. Iruka was the one that was pushing for more.

(You’re always pushing, Iru.)

He shoves, but Kakashi doesn’t let him go. His eyes snap open and he swallows down his panic.
Kakashi’s embrace loosens instantly, but he doesn’t let him escape either.

“Iruka.”

Iruka breathes. Pushes himself to make eye contact.

“Maybe I wasn’t being clear.” Kakashi starts and Iruka just manages not to cringe. “I do not want
to halt these…untoward activities,” his smile is a bit crooked as he repeats the phrase. “But you did
drop a water dragon on me earlier.” there’s a look in the grey eye,
a look that something that does things to his flagging erection.

“After I bathe, I would be more than willing for you to teach me how to take you apart after that. Or the other way around, if that’s what you want.” Kakashi brushes his thumb over his scar again and Iruka does shiver this time. “I won’t be long. I did think about trying to fit us both in here, but it seems you were right about that, although I think washing my back could be arranged?”

And like that, the feelings melt away. Kakashi isn’t humoring him, he really wants to see where this could go. Iruka stumbles over his words as he moves to leave. Kakashi gives him one last look and Iruka gathers up his clothes.

He paces back and forth for several moments, gets to the doorway of his room before he turns around and heads to Kakashi’s. He digs in his flak jacket and pulls out a tube. He sits on the bed, nervous and fidgeting.

This is so stupid, he thinks to himself. He hasn’t thought of Mizuki and sex in the same context for years. Thinking of Mizuki apparently opened more minefields than even he was aware of.

But that hadn’t been the first time, not with Kakashi. The other night, on the couch- the line about getting used to the static-

(You’re just not used to it, Iru. You’ll learn to like it.)

He wonders if it’s the hair color. There’s really nothing else similar about them at all. Nothing even vaguely similar. Even the hair isn’t the same, not really. More like two different shades, silver just happens to be rarer than shades of blond, brown, purple or any other color.

He stands up, paces some more. Gathers his clothes, puts them down. Sits down, stands up. He doesn’t know if he wants this. Well he does, but that’s physical.

Emotionally-

Interested in pursuing a deeper relationship at this junction.

He can’t help laughing to himself a bit at that. Words like junction and untoward? It’s so-Kakashi.

I like you.

Feelings before sex, maybe that’s it. He likes Kakashi as well. Maybe not in a romantic sense, but emotionally- words like that- joking like that, he thinks that maybe that’s his problem.

They’re friends now. Maybe they’ll be more soon, but Iruka doesn’t think he’s made a friend in a while. Doesn’t really have a good track record with those. He really doesn’t make friends. He has his few and is cordial with everyone but making new friends-?

Not so much.

He stands again and Kakashi is there, those pale hands are on his shoulders and he lets himself look. He likes the lines of Kakashi’s body, even if he has terrible posture and lets his eyes take in the scars. Scars are inevitable, no matter how good a shinobi, he can see a few marks but most have healed well. His hand reaches to the thigh that he’d fixed a few weeks ago now, sees the faint line of healed skin.

“I did not realize how bad that was until you healed it.” Kakashi’s places a hand over Iruka’s own. “It could have given me some serious trouble.”
“It was no trouble…” Iruka answers as he lets his gaze travel, taking in the jut of Kakashi’s cock. It’s flushed, more than the rest of pale skin before him and he likes it. It curves just a bit and he wants his hands on it, wants his mouth on it. He drags his eyes up past the muscle, lithe and firm back up to Kakashi’s own mismatched eyes.

He likes the look in those eyes and leans in. “Does it need to be covered?”

“There isn’t much chakra in such things.” Kakashi murmurs against his lips. “It should be fine.” They kiss and kiss and Kakashi’s hands roam, cupping his ass and sliding their bodies together.

He reaches and takes the tube, sliding it into Kakashi’s hand. He’s shaking just a bit as he turns and gets on the bed.

Kakashi follows, voice in his ear. “Walk me through it, sensei?” and maybe Iruka’s already keyed up again, but he swears he can hear Kakashi grinning. “I think I’d like to hear your voice.”

“Oh” he breathes as he lays on his back, his legs falling open. Kakashi moves between them and he brings them up, resting them on Kakashi’s hips. The thighs are muscled and he thinks he’s like to ride them, but not now. Their cocks brush and he gasps. “That’s nice.”

“Nice?” Kakashi grins as he leans over Iruka and goes in for another kiss. “Just nice?”

“No at all.” Iruka grins as he reaches down and grips them both. “It’s really nice.” He likes this, holding both of them in his hand, slightly sticky. He gives them a slow firm stroke and groans.

“I like my neck to get attention, if that’s all right with you?” he’s flushing now, but Kakashi has been avoiding his neck so far and he doesn’t want to push if necks in general aren’t his thing but-

Apparently no such issue as Kakashi starts sucking a hickey with an intensity that makes him squirm. There is something about having teeth near his neck that riles him up in a good way although he can see why it would do the opposite. He strokes them again and Kakashi pulls back a bit.

“Is this how you want it?” he asks, watching Iruka’s hand move over them.

“Oh, not exactly.” Iruka releases them and leans back, dropping his legs from Kakashi’s hips, and starting to whip through a few signs.

“What are you-” his eye lights with realization. “clever.”

Iruka squirms under the attention and twists himself, on his knees now. He takes Kakashi’s hand, still holding the tube. “You still have to stretch me. Start with one, okay?”

He finds himself grinning as Kakashi takes the tube, fumbling with it a bit. He slicks his fingers and brings them close, circling, teasing. Small pinpricks of pressure against him before he withdraws. Iruka can feel the blood rushing in his ears and he pushes back, but Kakashi just pulls back more, seemingly content to watch and tease for the moment.

“In,” he breathes, “inside.”

Kakashi’s finger pushes again and he’s afraid it’s going to be too slow but then it’s perfect, no more hesitation until the knuckle. There’s a sting of pain then that takes him by surprise and he must make some indication because Kakashi stills. He doesn’t say anything though, his other hand is rubbing circles into his thigh and he relaxes, tension seeping out of him.
Iruka wants to apologize but Kakashi starts withdrawing the finger and now he’s so aware of the loss, wants it back. He sighs, eager, as Kakashi slides the finger back in, but now it’s just the tip, crooked just so and rolling in small circles inside him.

It’s good, great even, the movement settling in his gut. He arches up, wanting more and hears a breathy groan. It’s the first real noise that Kakashi’s made. He flushes as the image of what he must look like, open and wanting.

He squeezes on the finger and starts to rock himself, angling for more. But Kakashi just keeps on pushing and withdrawing, each deep push a rush of sensation as Iruka trembles all over.

Iruka isn’t a stranger to sex, but this is more than that as he angles his hips back for more. But Kakashi doesn’t move for more, not yet. He seems content to just keep pressing, just enough pressure so that the need and frustration builds-

It’s not quite enough to come, not like this. He pushes back again, harder, hears Kakashi let out another one of those breathy groans. Iruka shudders as he realizes that this isn’t teasing, or even just learning what he likes.

He thinks that Kakashi might like the view more than an of those things, his ass clinging to the finger, the in and out. Iruka shudders at the idea and pushes back harder, moaning at the sensation as he drops his hand to his dick, letting the movements rock himself into his hand and back again. He’s panting, wants more pressure, more fingers, more anything-

Kakashi slides a second finger in and there’s another sting, but it’s too good at this point, the pain easing off almost as quick as it had come. It’s entirely not enough, although the full press of two fingers makes it that much easier to imagine Kakashi’s cock.

His hand tightens around his dick, crying out as Kakashi rubs across his prostate, voice thin as he shudders into the feeling, fucking himself into his hand and then back on Kakashi’s fingers, moaning encouragements for more. More and more and more. But doesn’t want to push either. He stills himself and Kakashi seems to finally come out of the haze he was in.

“Was that-” and damn, Iruka likes the hoarseness Kakashi’s voice, “all right?”

“We don’t have to do more,” he says as he turns to look behind him. Kakashi blinks at him, eyes wide and blown open in a way Iruka won’t forget. “I could come from this if that’s what you want.”

“Yeah?” Kakashi says, voice low. “You think I could make you come like this? Take you apart with my fingers?”

Iruka knows he can, if it’s done right. He thinks Kakashi could find that angle.

“What do you want?” Kakashi asks as he twists the fingers deeper, rubbing over his prostate. Iruka squirms into it, chasing the feeling, but Kakashi stops, waiting for an answer.

“I want your cock.” he twists, sighing as Kakashi’s fingers pull out, small points of pressure against his asshole. “Not that it’s not great, but how long do you plan on prepping me?”

“You didn’t say.” And Kakashi is totally pouting, and Iruka huffs out a laugh.

“You were too busy learning, stupid genius jounin.” Iruka grins as Kakashi’s fingers slide back in,
deep, before withdrawing completely. Iruka turns, holding his legs open. “I’m ready for more. Get over here already.”

Kakashi slicks himself and comes closer Kakashi’s cock slides against his stomach, hard and heavy and Iruka wants, one hand pushing against his ass as he lines up. It’s steady, slow and persistent, sinking into him. Kakashi keeps going and Iruka moans his approval, glad that Kakashi isn’t stopping at every half-nudge in. He clutches at the sheets, surprised when Kakashi lifts him, but he shouldn’t be. Iruka moans in approval, shifting his leg, the angle better as Kakashi thrusts the rest of the way in.

“I’m in,” Kakashi breathes against his neck and Iruka can’t help but smile at that, because how long has it been if Kakashi feels the need to tell him that-

His breath catches as he meets Kakashi’s eyes.

The look in them-

Seems almost lost.

Kakashi looking at him like that does something, Iruka curling closer and whispering words of encouragement as Kakashi starts to shift his hips, slow circles that make his nerves sing in pleasure.

And Kakashi just seems content with that, only moving his hips in those slow circles, that last inch teasing him, pressing and promising more. Iruka moans at the slow sensations, shivering.

He drops a hand to his dick again, fingers wrapping around it as Kakashi gives a hard shove, and he cries out, throwing his head back as his come spills over his fingers and down his dick.

His breathing is shaky as he strokes himself, wet and sticky as he comes down from the high of his orgasm. He belatedly realizes that Kakashi has stopped moving, still hard. He wants to rock himself on it, wants Kakashi to thrust hard and keep going but he curls into it, kissing Kakashi’s ear instead.

“You okay?” he runs his other hand through the hair, laughing a bit at the static, because everything is just keying him up more at this point, sensitive.

“I feel like that should be my line,” Kakashi leans in for a kiss. “Are you okay?”

“That’s a mutually exclusive line, I think.” Iruka laughs against Kakashi’s lips as he leans in for another kiss. “And you want an honest answer or an Icha Icha answer?”

“We can role-play later, sensei.”

“In that case, it’s not really very good. I mean contact is good but moving is kind of required. How about you just start and I can give you a graded report after?” he’s laughing again, but he can’t help it and Kakashi is laughing too, so that’s fine, right?

Kakashi pulls out a bit, thrusts back in. Does it again, pulling out more. And again. The long slow drags are great and it’s getting better, but he hasn’t hit that spot, not just yet. He arches his back and Kakashi’s hands are on his ass and they tilt him and there-

“That’s good, that’s-there-!” he cries. Kakashi does it again and he groans around the tongue. “More, you can go faster-” he moans at another long slow slide and Kakashi hits it again. “Yes, there-keep going-!”
Kakashi is so hot he thinks he might be burning. He drives into Iruka’s body, so hard that he’d be afraid to break him if he hadn’t sparred with him several times already. It sounds a bit like a fight, if he’s being honest and that only drives him higher. He can’t really stop, but he can feel that his control is breaking, he’s not hitting that spot anymore, he’s watching Iruka squirm but he can’t really follow through because he’s so close-

He pulls out, spilling over Iruka’s stomach, a little disappointed that the chuunin is still hard. Iruka drags his hand though the mess and Kakashi feels a spark of arousal as Iruka pulls a finger up to his mouth.

“You didn’t stay inside,” he smirks. “I don’t mind it, for future reference.” He pushes at Kakashi’s chest and it’s embarrassing how easy that throws him off balance. He catches himself though, falling back onto his arms and Iruka kisses him, tongue sweeping his mouth. They do that for a while, open mouthed kisses before Iruka starts kissing his chin and then down to his chest and down even further.

“Ah, I don’t know-” he says, because even though he’s half hard he isn’t sure that he has more to give.

“I know you’ve got plenty of stamina, so I think we can go one more round?” And Iruka hovers by his already half-hard erection and presses a kiss to the tip. It’s sensitive but Kakashi arches into it and Iruka drags his tongue down.

“Do you want to try?” he asks and Kakashi finds himself nodding because he knows that Iruka would back off if he can’t. He closes his eyes and Iruka makes a disapproving noise. He snaps them open, looking down.

“Watch this,” Iruka says as he continues to drag his tongue along the length of his cock. “I like this too, so please pay attention to sensei.” Kakashi groans as Iruka dives in and swallows him whole. Kakashi cries out and grabs at Iruka’s hair, but Iruka rolls into it, throat moving around his cock, hand rolling his balls. He tugs and Iruka comes off with a wet sound.

“See? All set to go.” Iruka grins and gives the cock a few slow pumps. Kakashi grabs the hand, twining their fingers together as he pushes Iruka back. He grins and slides down, heading for Iruka’s cock.

Iruka shouts and Kakashi digs in.

Iruka moans as Kakashi goes down on him. It’s sloppy and a bit too much teeth, but he kind of likes it like that so he shudders from Kakashi’s attentions, which are getting better by the second. Genius indeed. He wants to thread his hands through the hair, but between the static shock and the throating would be too much for either of them at this point, so he fists the sheets instead. The idea of it is enough for now.

Kakashi pulls away with one last lick and Iruka shudders.

“Did I pass, sensei?”

Iruka laughs and drags Kakashi back up for another kiss. “Passing marks, but there’s always room for improvement.” He doesn’t think he’s ever enjoyed sex this much.

Iruka is on his back as Kakashi nudges his thighs apart, pulling his hips up, cock resting along his crack.

Iruka lifts himself up on his elbows, eyes meeting as Kakashi pushes. He falls back down, crying
out as Kakashi slides in; one hard slide, all the way to the balls, filling him and it’s great. He’s thrusting now, cock striking that spot inside him, and he curls into the feeling, pulling Kakashi to his mouth. They kiss, open and wet. He lets Kakashi devour him.

The pace starts to become erratic and Iruka he grinds himself back up into Kakashi as he pulls out, chasing the feeling. Trying to guide the movement, what he needs.

The world has narrowed down to their points of contact as Kakashi continues to thrust inside of him. His hand twists in the hair and the static keeps him crying for more. He ruts against Kakashi, cock dragging along his stomach. He’s so close he can feel it at the edge of his senses, spiraling higher and higher.

Kakashi’s hand comes to grip him and that’s all he needs, the fingers trailing along his cock, his body seizing up and Kakashi slows, panting into his mouth and shaking. He breathes out something that really isn’t much in the way of words, but Kakashi seems to get the message and doesn’t stop completely, starting to push again, rearranging his legs a bit to accommodate his thrusts.

He lets himself sink into the pleasure of it, boneless. Kakashi keeps going, but he’s already losing the rhythm of his thrusts again, trembling and bracing himself. Several more thrusts and Kakashi is gasping, bracing himself over Iruka’s shoulders and trembling. His hips jerk in slow motions, still moving him through his own orgasm.

He shudders at the feeling, pulls Kakashi down and kisses into the mouth. Kakashi starts to adjust his weight and Iruka shakes his head “Stay,” he murmurs sleepily. Iruka doesn’t mind the weight at the moment.

Iruka stirs when Kakashi does move off him, pulling out with a hiss. Iruka can’t be bothered, not really as he curls up against Kakashi, resting his head on the shoulder. “Is this okay?” he asks, sleepy, trying to be aware of the neck. Kakashi runs his fingers through Iruka’s hair and he closes his eyes again, sliding into sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Um. yeah. So my goal here was two adults that are familiar with sex, and fun. Hope I hit both my goals and still sexily written?

NO REGERTS, go eat a milky way.

Also: so here I am trying to think super hard about ninja with summons that were NOT taught by someone from Konoha and I’ve got a total of three: Temari (which may or may not have been taught by Orochimaru impersonating as dad) Hanzo with the poison salamander and the Mizukage with the giant clam. Are there more?

Also you can say hello to some of my OCs, cause Naruto only gives me dead ones (I tried to look at one point). I will also give you dead ones in the form of Iruka's old cell teammates Aki and Miki. They'll be around and not terrible excuses for characters.

Did I make a princess mononoke reference? Maaaaaaybe.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

“Keeping my one plant alive is an S-Class mission. I made it one of Gai’s challenges. If it dies, he loses.”

Chapter Notes

I know it’s not Wednesday anymore and I went back and forth with myself about putting this slice-of-lifey thing out for you guys but it's here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When he wakes, he isn’t surprised he’s alone, although it’s a bit worrisome that he missed Kakashi entirely. He stretches and pleasure curls inside of him as his aches remind him of earlier. He heads to the bathroom to clean himself up and looks at himself in the mirror. Kakashi hadn’t been skimpy with the marks, but he had asked, hadn’t he?

When he walks out of the bathroom, toweling his hair. Pakkun is staring at him with those eyes. He’s still not quite sure about Pakkun, one moment telling him off and another grinning at him with a smile just a tad too wide.

Today is one of those too wide smile encounters before he lopes off.

Kakashi has cooked rice and stripped a couple fish for him and Iruka digs into it, famished. He doesn’t hear Kakashi in the house, so the man is probably out and going through his training regimen. Iruka should do his, he tells himself he’ll do it later.

He settles in the den, working on variations he wants to try with the water dragon jutsu before closing his eyes.

He’s on the beach again and he’s looking at the water. A creature bursts forth and Iruka recognizes it as Mizuchi, although the dragon is opaque and very nearly the same shade as the water, almost as if Mizuchi was formed from water. Mizuchi comes closer, wraps itself around him, but it doesn’t threaten him in the least. He sits back and digs his fingers into the black sand. He can feel Mizuchi’s contentment thrumming inside his own chest.

Kakashi comes in not much longer after that, dogs whining around him about the workout. Guruko, the biggest whiner of the three, dashes to the den and darts back out to glare at Kakashi.

“You overdid it, boss. Sleeping in the middle of the day.”

Kakashi feels a bit guilty, but not really. He could probably nap also. Iruka is indeed sleeping on the couch, several sheets of papers with hand seal patterns around him. Kakashi can see where Iruka has changed the design so it takes more chakra and requires less precise signs to keep the jutsu active. He thinks it would work for Iruka because water seems to want to work for the other
ninja.

“And then you put us on a runnnn,” Akino grumbles.

“Shush. I’ve been working with Bull more than the rest of you.” Bull grunts from the corner, and Kakashi grins. “You’re the only one that keeps me pushing myself the whole training bud.”

“I find that offensive.” Pakkun says as he opens his eyes from the spot that he was sleeping on on the couch.

“I have to change the workouts to fit your leg size. That’s a fact. I don’t understand how it’s offensive.”

“I got to cuddle.” Pakkun grins and Guruko whines because he wants to cuddle. Kakashi sort of wants the same.

"You should go water the plants. I don't think he's done that yet either." Pakkun grins like he knows exactly what he's thinking.

He probably does.

Insufferable.

"You could pick stuff and make a salad!" Guruko agrees as he snuggles into Iruka. "No cooking involved."

It's not a terrible idea because fish and rice twice in one day is a bit boring. He really doesn't have much of a cooking repertoire. He can do all the standard field recipes and that's pretty much it.

A cookbook floats to the edges of his memory and he turns away from it, out into the sunshine and vegetables. Picking things, he can do that much. Genin seem to think these lessons are useless, but they’re a standard requirement; the ability to tell the edible parts of a plant. He also gets the feeling that these are growing faster than they should be even when one factors in jutsu to help them grow along.

He gets a basket full and sets to work. Even after he's finished Iruka is still asleep. It is a bit odd, considering the man was forcing himself to work out after the chakra collapse. He exposes the sharingan and takes in the state of Iruka's chakra.

It seems to be in a state of flux, but it also doesn't seem harmful in any way like it had before. He wonders if Iruka finally got through to Mizuchi.

Considers waking Iruka up. Leaves his dogs to cuddle as he reads. Or tries to, anyway. Several hours pass before Iruka startles awake, jumps up.

"It's okay!" Guruko says and he settles a bit. "Boss made dinner too!"

Iruka doesn't know what came over him if he slept the entire day. But something feels a bit different also, better even.

"Your chakra is in alignment. More than it was, anyway." Kakashi says from the chair.

"Huh." Iruka sits back down, "Maybe you're right. I mean I guess it doesn't feel like it usually does.” He's always been aware of his chakra and has spent hours trying to measure it out the way one would a recipe. But this, this is different.
“I dreamed of Mizuchi.” he says “Or I think I did, at any rate. We just sort of…existed. We didn’t talk or anything.”

“But that’s more than you had, right?”

“I’ve dreamed of the beach before.” he says as the details trickle back. “I almost always dream of that beach when I’m under from an attack.”

“Can you describe it?” Kakashi asks and Iruka turns to look at him, discussing the black sand, the moonlight off the waves, the clouds and the sky. Discusses Mizuchi and the sort of but not really look the dragon had.

“Is that how it appeared to you also?”

“Mostly.” Kakashi agrees, because the description is nearly identical, although Mizuchi’s formlessness seems to be tied to Iruka, which he leaves alone for the moment. “I’m starting to think that the division isn’t so much a cage of the subconscious as another realm.”

“I think I would know that much.” Iruka says.

“You’ve only just remembered that you’ve summoned water dragons before.”

Iruka stops, remembering sitting in the blank white rooms of the hospital, staring into the concerned face of Hiruzen.

The memory itself isn’t odd, he’d been in the the hospital a lot that year; first with the chuunin exams, and then later-after his team died. But having Hiruzen ask the questions himself- that wasn’t protocol or even anything close to it.

“Maybe I did summon a large water dragon when I was younger. Perhaps at the chuunin exams even.” he looks down at his hands, wondering.

Even if that was the case, why wouldn’t he know about it? A water dragon itself isn’t so strange a technique, Lord Second had been famous for them; Kousuke-sensei had a pretty impressive number of water techniques. A child summoning such things was a bit of an oddity, but not necessarily unheard of.

He doesn’t remember summoning anything more than the standard techniques at that age, the maneuvers and combination attacks that he’d worked at for hours with his teammates.

“I don’t know.” Iruka says after a long moment, “I don’t think of that time much.”

Kakashi gets that. He doesn’t think of losing his teammates much either. He thinks abut them constantly, has conversations with them, visits them every day he can and stews on his inability to protect them. But he doesn’t really think about the specific instances of losing them-

-doesn’t think of sitting beside Obito as the rock pinned him down, doesn't think of his fist through Rin’s chest-

“Understandable.” he says, instead.
“Not really. If that’s what caused it-”

“That would have been reported. You would have been called into R&I if they had even suspected it.”

“Would they have let me remember?”

Kakashi doesn’t have the answer to that. Decides to ask Ibiki because even if he hadn’t been with the department then he’d have access to the files. Thinks that maybe that could be the reason that it took so long for them to put Iruka on a team to become chuunin.

“I don’t know.” he answers. “I do not know the full policies of Research and Interrogation.” His eye also prevented most basic hypnotism and memory occluding justu from taking hold.

“Maybe that’s it.” he says, sinking back into the couch, scratching Guruko’s ears absently. “Maybe we stopped communicating because I forgot how.”

It doesn’t sound exactly right, especially if Sandaime had medical ninja looking at Iruka, but it also sounds possible. He knows that Ibiki had to revamp most of the department with fully accountable standards especially in regards to their tactics with Konoha’s own shinobi. It had been a sort of ‘ends justify the torture’ during the war and there had been some people in the department that had lost sight of the true reason for the R&I division.

“I would not consider myself an expert at memory retrieval. I wouldn’t want to even try it.” Memories were even more precise than making a heart beat with electric pulses. That was something that even if his eye did copy the procedures only years of experience would make it safe. Scrambling a brain-Kakashi could do that. Had done that. Pulling out specific threads of memory and leaving the mind intact-?

“I wouldn’t ask that of you.” Iruka says, looking up. “I would go through the proper channels. Or at least ask Anko to pretend to go through them when we get back.”

“I think you should try to connect as best you can. You still have some sort of connection, even now.”

Iruka takes a deep breath and nods. “Guruko says you made salad?”

“You’d be proud, sensei.” he grins “I even remembered to wash the vegetables first.”

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Iruka doesn’t feel like sleeping again and starts cooking. “Some vegetable tempura might be nice, it’s too bad we didn’t have the budget for a chicken. Lots of recipes call for eggs.” He slices into the fish, trying to figure out what to make. Kakashi has wandered off somewhere and he’s with Guruko.

“Boss doesn’t like tempura.” Guruko says.

“Is that so? Does he have a favorite then?”

“When you cook the fish on the coals? They get that yummy smell then!”

“A fish grill? Really?” It seems like a lot of work, but then again it is perfect for outdoors and one isn’t stuck in the kitchen so it makes sense for Kakashi, somehow. It’s also something he can’t replicate here. But grilled fish with salt is easy enough and while river fish don’t have the quite the
same taste these were fatty enough that it should work.

It’s interesting enough of a task to keep him busy for a while, anyway.

Kakashi wanders into the kitchen and seems pleased with the setup as he takes one. Iruka figures he probably ate long enough ago. He starts to cut up some of the extra vegetables that Kakashi picked earlier.

“Not a huge fan of raw foods are you?”

“I have to be on a raw food diet for chakra replenishment several times a year.” he shrugs. “It’s not something I am overly fond of.” Iruka supposes that’s fair enough.

“Iruka was going to make tempura.” Guruko yips.

“I had only mentioned it. We don’t have eggs.”

“That is definitely not my favorite.” he says and Iruka laughs. He already has ideas about how to try it. One of the biggest issues with that is the batter, but he has a recipe he’d like to see Kakashi try he thinks.

“And what is your favorite sensei?”

“Ichiraku’s. Naruto didn’t get that from just anyone. It’s been my go-to for years and they cut me a deal when I take multiple students there. We take up the whole counter sometimes with lessons.”

“You spend a lot of time teaching.”

“I think there is a lot that needs to be covered and the academy only gives you so much time. At least they allow the training grounds to be used by anyone. Trying to book an official training ground is a bit intimidating for them. Some jounin are not great with their time slots either. Gai-sensei being the exception.”

“Why is he a sensei?” Kakashi asks, trying not to be put out. It’s not the first time that he’s called Gai a sensei, either.

“I’ve had him as part of my lessons for a few years now. Anko also. Well I usually have to bribe Anko with booze so she doesn’t scare the pants off them, but-” he shrugs. “She can be approachable if she wants to be. The two of them help the kids see that not every jounin is some unstoppable force of nature.”

“Gai is an unstoppable force of nature.”

“But he did that though his own hard work.

Kids talk about famous ninja, ninja who’ve mastered multiple jutsu, ones that history makes out to be godlike in their retellings- they build up these ideas in their heads about jounin, especially the elite. And trying to fit how you view your parents with that- I they to introduce them to different types of jounin and break those ideas, just a little. Besides-” Iruka grabs another pepper, starts chopping. “Lee needed a taijutsu expert, so I’ve had Gai-sensei working with him for a few years now. My taijutsu is was enough to get started but Lee needed more. Konoha doesn’t have many people who specialize in it. It worked out that his other team made rank in time for him to take on Lee as a genin.”
Kakashi supposes that it makes sense. Some sense, anyway. Gai is one of the few visible jounin of the village that could be not too terrifying presence for younger pre-genin. Someone they could laugh at but still powerful enough to leave an impression.

It still irritates him somehow.

“Can I teach with you sensei?” he leans over and puts his head on Iruka’s shoulder and looks at the pile of vegetables Iruka is slicing. “I think I’m a pretty good student.”

Iruka is shaking, trying not to laugh. “just because you can take a lesson doesn’t mean you can teach it.”

“I think I did all right.”

Iruka is laughing now and Kakashi pushes the knife hand down. Iruka lets go and Kakashi turns him around, kisses him and Iruka sinks into it. He likes that, the way Iruka can relax into him.

Iruka also isn’t shy about what he wants, pulling him closer as he leans in, hands digging at his flak jacket, which he shrugs out of.

“What do you want?” Kakashi asks, because he wonders where this is going. He isn’t sure that he’s up for another round just yet, although his dick seems to be making an effort. He doesn’t think he’s ever had this problem, he can’t really say that he’s ever been interested enough to be with someone more than the occasional one. Certainly not multiple times over multiple days.

Iruka’s grip on his shirt lessens as he leans back against the counter.

“We don’t have to go again, not in that way. Sex works a different set of muscles.”

That makes sense, although Kakashi isn’t so sure about putting sex and a productive workout in the same frame of mind is a good idea; it makes him want to build up his skill.

“So what are you thinking, you crazy genius?” Iruka is shaking his head, but he’s smiling.

“Did you want to switch then?”

“You don't just say things like that.” Iruka is mumbling now, disbelief on his face.

“You seem to say that a lot.”

“Because you keep saying things like that, and I can’t even-” And Kakashi kisses him to shut up.

He does.

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It’s sort of crazy, how their routine doesn’t really change, simply incorporating both Kakashi’s chakra and sex into it in addition to everything else. The sparring, the training regimens, the garden, fishing. Kakashi even separates out the dogs’s training programs and puts Guruko with him after a full day of some seriously obnoxious whining.

It’s so stupidly domestic and he finds that he doesn’t hate it. Not as much as anything even somewhat domestic had him running the other way. Iruka feels better than he has in a long time and doesn't really want to consider things like visiting R&I or having to deal with the elders and their demands.
He’s spent most of his time working on the training regimen that Kakashi follows. It’s a bit intensive compared to his normal workout, but he has the time to pace himself.

Uhei and Urushi had not returned yet, but Kakashi waved off Iruka’s concern; telling him that he’d asked Uhei in particular to do a few other things and wanted to get a head start on some of the Inuzuka theories from the dogs themselves.

“It’s a bit of an oversight most of the time. Most ninja don’t view them as their own beings, simply as an extension of their ninja partner.”

“True, I suppose. But I’ve never had an issue with making extra desk space if they have a particularly large dog as their partner.”

“That is because you are aware of it. And even then, most places are still annoyed when I bring all eight.”

“I don’t know why they’d be annoyed, that would be some serious money.”

“Only the smart ones see that.” Kakashi agrees. “The most any Inuzuka has at the moment is four. Eight could perhaps be considered excessive.”

“Inuzuka dogs on average end up as large as Bull do they not? I think they take that into account. If you take on too many, your chakra might not be able to keep up with their growth.”

“That is what I have decided. Urushi and Shiba are rather small, but I think it suits them. Having two bonded humans- well there wasn’t much hope for them after the attack so the fact that they didn’t grow into full size also makes sense. I also took them on late, being nearly fourteen at the time.”

“So are Hatake and Inuzuka dogs vastly different?”

“Different enough.” he agrees. “In size for one. Color, also. Inuzuka for the most part are shades of white, black, and grey although there are some exceptions. Hatake have a wider span of colors. They also have a variety of body types in comparison to the standard wolf-aspect of the Inuzuka dogs. And then you’ve got the weirdos like Pakkun.”

“Hey!”

“Your face is weird. We’ve discussed it in length.” he tells the small dog, who snorts.

“And Bull?”

“He- well he’s not much of a talker, and that’s because I’m not sure exactly where or from what stock he came from. Probably a few generations of civilian dogs mixed in. He found me one day and well- here he is.”

He scratches the big dog’s ears absently and Iruka feels like there is more there, but it also seems painful, so he doesn’t ask more.

“How does it work?”

“Summons? It’s more like I have a sort of low level compatibly with all chakra dogs and it gets better depending on the bond. They have chakra to some degree like all living things, but it’s also different- I’ve always said they are the ones that pick me, rather than the other way around. I mean there are cases of dogs picking out ninja that really don’t have ties to either one of our clans and
both the Hatake and Inuzuka are willing to go with the wishes of the dog."

“Really?”

“I don’t think there’s been a bond strong enough for the dog to leave the compound to find a ninja, but when Ibiki first started having seizures I asked him to take a walk among the Hatake ones to see if there was one that was willing to bond with him. They’re really good and noticing things like that. He ended up bonding with an Inuzuka. Not my fault.”

“Boss got chewed out good.”

“Still not my fault. They knew he was coming since they do most of the work and upkeep for the Hatake dogs. Why they had Inuzuka dogs there that day is beyond me. Kiromaru chose him. They never contested Kiromaru’s decision by the way, just me. They weren’t ever going to force Kiromaru to return, they just wanted to yell at someone even though it was not my fault. I simply set up a meeting.”

“Definitely not your fault.”

“I wasn’t even there when it happened. I was late. Not my fault at all.”

“How is it that being late didn’t help you?”

“No idea.” Kakashi smirks. “You’d think it would. But yeah, dogs choosing others happens. Sometimes it’s a little orchestrated, but there have been times when the dog runs from the compound to find someone. Some Inuzuka have bonded with Hatake dogs over the years so I don’t mind. I’m not around enough to train them the way they should be trained and it’s not like I have anyone else to save them for.”

He says it offhand, like it doesn’t matter. But it does. There was almost nothing left of the Hatake clan, Kakashi was the only one, although Iruka was sure that the elders were trying to find whatever ties among the civilian populace they could.

“The Inuzuka take good care of their dogs.”

“They do. I visit on occasion. They have been helping out with the Hatake dogs since before I was born.”

Iruka supposes that makes sense as well. One person with that upkeep-well that was a lot of effort. Iruka has a hard enough time managing his plants. He tells Kakashi as much.

“Keeping my one plant alive is an S-Class mission. I made it one of Gai’s challenges. If it dies, he loses.”

“You did not!”

“I did. His students actually do things for their sensei. You’d think that because Naruto gave me the stupid thing you’d think he’d water it for me-”

“He did?”

“Yeah, something like your house is ‘too gloomy Kakashi-sensei and here is a plant to eat up all that gloom’ and then he named the plant like naming it Mr. Gloomy was going to jumpstart the process.”
“I’ve got Mr. Sadness.” Iruka is laughing now, head on the table, shoulders shaking.

But the thing was, Naruto’s plant *had* showed him how gloomy his apartment was. He went back and forth from the Hatake compound and the apartment in between missions. The apartment had been filled with the sense of someone that never quite bothered to ‘live’ anywhere. Until his students had been whirlwinds and upended his whole life, sweeping that sense of gloom away. He wonders why Naruto would have thought to name Iruka’s plant ‘Mr. Sadness’.

Maybe it had been a point of Iruka’s life then. He didn’t seem like he needed something to eat up the sadness now, but Kakashi really didn’t need something to eat the gloom either.

“You can show me how to eat up some gloom, sensei?” he smirks as he leans in and Iruka goes from shaking with laughter to flushed instantly.

They’re sparing when the idea comes to him. Kakashi has taken to showing him some of the other techniques that he’s picked up over the years. He’s currently stringing a puppet of sticks and wire along. It’s surprisingly difficult for a makeshift sparing partner.

They discuss the advancements of dolls and puppets as Iruka dodges the blows from ‘Stick Man’. Puppets are not a specialty of Konoha, he doesn’t spend excessive lesson times on them.

“How advanced can these get?” he asks as he dodges a blow.

“I’ve seen them reanimate dead bodies if they have enough chakra and less scruples.”

Iruka slices, Stick Man reflects with his kunai-for-hands. He thinks for a moment, trying to remember what he knows about reanimation.

“Does the chakra pattern look the same to you?” he asks instead. He sends another kunai, this one gets stuck in the left stick leg.

“It’s similar enough.” Kakashi agrees, pulling the puppet back. “But once I see the original, it’s easy enough to tell them apart. It can be problematic if they have enough power to control several. The fact that you’ve killed it and it keeps moving is usually a tip off though.”

“Dead bodies don’t need water the way living ones do. The chakra pattern looks off.” he ducks down and slices his water out, cutting one of the limbs off.

Kakashi drops the puppet, it falls into a heap of sticks and wire. “We can get back to Stick Man later. Is this something I could look for?”

“Possibly. I don’t have any practical experience with dead body reanimation, but if you could see past whatever chakra signature the puppet master has- you could see that they were controlling the chakra pathways of the reanimated. I suspect it would be more difficult with a water chakra puppet master, because it could mimic the water in a body unintentionally. Reanimation is difficult even for things like your sticks just now. To reanimate a body would take even more. You have to use their own chakra paths. It would not transfer exactly, no matter the skill of the wielder.”

“So you could notice the dehydration of the dead bodies.”

“Something like that, I suppose. They shouldn’t be able to fight with such skill if they are in fact as dehydrated as I perceive them to be.”

“This would be an advantage.” Kakashi says as he sits down. “Animate Stick Man for me.”
“I can’t-”

“You spread out enough chakra to thread discarded senbons to trap me the first time we sparred. This shouldn’t demand more than that.”

“Let me finish, you stupid genius.” Iruka snaps, but there’s that fond look in his eyes that Kakashi wants to kiss and kiss and ignore the entire thing they’ve just stumbled on in order for kissing and probably more. He waves his hand instead.

“You may continue.”

“Ass. Like I was saying, I can’t animate something like this, it’s too far removed from a person. Give me a shadow clone?”

“Even better.” That way Kakashi can see (and feel) exactly what Iruka intends to do when it returns to him.

Two clones are standing in the field now as he sits with his Sharingan. He takes a moment to stare and decides he likes the way this looks. Wonders if he could convince Iruka to let him use clones because Iruka still has higher demands than he thinks he can keep up with sometimes, although he thinks he’s putting his genius to good use to close the gap in knowledge and practical application. Iruka hasn’t been giving him bad reports, after all.

Iruka breathes, thinking about what he wants to do and lunges out the threads, capturing one of the clones. Its movements are jilted, erratic. “I don’t have much practice with this.” he says, a bit apologetic but Kakashi is staring at the clone, more interested now in what Iruka is doing than fantasies of what they can do later. He’s good at multitasking like that. He watches as the water chakra that is threads itself thorough the pathways of his clone. It does look to be off somehow-although that is something that Kakashi would have always attributed to the ability of threading your chakra into something else, not a body fighting reanimation.

Iruka makes the clone start to go through some basic stretches and it’s a good way to see the jilted movements start to smooth out as Iruka gets a better handle on the body. It’s fascinating, actually. Until the clone steps on a discarded shuriken that Iruka didn’t see and poofs away. The return shocks him momentarily and he takes a breath.

He points to the other. “Think you can do it again?”

“No, not now. I want to show you something else. I don’t know if the clone can handle it, but if there are some water nin as advanced as we think then-” he takes a deep breath. “You can make it walk or something.”

The clone starts to go through the exercise series Iruka was making the other do just a moment ago. Iruka starts making some hand signals; although this set differs slightly; some could even be considered forbidden. He finishes and flings out the chakra. It touches the clone, which stops moving, falling to one knee. Iruka is sweating, but he forces the chakra threads to move and the body starts to rise. This is different than sliding chakra threads along pathways to animate a body. He is actively taking control of the living clone against itself.

He lasts for a few steps and the clone poofs out of existence.

This time the pain kicks him like a Gai roundhouse to the chest. Iruka had been possessing the water in the body and forcing it to move the body. This is similar to the nerve rewiring technique he’d seen from Tsunade, but also markedly different. Iruka is heaving from the strain and falls
back, panting.

Kakashi isn’t sure this is something that he should copy, even if he’s seen it.

“You can force the water inside a body to bend to your will.”

“Not well, obviously. And not easily.” he groans. “But if someone like me could stumble onto it, I’d bet more advanced water nin definitely have. It also leaves me very open to attack. It is not something I think just anyone could do.”

“You caused the clone enough pain from the _inside_ to cause it to dispel, the equivalent of causing someone to pass out. The battle would have been over.”

“If we had been the only two.” Iruka snaps back, irritated. “That’s not usually the case. And I’m basically useless afterwards. But that’s not the point. This wouldn’t work if someone didn’t have the right amount of water inside their body. Those were shadow clones, it’s the only reason it worked. It wouldn’t work in the slightest with any other type of clone.” he stands, unsteady. He starts walking to the house and Kakashi follows.

Iruka’s chakra isn’t too bad, but the technique had drained him physically. He only walks as far as the den before collapsing on the couch.

“Do you think you have enough data to try and see the water inside a person? I could probably show you again in a bit-”

“Not today.” Kakashi says as he comes to sit beside Iruka. “Perhaps later. I have a lot to think on about what I just saw. Viewing it as dehydration seems to be the best chakra effective route for the moment, although I can guess at what you mean about water chakra signature occluding a body’s natural hydration.”

“I can show you with one of my clones later.”

“You had Naruto teach you how to make shadow clones.”

“…maybe.” Iruka admits as he leans back onto Kakashi. “At least I asked for permission.”

“It’s not my fault my eye picks it up.”

“I still win.” he winces, “Haven't done that in a while. It’s as bad as I remember.”

Kakashi moves Iruka a bit, places his hand on the chest and starts up the pulse of chakra he’s become familiar with.

“I can see where a village would want to take advantage of such ability.”

Iruka breathes, and the effort pains him. Everything hurts. “They have.” he admits. He places one hand above Kakashi’s and focuses on his breathing. He curls his other hand around Kakashi’s free one.

“The stone. I used to visit every day before I became a teacher. My parents are there, and so are my genin team, our jounin sensei. Many people are there.”

“Yes.” Kakashi agrees, his throat tight. There was something raw here that Iruka was talking about, and he starts to pull his hand back, but Iruka grabs it tighter and threads their fingers together.

“But some people don’t make it to the stone. So I spend more of my time at the graduation wall
now. Missing nin don’t get their names on the stone. If you happen to be die of something else like ripe old age, or childbirth—"

Iruka lets out a breath, and to Kakashi it sounds something suspiciously like trying to hold back tears.

“Because even if they’re missing now, even if they died as enemies of the village, I can still mourn who they used to be.” Each breath felt like contact poison, paralyzing and painful, but Iruka needs to get this out; he hadn’t talked about anything like this since well before Hiruzen’s passing.

Kakashi was fumbling, feeling useless as he held Iruka. There wasn’t much he could do for this; it was just physical and mental exhaustion. Techniques like this were not classified as ‘forbidden’ for nothing. The strain they put on the body was nothing to joke about, reminding him of Gai in the aftermath of opening too many gates.

He never liked that either, that feeling of fumbling uselessness. There wasn’t anything he could do for this. he could only watch as Iruka closed his eyes, attempting to block out the pain.

“I’ve taught many children, taught them skills in espionage, given them lessons that will help them kill eventually. But I’ve also taught them other things, kinder things.” his eyes were open now, but they were staring far beyond him. “Not all of my lessons are taken to heart, and not all of my students remain loyal to Konoha. I’ve killed them before.”

“Your own students?”

Those eyes are looking at him now, and Kakashi feels stripped bare beneath their look.

Kakashi had done things. Terrible things. things that most ninja would have had their minds wiped for; except he had to live with them because the Sharingan prevented such things.

But he’d never had to kill his own students. Even Sasuke’s orders now were a ‘detain first’ degree. He’d only had team seven.

To kill any of them...

He didn’t know if he could.

“Maybe I wasn’t the one who slit their throats, but I’ve been giving monthly reports to the Hokage almost as long as I’ve been teaching. I’ve taught the Hyuuga’s exclusively for half a decade now. My reports have certainly condemned some; sent on missions they aren’t prepared for.”

His breath wavers, pain evident in every movement he made.

“I earn their trust, and turn it all over for someone else to make decisions. Each one is different you know. Has likes, dislikes, some not-so-well-kept secret crushes...” he laughs, but the sound was broken and ragged.

“Sometimes I wonder if I was really cut out for this. Raising murderers, I mean. Killing children. Yeah, Konoha doesn’t allow ‘geniuses’ to graduate too early anymore, it’s too much of a liability to their psyches. And I haven't graduated anyone under twelve since I was placed in charge of my own group of kids, but still, even that age...” his eyes slide shut again, pain radiating off him in waves.

Kakashi stops the chakra sharing, because he isn’t sure it’s helping at this point or just keeping Iruka awake. “Your students are more prepared than any I’ve seen. Your love for them gets
through.”

Iruka shifts, breathing hard.

“You know that I had to babysit team eight after the chuunin exams for a day and they chewed me out big time for messing with their sensei? Kiba had Akamaru on my heels all day and I found bugs in the pockets of my jacket for days.”

“And Hinata?”

“She was most displeased out of the three I think. She didn’t say anything about the other two or their behavior; never took her eyes off me either. Even as someone who trained with Hyuuga, that’s fairly creepy I’ll have you know.”

Iruka gives a smile, but it’s thin and strained, the effort paining him.

“Out of thirteen pre-genin teams that graduated last year only five made it to genin status. And only four teams made it to chuunin exams within the year. They were all yours. I like those odds.”

“Is it strange that I want this to stop? That I want to have a generation of ninja that don’t have anything more difficult than the occasional mountain bandit?”

And Kakashi can’t say he’s ever thought of such a thing. He was born in war, came into his own during wartime and war has been on the horizon ever since the last one ended. He’s been nothing more than a tool in the cycle of destruction and death.

“That sounds nice.” he says, and he means it. It sounds more like a nice dream than a plausible reality but he likes the idea either way. “I could get used to D-rank mission gardening for cranky old schoolteachers.”

Iruka wheezes a laugh and closes his eyes, his breathing stuttering for a bit before he manages to fall asleep.

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Chapter End Notes

Guh, wasn't sure if I wanted this now or later but. BUT. There it is. And the end of the first-ish arc (and weekly updates) is coming, although I'm not sure if I'm going to break it into a new story in the series or not.

Also the plants: Kakashi's plant is Mr. Ukkei, which the internet tells me is the sound for gloom? or something like that and I went and just called him Mr. Gloomy cause I think it makes more sense than trying to linguistically explain a maybe translation from the internet. Also, Iruka's plant is Mr. Inki 隆気 so Mr. Sadness, maybe? Or I'm totally wrong all over the place and just butchering things for my own story. Either way, Mr. Gloomy and Mr. Sadness.

When Ibiki showed off his head did anyone else think seizures? I know like seventh grade me totally thought that.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

“That’s a dangerous glare, sensei. Were you not the one who told me that mild chakra exhaustion is not a case of the flu?”

Chapter Notes

THIS CHAPTER. I have many much feels about it. I had this written, like I said (almost three weeks ago now, ugh). But Iruka-

Didn't want to share.

(Secretive ninja bastards, like really.)

So this chapter was an exercise in keeping the feeling (about 75% percent content ideas kept) and yet rewriting so much of it (I think I only kept about 25% of my original text, if that.)

I also want to point people in the direction of a snippet thing I wrote as a part of the Doing it Backwards series universe and it's Ikkaku and Iruka happy happy sap sap.
And some mythology, kind of. I like it a lot, even as short as it is.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kakashi ends up moving Iruka back to his room, although he doesn’t leave. Iruka is pale and overtaxed, the technique sapping more out of him than probably was healthy, considering his chakra issues. His chakra doesn’t seem to be rebelling or even in a state of flux. Just drained, then.

Kakashi knows how to handle that much, at least.

Iruka is in a fog, squinting at the brightness in the room. It’s late then, later than he should be sleeping.

“-water?” Kakashi’s voice breaks through the haze. He goes to sit up and nearly cries out as his back seized, pain lancing through him. He tries to relax as gravity pulls him back down. Everything hurts, but he has to let the tension unwind itself. Pushing through it just hurts more.

He knows this from experience.

The pain dispels the fog somewhat as he looks over at Kakashi. He’s not bothering with asking about the pain, they both know it’s something beyond standard field skills. He finds himself explaining anyway.

“My back. It acts up sometimes.” he offers, trying to flex his hands. Another shooting pain, although a bit duller than the first. “The medical team did the best they could but it was a deep
“You should have Tsunade look at it. She might be able to help with scar tissue.”

Iruka doesn’t want to tell him that she had already seen it, that this result is after months of work from her. That the pain had been so crippling before she’d returned to the village that some days he’d considered giving up teaching altogether.

“She’s looked at it. Some days are bad, is all.”

He pushes himself up on one elbow, just enough to reach for the cup and guzzle it down. He clenches his teeth as his arm buckles and he falls back down.

“Do you want something?” Kakashi says as he reaches to remove a pill pack from his flak jacket. “I have some mild ones for pain. Can’t have anything that would significantly impair you in a medi-pack but I also-”

“No, thank you.” he wheezes, trying to regain his breathing.

“-have pills that don’t do anything for pain but give you mobility.” he continues.

“No.”

“You have a low-grade fever, also consistent with mild chakra exhaustion.” Kakashi says as he places the pills back inside his jacket and Iruka wants him to just leave.

“That’s a dangerous glare, sensei. Were you not the one who told me that mild chakra exhaustion is not a case of the flu?”

And he did say that. Has been telling his kids that for years.

“You can go do your regimen. Some water and I’ll be fine.”

“I don’t think so.” Kakashi counters, a lazy smile on his face. “I would think you don’t have much experience with mild chakra depletion.”

“I have plenty of experience with mild chakra exhaustion.”

“As a caretaker, not a patient.”

Kakashi is right about that and Iruka lets his head fall back against the pillows.

“Fine.” he grumbles.

“So is this common for you? You said you’d stumbled upon the technique before.”

“No, never this drained. Maybe because I showed you both techniques? Maybe because I have more of a connection with Mizuchi? It’s pretty much a guessing game at this point though, so who really knows?”

“It is certainly interesting,” Kakashi agrees. “Now you say that chakra dehydration and physical dehydration often occur simultaneously, which makes sense. And you’ve had older Hyuuga look in on younger ones in your classes. They’ve probably picked up the signs for physical dehydration as well as chakra dehydration since they often occur in tandem. Perhaps a number of people could be trained to view such things.”
“It’s not something I can measure.”

“True. You are a unique case and replicating such a feat would be impossible. However, if we can distribute enough of this training then perhaps we won’t fall for such tactics.”

“It is an idea.” Iruka concedes. He has paired his Hyuuga students together, especially in the beginning. “But these are all points of discussion and practice is another matter.” he coughs, looking at the empty cup.

“More water then?” Kakashi picks up the glass and walks off.

Iruka flexes his hands again and the pain is duller now, hopefully enough so that he can move about. He rolls out of bed and stands, shaky. The dogs don’t seem to be keen on stopping him or running to Kakashi so he makes his way to the bathroom, sweating as he wills away the black spots dotting his vision. He shrugs out of his flak jacket, wincing from the movement. His shirts don’t really matter, he can’t be bothered with lifting his arms that high right now anyway.

He drops himself into the bathtub, turns on the water and lets himself sink into it, the water finally relaxing some of the knots of pain.

“Not so good a patient, are we?” Kakashi says from the doorway and Iruka opens his eyes.

“I heard a rumor that you’ve escaped out a third floor window at the hospital.”

“Point.” he smiles, crooked. “I only did that the once, I’ll have you know.”

“Walking down the hall doesn’t seem so bad now in comparison, does it?”

“I could have helped.”

(\textit{Let me help you Iru.})

He swallows, forcing the phantom words away. “You were helping. Got the water didn’t you?” he stretches out his hand to take it.

Kakashi leans against the counter and hands him the water, which he drains.

“I’ve been thinking,” he says as Kakashi takes the cup back. “That if I had summoned a water dragon before it would have been at my first set of chuunin exams.”

“The one with the design flaw?”

“Where did you hear about-” he doesn’t have to finish the question, “Kotetsu said something.”

“If you think the mission desk is the only place where one gossips about things like third floor window escapes and chuunin exams with design flaws, then you’d be wrong. But he did mention something, yes.”

“I don’t remember much, the medi-nin diagnosed me with a concussion and bruised ribs when we arrived at the rendezvous point with our scrolls. I’d always thought that was why my memory was fuzzy.”

“What do you remember?”

“Not much. We were hiding out in a cave behind the waterfall, laying low. We’d basically stolen our second scroll without a real fight. We bandaged up our injuries and decided to stay the night.
But I think the entire waterfall was part of their domain so it really wasn't very safe. Next I knew we were downstream and far enough away from them that we kept going to the rendezvous point.”

“The concussion could be the reason for the memory issues.”

“That’s what I assumed,” Iruka nods. “This is, I don’t really remember how I got the concussion in the first place. Only what my teammates told me after.”

“So what were you told?”

“That an Onbaa held me in one fist and basically smashed my head against the cave wall. We somehow managed to distract it enough to get it to loosen its grip and we jumped into the river.”

“You swam?”

“It was pretty much our only avenue of escape.” he shrugs. “I may have been disoriented, but water-” he stops. “I was probably less disoriented in water than on land, to be honest. Eventually we managed to get out and it was pretty close to the tower. We passed the first part of the exams that way.”

“The second round?” he asks, interested. Kakashi wonders what the fighting record was there, wants to know what tricks Iruka pulled out in the one-on-one fights. Kakashi doesn't remember much about the politics of the actual exams but ANBU had been busy with monitoring the foreign nin, not Konoha’s chuunin-potentials.

“There wasn’t an official second round.” Iruka says, looking away now. “They held the battles immediately to keep all the high level jounin sensei in one place in case of a planned attack.”

“My battle—there were questions regarding some of my techniques. It probably would have been worse if Izumo had participated in that set of exams.”

There had been questions about his water abilities then, abilities that Kousuke-sensei had claimed to teach him.

(It hadn’t been Kousuke-sensei.)

“Why could it have been worse?”

Iruka looks up at him, “Izumo and I are the only people in our age group with a primary water orientation. If we’d both been there it would have showcased all that Konoha had to offer in water strength.”

“That is the purpose of the exams.” Kakashi says, “and you are strong enough on your own to be considered a threat.” Iruka had managed to pull off complicated maneuvers without use of elemental chakra, Kakashi had witnessed it firsthand when they sparred. “I take it you won your first round, even suffering from a concussion?”

“Winning my round was a fluke, it was nothing special.” Iruka remembers very little of that battle besides an overwhelming sense of dizziness. He’d passed out before the second.

Nothing special? Kakashi doesn’t like Iruka's dismissal of his abilities. Doesn’t fully understand it either. Luck is just as much an asset as anything else that has allowed him to survive this long.

"Why is it that you abilities aren't worth the same amount of consideration as others? You've taught your students to counter their faults so I know you don't teach that way-"
Iruka shifts, gripping the edge of the tub.

"I don't understand." Kakashi continues. "You have talent and ability as a shinobi. Your sensei saw it, Sandaime saw it, I see it. You see the hard work and accomplishments in others, including Gai. And yet you think that line of thinking doesn't apply to you. I don't understand that."

Iruka closes his eyes, but there’s nowhere to run, not like this.

"I don't understand why you think the only real threat that you could have presented to anyone at the chuunin exams was if Izumo had participated also. Keeping a talent a secret is one thing, dismissing it entirely is another. And it is no small feat that you've managed to hide your chakra issue even though you've been exclusively teaching the hyuuga clan for years."

Kakashi just stands there, waiting for an answer. Iruka sinks back down, wanting to disappear.

The water really isn't hot anymore, and he really doesn't want to test himself by trying to warm it again. He looks back over at Kakashi and debates trying to get himself out.

Kakashi holds out his hand.

Iruka takes it.

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He manages to sleep some after that and wakes to Kakashi in bed with him. Kakashi is reading, but he closes the book when he sees that Iruka is awake.

It’s entirely too domestic.

More even, because his back had prevented any sort of ‘untoward’ activities.

He sort of wants to smile at the domesticity of it all, but he can’t. This isn’t real. They’re playing house, a house made of cards and just as susceptible to outside forces.

He’s kind of surprised that Tsunade hasn’t sent Kakashi out on a mission from House Warren. Konoha is short staffed, after all.

But even if they do get a bit more of this mission-vacation, it won’t last. He won’t get a life like this, even the fact that this is happening-

It’s more like a fairytale than anything else.

And fairytales end.

“Are you all right?” Kakashi asks.

“Better. Haven’t had a day that bad in a while.”

And Kakashi must read into that more than Iruka wanted, because the eyebrow raises ever so slightly.

“So there is pain.”

“It’s within standard,” he says, which is the truth.

Kakashi looks over the length of the scar again, and the gaze isn’t the kind that Iruka prefers,
instead it’s as if Kakashi is peeling his back open and trying to survey the exact amount of damage that Iruka has. He’s more exposed than he would like, like this. And this is just the normal eye, although Kakashi has told him that that the Sharingan doesn’t strip someone down the way that a Byakugan does.

“So there is constant pain.”

And he can’t answer that, can’t answer the intense look of concern in that eye as he lowers his head and looks away, but he thinks that’s probably enough of an answer for Kakashi anyway.

“Have you tried alternative healing methods? I am fairly skilled in the field of medical massage.”

And from Kakashi that doesn’t sound like a poor attempt to try to get in someone’s pants.

“That’s an interesting skill to have.”

“I’m fairly familiar with acupuncture as well, although I am more familiar with its uses for muscle strain. I would want to study the intricacies of the spinal cord some more before I attempted such a thing.”

Muscle strain, recuperating with natural methods instead of a quick healing jutsu-Taijutsu.

The gossip may count the numerous (and often strange) battles that Kakashi has with Gai. The gossip certainly does not even whisper about the fact that Kakashi has learned alternative healing therapies to help hone his friend’s taijutsu.

“So you taught yourself alternative healing therapies?”

Kakashi waves a hand, as if that is just something that people do.

(It isn’t.)

“It has multiple uses.” Kakashi counters, smiling that crooked smile again. “Maybe even a few untoward ones.”

“Can’t say I’m too familiar with friends doing things like that for me. Considering the last one is what landed me like this.”

He says it before he even realizes the words are out of his mouth, instantly regrets his words as the smile leaves Kakashi’s face faster than one snuffs a candle; a look of shock in the wide grey eye.

Kakashi stares, the answer coming to him.

It doesn’t make sense.

“Are you saying that Mizuki, your childhood friend and Mizuki-sensei the evil guy that attacked Naruto and stabbed you with a fuma shuriken were one in the same?”

It still doesn’t make sense, even when he voices the question.

Iruka hears incredulity in Kakashi’s voice and wonders how Kakashi didn’t figure it out before, but then again- Mizuki isn’t exactly a rare name- and the tale itself is so unbelievable that he doesn’t want to admit it to himself most days.
“Yeah,” he says, looking away again because now fuck it all- his eyes are stinging and he won’t cry over this, not again. “Nearly twenty years of friendship for what?”

He asks himself that question more than he probably should.

Kakashi clenches his jaw, trying to wrap his head around this. Twenty years? The only person he’s really known that long is Gai. The rest of his friends, although all part of the same graduating class, were not introduced to him until Obito and Rin had done so and while he’s certainly known them for that long, he wouldn’t count their friendship in as many years.

He couldn’t even imagine Gai turning around to stab him. Roundhouse kick slightly off center that sent him through a wall and resulted in three cracked ribs because one Icha Icha scene had been particularly distracting, yes. Stabbing him in the back, never.

“That doesn’t make sense,” he says, because it doesn’t. Gai is one of the few things left in this world that Kakashi can believe in.

“There’s a lot about Mizuki that doesn’t make sense,” Iruka says, staring at the wall, “but it was all him, no genjutsu or other form of coercion.”

Kakashi still can’t envision it. He hears the words that Iruka is saying, knows that people can turn traitor against the village but still- as far as understanding goes-

Iruka may as well be telling him that fish can fly alongside birds.

“So you were-”

“Can we just go to bed?” he curls his hand into a fist, wanting to touch Kakashi. They’re in bed together but the distance might as well be separate rooms. Tension pickles into pain, sliding along his back, and he relaxes his fist again.

Kakashi apparently doesn’t feel such a distance as his hand comes to rest on top of Iruka’s, tracing the lines of his fingers, his hand.

“I cannot say I fully understand.” Kakashi admits, “I do not think I may ever to be able to fully understand such a betrayal. However, I do know that you are an integral piece of Konoha. If anyone bothered to look at your first class-”

“They aren’t-“

“They are.” Kakashi insists, “You were their sensei, not the assistant, not the newly ranked chuunin with old lesson plans and Hyuuga thrown at you because others couldn't catch their chakra dehydration. They were yours from the beginning. They have more readiness than I think anyone expected, myself included. You gave them minds that could decide for themselves, gave them tools to help bridge the gaps of their shortcomings- I think we should pay more attention to the chuunin sensei of our world because they are the ones that are truly bringing up the next generation. And you did all of that while believing that you were nothing special?”

He turns his head into Kakashi’s shoulder, hands curling into the shirt as he breathes. He’s been cracked open, feels his eyes sting, but he can’t do anything except breathe. And why does Kakashi have to hold him, one hand in his hair and he can’t take this right now- he scrunches his eyes shut and it’s not doing anything for the stinging or the breathing-

“Just-just stay, okay?” he whispers, voice hoarse as he seeks out the other hand, tangling their fingers together, a lifeline, afraid of breaking apart for real. Believing in himself, well, he hasn’t
done that in a very long time. But he thinks he could believe in Kakashi. He wants to believe, wants to be held and not break apart. Wants to remember this moment forever, even when he dies.

Kakashi doesn’t laugh, don’t pull away, doesn’t call him overly emotional or make him feel like he’s asking for too much. Kakashi is there, holding him, safe, he won’t break, not from this. Like everything is all right.

And it feels like everything can be.

---

Uhei and Urushi had return with another slug summon who ran basic diagnostic on Iruka and Kakashi as well after chewing him out for trying to communicate with an unknown chakra element but she seems extremely excited over the prospect of this unknown chakra element although she loses some of that excitement when Kakashi voices the possibility for memory alteration. She says that she’ll send another scroll shortly.

It seems there is much that Tsunade has to handle, not just the convoy.

They fall back into a routine of sorts. They still spar, they still practice the dragon summon, they still kiss and they still have sex.

But for Iruka, the sense of the impeding end, the crumpling of their house of cards-just seems closer than before. Summer will end, and they’ll return to something.

Just what, he isn’t sure yet.

He still dreams of Mizuchi, dreams of the dragon curled around him, reaffirming the fact that he’s not alone. That he has never been alone.

But still, as the long days of summer pass, Iruka knows that Tsunande can’t keep them off the record for forever. He also wants to know about his seal. Wants R&I to have him before classes start; he’s already behind on some of them. He’d promised to give some summer lessons; he knows they won’t mind terribly because missions are missions but he still feels bad about it.

Kakashi had him starting to spend down his chakra, trying to sense Mizuchi inside of him. Iruka can see the dragon easier now, but there is still a disconnect there, Iruka becoming more convinced that R&I may have done something. He can’t connect every time when he is awake. Dreaming is different.

Kakashi lets that part of the regimen go; he has no interest in putting Iruka through that again if he cannot connect with Mizuchi consistently.

Kakashi has been upping Iruka’s standard workout the entire summer; Iruka thinks that he may even be keeping up with Kakashi when they go out on runs now.

“You’re not holding back on the routines, are you?” he asks in the bath after they finish their regimen.

“Nope.” Kakashi doesn’t even open his eyes from where his head is tipped back against the side of the bath. “Not for a while. You’ve got a stronger core than I do and more stamina.”
“I doubt that.”

“It’s true. That regimen is something Gai developed. Yours could have more strengthening, I think. Mine has less because my speed would be compromised if I bulked up too much. That’s the reason why I try to avoid prolonged hand-to-hand combat. And you shouldn’t doubt your physical limits.”

“Gai helped you develop it?”

“Gai is excellent at training skill sets and he has helped several of us with ours over the years. I’m sure if you asked he would make one for you.”

“I wouldn’t ask. He’s probably quite busy.”

“I’ll ask him then. Could even make a challenge out of it.”

“I don’t need the same training regimen that you jounin need.”

Kakashi is picking up on this sort of thing easier now, this dismissal couched in niceties. He doesn’t even think that Iruka realizes it most of the time, so he just makes note of it for later.

“Not so sure about that one. Keeping up with the kids can’t be easy.” he says instead. Kakashi lets the bit about the training regimen go. He’ll ‘suggest’ it to Gai later to bring up when he guest teaches at the academy.

“It takes getting used to, those first few weeks.” Iruka agrees as he lays his head back, enjoying the water. “It’ll really feel like work after this, with the school closed before and no summer session.”

“I think training should feel like work.”

“It’s a different type of work. The kids- well-after they pass the preliminary set they think they can start throwing shuriken and blasting fireballs and enlarging body parts and-” he sighs. “It takes the first few weeks alone to bring them into line and stop trying these half formed justus that they watch older kids practice.” He twists his hand, watching the water spiral around it.

“Sounds difficult.” Kakashi certainly doesn’t envy trying to balance multiple clan jutsus in addition to basic skills.

“It is. And then everyone thinks they are the prankster of the year.” Iruka snorts, “Most of their attempts are beyond laughable. At least Naruto gave me a run for my money, I’ll give him that.”

“Naruto put an eraser in the doorway when I went to meet them the first time.” Kakashi cracks his eye open, catching Iruka’s smile with one of his own.

“Classic.” Iruka laughs. “Also tricks like that are better for catching advanced shinobi, also. You see the triple crossed tripwires of chakra with the exploding paint tags. You never see the simple rubber band holding a paint filled balloon inside the hanging lanterns.”

“That was you?” Kakashi remembers that. It worked out in his favor that day, being late. It had been part of the new year celebrations and someone had filled several of the lanterns with balloons of paint as part of a New Year’s prank.

“Kotetsu was in on it,” Iruka grins. “Gotta keep you jounin on your toes.”

“Not all of us think being better in rank makes us better as people.”
“No,” Iruka agrees. “But it’s still fun. You should keep up with Asuma in case you ever decide to be on time. He always knows when I’m planning something. Too many failed pranks when I was a kid I guess.”

“How well do you know Asuma?”

“I lived with them for a while after the attack. Biwako Sarutobi had been in charge of things like orphans and monetary funds and her death put all of that into disarray. I wasn’t the only orphan from the attack, but I had no other family. Our building had been destroyed in the attack also. I stayed with them for a bit, until they managed to get me into the dorm-style housing for genin whose parents were on extended missions.”

Kakashi wonders if Iruka had been living in the Hokage Residence the night he had broken in for Danzo. The night where Sandaime had caught him (arguably at his peak) as if he was nothing more than an ineffective genin hiding behind a wall scroll.

So many occasions when they could have met; he’s been friends with Asuma for years. He cannot recall if Asuma mentioned Iruka living with him. He might not have, if Iruka was still in the academy at the time, Asuma would have been off on missions, more likely than not. He worked hard to get to jounin level.

“How long have you been doing wards?” he asks instead.

“Um- a while. I mean I used to do things like protect my personal items at school because I spent a lot of time collecting old things and fixing them up as best I could to fill my pack with weapons. My parents gave me what they could, but they needed the weapons more than I did. I make sure the basic weapon packs get doled out to those who need them, and spend lesson time on weapon retrieval and maintenance now.”

This is a problem that Naruto had never shared with him. Or Sasuke, for that matter. He’d known that Sasuke, despite having access to large sums of money, did not go out to spend it. He’d seen them sharpening their weapons one afternoon and had remarked on their ingenuity to sharpen dull weapons themselves rather than throw them out.

“More and more surprises, sensei.”

“Kids can be pretty nasty. Most of them don’t really mean it, but it’s something I have to work on every year. So I started figuring out ways to guard my locker and I spent a lot of time and chakra on paper seals and exploding tags. But the paper the academy gives you doesn’t last as long, so I developed a way to seal them off so they wouldn’t get damaged. One of the jounin that came to do a lesson saw them and well-” he shrugs. “Been doing part of the wards for the Hokage Residence since. Just a small layer with water seals, enough so that most ninja wouldn’t see-”

“They’d be too busy looking at the triple tripwire earth seals. Water wouldn’t even think to look and neither would anyone who was trying from inside Konoha.”

“…something like that.” Iruka smiles, and Kakashi slides over. Iruka could have very well been a part of the reason that Sandaime had caught him that night.

“That is amazing.” and he means it. Thinks of what might have been if he hadn’t been caught that night. Wants to tell Iruka all about it and fuck protocol. He pulls him close instead, kissing him hard.

Iruka shifts and Kakashi has him pressed up against the edge of the bath now, kissing hungrily.
There is so much that this man has, that this man has done and he never wants to let him go.

He doesn’t know if he can handle having another ‘precious person’ in his life, but it’s too late for that now. Their lives have been overlapping for too long. He won’t let R&I play with Iruka’s memories further.

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The bird comes not too long after that, with another slug summon. It runs some more diagnostics and he can hear the excitement in Tsunade’s voice about something new to study, nearly giddy at the prospect.

She sobers up some when Kakashi asks about R&I possibly playing with his memories. She agrees, saying she’s got Ibiki on it. Kakashi also discussed the Inuzuka and she acknowledged the idea. It was worth more discussion, at least.

Kakashi asked about the bloodline continuance motions and she sighed and told them that her moves against them were not gaining as much traction as she had thought.

Iruka pointed out that just considering bloodlines was perhaps not the best way to approach it. Konoha had many clans and even more secrets. Most also had no issue with succession and did not seem overly concerned with such an edict. He suggested that looking at rare chakra orientations or even rare permutations of common ones could be a better angle. He also suggested that certain chakra orientations were being recruited heavily by the elders despite their apparent ‘official’ focus on bloodlines and bloodline limits.

She agreed, asking about those with water orientation that Iruka was familiar with. She had taken on Sakura as an apprentice and seemed interested in seeing what Natsumi might be able to do. He also might have put Izumo in her sights as a test subject. (Just a little, anyway.)

She also seemed increasingly concerned about the convoy and their lack of hurry in regarding their return to the Land of Water. She'd sent out a few teams for intel but they had always been found out before they got close enough and had to abort the mission before it was discovered where they were from.

Kakashi spoke this time, explaining what he considered to be the problem; someone who could sense bodies in the rain.

Iruka explained that standard mission speed of travel for a ninja alone could tip them off. The ability might reach even further than any chakra-sensory types on record. Distance was more important than precision.

Iruka also suggested that the rain might not be natural, structured to catch them at certain points of the journey. A slower approach could get them closer. Perhaps as part of a traveling caravan or some other group that would not draw too much attention, if precision was truly being sacrificed for distance.

Tsunade thinks about the information, mulling over some of the ideas about the technique with them and if it was possible to be able to sense chakra in the rain, if this could be something that a Hyuuga could sense. She seemed satisfied with their responses and the slug vanished. Iruka moves towards the counter, washing the vegetables.

"She's going to want you as an assistant you know.” Kakashi says as he starts chopping.

"I'll have to pass, too much time. Shizune keeps her in line well enough."
"I'd want you as an assistant."

"And what would I be an assistant for? Training with the ninken?" he chuckles a bit. “Perhaps to make sure you get to places on time?"

“Rokudaime. If it ever comes to that.”

Iruka stops chopping; places the blade down. Leans against the counter, staring at his pile of tomatoes.

“Am I even allowed to know this?” he asks instead, his words thick; harsher than he intended. Information like this is worth killing for.

“I was on Sandaime’s short list also.”

“Why are you telling me this?” his hands are shaking, he grips the counter to steady them.

“Because I don’t want to lose your company.”

Iruka stares at the tomatoes, as his vision swims, willing them to explode or something. Anything to take him away from this.Fuck, he was doing so good at telling himself that this was a holiday. He’d learn to forget about the sparring, the sex, this temporary life that they had. That Kakashi would go back to being on the fringes of his consciousness; the occasional meeting in the mission room to talk about their mutual students.

He’d have missed it of course, but playing house and living life are two very different things.

But dropping a bomb like this-?

That sounded entirely too close to I don’t want to lose you.

He’ll have to be sworn to secrecy by Tsunade-sama when he gets back.

“Fucking stupid genius jounin.” he swears under his breath, squeezing his eyes shut. This ties them together in a way that really can’t be separated.

“For the record I have no interest in the position.” Kakashi says from behind him now, “but we have discussed it in case anything happens. There aren’t many alternatives and I hate them more than taking the position myself.”

“Don’t say any more. I don’t want to be biased.”

“You’d want me for the position wouldn’t you?”

“Of course I would, you fucker-” he turns and drags Kakashi’s face to his, kissing him hard. “But I can’t view the others in a bad light before they contest it.”

“That sounds very diplomatic of you.”

Kakashi is smiling now, his lips twisted just so and Iruka could let the moment pass. Kakashi isn’t going to demand an answer. But he’s already made up his mind, so Iruka leans back against the counter.

“Someone’s going to have to be. I know what your reports look like.”
Kakashi’s expression changes, something softer; almost like awe. His hands come and frame his face; he does nothing but look at Iruka for several heartbeats. Iruka squirms a bit at the look, but doesn’t break it either.

“I’d still have you train with the ninken though.”

---

Several days later, they’re sitting on the couch and Kakashi is watching Iruka idly flipping through his papers, but his lesson plans are pretty much done at this point. He’s moved on, drawing Mizuchi again and has started drawing other things as well. Iruka really hasn’t spent much time doing anything besides the training regimen, his lesson plans and cooking, so this is a nice change of pace.

Kakashi is whittling away at a piece of wood with his knife as he watches. He'd forgotten how much he liked to do this, it was calming and he still held a weapon while he did it. Iruka looks a bit agitated even after two rounds after morning training.

He grins to himself. Stamina, indeed.

“I wish I could have my class roster at least. I can’t develop the lesson plans any more without it. I know which ones I want to be the class leaders for the youngest, but it’s a matter of how many new ones I’m getting-”

“You should focus on your mission sensei.” Kakashi said, smoothing out a line of the wood.

“Really?” Iruka says, making a face at him. “It’s basically a vacation at this point.”

"Best mission I've had in a very long time." Kakashi agrees, whittling off another piece, "Top five, easy."

"But still-" He's smoothing out a corner crease on one of the papers, not looking at him. "You have a fairly active rotation schedule." It's not a question.

"Not like I used to. Less long term as well. Even after Orochimaru’s attack, it’s still less than before.” He counters, wondering where Iruka’s going with this. Not that his eye ever really allowed for extended long term missions. But most jounin have missions that are several weeks long, accounting for the time to travel to the location and back again.

Iruka looks up, Kakashi wonders if he realizes that he’s folding the paper again. "So-how does this work then? When we get back, I mean."

"I figure I'll ask you out on a date and we can see where it goes from there."

Iruka rips the corner off the page. Stares at it like he doesn't know where it came from.

"...is that a no then? I haven't even asked yet so I don't think you can reject me just yet?” Kakashi wonders if he missed something here. He likes Iruka and Iruka likes him. The silence seems more unsettling than comforting at this point.

"I suppose I can't. Until you ask that is.” Iruka finally answers, voice quiet.

"That seems ominous. I might just have to whisk you off unannounced, perhaps a midnight picnic? Moon-viewing?”
Iruka’s face doesn’t seem to like that idea at all even as he nods.

"Some very nice ideas." Iruka agrees, rolling the corner of paper between his fingers, "but really; what exactly is it that you want? It's been-" great, amazing, fun, I didn’t know I could feel things like this anymore, what am I going to do if you’re gone for more than a month, just stay with me-

Iruka stops, because he doesn't have words for any of it. Iruka rolls the paper ball, trying to find words. Kakashi puts his hand on top of Iruka's, stilling it.

"I am not sure as to exactly what I want from you like you keep asking. I think I want a lot of things. But I do not want to just return to how we were before we left the village." He threads their fingers together. "Is that all right?"

“Yeah.” Iruka breathes, staring at their hands. Light on dark, even after days and days training out in the sun. He thinks that he could handle more of the same.

He wants to try.

Chapter End Notes

This is one of the things I've been challenging myself from the beginning. To Iruka Mizuki's betrayal is like so super fucked up I don't have words.

Like Gai killing Kakashi or Ron killing Harry after all the shit they've been through and all that- just not caring about it at all!?!?! Like wut?

So I'm really excited to kind of dig into this toxic thing of a friendship that they had over the years, the darkness of close bonds, emotional brutality in close friendships.

I like really really like the idea of Kakashi and Iruka's lives like overlapping but never really crossing, although I would love to read Kakashi tripping Iruka's wards and meeting that way. (I think they'd both have been in pretty dark places then, so I'm not sure I can do that justice, but I like the idea of it anyway.)

ALSO: She doesn't get screen time this chapter, but Uhei is pissed she missed her boss getting together with Iruka when she was gone.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

“Anko.” Ibiki says from where he stands behind her.

“Oh shush. Go finish your knitting. I’ll let you have him in a minute.”

Chapter Notes

So we're at the point that I call real life konoha. Things like classes and missions and sex and desks and expedited forms for chalk and pencils (not necessarily in that order). This is also the piece of the story that I’d call part two maybe? Return to Konoha, anyways. We are also out of the weeklyish updates phase. So if people want to stop at 12, I guess that’s a logical stopping point.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The return summons comes, as Iruka knew it would.

Heading back is a faster trip and Iruka wonders if he’d been more out of shape than he’d realized when they started. Thinks that he might ask Gai for that regimen after all.

He’s too antsy to sleep, he knows that the next few days are going to be a lot of people; Tsunade, Ibiki, and whoever else as well as the hectic gear up for the start of school, and he’ll have to fill in the expedited forms and who knows what his fridge looks like by now, although he thinks that Kotetsu and Izumo have probably cleaned it out-

He doesn’t expect to be greeted by a pair of Inuzuka. Tsunande is not wasting any time then. He falters a bit when he realizes of them is Kamu, who is staring at him.

“You see.” the other one says, and Iruka finds himself looking at her instead.

She's tall and tan, with blood colored lipstick, dark smoky eyes and a mess of wild black hair barely held back by her headband, only somewhat tamed by the weight of it. She stands still, something he is unfamiliar with in most of his interactions with the Inuzuka clan, which gives the impression that she is less wild than most. And yet, she somehow is more wild than any Inuzuka he's ever met. A dangerous sort of beauty; it's similar to how a weapon can be beautiful and still run you through.

But more than any of that that, he sees Kakashi change, the casual way he holds himself sliding away into something else. Something dangerous and professional.

So this is more than a courtesy call, then. Perhaps the convoy isn't totally gone.

Both Kakashi and the woman are performing a set of hand-signals now, something complex and beyond his rank. Quite possibly Kamu's as well; he seems to be watching it as intently as Iruka is.
Something moves, coming out from behind the shadow of the tree and Iruka blinks as it comes into focus. He realizes that it is an Inuzuka dog, although it’s massive, somewhere between five and six feet tall. Certainly nothing he’s ever seen before. It reminds him of the stories the kids tell, stories of enormous wolves that run along the borders of Konoha.

She looks over at Kakashi, nodding before her eyes settle on him, sharp and suspicious before she turns to Kamu.

"They reek." she says, and Iruka tries not to flush. (He fails).

She leaps onto her ninken, starting in the direction of the village, effectively ending the conversation, for which he supposes he is grateful.

He can’t bring himself to look at Kamu though while they head toward the Hokage’s Office.

Kakashi blinks when he catches on to their welcoming party, dismissing his own ninken to the compound, glad that Tsunade isn’t wasting time with her theories regarding Iruka.

His eyes look over and he nearly chokes when he recognizes Wolf. Or Moro, he supposes he should use her real name in this situation.

She is as sharp as he remembers, somehow wild and composed at the same time.

Instead of the typical confirmation phrases, Moro starts in on what appears to be a useless set of hand signs that Kakashi finishes smoothly.

It's a bit overkill for a check-in like this, but then again Moro was never one for words when actions would do. She gives him a once over and nods before staring down Iruka.

She dislikes him, or something about him. It isn't noticeably visible to most people.

Then again, Kakashi isn't most people.

She says something about the fact that they reek. Kakashi figures she means of sex. Or each other, or both. He doesn’t mind, although Iruka is shaking his head in embarrassment. He supposes that could be embarrassing for most people to be figured out in such a manner, although his ninken broke him of that long ago. They start off towards the tower.

Kakashi was unaware that the large windows even opened so wide as they shuffle in, including the two ninken.

Tsunande is waiting for them despite the late hour, nursing a cup of tea much to her lament. Shizune stands behind her.

“Well done, Moro, Kamu.” Tsunade says as Moro comes to stand beside her, her wolf padding along silently and sitting behind the desk.

*Kamu?*

Kakashi looks over to take him in. Unfortunately there isn't much more to see, Kamu seems just as similar as the majority of his clan, with wild hair and jumpiness both. He can see a set of small scrolls (probably for diversion tactics) strapped to his leg and wonders if Iruka made them for him.

Tsunade and Moro are exchanging hushed words.
“Very well.” Tsunade nods and Moro steps back.

Iruka can feel it, feels the presence in the room become heavier, somehow. He watches as Kakashi lifts his headband before he understands that it is her chakra. And he'd thought she was dangerous before.

Kakashi looks over the swirling mass of chakra, surprised. Moro does have something very similar to Iruka’s waves of chakra, although it is connected in ways that Iruka’s isn't as well. It makes sense then, the solo missions. The fact that they were not often matched on missions despite paring well together.

One couldn't hide this from his eye if the situation called for it.

“A god then?” he questions.

“It is a belief that the Inuzuka have. Their gods come to the aid of a select few, although this is the first record during Konoha’s history.” Shizune says.

"Wrong," Moro says, reaching her hand to stroke the muzzle behind her. "Not the first," she clarifies, "although the wild gods heard my parents plea when I was dying after my birth and sent Moro to me."

Kakashi remembers, thinks back on quiet moments and Moro's urging him not to let his own clan shrines fall into disuse.

Kakashi never truly understood in her belief of the gods of the wild, but he did start to pay more attention to the shrines, if only because neither of his parents names were on the memorial stone. Only the Hatake shrines remembered them.

Thinking of the stone only makes an urge swell, the urge to visit.

“That has been unconfirmed.” Tsunade corrects, annoyed.

"Not the first," she says again, irritated, “We are one," she says, reaching out and the creature vanishes. It is both like and unlike the dispelling of a summon. She lifts her arm and a tattoo of the wolf head is there.

Kakashi stares at the marking, taking it in. "Mizuchi said something similar. One being."

“Giving a name is separating the two.” she snaps, touching the mark as Moro reappears. She twists, hair swishing as she snaps her head to look back at her ninken.

Kakashi supposes that is true. He'd always considered it odd that both Moro and her partner shared the same name. But if they were the same...

"If what we know so far is to be believed," Tsunade says from where she is taking notes, "than Iruka did not know of such an existence. Naming something could have encouraged a closeness."

And Kakashi sees a sadness in Moro now, only visible in the arches of her eyebrows, for she hasn't looked away from her animal partner.

She turns back to Kamu, who seems floored, looking back and forth from Iruka to Moro.

"Do you see what I mean now?" she asks at Kamu, harsh. "Do not take me lightly again."
She rolls on the balls of her feet and vaults up onto Moro's back, turning to Tsunade. "Are we done here? I've told my story. If he can connect with...Mizuichi we will try some communication skills."

"I've a mission for you two," Tsunade says as she holds out a scroll that Kamu takes as both Moros move towards the window. She looks back at Kakashi, eyes going soft again before she barks out Kamu's name and he jumps up behind her. They leap out the window, his own niniken following.

"That was informative." Kakashi grins as Tsunade scowls after them.

"No manners, that girl. But it has brought to my attention that there very well could be more cases of this throughout Konoha, most of the Aburame clan to some degree is like this."

Kakashi supposes that is true, in a sense. Different insects come for different chakra, different permutations of the power. Supposed legendary bugs to certain clan members.

"So there is precedent."

"But no real information. And to have been sealed-?" She clicks her tongue, standing up. "Now let me see." Her hands glow and Iruka strips off his flak jacket and shirts.

"Definitely more stable than I’ve ever seen from you. But you are more stable after an attack are you not?"

"Yes, but I haven’t even begun to feel the division yet."

"Longer than usual, then." She pauses, looks over his neck, takes in his hickeys. Glances at Kakashi as she heals them, smirking.

Iruka wants to crawl under a rock now, because Tsunade is healing his hickeys.

Kakashi is being silent about it, which Iruka counts as a blessing because he doesn’t think he could handle the snappiness while she’s looking over him.

"There isn’t much I can do at this point, considering the stability of your chakra. I'll be monitoring it with more regularity than before, but it seems like the sharing has been effective. Your turn." she looks at Kakashi, who eyes widen in surprise. "You think I’m going to wait to chase you down when I have you in my office? Strip."

Kakashi does so as Iruka focuses on hurriedly pulling on his own uniform.

"Please leave my marks be, Tsunade-sama. Especially if you plan on sending me on a mission."

"Brat. And no mission today. You two have a date with Ibiki." she starts in on examining him, pausing when she gets to his leg. "Interesting. You didn’t get it looked at right away. Field medic?"

"Chuunin sensei." She looks over at Iruka.

"You can heal?"

"Minor." he says, looking sideways. "Felt like a burn."

"Not minor. Not totally incorrect with wound type either. An admirable job, considering."

Her eyes are back to Kakashi. "I am not amused. This could have been serious, possibly career
ending. You are supposed to be vetted every time Kakashi. Every. Single. Time.” she pokes him in the chest with each word and Iruka can see that she’s putting enough force behind it to hurt.

“I do want to run you through some chakra exercises at a later date, Iruka. I didn’t realize how impressive your fine chakra control could be when it functions properly.”

“Go on, get dressed and go see Ibiki. Tiger will take you.”

An Anbu appears in a puff of smoke and Kakashi looks over as he pulls his shirts back on. It’s Yamato. “Another name?”

“A name to match the mask. They’re supposed to be animal names, stupid geezers.” Tsunade huffs and holds out her cup to Shizune. “Now it’s time for alcohol.”

Tiger takes them to the edge of the R&I compound, smooth stone walls all the way around. Iruka knows this, he’s walked with Anko to her work before. Tiger slaps on a seal, which slides open a section of wall and they slip in.

“Tiger, really?” Kakashi pesters. Tiger remains silent as they walk through the halls.

Iruka breathes, the entire place is structured to be gloomy and disorienting, he knows this much; with an underground series of tunnels that change constantly with earth techniques that connect to the prison.

“It’s about time you idiots showed up, cutting in on my beauty rest isn’t-IRU!” Anko cries and lunges at him. “Going off and scaring me like that! Unallowable!”

“You can’t-”

“Unallowable!” she shouts again. “I’ve been alone all summer! What’s up with that, really? It’s no fun drinking alone.”

“Alone?” Iruka smiles as he steps back.

“That’s not the point, Iru. It doesn’t matter whose buying the drinks, I like going out with you. And we outlast most of them anyway. Not worth it unless they get through you, eh?”

“Anko.” Ibiki says from where he stands behind her.

“Oh shush. Go finish your knitting. I’ll let you have him in a minute. You don’t go out drinking either.” she turns back to Iruka.

“So, jounin training? Redacted names, even.”

“More like getting me out while the convoy was here.”

“Ah, refugee water nin. I could see that, partially anyway.” She glances toward Kakashi and back at Iruka, lowering her voice. “With him? You see the face?”

And Iruka must give something away in his face because she grins that grin (he'd named it cheery and it was equal parts lucky you for getting some and fuck you for getting some when I didn't) and slaps him on the back. “Oh man, you did! Bastard. Not me so much. Ibiki isn’t into sex, apparently.”

“You!” Ibiki snaps. “Chat’s over.” He opens the door and they shuffle in.
The room is only big enough for one table with two small chairs. He understands that the entire size and dimensions of the room are made to be disorienting, but it really doesn't prepare him for it either. His eyes are drawn to a small Inuzuka dog laying in the shadow of the table who looks up and lunges at Ibiki.

It’s an interesting contrast to be sure, the small dog in the large and rough hands of Ibiki; he ruffles the white-gold fur and puts the dog down on the table.

“She got too big for him to carry her in the jacket all the time. It was so cute.” Anko sighs and Ibiki glares and points. “Other side of the wall.”

“Got it, got it.” Anko waves and leads the two into the watching room, where the three of them vanish. The reflective tags and the rock has done an excellent job at hiding it from the other side. Iruka could barely notice the outline, even now that he knew where it was. He certainly couldn't see Anko, Kakashi & Tiger-Anbu-san.

On the other side, Kakashi can see Iruka perfectly. As Iruka and Ibiki sit at the table, Anko turns to them.

“And who are you, Tiger?” she grins at the ANBU, who stills. Kakashi knows that Yamato is fighting the urge to step back.

“Don’t scare him, now.”

“I like the innocent ones.” she grins, pressing herself closer. “Easier to teach them what I like.” she licks her lips and Kakashi is trying not to laugh at the rigidness in Yamato’s stance.

“But alas, such boring men on the clock, ANBU are. Come meet me and drink sometime, hmm?” She turns back to the ‘window’ and reaches into her vest, pulling out a notebook.

“Gotta take notes. Part of Ibiki’s new accountability stuff. Two interrogators even for regular check-ins. And our teams change fairly consistently.”

Kakashi nods. He’s impressed with Ibiki’s and Tsunade’s overhaul. There were times that check-in was sometimes worse than the actual mission, especially during the war. They turn as Ibiki starts the interview.

“So you think that you might have been in here before?” Ibiki asks, and Iruka nods.

“More than standard twice yearly check-in anyway. I think it would have been after chuunin exam session summer one-two-five.”

“I’ve looked it up.” Ibiki answers gesturing to the folder on the table. “Seems like that one was a bit of a fuck up, hmm?”

“I’ve been told as much.”

“You don’t remember.”

“Not really.”

“Tell me what you do remember.”

“We’d had both scrolls by then but we weren’t doing so well. The three of us were hiding in the
cave. One of my teammates-

"Which one? The reports have to match."

"Aki." Iruka says through gritted teeth. "He’d injured his wrist. And M-Miki had a head wound which was shallow but bleeding a lot. We’d gone and hidden in a cave inside the waterfall."

"Were you injured?"

"Not like either of them, although I was diagnosed with a concussion when we did arrive at the tower. I helped Aki wrap his wrist and we were able to bandage Miki’s head up. We had decided to rest for a bit, we’d only just lost our pursuers since we’d stolen the scroll of heaven without a real fight.” He grins a bit, remembering his plan and how well it had worked.

"And then?"

"Nothing. The next thing I knew we were at the tower rendezvous point and then we had our first round fights and even that’s hazy. I lost consciousness, because next I knew I was in the hospital. He stops, closes his eyes. He remembers looking into the concerned eyes of Hiruzen.

"You collapsed, Iruka. Do you have any memory of it?"

"It says here that the waterfall was where some of the Onbaa were living. They probably didn’t take well to three human residents, however temporary. It’s quite possible you got a concussion from one of them, although making it to the tower with one man down seems like some serious work. Your teammates said you carried them downriver.”

"There was a river running away from the waterfall,” Iruka agrees. “I could have carried the three of us down it. I don’t remember doing it, but it is possible.”

"Carrying three down a moving river?" Ibiki raises an eyebrow.

"I am a water affinity,” Iruka says, “so we could have swam it or perhaps I had been with it enough to carry the three of us. At the time I could carry myself and another easily. Three- well it wouldn’t have been impossible in a life threatening situation.”

"Fine.” Ibiki agrees, looking at his papers. “It does seem that R&I did field interviews after the fact. The three of you were among several that had encounters with the Onbaa. All of this is on file and checks out.”

Iruka wants to sigh with relief, but Ibiki has opened another file.

"However, when I looked this up I found this. You were brought in a second time.”

"When?” Iruka breathes, voice caught.

"After you were released from the hospital. Mission Report C-3909.”

"What?” Iruka says, startled. That he remembers, even if he doesn’t want to.

"What do you remember?”

"It was C rank courier mission, we were supposed to deliver a scroll but the border disputes were going on then. I guess there was some sort of trap-contact poison- it was more like a mist I guess-“ he closes his eyes.
“My teammates-both of them- were ahead of Naoki-sensei and I. He managed to dispel it but we’d all been hit by that point.”

He looks down, staring at the grain of the wooden table. “We weren’t as bad off, Naoki-sensei and I. We turned back- he carried Aki and I had Miki-”

He remembers running faster faster faster because they needed him they needed him. Remembers the pain lancing through him, never able to take a full breath but knowing that that didn’t matter.

Remembers Miki talking to him, soft and quiet and so unlike her, broken by hacking coughs that were wet with blood. Remembers urging her to keep talking, to stay awake, anything.

Remembers when the medic met with them, whisking off Aki and Miki as the forest had spun into a swirling mass of greens as he’d blacked out.

“We met up with a medic before we got to the gates. I must have been taken in too because I was in and out of consciousness when I arrived at the hospital.”

“They’d kept me in the hospital for a couple weeks after that, testing my blood. It had been a new poison, and they weren’t sure about the effects.”

He remembers, a white room with Naoki-sensei sleeping, deathly pale against the sheets. Remembers sitting there, waiting and desperate for news that no one brings. Only sad looking medi-nin to test his blood.

A quarantine room with only two survivors.

“They figured out that I shouldn't have made it, that I'd gotten enough of the poison to kill me, but somehow I'd been able to move and run and even carry Miki back to Konoha. Naoki-sensei seemed even worse off than me, and he'd been exposed to similar toxins before. The hospital finally decided that I must have had some sort of resistance because I was the child of water nin.”

"Water does seem fond of this particular poison compound." Ibiki notes. “Although at the time this seemed to be a new compound. Not new anymore, but this was the first case of it we had. A contact poison we now call compound 1139.”

“Yes, that was why they’d had us in quarantine. But what does it matter if it was a new poison or not?”

“It’s standard procedure to perform autopsies on death from contact poison, especially when it seems to be a new poison or poison variation.” Ibiki doesn’t wait for Iruka to ask about the autopsies. “Both your teammates were found to have water in their lungs,” he flips to another page. “Your sensei also developed complications from water inhalation as well. You didn't develop those complications, although that was attributed to your water affinity at the time. Water inhalation is not the method of transfer for this poison, nor a side effect in subsequent autopsies. This particular side effect seems limited to these first three cases. Do you remember water?”

"We didn't- I don't remember- water?” Iruka's voice broke, "No-that's-what?"

"The amount of poison you three inhaled should have killed you almost instantly. We know that now. Even a grown man wouldn't have lasted long enough to return to Konoha,” he flips another page, “Your sensei gave a report, as required, but didn’t say anything other than how hard you worked to bring your teammate home. Do you think you can elaborate?”

“Isn’t that why I’m here?” he says, choking on the words, tasting bile. Iruka knows what Ibiki is
digging for here, but he can’t believe it. He can’t. Is this somehow his fault? Did they die because of something he did?

_Did I kill them?_  

No, the poison wasn’t him, but water- why water? He remembers Naoki-sensei going to the hospital several times after being released, telling Iruka it had been for more tests, since his tests were more complex, having been poisoned before.

Secondary issues relating to water in his lungs, according to Ibiki. But would would Naoki-sensei have lied? There was no reason to lie about something like that.

Unless-

He closes his eyes, and sees Mizuchi, a coil on water imprinted on the back of his eyelids; he breathes.

He doesn’t know why his sensei lied. Doesn’t know what happened, facts dropping down in the pit of his stomach like badly skipped stones.

He doesn’t have answers or memories.

But he wants them.

He opens his eyes.

"Give them back to me."

Ibiki holds up his hand.

---

Kakashi startles when Iruka collapses face first, Ibiki's other hand holding him up.

"He'll be here for a while." Anko says, sympathetic. "Memory retrieval isn't pretty. And I never even suspected so my guess was it was someone good."

Anko opens the door. "You don't have to stay. Tiger will, because that's what Godaime wants."

He nods at Yamato, relief flooding through him.

"You'll send for me?"

Anko is agreeing, but he's watching Yamato nod before he agrees to leave.

Kakashi leaves the compound, taking a second to get his bearings (flickering out of R&I is always slightly disorienting even for Konoha nin, simply because of all the wards set into place). He takes a deep breath, calming after being inside with the dank, stale air.

He flickers himself beside the memorial stone and he knows he wasted far more chakra than such a technique should but it doesn’t really matter as he kneels beside the stone, looking from Obito’s name and then to Rin and Minato then back to Obito, because time and other deaths separate his closest friends.

The edges of the world start to blur from lack of air. His eye (Obito’s eye) is crying (like always).
Makes himself breathe, trying to form words.

"I met someone."

Then why are you here you idiot! Obito cries at him.

"He calls me an idiot too."

Sounds like he's got more sense than you do. Rin says and he freezes. He talks to them constantly, but Rin hasn't answered in years.

But really, why are you here? That's really not cool. You've found a living comrade, Kakashi. Go to him.

Minato now.

Kakashi vanishes.

Chapter End Notes

So here we go with some more OCs but I hope they aren't too distracting. I just like Kamu a lot. There's also a nerd reference with Moro. I really wanted a giant dog as well.

Also for those who write and those that don't: November is coming, which means Nanowrimo. So I have plans/designs for myself to do that this year. I've this story that I want to work on as well as a couple others (my crazy worldbuilding ideas are not just for Naruto :)

Thanks for following me on the crazy journey everyone!
"Kakashi. Tell me something."

Prove you are you.

Kakashi gets it, eye grinning.

Hey all, I wanted to get this up before November and then we'll see about one more (I'll probably post 1-2 times in Nov because editing something is pretty good for other stuff I write, I've found).

Also I just want to make clear in my view all Inuzuka have some sort of markings (I'd been looking around online and in some of the 'clan' photos from the anime some Inuzuka don't) So my headcanon is they do and I didn't spend time writing about it because they (both Kamu and Moro) do have markings. I will try to clear that up later.

Nerd Note: Konoha is pretty big. So I've gone and sort of given different living quadrants names based off types of flowering bushes instead of street signs (also this seems like something the First would have done, honestly. I kind of wanted something about actually organizing Konoha so yeah). There will be more things about the land that became Konoha eventually, but this is just about organizing the village.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He appears beside Yamato, taking a step back from the recoil. More chakra wasted, but he can't really care about that either.

"That isn't how you're supposed to use that jutsu." Yamato grumbles, leaning against the wall from his own recoil, which was worse considering he was the anchor. “Also, really not supposed to break into R&I with it.”

“Sorry. How long?"

"An hour. He's still sleeping."

"Anko left you alone then?"
"For the moment. Not sure where she went to, actually."

"Where is he?"

"One of the cells. It has a bed. One of the better ones I'm told." Yamato points behind himself and Kakashi eye follows to the outline of a door, barely visible in the wall.

"Your stay was not as pleasant?"

"I was part of an assassination effort, so no. Until Sandaime pardoned me."

"Point."

He stands outside the door for a moment and steps in. Iruka is sleeping, but it's not peaceful or restful looking. He's sweating and jittery. Nightmare then.

He's familiar with those.

"You came back." Anko says from the doorway. She's holding water and some pills. She puts them off to the side on a table of sorts she's pulled from the wall.

Kakashi doesn't see the point in acknowledging that so he gestures to the pills.

"Nausea, headache, dehydration. Standard for something like this." She comes closer and looks at him. Stares.

"You hurt him and I'll kill you."

Kakashi likes the fire in her eyes, likes that she cares for Iruka that much. He'd gotten a few glimpses of Iruka's life at House Warren, snippets of stories and friends. He's glad one of the people that Iruka seemed willing to consider a friend considers him one as well.

And yet-where had she been before? Kakashi doesn't know much about Anko personally, but he does know that she's been a part of the fabric of R&I for quite a while, which means semi-permanent stationing in Konoha.

"Good job you did with the last one, then."

She sucks in a breath. Releases it.

"You're right. I was too wrapped up in my own things to really pay attention to my best friend. But I'm watching now."

Kakashi doesn't doubt that she'd make a good attempt of trying to kill him either.

"Is he dead?"

“Mizuki? No. Fucking bullshit by the way. They're keeping him because of some reason or whatever. Probably a bloodline. Need to know basis. I'm not part of that need to know. We just assess his threat level every couple months." Her grin widens, she licks her lips. “That’s a pretty good time actually. Haven't missed one yet."

Kakashi is going to have to look into that. Bloodline? Fucking bloodlines.

"You familiar with standard for memory retrieval?"
"Not so much."

"Oh right. The eye," she shrugs, "so standard is to let them sleep unless they start throwing up. You have enough med knowledge for that at least, yeah? I can attempt to calm the memories after, if they’re particularly bad; but he has to have them first. But that doesn’t usually happen that way, all at once. They come in pieces. Sometimes the process takes weeks."

“You’ll keep him here?”

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” she says as she walks towards the door, “I’ll be back to check in,” she stops in the doorway, turning back to look at them.

"Seriously though. I will kill you."

She closes the door.

---

Iruka runs, feet slapping the ground. He hads to get there he has to. An oppressive heat is all around, it’s as is the whole world is burning.

He opens his mouth-

Smoke rushes in, thick and suffocating as the image blurs-

There’s something wrapping around him, squeezing him tight, tighter, spots in his eyes as he grapples for consciousness.

The smoke isn’t fire this time but it wraps around him worse than anything he’s ever felt before, ice traveling through his veins as he calls for help-

He stares up, hands digging into his neck as those eyes look down on him. The grip tightens; he closes his eyes to block out the view.

He feels Mizuchi dance against the sky, watches the dragon spiral higher and higher meeting the edge of the sky.

A rush of rain so great, he feels like he can breathe again.

---

He startles awake, lunging for the bucket beside him, heaving.

He catches a flash of silver hair and groans.

"Where are we this time? I don't enjoy this sort of thing. You'd think that after the last time-” he heaves again. “I'm also hoping you weren’t expecting me to lose my lunch.”

“Iruka,” the voice says, and he looks up into one grey eye. "You're in R&I, memory retrieval."

He heaves again, ducking his head down. Fucking memories, this isn’t what he wants to share with Anko. He knows she has to be nearby, and he forces himself to breathe.

Kakashi had come back though. He didn’t think he would have. All the talk in the house-well he really shouldn’t have doubted Kakashi either. Kakashi wasn’t someone to talk just to hear himself talk.
"Sorry. I thought that- never mind. The memories-“ he stops because if by some miracle Kakashi
isn’t thinking about his momentary disorientation as something more than a side effect of whatever
Ibiki did, then talking about it will have him thinking of other reasons.

“Water?” he croaks out instead.

Kakashi holds out the cup.

"You want medication? Anko left some."

"Um-no. Not now.” Iruka puts the bucket down and takes it, hand shaking. Dips his finger inside and tastes it. Sips some. Drains it.

"Kakashi. Tell me something."

Prove you are you.

Kakashi gets it, eye grinning.

"You like it when I crook my fingers-"

"Shut up! You know they're listening!” He ducks his head down between his knees but he's trying not to laugh so he thinks that it’s all okay. For the moment, anyway.

"How are you feeling?"

"Like I just got a concussion from someone shaking me really hard. Which I'm pretty sure has happened, I'll have you know." He focuses on breathing.

"I am also familiar with the feeling."

Iruka groans. "So what happens next? I don't think I have anything useable for Ibiki now. I mean I think that he's probably right. My memories are probably times that I summoned Mizuchi without really knowing about how I did it. Unconscious acts of trying to save myself I guess."His fingers tighten around the cup, Kakashi can see ice starting to form.

"I think some real rest at home might be in order." Kakashi says to the wall.

"I agree. Iru's no threat.” Anko says as she opens the door. “Well, only to pervs that don't know the word 'no'. You don't even know the word 'sex' so you're safe from that at least."

"I am the one who-"

"You're tired,” the dog yips, "He has an ANBU guard. We can call them back in three days."

"Two against one Ibiki!"

"Fine.” He waves his hand. "I trust you remember the way out Kakashi?"

He nods and stands. Looks at Iruka who breathes a few more times before lifting himself off the bed. He rocks on his heels a few times, steadying himself.

"Lead the way."
The night is cooler than he expected for summer and he breathes deeply when they come out the side wall.

"My head hurts."

"That's to be expected, I think." Kakashi answers as he slows his pace. There really isn't much in this part of the village, R&I wanted it that way after the destruction of Kyuubi. He knows that Yamato is nearby and waves in his direction.

"What?"

"Oh just Tiger." He can't get over the name. He waves again towards a new spot.

"Ah, my guard."

"For now. Not a bad choice though, overall." He waves at the yet another new spot that Yamato has relocated to. "I do have to say I think our mission did wonders. I haven't been right this many times in a row for quite a while against him."

"I don't know if I like the fact that you're so proud of that fact or if I should be frightened."

"A bit of both, I should think. Be glad he's on our side, anyway. His earth element is the best I've seen."

"I really shouldn't know these things, I think."

"You can tell already from the fact that he can travel that fast."

"Still shouldn't be saying them out loud."

"Point." Kakashi says. "But this whole section of the village is warded so it's fine for the moment. Also I'm not saying anything you won't learn eventually. I probably should have said something to Tsunade after they left. Was a bit stunned at Moro."

Iruka looks at him for a moment, then shrugs.

"And that was the Kamu your friends talked about?"

"I wasn't going there with Moro. Do you really want to go there with Kamu?"

"What do you mean?"

"You've slept with her. I've slept with him. Do we really need to share more at this point?"

"I suppose not." Kakashi says as Iruka tries to pull ahead as they walk. His entire stance is off, exhausted and rigid, so Kakashi keeps pace easily. He also wants to know how Iruka made the leap to Moro. Not that it was wrong, but he’s still not sure where he got it from.

Iruka sighs, slowing down again.

"Is your place closer than Rose District?"

Kakashi stops playing the ‘game’ with Yamato and turns to look at Iruka. Iruka is disoriented, the fact that he’s admitting it shouldn’t be surprising. Iruka isn’t one that will run himself ragged in an attempt to keep up with a jounin. He’s seen Iruka admit his limits for several weeks now.
However, Kakashi thought that Iruka would insist on returning to his own apartment. He could transport them after they leave this area (purposely left abandoned when it was rebuilt after the attack of the Nine Tails and crawling with enough wards to make his ninkei itch as he’s repeatedly been told) and while most of the village has minor wards against transport they don’t really apply to jounin level. He could say all of this, but he’s sure that Iruka knows those facts as well as he does.

“Weigela District.” he says, which isn’t much closer than Rose. “The Hatake compound is just outside the end of this area, however.”

So close, that he incorporates several of their wards for his western defenses. Close enough that the compound doesn’t have a district name associated with it.

Iruka takes another deep breath, assessing the emptiness of the area. Stopping seems to take more of a toll on Iruka than the walk had. His entire body slumps as his eyes flit left, very close to where Yamato is hiding.

“You’ve wards against outsiders?”

And that is a bit of an odd question. Most ninja do, even with small spaces like safes and lockers; never mind living spaces like apartments or houses. Wards on buildings with history are even more so since they have years of build up; wards upon wards, input from dozens of different ninja.

Iruka knows this as well, considering he’s been he’s helping with the Hokage’s office for years now.

So the real question here is if there are blood wards (there are), which means that Kakashi either has to alter them or- take Iruka in with him.

He reaches his hand out and Iruka takes it, whole body sinking against him.

“There are easier ways to hold hands,” he says. “That was easily the most circuitous path of reasoning I’ve seen. And I’ve read plenty of novels with circuitous leaps of reasoning.”

“Keep you jounin on your toes.” Iruka says, with a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. “Which way?”

Kakashi starts walking.

---

He doesn’t stay at the compound often, not since he took on team seven. He visits and the dogs train here regularly, but he doesn’t spend excessive amounts of time here unless he is allowed to recover on his own recognizance.

This should mean that the house is a mess. Thankfully, Kakashi has people. The same family has been in service since before his grandfathers time, so the place isn't in shambles, although he doesn't make them bother with the whole compound anymore. Hasn't since his father died.

As a result they've put most of their efforts into the garden which is full and beautiful even in the moonlight.

“Gai’s green thumb extends to this?” Iruka asks after they enter the compound.

“No, that would be Hatsuna, Hatsue, and Hatsuko's doing. I think I hear them now.”
Three elderly women come up to the shoji screen and slide it open.

"Shame on you returning so late, the dogs came back hours ago-"

"Guest!" One of them gasps and Kakashi nods at them.

"We had to take a detour and found a wolf-"

"Idiot." Iruka snaps, jerking himself away from Kakashi to bow, wavering only slightly.

"We just came back from a mission and had to check in with Godaime-sama. Sorry for being so late."

"This one," one of the women says as she points to Iruka "has manners." The other two sweep Iruka into the building. "Are you hungry? You’re so pale.” They start bickering about what to feed him.

"Ah, well thank you but I'd rather just have some water, please."

“Oh that won’t do,” they titter and Kakashi smiles at their antics, clearly worried about the ninja that is leaning heavily against the wall as he removes his shoes.

"They won't let you rest until they at least get some rice into you."Kakashi says, enjoying that their attention is on someone else, although that isn’t entirely true as Hatsuko is eyeing him just as much as she does Iruka.

"The young master is right. I can't imagine-" Hatsune mumbles “Have to arrange a room.” Hatsune and Hatsuna start in on which of the guest rooms is best and Kakashi can see Iruka shifting his weight, and can see that Iruka is wondering if he made a mistake in not returning to his own apartment. He winces, touching the bridge of his scar.

Kakashi steps forward, hand on Iruka’s hip. Iruka relaxes into the touch, then tenses up again.

"Don't bother. He can stay with me.” Kakashi calls and Iruka ducks his head, rubbing the bridge of his nose again.

"Really it's no trouble." one of them says but Iruka is already shaking his head, telling them he was fine and Kakashi smiles as they bully the two of them into the kitchen, discussing food again.

Kakashi watches as they start pulling out dishes, already discussing on what to cook in the morning. Iruka isn't really paying attention anymore, gulping down water almost as fast as they refill the glass and managing a few mouthfuls before Kakashi thinks it’s better to get him to bed before he collapses on the counter.

Once in his room Iruka drops to the futon and fumbles with his flak jacket for several tries before the zipper comes undone and the jacket slides off. He touches his weapon pouch before seeming to think better of it, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Can you cut the wraps?” he asks, “I’d do it but-” he screws his eyes shut and breathes. “It’s just-”

Kakashi lowers himself to his knees and starts to unravel the bindings.

“You don’t have to,” Iruka says, leg jerking away, “cutting them is fine.”

The first one is already undone, gravity helping as the bindings loosen.
“It is no trouble to undo them-”

“Do you want to tie me up?”

It’s not that Kakashi doesn’t answer; it’s more that he cannot, stunned by the question. He continues to unravel the bindings on the other leg now. It isn’t something he has experience with, although he isn’t totally against the idea of giving control to someone else. But the wild look in Iruka’s eyes is something else.

“I’ve never considered it before.” he says, which is true.

Iruka’s whole body sinks with relief. “Okay, that’s-okay.” he sways a bit and Kakashi strips off the weapons holster and moves to take off his own uniform.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve slept in a futon,” he says, more to himself than to Kakashi. “…my Dad was fond of them, used to pull them out when Mom was on extended mission, cause she didn’t like me sleeping in bed with them. He’d say that the rule didn’t apply to futons,” he chokes out a laugh before closing his eyes.

Kakashi lays down beside him, hand pushing Iruka’s hair back. “Sounds like a nice memory.”

Iruka is focusing on measuring his breaths, and it seems to be working as the jagged edge of them smooths out with each one.

“It is.” Iruka says, as he curls into Kakashi. “Mom took more missions so I’ve more memories with him,” his hand hand clenches at Kakashi’s shirt, “I don’t know if I really want the memories. I mean I do but—water in their lungs- that had to be because of me.” Iruka chokes on the word. “So was it me? Did I kill them? Or did I just made it worse by trying to protect them?”

Kakashi is measuring his own breaths now, and Iruka falls back into pacing his breathing. Whatever spurt of wild energy from before has spent itself now, eyes unfocused with exhaustion.

“The poison was not you.”

It’s not the most comforting thing to say. But it is truth, which seems to help Iruka as the eyes slide shut, finally falling into sleep.

---

Iruka is sitting on the beach again, staring at the black sand where the water laps at the edges. He stands, walks to the end of the beach, then retraces his footsteps to the other end. He looks up, and sees Mizuchi, spiraling high and away from the shore along the edges, scales reflecting the beach and the sky, rippling and refracting in the darkness.

“I killed my best friend trying to protect her.”

A voice resonates against the sky and Iruka somehow knows it’s Kakashi speaking.

Mizuchi croons at the sky ceiling, a low sad sound that matches the ache that Iruka feels. He reaches out, amazed at hearing Mizuchi for the first time. Mizuchi snaps back from the edge of the sky and dives at Iruka. Iruka hears this noise this noise as well, a happy sound that the dragon makes as it curls around him.

"Iruka."
“Mizuchi.”

"I did not want to hope that we would speak again because I did not want to be disappointed. But it seems like he kept his word." Mizuchi croons to the sky, the sad noise resonating through Iruka.

"Where did you go?"

"My presence was hurting you. We did not speak and you rarely dreamed of me. With nothing to do, sleep seemed to be the last thing I could do."

The ache grows, and he shakes his head. Being left alone was never the answer.

"I have missed you."

"I think I've been missing you this whole time as well."

"There is much that we have missed." Mizuchi agrees, curling tighter.

"I'm afraid." He says, closing his eyes. "I want them back, I do. But I'm also afraid."

The dragon shimmers, sliding off Iruka and taking form beside him; he’s looking at a mirror of himself, blue skinned with a scar the color of moonlight. Mizuchi takes Iruka’s hand.

“Admitting fears are the first step to overcoming them.” Mizuchi says and Iruka nods. He knows this lesson, teaches it. He can believe that Mizuchi has always been there, somewhere inside, with words like that. He leans into Mizuchi, content to exist together.

“When did I forget?”

“I am the same as you, Iruka. We were cut off from one another. But we were not separate then. Even when you felt alone, I was there. Even when you stopped talking to me, I was there. You dreamed and drew and thought of me. We were still connected.”

“But then you went to sleep,” he counters. How long had he been fumbling, trying to connect with something he couldn't reach; something he couldn't remember.

Memories that had been taken from him.

"Our attempts at connection were doing more harm than good. We saw connections everywhere and yet couldn't make our own."

He closes his eyes. He remembers this; there has been a time when he'd fall into bed with anyone who asked. Clinging, clawing for something he couldn't name; a connection. For attention, for acknowledgement, all the wrong reasons.

He remembers the need to feel like he still mattered, but he also remembers the hollow emptiness afterward; the restlessness that came back twice as strong, even more insistent making him feel even more disconnected than before the sex.

“So we are different now.”

“Perhaps we are closer to separate that can be one.” Mizuchi agrees sadly.

"Will you stay?"

“Always.”
Chapter End Notes

Anko and Yamato, my babies! God I love them so much. Kakashi has crazy friends in the form of both Yamato and Gai and I love writing their dialogue, like oh so much.

WHERE ARE YOU GAI, come join us soon plz.

......also. Is there no kakashi/gai/iruka anywhere on the internets? Does it exist? Do people want it or is that just me....also because i may have written something. (Moar writing sex goals) Usually I have to work at writing...and this was just delicious and fun to write and I look at it and go like WOAH. (and it's a good WOAH because usually my stuff is passable or okay or that was a super good idea but I don't think I got what I wanted across but not really WOAH) So basically-is this a thing people are willing to read? Or is it like a camp of one pairing vs. another? (I am not cray cray loyal to like any pairing but I know such things exist)
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

Hey everyone, so here we are. Still not completely satisfied with this, but I'm coming to the realization that maybe that will never be my opinion for my own writings.

All of your comments have been so inspiring over these months and I love every single kudo, every comment. The fact that you stick with my rambles makes me so happy. Truly.

Super random here: Somehow my names got confused and the name Sumiko from previous chapters has been changed to Natsumi. She's not really important, but the name had been used elsewhere in my head/my storyline and I needed to change it. Apologies.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He feels the rain on his face and tastes smoke, cloying and thick as he runs toward the heat, the fires.

The smoke is everywhere. In the air, in the rain, in his lungs. Their apartment building is burning; the whole quadrant is. He breaks away from where they've been rounded up and runs runs toward the heat, the fighting. He needs to get there needs it more than his fear, more than anything he's ever needed before.

Calling out won’t get him anything, there’s just so much noise. Instead he just follows the water. The smoke is thicker now, the creature leaving trails of fire in its wake.

He feels a dousing of rain, breaking the smoke haze for a moment.

He can sense his mother and runs, runs toward the direction of the rain. The rain stops and he blinks, trying to place her in the smoke.

She's covered in soot and leaning heavily against a sword, using it as a makeshift crutch. Iruka cries out as he sees that there’s a gash in her back that is oozing sluggishly. It doesn’t seem to slow her down much, shouting out orders to the less injured, directing others to help put out the fires.

“Mom!” he screams, lunging at her as she turns to look at him.

“What are you doing here?!” she cries, annoyed; she hugs him back anyway. She calls for another
wave of rain, the ninja around her responding.

“I had to come,” he says as he looks around. He can see the fox, tails lashing on the other side of where their tenement used to be, and the tails still come far closer than he thought they could, longer than they look.

“Where’s dad?”

“Around the other side,” she gestures to their collapsed tenement.

A roar then; a roar so loud it shakes the ground.

“My Iruka,” she says, grabbing him. “I love you.” he doesn’t have time to be surprised, doesn’t have time to answer, because he world is sliding out from under him as someone picks him up. He’s screaming, beating on the shoulders as a fiery tail slams down in front of his eyes, blocking his view. There’s a searing pain, starting deep inside as he screams, loud and reaching for the sky.

A rush of rain so great, it puts out most of the fires.

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He startles awake again, breathing hard and fumbling against the sheets. He needs to be out, the smoke, it’s too hot, too much-

“Hey,” he hears a voice and he lunges out, rolling onto his knees and cursing to himself himself because where are his weapons-

“That’s not a nice way to wake up, I’ll have you know.” Kakashi says, out of reach as he regards Iruka.

Iruka blinks as the world comes into focus, takes in the soft paneling of the room and the futon below his knees. He looks at Kakashi for a moment and reminds himself to breathe.

“Oh, just-” he’s panting now, but lets himself fall back to the futon, covering his eyes with his arm. “Fucking hell. Don’t you know standard?”

“I didn’t touch you.”

Kakashi was right, he hadn't touched him.

"Fuck," he says, as he concentrates on his breathing

“I don’t think this is the best time.”

And Iruka laughs, the tension melting a bit. He drops his arm, focuses on Kakashi. “Maybe it’s better that we have separate rooms after all.”

“You wouldn’t have remembered where you were.”

That was true. He hadn’t.

“Fine.” he grumbles as he sits up. “Are you sure we can’t renegotiate the sex?”

“We can always renegotiate sex.” Kakashi smiles. “But I still think that this isn’t the best time. I should be going to see Tsunade-sama.”
“So early?” Iruka can barely see sunrise creeping through the window.

“She’ll never expect it,” he smiles, “The less foot traffic the better. Also Tiger-” he snorts. “I seriously cannot take that name.”

He opens the shoji, where Tiger is indeed standing before he turns to look back at Iruka. “Tiger- ha- will be here. I’m sure Tsunade-sama will let you return to the school to get your things in order while you stay here.”

“Who said I was staying here?” he snaps, reaching for his weapons pouch.

“Ah.” Kakashi scratches at the edge of his mask as he stares. He seems to sink somehow, even though he doesn’t move in the slightest.

“You don’t have to stay,” he agrees, “however, your reaction upon waking concerns me. I would like for you to remain closer to R&I until they’ve checked you over a second time.”

It’s not a bad solution, but Iruka only just stops himself from rejecting the offer just because it’s worded nicely. Kakashi isn’t trying to be argumentative here.

He’s being the argumentative one, the one primed a ready for a fight. And Kakashi does have a solid point, considering how close his house was to R&I.

“I’ll think about it,” he finally says because Kakashi is still standing there, still waiting on an answer.

“The sisters have probably made breakfast by now. If you ate some, I’m sure that would make them happy.” And with that Kakashi lopes off, leaving Tiger standing in the doorway.

“Well I can’t really sneak out after that, can I?” he asks Tiger. “Would be rude, wouldn’t it?”

Tiger nods.

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Iruka manages to eat some rice porridge (they really had spent time making something for his still churning stomach) before heading off himself.

He heads to the stone, says a small prayer before sitting down. He tries to remember what his mother had done to him, if she had even done something. He doesn’t remember much besides the look in her eyes.

Then again, that’s the memory he’s always carried.

Had her death done something? Had they been connected in a different sort of way? Had she known that his father was probably dead when she did it?

He feels something then, a presence inside of him, warm and alive. Almost a hum.

“So that rain wasn’t her. It was us?” he closes his eyes, trying to remember. “Is that part of the problem then? Could she have lifted her half and dad didn’t?”

He’s not at the beach, but he feels Mizuchi.

The seal was before memory.
“Infant, right. Same case with the scar?” Mizuchi agrees as he touches the scar on his nose and sighs. Some questions just didn’t have answers.

“I thought that talking to oneself at the memorial was something only crazy jounin did.” Kakashi says as he comes to sit beside him.

It was silent, his arrival. A whisper on the breeze instead of the crack of misplaced air from the displacement of space, which is a feat in itself.

Iruka understands transportation, understands the noise of displacement. To move with such silence- such a level of silence means that Kakashi is completely familiar with this area, with this space surrounding the memorial stone.

It’s a depressing thought, the idea that there are so many dead that Kakashi would visit so often.

“Well I have something that answers now.” he says.

“You heard Mizuchi’s voice?”

“Just today. Makes me believe that the memory loss did affect our communication. How was Tsunade-sama?”

“She took the news about as well as one would expect. You have an appointment once R&I clears you.”

He nods, closing his eyes. “It’s more than a voice inside my head though, it’s different from myself…” he says, trying to put thought to the voice, to the feelings. “But it doesn’t feel separate, not in a way that you would try to talk yourself out of something…I must sound crazy.”

“Perhaps not so much.” Kakashi says, eyes on the stone. “I had thought you said the graduation wall was your preferred space.”

“It is,” he agrees. “But the wall has my parents.” he says, quiet. “They didn’t graduate here. I mean I went and got them a stone in the cemetery when I could afford it but the fires from the Nine Tails-there wasn’t anything to bury, this is where I-” he swallows, rambling.

Remembers standing, drenched from the rain and begging for them to come back.

“My parents are not here.” Kakashi says. “They are at the Hatake shrines.”

Iruka knows pieces of the story of Sakumo. He doesn’t really understand it, however. Never truly understood the mindset that surrounded that story, the one that ended in suicide. To Iruka, the team was important, vitally so. It was something that he taught, something he stressed always in his teaching- but others didn’t always see it that way, even today.

Iruka didn’t believe that, not in the least. It didn’t matter if you knew them or not. It was one of the reasons why he made his kids work in teams of two and three constantly switching them up until he settled on what he considered to be the best sets of ability.

Mizuki had laughed when one of his teammates had died. It was such a clash with everything Iruka believed in, shaking him to the core. He’d known that Mizuki believed that the talents of one could outweigh the team and yet- his face after the funeral when the tears had been shed and they had returned to his apartment.

The laughter-
Years of camaraderie and missions—

Iruka still couldn’t bring himself to hang the photo of his team in his living room, it stayed hidden away from the prying eyes of visiting students. He loves them, he really does. But their casual questions gutted him in the beginning.

-You look so young Iruka-sensei!-

-‘Did you have a crush on the pretty girl?’-

-What is your sensei a master of?’-

-‘What are their names?’-

It’s not their fault they’d been living in a peaceful time, a place where death is harder to assume. He likes the world that way, that his students can live in a world were death isn’t the norm that separates people. But still, such questions pry deeper than he was ready to share at the time.

He thinks that he’s ready to pull the photo out again, take the memories and all they have to give him, good and bad.

“The wall isn’t a complete picture of the sacrifices of Konoha.” he says, wiping at his eyes, not sure when the tears had started. “But it is a good place to remember them whether their names are here or not.”

Iruka stands, touching their names, one above the other. “I’d kept them inside for so long that even saying their names—” he swallows, wiping at his face again. “But I don’t want to do that anymore. I want to remember them. I’m afraid of these memories, you know. But I want them, I want everything they have to give me, including the pain.”

His hand is shaking now, he puts it on the stone to brace himself.

“That is how you begin.” Kakashi says, behind him now. His voice is small, so small that Iruka almost misses it. “You can start, and I will try to match your courage.”

His fingers trace the first name as he leans back into Kakashi, warmth seeping into him as he breathes.

“Aki was a bit of an idiot, actually.” he says smiling even as he wipes at his eyes again with his free hand, “You should have seen him and his father. It was a comedy skit every time they talked—always never able to shut up about each other.”

The hand moves down to the next name. “And Miki—” he sniffs, “We talk about eye dojutsu, but I’ve never seen anyone have such sharp eyesight without one and I’ve taught a lot of kids, so I’m pretty sure that’s not just my memory talking. But try to point something out in a store and she’d just stare at everything blankly.” he exhales, laughing to himself as Mizuchi curls inside of him, a warm feeling bubbling up from the spring of memories.

“They used to fight over which one of them was going to have me over for dinner, actually. Probably got my start with real cooking with Aki. There was only so many times we could have eggs and cheese for dinner.” he snorts a laugh, “although I can make a pretty mean omelet if I do say so myself.”

Kakashi takes his hand and brings it to the stone, the hand moving as Iruka’s fingers come to trace a name, unfamiliar beneath his fingers.
“He gave me my eye.” Kakashi says, words falling like drops as Iruka reads the name under his fingers. “We did nothing but fight. I was a higher rank, he was older. Even here all he does is nag me.”

Obito Uchiha.

“And-“ Iruka can feel a faint trembling as the hand moves over, scrolling past years on the stone before landing on another name.

“She was the one thing we both cared about,” he says as Iruka’s fingers intwine with Kakashi’s. “and after-“ he swallows, “she was my best friend.”

Rin Nohara.

Iruka has questions, but he lets his eyes drift, sinks into their embrace as he thinks about the stone, about his half formed memories and the sense of contentment coming from inside.

They stay like that for a long time, until someone else comes up the hill and Kakashi slips away, quieter than a whisper on the wind, leaving Iruka with the warm memory of a lingering embrace.

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“I’m so behind.” he groans as he looks over the materials he has planned out. The lessons are good, but he still has to put in rush requests for paper and other classroom necessities.

He’s also had a bit of a headache building most of the day, the continued sense of something behind his senses, which he has come to realize as his Anbu guard, although it feels different now, more like an echo than any other feeling he’s ever had from sensing chakra before. Thankfully, he seems to be far enough away that it is something he can push to the side.

Perhaps his abilities are stronger with this newfound communication, although he isn't quite sure what to do with it. So the headache builds, lines of tension that he really can’t wait to fuck out later.

The door opens and he turns to look, hoping he doesn’t grimace at Ebisu, standing in the doorway in that apologetic-and-yet-not-apoogetic-at-all manner of his.

“I was hoping we could talk, Iruka-sensei.”

“We’ve discussed this, Ebisu-sensei.” he says, trying to be polite and hoping his smile doesn’t seem too strained. “I have my lesson plans and I run them. You are more than welcome to offer additional tutoring as needed. But I do not graduate based on innate abilities. Konohamaru is talented, but not emotionally ready to be taking advanced lessons with older students yet. I can review him again at the halfway point of classes and we can discuss it then.”

“However, the-”

A ‘plink’ of sensation then, as he realizes that Konohamaru has managed to sneak in through the open door while Ebisu attempts to persuade him of Konohamaru’s talents. Iruka knows that Konohamaru will indeed be a talented ninja one day.

The time before that one day comes is the part that the two of them can’t quite agree on. Times like this make him miss the old man fiercely, because he had kept Ebisu somewhat at bay.

Iruka can’t help but grin as he realizes how much stride Konohamaru has made in the time the school was closed. He'd clearly paid attention to his training in the interim. Iruka reaches into his
pocket and flings a senbon past Ebisu. The other man isn’t startled, but Iruka doesn’t expect him to be, he definitely knows that Konohamaru wouldn’t have just waited patiently, and had sensed the boy’s approach as well.

The senbon catches on the edge of Konohamaru’s disguise sheet and pulls it back.

“You have improved, Konohamaru. But we are in a time of peace, even if it is a fragile one and I do not believe in advancing careers for the sake of looking good. You can transfer out if you want.”

“That is what I was talking about,” Ebisu says with a flourish of paperwork.

“I will gladly sign off this paperwork if it is what you truly want Konohamaru. But think about this. Sixty-three pre-genin graduated from this academy last year from both sessions. That means twenty-one teams. Only seven teams made it to genin, so twenty-one students. I taught twelve of those twenty-one at one point or another. All twelve made genin and all twelve were then recommended for the chunnin exams, one of which did make chuunin.”

He grins and turns back to Ebisu, whose lips are in a tight, thin line. He kind of likes silencing this insufferable man.

Iruka takes the papers and signs them. Hands the stack to Konohamaru. “Think about those numbers, okay? But I do hope to see you in my class in a few days.”

“BOOM.” Kotetsu says, standing in the doorway now. “About time you came back! It’s been so boring without you!”

“You have a class rotation this semester?” he asks as he exudes himself, turning away from tutor and pupil to walk with Kotetsu.

“We’ve got a pretty new crop this time around, actually.” Kotetsu says as he waves lazily over to a group of other chunnin sensei that are mulling around and chatting at the chart that tells them which rooms they’ll have.

At least Iruka doesn’t have to worry about that, his classroom being a permanent slot for several years now.

Kotetsu is right, most of them are several years younger than the teachers he’s been familiar with over the years, all getting ready for the start of classes in a few days. It makes sense of course, since seasoned chunnin will be needed for other village roles that are usually run by jounin which are needed for missions.

One of them is coming up to them now, a young woman with messy grey hair and eyes. Her vest is new, crisp in a way that only new vests are.

She can’t be older than seventeen, although Iruka thinks she is younger, nervous energy as she looks up at the pair of them. He doesn't remember teaching her at any point, although he thinks that she could stand to wear her weapons pouch higher. She’s probably had a recent growth spurt.

“Iruka-sensei, Kotetsu-sensei.” she says, looking at them

"Momi-sensei," Kotetsu greets her.

"Most of us are going out to that new bar in the civilian quadrant tonight, if you're interested,” she says to them, her eyes drifting back to the group of new chunnin.
"I've baby duty-" Kotetsu sniggers at his lame pun, "so I'll have to pass. And Iru is an old man-"

"What district?"

"Gardenia," she says.

And that is within the civilian quadrant, rather than on the fringes of one.

"I'll go," Iruka finds himself saying as she smiles and tells them a time before heading off.

“How old is she?”

“Fifteen.”

“That does make me feel old, I’ve issues with drinking with them that young.”

“Like we didn’t.” Kotetsu snorts.

“We didn’t go out drinking as a group with older ninja.” Iruka says. “I certainly never asked Head Teacher Minoru to come out with us.”

Kotetsu laughs again, shaking his head.

“I think I should go.” Iruka says. “As a way to learn their names at least. I’ve missed all the prep meetings.”

He looks back at the group. They are young, younger than he’s gotten used to over the years. Even Shikamaru- there hasn't been a twelve year old chuunin since the last war. He knows that Tsunade has to fill in the gaps of service, but still-

It doesn't bode well for the feeling on his stomach.

"You should ask Anko out to that bar tonight," Kotetsu says, "she's been harping on us about you since we got back from the mission, cause I’m pretty sure she figured it out. Although I think she's allergic to babies cause she only bothers us at work for the most part. I swear she ran when I asked her to hold Kazane the other day." he laughs.

"You've been watching her?"

"We talked about it, Izu and I before we went to visit Yugao. We’ve had her pretty much since Yugao returned to active status."

Iruka frowns a bit. He doesn't really like the sound of that either, although he knows that the Anbu Corps faced some of the largest death tolls from the recent attacks and knows that Yugao's talents were a highly specialized field, if she wasn't Anbu herself.

“So Anko’s been taking you to the bars then?” he smiles at the image, because Kotetsu and Anko are hilarious together.

“We’ve gone out drinking a few times, but I’ve got Izu. At least the two of you are both single. It works out better that way.”

“Not so single.” he says. It’s surprising how easy the words come out. he’d hated to call it dating when he was with Kamu. Shied away from acknowledging it he’d rather let people put the pieces together.
“What.” Kotetsu stops walking.

“You’re going to make me say it again.”

“You bet your ass I am. I need to make sure I’m not dreaming or that I need to clean out my ears.”

“I am not single.”


“What?” Iruka is concerned now; Kotetsu isn’t one to worry unnecessarily.

“I’m thinking about what to say, gimme a sec, jeez. Izu would be so proud. Tell him about it later, okay?” he tugs at his bandage and grins, slinging his arm around Iruka’s shoulders.

“I changed my mind, I’m not going to say anything because you know what? I have faith in you. I’m sure you’ve thought about all the things anyway. Go for it. But seriously, tell Izu I thought about what to say.”

Iruka agrees, laughing.

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They split up and Iruka heads over to his apartment. He’s not wrong in assuming he has a pile of mail from the past few days in front of the door and more on the table next to his door.

His fridge is empty, save for a jar of pickles. He figures that Izumo cleared it out and is grateful. His plants are also alive, although a bit dry. A baby will do that to you.

He spends up time tidying up his house before he ventured into his bedroom and pulls out a bag. He drops it on his bed and stares at it, wondering if it’s worth packing.

_Not so single,_ he’d said.

Is this really what he wanted to do right now? He’d barely scratched the surface with Mizuchi and then there was his memories.

"]_I killed my best friend trying to protect her._”

The words come Iruka knows they’re Kakashi’s as he thinks back to the beach. He closes his eyes, focuses on his breathing.

There were plenty of reasons to stay at the Hatake compound. Space, closeness to R&I, the fact that his neighbors wouldn’t be prying and trying to feed him, asking about missions and schoolwork and all the kids that probably came by over the summer and somehow ‘forgot’ to practice keeping their footsteps quiet on the stairs.

And there was the fact that he sort of _wanted_ to stay there.

“Could use some help deciding here.”

He swears Mizuchi snorts in laughter, but doesn’t offer anything else. He kind of wishes that Mizuchi could, but the idea also seems a bit strange, because aren’t they supposed to be the same?
Thinking about it doesn’t really solve anything so he reaches for the bag and stuffs some necessities and his mail inside of it before sealing it inside a scroll. He grabs the rest of his forms and heads to the mission office.

He sees Izumo and waves as he goes and puts in his requests for school supplies and lets the boss know he’s back to be put on his regular schedule when school starts up and Tsunade clears him before he heads back over to the mission floor, where Izumo is working.

"Doing late shifts this time around?" he asks.

"It works out better this way," he smiles. "With Kotetsu starting a school rotation and Kazane."

"Anything new for procedure? Reports look a bit backed up."

"You're telling me." Izumo huffs, "but we couldn't put in the usual overtime, not with Kazane. And with the edicts- there's going to be a rush of spring babies I think." Izumo says. “That also presents its own set of problems though. Don’t think the elders thought of the big picture when they set those edicts up, did they?” he snorts and stamps a ‘rejection’ on the mission scroll that he was just handed.

“Incomplete. Also dirty. Redo it please.” The jounin grumbles like he’s going to protest, but slides on by as Asuma comes up behind him.

“Iruka, you’ve been gone a while. You look better.”

“I feel better,” he answers, honest. “I got some training in over the course of my mission. I’ve never cut corners with my routines, but I haven’t put that much time into my own training in a while.” he usually gets his training by cobbling together whatever he needs for his kids. Sometimes that results in a skewed training set for a few weeks here and there. “Just got back yesterday. Hopefully Tsunade-sama approves the payment for the long term, because I kind of need to fill my fridge. How are your three?”

“Well enough. Shikamaru is on rotation again for teaching.”

“Really. He must have had results then.” Because even if they were short on necessary job coverage, not even circumstances would put someone completely unsuited in the same job code a second time.

“I don’t quite understand it. He lets them run amok.”

“That is a lesson in itself I think.” Iruka muses. “You around the next few days? I have some additional time off.”

He nods and passes in a scroll. Iruka looks over Izumo’s shoulder. It’s passable, but Asuma’s always are that. Just enough. He’s more like Shikamaru than he realizes.

“Want lunch?”

It’s sort of a surprising offer, but then again Iruka can’t really remember the last time he went out with Asuma, and he is hungry so he agrees, following Asuma out of the mission office.

“You’re not meeting with the kids are you?”

“Not today,” Asuma answers, lighting a cigarette. "We're still working on drills, but Ino and Choji didn't-"
The wind changes, wisp of smoke drifting towards him.

**Smoke, cloying and thick rushing in- choking him**-

Iruka stops, coughing violently into his arm as he struggles to breathe. It passes, the fit gone as the smoke fades.

Asuma turns, puts the cigarette out.

“You okay?”

Iruka waves him off. “Just a memory.”

Asuma raises an eyebrow.

"This have to do with visiting R&I?"

The sensation of relief washes over him. He wasn't told specifically against saying anything regarding his visit, but they didn't need to.

One does not simply just broadcast memory erasure or possible village cover-ups.

But Asuma knows, has been in the loop for years; entrusted with many of Sandaime's files and decrees upon his return to Konoha. Iruka knows that Asuma has access to his file. Asuma is also one of the few that had seen his issue early on, when it wasn't so...dramatic. It had still be worrisome, but manageable. But like most long-term conditions, he'd also been aware that the issue wasn't resolving itself. Even if he hand't been around for a debilitating attack and coma during the years he was outside Konoha, Iruka is sure that Asuma also knows the attacks were getting worse, not better.

"Yeah," he admits. "They aren't sure about much."

It’s a bit late for lunch, the restaurant is nearly empty and that's fine for Iruka, because it means less people. They sit; Iruka talks about the paperwork (all the paperwork), the lack of food in his fridge, the fact that he's heading out to meet several of the new teachers tonight. Asuma talks about Ino and Choji attempting to find a third to take the chuunin exams with. Iruka points him in the direction of Natsumi, who should be more than ready to tackle the exams this time. He takes the recommendation, saying he'll stop in on the next training session he catches.

"Heard they're going to be running a extra set of tokubetsu trials this year." Asuma says and Iruka pulls a face, annoyed.

"You know that isn't the case," he says.

Asuma flips a piece of meat on the grill, smirking.

"Still think you could make it, chakra issue or not. How has it been?"

"It's been better, actually." he says, and he means it. "We're trying to pinpoint when they started." 

"Are they thinking memory suppression?"

And Iruka knows that the real reason for all of this-Asuma doesn't know about Mizuchi. He doubts that even Ibiki and Anko really know more than is necessary.

And that hurts.
Not being able to share Mizuchi-share himself-hurts. The feeling crushes him harder than the smoke did, he sucks in a breath.

"Something like that," he finally manages to say. He can't trust himself to not say more, not at this moment.

"The older the memory, the more disorienting." Asuma says, jaw tight. Iruka sees Hiruzen in the look; it helps him steady himself.

He can't talk about it, not now.

"How do you know Kakashi?" he says instead, the first question that springs to mind. Asuma knows who his mission partner was, at least.

"What is it that you want to know?" the lines of his face have relaxed some, the smirk is back; Iruka can't help but smile in return.

"How well do you know him?"

"Officially- we graduated as genin together back in the day. Didn't know him all too well then, since he'd only been in school with us for a year. But Rin-one of our class, she was pretty adamant that all of us were graduates together. She ran lunches, meetings, sparring sessions and card games regularly. Kept us together through war and after."

He wonders if Rin is the same Rin from the stone this morning. He wants to know, but doesn’t want to find out this way; he wants that impossibly quiet voice to tell him.

"And Kakashi?"

"Well he was kind of annoying, actually. Always complaining about anything that wasn't training. And you couldn't cheat at cards with him-he had this thing about rules back then-you'll have to ask him about it." he smiles, spearing a piece of meat. "But I like to think that it worked out for the best, really. Even if we can't all meet up anymore."

"That sounds like yet another reason I don't want my kids to graduate too early. Social skills are important and when you've got an additional age difference to factor in-," he groans, “Ebisu was on my case again today.”

“My nephew? He has improved, I can see it. But no, I don’t think he’s ready for a team.”

Iruka agrees and tells him about the afternoon, laughing as he remembers Ebisu’s face. It’s good to be back, to joke and laugh and spend a day hanging out with people. He’d been burying himself in work since Naruto had left.

“IT’s good that you can spend time outside of work.” Asuma says, plucking the thoughts straight from Iruka's head.

“I do spend time outside of work." he says, trying not to be defensive.

“Not often. We haven’t played shogi in over a year and even then you were in the hospital. I know you think it’s an old man’s game.”

And he is right, of course. Asuma has that way about him.

“I’m pretty old now myself, so I guess that makes it an okay game to play.”
Iruka heads down to Ichiraku even though he’s full from lunch to check in. They grin at him and tell him about the letters Naruto’s been sending, comparing the ramen of different places with theirs. It sounds just like him.

He doesn’t expect to see Anko come up to the counter. “I’m meeting up with all of my friends today it seems.”

She smiles, but it isn’t her usual grin. So she’s here to check in on him for work as well then. She buys him a bowl despite his protests and he picks at it as he looks at her.

“You remember anything?”

“Smoke. Lots of smoke. Something to do with the night of the Nine Tails. I’m running for my mother I think.”

“That’s even older than we thought, if you have memories that buried…” her eyebrows come together and she frowns.

“I think it must be tied somehow, maybe it was the first time I knew that I could summon Mizuchi.” He shrugs. “All I really remember is smoke.”

*We remember more than smoke. Remember the rain.* Mizuchi’s voice reminds him.

“That’s different.” he says, only realizing he’d said it aloud when Anko looks at him.

“The memory is different? Like a partial memory?”

“I’m not sure.” he says and he means it. That night had always been chaos and his memories were no exception. The memory doesn’t change, but the feeling-

Mizuchi being there-

Makes it different, somehow.

*Different?* The voice questions.

**It's just different. I don't know what we did.** He answers back, forcing himself to think instead of speak. He fiddles with his noodles watching them drift in the bowl.

"I told him I’d kill him if he hurt you."

He looks up. She’s staring into her own bowl, angry. Iruka can't bring himself to say anything in response as he turns to his own bowl.

Anko-well-if she’d gone and found someone to be serious over-

His threat would’ve been more detailed.

And he is serious about Kakashi. He’s not sure what his feelings are, but they are different from anything else.

"He went and asked me if I'd done a good job with the last one."
Her voice is quiet now, Iruka knows she had her own demons to face then, the girl who had found everything in Orochimaru and had been used-thrown away and threw herself into her work.

Iruka is familiar with the coping mechanism.

"I didn't notice you either Anko. Orochimaru was-”

"But that was what I was learning Iruka. Everything I was learning reflected back at me when I was with you, and I never even noticed..." she looks at him.

"I don't think I let you see. Not until I was ready to ask for help. And I think being with Mizuki-well, I think it was always an attempt for me to try to connect with what I'd had before, before everything.”

There’s a warmth then, Mizuchi and him in agreement.

"I think that's what he did for me, not that excuses either of us. I wanted to return to better times, connect to the past. He gave me that, if only sometimes. And maybe my memories have something to do with it, but I think most of it was me."

"It wasn't your fault."

"Much of it wasn't my fault," he agrees, "But before any of that-before out relationship started even-I did still made poor decisions and I hold myself to them. It was easier to stop meeting you then deal with him and his difficult temperament. You were so busy and the excuses-they were real. I took on more and more yet involved myself with people less and less. It was easier if I kept busy."

“Iru…did you let him know?”

"I did talk to Kakashi about it, at least a little." More than he had with any person besides Anko.

"He didn't blow me off, you know."

"What?"

"I said I'd kill him. He didn't make a comment about being a higher level or anything like that. He just nodded, accepting my feelings for you."

"I'm starting to realize how different he really is." Iruka answers. "And I don't think I dislike it. He said he's going to ask me out on a date."

He finds himself smiling.

"When he does, I'll say yes."

Anko grins back, slaps money on the counter as she drags him off the stool, waving goodbye Teuchi.

"Then if you're going to be emotionally unavailable I'm going drinking with you tonight!"

---

"What about that one?" She points and Iruka looks over tipping back another shot. The headache is finally starting to dissipate, somewhat. He figures that his guard must have changed shift.
The other teachers had smiled and exchanged greetings and Anko helped to introduce him to everyone as she was often used in the curriculum for special class lesson sets and invited to many of the school events. They had hung around for a few beers, but most of the others were already moving on to another bar, another crowd to see. Iruka waved them off, feeling old.

“Don’t even,” Anko had laughed as he shared his thoughts. “You just don’t want us old farts to show them up.” She turns and motions for Iruka’s eyes to follow as he lands on a shinobi. “That’s Matsuo-san. Messy reports.”

"Boring," she points to another.

"No," Iruka says as he waves for another.

"Why not? You know him?"

“No. I think that it’s just too much...purple."

"Point." Kakashi says from beside him and he turns, holding onto his beer.

“I didn’t know you came out to places like this.”

“Sometimes.” He says, moving closer. Iruka can’t say he minds.

“How was your day?” he asks and Kakashi shrugs.

“It was a day.”

“I had a good day.” He grins as he remembers. "Haven't had such a good day in ages. Even got to lecture Ebisu, which was great. I’m not really into bars anymore but you can’t really refuse Anko though.”

“Damn straight!” Anko says as she drapes herself over Iruka, passing him a beer. “Besides, you haven’t asked him on a date yet, so he’s he’s mine tonight, jounin! My wingman.” She lets out a noise of excitement and points. “Ooh, what about that one! Rocking the second’s forehead protector. And it works. I like it. I like it a lot. It has personality. Bet that helmet could rank in a personality quiz.”

Iruka doesn’t recognize the man immediately, which is a feat unto itself. "I think his name is Yamato?" he says finally as he thinks to the mission office. "His reports are fine."

“Yamato,” Kakashi answers, waving the man over.

Anko lunges, never one to let an opportunity pass. "So you know each other, even better! Manager, booth please!"

He starts walking toward them and there’s something about him; something that draws his eye in. Mizuchi too, although he can’t quite put his finger on it. It’s like he’s recognizing something.

Iruka is lost in his thoughts and familiar with Anko’s tactics, so he lets himself get pushed into sitting arrangements. Yamato looks a bit lost as he ends up beside Anko. Iruka still can’t place his finger on it as he stares at the other man, frowning to himself. Anko waves over an employee and Kakashi takes advantage of her distraction to lean into Iruka’s side.

"Share your thoughts?"

Water? Mizuchi questions and Iruka echoes it at Kakashi.
“Did you want some?”

"Ah, no. The chakra I mean." Anko has placed their order and is turning on her charm now and Yamato is responding, if awkwardly. "It feels like water. But not. I guess I've had more than I realize."

"You're not wrong." Kakashi says in his ear. "It's not impossible to have dual nature orientations."

"Not impossible but water isn’t probable, not after-"

"You need more faith in your abilities. They are quite impressive."

Iruka brings his beer up, a warm feeling spreading from his gut.

“And what’s this I hear about a date…? I thought I was to be rejected when I did ask."

"I don't remember saying anything of the sort, actually.” Iruka grins and lets his hand fall to Kakashi’s lap. The eye curls upward and Iruka would say the eye is smiling at him. Kakashi’s hand comes to take his and his heart melts a little because he was trying to be sexy, dammit, and now they’re holding hands.

He doesn’t mind all too much though, because this is nice as well.

"Shall I walk you home, sensei? Maybe have a picnic out in the gardens?"

“Sounds like a plan.” Iruka slides out of the booth and squeezes himself beside Anko, who drapes herself on him.

“Your wingman is heading out with the friend. The rest is on you.” She squeezes his shoulder they share a grin.

- 

"Not much of a picnic in here." Iruka says as he lays out on the futon and Kakashi thrusts into him.

"Do you want me to stop?" Kakashi lifts his leg and there-

"Not-not-really. Just-fuck that’s good-making a point."

"You are amazing." Kakashi answers as he leans down to kiss him. Iruka squirms from the position, but it crawls up his spine in a good way. He shudders, linking his arms around Kakashi’s shoulders.

"Just a bit- more!" he cries out as Kakashi bites his neck and he's coming, unwinding himself from the embrace, stated. Kakashi rocks a few more times and Iruka loves it; oversensitive but still good and then he's coming too, trembling against Iruka.

He doesn't think he's ever had someone so invested in making sure he's enjoying himself before. He’s had a good time before, sure. He’s had attentive lovers even. But someone who wants to learn and take everything and give it back even better- that’s new. And amazing.

Good, Mizuchi's voice resounds in his head. He breathes out his agreement.

"What are you saying about me? Good things, I hope." Kakashi grins and licks a stripe up his neck, still softly rolling his hips and shuddering against him.
And at least, Iruka has this. Kakashi knows that this isn't some thing that is inside of him. That Mizuchi is a part of him.

Mizuchi isn't a voice of reason or denial, not a voice of for or against, not ego or pride-

It's just Mizuchi.

And he isn't sure how he'd gone without for so long, piece slotting into place like they'd never been separated.

"Just agreeing that we like you." the words fall from his lips and he thinks he should be surprised at how easily the words came. But should he be surprised? He's known that he’s liked Kakashi as more than a warm body since before the first time they’d done this.

It really isn’t much of a leap to share at this point, is it?

Want.

"I happen to like you as well," Kakashi agrees, moving away. Iruka sighs as he pulls out. He watches Kakashi lean back, muscles stretching and he grins, watching the movement.

"Are you ogling, sensei?"

"It's a pretty good view."

"My view isn't bad either." Kakashi grins and leans back in. He cleans them up and then moves next to him, hand on his chest as he starts to share his chakra. Kakashi usually does this after, waiting for Iruka to fall asleep first. The chakra drags through him, but it just adds to the experience.

Iruka smiles, warm and sated as he lets his eyes drift shut.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone cares to know, Ebisu was basically complaining loudly about not being invited out with the teachers and that's how Kakashi figures it out. Yamato may have nodded in completely unrelated ways to Kakashi's questions, but he didn't spill Iruka's plans, nope nope.

Also, um I don't really think that Kakashi and Obito had lots of time to become real besties. I mean there is a really important relationship there, but not bffs. I like to think that Rin and Kakashi became a lot closer as friends (even to the point of best friends) after Obito was gone. That's my personal headcanon, anyway. (I have some Drabble type things that I might connect for a post one of these days)
Hey everyone, I know it's been forever and I'm so sorry about that. Someone hit my car and it was a pretty serious car accident a while back (I'm fine, but my car wasn't) and basically all my extra energy and days off were poured into that nightmare of life (still not completely settled). As a side note, I wish that on no one. Haven't felt quite so small in my life when something this massive (to me anyway) happens and then I was told 'you'll have an adjustor within three business days'. Cog in a machine, for reals. And driving, ugh. But I'm at a point where things are starting to smooth out, so I really wanted to try get back into the rhythm of this.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

“Just what I expect from you! It’s not hip to hold back in matters of exercise of the heart, whether it is cardio or love!”

Chapter Notes

Emotions are hard.

There's a small bit of overlap in scenes here, one from Kakashi's pov and then again from Iruka's. I don't particularly like that sort of thing most time and it was hard to write it but I'm glad I did. Challenge thyself!

Have a wonderful snow day present all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He flails, not really with any sense of direction, just movement as the ground falls from under him.

His fingers catch in fur as he realizes that something large and decidedly not-human has him. The paw is wrapped around his waist, the pressure increasing-

Black spots dance across his vision as he reaches blindly towards the waterfall, calls for help-

He hears the rush of the waterfall, the roar as it comes in towards Iruka and the beast, pushes them back.

The creature, stunned, loosens its grip. Iruka scrambles, falling down. The drop is awkward, the pain sudden as his head hits the wall, but there’s no time.

He runs, grabbing at his friends as he rushes to the waterfall.

It’s either with the waterfall or back to the creature, who roars in his ears, realizing that Iruka is gone.

“Get out now, get out now, get out now” he says, a mantra as they jump into the stream of falling water.

It comes for him, sweeping around all of them and he whoops as he realizes it’s Mizuchi, that they’re still together somehow and then they’re rushing down down down- crashing into the water and Iruka is laughing as they ride the river all the way to the rendezvous tower. Mizuchi drops them on the shore and he coughs as he drags himself out.

He must black out for a few seconds because then he’s alone, Mizuchi inside again and a serous pounding in his head.
He looks around, landing on Miki and Aki. They’d dragged themselves out of the river and thank the elements Miki was still wearing the tube with the scrolls.

“Hey,” he coughs out as he tries to stand. He barely gets to his knees before he slumps back down.

“What was that!?" Aki shouts. "Flipping amazing!"

“It was, wasn’t it,” he grins, looking back to the river. “That was Mizuchi if you can believe it.”

“No way, that’s like way bigger then usual!”

“Almost dying helps, I guess.” Iruka shrugs as he looks to Miki. She’s pale, but her bandage is still wrapped tight.

“You okay?”

“We just rode a waterfall.”

“I guess we did, yeah.” He smiles again, happiness thrumming through him. “Sorry if the ride was a little rough.”

"It was kind of scary." Miki says as she wrings out her hair and his face falls. "The waterfall came in at us. Also you didn't tell us."

Scary? Mizuchi had just saved them. He frowns and shrugs. He supposed it could be scary if you didn't trust the water like he did. Water could be scary, that much was true.

“I didn’t do it on purpose. It really wasn’t like a plan or anything , I mean-“

"The creature had Iru! That was way scarier! That was one paw! Which proctor thought that was a good idea?! “

The shout scares a bird nearby, and Aki lowers his voice.

“But seriously can we go to the tower before someone tries to take us out."

"I might need some help." Iruka says from where he's sitting. "The world is spinning juuuuuuuuuuuust a little more than I'm used to. I hit my head pretty hard when it let me go."

Aki grins and hauls him up. “I really want to know which proctor thought that was a good idea?!”

---

He opens his eyes and stares at the ceiling. He's curled up against someone and he freezes for a moment before breathing out a sigh as he turns and sees Kakashi.

"You have a habit of startling when you wake."

"I don't usually spend the night in places that aren't my own."

"I don't think it was quite so pronounced when we were at the safe house."

Is right. We did better.

"It was different." He answers but he's not sure who he's answering at this point. "I did summon Mizuchi at the chuunin exams."
"Did you?" Kakashi questions as he turns and reaches for a pair of pants. Iruka tries (and fails) to not notice the lines of muscle flexing as Kakashi pulls them on.

"We can have an open air bath and you can tell me about it if you want."

"In summer?" Iruka says, glad that his voice comes out only a little thick, curling his fingers in the sheets rather than reaching for Kakashi to drag him back into them.

He breathes, stares at the sheets in his fist. School is coming, and he’s sure that a mission for Kakashi is coming sooner rather than later.

Lazy days of nothing but workouts and sex are past them now.

He’s going to miss it, but he knows that cutting back now is better than going from several orgasms a day to the occasional self-induced one.

"It would be better in fall, wouldn't it?" Kakashi tilts his head, "But I want one now. We can have another bath in the fall."

"You like baths don't you?"

"It's a luxury missions rarely afford me."

"I can see that." Iruka looks over and Kakashi smiles at him.

“I’m not in the habit of denying myself something just because it might not be the best time-“ he leans in and Iruka can’t be blamed for dragging Kakashi back into bed with him, can he?

---

Iruka sighs as he sinks into the wooden tub and Kakashi was right; this is nice. The weather hasn’t creeped up into the standard heat that summer usually has, so the bath is more relaxing than he thought it would be.

“You said you remembered more," Kakashi says and Iruka makes a noise of agreement as he drags open his eyes to look at Kakashi.

“I summoned Mizuchi. I mean it was a summon, but not intentional like the one we worked on. My team, we took shelter in Onbaa territory. Didn’t go so well for us, if you can believe it."

“They are quite territorial from what I understand.”

“It’s why we don’t really go around the long way behind the monument.” Iruka agrees. “I mean there’s usually some daredevil that thinks the whole thing is a joke but-“ he laughs, “thank the elements Naruto never tried to test that out.”

“I’m sure he had enough trouble to get in without trying to visit the Onbaa.”

“That’s sure,” Iruka laughs again, closing his eyes.

He sees Mizuchi like this, an image painted behind his eyelids, constant and present and just there-

“It had me, one huge hand around my middle, crushing me.” He can’t believe that he forgot this, because the memory is crystal clear now; the memory of being squeezed, the painful haziness as he felt his consciousness slipping from under him-
“Mizuchi came in with the waterfall, and we rode my team all the way to the rendezvous point.”

And he remembers the feeling, the elation as he realized the waterfall was Mizuchi; he’s grinning just from remembering the sense of connection.

He isn’t sure how it’s possible to forget (to be forced to forget) such a thing, wonders how he could tap into it again.

"It like I was the water and it was me."

We were one.

"Sounds like an adventure."

"I'd hit my head hard when the Onbaa let me go, so that’s where I got the concussion. I guess Aki and Miki made something up instead of telling them about Mizuchi."

"That seems to fit with the story."

"It was amazing." he says, leaning against the edge of the bath. "But if the only times I've really summoned Mizuchi is when my life is in danger-" he sinks down. He doesn't want to think about losing his team.

"Did you collapse afterward?"

No, we were together.

"I think we worked together so we recovered together without either of us spending down the chakra in its entirety. If that makes sense."

"I can split my chakra in two, each with their own chakra reserves. I suppose it would be like that then. In tandem."

Iruka shrugs, but his mind is stuck on two. Iruka is not unfamiliar with the idea of clones, having used them on himself before. But he’s never been able to keep the thread of concentration, so clones don't really work out the way he wants.

It just makes him irritated and hot for more and drains him more than he should. It's definitely not something for daily use.

But he would never teach someone the technique such as shadow clone for the purpose of getting off.

But Kakashi already knows it, knows something that is probably a next step even, with two sides of chakra split into clones.

Two? Mate twice?

Mizuchi’s thoughts echo his own as he ducks into the water to hide his face.

It doesn’t stop him from trying to figure out the logistics of it all. It’s a delicious idea, even if such a thing would take too much chakra to really be viable.

"Sensei?"

"Nope. Nope." He stands up and vaults himself out of the bath. "It is time to get dressed and start
the day. See you at breakfast.”

He talks with the sisters, who are organizing breakfast. Asks them if they would allow him to cook with them that evening. One of them frowns a bit but they agree. He asks about delivery and learns that there are many more people to serve the family than the three of them, but almost all have relocated to other parts of Konoha, made their own lives.

Too many people to care for too much house with only one surviving clan member.

Fewer people to remember those who lived here before.

It feels lonely.

The dogs rush by, doing laps around the house; barking and braying at one another about short legs and laziness and Iruka smiles at them.

Kakashi stands behind him, watching.

"I think I would like to meet you for lunch at the academy. Would that be amenable to you?"

Iruka shakes his head, turning back to face Kakshi after the dogs have passed. “Amenable? Yeah, it would be amenable. As long as you bring the lunch.” he snorts, because he can’t help it. "and keep the untoward thoughts to yourself."

---

It's another beautiful day, the summer heat tempered with the soft breeze as he cleans his classroom. He scrubs down the desks and marks the ones that really can’t take another year of abuse. He wonders if he can take some from another teacher.

He sees Konohamaru in the doorway.

“Did you make a decision?”

“I’ll stay with you. Naruto told me that there were no shortcuts.”

“He’s right about that.” Iruka smiles at the boy. “And don’t worry about chakra control. That’s what the academy is for. I failed Naruto’s graduation three times.”

“What?!” Konohamaru looks floored and Iruka should’ve figured that Naruto wouldn’t have shared that tidbit. Not when he was trying to look good anyway.

“He couldn’t make an acceptable clone. I ended up reversing the last fail when he did master it but chakra techniques take time. That’s why we have different class levels. Nobody is ANBU level out of the gate.”

Konohamaru thinks for a moment then nods and walks off, leaving the stack of papers behind.

“That is the meaning of a true sensei.” Kakashi says from outside the window. “I feel enlightened just watching it.” he holds up the lunch, and Iruka shakes his head.

“Again with the windows?”

“It was closer.” Kakashi says as he climbs into the classroom. “Although I do think there is merit to the idea that early graduation places us in situations we are not mentally ready for.”
“Nine is too early. Six is far too early. The only reason I’d even let Naruto test early is because I knew he would fail.”

“You cannot rewrite the past,” Kakashi shrugs as he walks to the teachers desk. “Your desk looks like it needs some help.”

“Probably. I could use a whole new set of desks, actually. There’s only so much kunai gouging and shuriken abuse that they can take, after all. But I’d settle for the standard school supplies. I put in the expedited request forms, so I should have those for the start of school, probably.”

“There are expedited forms for school supplies?”

“There are forms for everything,” Iruka reaches for the food. “You should know.”

“Are these the dimensions for the desks that you want? Is this one good for your height? It looks a bit small. Can’t be good for your posture.”

“Chuunin sensei are usually younger than I am. A few rotations after promotion and then moved onto other work unless they’re particularly suited for it. And are you really one to talk about posture?”

“So it is small.”

“It is fine. You see that this isn’t anywhere near as damaged as some of the student desks.”

“Still small.” Kakashi says as he sits on top of the desk. Iruka doesn’t fight it because he only has the one chair. They open the meals and Iruka is impressed even though he figures that Kakashi just packed up things the sisters had made. It’s still an impressive setup, nonetheless.

They sit for a few moments, Iruka enjoying the breeze from the open window and the fact that his classroom is well on its way to being ready for the first day of school. He still has some things that he has to gather for the first day of classes; he has to check his roster one more time and check out the weapon sale booths, has to see if he can get any desks-

He glances at Kakashi, startled by the fact that Kakashi seems content to sit there and enjoy his own lunch, entertain his own thoughts while Iruka gets lost in his own thoughts and planning.

Mizuki always had to be at the forefront of any thoughts, especially if he was physically there in front of you. Center of attention, always.

Kakashi’s gaze comes back to him, face brightening. “Are you having untoward thoughts? I think the classroom could be an enlightening place for such lessons.”

“You’re an idiot.” Iruka snorts and turns back to his food.

“That’s not really answering my question,” he teases as he leans in. “Can I feed you?” he asks and Iruka nearly chokes on his bento.

“Why?” he looks at the bento, it doesn’t seem like Kakashi has been avoiding anything in particular from the box.

“I don’t know if I like that suspicion.” Kakashi muses as he eats another piece. “I just thought it might be interesting. It happens in books after all. You don’t have to.”

Iruka remembers that being with Mizuki sometimes felt like a hidden trap- you never knew what
was going to cause a slip, what would cause you to end up on your face and wondering how it had happened in the first place. He wonders if his reactions are of the same vein to Kakashi. If the minefield of emotions is worth it for someone like Kakashi.

But Mizuki had never tried to meet halfway. It was his way and his way only. Iruka doesn’t want to be like that.

He doesn’t apologize for his suspicion; instead he nods and opens his mouth. Kakashi leans in and gives him a piece. He chews and swallows, unaware and unable to taste what he is eating as he tries not to gag on his insecurity.

And then Kakashi leans in further and kisses him.

It’s slow and sweet and Iruka is more than happy to switch tracks as he kisses him back. Kakashi’s hand is in his hair and he tilts his head back to deepen the kiss. The difference in height ends up ending the kiss earlier than he would like. Perhaps the desk is a bit small he thinks as he rubs his neck.

“Thank you,” Kakashi whispers and Iruka finds himself looking away.

Into the eyes of Gai who is also at the window.

“WHAT IS IT WITH YOU JOUNIN AND WINDOWS.”

Kakashi turns his head and waves at Gai who climbs in.

“I can’t-I can’t-” Iruka fumes as he blushes, wanting to bury his face in his hands like he's a pre-genin that just got caught passing notes.

“I interrupted the summer breeze of love. Look deep into my eyes and accept my sincere apology!” Gai grabs his free hand and Iruka tries to shrink back.

“Don’t bother to notice his handsome manly features however.” Kakashi deadpans. Iruka snorts, tugging his hand away.

“Ooh, that was so hip of you, Kakashi! Taking my lines and using them against me!”

“Did you come to organize the schedule for classes?”

“Quite right, Iruka-sensei. But first-” he holds out his fist. “A round of janken to prove your summer love of youthfulness!”

Iruka is sudenly glad that the other chuunin-sensei had kept on drinking the night before. Any other day and they'd already have an audience. He sighs, but puts down his lunch. Gai has been a a part of his lessons for a few years now, so he is somewhat familiar with his...everything. Gai beams and Iruka swears he sparkles.

They play. Win, lose, tie, repeat. In the end they’ve played twelve rounds with five wins each and two ties. Gai seems satisfied with that and moves on to his schedule, which he pulls out of somewhere, Iruka is used to the flourishing movements so he doesn’t think on where too much. As Iruka pencils him in, he looks over at Kakashi who is back to eating his lunch, whistling an off-key tune. He smirks to himself.

“Gai-sensei?”
“Yes, Iruka-sensei?”

“Kakashi said you were rather good at developing exercise routines.”

Gai spins his head around towards Kakashi so fast that Iruka fears it might pop off.

"That isn't news, Gai." Kakashi says, feigning indifference.

"It is when it is coming from the mouth of Iruka-sensei and not couched within an insult in that hip way that you do," he says and Iruka swears that Kakashi’s eye shrinks from the blinding smile.

“I was wondering if maybe you could help me with one,” he says, because he figures he should ask before Kakashi does.

“It would be most excellent to help Iruka-sensei with an exercise regime!” he booms, although he’s still facing Kakashi.

“He kept up with Routine Strawberry for most of the summer. I didn’t pull any punches either.”

“Just what I expect from you, my rival! It’s not hip to hold back in matters of exercise of the heart, whether it is cardio or love!”

Iruka is trying not to laugh as Gai spins back to him.

“I would be most honored, Iruka-sensei. Say we meet next week? After class?”

Iruka nods, Gai flings himself out the window and uses the tree to launch himself onto the school roof, shouting about exercises of the heart.

"That was unexpected."

"That's just the beginning. That's an invitation in Gai-speech. He may have been behaving over the years he's helped teach, but just you wait."

"You're the one who said I should ask," Iruka hisses.

"I did say that, didn't I?" Kakashi says, and his smile is so genuine that he can't really be mad at it.

"Well you'll just have to be enlightened with that information all by your lonesome."

"Hey, wait a second-" he says, smile fading.

Iruka can't hold his laugh in.

---

Iruka stretches out at the table, sliding into the chopping, slicing, and dicing that the sisters are doing. They concede that it might be nice to try a dinner that he made. Kakashi knows that it won’t happen anytime soon, but he can see that Iruka enjoys the idea of it nonetheless.

“Your’re going to win them over. Hatsuko is making noises of approval every time she passes me now.”

“Is that so?” Iruka reaches for his stack of new letters and starts in on them.

“I heard an interesting story this afternoon after lunch.”
“Did you?”

“I was interested in Konohamaru and did some digging. I heard that you were— how did he put it— positively badass and insanely cool, like a boss.”

“Ah.” Iruka refuses to look up from the letter, a flush creeping high in his cheeks.

“He also told me that you told him your graduating stats last year.”

“I may have been bragging a bit, but Ebisu—”

“Is an ass. Talented, yes. But also an ass. And is it really bragging to list the numbers?”

“I don’t like him challenging my classroom teaching procedures.”

“Besides, bragging can be sexy.” he shifts closer and Iruka looks up.

He likes the look in Iruka’s eyes, the flash of want as he holds his gaze for a long moment before he turns back to the letters, pushing a stack towards him.

“The Hatsu sisters gave me a stack for you.”

He takes out letter, one different from the rest of the pile, an order for weapons that he’d placed before he’d left for the summer. “I liked the work that they did on my weapons. Would you want a set ordered for your class?”

“No, thank you. I make that a lesson in itself, forming your own weapons packs.”

“No a bad idea,” he agrees, glancing through the rest of the pile. “Hope your letters are more interesting than this, although I suppose they could be good to help start fires for the bath.”

“That’s rude.”

“No, what’s rude is that the council sends all of these letters without bothering to tailor them to the recipients. One letter fits all,” he continues, scanning over it. “To consider consider the future and to ensure the legacy of konoha’ and they don’t mean adoption,” he waves the envelope and pulls out the letter, before tearing it in half.

“I mean I’m probably going to have to go to a few ’meetings’ to placate the vultures while Tsunade gains traction in her appeals,” he waves another in Iruka’s direction. “But first, they have to send me a tailored letter. None of this repetitiveness one fits all that they keep sending.”

“I have one also.” Iruka says as he shifts through his pile. “Three, actually. Not that I expected any different after Izumo told me as much.”

The realization that Iruka is also of notice to the council doesn’t escape him, but it still grates in a way.

“There is also the Sharingan to consider at this point.” Kakashi rips open another letter and skims it before tearing it in half. “I must have enough blood to keep it, or that’s how the theory goes, anyway.”

“What?” Iruka questions, concern in his eyes now.

He supposes that this really isn’t common knowledge even if Iruka had been briefed on Sharingan signs for Sasuke.
“No one has kept a transplanted eye as long as I have,” he says, tearing another letter. “It does have a draining effect from constant use, but the cases that we know of usually die, go blind in the transplant, or are forced to have it removed within a few years. The fact that it doesn’t need to be sealed when not in use is odd, as is the fact that I’ve also managed to access the higher level dojutsu.”

He shouldn’t be sharing this, only the fewest of the few know the extent of what he can do.

And yet-

He has never been commanded to not share these details, namely because he thinks that no one has ever considered it before.

Iruka looks like he wants to ask, but he also knows that this is something else, knows that he probably should not know these things.

“You’ve seen different permutations of the byakugan eyes. Same core ability, different ways to see, I suppose would be the best way to phrase it.”

Iruka nods, because there is no point to deny it, and Kakashi knows that he’d have noticed that his students see the same lesson differently, even with the same eyes.

“It is similar for the Sharingan. Different eyes, different specialties. Different dojutsu. What’s more, the eye can develop further, secondary and tertiary jutsu that demand more from the user. I have activated some of these.”

Iruka moves closer as he explains, away from the pile of mail and closer still, until he is in his lap, straddling his legs. His hands touch the headband, fingers tracing over the symbol before he shifts the headband up.

He stares then, into the eye, regarding it in a way that Kakashi hasn’t seen before. Really looking at it, taking in the details. Kakashi wonders what he notices, although he can probably see the standard watery nature that Obito’s eye always has, swimming with emotions.

Iruka’s thumb traces the line of his scar, even across his scarred eyelid, the sensation simultaneously faint and electrifying.

“Does it hurt?”

Love can hurt, he wants to say, but the look in Iruka’s eyes seems a bit wild now, the same feeling he senses whenever things start to drift too deep, too personal. He wonders if the eye gives away his feelings as much as it had with its original owner.

“No this,” he says instead, truthfully referring to the scar. Iruka traces it again.

“The eye transplant took precedence when Rin healed it.” and his explanation seems to chase the wild look away somewhat.

“Medical training is a difficult area of expertise. To do something like this, in the field- I’m glad you had a teammate like that.”

The smile is warmth and sunshine and goodness, so much so that Kakashi thinks he could melt with it.

“Iruka I-“
And Iruka leans in, looping his arms around in a hug, the force of it cutting him off, fingers digging into the fabric, a warning or a plea Kakashi isn’t sure.

He can feel his heart beating, can feel every exhalation of breath and shudder. After a moment, he doesn’t know whose are whose as they sit there, existing.

Iruka drifts off, breath steady even as Kakashi shifts his headband back into place. He thinks that this might be the only sleep Iruka gets tonight, his meeting with R&I ticking closer with each minute.

Kakashi wonders if this is some sort of punishment; the fact that he wants to try and possess the sunrise instead of just watching it.

But tomorrow is a deadline, one that is not just for Iruka. He brushes the fringe out of Iruka’s eyes, smiling as a thought comes to him.

He’s right in his assumption that Iruka doesn’t sleep long, the position is not ideal for sleeping. He gives Iruka a slow kiss, careful to not get swept up, suggests tea and dashes off to find one of the sisters.

Hatsuko smiles her knowing smile and agrees as he heads out the shoji door.

Yamato is there as he knew he would be. He still finds it irksome that Tsunade has to do something like this, has to have a watch on Iruka. But then again, he can also see reasons for it, understands that Iruka is the child of defectors, held a significant relationship with a traitor, unknown chakra element hidden from pretty much everyone-

Polite and composed reasons that sound nice on paper but mean nothing once you meet the man. How anyone could possibly think that Iruka is anything detrimental to the village- the very thought bothers him.

He’s glad that Iruka asked for the exercise routine, at least Gai will be around the village when he gets a mission. He knows that whether Iruka is cleared or not, he'll be back in mission rotation come tomorrow (he’s surprised that he hasn’t gotten a preparatory notification, if he’s being honest).

There's also his kouhai as a possible person to check in, if last night was any indication. Anko is close with Iruka and will probably try to meet Yamato again through Iruka.

Yamato should have some good sweets to share with the woman, at least. Even Kakashi knows how much of a sweet tooth she has and Yamato must be getting some benefits from switching so many night shifts with the other Anbu (most don't want to bother with the nightmare that is the Hatake wards.)

“...why are you out here, senpai?”

“Deadlines. Can’t sleep.”

Yamato tilts his head, moonlight reflecting off the mask.

“Wouldn’t sex-“

Kakashi tries to interject, but Yamato continues, well used to Kakashi and his interruptions.

“-be the most expedient way to ensure sleep?”
“I could use your help.” he says and Yamato takes a step back before Kakashi realizes what he’s said, but it’s almost worth the slip to watch Yamato squirm. It’s what he gets for cutting him off, anyway. Kakashi lets the words hang and Yamato sighs.

“Help with what, senpai?” he finally asks, hesitant.

“Desks.”

“...desks,” he repeats.

“That’s what I said, yes. Leave a clone.”

“That is not what my assignment is, senpai.” But he’s already making the signs, a clone standing beside him.

---

“It is similar for the Sharingan. Different eyes, different specialties. Different doujutsu. What’s more, the eye can develop further, secondary and tertiary jutsu that demand more from the user. I have activated some of these.”

Iruka moves closer as he explains, explains differences in doujutsu and abilities (things he probably shouldn't know, things that Kakashi has to let him know because Iruka knows missions are coming and that if anything ever happened- he wouldn't be told such things. (He doesn't want to think about missions gone wrong and losing people and when did Kakashi become a person he didn't want to lose?)

He doesn't realize that he's in Kakashi's lap until he's in Kakashi's lap, straddling his legs and shifting the headband up. He stares into the eye, really looks at it, the swirling tomoe and a red red color that reminds him of blood, of life. He's always been a proponent of Kakashi covering it up, more so now than before because he doesn't want there to be any reason for his chakra to be wasted when a mission does come through.

He follows the line of the scar, Kakashi's eyelid drooping shut as he traces over it, the long and deep scar that continues into his cheek. The original injury must have completely destroyed his original eye and Iruka wonders if the crooked smile that he likes so much is a partial result from this injury.

“Does it hurt?”

“Not this,” Kakashi murmurs, giving Iruka the the very smile that he's thinking of, crooked and broken and perfect. His fingers tremble as they trace the scar again.

“The eye transplant took precedence when R-Rin healed it.” he explains, tripping on her name, and Iruka can't help but smile at that. He's not expecting Kakashi to tell him everything about his teammates, not when Iruka can barely say his own teammates' names, but listening helps. He knows this, objectively and emotionally.

“Medical training is a difficult area of expertise. To do something like this, in the field- I'm glad you had a teammate like that.” And he means it, means every word, is eternally grateful that Rin was able to heal Kakashi. That Kakashi has made it to this very moment, with him in Kakashi's lap and that crooked smile on his face and staring at him and smiling at him like- like Iruka is the reason for his smile.

"Iruka I-"
He leans in, pushes in and loops his arms around Kakashi, grabbing fistfuls of his ninja blacks because he isn't sure how he wants this to go. Sex, he's good with sex. Knows sex, knows the reasons behind it. But this sort of thing, he just doesn't know.

His heart is racing, but so is Kakashi's. He relaxes into the embrace, his head on Kakashi's shoulder.

He's not sure how long they sit there, existing. He must doze off at some point because he jolts with a start as his leg, numb from the position, decides to prickle violently.

Kakashi huffs a laugh when he tells him, hand rubbing small circles into his thigh as he leans in for a kiss. Iruka opens his mouth, tongue sliding in. It's a slow kiss, but deep and Iruka slides his hands up Kakashi's back, leaning into the warmth and the sensations of Kakashi's mouth on his. But Kakashi's hand doesn't move from his thigh, gentle squeezes of pressure.

It's nice, kissing just for the sake of kissing, even if all he really wants is to be spread out on the table and made to forget his upcoming visit to R&I, maybe grab a few hours of sex-induced sleep before forcing himself through a day that just ticks down to an eventual meeting.

But Kakashi seems content with kissing, with deep kisses that make him dizzy with want. Iruka pulls away from Kakashi, a suggestion of more on his lips but this time it's Kakashi is talking first, saying something about tea.

One of the Hatsu sisters brings some, telling him that the young master had an errand. Perhaps Kakashi got a letter, a late night conference with the Hokage about an upcoming mission. He hopes that Kakashi would tell him that he had a mission at least. He is in Kakashi's house, after all.

There are a million reasons that Kakashi would leave and very few of them (if any) have to do with Iruka, and Kakashi is honest enough to tell him when he can't go again, and they did go two rounds today already-

He forces his attention back on his letters. His students are always a welcome distraction and he finishes his responses and contemplates trying to sleep for real. Doesn’t know if he wants to remember something new just yet. If he wants to remember something without waking up with Kakashi beside him.

(Always so needy, aren't you?) Mizuki's voice curls like poison and he looks up, can see the sky lightening the window and decides to head to the fish market.

It's a bit of a walk, but far less than the walk would be from his apartment. He breathes in the air, missing this. He usually would train at this time, before the earliest students would arrive and his visits to the market have dropped considerably over the years. The market itself has also decreased; several groups of refugees have moved on since the Nine Tails’ attack. It looks like it is even smaller than he remembers, he wonders if more have left from the recent convoy.

He grins at Jirou, an older man he is familiar with who waves over to him. “Come show this upstart how to slice open an eel, Iruka!” he calls and grunts at the young man next to him. “My future son-in-law. I can only hope my future grandchildren have more sense with a knife.”

Iruka smiles, guts the eel and talks with Jirou, eventually landing on an agreement for deliveries for the Hatake compound. He’ll discuss the particulars with the sisters later on, but Jirou’s fish was quality and it would also give the young man something to do outside of being bullied at the stall.
He picks up several different types of fish and spices and even stops at a stand for some grilled squid. As he leaves, the wind changes direction, a wave of fishy smoke coming at him.

He drops one of the sticks he's holding, a wave of memory-induced nausea in his gut. He forces it down, looking around and focusing on the sights and the sounds of the fish market instead of the half formed memories. He walks back to the compound, parcels in hand. It's still early, but the sisters are already outside and sniping at each other as they water the plants. He passes the parcels over, smiling and talking about delivery schedules.

He enters the house, debating attempting to sleep versus gathering his things and going to the academy. He sort of just wants to curl up and ignore the world. Ignore that this is the day he should check in with R&I, ignore everything.

He wants to sleep.

He never wants to sleep again.

Mizuchi makes a noise of distress, echoing his fears.

“I don’t want to remember.” he says to himself as he gathers up his things. “Even if we stay like this forever-”

No! No more sleeping!

“We killed them.” he says, sinks down. He knows that now. He doesn’t need the memory for it. It doesn’t matter that he would have never chosen to lose these memories, it doesn’t matter what he wanted to do, what he summoned Mizuchi for. They hadn’t made it.

He’d made Miki talk to him the whole way back even as she died slowly from poison. Slower than it should have been.

“Should have been instant” Ibiki’s voice repeats in his head.

He drags himself to the school. He breathes in the scent of chalk dust and wood. He can spend his day cleaning and scrubbing and pestering Kotetsu about his class in summoning weapon scrolls. Kotetsu wasn’t one to have a lesson plan.

He walks into his classroom and stops.

Looks back at the doorway to make sure that he is in fact in the right place. Twenty-one new student desks sit in front of him. And one new teacher desk, adjusting for his height.

Kakashi sits in the chair, legs up on the desk, Yamato nearby.

“I said I didn’t want you to buy anything?” he asks, but he knows that an order of desks like this couldn’t have been made already. Maybe a couple, but not this many.

“No one could have special made that many on such short notice.” Kakashi answers. “Except for the pair of us.”

“I did most of the work.” Yamato grumbles.

Iruka bows and thanks Yamato, who seems a bit stunned at the thanks. He gets the feeling that Yamato isn’t used to people in general.

“We made them a bit resistant to standard damage as well. Yamato’s good with things like that.”
Iruka thanks him again as he looks around the room at the desks. His class. His next set of students that will use these desks for years (because he will totally punish any that damage these new desks). This is his space now, truly. No remnants of other teachers here. He blinks, because he can feel his eyes stinging and Mizuchi crowing in happiness and why is Kakashi doing these things? Why is he bothering with him still?

He’d said he try this thing, but he’d never really expected Kakashi to be serious about it once they had got back. Although that wasn’t true. He knew that Kakashi wasn’t the type of person to say something and not follow through. He’d hoped that Kakashi would just leave him alone, more like.

But even that wasn’t true either; he’d kept encouraging it too, joking and sex and discussions about students and untoward thoughts and fish delivery schedules and-

What is Kakashi doing to him?

“I don’t understand.” Yamato says, “Do you not like it?”

“No. I love it.” Iruka says as he comes closer. “This is seriously the most thoughtful thing that anyone has ever done for me.” He means it. “Thank you both.”

Yamato discusses the properties of the wood for a bit as well as standard maintenance before he leaves, and Iruka notes that just because Yamato seems a bit odd with people doesn't mean he doesn't know how to use a door. He kind of wants to laugh at himself, paying attention to Yamato's door vs. window habits instead of looking at Kakashi. He stares at the closed door, still not looking at Kakashi.

“I don’t know if I can do this.” he whispers in the direction of the door. “I just-”

“You don’t have to make excuses.”

“They’re not excuses!” he turns around towards Kakashi, but still isn’t looking at him, not really. “I’m not the person that you think I am.” He’s been watching, sees Kakashi doing these things, loves them even. “I can’t give you what you want.” he says instead. “I’m not-not- I don’t even know what I am.”

“I don’t think that matters to me as much as you want it to matter.” He shrugs, stepping closer and Iruka sees that his hands are buried in his pockets. It’s more than his standard bad posture. It’s as if he’s trying to protect himself; hunched away for protection from him.

“It should matter.”

“Should it?”

“I’m no good.” he whispers, stepping closer, even though he knows he shouldn’t.

“I think that’s my decision to make also.” Kakashi answers, the stance relaxing. “If you don’t want to be with me then that is your decision to make. I can only decide that I want to be with you. Trying to push me away won’t work.”

Kakashi’s hand is tilting Iruka's head up and he stares into the eye.

“I don’t want to ruin this.”

“That isn’t how feelings work.” Kakashi says, tugging his mask down. “I don’t want more than you want to give. I don’t want more than you are comfortable giving. But I won’t let you try to
push me away either. If you don’t want this, tell me plainly.”

He can’t say that. He can’t say he doesn’t want to be with Kakashi. He wants this, possibly more than he’s ever wanted anything before. Or at least thought he wanted.

“I don’t know what I want from you.” the truth bubbles up from inside him. He looks into the eye, hands shaking.

Memories or not, you are still you. Still Iruka. Still the person I love. And it’s my choice to decide if those things matter to me.”

Love.

"I am you know." he says again, smiling now. "I am in love with you. And I'm not one to deny myself the pleasure of telling you simply because it may not be the right time."

"Love isn't like a bath!" Iruka snaps, and catches Kakashi's eye this time.

He smiles, crooked and warm. “I won't deny myself either one when the chance presents itself.”

Iruka sputters, face red.

"You don't need to answer, nor am I expecting one. Don't force yourself to answer my feelings-"

Iruka hadn't even realized he'd opened his mouth. Closes it again.

"If you want to end this..." his smile twists and Iruka hates it. "I don't want to, obviously. But I think it would be all right if you moved on.”

Iruka’s mind blanks.

“You don’t-confessing and then saying it’s it's okay to move on-! What-!”

"What do you want me to say?” Kakashi says as he comes closer. “That I was jealous of the thought of Kamu before I ever met him? That I didn’t want to love you? I didn’t, but that’s not how feelings work either. By the time I figured it out it was already too late. Team Seven, they clawed spaces in my heart I didn’t know I had anymore. But you-you went and stole it. I don’t want it back, by the way.”

Kakashi takes a step closer, “You can decide what you want to do with us, but trying to push me away with things like ‘I’m no good’ isn’t going to do it. I don’t want to force my feelings on you.”

“Then what is this?” Iruka says, voice cracking. “You say that and then-” He stops, looking down, gut churning. Forcing. When did that become the word that other people's feelings inspired? A confession shouldn't force him into a corner, not like this.

"My feelings are mine to give. You don't have to accept them.” Kakashi whispers as his hand moves to cup Iruka's face, thumb on the edge of his scar.

Iruka feels like he's drowning, he can't hide from this, can't push it away.

He closes his eyes, voice breaking. "I don't know what this is."

"Will you let me love you?"

Iruka shakes, because this is all wrong. He shouldn't be doing this; he's too lost in memories and
his own life to be taking anyone's love for himself. It was why he'd moved on from anyone that had tried to be more. Because he hadn’t been able to give more.

But he wants to try. He wants to start.

"Okay," he whispers, “okay.” And he leans up, pressing his lips against Kakashi's. it reminds him of that first time on the couch in the middle of nowhere. He'd known then that this was different from anything before and he'd done it anyway. And here he was, doing it again.

Kakashi pulls away and his lips quirk into a soft smile that makes his insides squirm. "No more pushing me away?"

“You start and I’ll try to match that courage.” he says, breath shaking as he leans in.

Chapter End Notes

So an entire chapter with emotions abound! I also debated cutting it off with the 'I can't do this," line but I couldn't do it :) So instead we had some emotional resolving(?) at the end here.

I've also made a few decisions with where I want this story to go, so I'll be cutting it off in a few chapters and having a part 2? (Not really sure how ppl do that in the fandom, actually so I'll figure out the logistics of it soon, I guess)

Also, I have been writing, but it's really only got a few appearances of Iruka and Kakashi and lots of appearances of Gai (about 15k now) of Tenten&Lee&Neji long-ass story of eventual naming of Metal backstory that no one asked for, so there's that.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

"Do you want to be in possession of this information? It would be difficult to seal it now, considering the fact that you are in the process of recovering memories but it could be done."

Iruka blinks.

He could dismiss this?

Chapter Notes

It's kind of shorter chapter this time. But it had a pretty clear cut off point so ＾﹏＾I am still alive and now that the new person at one of my jobs is hired I might have some free hours, I hope.

Thanks again for all the wonderful comments and kudos and it really makes my day to get those notifications even if I'm terrible at answering them right away.

They sit outside the R&I compound as they wait for the door to open. Iruka focuses his breathing, wondering what the plan is. He hasn’t remembered everything, he might not even remember everything without more prompting.

....and he doesn’t really want to think about more prompting.

"I still haven't remembered the poisoning,” he says, staring at the wall. “There really isn’t a guarantee when I will either, or even if I will. Feels like I should have thought, for a deadline like this.”

“I find deadlines to be some of the most infernal and terrifying things people create for themselves.” Kakashi says as Iruka turns to look at him, making a show of turning a page in his book.

“Is that why you always come at closing time to turn in your mission reports?”

“Partly.” he grins behind his mask. “But I don’t necessarily make a habit of that either, do I? I think those times just stand out more.”
Iruka nods, turning as he hears the wall slide open. Anko steps out. She looks worn, a far cry from a few nights ago. Her hair is messy, even more than usual. She holds up her hand, waving lazily as she comes closer. Her clothes are slept in, making it rather obvious that something is happening behind the scenes.

"We're postponing the check-in." she says, coming to stand in front of Iruka. “We’ve got some more pressing concerns and Godaime doesn't want to put anyone else on your memory issues. One of us can find you when we need to.”

She leans forward, her hands on Iruka’s shoulders. “Stop looking at me with that worried face and those worried eyes, you overgrown worrywart. I’ve seen those kids put you through the ringer plenty of times. A double isn’t going to kill me.”

“I suppose not.” Iruka agrees.

“And you---” she says, stepping back to look at Kakashi. “Tell your friend he better get off his ass and get back to me. There’s a difference between playing hard to get and a being an idiot.”

“He’s not much for social norms.”

“I get that. That’s why I’m telling you. Anyone that wound up is Anbu, not that’d I’d mind unwinding that.” she looks back at Iruka, pleading. “Iru. Tell him the line. I can’t- he’s not my type and the line just doesn’t work that way.”

Iruka is snorting into his hand, bunched over and laughing. “You didn’t!”

“Flew over his head like a fucking bird. Totally missed it.”

“I think it’s more than Anbu, then.” Iruka is still shaking, he’s laughing so hard. “I can’t believe you tried it, we haven’t done that in years. What did he say?”

“Not telling you yet. And you’re probably right about that,” she muses. “He’s probably some child soldier or something. No one who ever attended school is that dense. Even you.” she points at Kakashi.

“Should I view that as a compliment?”

“Probably.” She agrees, turning back to the doorway, where the little dog is waiting for her. “I get it already, we’ve got work to do. Damn, Ibiki’s always got his panties in a wad. Get him laid already, why don’t you?”

“Like that’s something he’d take my advice on!” the dog snaps back as the wall shuts behind them.

“Care to share the joke?”

“Not just yet...” Iruka is still catching his breath as he looks back at Kakashi. “Someday, maybe. I can’t believe it, I really want to know what his answer was now.”

“I could ask?”

“No, don’t bother. He’ll figure it out. That’s the best part. Although you should tell Yamato to at least contact her. She doesn’t give out her contact info to just anyone. It takes more than a sexy helmet, that’s for sure.”

“Sexy helmet?”
Something about his question has Iruka laughing again.

“Anko’s words, not mine.” he says, still laughing lightly. “You have to admit, that style headband is pretty interesting. Says something about personality.”

“He’s an interesting guy.” Kakashi finally admits. He can’t really say much in the way of Yamato and his past, since it isn’t his story to share. Although Iruka’s and Anko’s musings are far closer to the truth than he thinks he’s ever heard anyone come up with outside of Anbu Corps.

“Has to be, if Anko is interested.” he glances back to the wall, slumping a bit.

“I guess we should go see Tsunade-sama then.”

---

The walk is silent, a churning feeling growing in his stomach. He’s relieved that check-in has been postponed and yet-

He kind of just wanted it to be over already. Kakashi won’t have an extended delay, even this long has to be tough on mission rotation, although he is glad that Tsunade isn’t pressing the jounin the way the council had in the aftermath of Orochimaru’s attack.

He’d gotten ‘talked to’ several times over the fact that he didn’t pass on missions to those that didn’t have adequate chakra to complete them.

They enter the residence and Shizune sweeps them to the top of the tower. Tsunade looks up from her paperwork.

"Early?"

"Check-in was postponed."

"Right. Should've guessed as much." She folds her hands and looks at them. “Shizune, Iruka, wards please. Anbu, outside.” She leans in after they comply. "Exactly what knowledge did Kakashi share with you?"

"Your plans regarding the position of Rokudaime."

She sighs, pulling out a cup. Shizune pours tea. Tsunade sips it, grimacing.

"Do you want to be in possession of this information? It would be difficult to seal it now, considering the fact that you are in the process of recovering memories but it could be done."

Iruka blinks.

He could dismiss this?

Could let this information be buried?

It makes sense, now that he thinks on it. There have been cases where people have stumbled on information they do not wish to know. There have been times where Iruka has stumbled onto information that he shouldn’t have. He’s been presented with the option before and, when given a choice, Iruka has never elected to forget.

But this-
He never even considered having the information buried.

He doesn’t think he could ever elect to forget, to bury those words, that soft look in Kakashi’s eyes as he told him, back at House Warren.

"If you feel that it is not an undue threat for me to be in possession of this knowledge then I wish to keep it."

She nods and holds out her hand. Iruka knows this; he's had them before. He takes the hand and she makes hand signals with the other. His tongue burns for a moment and fades. He nods, removes his hand.

"I'll approve your return to work as well because I do not know how long it will be before R&I has the time for an internal matter. I expect you in the hospital regularly in order to monitor your chakra progress. Where are you in terms of your recovery?"

“I don’t really know, to be honest.”

“It is certainly different from any of the notes that I have for you,” she agrees, “and I feel that the memory gaps are a large piece of the secondary chakra backlash problems you develop. I think that many of your minor attacks will stop now that you and Mizuchi are both aware and communicating.”

That statement rings true to Iruka. The minor attacks had really only happened in the past several years. Probably related to the ‘sleeping’ periods, now that he thinks on it.

I am sorry to continue to cause you pain.

We didn’t know.

"This is the something we are making up as we go along," Tsunade says, “and while I have people looking into some records this is unusual and I think the memories could supply some answers. Just check in at the hospital regularly and if you need to pass a message you can do so through Sakura."

She rolls up her notes and holds the scroll up; Shizune takes it and puts another scroll in its place.

It’s for Kakashi. Iruka isn’t sure how he knows it because the scroll has no markings, indistinguishable from the scroll of notes she’d just handed to Shizune.

But she lobs it at Kakashi who catches it and tucks it into his vest in one smooth motion.

“I would like Iruka to be informed of my medical conditions if such things become necessary.”

“I’ll make a note of it.” she says and Shizune clicks her tongue.

“There’s a form for that.”

“There’s a form to just notify?”

“It’s a subdivision form within the medical proxy forms, but it functions also as a stand alone form.” Iruka says, voice wooden.

He doesn’t want to think about Kakashi being injured.

“See, that’s good paperwork.” Shizune chides lightly, pushing at Tsunade. “We catch more
attempts at infiltration with our paperwork system than anything else, you know.”

“I am aware of the value of paperwork, Shizune.” Tsunade says, “doesn’t mean I have to enjoy it.” She sips at her tea again and looks back to them. “Dismissed.”

---

They walk out, Iruka blinking as his eyes adjust to the sun.

"You seem familiar with the procedure."

"I've been in the mission office longer than I've been teaching. I’ve come across sensitive material before." He says as a way of answer.

“There are a few of us,” he elaborates, “chuunin with structural knowledge of Konoha in case anything ever happened with the chain of command.”

Kakashi knows this, knows that Shikaku planned contingency upon contingency in regards to Konoha and its structure.

It’s one of the reasons that the council did not wield more power after the Third died. It’s also the reason that Tsunade has concrete selections for the sixth as well as emergency alternates.

Iruka could very well be one of those people, one of the few that are semiofficially marked chuunin as part of a contingency measure.

"And here I thought the mission room was merely a hotbed of gossip.”

“It is certainly that,” Iruka agrees, “although I’m sure you understand that gossip only helps further stories away from their original form. I’m actually rather interested to hear what the mission room has to say about what I’ve been doing this summer-” his head turns as someone calls for him.

"Natsumi!” he calls back, waving her over and smiling.

And that look, that smile of recognition as he places his student- that look isn’t something that can be faked. He cares about his students and it comes through in every action, every movement.

The girl looks to be a few years older than Sakura, with intense brown eyes and a wide smile. Her skin is dark, a few shades darker than Iruka. He sees that she’s taken to strapping a water bottle to her weapons holster, much like Iruka and Izumo do.

Her hair though-

Training certainly did something to it, considering it’s a huge mess, half dried and sticking out everywhere.

"Been training?” Iruka half-asks as he gestures to her hair.

She smiles wider, nodding as she fishes out a twig. "That bad, huh? My hair tie snapped. We just finished practice, actually. Izumo-sensei had to get ready for a shift at the mission desk."

"How's it going? I got your letter about training with Tsunade-sama."

"She’s great! I don't know if I have enough chakra to become a field medic but it's fascinating so far!”
“I’m glad that Izumo is working out as a sensei for you, since it was a last minute change and all, but perhaps we can talk another time?”

She looks and really notices Kakashi, that he’s still standing there, waiting.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” she says and Iruka waves her off.

“It’s no trouble, really. You know where to find me once classes start, hmm?”

“Yeah, okay.” She agrees, but doesn’t move to leave. She doesn’t glance at Kakashi directly this time but it’s noticeable that there is something that she wants to talk about with Iruka, something she doesn’t want to mention in front of him.

“I think I’d like to bring a friend.” she says after a moment and Kakashi can see the cheerfulness fade from Iruka’s eyes as he nods.

“You know where to find me, school starts up soon.”

She nods again, thanks him and runs off.

“She’s training for the chuunin exams still?” Kakashi clarifies when he’s certain she can’t hear them.

“She only figured out her chakra orientation recently and since water orientations are scarce it’s been slow going to train so she’s a bit older than most. She wasn’t in my class.”

"You cannot teach every student."

"...I suppose not." He turns to Kakashi. “Is your mission urgent?”

“If I wasn’t instructed to leave immediately it isn’t. I’m thinking that maybe we should go on that date now.”

Iruka looks back towards him, surprised.

“What did you have in mind?”

"Didn't plan that far."

"Well then, I'm in the mood for meat." And with that, Iruka starts walking.

---

They're over in a corner towards the back of the restaurant. He’s familiar with this place because it’s one of Asuma’s favorites, although Kakashi doesn’t remember the last time he came here.

The restaurant is divided by a set of hanging curtains, a barrier with the official purpose of dividing those of age from the family part of the restaurant. In reality, it was developed to offer ninja the ability for a less hectic dining experience, with a quieter atmosphere.

But it has the added bonus of keeping most of the other diners behind a curtain. Kakashi only counts two other sets of diners, one who is too engrossed in reading or writing something and a young ninja couple that thinks they’re getting away with something scandalous in the middle of the day.
Kakashi can be a bit lazier with his eating than he’d normally would like this. It’s another thing he’s unfamiliar with, the fact that Iruka doesn’t pressure him to eat in a certain way, only to avoid eating too quickly on account of indigestion, rather than manners or a desire to see his face.

Iruka thinks of everything, it seems. Even when it’s a spontaneous date.

Kakashi is the one who offers to get another bowl of meat and vegetables since he’s sure that their server won’t think to return anytime soon and Iruka wasn't kidding about being hungry. It's no Naruto but it's an impressive amount just the same.

Someone has come through the curtain and is standing at the bar counter. Kakashi sees that it’s Asuma as he turns.

Kakashi holds up one hand, a lazy sort of greeting that Asuma returns as he picks up the bottle of sake that the bartender puts down.

Asuma’s gaze sweeps past him, calculating who else is here, much like Kakashi himself had done not long ago. Kakashi sees when Asuma’s gaze finds Iruka, recognition in his eyes.

Or more accurately, Asuma takes the two separate recognitions of Kakashi and Iruka and puts them in the same space.

Together.

He walks up to the edge of their table where Iruka is still sitting.

Kakashi gets the bowls and heads back to the table, but Asuma is already heading back to the counter.

“Ah,” Iruka says, scratching at his scar and looking at the bottle. “Should probably have some then, since he left it.”

Kakashi takes it and pours two cups, Iruka picks his up and swirls the liquid slowly, watching it. It’s one thing to be told that Iruka knows Asuma and another to see it.

“Alcohol is for drinking,” Kakashi agrees as he sips his.

“Yeah,” Iruka agrees, tipping the cup back in one go and Kakashi refills it.

“Shouldn’t have too much, though.” He finishes the second. And then a third.

"Are you even tasting it?"

"Of course I am. This is the good shit. But alcohol is mostly water, after all. Verrrrrry delicate balance. First few cups aren’t much of anything." He stares at the cup and watches the sake swirl around in the cup as he tilts it.

“Asuma trusts you,” Iruka says after he tips that cup back as well.

“We work well together.” Kakashi agrees, pouring more sake.

“He mentioned that you graduated in the same year.” Iruka says as he sips this cup, “It’s nice that you’ve known people for that long. I really can’t say the same for my graduating class. The attack of the Nine Tails shifted a lot of us around, for multiple reasons. I mean there were a couple but—“ he shrugs, “even my teammates weren’t in my class, not really.”
"No?"

"They’d gone and streamlined us into different groups, trying to make up for what the village lost from the attack. I’d tested high in potential for genjutsu. My jounin sensei had been one of the coordinators of the program and recommended the three of us together as a team. A bit unorthodox, but not unheard of. Not all that different from Gai’s team, now that I think about it."

"You were part of the genjutsu expansion effort?"

"For a very short time. My father had been known for his skill in it. I was decent at it, but I never really had the mental strength needed to truly sink myself into the illusions I created. It’s not my favorite form of jutsu. But I’m willing to train with other genjutsu users as I’m only one of a few that uses water as a base of their genjutsu."

“It’s a strength to admit what one is not comfortable with.” Genjutsu in particular was an art that required a specific type of mentality and personality. Most genjutsu were slight-of-hand typed hiding something within the fabric of the regular. But to be pushed into the genjutsu program- that was high level stuff, creating separate spaces to trap someone and make it difficult to leave.

He thinks briefly on Itachi and his tsukuyomi, a skill he’s been working on himself.

Perhaps high enough to create such a space as one where Mizuchi lived.

“You seemed to have skills in several ninja arts. The genjutsu expansion effort was particularly specialized.”

He shrugs again, sips his sake.

“Like I said, I washed out of that pretty quickly.”

He’d thought at one point that maybe if he could do it like his father- but it hadn't brought him closer to his father. He'd disliked the program almost as son as he started it. And Mizuki- he'd been a part of the program as well. Excited at being together first and then moving past Iruka and making new friends, pushing him aside and cruel in the way that kids sometimes are.

At least then, Iruka believes Mizuki’s antics were unintentional.

Unlike later.

He shakes his head, trying to dispel his thoughts. He's such a mess. Why does Kakashi want to bother with him at all? Someone like Kakashi could find someone to bed, easy.

Hell, he could easily bed people and he wasn't anywhere near as good looking.

Kakashi taps his hand and Iruka snaps his gaze toward the grey eye.

"You're thinking bad thoughts. Not the good variety either."

Iruka looks away. Kakashi keeps noticing. He was fine with his kids and his life before. And now there was this growing and taking hold inside of him.

He focuses on the food again, trying to make the conversation regain the lightness of earlier.

But there really isn’t much time left, because Kakashi should get some sleep and read his scroll and see what needs to be done in regards to preparing for his mission and Iruka doesn’t want to interfere with any of that.
But when they leave and Kakashi suggests a walk he can’t really bring himself to say no.

They wander through the streets of Konoha. He keeps step with Kakashi, not really taking in the shops and streets that they’re walking.

Eventually Iruka realizes they’re walking the path to the memorial stone and wonders if that was planned or if that’s where Kakashi’s feet eventually take him when left to wander.

He stares at the stone, eyes looking over the names.

“A mission without a proper color code means that I won’t leave or enter the village by the normal gates or routes.”

Iruka nods, he knows this.

"Do you not wish to be informed of my medical status? I did not mean for it to pressure-"

"No, it's fine." he agrees, still not looking away from the stone.

"I mean what I said about deadlines earlier," he says and Iruka turns to look at him. "I find them to be some of the most infernal things people create for themselves and often unnecessary. However, deadlines do matter on occasion. I would never jeopardize priority information that the village needs or during a mission. And when it comes to regrets-" he looks at the stone. "I would rather be transparent with myself rather then regret it later. I apologize if either my asking for you to be informed of my medical status or my confession caused you undue distress-"

And how is it that Kakashi can make his eyes always feel like they're so damn full, trying to blink away tears as the outline of Kakashi swims in his vision. He gets this, gets that most missions are dangerous and hold the possibility of death. Kakashi is a damn good ninja, a fucking amazing ninja. But that doesn't always save you. The village isn't completely safe either. So Kakashi saying that, laying it out for him-admitting that the deadline of his mission is what pushed him to confess-Kakashi wanted to tell him, wanted to share his confession rather than carry the regret of not saying anything.

Which makes him feel like a selfish asshole.

"It's fine, really." he says, stepping closer. "And I'm sorry if I caused you distress over my reaction. I made it about myself and that's not what confessions are." he reaches his arms around, bringing Kakashi into them, pressing his face into Kakashi's neck, feeling the pulse thrumming there. Kakashi's hand his on his cheek, thumb stroking his face, and Iruka turns into the touch for a moment before pulling away, raising his head to look at Kakashi, drawing in a shaky breath. "And while I'm not sure what this is to me, please don't apologize for that."

"I do love you, you know," he says, his grey eye crinkled and smiling.

"I don't know how you can say these things." he manages to say.

"I'm a hopeless romantic at heart.” Kakashi turns towards the stone. “I blame my sensei." I hope he’s getting a kick wherever he is, watching me flounder like this. All he had to do was save the girl."

"I'm sure there was more to it than that."

"Of course." Kakashi agrees. "But not the way he told it. I miss them."
Iruka doesn't know which 'them' he means but he misses them too, misses them for Kakashi. Misses his own friends and parents and kids that he taught.

When Iruka reaches for Kakashi's hand, he finds the hand he's seeking reaching for him. They say nothing to each other as they stare at the stone. Their fingers, entwined, are enough.

Later, when Kakashi readies for the mission, Iruka sits by and watches. He doesn't feel comfortable with staying at Kakashi's house when he won't be around and he really should be returning to his own apartment, anyway. School is starting soon and he really has to make sure everything is ready.

Still, he'll wait for Kakashi leave first.

Kakashi seems to have most of the materials he needs and has even taken a few of Iruka's more useful scrolls and tucked them into one of his weapons pouches. Iruka watches the body move, sleek and power and grace and he wants.

It's stupid to want like this now, and while he won't give in to the hunger he wants anyway.

Kakashi comes to stand in front of him and Iruka's eyes are drawn to his lips. He stares and leans in, those lips pressing against his own, soft and slow. Welcoming him in, again and again. Several kisses later Kakashi pulls away, touching his forehead to Iruka's.

He doesn't say goodbye, they don't even say that in the mission room. Still, he can't bring himself to say something deep like 'come back to me'.

"Be safe," he says, which is the same thing he's said thousands of times in the mission office although it feels different also as Kakashi leans forward once more, a final kiss and then he's off.

Chapter End Notes

Love confessions are hard and take so much effort and being turned down is also hard. But I think that there's also a courtesy there, like not to crush the other's person's feelings even if you don't feel the same. And also they're grownups so there's that.

On a different note: I imagine that Yamato is pretty unknowing of some things. Not necessarily everything that happens ever (kind of like Sai) cause he's way older than like 14-15 but innuendo for sure. Like someone be like 'elements, get a room already!' and he be like 'we are in a room' or 'how does one possess just a single room?' although my caveat to this is that he gets wood jokes because Kakashi would eventually give in and explain them because Anbu kept at the wood jokes. So if anyone has any fun innuendo to share, please do! cause i plan on slipping some in somewhere...
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Long, but actually supposed to be even longer. We are looking at Iruka w/o Kakashi which is going to be kind of a norm, considering who Kakashi is and all. So more about living by himself again after weeks of nothing but Kakashi and the dogs. It's kind of like worldbuilding and stuff and I hope it's not boring?

(Please let it not be boring.)

Also a heads up here: there is a flashback Mizuki scene with some violence although nothing sexually graphic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One

Iruka goes back to his apartment, looking through his papers, sorting things and deep cleaning the layer of dust that’s appeared in his absence.

His school plans might be set, but most of his materials are not and he’s only got a few more days to get them ready.

But desk repair and replacement- he won’t have to do that. He can almost see Kakashi sitting there, that soft look in his eye- Iruka closes his eyes and falls back on his couch. Maybe that's what he's been doing all day. Distracting himself. It’s odd not having Kakashi around, although he knows this is normal. They’ve spent several weeks together after all.

He can feel Mizuchi, crooning sadness. It makes it even worse, somehow. He starts in on his closet digging out his sheets and airing out the few civilian clothes he owns.

He ends up pulling out a small box, wrapped up with pretty much every ward he knows, a chain of memory and learning piled up over the years. He unties the ribbon, the wards falling away with the smallest push of his chakra sliding off the lid.

The photo stares back at him.

It’s one of the most complete photos he has, the edges brown with age and only a faint smell of smoke clinging to it.

His father is smiling broadly and Iruka can see a tooth missing from his own wide smile. Even his mother is smiling, in her own small close-lipped sort of way.

He can feel Mizuchi’s happiness alongside his own, amplified and he remembers a festival of sorts, the wind carrying flowers through the trees and a late night picnic to watch the stars.

Of riding his mother’s shoulders as they walked home, tired and full and happy.
"Did they have ability like us?"

We are different.

“What did they know?” He asks, but when Mizuchi doesn’t know he isn’t surprised, for their memory is fragmented together.

Iruka tries to reach for something, because there would have been talks, his parents checking on the seal; seals like his are not just precautions.

He closes his eyes and slides into Mizuchi’s space. It almost seems as if the dragon is growing the more time passes. The scales gleam differently now; a deep glinting shade of blue deeper and sharper than before. Healthier.

"I have work tomorrow. It won't be so bad." He slides his hand over the scales as Mizuchi circles lazily, sighing.

Lightning.

"We don't need it every day."

Want.

And Iruka can't really tell Mizuchi off because he wants too.

Mizuchi circles around him a few times, slow and lazy before he drifts down, curling around him, scales rippling in the moonlight. He breathes in, settling into the embrace.

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He wakes as the light starts coming in through the window. He’s stiff and achy from his sleeping position, but no dreams.

He doesn't know whether to be glad about it or not.

He stretches, trying to get the ache out of his limbs and gets ready.

It’s odd, having to go to a designated training ground after becoming used to simply stepping outside House Warren. It’s early, so he snags one of the training areas easily enough.

He finds the stiffness finally starting to leave and relaxes into the stretch and burn of the workout.

He slept in a bit too much for a proper run before his shift at the mission office, but his eyes drift to his water bottle.

He coaxes out the water, the shape of it elongating into a line and starts in on moving through another kata, this time with the water.

It moves with him, fluid and amorphous as he does the exercises. A sense of elation bubbles up inside him as he moves, and he laughs when Mizuchi crows with happiness when he finishes the set and returns it to the bottle.

A quick shower later and he's on his way to the mission office.

The files are a mess, which goes to show just how things really go to shit when Iruka and Izumo aren’t there to whip people into following protocol.
There is plenty of scolding to be done, but Iruka spends most of his morning walking a new chuunin through the ropes and sorting the backlog of low ranked missions before they take their place at the receiving desk.

Kaede is about fourteen or fifteen and tall, full of awkward angles and movements that he hasn't fully grown into yet. Iruka takes him to his usual desk and sits down beside him.

“The scrolls we went through earlier had already been approved, but as you know they get stamped here. And you need to make sure these have exactly what you need, no excuses. It doesn’t matter what rank the mission is or what rank the ninja trying to give it to you is; don't let them try to get out of it. There are a number of fields that need to be filled out and they have to be filled out in the correct order for reference if needed at a later date.” He looks around the scrolls.

“Anything odd recently?” he calls out to the room and someone calls out a response. “Excellent, give it here.” The scroll is tossed to Iruka, who rolls it out for Kaede.

“As you can see this has been written in haiku, which makes it a bit difficult to get through, but all of the necessary information is provided. In addition,” he points to a phrase that isn’t exactly right. “Now this could just be artistic to make the scheme fit, but it is a minor error overall. Not worth a redo, although I will have to talk with them the next time I see them.”

“But isn’t the error-“

“It’s very minor,” Iruka points out. “The essential information is there. Also, keep in mind that some jounin do not have the best grasp of language, due to sparse educations from the war. A report with a few minor spelling errors really isn’t worth making them redo. However, essential facts such as locations, items retrieved and contractors do need to be correct. You also want them to be complete and without water, dirt, blood or anything else that could obscure or damage the file when we need to reference it later.” He looks up as Gai whirlwinds in and comes to a stop in front of them.

“What a beautiful day to watch the summer blossoms of love!” He shouts as he pulls out his report. Iruka is used to such entrances, although he has to force himself on Kaede and reports to ignore the thread of thought that makes him wonder if such a statement is related to Kakashi. But then again, it is Gai, so he can’t be sure. He holds out his hand for the report as he greets Gai and Lee, prompting Kaede to take the report and goes over the sections with him. It’s probably one of the best examples he could start with and he tells Gai as much, glancing as he sees Neji and Tenten shuffle in behind their sensei and teammate.

Tenten waves at him, and he knows the girl is excited to get back to their usual discussions regarding funijutsu theory. He also notices that Neji is wearing the chuunin vest, so he must have passed the most recent set of exams while he’d been gone.

He lets Kaede stamp it before sitting back in his chair, looking at the three of them.

“Congratulations seem to be in order,” he nods towards Neji. “Have you been assigned a rotation yet?” He hopes Neji is assigned to the mission office, considering first rotations are common job codes; assignments include teaching, the mission desk and the hospital.

"Mission desk."

"I’m sure I will see you later on,” he says trying not to grin, turning back to the returning Kaede as the team leaves. Between Kaede and Neji, he thinks he might have the reports under control even
sooner than he’d thought. He collects several more reports with Kaede and then brings him back to file them. "Don't leave the files to be sorted later; you'd be surprised how many of the lower rank missions start to resemble other ones and you remember them best the day you receive them."

Kotetsu comes in with Izumo when Kaede leaves at shift change. Izumo has something strapped to him and Iruka realizes it’s a sling of sorts, a bundle against his chest.

"Kazane then?" Iruka says as he tries to get a look, but she seems more hair than anything else, curled up into Izumo and sleeping.

“Maybe next time,” Kotetsu says as he steals a kiss from Izumo. Someone gives a low whistle and Kotetsu grins as Izumo realizes he can’t retaliate in his usual way without waking the child, settling for flipping him off as he leaves the mission office.

“He’ll get you back for that.”

“I look forward to it,” Kotetsu smiles as he slides behind the desk next to Iruka. “But the walks have been a nice change, they help get her to sleep and we haven’t walked one another to work in ages. You done for the day?”

"Doing a double, actually. Trying to get back into it before school starts."

“Nice! Well not really ‘cause doubles suck but we get to work together so that’s good. Haven’t worked with you in forever. Though I still think you’re crazy for trying to squeeze in mission office day before school starts.”

“You have a teaching block this session.”

“Yeah but I’m just there for half a day tomorrow, for introductions. That’s not the same, and it will be lucky if we get to see each other first few weeks in. Besides the kids always are too wound up to listen to the boringness that is me talking about weapon summon and scroll containment theory. I’m working with Shikamaru this time around.”

“I’m always open for classroom collaboration. Especially for Shikamaru.” Iruka still worries about Shikamaru’s placement in the academy. But he also knows that the last class must have produced measurable results, it was rare for a new chuunin to get the same rotation twice. Iruka really hadn’t paid too much attention to outside classes the last round, his injury and the surgeries were time consuming.

“You see the shitload of crazy that the mission office is?”

“Trying to teach a newly promoted chuunin today, but nothing is where I remember. You could have put someone else in charge.”

“We did. But we didn’t have time to check the work as well as we should have. With the convoy and Kazane, well-” he shrugs. “It was an adjustment. And now- our schedules are a bit off because Yugao’s mission was extended. We’re gonna have her a few more weeks at least.”

“At least?”

“I mean I don’t know the details, but yeah. It’s pretty high up the chain, her mission.” he tilts his head, thinking. “I mean, I’m pretty sure I saw an Anbu tattoo on her. You don’t think she was reinstated, do you?”

“I wouldn’t know. Wasn’t really friends with her.”
“Well, yeah, that’s what happens when you get fast-tracked though the ranks. She’s always been a bit of a loner and never hung with us much, even after she and Hayate were a thing. The only friend I ever saw her with was that one jounin-um-with the hair and those badass kama weapons-”

“The name you’re looking for is Tsubaki, who also happened to be engaged to Mizuki?”

“That’s her name!” Kotetsu agrees, looking chagrined. “Not like we ever hung out with her either. Awwwwwkward.” he coughs. “Let’s forget about that then, I’ve got a bit of a favor to ask. Would you mind watching Kazane for a bit tomorrow night? Izumo and my schedules overlap for a few hours and I know classes are starting and I could duck out of my shift if I had to-”

“It’s fine.” Iruka says. “Take the whole night even, as long as she gets picked up at the academy before class starts the next day. I wouldn’t say no to lunch, either.”

“Deal.”

---

The rest of the shift passes in a haze of paperwork and instruction, the monotony soothing in one way yet grating in another. Work fills up his hours in ways that he never truly realized before now. He likes working at the mission desk, he does. But he thinks that he might not pick up as many shifts as he had done before now.

He stops for a bowl of ramen, not wanting to bother with cooking or shopping and chats with Ayame and Teuchi instead about school and Naruto.

Thinks of coming here with Naruto and Kakashi.

He considers going out, but he it feels more like another piece of work rather than a way to relax, which is what he really wants to do.

His apartment still needs some serious cleaning after weeks of disuse but he doesn’t have the energy for that either. He crawls into bed, sinking into sleep.

His dreams are full of smoke and rain, watching the tenement fade beneath his mother’s cries and smoke wash over him.

The rain washes away the smoke; it’s thinner now, incense floating through the air, a sickly sweet smell that settles around him as he tries to suck in a breath, noticing the grip on his neck.

“Well, yeah, that’s what happens when you get fast-tracked though the ranks. She’s always been a bit of a loner and never hung with us much, even after she and Hayate were a thing. The only friend I ever saw her with was that one jounin-um-with the hair and those badass kama weapons-”

“Iruka hears the words in a fog, struggling to suck in a breath. He knows that he’s alone, no matter how many people he can call by name.

“But that’s all right. I don’t mind you whoring yourself out for a smile.”

Iruka wheezes, the grip still not letting up, rough and violent, his head spinning in response.

“But even if you give yourself to everyone, they won’t love you like I do.” Mizuki leans in, grip relaxing as he smiles down at Iruka.
Iruka shudders, trying to suck in the sweet air as he shakes beneath Mizuki, clinging to his shoulders and focused on nothing else as those words wash over him.

Mizuki whispers then, words of love and devotion, soft words against his skin and trills of joy run up his spine even as the grip returns, pinches him harder, sliver hair swaying as he searches out those eyes, trying to find meaning to match those honeyed words that he craves.

- 

He wakes up with the taste of blood in his mouth, lurching up. His hand touches his neck as he breathes, annoyed with himself. Anger bubbles up inside of him and he pushes it away, focuses on taking measured breaths and trying to ignore the cold sweat that lingers against his skin.

He’d known, known that agreeing to regain his memories would do this, would knock things free, both known and unknown.

He just hadn’t been prepared for it.

He sighs, rolling out of bed and starting his morning stretches.

“Might as well head to school early.”

He arrives at school long before the sun is up, checking his official roster. No last minute changes this year, which is good.

The entrance ceremony he leaves to the other teachers, because he doesn't fully agree with that concept any longer, the idea of dividing up the new entrants into their own basics for a year. He'd rather have his kids from day one and teach them how he prefers. So many under only a few teachers, most with limited experience- that's how people slip through the cracks. He might try to appeal the process again, now that Tsunade is more settled as Hokage.

The entrance ceremony ends and he turns his attention away from policy to his own students, watching them file in, including Konohamaru. Nine new students this time around in addition to the two Hyuuga that are temporary additions. Eleven total. His older students line up along the back and the newer ones follow. He calls up the new ones first, reading their names and jotting down nicknames before turning to the rest of his class.

“Before I get to divvying you all up I would like to draw your attention to the desks.” Several kids had remarked on them while he was taking roll. “I do not think that I need to state that these are brand new.”

He catches eyes with Jun, his current troublemaker.

“However, because they are new, this means that they do not have any markings, initials, scratches, chewing gum or anything else that could mar them. And we will keep it that way, won't we class?”

Jun nods, not fully meeting his stare and the rest of the class agrees.

“Good. Pair up, now. Oldest students to the front rows, one per desk. Hanabi, also pick a desk for yourself.”

If she’s surprised by his statement she doesn’t show it. When he puts the three new Hyuuga beside her however, her eyes widen just a bit. He’d thought that she wouldn’t like it, but having to monitor the three new students is a challenge and he needs her help.
The remaining eight he doles out to his oldest students.

"Now the student sitting next to you is your teammate. You are in charge of them, not as a boss or a superior, but as a senpai. You will help them out with most of our lessons and in turn learn the basics of teamwork with a new individual. While you will be placed into teams of three upon graduating that does not mean those are the only people you will ever work with. If you think that someone else may be better suited as a senpai for your teammate once you see strengths, you can approach me about it; I will listen and make a change if I see fit."

He nods at them, this isn't the first year he's implemented this, although sometimes it didn't always work out. He hadn't been able to do it with Naruto's group; older students had been few and far between, low births a result of the Third Ninja war while Naruto's group had been a significant baby boom after the war's end.

He has to say he rather likes the large and lively class loads he's had the past couple of years, physical reminders of peace.

He goes through some of the other instructions and points to the packs on his teacher desk for the newest students.

"Each pack has a simple variety of weapons." He says as their eyes light up. "And one type of tool or jutsu that you will be studying with your senpai. Now you may not have heard of it, or you may think it is not useful- or even be very good at it. It may not even be a good fit for you and your chakra needs. Or even your senpai’s. Or even mine."

There is some confusion in the new eyes then, but his older kids remember this lesson.

“But just because it may not be a good fit for you does not mean that someone else will not use it against you in the future. So study hard.” He calls them up, practicing their names again and tries not to smile too wide when Konohamaru picks up the pack with taijutsu as the special component.

He goes through a basic history lesson then, although he has decided to give students their own opportunity to discuss their clans and their family history this year. The story of the goddess that Moro shared with him is a common tale among the Inuzuka, and such things should be known.

He’s never really enforced it because there are students that don’t have clans or a real history; he remembers hating his own similar assignment, because it had pointed out just how very different he was. But there were also stories that his father had shared; stories that he’s never heard inside Konoha. So he thinks that this could be more enlightening this time around.

He ends his day with something most teachers think him crazy for, especially on the first day. He thinks so too, most days. He leads them outside and pulls out his training shuriken, far less lethal than standard, but still sharp enough to stick to the targets and the correct weight distribution when compared to real shuriken.

He calls Hanabi and Genta forward as example; they both which have great posture and aim. He points out the positioning of their feet, how they balance their weight, the way they hold the shuriken and sages above do not throw it like a baseball.

"This is one of the things you will practice with your new teammates. They will learn from you and ask about your form. If your form is incorrect in any way, then they will help you. This goes the other way also, if your kouhai see anything wrong with yours you are to listen.” He looks to another student, while the smartest in the class, has the habit of favoring one side when not paying attention.
They start off, and Iruka stands back and lets the class at the shuriken.

He can already see potential in the Hyuuga, not that he expected different. Family tutors will do that. He likes the way Uyeda holds them, even if his aim seems be a bit off, he sticks almost all of them.

"Now, I want you to keep this up. We will not be able to practice this every day, but the school training grounds are always open. Three days a week before or after classes one hour. I would prefer you work with someone, it can even be someone from a different class, catching your own mistakes is not easy. You have log books in your pack; the rest of you know where yours are I hope. I am here to sign them if you want. If you do your lessons at home, a guardian is to sign them." he looks over at them, grinning.

“And by guardian I mean a human adult who is a part of your household. Not your brother or sister, not your animal partner, and not the person who delivers dinner. Dismissed." He watches them gather their packs and rush off.

Hanabi hangs around and walks over when everyone else is gone. She’s grown over the summer, a few inches taller now.

She stares at him, eyebrows furrowed. Iruka gets the feeling that she wants to ask why he put her with three other students. She frowns harder and he smiles.

“I know I’m asking a lot of you,” he says, quiet. “And I spent a lot of time thinking about this setup, but I believe that you are the best person besides myself to recognize the chakra strain that they might put themselves under. If you ever feel like it’s too much or want additional help don’t be shy about asking-”

"I want you to teach me barrier ninjutsu techniques.” she blurs, cheeks red.

“Barrier ninjutsu?” he repeats, surprised.

She seems to catch herself and repeats the request politely, looking confused now and Iruka wants to sigh. The clan puts too much pressure on this poor girl and here he is, asking more of her.

He puts his hand on her shoulder.

"I think you are capable of this. I trust you to look after these kids with me. You know the exhaustion, you know how to handle it if you end up with another class for a lesson. And as for barrier ninjutsu- well. You need to work on your handwriting. It’s passable for class, but not for barriers.”

He smiles at her and gets the feeling that if she were any other child, a child without a clan’s weight upon her-

He thinks she would be sticking her tongue out at him.

"I have some books."

He lets her go off, grinning to himself.

His kids are a good bunch this year, he can feel it.
He heads over to the Hokage tower and Shizune ushers him in. He looks around, taking in the interior of the tower, the soft paneling on the walls, a sense of warmth; a carryover from Hiruzen’s decorating or perhaps even older.

He smiles as he recognizes the wards throughout, a sense of age and loyalty infused in the room. It always gives him a bit of a low grade headache, this many chakra energies but also reminds him of Konoha’s strength, so he doesn’t mind.

He can see that Tsunade has added more touches to the room as time has passed; he can see various medical texts piled up in the corners of the bookcases and a few anatomical sketches on the walls.

Tsunade wastes no time in looking him over, adding notes to his chart.

"Is the previous Hyuuga medi-nin from your file still active?"

"No."

"I figured as much. Do you mind bringing in another at this point? As we have no active medical staff that possess the Byakugan I’ve decided to reassign Neji’s chūnin rotation, if you don’t mind. Konoha has an agreement that Hyuuga only perform one medical rotation, so I have a few I could choose from theoretically, but Neji’s abilities far exceed any of the others."

Iruka nods, although he does wish that it doesn’t mean losing Neji at the mission office. He’d always thought that the clan would be fantastic in the medical field, but the clan as a whole seems a bit disproving of such a career. Even his previous medical-nin had only become one after invalidation from normal field work.

Tsunade moves on with her notes, reviewing their communication, the description of their shared space, and going over the memories he’s recovered so far; taking notes as she talks with him.

"The lightning chakra, it does more than keep your chakra in alignment?"

He nods and he can see that she has Kakashi’s letter as well as his own previous descriptions of his attacks and aftermath. “It helps keep us communicating, and in regards to my chakra—I’ve been able to do things with it that I haven’t done in years. We share the same chakra pool, unlike Naruto. I’m sure that being able to communicate helped with that.”

“You do share the same chakra,” she hums a note of agreement. “But so does Moro, and she doesn’t have the same issues as you. So why sleep at all?”

“It has to be a part of my memories. I’ve had snippets of Mizuchi all along, and I’m certain my parents must have known something because of my seal.”

“It certainly is an interesting piece of work, your seal—there are several different schools of thought within it, although we are waiting on more information in regards to that.”

Iruka doesn’t really have theories for her, he’d never really seen scrolls on advanced sealing techniques before, which he informs her. He also tells her that his father’s specialty was genjutsu, which could be the fact that there is a separate space for Mizuchi.

She clicks her tongue against her teeth as she takes notes. “I will see what we have access to in regards to sealing containment theory. Something like this, it isn’t usually done without reason, but it would take some serious skill to cut out something so entwined without destroying the psyche, which leaves a question of why it was done in the first place. Also I’ve never heard of such longevity, considering your father died over a decade ago. You also tested high in genjutsu,
perhaps you’ve maintained the space unconsciously.”

Iruka thinks on that for a long moment, considering.

“I don’t really have a reason as to why or how it was done or the fact that it has lasted so long- but I believe the disconnect- the fact of being unable to communicate-I believe that’s part of the reason that Mizuchi decided to sleep in the first place, thinking it a way to help me.”

She scratches down more notes. “What is your schedule with Kakashi then? How often do you need the chakra?”

"Need? I’m not sure." he stumbles on his words, a flood of heat and memories behind his eyes. Sharing chakra for them is intwined with sex more often than not, another layer pleasure.

The scratching stops and she’s looking at him, her grin is just a bit too intense now, catching his slip. "How often do you receive it?"

"I don’t think need chakra more than once a week. After the chakra exhaustion Kakashi took nearly a week to recover.”

She lets the other question go, although her grin really doesn't fade.

"So the sleeping period. When did it start?"

We did not talk. We did not dream. Hurt.

There is a flash of anger, swelling up at the remembrance of his dream, the feeling of hands on his neck.

He looks down and grips his knees even as Mizuchi’s anger uncoils inside of him.

This isn’t the time for that, he thinks, although he isn’t sure if he believes it. He flexes his fingers, breathing as he thinks on her question.

“My chakra was all right at that time, for the most part. I’d always had bad reactions to spending it down, but nothing like now. So when they started to get worse-“

That’s when he’d started on the tattoo. A desperate sense for a connection that he didn’t have anymore but still craved, soul deep and searching.

"Around seventeen or so? About a year after making chuunin rank?"

He nods, “The opinion of the medical staff was that I had more or less finished growing physically by that point, so the energies turned inward and worsened."

She clicks her tongue in irritation, more to herself than to Iruka, not raising her eyes from the notes.

"I can see why they’d think that, but still. The medical charts on this are all over the place. And we had decent records on Kushina and Mito before her, so we definitely had ways to track disparate chakra so I'm more than a little irritated over this lack of professionalism in regards to you, Naruto, and Moro. What's worse is I don't have the time to devote to this issue the way I would like, considering the state of village politics at the moment."

Documentation in regards to disparate chakra? It makes sense, Konoha has housed the Kyuubi for decades. There are ways to monitor chakra fluctuations so why had he never thought there would be ways to track his own? He’d certainly tried on his own, but no one had ever brought forth the
idea or theory of his own seal, which makes him think that perhaps Hiruzen had not truly understood what exactly the medical staff had done in regards to his issue.

"I could put Sakura on it, I suppose." Tsunade continues. "She’s at a good place in her training-" Shizune leans in and whatever she whispers put a bit of light in Tsunade’s tired eyes.

"That is an idea. I mean we have no idea how it could manifest on you but she’s at a place where she can start working on the technique as well. I mean, you'll have to go through some higher level medical jutsu first, but I don't think you'll have much of a problem, considering the job you did on Kakashi’s leg. That was even better job than I originally thought, when I rechecked the injury. Your overall chakra stamina might be lacking, but I’m not expecting you to become a medical nin. That kind of chakra refinement is perfect for such a technique and Shizune has more leeway than I to teach the two of you.”

Iruka looks from one woman to the other.

"I am not sure I understand."

"That makes me feel a bit old, you know. Do they not discuss the techniques of the second shinobi war in history class?" she says, her eyes crinkling a bit at the word ‘history’.

"I know them well enough, but I am the child of refugee water-nin. Textbooks don’t really capture the intricacies of war techniques.” And he’s babbling about history now and he can’t believe that he just said that, but he does know his history.

Tsunade blinks and gestures to herself, or more specifically gestures to the diamond on her forehead. “Basically put, this is a chakra storage technique. Also helps keeps me young, but that’s just a bonus. It’s also gradual, so you don’t put more than you can afford into it. So if you approach the edge again-"

"I could release it.” He says, understanding. It sounds more like hope than anything he's had in a long time. Mizuchi agrees, crooning in happiness, a warm feeling spreading through him.

"That's the idea anyway. I mean I would like to study an official attack on you but I think preventing one is a wiser course of action. So between Neji and Sakura, hopefully we can at least document this. I would also like you to visit with Moro on some of the particulars of communication. I will be interviewing her also over the coming weeks about her abilities as well. I will have Tiger escort you when necessary." The Anbu appears behind her. "It’s necessary to have a least a couple,” she explains, seeing something in Iruka’s face. “Dismissing them all makes some people suspicious you know.”

He nods, understanding the logic, but understanding does not make the panicky feeling in his chest lessen. The idea that a number of people know (or will know) is terrifying, even if they don’t know the whole story.

“Be secret, be safe.”

The words come to him, unbidden, but it’s more a memory of the words than anything specific attached to them.

But it’s more than that also; almost a mantra of sorts; not unlike his words to Kakashi before he’d left for his mission-

And that makes him believe, more than any sort of speculation or assumption-that his parents had known something.
“-once these techniques are approved-,” Tsunade continues, “the chuunin status will stay. The talents and knowledge you possess that can benefit the village are greater than the need for outside ninja. I am writing up an official report about your talents and the decision to not promote you to take the jounin trials or even tokubetsu status. I will need a statement from Kakashi when he returns.”

“And I’m the one who has to retrieve it?” Iruka says with a wry smile.

She laughs and dismisses him with an appointment for next time, when she’ll attempt her own lightning chakra on him; it lets him know that she expects the mission to take at least a week.

He doesn't know if he likes knowing that fact.

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He goes to catch up with Asuma later after class and even though he feels like he’s been through the wringer with the kids and first day craziness he really doesn’t want to do boring things like shopping and cleaning his apartment.

He doesn't want to return to his empty apartment just yet.

The door is open, as always. One of Asuma’s beliefs, considering the number of teams he’s had over the years. He walks in, looking around at the strange mix of things that Asuma has collected over time; pressed plants from the mountains, a photo with the daimyo and the other eleven of the protection squad, another picture that featured of Iruka, his sister Kita and him, all smiling.

"Oh, Iruka.” a voice comes from the kitchen and he turns, seeing Kurenai. It’s not unusual to see her here, she’s been in a ‘relationship’ with Asuma for a few years now and friends with him years before that.

He wouldn’t exactly describe his relationship with Kurenai as ‘close’, but he does call her a friend. Proximity to Asuma over the years has put them together more than once.

Not to mention the fact that she is the jounin sensei of some of his students.

“Is Asuma around?”

“He’s out on a mission. Do you want a cup of tea?”

Iruka nods as she ducks back into the kitchen, wondering if he was placed with Kakashi and hopes not. Kakashi is one of the strongest jounin the village has to offer; so is Asuma. Having them together on a mission just ups the difficulty.

Kurenai brings out a second cup before sitting on the couch, her eyes fixed on him.

“How was the first day of classes?”

“Don’t remind me,” he half-jokes, “but they’re a good group.”

“You don’t expect any issues from the time when the academy was closed?”

“Not particularly. I expect that several didn’t train during the interruption, at least not properly. I also would rather have the newest students be integrated into my class than pushing back the initial year even further.”

“There is something to be said for at least knowing your entire class.”
“I disagree,” he says as he picks up his tea. “I’m not saying that it wasn’t useful at the time, because most academy students only went to school for an average of three years. But now-students attend the academy for at least double that, which means they will meet the rest of their peers over the course of their schooling. With the graduation system we have in place now I think the time as a team is more important.”

Kurenai drinks her tea, thinking on this.

Laying a foundation—a core group of young people around the same age and skill level; that meant replacements if necessary. And war-

War made loss- which in turn made replacements necessary.

Iruka isn’t making excuses for the village or its decisions at the time, he had not been a part of the last ninja war. The education system may have had a place once, but now-

“I suppose that’s a fair assessment.” she agrees with a tilt of her head. “Is that one of the reasons why all nine of your recommendations made it to the chuunin exams? Your focus on the team unit? Team 8, their teamwork was one of the main reasons I recommended them.”

He stares into his tea.

“I place great value in the team unit.” he says after a long moment. “I also believe that team formations made before graduation are likelier to stay together.”

It’s also one of the problems he has with the aim of the chuunin exams as a whole. The value the exam places on the team unit and then the forwarding of rank for the individual and not the team as a whole- it seemed to be counterproductive in the current atmosphere.

“The aims of the academy and following graduation and chuunin rank exams seem to be at odds with one another.” He says, “it helps to place value in the individualistic talents rather than as a team. The academy as a whole does not place the same value on the team as I do, this is one of the underlying reasons for the significant failure rate in my opinion.”

“Individual training should not be forgotten.”

“I’m not saying it should be. But as a sensei to a few dozen students, it is not my place to work one-on-one with particular talents. That is what the off-sessions are for. Especially when it comes to particular and individualized skill sets. I can’t say that the genjutsu initiative was something that functioned well as a few sensei and many students.”

“I do agree with that,” she gives a small nod, conceding the point. “Genjutsu is not something that can be taught one to many. Genjutsu is also different in how one traps their opponent- to have an ability that is specific within an already limited field—that’s how you end up being bounced around from unit to unit. That was my experience; I’m sure it was yours as well.”

Iruka doesn’t remember much from the genjutsu initiative; only a few vague training sessions from the genjutsu program before he left it. How one used their genjutsu to trap their opponent- it was akin to differences in elemental chakra.

And when it came to him- Iruka uses water for the base of his genjutsu, a reflection in a puddle or a drop of water falling on your face- different than standard and iruka remembers displaying it for several dozen people, different units and trying to fit in- not really an aim of genjutsu but a desperate need for a kid who didn’t really belong anywhere.
“Genjutsu isn’t for everyone,” she says. He nods, not in agreement but because he’s heard this before. And he would never force someone to learn something they were unsuited for.

However, that had not been the case in the wake of the destruction and death the Nine Tails had wrought.

Konoha had needed ninja. Having fewer forces meant they needed sharper weapons; those who could do more to make up for the lost.

It is not surprising that Sand had done something similar with their own ninja, having rookies with powers they couldn’t control. Konoha had their own muddy history with prodigies, ninja youth with powers too advanced for their emotional development.

“A genjutsu wall is mere paper when the will doesn’t support it.” Iruka says, and he sees the look in Kurenai’s eyes soften.

“That’s one way to put it,” she agrees, smiling. Because she understands, knows that genjutsu is different for every person, takes in different ways from the user. His was based on the physical, but other varieties required more mental strength.

Because at its core- genjutsu is a mental bridge.

“Naoki-sensei told me that before I was dismissed from the program.” A dismissal that had been his gateway to a real team, a real place where he belonged.

“Some are not suited, chakra talent or not,” he agrees, parroting his lesson from earlier.

“It is a good thing that some of the adults were able to recognize that not everyone had the mentality to work genjutsu, talent or not. We had some-“ she shakes her head. “Some were not so lucky. Building mental connections...it takes from you.”

Iruka stares back into his tea, suddenly tired. He doesn’t have the same kind of genjutsu talent, not the talent that the program leaders had been looking for at the time.

He’d thought it would bring him closer to his father, his talent for genjutsu.

(It had only highlighted his absence.)

“You’d think that the council would realize that, at least. Personality is just as important as talent when it comes to genjutsu.” She sighs, placing her cup down.

“Have they been pressuring you as well?”

“Oh?” her eyes gleam, “that would make some sense at least. You can inherit elementary orientation, not the personality required to wield genjutsu.”

“So does that mean the two of you-“ he swallows the question with another mouthful of tea. It’s not his place to pry, even if he does know that they are together.

Kurenai smiles, catching the rest of his question.

“I suppose you could say we are. It’s still not something we’re announcing, but you are correct in assuming that the council views my abilities as desirable. So we did some research, Asuma and I-” she laughs then, eyes alight with the mirth, “and decided to follow the official guide.”

“Official guide,” he repeats, smiling. “How long is it?”
At least two years, we think. We’ve been passing it around also. You wouldn’t believe some of the antiquated steps, we’re supposed to have supervisors at all times.” She laughs again. “Although a double date could be nice.”

Iruka isn’t sure if that’s a sort of tactic to let him know that she knows about Kakashi or if she’s just being honest. He doesn’t know her well enough for that.

He nods, wondering what he’s supposed to do with this. He could tell her, he supposes. They hadn’t decided to be a secret; he’d already admitted they were dating; not to mention Gai dropping in on them. Kurenai clearly felt comfortable enough with him to share about her own relationship. That didn’t mean he had to reciprocate, but he’d talked about far lesser ‘relationships’ with her before.

He was so inconsistent. How could he expect anything from anyone else when he couldn’t settle his own mind. He’d decided to commit to this, hadn’t he? Agreeing to a hypothetical double date shouldn’t get him this introspective.

“Just a thought,” she says, picking up her cup again, looking over at him curiously. “Do you have someone?”

That answered one question, at least. Her question before was hypothetical and his exaggerated delay gave her something to focus on. “I’m sure the four of us would have a good time even if I’m not familiar with them. It doesn’t have to be a serious meeting.”

It sounds pleasant, in a strange sort of way. He doesn’t think he’s ever really done a double date, when he thinks on it. He’s gone out with a group of friends, certainly. And people have dropped in (sometimes literally) on dates before, but actually planning a double date-

“Asuma makes it serious, placing some serious judgement in people’s choice of beer. Not that he’s usually wrong, mind. But not every date is a serious choice.”

“He does, doesn’t he?” she smiles. “He places a large amount of value on store bought cigarettes too.”

“He’s just a snob about cigarettes because he rolls his own with Shikaku, which really is just as much effort as the Hiruzen-sama and his cured leaves in his pipe.”

They both have a laugh at that, because the banter the Hiruzen and Asuma over the differences between their smoking preferences had been hilarious to overhear.

“When did you realize Asuma was different?” he asks, surprising himself.

It was another question he hadn’t meant to ask, delving into a sort of personal ground he wasn’t sure he was close enough to Kurenai for.

But again, she doesn’t seem put off by the question, a different sort of smile on her face now. A soft look that Iruka doesn’t think he’s ever seen from her before. Perhaps it is a smile reserved for thoughts of Asuma.

“I’ve been his friend since we were young, you know that. Our clans are close and at some level-he’s always been something more to me, but I valued our friendship more than any thought for something else. I had enough to worry about then without adding romantic entanglements. The war- watching my father lose my mother, I held no interest in romance.”

“However cliche it may be, sometimes you do not notice such things until there is distance. After
the war, after the attack from the Nine Tails, there was a sense of distance between us. He disappeared, first into missions and later- to the monks and the protection squad. He was distancing himself from his father, from the village. But it felt-“ she takes a shaky breath, “it felt like he was distancing himself from me. I understand now that it’s because of some of the things he found out at that time, but it still felt that way to me.”

Iruka knows this, understands this feeling. He was also familiar with the feeling of distance, of being abandoned by one of the few people he considered important. He knows that Asuma and his sister Kita had found (or been told, he’s not quite sure) about some of the decisions that their father had made regarding the third war and then, later, Orochimaru. Both had left the village for a time, although Kita did have Konohamaru at some point and still believed in Konoha enough to leave him in the village’s care.

But even knowing the reason now doesn’t change his feelings from that time, his desperate struggle to recover from his own injuries of the attack that took the lives of his teammates and invalidated his sensei. His desperation for a connection-

He traces the rim of the teacup, thinking that if he’d been willing to see past his own despair, if he’d been willing to talk, to see Kurenai hurting, then things might have been different.

“I decided to work on my genjutsu, enter a different and advanced phase of training. My genjutsu is based on gaze, which although different from those who carry bloodline abilities within their eyes is still similar enough to one. I was paired with a tutor, one with ability that mirrored my own. That sort of closeness-the mental space we shared-I can’t really explain it. And I loved him. We were great together, for a while.”

Iruka isn’t sure what to do with that. He’d never known that she’d had someone else. With Asuma gone from the village, there had been nothing connecting them really. They lived their own lives, separately. He’s being drawn into her story, leaning in as he listens.

He understands somewhat the way that genjutsu is, although he also doesn’t. He never really could fall into the mire that was someone else’s headspace, not for long.

It could be in part due to Mizuchi having a space within himself, he realizes that now. It’s also a reason why Naruto cannot perform genjutsu. When someone has something of such power within- it can’t be hidden underneath the haze of genjutsu. Not truly, not with someone that knows the art.

Perhaps that was what his sensei had noticed, so long ago.

“We did well in a universe of two,” she admits with a sigh. “But one cannot simply exist in such a way forever. The world consists of more than two. We parted. Asuma returned not long after, to take on a genin team. We fell back into a routine,” she smiles that soft secret smile again, “and I wanted more than we were before he’d left.”

“So Asuma is real?”

And now he’s said something wrong, because coldness creeps into her gaze, sharp like ice. “Perhaps imagined was the wrong word to use. What I had before wasn’t a lie. I loved him, and everything we shared- my feelings- were real. Our issues stemmed from our ages and experiences. They eventually became too great an obstacle for us and we parted amicably. Even if it didn’t last, even if we weren’t forever, even if most of our interactions were different from standard that doesn’t make it any less real.”

Iruka sits, stunned. He gets the feeling that this argument isn’t aimed at him, not truly. But it strikes
My feelings were real.

That he understands.

My feelings were real.

He had loved Mizuki, hadn't he? Even if Mizuki hadn't deserved it; even if Mizuki hadn’t loved him back; even if everything crashed in a spectacular end with a million shattered pieces he had to build back up—he had loved him. His love had been real.

Continuing to live with the distance, to have this safe place he'd made; that was the part that wasn’t real.

It had been so easy to say that it hadn't been 'real' and that the whole thing didn't matter. But it had mattered; it still mattered, it still crept up like a vine and tried to choke him when he wasn't paying attention. It would always be there and it was his choice to let it poison him or try again.

He had told Izumo that he wanted more than ‘okay’ and he meant it. He wanted something more, even if he wasn’t sure about it. Kakashi was fun and brilliant and used stupid words like ‘untoward’ and spent the whole night making desks after Iruka had told him not to bother buying anything.

Okay wasn’t a word to describe any of those things.

They were already more than 'doing okay'. He smiles at Kurenai and nods.

"I think a double date would be nice."

---

He collapses into his chair when he gets home, tension unwinding. First days are always fun but they still inspire a sense of anticipation that sets him on edge for the day. It results in stiff muscles and a deep sense of weariness.

Not that his conversation with Kurenai had been relaxing, either.

Although...

He does feel better, oddly enough.

This is also usually one of the few days that he bothers with the dive bars (with or without Anko) and goes to find someone. Wants the tension fucked out of him.

Not an option this year, however. He makes some tea and takes an extra long bath, which helps some.

He barely remembers his agreement with Kotetsu until he gets a knock at his door.

Izumo is there, Kazane in his arms.

"Thanks for doing this," he says as Iruka takes the baby, getting his first real look at her. She looks more like Hayate than Yugao, possessing his dusty colored hair and wide eyes that follow him, curious.
"How long have you had her?"

"Couple weeks now. Yugao is on a pretty high status mission as far as we can tell. Higher than our pay grade anyway."

Iruka frowns. He doesn't remember Yugao much or know her personally. But he doesn't really like the fact that she's taking such missions almost immediately after being cleared to return to active duty. He knows that people can balance being a jounin and the responsibilities that come with parenting, but Anbu is a different beast altogether.

He shifts the baby in his arms. She's settled already, blinking up at him sleepily, a half smile on her face.

"She's really great, according to like every parent ever. Sleeps through the night already and takes naps that last a few hours. It's been really good, actually."

Iruka looks up from the child in his arms, back to Izumo. There's a sense of something in his voice, an emotion that he can't quite place.

"So Kotetsu-?"

"I know his parents put a lot on him being one of the older siblings but I think that there's potential for us to have our own."

Iruka looks back down at the girl, who is still looking at him with those wide eyes.

"I'm happy for you."

They talk a little more, mostly about Kazane and her schedule and the promise that one of them will pick her up before he leaves in the morning. Iruka tells them not to rush and to just come to the academy before classes officially start since he'll be there early.

Kazane, as it turns out, is a perfect partner to distract him from a lack of one. She is a bit on the fussy side from new surroundings and she does wake up later on for a snack. But Izumo was right, Kazane is calm and unruffled, overall.

She watches him with interest as he gets himself ready for the day and really seems to enjoy their morning run, as Iruka has cut out some of the more time consuming parts of his workout in favor for the girl. He picks up a basic bento on the way, still unbothered by the lack of food he hasn’t shopped for.

They arrive early enough so that Iruka can watch his students. Some have taken yesterday’s words to heart and are working with some of their other friends. Kazane also gets plenty of attention at the academy as well from other teachers and students that arrive early.

"She's so quiet." Moegi says, stunned. "My little brother is older and noisier."

"Kazane seems to be a special case." Iruka smiles at her. "Most babies are a little difficult. Although I remember a particular terrifying baby-" he looks over at Konohamaru.

“What?!” he shouts, taken aback. “What do you know about babies!”

“I know that you were a nightmare. Always, always unhappy.” he grins and Moegi and Udon look at him; that stunned look that students get when they realize that their teachers have lives and do things and actually exist outside of school. “You knew Konohamaru as a baby?”
“I had moved out by then, but yeah.”

“Iruka-sensei lived in the Hokage Residence?” they snap their heads back to Konohamaru.

“He just said I wasn’t born when he moved out! How in the name of the sages should I know?!!”

“Language.” Iruka says, but his smile takes the bite out of his words. You were only calm with Asuma really and that’s because I think he’d let you cry yourself out."

And Konohamaru has that look now, a bit awed and accepting.

"He says I chased him to the monks."

Iruka laughs, that is just so Asuma.

"I don’t think that's quite true, but it may have been a bonus." He turns back to Moegi. "Most babies are somewhere between those two extremes, so I think your brother is just fine."

Iruka walks the training grounds and notes the students that have arrived. Most of his are here, but the first week isn’t really a benchmark of consistency.

Kotetsu comes by before the first bell and takes her and Iruka turns around to start another day of classes.

He is drained by the time he gets home the world blurring along the edges. His sleep had neither been restful or deep when he had been trying to make sure that Kazane was all right.

He really doesn’t want to bother with things like shopping or cooking and he ends up eating the rest of the food that Kotetsu had given him earlier before heading to bed.

---

"Oh man you should have seen Junpei's face I'm telling you-"

"Eyes on the path." Naoki-sensei says and Aki shuts up.

"So how much longer?"

"We're just passing it off to the next leg of the journey."

"I dunno. Three hours is pretty long."

"You’ll be home for dinner."

"Iru's at my house tonight!" Miki cries and Iruka smiles. "Mom's making ramen!"

"No fair!" Aki cries, "dad only had cheese and eggs last night."

"It was still pretty good, Aki." Iruka says as he looks back at Naoki-sensei.

"Eyes on the path." He repeats, but he's smiling too.

Iruka breathes, tasting water on the air which is confusing, that isn't where they should be, not yet.

"I can sense a river," he says as he looks at Naoki-sensei again, slowing down. “We shouldn’t be out by the river yet?"
Naoki-sensei frowns, but doesn’t dispute Iruka’s sense of water. He looks closer at the path instead, snapping his head up and calling to the three of them. "Pull back-"

And a cloud of smoke rolls over them. It stings, it burns. Feels like a senbon prick, only millions of them and all at once, on his skin and in his lungs and he looks at Naoki-sensei as his vision blurs and calls out, calls for help.

“Mizuchi!”

-

Iruka calls out for Mizuchi as he wakes, taking notice of his surroundings, staring at his ceiling and bedroom, the details of it in his mind.

His bedroom, not the forest.

Iruka. Mizuchi answers, slow and peaceful. It helps calm him.

He curls into himself, breathing. He wants his memories, he does. But he never had a choice about them.

If he'd noticed the water in the air instead of fooling around, paid more attention-

He shakes his head. It doesn't make a difference now. They're still dead and he's here, now.

And if yesterday was a morning for anger, today is a morning for mourning.

He finds himself out at the stone, sunrise a pale line on the horizon. It's fine, he's long since remembered where the names are.

"Mom, Dad, Miki, Aki, Naoki-sensei, Hiruzen," the names continue, unlocking him bit by bit. He'd loved all these people and it had been real. Each in his own way, each reminding him that he isn't broken.

"I miss you."

He runs, closer to a sprint, really, to the training grounds. He's not as our of breath as he thought he would be, Kakashi's regimen did its job.

"Regimen Strawberry." He laughs to himself as he starts the basic movements, although he's taking his water along with his movements, moving the water whip alongside him.

It's peaceful, Mizuchi with him as he moves through the set.

"Such a fabulous display of youthful exuberance to greet the morning sunrise," Gai says as he drops down from one of the walls beside him.

The water trembles from the surprise appearance, but he manages to hold it.

"Hello, Gai-sensei. Good morning to you."

"I saw you running and it intrigued me enough to change our own early morning workout."

“So the rest of your team?"

"I made them keep standard." His grin shines brighter than the approaching dawn.
"Very thoughtful."

"I thought so as well!" Gai agrees as he leans closer. "I hold much interest in this water move set you are performing."

"I'm sort of making it up as we go along." Iruka admits as he starts to move through the kata again. "I have a bit of a chakra issue for a few years now and it's only just become less problematic, so I've been more focused on physical aspects of training than chakra."

Most people that are a fixture in academy classes, Gai included know that Iruka has some sort of chakra imbalance, but it's still nice to admit such things on his own terms.

"Admirable," he says, eyes lighting up. "You have good form."

"I hope my form is good," he snorts, "otherwise I'd be teaching forty plus students wrong."

"There is good training form and there is comfortable training form. You possess both."

Iruka barely holds onto the water this time, makes the water spread out into a disc, obscuring his face.

"Excellent! I will see to incorporating this element into Regimen Super Strawberry!"

He knows he asked for a regimen, but it's still a bit of a surprise that Gai is actually spending time on one.

"How are the kids? Now that Neji has made chunnin and all?"

"Lee is fired up for the next set, of course. They've already asked Sakura as their third member."

"That sounds like a good team."

"They will be most outstanding!"

Iruka pulls the water back to the bottle on his hip, settling down into a different move set, something more complex and taijutsu focused. Iruka wasn't lying when he said that he’s spent time on physical training when chakra avenues had been closed to him.

"Would you like to spar?" Gai asks, eyes gleaming.

This isn’t the first time Gai has asked, the first time that he’s been caught in the morning by the taijutsu specialist.

Before, he would just smile and wave it off. But he finds himself nodding instead, interested in what he can do, even if it means he’ll end up in the dirt.

“Water nature doesn’t lend itself to fixing damage,” he says as he falls into a stance.

"I am marvelous at rebuilding!” Gai says as his smile nearly breaks his face, also readying into a stance. "Show me your youth!"

Gai is a blurry of motion, fluid and striking out with a series of jabs aimed at his head and chest. Iruka only just managed to block and sidestep the punches, but Gai wasn’t giving him quarter either.

He gets inside his defenses easily, and only a quick twist keeps Iruka from being sent sprawling.
He turns, Gai nearly on him again. He lurches forward with a few punches of his own.

Gai blocked him easily, catching the swings and jabs with his forearms, knocking his attacks aside without much effort. He wonders if Gai is actually trying on some level, but he doesn’t have time to think on it, barely has time to dodge and counterattack. One such attack forces him to his knees.

Iruka lunges up, striking in a skilled set of swings that he hoped Gai didn’t hold too much familiarity with, a set that was designed to drive someone backwards. He needed to get up again. Proper forms and stances were not the way to come at someone like Gai.

Iruka isn’t unfamiliar with rushed and sloppy fights, and isn’t above using such mixed fighting to get the results he needs. He presses forward again, trying to hook his heel and sweep it underneath Gai, aiming a punch at his face at the same time. Gai ducked the punch and took the sweep, which Iruka uses to put some distance between them, slapping down a paper seal on the ground to make a makeshift barrier.

The distance was what Iruka was really aiming for, already moving through the signs at blinding speed.

**Ready?**

*Anytime.* Mizuchi replies, and Iruka can see him this time in his mind as he summons him. He's gotten better at it over the summer, but it still takes a lot out of him.

In a real fight, this would leave him far too open; Gai had recovered even faster than he’d considered, gracefully rolling with with his attack, executing a backflip that put him back on his feet in one fluid motion.

He rushes forward and the seal catches him, but it’s a minor one, a diversion that only buys him a couple of seconds. Gai takes it down, his kick whipping up a wind that shreds the paper seal easily. He could have been on him by now, could have stopped his summon, even killed him if he’d been an enemy but Gai seems to be playing gentleman now, interested in what Iruka has planned.

The ground rumbles and Mizuchi erupts out of a nearby well, rushing towards them. Gai flips backwards onto the wall and Iruka follows the movement, Mizuchi subtly changing course, charging forward in a wave, almost on top of Gai, ready to swallow him.

Gai laughs, jumping up, insanely high as he is suddenly on *top* of the long whip of water that is Mizuchi he runs along the length even as Iruka changes the shape, making Mizuchi longer and longer, but it doesn’t seem to matter as Gai jumps off, launching himself at Iruka.

And then there is Tiger is his face and Iruka’s thread of control snaps, Mizuchi raining down on them, drenching the practice field. Iruka manages to avoid most of the downpour, but even he is not completely dry, unprepared for the loss of control.

Tiger, however, *is* dry.

Iruka shakes his head as he starts to wave the water away from him, sending it back to the well as Tiger does the same, wondering where all these water orientations are coming from. He could have certainly used more than Kouske-sensei and Izumo growing up. First Yamato and now-

The careful movements of Tiger are too reminiscent of Yamato to be coincidence, not to mention the teasing Kakashi had reserved for this Anbu.

He’s learning confidential secrets of Konoha everywhere it seems.
“This is a big ruckus for this early in the day,” the bird-faced Anbu says, her voice purposefully low.

"We were merely having a workout to display our youthfulness!" Gai grins, not cowed in the slightest by the scolding that they’re getting.

"That's all well and good, but these training grounds aren't made for flooding," she says and Iruka apologizes.

Tiger/Yamato comes to stand beside him. “There are other practice grounds more suited to such things.” He says, voice lower pitched than usual but still very much Yamato, Iruka is sure of it now.

"Yes, Tiger-san and Eagle-san. We shall relocate elsewhere!" The two Anbu vanish and Iruka turns to smile apologetically at Gai.

“Actually we’ll have to take this up at another time. My kids will be arriving soon.”

“Such an admirable dedication to one’s pupils!” Gai says as he slaps him on the back.

Iruka lurches forward, just preventing himself from landing face first in a patch of newly formed mud. He can’t quite stop his grin though, because he can still stand after summoning such an effort of chakra.

"That was an splendid water summon, Iruka-sensei.” Gai says, returning his grin.

“Pretty impressive, being able to walk on it like that,” water is constantly moving, and with something that was being manipulated by another- it is a real feat to keep one’s chakra output well matched to the surface of something being manipulated by another.

“Indeed,” Gai agrees, beaming with the praise, waving towards the trees where his students shuffle out, also drenched from the unexpected downpour.

"THAT WAS AMAZING IRUKA-SENSEI, GAI-SENSEI!” Lee yells as he rushes towards them.

Iruka sidesteps the young man, letting him rush into Gai because he would certainly end up in the mud that way.

Neji and Tenten are not far behind their teammate. The look that he sees in Neji’s eyes-more than the Anbu, more than the scolding, makes him feel like he just fucked up. Even this early in the day people are moving, machinations are playing out and here he was sparring with an very visible and very elite jounin.

Kind of a stupid move, really. He sighs, thinking that he'll be getting a lecture later on from Tsunade. He waves the excess water off the four of them, apologizing. Lee and Gai and even Tenten brush it off like nothing, because they probably do run through rivers and lakes and waterfalls (if not water dragons) as part of training.

But Neji keeps his eyes on him for a long moment before he turns and follows his team.

---

After school lets out, Kotetsu and Iruka grab a bit to eat and walk to the hospital together, because Izumo has the hospital the other half of the time the way that Iruka and Kotetsu are teaching their half. Izumo is waiting for them with Kazane.
"Hello there, who let you have a baby?" Kotetsu grins as he slides up to Izumo and leans in for a kiss. Izumo turns his head and Kotetsu doesn’t seem to mind, kissing him on the cheek instead.

"You're late," he says, passing over the baby and starts to walk away.

"You love me anyway." He says as he takes Kazane's hand as they wave at Izumo. He turns to look over his shoulder and waves back, smirking. "She needs to be changed."

Kotetsu stares at Iruka and then back to Kazane. “It’s true love, baby girl. Even if he’s being grumpy and pretending that he doesn’t like kisses.” He gives her a kiss and she giggles at him.

"He was lying about you needing to be changed though, I hope." Kotetsu pulls the diaper and peeks before grinning at Iruka. "True love, I tell you."

"More like he didn’t want an unhappy Kazane, I think."

"You think your thoughts and I’ll think mine," Kotetsu smiles as he shifts the girl in his arms. “I never got the chance to thank you for taking her the other night. Izumo really hasn't slept well. I mean she's great but he's such a worrywart. She had a coughing fit the other day and you should have seen his head spin."

"Babies inspire a lot of feelings."

"You can say that again. He's super attached, you know. I don't really know what's going to happen when Yugao comes back for her. He keeps forgetting it's temporary."

"You should have a real one then."

"It's not that easy, you know."

"You could petition for an orphan or go through some of those channels for one of your own. I'm sure Tsunade-sama can work something out. I don’t think they would stop Izumo, considering his water chakra."

Kotetsu quiets, looking at Kazane as he thinks. "Maybe." he says after a long pause where Kazane grabs onto his jacket. “Well we’ve got to grab some grub for dinner."

Iruka thinks about shopping, but instead heads into the hospital and asks after Tsunade. He feels fine after this morning, but he feels like he should get it checked out sooner rather than later.

Sakura appears a few moments later, nearly crashing into him. She's carrying a stack of books taller than she can see. Iruka offers to take some as they head upstairs.

"Thank you, Iruka-sensei. Tsunade-sensei has me working on a couple of pet projects right now."

"Only a couple?"

"You should see the research room," she laughs, "this is nothing."

He catches Anko coming down the hall. Sakura moves on as he stops to talk with her.

"I'm fine Iru." She says before he can even ask anything. "Stop worrying with that worried face of yours. Godaime is simply looking into my curse mark, trying to figure out if it can be neutralized. It's inactive for the moment but--" she shrugs. "How are the memories? We've still got a bit of work still before we get to you."
"I've had a few. But not really what you're looking for. Not yet."

"That's another reason for postponement then. They have to come on their own, they are clearer and easier to place that way. And I'm in no rush to scramble you up like eggs either. You up for some dango later?"

"If you come to mine."

"Tough day with the kiddos then?"

“That’s a word for it,” he agrees, tired just thinking about it. "I want to have them earlier. I'm tired of trying to correct these assumptions about techniques and jutsu."

"I'll be over. With alcohol even. The good shit."

Iruka enters the room, and it does seem to have books everywhere. Sakura has already spread the volumes she carried out over the table, scanning them and making notes. Tsunade is in a corner, doing the same. Shizune steps away from where she was also taking notes to shuffle through a pile of folders.

"I've got a bit of scheduled time left from my 'official' project of the cursed seal before I have to return to the tower." She doesn't look up from her book, but Shizune hands her some of the folders she just pulled out.

She places a marker on the page and stands, joints cracking as she flexes her hands. He tells her about the morning and she scolds him, updates his charts and asks him to stop by after his mission desk shift later on before she leaves, grumbling about politics all the while.

"Tsunade-sensei doesn't care much for the political piece of being Godaime.” Sakura says after Tsunade and Shizune leave.

Neither would Kakashi, Iruka thinks. He knew that there were a number of things that were more tedious than anything else, but he can't imagine the pressure that Tsunade must be facing. Sakura probably doesn't even see the full extent of politics that Tsunade has to deal with.

"She's doing a great job and even has you as an apprentice."

"That's Shizune's specialty. Scheduling Tsunade-sensei." Sakura grins at him and motions for him to sit. She asks a number of similar questions about both himself and Mizuchi and he answers them as best he can, although he does avoid the trap of the electric chakra this time.

There are just some things that he is not comfortable sharing with his students, his sex life being one of them.

"I heard you're going to be working with Lee and Tenten for the next set of chuunin exams?"

"I'd be waiting for years if I waited on the idiot." she huffs, smiling. "But all of us spar fairly regularly between missions and job assignments. I actually have a match with Hinata after work and we're going out for dinner later this week. She'll be a challenger in the next exams for sure."

Iruka agrees and her smile turns sheepish. "But you knew that, I'm sure."

"You all have incredible potential, I'm just glad that you can work with one another to become stronger, both as people and shinobi."
"That was super teacher-like, Iruka-sensei."

"I am a teacher, after all." She laughs and moves on with the forms. There isn't much more that he can discuss with her that he hasn't already talked about, but she seems to have some ideas as to where she wants to look and study.

"You've been getting the lightning chakra from Kakashi-sensei so far?"

"I collapsed on mission and my heart rate slowed dramatically. The chakra helped in terms of recovery and then as a means of communication with Mizuchi."

"So basically we don't know what would happen if you stopped the chakra now?"

"I mean we communicate fine now, so I don't think we would lose that, but my control-that’s the piece that is in flux."

_Summoning this morning._ Mizuchi trills, and Iruka can't help but smile because even if it was stupid it was pretty awesome.

"I think Tsunade said she's going to take over the sharing aspect if Kakashi-sensei has a longer mission run. Primary electric orientation is a bit on the rare side in general."

"I've had chakra over the years, but medically you try to pull yourself away from the orientation. Even when I heal minor scrapes and things."

She nods. "So you never had a full elementally charged chakra as a part of the healing process. It's not a common tactic for sure, but I can see why Kakashi-sensei would try it. It's a fine balance, but I can see him having enough skill at fine chakra tuning to attempt it." She looks at him, eyes drawn. "Still, that must have been frightening. Especially since you've had the issue before."

"I should have said something before. I know."

“That’s neither here nor there. Tsunade-sensei wants you to start some medical training techniques. We can practice for a bit now.”

She picks up a scroll and unrolls it. A fish appears in the middle, damaged and weak, barely moving.

“To heal it then?” he asks and she nods, showing him how she performs the technique before summoning another.

“I’m guessing I’d need something a bit more neutral for the healing palm technique?”

“Bodies are mostly water and she’s not expecting you to go through the official training, so I don’t think that is needed. Whatever feels most comfortable for now.”

“Ah,” he scratches his nose and takes a water from his pack, spilling a bit on the fish before laying his palm across it. The fish jumps up almost immediately.

“Have you done this before?”

“I guess I have, although I never considered this a healing technique really. We’d get discounts on the weaker looking fish. My father was pretty good at this sort of thing when we went to market. I kept it up when I was a broke genin.”

Sakura rubs the bridge of her nose. “You did that super easily, you know. I spent weeks on it.”
“I couldn’t do it at first either. Like you said, bodies are mostly water— I’m sure it is far more
difficult coming from a place of—”

“It’s all right, Iruka-sensei. Not everyone is great at something first try, but sometimes they are,”
she smiles, parroting a teaching lesson back at him. “I was just thinking that you might have had
more difficulty with it.”

“I can’t summon anything more than a standard fireball, you know. Drains me far more than it
should. I always made sure to have someone else come with me on those practice overnight trips.
There was no way I could have helped all of you start multiple fires.”

She nods, talking about the strain that elementally opposing techniques can place on a body; her
eyes getting a bit of a faraway look. Those occasions were some of the few times he allowed
Sauske to truly practice his fire techniques. Much of the academy was made of wood, including
large parts of the training grounds and even though he’d had faith in the boy’s skill there was
always a chance of a wind shift or a seriously bad shuriken throw that could alter his aim, even
slightly.

“Kakashi-sensei emptied his chakra once with us, you know. I know now that he probably didn’t
give himself enough time to recover from his own mission before taking one with us and then he
went and copied advanced water techniques which put even more of a strain on him. Took him
almost a week to recover and he was putting us through training the entire time. He’s pretty bad at
things like that, taking care of himself.”

“I think you three helped him with that.” he says, serious. He knows firsthand the trust that these
kids inspire. The fact that his kids kept him smiling even in the darkest times. He thinks this class,
these nine, will always be something more to him.

“Probably. You know he made a mission out of us cleaning up his apartment? Ugh, it was terrible,
garbage bags that somehow never made it out. Although I guess it’s pretty hard to make trash day
as an active jounin,” she frowns. “I’ve missed the past two myself.”

“Sounds like something he’d do,” Iruka smiles, imagining the scene. Naruto, openly asking what
everything was and why; Sakura, taking in everything and hanging on to every answer Kakashi
gives Naruto; and Sauske, pretending that nothing really mattered except he too would be listening
in.

They do the fish healing half a dozen more times before Sakura makes a few more notes, ready to
discuss the possibility of giving him something else to try healing with Tsunade, to confirm if the
fish is just too easy of an option.

They head out and Sakura says that Neji has orientation for a couple days for his regular work, so it
would be a couple days before they can start using him for side projects.

---

Iruka heads home, prepping his class materials for the next day.

Anko opens the door, alcohol and food in hand.

“I decided to bring over other stuff too. I can make a meal out of dango, but you’ve probably been
eating boxed lunches and ramen, so I got some meat.”

“Didn’t have much meat on the mission,” Iruka agrees as he starts opening the containers.
He can’t remember the last time he’d sprawled out with Anko like this, food, beer, and snacks.

She leans against him, twirling the dango skewer. “I went out last night, you know. Missed you. First day of classes is basically tradition by now.” she sighs, looking up at him. “Stop with that worried face, Iru. I don’t feel bad that you’ve got a thing. I couldn’t net someone yesterday anyway.”

“What?”

“That’s not true. I’m amazing, after all!” she laughs. “But none of them caught me. Not enough for me to want to drag them home. Or even to the bathroom, actually.”

“Sounds serious.”

“It is. Yamato still hasn’t got back to me; Kakashi probably didn’t say anything.”

“I wouldn’t know. He’s on mission.”

“Is that why you’re not getting plowed right now?”

“That’s not fair.”

She flicks the skewer into the garbage and flings herself on Iruka hiding her face in his shoulder. “I don’t mean it, you know that. I just- I wanna~” she groans. “Feeeeeelings. Gross.”

“Not as bad as me. At least you admit your feelings.”

“Iru,” she looks up. “What happened?”

“I loved Mizuki.” he says, and her face scrunches up. “I spent a really long time telling myself that it wasn’t real- but that was unfair to me. My love was real.”

“I’ve said a lot of things about him but I never said you didn’t love him, Iru.” she pulls his ponytail. “I get that much, at least. It didn’t matter what it was to everyone else, it was real to you. And maybe it was unhealthy and dependent-” she touches her mark, still staring at him, “but does that make it less real? I don’t think so.”

“Then you’re better at feelings than I am. Kakashi’s honest with his feelings…it makes me uneasy.”

“That sounds pretty honest to me.” Anko tugs his hair again.

“That’s after I tried to get him to break up with me.”

“Damn, Iru. He only just asked you on a date. Or did he?”

“We were together on mission for most of the summer.”

“Right, right. Nothing wrong with backwards. Pretty weird that I’m doing things right way round actually.”

Iruka snorts.

“Shut up that face already. Now tell me about this date?”

“He hadn’t planned anything after I agreed.”
“Not winning points from me.”

“You can’t plan your way out of a paper bag.”

“I know that. You’re my planner, you can’t be his! Sneaky jounin.” she sighs, sinking on him and closing her eyes.

“Can’t sleep like this.” he says, pushing her hair back. “My back won’t take it.”

She groans, lifts herself up, sticks her tongue out. “Bullshit that we can’t cuddle anymore.”

“We can, just not that way.” he leans up and lets his head fall to her shoulder. Her arm comes around his shoulders.

“Still bullshit.”

Iruka slides out when her breath evens, putting the rest of the food away and grabbing a blanket. It’s not really cold enough for one, but Anko is weird like that.

“It kind of is bullshit.” he agrees, pushing her hair back.

- Anko is making noise far too early in the morning, even for him as he sits up, groggy.

“What are you doing?”

“I thought I’d cook.” she sticks her head into the hallway, munching on a stick of dango.

“That’s a terrible idea.”

“Even I can cook eggs, Iru.”

“Where did you get eggs?”

“Broke in the market a few doors down and got some stuff. You had nothing going on. Left them money, no worries.”

“That’s not the point.”

“I grabbed stuff for lunch and some canned stuff too. Thought about cooking that, but that seemed more likely to end up burnt.”

“Just-” he sighs. “Let me finish breakfast.”

She smiles and lets him at the couple of bags of groceries on the counter.

“What were you buying?” he pulls out a cord of rope.

“I needed things for me. Should have probably waited on the rope and magazines though, my receipts can get reimbursed for work.”

“Magazines?”

“The medical staff make us wait for them to wake up sometimes, gets pretty boring.”

“And these?” he pulls out the box of condoms.
“I can’t get those reimbursed, Iru. I know there might be some stories about R&I but we don’t do that sort of thing. Don't think that was a thing even when it was old school T&I.”

“Not what I meant.”

“They’re new. I was still kind of tipsy so I got ‘em. You can have some if you want.”

Iruka puts the box on the counter.

“Never mind, lets find some actual food in here. Mostly snacks.”

“And eggs.”

“…and eggs.” he agrees as he finds them.

He makes them some eggs and fries up the leftover rice for them. They eat and Anko sits on the couch as he gets ready for work, flipping through her magazine.

“You pack up your stuff?”

“Yeah. Might go to the market when it opens. I kind of want that receipt.”

Iruka shakes his head as he picks up his flak jacket. He grabs a pack of worn down weapons, because he’s been thinking about showing them basic maintenance. Several sessions of practice throwing has probably dulled several of them.

He grabs a couple others that are damaged because his older ones need to see what’s possible with random assortments. He goes to tuck them in his pocket and frowns. There’s a folded up piece of paper that he pulls out.

He unfolds it and sees Gai’s messy handwriting and a key taped to the bottom.

Youthful love waters youthful blossoms.

“What’s that?”

“I think it’s the key to Kakashi’s apartment.”

“No way! He slipped in in? That’s smooth, Iru!”

“I think it was Gai-sensei.”

“Threesome?! On for you cause I’ve heard he’s…thick, although I’m not sure if they meant his attitude but-”

“It must have been when we sparred yesterday,” he cuts her off not wanting to hear the rest of her gossip.

“Lame. Threesome sounds better.”

“I’m sorry that my story about my possession of the key isn’t entertaining enough for you.”

“I still love you. You let me know if you get that threesome, though. At least someone should be getting laid.”

“Anko!”
“You going to head over there? Check out the porn collection?” she wags her eyebrows at him.

“I won’t be exploring, just watering the plant.”

“Also boring. You should totally get off in his bed! Stop with the scandalized face, already. Like we haven’t done worse. I think that’s pretty hot, myself.”

“I have to get to school.” he says instead, shoving the key in his pocket along with the damaged weapons. “and you should go to the mission office and see if Yamato is on mission or not.”

“Fine, spoilsport. You better let me know what he’s got for the Icha Icha though. ‘cause I’ve heard he’s got the special edition of Icha Icha Whirlwind with Extra Maelstrom Content.”

“He said you spoiled an ending for him.”

“He’s still harping about that!? Jeez. It was an *accident*. He’d been on a mission and was a book behind. He might not lend it to me, then.” she groans, then grins. “Then you read the bonus chapter and get back to me. Don’t make that face either, we’ve compared positions. You can give me a summary of the chapter when he lets you read it.”

“Maybe.” he agrees, blushing and trying to shut her up.

“Plan made!” she pumps her fist and heads out the door with her shopping bags. “See you around, Iru.”

“See you.”

---

School is mostly uneventful, although he doesn’t have the time to start in on weapons maintenance, as the jounin that teaches moderate illusions is available only for a few days before he’s needed on long-term mission. Iruka pulls the kids that he believes has the chakra control for such a thing, mid-level and higher.

He doesn’t want to spilt up the lesson on weapons and maintenance however, so he pushes the lesson back.

Tsunade isn’t at the hospital today, so he gives Sakura some updates.

The door slides open and Neji walks in. “Had to go through basic-”

“Orientation for the standard hospital shifts, yes.” Sakura says, a glint in her eyes as a she picks up the notebook. “but you did get a notice regarding this?”

“Godaime mentioned it when she changed my rotation.”

“Good, good.” she grins. “So there’s two to monitor but Iruka-sensei is the only one available right now. Moro should be back soon. You’ll be assessing their chakra and the differences between the divisions between them.”

Neji activates his eyes, staring at him.

“It almost seems double.” he says after a moment. “As if it’s been stamped twice and has an extra outline. Close, but not the same. Unlike the other day.” he explains the difference in chakra as well as the points of tenketsu to Sakura, who takes furious notes.
“I’ll have to study them further,” he says, blinking. “The doubling makes it seem off, somehow. I cannot honestly say that you possess a fully active 361 tenketsu. It could be less, due to the seal.”

“Could tenketsu slowly close on their own?”

“Not that I am aware. But in extreme circumstances, such as the loss of a limb, the nearby tenketsu can be overwhelmed because the body does not immediately understand the loss.”

Sakura is nodding, following along with his explanations. Iruka doesn’t quite follow, but he thinks this may be something after all. “I think that might be it. I start to lose my ability slowly, the tenketsu closing with our disconnect. But I keep trying and it overwheels the nearby chakra points, which is turn close.”

Until the chakra is forced into other chakra points, unable to be used and lashing out. Forcing itself outward and then returning inward, plummeting into him and his body attempting to protect itself with the coma-like state.

Sakura doesn’t seem to find his theory completely useless, taking more notes.

Neji seems skeptical, although he doesn’t say anything.

“Does that not seem possible?” he asks.

Neji tilts his head as he thinks. “For a standard chakra, I think not. The gentle fist can shut them down temporarily, but tenketsu have no reason to simply shut down on their own. Damage can cause such a thing, as well as repeated injury to specific points even if one is healed. Perhaps the disconnect could manifest itself as damage to the points from the constant fluctuations.”

“What about Naruto and the chuunin exams?”

Neji’s eyebrows crinkle momentarily, so fast that Iruka thinks that Sakura missed it, looking at her notes as she asks the question.

“When he activated the Nine Tails’s chakra that was a completely different set of tenketsu.”

“So that looks different, then?” Sakura asks.

“It is a totally different set. Within, but hidden until needed. These are apparent. Strange, but apparent. Has it always been this way?”

He’s questioning his own abilities now, wondering how he could have missed it when he was under Iruka’s tutelage during the off sessions of class. Iruka’s colleague at the time had been overwhelmed with how far and frequently Neji pushed himself and a serious trip to the hospital had in turn caused Sandaime to recommend Iruka for extra training sessions.

Neji had been young and talented, but Iruka had not given him the leeway that his colleague had; he’d been very firm about chakra levels and exhaustion, and his success with Neji had been one of the reasons that the Hyuuga family decided to have him start tutoring infrequently at the compound.

Most people find it disconcerting to work with the Hyuuga because their eyes don't give the standard emotional breadth of expression. Iruka’s never really had a problem though, mostly because of Anko who has the eyes if not the ability associated with them.

“I’ve had a bit of a chakra issue since I became chuunin, if not earlier. Well before we met. I don’t
think you would have seen much. The other half was asleep within me then. I had a few attacks back then from the disconnect, but I was never well enough to teach when those happened.”

He can tell that Neji doesn’t take his reasoning as an excuse for never noticing, but he does relax his face a bit.

“Okay then,” Sakura says as she finishes up writing and closing the book. “Neji has to be getting to his shift and it’s time for me to head out. We can regroup in a couple days when Moro returns, although I do have some charts I’d like you to update each day, Iruka-sensei. I also have some texts regarding chakra distribution for you Neji.”

She passes Iruka a couple of folders and then dumps an enormous book on Neji, who strains, but holds it. She drops a couple more folders on top and his arms shake.

“Where would you suggest I put this during my shift?”

“Oh. I guess you can leave it here and pick it up after then. Don’t want anyone getting ideas from reading it.”

“I am sure very few could lift this.” he pulls it up, half-pushing it back onto the table.

“Oh?” she smiles, “I guess not, but still better safe up here I think. The charts are pretty standard for both of you. If you don’t understand anything, just ask next time. Let me add you to the wards really quick and we can be off.”

Sakura records both of their signatures on paper and ties them into the wards. It’s delicate work and Iruka is impressed. The three walk together before Neji goes off for his shift.

Iruka walks with Sakura to the lobby where he sees that Hinata is waiting. She greets him, smiling. He smiles back, glad that she seems to be growing into herself more and more.

“Let me just grab a couple things before we go, all right?” Sakura asks and Hinata agrees as Sakura goes behind the desk.

“How are you doing? Sakura says you spar regularly?”

“I spar with Sakura a couple times a week. Ino, also. And my team.”

“That sounds like a good range of abilities. I hear that you’ve been giving Asuma some good shogi games as well.”

“Ah, well-” she blushes “haven’t given him a real challenge yet.”

“Anyone who puts in the effort makes it a worthwhile game to Asuma. Now Shikamaru on the other hand, well.” he laughs. “You can tell when he thinks you’ve made a bad move.”

Hinata smiles. “That’s true.” she looks down for a moment and then back at him, serious now.

“Did you ask Hanabi to watch over the new Hyuuga students?”

Iruka blinks, surprised at the question and that Hanabi is close enough to Hinata now to share such things.

“I did.” he says after a moment. “I understand that it is a lot to ask. If she considers the task too difficult-’”
“It is good for her.” Hinata interrupts, before catching herself, blushing hard, “I mean, um- you can finish, Iruka-sensei.” she’s blushing harder now and Iruka can’t help but smile.

“It is good for her?” Iruka asks, and Hinata takes a breath, meeting his eyes.

“Hanabi is the heiress, you know that.” Iruka nods and she takes another breath. “But father-well- I think this is good for her. Even being heiress is um- father makes her train mostly. We sit in on some politics and legislative matters on occasion but- this is the first real responsibility that she has for the clan. This matter- it is important to her.”

“Thank you for telling me,” Iruka says, throat tight. He’s glad that the girl doesn’t view it as a chore, as another responsibility on her small shoulders.

“Did she say anything?” Hinata is frowning just a bit now and Iruka smiles at her.

“She did not give me any indication as to wanting or rejecting the responsibility.” Hanabi had simply accepted his decision with no real apparent feelings on the matter. Then he grins. “But maybe you can give her some help with her handwriting.”

Hinata looks at him, a question in her eyes.

“She did demand I teach her barrier seals in return for asking for her help.”

“She did?” Hinata has a sort of pinched look now, and Iruka thinks she might be annoyed with her sister’s bluntness. How far she has come, he thinks with pride at the small girl that couldn’t meet his eyes even a year ago.

“She is a bit difficult when it comes to such things,” he says, thinking back to their exchange, wondering what he missed. “Perhaps you can help her with her handwriting, she’s got a bit of a way to go before she can work sealing jutsu.”

---

Of course the heat that he’d been lucky enough to escape for most of the summer rushes back with a final wave and he spends most of his afternoon soaking in a cool bath as he tries to push the heat away.

He sleeps for a few hours, fitful and annoyed when he wakes, sheets irritating against his scar. It’s too early to be awake, but his mind is racing and sleep seems to have escaped for now.

Wonders where Kakashi is with his mission.

Want.

The feeling that he’s been ignoring curls around him; the haze of heat and desire blending and itching beneath his skin.

Want.

His hand drifts down. He’s half-hard, not that he’s surprised. The feeling has more of desperate tilt to it, even though he’s tried to keep himself busy. He usually takes care of himself in the shower, as much a piece of his routine as brushing his teeth, but it doesn’t satisfy the urge that builds beneath his skin, not the way that sex does.

It’s only been a few weeks since Kakashi—this can’t be the limit of his patience, can it?
He’d had a longer spell at House Warren.

But had it been really? There had been training as well as his chakra collapse, not to mention the sense of something between them; something low and simmering that kept his attentions focused.

He’d certainly pulled out a number of tricks during training, knowing Kakashi had been watching. And that was an idea, Kakashi watching. They hadn’t really explored that, considering that House Warren had more or less been theirs.

But it was a delicious idea nonetheless, the thought that Kakashi could be watching somewhere in the shadows of his room.

His cock is already tenting his pants and he rubs his hand over the fabric, sighing with pleasure. He does that a few more times before he gives in, sliding his hand beneath the loose sleep pants and taking himself in hand and watching the movement of his hand beneath the fabric, his strokes slow and firm.

It’s such a break from his usual, he bites his lip as he continues. It feels good, but it seems like a tease, he thinks. If he was watching he’d certainly want to see more than some tented fabric.

As the idea firmly takes root, Iruka arches his back, hips hitting up as he slides his pants down, putting on a show.

It’s wonderful like this, his want growing as he decides to take himself slow, trying to think about what Kakashi would do if faced with such a display.

Iruka knows if the situation was reversed he wouldn’t be able to keep his hands to himself; there’s something about touch that thrills him in ways that a show never could.

But Kakashi- he could come out of the shadows or he could keep watching, depending on his mood and glint in his eyes. Imagines his eyes, one glowing like moonlight, the other like the dying embers from a fire, dual gaze burning into him from the shadows.

Desire pushes him higher and he groans, drags his free hand to his mouth, tracing the shape of his lips before sucking a digit in, then two, swirling them inside his mouth.

He lets his fingers glide lower, drags a finger over his hole. He shivers, pressing against it, wanting more, wanting a stretch.

He pulls his hand from his cock, still twisting his fingers inside him as he fumbles blindly at the table beside his bed, groping for the tube he keeps there. He slicks himself, pumping his cock a few times before turning to his side.

He reaches behind himself, pressing two fingers against his hole. There is resistance, intense and sharp but no less arousing. He exhales, groaning as his fingers move.

This is what would break Kakashi he thinks, drag the man out from hiding because Kakashi really does enjoy this part, swirling and dipping and pressure and the slick slide of in and out. His cock twitches just thinking about it, the slow syrupy heat of the push pull sensation of fingers and he swears he can hear the small noise that starts at the back of Kakashi’s throat that he always wants to swallow down.

He keeps his eyes closed, not wanting to look in the corner, not wanting to ruin the idea that Kakashi is watching.
Kakashi liked him open and wanting and the pressure and stretch are sharper after so long, intensity almost too much making him shake as he squeezes his cock, grounding himself. He pulls his fingers out and presses them back in but it’s not enough it doesn’t-

He drags his fingers out and rolls over, on his knees and pushes his fingers back in. And there, that’s the push pull that he wants as he thrusts forward into his hand and pushes back against his fingers, letting the feeling edge him higher and higher. He’s trembling, moaning as he rocks himself harder, higher.

When he comes he forces his fingers deeper, pushing against himself, his body trying to push them out, shaking and choking on Kakashi’s name.

He collapses on the bed, boneless and uncaring of the mess he’s just made for the moment as he lets his world tilt sideways and falls back into sleep.

-  

_Smoke, thin and trailing again. From incense or maybe a cigarette, his vision swimming._

_Hands on his neck, squeezing tighter and tighter as spots dance in his eyes, because this is different, a fear inside of him as he scrabbles for purchase, trying to cry out for help, for anything._

_Something shatters._

He snaps up, panting. Blinks rapidly as he tries to place the image, the situation, but the dream is fading, foggy compared to some of the clear memories he's had the past few times.

He falls back down, head against the pillow as he breathes. Goes and strips down the bed, showers and does his standard exercise regimen. It’s still too early to head to the school, so he finds himself heading to the address scribbled on the note that Gai had left.

He keeps telling himself that it shouldn’t be a big deal, that the apartment isn’t really something that important.

But he wouldn’t be giving up keys to just anyone. He hasn’t seen Gai about, not since their ‘spar’ and wonders if his team got a mission. It would make sense, considering Gai isn’t the type to leave a ‘challenge’ to someone else.

The apartment is about the same size as his, a bit smaller even. He doesn’t see any of the garbage that Sakura had mentioned from before, although he thinks that Kakashi has loads more free time as a jounin than as an Anbu. Or that Gai would have taken care of such a mess long before Kakashi and Iruka had returned from House Warren.

The shuriken bedspread though, he chuckles to himself as he wonders who bought Kakashi such a thing. He walks over to the plant and waters it.

It’s not his fault that next to the plant are a few pictures. Team Seven, Iruka’s heart aches. He’d known that Sasuke was in a dark place, but he’d tried and Sasuke had chosen for himself, followed his own path. A path that had nearly killed Naruto.

He turns from that photo to another, one with a much younger Kakashi and what must be Rin and Obito with their sensei, almost in the same position and Kakashi and Team Seven’s photo. Obito has the clear coloring of an Uchiha, and the girl- he doesn’t recognize the markings, but they’re clearly shinobi markings. He’s never seen such a color before, not in all his teaching years although he assumes that her family could have come from Ushizo before it fell.
He knows that there are few civilian shinobi from the time of the war, with the advanced graduation schedules- they couldn’t have kept up with the pace.

And Kakashi- he looks young of course, but still-

He thinks that Kakashi would have been an orphan by the time the photograph was taken and his heart aches for a different reason.

His eyes drift to the smiling sensei standing behind the three students and his breath catches.

He feels as if he’s looking at an older Naruto. The shape of the face the color of the hair- the eyes might be closed but he’ll bet his paycheck they’re just as blue as Naruto’s also.

He knew that Kakashi’s mentor was the Yondaime, he knew that the man had sealed the fox into a newborn-into Naruto. Hiruzen has told him enough times that the previous Hokage wanted Naruto to live as he wished, to be viewed as a hero and not a symbol of village destruction.

And yet- he somehow missed the fact that the Yondaime was Naruto’s father.

The more he stares at the photo the more he can’t believe that he never guessed, never even crossed his mind. The rock relief of Yondaime doesn’t capture all of the features but still-

Anyone more than a few years older than him should know exactly who Naruto is related to, even if it was never formally announced. He guesses that must have been another piece of the edict that Sandaime had placed to protect Naruto. Yondaime had been a famous ninja in his own right; Naruto would have been in danger simply for existing as he was, never mind the fact that he had Kyuubi inside.

Hiding in plain sight all this time.

It’s no coincidence that Kakashi ended up Naruto’s jounin sensei. Probably one of the few who knew what Naruto could really be capable of.

It hurts, the fact that Hiruzen never bothered to share this with him. But then again, Iruka knows he wouldn’t have been able to keep it from Naruto when he asked him if he knew anything about his parents. Wouldn’t have been able to spend time in records room searching for an answer he already possessed.

Hiruzen must have had some larger plan in place regarding this information. It must have been difficult, playing a game against the village where only certain people could even view all the pieces.

It still hurts, though.

He turns around, closing the door behind him.

---

The fog rolls over him.

He can’t breathe, the world tilting sideways as he clutches at his chest, urging himself to breathe, fingers scraping against the bark of the tree branch he’s kneeling on. A million senbon prick him, going deeper every time he tries to suck in air, agony ripping across him.
**Iruka!** Mizuchi calls, reaching. Iruka reaches back, tapping into the same vein they shared at the exams, somehow bridging into one another.

He calls for the river, desperate. It roars at his call, swelling and swelling, breaking free of its banks and shooting up towards them, the shape of Mizuchi.

It’s going to swallow them he knows, trying to call out to his sensei- he’s the only one he can see from this vantage point. The words get stuck in his throat, garbled and weakened from the pain in his lungs and then he’s trying to hand-sign ninja shorthand; to let him know this isn’t a part of the attack, that this is safe.

The water hurtles at them, but it doesn’t slam into him, instead it catches him, gently cradling him, pulling him into the water. Iruka feels like he can breathe again, the gripping clutch around his lungs easing.

The water has brought Aki into view and Iruka moves towards him, somehow able to move freely even submerged in water.

The grip on his lungs continues to fall and he realizes that the water is somehow taking out the poison.

He reaches Aki noticing a gash on his friend’s head, he touches the wound, skin knitting back together.

**Iruka!** Mizuchi calls again and suddenly he can’t sense the dragon, can’t feel the sense of us- he’s alone, the voice snuffed out like a candle.

And as the sense of Mizuchi vanishes, so does his grip on the water. It collapses in on itself, heavy and dragging them down with its weight, echoing as it crashes down on the trees below them; a wave in the middle of the forest.

He clutches at Aki as they fall, wrenching them away from the water’s grip, his muscles creaking with protest as he holds onto a nearby branch, ripping the skin off his palms as he cries out from the added weight of his teammate.

He can’t think, can’t do anything except call into the void, reaching for Mizuchi. His head pounds, his stomach churning and vision unfocused. He vomits, but it’s mostly water and the remains of the poison drifting away.

Aki coughs up a mouthful of water and Iruka focuses on his friend, clearing his airway and trying to coax him to cough up more of the poison. His head aches, and the fact that his calls for Mizuchi echo back at him doesn’t help.

Aki coughs up some more water, Iruka tilting his head back again as he groans weakly. He opens his mouth, but the words are lost as he turns to the side, coughing and sputtering.

Iruka looks around, trying to see his sensei or Miki or anything through his blurry vision and trying desperately not to panic.

And then-

He sags against the tree as relief floods through him because Mizuchi is there, inside him and just as weak as he is, but **there**.
He opens his eyes, awake for the first time in days without clutching or crying out.

It’s the most he’s remembered of the event so far. The most complete recollection and surprisingly it didn’t make him panic upon waking. The relief at the sense of Mizuchi inside him, he thinks.

“So is that what happened? We tried to save them and couldn’t?”

Mizuchi makes a low sad sound and he wants to cry, feeling like he’s failed them all over again.

Although at the same time it feels different, looking back at the incident with age and experience.

That sort of thing-

He hadn’t thought it was something possible that he could do now, never mind as a developing genin.

He certainly wouldn’t expect that sort of feat from any genin.

But it still feels like he failed somehow as he remembers Miki’s weight as he carried her, the warm wetness that was not water against his back-

Kakashi said that he’d have taken the pain for the chance to keep living.

Iruka had made a similar decision with a fuma shuriken in his back, even thought he hadn’t viewed it as a decision then.

Saving Naruto hadn’t been a decision, it had been a reaction.

But after, when he’d been in the hospital- that had been the price for his reaction; the decision had been the surgeries and the physical therapies, all of it.

Even knowing the price- he’d do it again.

But poison hadn’t been a choice; neither had his clumsy attempt at saving them. He wishes, now more than ever, that he had Naoki-sensei to talk with. He hadn’t been ready to talk about them then, and then he was gone too.

He curls up, closing his eyes and drifts to the beach, lets himself just exist alongside Mizuchi.

---

He should be surprised when Tiger appears at the end of class. But he isn’t.

The kids, on the other hand, are tripping over themselves, awestruck and a bit afraid.

“You are requested at the Residence.”

He turns back to his kids and smiles. “As I have an errand, I will not be available to sign your logbooks today. Another teacher can if they’re at the practice grounds or you can simply practice on your own. If you practice with at least two others then I will allow you to sign for each other-this time. Dismissed.”

They grab their packs and rush at Yamato, who disappears in a swirl of smoke and leaves.

“Too slow.” Iruka laughs and they grumble.
“How can they do that?” Koike asks and Iruka can’t ignore the opportunity for a lesson.

“The town is warded against minor long-distance transport. If everyone transported everywhere without a thought as to location or circumstance, bad things could happen. That’s why most everyone walks everywhere.”

She nods, but still looks a bit forlorn. Her father is a jounin, if he remembers correctly.

“I only use barriers and seals for transport myself and only when absolutely necessary,” he continues and she smiles a bit at that. “Advanced transport like that is only allowed for the highest level jounin.”

“But substitution-” Konohamaru starts in.

“Is a different skill entirely. And one that I will expect you to master in time for graduation.”

Konohamaru groans.

“Please remember to work on your homework and your special assignments. Presentations are coming up. Class dismissed.”

He heads over to the Hokage Residence. He enters and the ninja at the desk waves him over the the chairs nearby.

“Godaime is with someone at the moment. I’ll get you when she's done.” Iruka turns, heading to the chairs. Why would he have been summoned to be sidelined?

Someone was injured most likely, and if she was treating them here instead of the hospital- that meant mission level injury. Important information to be shared.

Could it be Kakashi-

No, it can’t be. Kakashi wanted him to know about medical notifications not to sit around for news.

His thoughts stop as he notices who else is in one of the chairs.

Kamu slouched in the chair, his legs stretched out, Aomaru laying nearby, having shoved one of the chairs aside to lay beside his partner. Kamu’s got a bruise swelling on the side of his face and Aomaru’s white fur is matted with blood in places. Kamu’s eyes are on him, his hand scratching at Aomaru’s head absently.

It looks like a rough mission, because the three scrolls he usually carries around with him is only one today.

“That doesn’t look so good,” Iruka says, sitting down.

“Not so bad,” he says, smiling. “Your scrolls are just as good a distraction as ever.”

“I can make more,” Iruka offers.

“Might take you up on that,” Kamu smiles and it’s easier now, less strained.

Their relationship had been easy, Iruka remembers. Comfortable.
Not anything like the mess of feelings and missteps that he’s had with Kakashi.

Aomaru looks up at him, those blue eyes a bit unnerving, as always.

“Doesn’t smell like pain.” the dog says as he drops his head to Kamu’s lap. “Doesn’t smell like the other one either-”

“I didn’t ask him that!” Kamu reddens and glanced away. “Well the pain bit was me yeah, but not the other bit-”

“It’s all right.” Iruka says, because Kamu would worry. His injury had been a feature of their relationship, after all. Sometimes he’d felt like Kamu had to deal with two sides of him; the side where pain broke his day and his regular self.

“My back hasn’t given me any serious trouble for several weeks.” He says instead and realizes it’s true. He’ll always have pain, daily and manageable, and he still has bad days and sharp moments of pain that won’t let him forget his injury but overall (the overwhelming draining constant pain that had run him down) was gone.

“That’s good then,” Kamu shifts again, trying to push his hair out of the way and winces. His hair is as wild as it always is, even wilder even, although that’s probably the mission that he just came back from.

But the hair parts to reveal a nasty looking cut, still sluggishly oozing blood.

“You should get that looked at.”

“It’s not infected.”

“Not the point.” Iruka says, sighing at his stubbornness as he comes closer, only just stopping his hand inches from the wound.

“Ah, sorry.” he says, closing his hand, not sure if he’s overstepping here. “If you want-?”

“You can heal it.”

Iruka lets his hand close the distance and unlatches his water bottle, focusing on the injury. The water swirls around his hand, covering the wound as he wills the skin to come back together, wound closing up under his palm.

“Thanks.”

“You here with Moro, then?”

“How’d you guess that one?”

“I’d think only certain medical staff would have access to her. Can’t be serious enough for the hospital though if you guys came out here. And a wound like that is definitely worth a look at so Tsunade must have to see to something or someone else first.”

“Right again.” and he’s smiling now, that half-smile when he’s impressed, his fingers buried in Aomaru’s scruff. His eyes catch the light and seem to hold it, more honey-colored than the brown he’s familiar with. “I was actually thinking-I mean maybe-” he stops.

Moro the ninken wolf is standing there, large and imposing. The front right leg is freshly bandaged although spots of blood are already seeping through. “Godaime will see you now.” the ninja at the
desk says from behind the wolf. “Both of you.”

Iruka looks at Moro. Her right arm is also bandaged, which matches the bandage on the wolf. Compared to last time she also is far more wild looking, hair windswept, chakra more unrestrained.

“A bit nasty, that.” Tsunade continues as she looks at the arm again. “I still want you at the hospital. You should have gone straight there and sent me a message. I would have met you there. The council doesn’t question me on emergencies.”

“I do believe I made that suggestion,” Kamu says, cheerily.

Moro isn’t amused, turning her head to glare at him as a growl fills the room.

Iruka thinks Moro the woman might be growling too, but it’s drowned out by the wolf.

“A very good suggestion, and one that you should have heeded.” Tsunade says, nonplussed about the growling as she looks at the wolf’s bandages again.

“At least the bleeding seems under control. I sent a summons to Sakura; I want her able to dress injuries such as these. I also have a Hyuuga on rotation that will look at your chakra points. Both of you.” she points at Kamu and Aomaru. Tenketsu on summons or partners isn’t something that we have much data on, which I plan to rectify. Hana should also be back from mission by this evening so you should have her look over your partners. Animal physiology is not my speciality.”

“Might as well check his injuries.” Moro says, voice thin.

“Since you asked so nicely.” Tsunade smiles as she walks over to Kamu and pushes his hair aside.

“You healed this, Iruka?” she makes a noise of approval. “Going to have to move the training up a few steps then. Which is good because I didn’t want Sakura too far ahead of you. Puts you on par with Ino at this stage.”

“Ino?”

“She’s also learning some medical chakra. Lifetime rivals make you push yourself higher than you thought you could ever push yourself. Or something like that anyway, I’m paraphrasing.”

Iruka snorts, shaking his head.

“Shizune, sort out the rest of my appointments, would you? I might as well head over to the hospital with these two as a unit and check these injuries over one more time with Sakura. Moro, let Kamu do the transfer.” Moro gives a stiff nod in acknowledgement. “Iruka, you should come along and we’ll see what you three look to Neji in the same room.” her hand rests on his shoulder, grip tightening.

They fade away in a whirlwind of smoke and a spike of shock thrums through him, unexpected and sharp, his head spinning as the hospital forms around them.

His skin prickles with the sensation as she lets him go, “Forgot about that, considering opposing natures and all,” she smiles, laughing to herself. “The shock is no joke, huh?”

“Can’t say that Kakashi’s nature is quite so intense as that.”

“That was my fault, really. Didn’t think about tempering it. Not sure I never have moved a water orientation in peace time before.” A shadow crosses her face, an intense sadness that makes her
look far older than she appears.

It’s replaced by a look of irritation when she glances around the room, where Moro and Kamu should be by now. This room is set aside for those to transport in.

It is another few long moments before the pair appear, Moro unsteady on her feet, looking exhausted in a way that she hadn’t just moments ago.

“Aomaru and Moro are coming.” Kamu says, not looking away from Moro.

“She tried to summon Moro back to her, didn’t she?” Tsunade clicks her tongue when he nods. “With the injury, I bet that worked out fantastic.”

She grimaces, swaying on her feet.

“Stupid.” she opens a nearby door and ushers the three of them in. “Moro. Iruka. Sit down. Kamu, go get your animal partners before they start tearing down the hospital trying to find the two of you. I’ll fetch Sakura from where we were supposed to meet and bring her here and we’ll redress those wounds.”

“I can help.” Iruka says, starting to stand.

“You aren’t much better off than she is, Iruka. I’m glad that Kamu’s injury was shallow, because their injuries were caused by a chakra resistant weapon.” She pushes him down into the chair and heads out the door, Kamu behind her.

“Do they teach chakra resistant weaponry in the academy?” her voice is sharp with irritation.

“It is taught, but I can’t say I’ve ever seen the effects of one.” Iruka answers, too dazed and surprised to really take her words for the pointed barb that she’s going for.

Iruka knew of such weapons, of course. Weapons forged with only the negative aspect of chakra, made in such a way that they drew in chakra energies of the one they strike. Chakra resistant wounds are difficult to close and often lethal- considering where the wound is located.

However, weapons forged with negative chakra are not common, for multiple reasons. They are extremely difficult to create, needing to be forged by someone with chakra talent; which is both dangerous and unstable for the creator. Chakra imbalance is a deadly condition, Iruka knows. He cannot imagine someone inviting such a thing upon themselves.

Because of the imbalance taking place within the creator; such imbalance cannot be kept up for long, which results in weapons that are often small and must be distinguished from most other weaponry (it would not do to lose such a thing in a battle among other commonly used weapons) most often decorated knives.

But the biggest downside of a negative chakra weapon was the fact they did not stay negative. Chakra is not a vacuum, and just as a chakra wielder can spend down their chakra until death- the reverse is true for such weapons. Contact with positive chakra interacts with the weapon and over time-negates it.

Overall, it is an expensive, time-consuming, and often short lived weapon.

It is still an alarming thought that such things are being used against them.

He looks at Moro’s bandaged arm and finds himself asking about her bond instead of giving in to
her taunts.

“How does the bond work? Who was injured first? Have you always shared one mind? Did you disagree? Have you ever lost contact?” She snaps her eyes to his and he isn’t sure what she sees there, but her gaze softens some and she shifts in the chair.

“For us- I was born alone; as most Inuzuka are. I was also dying, born too early, too small. My parents made pleas to our goddess and she gave me Moro. I was marked— she sweeps her hair aside and Iruka sees a third mark, a triangle not unlike the Inuzuka standard marks but this one starts at her hairline and covers a portion of her forehead, “and we have been together since.”

“Was Moro always so large?”

She blinks at him, letting go of her hair to steady herself in the seat.

“No. Moro was small when the goddess came with him. We grew and aged together.”

_They were young together, aged together. Like us._

“Are you the first?”

“No.” she says, “I’m not the first, no matter what the records say,” her eyes are distant now, looking past him. “For Inuzuka, we are more than a family, more than a clan. The ideal of family that the Sandaime touted is just that to us, an abstract ideal. We understand it and follow it, to a degree, but…we are pack. And…it is hard sometimes, to try to place pack _within_ the idea of Konoha. Pack is more than the abstract, but it is also a tighter bond. To lose a mate, to have you pack _leave_-” her voice warps for a moment, catching on the word. She seems to catch herself and meets his gaze.

“I had met another before, when I was young. I could sense them, in the way of a child, I knew that something was different about _us_, that we were different somehow. With you- I had not sensed such a thing. But now- it is different. You do not feel the same as before.”

The thought of not telling her about his memories flits by, but she is the only one that might have some answers for him.

“Mizuchi and I—” she makes a face at the fact of different names but says nothing, “we had our memories sealed. Until recently, I had not talked with Mizuchi for several years.”

Her face is tight now, and a growl comes from her throat. It is a deep sound, something he wouldn’t have thought a person capable of making. He hopes that anger is _for_ his sake. She doesn’t move to say anything so he continues, trying to get some more information.

“Does Moro remember things you didn’t? From the time when you were too young to really remember?”

Her face is still tight, but he thinks it might be more out of pain than irritation now that he’s paying attention.

“Moro is a timeless piece of the goddess,” she says, voice low, “however in this life we are tied. Moro only remembers this life. When we were young-Moro was not my eyes and ears when I was too young to understand such things; because Moro was also too young to understand such things. But neither are we the same. When we were older there were things that Moro would notice that I did not. Moro noticed things that I could not notice, for they are not human. Moro possesses a different set of senses which could enhance or contradict my own.”
Iruka follows most of this, understands how ninken partners can notice things than even enhanced Inuzuka senses would not. Kamu asking Aomaru to scent Iruka’s pain was one of them. But most Inuzuka get their partners later on, when they start at the academy, when they start learning to manage their own chakra.

“And you-” she looks at him, something deep and tired washing over her expression, highlighting the lines of her face. “To be together but separate...I cannot imagine such a thing.”

“We are more of a separate that can be one, now.” he says, and he believes it. He believes that they can get through this. He shouldn’t have had to fight for this, for something he always was.

But he’ll fight for it.

We will.

“See? Everything is fine, you’re just a worrywart.” Tsunade says as they return, Sakura and Neji with them.

Kamu murmurs something Iruka doesn’t quite catch as he flits between the two of them, nervous and antsy as Tsunade and Sakura check them over, discussing chakra points and taking notes with Neji. Iruka listens, but only just, because Tsunade was right. Healing Kamu did take more out of him than he’d thought.

“I still am not sure as to how many points you possess. The effect is rather dizzying.” Neri admits. “But perhaps your theory has some merit after all. There seems to be points where there is only one stamp instead of the double outline. But I cannot tell which would belong to you and which is not.”

“They’re both us.” Iruka says, and he thinks this is part of his problem. Trying to be ‘his’ and ‘Mizuchi’ when it shouldn’t be two.

“And hers?” Tsunade prompts.

“Hers are a normal set; although I’ve never seen a ninken with so many before, perhaps even as many as standard.”

“Can you count them?”

“I could.”

“We’ll get you on that soon enough. You’re staying overnight,” she says to Moro. “I need to see if we can get this wound to a better state or if we need surgery. I took care of what I could, but the weapons are a different make from what I’ve encountered before. Surgery might be useful though, most of these kids don’t understand the physical demands of medicine, not really. Even that head wound of yours Kamu- I would have stitched it and left it alone. It makes me debate if I should keep you overnight as well, Iruka,” she says, forehead creasing.

“I think I’ll be okay. Some rest.”

“Raw diet.”

“That too.”

“Fine. Hang around for a bit. I want to check some other things.” Everyone else files out, Sakura is talking with Neji about getting Hinata to look at Kiba as one of her side projects for more data and Kamu half-herding Moro out of the room with Shizune.
She’s holding onto his wrist, checking his pulse. “The mission’s been extended.”

“What?”

“I think I’ll try to share the chakra tomorrow.” she continues, looking him over. “Do you think you can wait? I could probably do it now, but I want to try a few more things with Moro’s injury before I resort to surgery.”

“It’s fine.” Iruka says, and he means it. “I can get through tomorrow.”
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

“Trust a teacher to turn it into an analogy about school.”

Chapter Notes

Hey there! Hope you guys are still hanging around and are ready for some more words! Posted before I hit a year so I'ma count that as a win! I've had some vision problems which is my main issue with writing as of late, but I do most of my writing on my phone now (smaller screens are better I've found) and I've got the next few chapters sketched out so hopefully not so long a break between 19 and 20?

Following that, I've a question: sometimes on my phone it gives me the option to make the text bigger/plays with the color scheme and i've found that infinitely easier to read with but my own story doesn't give me that option, does anyone know how to enable this feature in settings?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Iruka doesn't really have the energy or the patience to keep everyone in the classroom the following day, still drained from healing Kamu. He takes a walk through the training grounds, keeping notes on his students. Okita, one of his oldest, seems to be improving every day, and he’s noticed the callouses on her fingers from consistent practice. He’ll have to sign off for her to work with some of the more advanced classes because he isn’t planning on graduating her just yet.

"Iruka-sensei."

"Iruka-sensei, over here?"

"Iruuuuuuuka-sensei!"

“Iruka-sensei!"

He tries to answer most of their concerns, correcting stances and weight distribution but a headache is building behind his eyes as he rubs the bridge of his nose. Today seems to be one of those days.

"Iruka-sensei," Hanabi's voice calls, clear and urgent. He snaps his head from where he's talking with Okita about practicing with heavier shuriken, so she’ll be able to throw shrunken with surprises, such as flash bombs.

"I think that Hiyoko is having some trouble." Iruka waves off Okita and heads over to where several Hyuuga are practicing, not just the ones from his class. As he looks over the group of them he can see that Hanabi is right, something is off with Hiyoko.
He comes up to the smaller girl, the other students stopping their own mock fights. He gets down on his knees. “Hiyoko, we’ve talked about strain and exhaustion before.”

Stopping seems difficult for the girl, who is still shifting her weight around uneasily, her eyes blinking rapidly. She can’t seem to relax her eyes, which isn’t a good thing. Iruka reaches up, touching her forehead as he turns to grab his water bottle, but Hanabi is holding one out to him, ready. He takes it, passing it to the young girl.

"Small sips, please. Close you eyes for now. Breathe with me."

He doesn’t like her trembling doesn’t like the lack of sweat and clamminess he can feel under his hand. “We're going to head to the hospital, have someone look you over.”

He turns to Hanabi.

“You can join us at the hospital later, if you wish. Hideaki, Haruko-“ he turns to his other two Hyuuga, ”you should go to home, let her parents know.” He points to one of the older ones. “You let the Academy Leader know. He should still be in his office.”

Hiyoko moans, dropping the water bottle. Iruka pulls her closer to him, digging in his jacket for the transportation scroll.

"Keep breathing, okay? We're going to transport, but I've got you."

He slaps it down, activating it. The circle swirls and he feels the familiar tug in his gut as the jutsu activates, pulling them to the hospital.

This isn't the first time that he's had to do this and it won't be the last, not when you put developing children, chakra talents, and weapons in the same space.

The medi-nin looks up from the desk.

"Minor chakra exhaustion and minor dehydration as well. If Neji is on rotation, that would be helpful." The medi-nin calls for someone and starts in on checking Hiyoko over.

Some newer chuunin that he doesn’t recognize is trying to run some standard diagnostics and he finds himself snapping at them. He understands procedures well enough but this isn’t a new issue. Other staff would know this.

Protocol procedures aren’t what she needs now. Hiyoko stumbles, shaking harder now. Iruka picks her up, startled at the heat he can feel from her small form now and turns to see Iō, the previous chuunin gone. Ino is standing beside him, looking at Iruka intently.

Hiyoko trembles in his arms, hiccups more than breathing now.

"She's getting worse." Iruka says, because she is. "Moderate exhaustion now.-“ It's spiraling like he's never seen before.

“Tsunade is in surgery as are several other medical staff, including Sakura and Shizune.” the gruff man says, “I’ve sent notice, but this-“ the man’s eyes are concerned. This isn’t a typical concern, and even Iō who has been around for ages- probably hasn’t had too many cases like this and it twists inside that there isn’t anything he can do.

Water.
Maybe he can do something.

“Just get me some water.” Iruka says, shifting the girl in his arms. “Did they inform Neji-?”

“Here.” he says as Iruka puts Hiyoko down, staring down at the girl a Iō tries to stabilize her, trying to get her to stop shaking enough so that they might get some fluids into her but basic healing won’t fix the imbalance that’s inside the girl and they both know it.

“I could try to divert some paths-”

“Do it.” Iruka sucks in a breath through his teeth. Something about this grips him, twists him, angers him. Everything is grating, even watching Neji start to divert some of the chakra paths for Hiyoko.

Ino must have been listening, because she returns with large barrels of water. Iruka turns towards them, ripping one of the barrels lids off; he’s broken into a sweat already and he hasn’t even done anything yet.

The girl moans, something that could possibly be ‘sensei’ and Iruka nods at her. “That’s good, Hiyoko, keep talking to me.”

“Talk to me!” his memory echoes; he shakes it away, focusing on the girl and the water before him. He isn’t sure what he’s doing, but the water is there, ready for him. He calls it, sliding into their shared space without leaving the room. Mizuchi is there, behind his eyelids and he can sense the water, the shape of it and what he wants from it, his hand signs causing it to rise from the bucket, slosh against the edges.

Ready?

Always.

The water shakes the barrel, tipping it sideways and nearly slamming into the ground before shooting over, enveloping Hiyoko.

The water pulls her into it, her small body rising, a cocoon of sorts as it ripples around her body. It’s not that different from rehydrating fruit, he realizes as he can feel the water, feel what Hiyoko needs.

Pain lances across his back, startling him with the sharp point of intensity and his breaths are shorter, pained and aching, everything radiating pain. Pain like he hasn’t felt in over a year, and he half wants to check and see if he’s ripped open his scar. But he can’t do that, can’t take his eyes off her. His limbs are shaking, head spinning but he holds the water. She’s not safe yet and he can’t drop this, he can’t.

The water stretches, thinning as it curls around Hiyoko. Less a cocoon now; more like a water whip, more like Mizuchi. It ripples around her slowly, releasing the girl to the bed.

He watches as Mizuchi glides back towards him, his eyes following the water as the shape fades, loses form as he guides it back to the basin.

He blinks and Mizuchi is gone, scooped out of him, leaving him hollow and alone. More than alone, it was a world without.

He can feel himself fading, crying out for a voice that isn’t there-
He crumples.

---

Iruka holds Aki to his chest, coughing up water and trying to stand, he doesn’t know where Naoki-sensei or Miki are. Doesn’t even know which direction is which. Aki shakes against him, skin hot to the touch, mumbling nonsense which means he’s breathing again.

“`Iruka!`”

“Here,” he manages to croak out as he tries to stand.

“We have to get back to the village,” Naoki-sensei says as he drops down to the branch nearest him. Miki is standing beside him, swaying but conscious. She leans against the tree as Naoki-sensei takes Aki and shifts the boy in his arms. “Get running, you two.”

Miki grips the tree and shakes harder.

“Come on Miki,” Iruka urges. “We can stay at this level, where the branches are closer together.”

They start, Naoki-sensei outpacing them easily. Miki keeps stumbling, losing her footing. Iruka is doing better, but only just.

She falls again, slumping against the tree as she tries to breathe.

“It hurts, Iru.” she coughs, turning into his shirt.

“Get on my back.” he says, even though he isn’t sure he can make it back, never mind carry her. He can barely keep up as is. But Miki isn’t getting used to the heavy feeling or the exhaustion like he is, she’s getting worse.

Miki climbs on his back and Iruka starts, stumbles, only just catching himself against the tree. He can only just see Naoki-sensei in the distance and focuses on him.

“Talk to me, Miki. You're heavy, you know.”

She coughs against his back, a weak laugh that feels like a victory as Iruka starts moving again. “Rude.”

“Doesn’t make it any less true.” He stumbles again, but he can’t keep stopping because if he loses sight of his sensei he’ll lose his way and then what.

“Truth like that,” she coughs again, “wonder anyone wants to date you -” she stops as Iruka drops heavily onto another branch.

“Not true,” he manages to say, jumping just a bit higher because if he loses anymore height the next drop will be the ground. “Everyone wants to date me, I’m being fair.”

She gives another weak laugh, her arms tightening around his shoulders, which Iruka takes as encouragement.

“Dating everyone at the same time is rude.”

“Not if they all know it.” Iruka grins because he’s got this now, despite the burning in his limbs.
Adrenaline or something, because they’re actually moving now, Naoki-sensei more than a moving dot on the edge of his vision. “I’m honest like that, Miki-chan~”

She groans and Iruka hopes it’s out of disgust.

“Tell me something else. You think Aki’s been harping on about Junpei too much lately?”

“Of course, you’d think we were in academy the way he’s going about this crush-” she coughs again. Shudders against his back, breathing hard.

“What’s your favorite season?”

“Fall.”

“Tell me about it.”

And they run and run and run like that. Her breathing gets worse, her voice getting slower, words thick in her mouth. It hurts to listen to it, but he keeps urging her to talk, to say anything, it doesn’t matter what- her coughing fits get longer and weaker, a wetness on his back that he knows isn’t sweat.

“Miki,” Iruka calls as he pinches her hand, feels her stir against him. “Miki.”

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Call you…Mizuchi scary….didn’t mean it.”

“Don’t worry about that, I guess it was kinda scary since you didn’t really know about it. I didn’t really know either though.”

“…should have known…not scary… like an angel…” she shakes weakly against him, her grip on his neck going slack.

“Tell me!”

---

“Can’t even perform a routine op without someone causing trouble, can I?” Tsunade grumbles from where she sits beside him.

He tries to move, but it’s sluggish and delayed as he turns his head to face hers.

“Mild sedation, should wear off in a bit. Having you come out of sedation was no simple walk up a tree either, let me tell you. I mean the brat takes the cake and the whole bakery with it, but that was a batch of brownies maybe.”

“Don’t-“ he wheezes, breath catching in his throat. She frowns, her palms lighting up as she looks over him.

“I can’t believe you’ve done so well with damage like that. You suffered a secondary injury from your previous lung puncture from the strain you put yourself under yesterday. It’s a lucky thing that the person who ran point on your injury is no longer practicing medicine. I am pissed with
everything in regards to that, I’ll have you know. Not a fan of the treatment set they chose, no real marking in your charts, it’s very irritating, I’ll have you know.”

“Hiyoko?”

“She’s fine. Enjoying the attention, actually. She’ll be out first thing tomorrow with her first commissioned raw food diet. She’ll need some extra lessons of course, no one on record has hidden their exhaustion so well.”

“It was so fast-”

“She probably didn’t even know she was doing it. From both you and Hanabi, which makes it even more impressive. But once she lost the thread of control, well then everything went to shit. Bang up job you did there, by the way, even though I told you to take it easy. But it all worked out, so I can’t be too mad at you. How do you feel?”

“Wrung out.”

“And?”

“…not as bad as I’d thought I would feel at this point, honestly.”

“That’s the chakra bit there. Gave you some, pretty interesting. You were closer to a coma-state than I’ve ever seen before. But the chakra pulled you back.”

Is good.

Iruka can feel the thread of lightning inside of him still, helping balance him. It feels different from Kakashi’s, but that’s to be expected.

“How did you know you could do that?” Tsunade says, tapping his chart.

“I didn’t. I just had to try something.”

“Iō explained things. It was beyond the scale of his abilities, beyond many medic abilities, actually. And that sort of dramatic turn- it’s not something I would expect most people to be able to handle. Water is even more difficult and intricate than restarting one’s heart with electric chakra. It’s not something one just tries. So again, how did you know that you could do such a thing?”

He shakes his head, swallowing.

“Izumo told me that you’ve been rehydrating fruit for years.”

“That’s not the same-”

“It’s a start,” she leans back in the chair. “This is not a garden variety situation, you understand and I do need to somehow explain this.”

“I think I’ve done it before, although not consciously. Even with Hiyoko, I didn’t really know what I was doing, just that I could, if that makes any sense.” He swallows, sinking back into the bed, tired.

“Explain.”

“When I was a genin, my team was trapped in a sort of poison fog I guess? I summoned Mizuchi to heal us, but I couldn’t hold it then. My teammates died from the poison.”
“Your jounin-sensei as well?”

“He had more difficulties with the poison than I did, but he survived. Ibiki told me that none of us should have made it back and all four of us were still breathing when we came through the gates.”

“I know this case,” she says as she flicks through his charts. “First on record for us, Toxicant 1139. Two survivors, one adult and one pubescent. They chalked it up to your heritage—” she sucks in a breath, irritated. “I wasn’t in the village at the time, but one of my previous students sent me samples of it, we worked on the antidote. Ibiki is right, you shouldn’t have survived being hit with it, much less the trip back to the gates, what with the poison’s makeup—”

“Not the point,” his fingers grip the sheets.

“I suppose not.” she concedes, not taking her eyes from his as she closes his file in her lap. “But this water technique- the healing stasis you summoned, that could very well have been what saved your sensei. You, as a grown man, could barely hold the stasis for one and you somehow held it for four, one of which was yourself, at such a young age?”

“I’m only saying what I remember. I told Anko as much. And it didn’t do much good, did it? Apparently the half job resulted in water in their lungs.”

“Yes, that was a complication that only occurred with the first case of Toxicant 1139, so I would assume that was from your attempt at rescue. You sensei did have water in his lungs, but what he did not have was a lethal dose of poison. Upon arriving at the hospital they were able to treat your sensei for something they understood than stand by helplessly for something they couldn’t.”

Iruka looks at her, but she’s looking away now, eyebrows drawn in a tight line, age hiding in the shadows of her face.

“That’s the hardest part, I think. The sense of hurt when you can’t help someone- when you know that death is coming no matter the skills you wield. The medics wouldn’t have been able to help them with the poison. Doing what you did, in a way, was impossible.”

He fists his hands in the sheets, because it certainly doesn’t feel like he’d done the impossible. Not yesterday, and not back then either.

“Things happen, people die. Toxicant 1139- that amount of poison-- you shouldn’t have made it fifty trees, never mind home. But you didn’t take no for an answer. What you managed to do yesterday- I considered it impossible until you proved me wrong. I could have gotten her out of the danger zone but she’d have been here much longer than an overnight stay, that much I can confirm.”

Iruka isn’t sure what to say to that. The girl had been in a serious state, although he still didn’t consider it impossible, not even once. Just something he had to do.

“You know, I didn’t get how important you were at first. Naruto loves you, anyone who has spent more than five minutes with the kid can figure out as much. But anyone who spends that kind of time with Naruto can see how good he is. He convinced me you know, convinced me to come back.”

Iruka can’t look away from her, his eyes burning.

“You think I wanted this job for myself?” she laughs, bitter. ”No, I had no desire for this. This was never my dream. My plans, plans for the sixth- that's just if I can't make it that long. The job is waiting when Naruto gets there. And I believe that he’ll help change our world; change this
标准的血和暴力和战争-这个世界的暴力生出暴力。”

她微微前倾，合上文件夹。“我失去了非常重要的几个人-我失去了对木叶的信念，把它留在了背后。我原以为梦境的结束就是梦境的终结，但事实并非如此。只要我们还有人相信木叶所代表的一切。即使鸣人没有改变世界-他已经改变了我的世界。但他的坚定的信念-那是你赋予的。第一个承认他的人。一个已经失去了一切，但仍相信的人。”

“我不能离开，”他说，摇了摇头，那不仅仅是说说而已。那从来都未曾想过，尽管他做了一些他为之自豪的事情，但木叶是他的家。他的父母在这里建立了自己的家园，他们只是穿了一身的衣服。

他试图去恨，试图把一切都归咎于鸣人，就像其他人一样能够做到。他确实恨过一段时间，无名的恨围绕着一个他从未见过的人。

但鸣人当然没有成为杀害他父母的人，他的无名的恨在真正见到他时很快就消失了。他独自一人，脏兮兮的，饿着肚子，睡在一棵树上，离他的某些经验太近了。

“那就是我为什么相信木叶，”她说。“失去了一切之后你就…继续前进。他们的死亡并不是你生命的终结，也不是你的父母或你的队友。”

它不再只是令人痛苦的；他现在哭得很凶，是一个在最强的村子里面前嚎啕大哭的家伙。

他仍然会想起他们。他知道他已经处理了他们的死亡，但他的记忆让他好像重新经历了一遍。但某种程度上感觉是正确的，让他能够超越他从不愿意去想的记忆-不管是好是坏。

“世界不等人。”他揉着眼睛，说道。“学校要么与你同在，要么与你同去。”

她笑了，她自己的眼睛也闪烁。“相信老师会把它变成一个关于学校的类比。”

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接下来的几天就不用上课了，因此伊鲁卡有些幸运。尽管来找他的学生浪潮有些令人惊讶。显然，小由依在玲来看望他的时候，告诉了她小由依的消息，于是就导致了多人来他家探望。

“我现在可以做185个俯卧撑和仰卧起坐了，而且我可以在村子里跑两圈。”小由依兴奋地告诉他说。

“也许你应该开始戴负重背心。”

“哇哦，他真的是在这里！”一个声音惊呼，然后更多的人进入他的房间。犬夜叉，日向雏田和市之子跟着，雏田站在她们后面。
“Did you think I was lying or something?” Hanabi’s voice says as she steps out from behind Shino. “Hiyoko was pretty serious.”

“Ah, well she managed to hide it from both you and Iruka-sensei so that’s pretty impressive.” Sakura says to the girl, who grimaces.

“Yeah. Only Neji-niisan ever did something even close to that before. Still don’t like the fact that I missed it.”

“You caught it before she lost control. That is also impressive.” Iruka says, and Hinata agrees, which makes Hanabi’s grimace smaller. “Has Neji been by yet?” Sakura says as she flips to another page in the chart.

“Not today.”

“This is part of his medical training?” Hanabi asks, looking back to Iruka. She's sharper than most people give her credit for. Most first rotation chuunin would not be attending to someone alone and Hanabi seems to realize something is off here, even if she can't quite put it to words.

“This was a case of chakra drain that differs from what Hyuuga do to themselves as standard. It’s good experience to view different types of exhaustion, Hanabi.” Sakura says, "he's been working with a number of medics regarding various chakra pathways.”

“Hey there,” Kamu's voice comes from the doorway. Kamu is leaning against it, Aomaru and Akamaru greeting one another.

“Again? You do realize I’m a genin now, I don’t need a class chaperone any more.” Kiba days before he glances back to Iruka and then back to Kamu.

Iruka isn’t a fan of the realization in Kiba’s eyes, but Kamu waves him off before he can really say anything.

“I’m just stopping by, I’ve got my own injuries that need tending to, you know. Have you stopped in to seen Moro?”

“Like she’d want to see me,” Kiba laughs, “just cause sis and her get along doesn’t mean anything about me.”

“You should probably stop by anyway.” Kamu says and Kiba pulls a face that is nearly identical to the one Konohamaru had just minutes before.

“We should be heading out for lunch anyway.” Sakura says as she sets the chart down. “I’ll be back tonight.”

“All right.” Iruka agrees as they leave, Kamu coming to sit beside him.

“Kind of like when we first met, huh?”

“I was on drugs, I take no responsibility for what I said.”

“That I was handsome.” he wags his eyebrows.

“I also threw up about thirty seconds later.”

“Barfing doesn’t make the compliment disappear.” he smiles, but it’s thin, weary. Iruka doesn’t really like it. Kamu was better being loud and bright. Kamu inhales, gathering himself.
“I just want to be clear here. You wouldn’t go out with me again, would you?”

“No.” Iruka says before he can even think about it, before he can even consider what to say to let him down easy.

“Oh, well. Wow. Pretty direct then. I mean I kind of expected it but—”

“You said you loved me.” and Iruka ducks his head a bit, blushing now as he stares at the sheets. He clenches his fists, dragging his eyes back up. “You confessed and I ran away from it. That wasn’t the right thing to do.”

“I didn’t need you to do anything about it.” Kamu says, soft. “Is loving someone a problem?”

“I made it a problem.” Iruka answers, looking down again. “Words like that…openness like that, it makes me uneasy. I felt cornered. So I ended it and I’m sorry for the way I did it.”

“But you’re not sorry for ending it.”

“No,” he finds himself answering again. And it’s harsh, yes, but also true. “I was…content. And you wanted more.”

“And I was okay with what we were. I’d known from the beginning that you weren’t interested in a ‘relationship’. You’d told me as much before we even started. But I couldn’t not tell you.”

“I don’t know if I could have grown to feel more for you, but I don’t think holding on to what we were was fair either. You were open, I wasn’t. That isn’t a relationship, not one that either of us deserved. And I was afraid to try for more, then.”

“But you want to try now?”

“…yes.”
Kamu sighs, sinking back in the chair.

“You know I imagined that, a smile that only I could put there. It’s nice that I get to see it. Even if I’m not the one who put it there.”

He scratches at Aomaru’s ears and he seems more at ease now that he’s cleared the air between them. Kamu’s straightforwardness had always been something that Iruka had enjoyed.

“When it comes to someone else being sure-well I think maybe I get where you’re coming from now, with the unease and all that. Moro’s just—” he stops. “I don’t know, really. From a different world, almost.”

“But you don’t hate it.”

“…I guess I don’t.” he admits, mouth curving into that half-smile Iruka is familiar with.

“She seems like an intense sort of person.”

“That’s one word for it,” he chuckles.

“When I get cleared, you want to spar? We never had a real fight.”

“Sounds like a plan.”
“Iru! Why is it that you’re always laid up in here, man?!” Kotetsu says as he comes by sometime later, Kazane on his hip.

“I’m only in here for the weekend, what’s the issue? Standard chakra depletion. You should be proud of it.”

“I am. Much better than the warded room and the coma. Izu’s not on dinner yet and I have to go to the bathroom like I can’t even-“

“Too much info. I can have her for a few minutes.”

“Shut it, mister-lemme-talk-about-sex-positions when I’m drunk.” he places Kazane on his chest and heads out into the hall.

“Who gave you a baby?” Ino asks as she comes by a minute later. He’d had a bit of a tough time trying to imagine Ino as a medic when Tsunade had told him originally, but she suits the role like anything she decides on. Same sort of determination as Sakura, actually. Naruto touched more hearts of these kids than they realized.

“Kotetsu-sensei.”

“And how did he get a baby?” Ino is in full-fledged information gathering mode now.

“Babysitting, actually. Mother’s been on extended mission for several weeks now. We were good friends with her father.” she doesn’t miss the past tense, eyes widening as she looks the baby over. “This must be Kazane then! She can’t be more than six months old, if that.”

“Four tomorrow, actually.” Kotetsu says as he returns. “And we’ve had her for almost two now.” he shakes his head, sitting down beside Iruka. “Thinking that we might’ve to have a talk with her when she comes back.”

“I figured you’d be in here. Couldn’t wait for me to get off for my dinner break, could you?” Izumo says as he walks in.

"Like you weren't gonna stop in to see Iru on your break." Kotetsu smiles. "Kiss?"

“No.” he glances at Ino.

“Don’t hold back on my account,” she says, eyes gleaming.

“See, she gave us permission.”

“Answer is still no.”

“Iruka doesn’t need to give us permission. He lived with us, he’s seen worse.”

“Still no.”

“Just go, already.” Iruka cuts in. “Get some food and bring me something. Anything but cafeteria food, please. Leave her with me.” Kazane is already sleeping, snuffling into Iruka's warmth.
"You aren’t in any position-" Izumo starts.

"I’ll be here.” Ino says and Kotetsu takes Izumo’s wrist and half drags him out, shouting his thanks.

“Kind of obnoxious, really.” she huffs.

“You should have seen them when I was your age. He’s right about them being worse, you know. When the three of us lived together.”

Ino laughs. “It’s hard for me to remember that you’ve got a life too, Iruka-sensei. Probably because you were my teacher and all.”

“That’s true.”

Not that he’d had much to share at the time, anyway. He really hadn’t spent time doing much of anything, then. His life is a bit of a blank, even to him. Living day to day, minus school. Living Mizuki.

“Do you want me to take her?”

“Go finish your rounds. You’ll be done before they return. If you see Tsunade-sama, please send her my way, if you would.”

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It’s not Tsunade that comes, but Shizune and Neji. He seems to be settling into his rotation, confident as he charts down notes and looks him over. Shizune drifts closer and Iruka passes Kazane over as Neji writes in his chart. Kazane scrunches up her face, annoyed with being moved.

"How is Hiyoko? Did they send her home?"

"Her condition is favorable." Neji nods. "She is scheduled to be released later today."

"Why is there a baby here?" Shizune asks, "People shouldn’t be giving you work."

"She was sleeping. Not much work in that."

"You can barely move your arms."

"That’s all I really need at this point. And my mobility is better than it was."

"It is." Neji agrees. "The chakra paths are recuperating efficiently within standard deviation. Mobility is adequate."

Shizune is frowning a bit. "That’s not really what I was saying."

"Leave him be, Shizune. He sounds like a textbook, but that’s fine in its own way." Tsunade says as she enters the room. "Just gave the approval for Hiyoko to go home. Neji, go and take a final report of her chakra pathways before she leaves, if you would." Neji passes over the chart and dips out of the room, silent.

"And who is this?" She moves closer to Shizune and Kazane.
"That's Kazane-" he pauses, frowning. "I'm not sure what her surname is, actually. The daughter of Hayate and Yugao."

"So this is the child that has my assistants on a tighter schedule than Shizune gives me. Been a bit of a dance with scheduling recently. "Can't be helped, though," " she hums, looking at his chart.

That tells Iruka that whatever mission Yugao's on is even longer than the few weeks Kotetsu had confirmed. Which isn't really fair to Kotetsu and Izumo or Kazane. Or even Yugao; separating her from the child will just make it harder on them both when she does come back.

"Is Yugao still Anbu?" he asks, and Tsunade doesn't look up from the chart.

"You know I can neither confirm or deny that."

"It's not healthy for either of them to spend that much time apart. Kazane has spent more of her life with Kotetsu and Izumo than Yugao; which she doesn't really know by the way. We were all friends with the deceased father more than her."

Shizune is frowning now, her eyebrows knit together in concern.

"I didn't think there was an issue." Tsunade says, adding her own notes.

"I'm not sure how that's possible." Iruka says, trying not to grind his teeth. "Kazane is barely four months old and Yugao went and took a mission that's pushing two months. So more or less immediately after she was cleared to return to active duty."

"One can decide to be both a parent and a ninja. They are not mutually exclusive careers."

"For a standard ranked ninja, I agree. If she is Anbu- well Anbu is a different category altogether. Also she has no real network of support as far as I can tell. Another ninja recruited too young. She's younger than I am, you know. She only had Hayate and one other friend, who is on some sort of years-long mission. That's not much of a support network when half of that network is dead and the other half cannot communicate with you."

Shizune sucks in a breath, frowning harder. Tsunade sighs.

"I will discuss this with her. I suppose such an insistent desire to return to duty could have an underlying issue." she looks back to him.

"You should be spending time and energies on your own recovery, not worrying about-"

"I'm excellent at multitasking." Iruka says as he takes Kazane back from Shizune. "Recovery, child-rearing, teaching. Sages, give me a textbook, I can study too."

She grins. "I've got plenty for you. Going to start on the chakra storage earlier than I thought as well. Your moulding skills are better than I assumed."

"I want to go back to my apartment."

"You're in no condition to be back at work yet. Coma-states are serious. Even minor ones."

"I know what my body is capable of. Especially coming out of a coma-state."

"I'll move your physical therapy test up. And you'll need someone to spend the night."

"I'm pretty good at multitasking, I'll have you know." he says again, because he's not going to be
corralled here longer than he has to be.

She laughs. “Well then I’ve got some training basics for you. I want you to get started on the storage technique sooner rather than later. The center of the forehead or perhaps the center of your stomach would probably be easiest as a focal point.”

“You seem to think I’ve got more than a sense of basic healing principles.”

“You do. Sakura is amazing at chakra manipulation and moulding, but I would never have thought that you were the one that laid the path down. Although Ino is also very talented, but I had attributed that to her family lineage when I’m sure you also played a role in it. I’m getting old, not recognizing talent like that immediately.”

Iruka smiles nervously, not wanted to agree or disagree with the comment, because Tsunade was notorious for twisting youth or age into a point of conflict.

“So this technique?”

“The concept is similar to sealing part of your chakra into a standard seal, although the medium is yourself instead of paper. You add to the reserves every day, eventually building up a vast reserve. Sakura has been working on it for a few months now.”

“She doesn’t-”

“Have a mark? I’m thinking not until maybe a year or so? Her reserves are standard, and I do work her pretty hard.” she laughs. “Although in your case I don’t necessarily expect you to save it for years at a time, only to release it when you're in danger. So maybe you won’t have one, after all.”

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He spends several more restless hours in the hospital after Kazane is retrieved, students of varying years popping in and even a few parents here and there as well as several teachers. It's a bit unexpected, the number of people that come to visit; and very tiring. He doesn't get to close his eyes before someone else is there.

It makes him long for House Warren, where minutes ran into days without effort.

Of all the visitors he certainly doesn't expect Hiashi to pay him a visit, so he scrambles as he tries to sit up, give some sort of proper greeting.

"Lord Hiashi-"

"No need to stand on formality, Iruka-san." Hiashi smiles softly as Iruka settles back down, wincing with the effort. "It seems like Hiyoko gave you quite a scare."

"A bit." he admits. "Godaime thinks-"

"I know of Godaime's theory. I agree with it. I will be taking Hiyoko for further tutoring. It is detriment for such talent to languish simply because it belongs to the branch house."

Hiashi is older than him by a number of years, but Iruka thinks that after years of tutoring visits that he understands the man a bit. There have been a lot of events over the years; the structure of the clan changing subtly with each one. Even the fact that Iruka was invited as a tutor of sorts was
a contested decision.

But something like this, personally tutoring a branch child- that's a fairly decisive action. Even though Hiashi had been clan leader in name for years, the death of his father finally gave him the ability to shake off second guessing himself.

He is rather like his eldest daughter in that way.

"Neji?" Iruka questions, because even though he didn’t have the young man for long, he still was rather protective of any of his kids, no matter how temporary.

"He went and recreated techniques of the main branch on his own. Some lacking in finesse, other approaches are even better than standard. He too should be part of the new initiative."

"Is the tenketsu something that can be taught?"

Hiashi's face tightens, but with thought, not anger. "I do not know." he says after a long moment. "It was always something that I was taught to believe to be an innate ability. Even Neji- he is my nephew. But perhaps-" he pauses. "Perhaps one could be taught to see... even if all 361 are not visible the locations of the core 76- it is an idea."

An idea that Iruka hopes leads to less tension between the branches of the clan.

"I am told that you were the one to speed up Hiyoko’s recovery."

"Ah- nothing so dramatic as that." he smiles "just managed to bring her here in time."

"I will allow you and Godaime have your secrets. But I am well aware of the damage that one can do to themselves in such circumstances. She possessed no such damage."

"How is it that you have more visitors than anyone I’ve ever seen?" Tsunade groans as she enters the room. “Can you people just stop bothering my patient already? He's fine, the girl is fine and we've already discussed this and yet here you are making hospital visits. Insufferable busybodies the lot of you." Anko pops out from behind Tsunade, grinning.

"She already took my alcohol~" she whines, but stops when she looks at Hiashi. She gives a half-assed bow and he nods, leaving.

"Ugh. What's he up to?"

"Standard village bullshit." Tsunade shakes her head. But he's behind my proposals at least. I didn’t expect it, to be honest."

Iruka isn’t surprised. If something like bloodline edicts go into effect- even if the Hyuuga aren't the council's main concern who is to say it would stay that way? Who's to say that they wouldn't try to convince them to attempt to marry into other bloodlines, trying to create even better ninja offspring.

Anko shrugs. "They've got their own bloodline thing going. Outside marrying is frowned upon. I mean they don't really care if it's a branch but- they've got plenty of things to make sure the kid isn't too close to the next family. That's when they start to get a bit weird."

"You're plenty weird yourself." Iruka says and she grins.

"I can totally blame it on them though."
Tsunade shakes her head. "You're getting out of here because it seems like everyone is trying to get in here."

"Iru's like everyone's favorite." Anko grins as she sits on the edge of the bed. "With that worried face of his how could he not be?" she tugs on his cheek.

"Shouldn't you be at work?"

"Taking work home with me." She grins wider.

"Did you just-?"

"Yep. Totally just referred to you as my work. My gentleman of the night."

"That is-"

"I'm seriously terrible I know." her grin doesn't fade. "I'm ashamed for you, even."

"You look it."

"This is a look of utmost shame. Now let's get you home so we can get to the fun stuff. And food- you probably need food huh?"

"Anything else than this raw diet." he looks at Tsunade. "The raw diet could use some more fish also. No wonder Kakashi hates it."

"That's because the brat is always spending himself down to the bare minimum. You get to be off it already, so stop complaining."

"Still awful."

"Noted. Now go get his medications and get him out of here." she starts scribbling something and passes Anko the list.

"We could have done this before I came all the way up here."

"Go stretch your legs and get the meds before I change my mind and keep him overnight."

"Going, going." Anko sing-songs as she leaves the room.

Tsunade turns back to Iruka and passes over several folders from the pile she’s holding.

"Please look through them. I'm gaining some ground with the policies but not much. They are being rather insistent about this."

"Matches?" Iruka hadn't thought he was priority, despite his water orientation.

He doesn’t see any sort of identification on them, probably tied to his chakra then.

It’s something he really hadn’t thought about, simply because some people in power still think he’s not really trustworthy, being a child of foreign ninja. He thinks he wouldn’t be a priority even if people knew about Mizuchi and viewed him as some sort of untapped potential.

But maybe the spar from the other day had convinced some people that he was worthwhile despite the risks.
"I don't want to do this to him, especially now.”

Iruka turns away from the pile, back to Tsunade, incredulous. This isn’t for him, about him. These aren’t his matches. They’re Kakashi’s.

And that-

Iruka thinks that is a bit much to be asking of him.

That’s not-

It kind of is something Konoha would do. Not that Iruka and Kakashi are a permanent fixture or anything but he can see the benefits in which long term partners choose someone together. It’s not much different from what Izumo and Kotetsu are discussing.

Raising a healthy child both physically and mentally- the village knows how important that is now.

It’s just-

They’d only just started this whatever they had and now he’s supposed to be looking at other people for Kakashi to sleep with?

He still feels like they’re asking too much of him though, his chest tight as he looks at the pile of folders.

“He wants a tailored letter.” Iruka manages, his throat suddenly tight and dry. "None of the one size fits all they’ve been sending. He ripped up the last batch I saw.”

Tsunade grunts. “Sounds like the geezers. Sounds like him, too.” she moves away from his bedside, her heels clicking on the floor. She pauses in the doorway; Iruka looks up. She’s staring at him over her shoulder and he’s struck by the age in her face despite her youthful appearance.

“I know this is a strange thing to be asking, but I think you can help.”

He wants to say no, wants to shove them back in her face. He opens one of them, the pages blank like he’d assumed.

“This isn’t-“ he swallows down the word ‘fair’; it feels like he’s protesting too much homework and not potential decisions for someone else’s future.

“It isn’t fair.” Tsunade agrees. “And perhaps my pushbacks will go through. But it does have to look like an attempt is being made at the very least.”

Iruka nods, but he still feels vaguely ill, the knowledge heavy in his gut. Far heavier than the stack of folders in front of him.

He hears Anko thumping in the hallway before he sees her, Tsunade taking her leave as Anko comes into the room, a bag of medication under her arm.

“Got the drugs! Let’s blow this dango stand!”
Chapter End Notes

Nerd Note: I was thinking really hard about language and phrasing and ninja stuff and that was where garden-variety because that's very First Hokage phrasing to me. (I don't own the word, obviously but it makes me very happy). Same with walk up a tree, very first Hokage.

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